

We hold you close Katie West

20 February – 24 April
Presented with Perth Festival



A gentle assembly of textile, sound, and video, Yindjibarndi artist Katie West's immersive exhibition invites us to reconsider our relationship with the natural environment and each other.

We hold you close offers a space of quiet contemplation in which visitors can rest, listen and make by hand. Visitors are invited to sit, sip a cup of tea and join in the making of hand-twisted string from repurposed fabric. Over the course of the exhibition, the string becomes an ever expanding supportive structure made by all who have visited.

Curated by Eloise Sweetman

We hold you close a song for material intimacy

Text by Katie West and Eloise Sweetman

We hold you close is a song, a yarn, and an immersive exhibition. We, artist Katie West and curator Eloise Sweetman, see this exhibition as an assembly of matter, material, and human bodies. At its core, the exhibition explores relational materiality (the agency of material and its influence on the maker) while celebrating embodied knowledge (the body knows how to act). West's interest in embodied knowledge has led her to think about singing and, by extension, artmaking. Both these acts hold memories even as our minds age and ensure knowledge is shared across generations. We titled the exhibition *We hold you close*, to acknowledge and call to the continuous line of connection to those who have passed, those who are present, and those who will come. It is a song for material intimacy.

Connection through companionship and to one's environment is vital in West's work, as she navigates her ties to Yindjibarndi kin inherited through her mother, as well as the disruption of these ties due to her mother's and her own experiences as adopted children. Artmaking is cultural renewal. Matter and material are teachers when teachers are not always present to pass on knowledge. In the making, West asks: what songs does the material sing? How does this material want to move with my hands? In turn, what does the maker's embodied knowledge sing back to the material? How can the song be passed on through string, hand-dyed textiles, and in the assembly of making? For West, artmaking is an opportunity for contemplation and learning in her own journey of knowing herself, knowing our world.

We hold you close comprises three installations that, true to West's practice, create contemplative spaces for audiences to sit, converse, and make. The core of the exhibition is its titular piece, an installation marked and held by a patchwork of textile representations of baskets made using recycled and naturally dyed fabrics. This is a work of and for West's ancestors. The baskets depicted mirror those made by Katie's grandmothers for generations, woven from plant fibres.

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Credits

Composer: Simon Charles
Musicians: Djuna Lee and Jameson Feakes
Field Recordist: Josten Myburgh

The artist would like to thank all the friends and family who participated in the textile dyeing workshop over one weekend in York, 2021.

I found out about the baskets in 2017 following a residency with Juluwarlu Corporation based in Roebourne. Seeing just a photo of this basket was an incredible feeling. From having no knowledge at all, just by looking, I knew that this was something I could learn to make one day. This made me feel connected to my family, ancestors and other Indigenous people who also make string and weave. This was important because my adoption experience has caused a great sense of alienation in all those spheres. I had always loved weaving but always held back from exploring this deeply because I felt it wasn't my place to.

The artist works with readily available materials and uses sewing skills she learned from her adoptive grandmother as a child. Layering and sewing pieces of velvet, organza, lycra, and flocked fabrics together, West gives as much attention to how colours are brought together as she does to how the layered fabrics and stitches feel, their weight and different textures complement each other.

West has incorporated hand-made string into these patchworked baskets, using a technique learned from different women over the last few years and which often employs the body as a supportive structure to twist the material between one's fingers or thigh.

West describes her sewing process as analogous to drawing, often using the string she has made or collected to highlight certain aspects of the artwork. Each patchworked basket beckons to the audience like flowers luring bees and honeyeaters with their brilliant colours and glistening textures.

By draping her textile pieces across and over each other, West frees them from entrenched visual hierarchies of front, back, top and bottom, reflecting her interest in creating transformative spaces of flux and transition. Through multiple variations in arrangement and composition West's work resists being fixed in one place or being caught by category.

Using fabric has come about because this is a material readily available to me, and sewing is something I learnt how to do from a young age. I've always enjoyed the colour and texture of fabric. I'm motivated to make these pieces because it is a way to make these baskets present in my life and for my family, including the next generations of our family line. I want the children in my family to always know their ancestors made these baskets.

Nestled amongst the textile banners is a video projection, a collage of material and movement. Structured by sky through a recurring day, West can be seen hand-twisting string as textiles float in and over her hands as she works. Through this act, West places herself into a collective story of string making and weaving, surrounded by her ancestors. In this video, West shares her way of making string. While, her attention is on the task, she ensures that viewers can follow her movements.

Scattered across the three galleries are soft furnishings made of hand-dyed textiles using bark, leaves and flowers from a two-day workshop with West and her family and friends. The group walked along the Avon River on Noongar Ballardong boodja, collecting plant material – bark and leaves blown to the ground by the wind and weeds grown in the cooler months. They made dye bundles and immersed them into pots of water on an open fire to bubble away and become infused with the plant colour. The group shared time around the fire, ate lunch, and drank cups of tea, while waiting for the dye pot to do its work. The collective and collaborative process results in soft furnishings carrying the colours and scents of earth, plant, and smoke.

In the process of naturally dyeing fabric I found a way to reflect on the notion of connection to country. This process was important when I had no knowledge of any craft associated with my ancestry.

In *Space to make string* (2022), West invites the audience to sit and make hand twisted string and to add their string to the walls. Each piece of string becomes a material narrative that is picked up, embodied, repeated and passed on.

The handmade string, I feel, is emblematic of a pace of production that supports the health of the Earth's atmosphere and human kinship connections. This kind of making opens up space in our minds to connect with others while all engaged in the same activity. There's opportunities for intimacy, which perhaps have become rarer in human communities as the production of goods has been accelerated and outsourced.

It is not an overgeneralization to say that all people have connections with string making, plant fibre and textiles. I hope those who visit this space find comfort in reflecting on these connections in their own experiences of kinship.

Tea for We hold you close (2022) is an area dedicated to making and drinking tea together. Like the slow pace of string-making and weaving, and akin to the process of natural dyeing, the audience is invited to give soft focus to the preparation and consumption of tea.

An accompanying six-channel soundscape cycles through the three galleries. Made of the sounds of fire, of rain, of making, of walking, the soundscape was recorded by Josten Myburgh during the two-day textile dyeing workshop. Scored by composer and West's long-time collaborator, Simon Charles, the free-forming soundscape of collective work and artmaking incorporates string instrumentation by musicians Djuna Lee and Jameson Feakes. West invited Charles to respond to his own experience of the textile dyeing weekend, the resultant field recordings, and his conversations with West about the movement and rhythm of making string and weaving.

I'm revisiting ways of making from when I was a child through fabric and sewing. Even with making the video, an approach that came naturally during my undergraduate studies in art seemed to come back. I'm reconnecting with ways of making that gave me joy and my first experiences of sustained focus. At those times, I feel a combination of joy, a sense of peace and knowing myself within my connections to others.

I believe that these kinds of experiences are vital to human thriving. In some circumstances, those experiences need to be deliberately practiced and protected. It's a kind of resistance. I am thinking about what coming generations in my family will inherit. They will inherit meaningful and strong connections with others and the embodied knowledge to find and create more. I want to give them the ability to hold peacefulness in their bodies and let them know they have all the space in the world to be themselves. I want to ensure they inherit meaningful and strong connections with others and the embodied knowledge to find and create more.

We hold you close is curated by WA born, Rotterdam based curator Eloise Sweetman with whom West has been working since 2016.

Katie West (Yindjibarndi, b.1988, Boorloo/Perth) currently lives and works on Noongar Ballardong boodja, in York, Western Australia.

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