

firstdraft

Gallery 1

9 February - 24 March

Luddite/Sodomite

Charles Levi

@charleslevi | charleslevi.info

Luddite/Sodomite is a series of four textile and embroidery installations that investigate the immediate link between labour and textile through a queer lens. Engaging with historic activism of textile labour and similarly arduous, referential queer handmaking processes, this series acquires a diaristic quality that underlines the importance of having a manual and tactile approach; positioning the hand and the manual use of a needle as a necessary, bodily tool for manifesting, consuming and laboriously stitching a distinct queer experience.

Focusing on the development of habitual meticulousness introduced through intensive detail and the compartmentalisation of experiential feeling into queer-tinged coded symbols as a narrative form; each work signals to the presence of mental labour in tandem with physical and begins to dissect the process of labour induced catharsis and other emotive components like ambivalence, particularly prevalent in capacious textile practices. By interrogating the slowness and the inevitable catharsis present in embroidered needlepoint, a duality of frustration, arguably a Luddite mentality and contemplative meditation appears within the work.

Luddite/Sodomite looks intently and is indebted to The Names Project, AIDS Memorial Quilt as an archival project that is completely indicative of queer labour, symbolic heraldry and celebration, frustrated strenuousness and hardship and cathartic handmaking, making it a crucial referential facet and a desirable objective. Despite being visually steeped in purposeful ambiguity as a reference to exclusive instances of radical queer coding and flagging, this exhibition is overall, an open, inclusive analysis of a labour-heavy, hand-centric, queer textile practice that exists on an ideological intersection.

Gallery 2

Corey Black

You Won't Believe The Snap In Your Throat

firstdraft
gadigal land
13-17 riley street
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nsw 2011
+61 2 8970 2999
firstdraft.org.au

Gallery 3

Amanda Bennetts

I feel the weight of the minute as I bend my body towards the clock

we acknowledge and pay respect to the gadigal people of the eora nation, the traditional owners of the land on which firstdraft is built and operates.

firstdraft is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW; and assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body.

Gallery 4

Vedika Rampal

Residues



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Charles Levi is an expanded textile and installation artist. His practice positions itself amongst the radical potentialities of the queer archive as well as the nuances of bodily labour present in textile methodologies. Levi utilises his capacious practice to cathartically produce allegoric narrations of queer experience, while simultaneously obscuring the legibility of his work by implementing coded heraldic symbolism reminiscent of historic instances of queer flagging. Levi commonly meditates between notions of inclusivity and exclusivity, a common practice within queer spaces, ensuring an equivocal and esoteric dimension. Levi engages with similarly laborious queer-centric textile practices whilst simultaneously positioning itself within a separate conversation that investigates the immediate intersection of feeling and fabric.

Artworks (clockwise from left, and top to bottom)

Charles Levi

Pinion, 2023-24

textile appliqué and embroidery
dimensions variable

Charles Levi

Prospect, 2023-24

textile appliqué and embroidery
dimensions variable

Charles Levi

Maker, 2023-24

textile appliqué and embroidery
dimensions variable

Charles Levi

Facial Vestments, 2023-24

textile appliqué and embroidery
100 x 150cm (approx.)

Scroll to next page for essay
by **Paul Yore**

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SMASH THE MACHINES!

by Paul Yore

As I write this, garment workers in Bangladesh, the vast majority women, are on strike protesting dire conditions and demanding basic wages in an industry synonymous with slave labour. Their condition is highly precarious, with at least three workers killed in violent confrontations with authorities, and many factories shut down since the strike began. The factories that employ these impoverished textile workers supply clothes to some of the world's top brands such as H&M and Zara, feeding the highly profitable fast fashion sector, at minimum cost to these companies.

Textile workers have long occupied the coalface of radical struggle against exploitation and capitalist greed, a tradition which can be traced back at least to the industrial revolution, a period when the production of textiles was rapidly transformed by mechanisation. New automated looms and spinning and weaving machines required only relatively unskilled (and therefore low-waged) workers to operate and maintain, meaning an increased productivity of inferior quality cloth, at a lower cost to the factory owners.

Before industrialisation, textile production had long been the domain of highly specialised artisans - weavers, embroiderers, lace-makers, knitters, and seamstresses. Almost overnight, the livelihood of an entire class of producers was in jeopardy, along with the knowledge of many traditional craft forms. These evolving industrial conditions sparked one of the most infamous struggles in the history of industrial relations. In the 1810's, in the midlands and north of England, bands of newly unemployed weavers broke into textile mills, sabotaging the automated loom machinery that had been installed to replace them. These 'Luddites' as they were known derived their name from a semi-legendary weaver named Ned Ludd, who provided the nom de guerre for letters penned by the radicals to factory-owners and officials issuing their demands.

The centrality of textiles in the historical struggle between labour and capital is perhaps no coincidence, as textiles seem to richly embody the very notion of productivity itself. The woven surface is a visualisation of arduously expended human toil: each stitch the deposit of an individual act of exertion, each thread a marker of labour-time. Despite the highly specialised and laborious nature of needlecrafts, these forms were historically disregarded from the domain of fine art, and this is largely due to misogyny.

The work of making textiles was long deemed women's work, dismissed as merely utilitarian or at best decorative. At least since Victorian times, needlework was upheld as a marker of quiet and dutiful domesticity, an essential component of reproductive heteronormativity. This historic fact in part explains the contemporary revival of woven forms by a new generation of queer and feminist practitioners interrogating complex histories of gendered labour.

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For this exhibition *Luddite/Sodomite*, Charles Levi presents a suite of beautifully crafted embroideries hanging like spectres or suffragette banners, taking up time-honoured preindustrial craft techniques and transforming them into beguiling contemporary artworks. Indebted to the historic AIDS Memorial Quilt, a project which seems to sit at the nexus of emotionality, activism, queer labour and art, Levi's cryptic pieces brim with a multiplicity of possible interpretative directions; their ambiguity belying a radical queerness posited with acerbic political intent. Drawing on the vernacular of traditional quilts and embroideries, pop cultural imagery and heraldry, these meditations on contemporary life and embodiment serve, as Levi describes, as a 'radical form of archival evidence', documenting the experience and labour of the queer subject.

In the age of newly emergent technologies like robotics and AI, there exists again an urgent impulse to smash up the machines as the Luddites set about doing 200 years ago. But in the imaginary space of art, the call is arguably greater: to destroy the ideological machinery that underpins exploitative structures of power. Karl Marx himself, reflecting on the Luddite revolt and its aftermath, noted:

*'It took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which utilises those instruments.'*¹

For me this is the great power of Levi's work - it attacks the current form of society and, crucially, imagines a myriad of radical new forms.

¹ Karl Marx, Capital Volume 1, (Penguin Classics 1990, pg. 554-555)

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