

'Well, I heard it on the radio,' says Pat, 'and I thought, that's something I can do. No-one in the family wants my knitted things anymore, I haven't done it for a long time . . .' Bronwyn is sorting out bright skeins of wool, and Pat selects yellow.

'Eighty stitches loose cast on,' Bronwyn is saying, 'knit for a metre and cast off.'

'Why do people do it?' I ask Bronwyn after Pat has left. She looks puzzled, as if contemplating the question for the first time.

'I think it's something they can be part of,' she begins, 'and it's a simple thing. A guy who works in this office taught himself to knit from a book so he could do it. Plus it's something that people can participate in quite a simple way, but I guess it's kind of wacky too,' she concedes, 'and also creative—you can be part of an art work that is so accessible. People feel they can participate,' she concludes with a nod. Over 70 knitters, from the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales so far have agreed.

I keep thinking about what Pat said: 'No-one in my family wants my knitted things.' It's the same thing said about the penguin jumpers, the same thing in the knitting guilds. Knitters and what they're knitting somehow seem to have

become separated. The desire to knit is there but the knitting itself is too daggy, or too old-fashioned. Where technical excellence meets bad design, knitters have nowhere to go. There is a well of unloved knitwear too tired, too unfashionable, sitting in silent testament to craft passion gone wrong.



There's an eye-catching picture of Germaine Koh, another artist, at a recent installation of her work. The tiny woman sits atop a long flight of white marble stairs. In each hand she clutches metre-long knitting needles, broomstick thick, while before her an 80-metre river of colour cascades all the way to the floor of the Great Court of the British Museum. *Knitwork* is a piece of art the Canadian began in 1993 as a 'lifelong work'. Since then it has snaked its way through art spaces in Canada, North America, Australia and the United Kingdom, being steadily added to in each location. It's made of cast-off garments—socks, scarves, jumpers—that Germaine reknits into the wide blanket. To date, over 300 garments have found a new home.

Germaine is preoccupied by everyday activities, mundane things that shape our lives. 'From the start it was kind of a terrifying thought,' she says softly, 'what if you decide to do this for the rest of your life? There's a sub-intention to give

value to things that are in process and to value that as a thing in itself.' Knitting as lifelong obsession. Not something unfamiliar to many knitters, but not one they would necessarily expect to see honoured in an art gallery as well.

Germaine is fascinated with people's reactions to her work. 'First of all, a lot of people ask me if I'm going for a world record,' she says, 'and I tell them there are plenty of people who knit more than this in a lifetime, they just don't collect it together. You people give a new appreciation for what their mothers have done.'

On the other hand, the professional knitter takes a different approach entirely. 'People who knit—who on the whole tend to be older women—in a way regard it as matter of fact. Often they ask me technical questions and talk to me as a peer. It's very interesting to be approached as part of the club by this group of older women. I've met quite a few knitters who seem surprised someone would immortalise this product.'

With all the wool coming in from donated cast-offs, Germaine also keeps archive pictures of the originals. 'There are associations with different parts of it,' she says, while admitting now some of her memories are growing fuzzy. She sets only a couple of basic rules for the piece: firstly that it be human in scale—it is basically the width of a blanket—

and that once she starts with the unravelled yarn of a particular garment, she must use it all, though the garments may overlap.

As a result, *Knitwork* is visually rich and poetic, with moods that change throughout the piece, shifting from murky greens and browns, to thick bands of colour—bright red, yellow, purple, turquoise, and then painterly mixes of scarlet and emerald, rust and blue, black, orange and white. 'There are variations in the piece,' she says, 'I get tired of combining certain colours, and there is a section I really dislike, but I have to live with that. There are certain variations in stitches. In parts there are details and cables and there are some technical limitations, generally I do a moss stitch.'

'I guess I wanted to argue for valuing the present,' she says with a very Zen sensibility of her ultimate aims, 'rather than dwelling on the past. I think that is somehow related, politically, to focusing on commonalities rather than differences. I think there might be something stoical in this.'

Back in Canberra in October the house-cosy is up. The giant multicoloured patchwork canopy enclosing the house seems to jump out of the landscape, playing with perspective. It is certainly generating considerable interest, becoming a tourist attraction on the busy avenue. Bronwyn is reflecting on the reactions to her piece both by herself and her eventual