

OBSERVER

‘Eliza Kentridge, Tethering’ at Cecilia Brunson Projects Is Heavy With Meaning

Embroidered artworks may evoke dreams, but the spirit of this exhibition that considers the relationship between art and domesticity is very much of this world.

By Frances Forbes-Carbines · 07/23/24 8:00am



Artist Eliza Kentridge's work *Untitled* is otherworldly while being very much of this world. Elliot Gelberg-Wilson

To visit London's Cecilia Brunson Projects this summer is to experience a beguiling departure from everyday life; a tonic for the shallowness of the present. Making your way past the cafes of Bermondsey Street and slipping through an unassuming gateway, the commanding aspect of Royal Oak Yard gives the effect of walking through a de Chirico painting—towering buildings, long shadows, stillness—you then turn a corner and are confronted by humane, thought-provoking artworks in a soothing, beautifully-lit space. It is here that artist [Eliza Kentridge](#) has her exhibition, “Tethering;” it is here that her expansive embroidered installation fills the wallspace, revealing to the viewer a nonlinear narrative that feels at once intimate and engagingly universal. The wall speaks: it tells the story of lives measured out not, as T. S. Eliot wrote, in coffee spoons, but instead in minute acts of love and of care.

The installation, though materially as delicate as gossamer, is heavy with meaning and striking in its power to spark your imagination. Quietly engrossing, the untitled artwork recalled for me the magic of seeing sixteenth-century tapestries up close. In each case you stand before the work, silent and reverential as it draws you in—at once in the exhibition space and far away in a state of reverie, perhaps communing with a long-lost relative or friend. The work is, by turns, serious and playful. It contains symbols both figurative and abstract. “It reminds me of the cave paintings of South Africa,” I heard a woman say, “...the colors, the figures, the animals.” Viewers stopped at length before the work, looking ever more closely at the stitches, appearing lost in thought.



An installation view of “Eliza Kentridge: Tethering” at Cecilia Brunson Projects. Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects

Why do hand-sewn textile works inspire such depth of feeling in those who view them? Perhaps it is the very nature of fabric’s natural connotations of softness and comfort: of the beds in which we lay as infants; of family homes. Perhaps it is the way in which they are made: the process requiring perseverance, dexterity and gentleness. On the evening of the exhibition’s launch, Kentridge was in conversation with poet Rachel Spence. Spence gave a recitation of W. B. Yeats’ *Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* from *The Wind Among The Reeds*. Aedh—a pale, lovelorn character—regrets that he does not have “the heavens’ embroidered cloths / Enwrought with golden and silver light” to spread under the feet of his beloved; being poor, he has only his dreams: “I have spread my dreams under your feet / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.” Previously, I was often dismissive of embroidered artworks, but these words led me to look with a newfound appreciation.

Embroidered artworks may evoke dream worlds, but the spirit of “Tethered” is very much of this world. The backing material used is not cloth, but repurposed tea bags: each patch of the embroidery is a tea bag that has been emptied, dried, pressed and embroidered; each tea bag is from a cup of tea that the artist consumed while caring for her elderly father. Together they give a sense of flux—the patches of the embroidered installation can be seen as micro-measurements of time. This relaying of time is found elsewhere in the artist’s work: in Eliza Kentridge’s book of poetry, *Signs for an Exhibition*, she talks about present distractions from an “adult’s hurly burly morning,” as she remembers vignettes from a childhood canopied by the eucalyptus and cedar trees of South Africa, the daughter of two anti-apartheid lawyers: her father, Sydney Kentridge, defended Nelson Mandela in the four-year Treason Trial of 1956 while her mother, Felicia Kentridge, founded and steered the Legal Resources Centre and would work to abolish the draconian laws that had destroyed the lives of millions of people. Eliza Kentridge’s work entices the viewer to ask more about those times. What discussions they, as a family, must have had after work each day. One of Kentridge’s poems speaks of late-night conversations over tea around the kitchen table “Pecking at cake and stories / Gathering the different evenings into one.” Kentridge’s work elicits, rather than demands, curiosity about this dramatic period of history. To me, this is the more powerful and lasting approach.

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Who are Kentridge’s inspirations? From childhood, her brother, the artist William Kentridge, who “was always making wonderful stuff... my younger brother, Matthew, and I would hang around and help him with silkscreen posters,” Eliza enthused during her talk. This childhood interest in art carried forward into a lifelong talent for sewing: “At school in Johannesburg in the ‘60s we had a sewing teacher. My father’s mother sewed beautifully. My mother sewed. I liked hand stitching and started getting into it again at university... A few years ago, I went to classes in Wivenhoe, Essex and I learned beautiful stitches from all over the world.” The practice of sewing was informed by other artists: “I had El Anatsui in my mind,” Kentridge said. “I’d always thought of him, ‘how can I make something as wonderful as that?’” Sonia Delaunay, Louise Bourgeois and Henri Matisse were also inspirations for their uses of color.



A detail view of *Untitled* (2022-present), the featured artwork in the exhibition. Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects

Another key inspiration is of folkloric origin. I was drawn to a feline-looking creature in Kentridge's work: uncannily humanoid, he appears in the installation more than once, clad in varying attire. What is he? "Tokoloshes are disruptive and harmful household spirits in much southern African folklore," Eliza Kentridge told Observer. "My recurring long-eared figure derives from a wooden carving of a tokoloshe I was given when I was 20. Half-man, half-hyena/cat, it has a different sort of presence, and I have been drawing and sewing versions of this creature ever since. It is part of my personal panoply of images for decades—both same old, same old and full of surprises. At times I draw it very consciously; at other times, it arrives as a doodle. In fact, quite a few of the embroidered tea bags are versions of doodles I make on the edges of newspapers or envelopes."

As I left the haven of embroidered cloths to cross Royal Oak Yard and rejoin London's bustling throngs, traffic and neon lights, a world away from the material delicacy and familial care of "Tethering" and the meditative beauty of *Signs for an Exhibition*, I thought about my own family, my personal shortcomings and strengths; I thought about loss and remembrance and a line from a half-remembered Philip Larkin poem came to me which now for me encapsulates the exhibition: "What will survive of us is love."

"Tethering" is on view at Cecilia Brunson Projects, Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3GE, through August 9.



Eliza Kentridge, *My Friend's Napkin*, 2020; embroidered linen. Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects