

INSIDE OUT

Whether working in her off-grid home camp in the Adelaide Hills or her inner-city studio, embroidery has become the perfect conduit for artist Kasia Tons to explore universal themes around our connection with the environment and each other

AUSTRALIAN ARTIST KASIA TONS is actor-like, making characters to shield within as she navigates the world, yet having the courage to own her beliefs publicly. In conversation, what's immediately obvious is her emotional honesty and embrace of her principles, played out in her exuberant hand-stitched works. It's a life led by ethics: she talks from her yurt-style dwelling in the Adelaide Hills, where she lives off-grid with solar panels, a composting toilet, a developing vegetable patch, and her dog for company. Tons speaks thoughtfully, pausing often for reflection. Her considered strategy is to prioritise making art, which encompasses decisions about cost of living, mental health needs, suitable locations for living and working, and what she's willing to sacrifice. Her work is made primarily from second-hand materials, but she turns to new fabrics when these aren't available. Her pieces are both counterpoint and

complement to her life decisions: colourful, free-flowing, sometimes a little scary, organic and born of impulse, and with charm in their embrace of generous hand-stitching and layering of multiple fabrics. She tells me: 'Embroidery is a very humble process, and very sincere, since it takes so much time.' Kasia Tons grew up in rural South Australia. For 18 years, personal and professional travels took her to diverse Australian and international destinations across Latin America, Europe and New Zealand, before a relatively recent return to Adelaide. She finds some aspects of urban life challenging, and clearly relishes living and travelling in remote rural locations and communities. That life has been precarious and even dangerous at times, but she enjoys encountering people who explore their authentic selves, and regards cities as places where citizens adopt masks of social acceptability.

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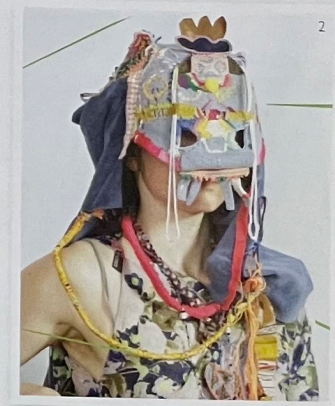
Untitled #3 / Bonnet, 2020.
Wool, paper, wire, felt, gauze,
paint, beads. Hand embroidery,
hand beading, machine knitting,
needle felting.

PHOTO: DAVE LASLETT

I'VE WORKED WITH MASKS, BECAUSE THEY'RE SUCH A PSYCHOLOGICAL ITEM. THEY'RE SO SYMBOLIC OF SO MANY THINGS, LIKE THE FRONTS WE PUT ON... CREATING THESE MASKS IS LIKE AN EXPRESSION OF WHAT'S GOING ON SUBCONSCIOUSLY



She is the Spirit of the Doorway Leading Out (cloak component), 2016-17. Cotton canvas, beads, natural and synthetic embroidery threads, reclaimed fabrics, textile markers, Hand embroidery, beading, appliqué. PHOTO: KASIA TONS



1. The Heavy Mask, 2020. Felt, wool, pebbles, sequins, natural and synthetic threads. Hand embroidery, needle felting, beading. PHOTO: MADIŠYŃ ZABEL

2. Traditional Dress of No Where, 2015. Reclaimed fabrics, beads, natural and synthetic threads. Hand embroidery. PHOTO: KASIA TONS

3. Human, 2018-19. Reclaimed fabrics, natural and synthetic threads, found objects, beads. Hand embroidery, machine knitting, beading. PHOTO: KASIA TONS

Masks, so topical now, have been integral to Tons' practice: 'For the past seven years I've worked with masks, because they're such a psychological item. They're so symbolic of so many things, like the fronts we put on, and so creating these big masks is like an expression of what's going on subconsciously with us.' There were anxieties about first encounters as she travelled, putting herself into small townships and strangers' vehicles, worrying about what her appearance said, but she also relishes the feeling of vitality her then opportunistic life yielded.

Traditional Dress of No Where (2015), a typical riot of coloured thread and collaged fabric, is a loose-fitting mask, with eye holes, stitched nose, a sunshield-like long covering over the neck and shoulders at the back, and rather disconcerting flaps of fabric like teeth: 'I made that work at the time of living in a very transient way where I didn't feel a sense of belonging to anywhere or anything. Through making this I was trying to create some sort of identity for myself and a strength shield to protect against the negative opinions and cautionary tales I often heard from people I met, usually when hitchhiking, which in hindsight only came from a place of caring but at the time I saw as bad luck to talk about risk and danger.' Assumed identities are also evident in her exhibition titles 'If I Were a Street' (2019); 'In my Next Life I'll be Joelene' (2008).

Tons studied textile design at RMIT Melbourne, where she specialised in knitwear, but embraced hand-stitch in very different circumstances. Aged 21 and travelling in Mexico, she sought an accessible





1. Tons in her Kent Town studio, 2021.

PHOTO: MEL HENDERSON

2. Her outdoor studio in the Flinders Ranges, 2020.

PHOTO: DAVE LASLETT

3. *After* (detail), 2019-20.

Natural and synthetic threads, cotton canvas. Hand embroidery.

PHOTO: MADISYN ZABEL

creative medium, a readily portable way to pass time while travelling on the bus network. On impulse she bought a second-hand communion dress and some green thread, and began to stitch instinctively. This approach was not only affordable, but immensely fun and enjoyable. This spontaneous approach to stitch has remained. 'I was making without much thought, [my work] not researched 'til after'. She embraced the way that her stitching is shaped by elements of unconscious thought and even 'the mythical side of life', and finds freedom in the absence of a deep history of embroidery in Australia. Tons often doesn't know what something once started will end up as, but embraces the struggle and 'pushes through that awkwardness'. After over 15 years of stitching she feels there are still many unknowns, loving 'all the colours', enjoying the chaos of making and the energy it brings. Unsurprisingly one creative hero is Tilleke Schwarz, whose unplanned and portable hand stitch also developed as a response to extensive travel. Despite her openness, Tons' masks are her 'privacy setting' to obscure what is underneath; costumes enable 'exaggerating elements of yourself not fully realised in real life'. Textiles are her story-telling medium, one where only the embroiderer knows what's really going on – interpretation is needed to access the full meaning of a work. Significantly, Tons' usual strategy in difficult situations is to imagine she is a character in a film. The actor, adopting a real or imaginary

works inspired by conversations with her local community as they navigate ongoing Covid restrictions and fears, and other challenging incidents. Each piece is specific to an individual and accompanied by a narrative on Tons' Instagram. While stitch is still important ('the most consistent thing in my life is embroidery'), her practice now expands. In 2020 the exhibition 'After' at Craft ACT in Canberra explored a future world inspired by EM Forster. It included *Daffodil*, a quirky yet disturbing collaboration with animator Jonathan Daw; the hand-stitching adds everything to the narrative. Country Arts South Australia (CASA) commissioned *To Live Deliberately*, Tons' 20201 collaboration with Dave Laslett, an artist-photographer and fellow off-grid dweller, with whom she worked for two months in the remote Flinders Ranges. The result delights her: 'The first thing I've made that doesn't have a body inside it... stand-alone.' Another cultural hero, socially engaged artistic all-rounder and film-maker Miranda July, is an influence on Tons' newest decision, to study film. Her intent is to place her creations into time-based settings, enabling more narratives. As her work matures, Kasia Tons is allowing it to speak for itself, her community and her causes – the work itself is becoming the actor, standing alongside this passionate and inspired artist. © Liz Cooper

