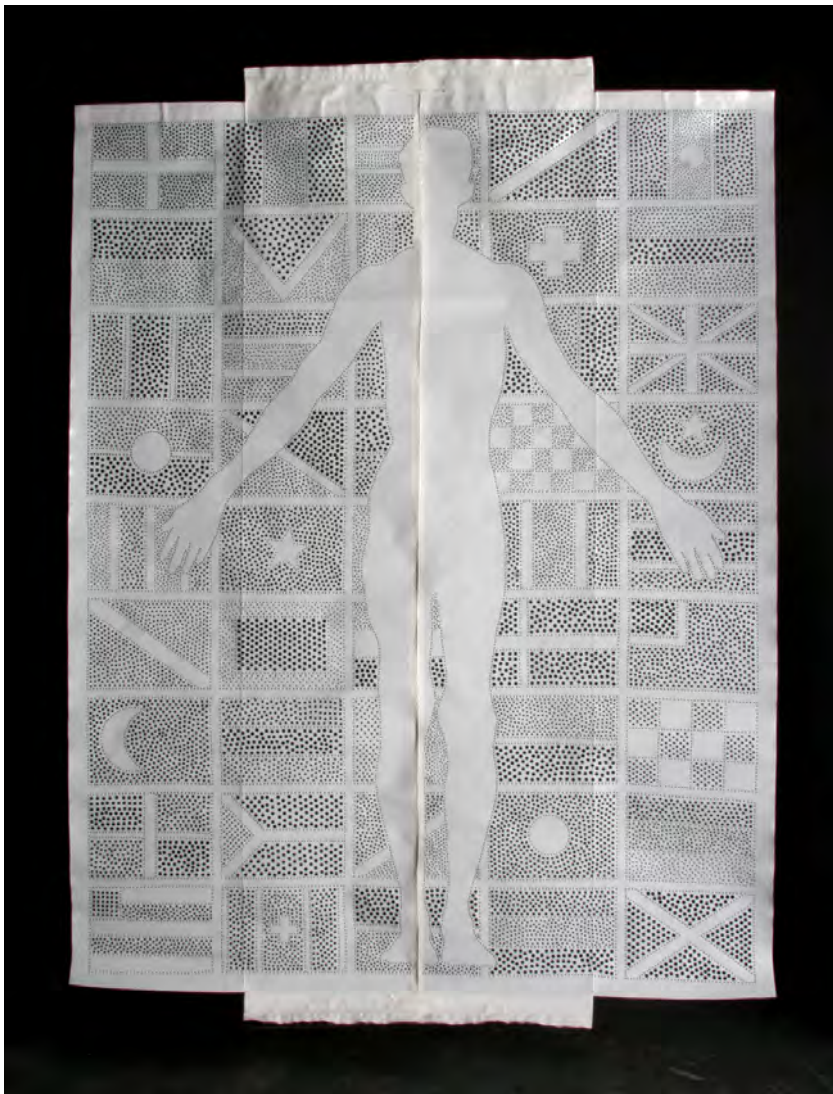


# 'ONE CENTRE-ZIP WHITE'

Shroud as Conceptual Textile Art

MONIQUE VAN NIEUWLAND



The recent past has witnessed the resurgence of the shroud, both as a practical object and a form of conceptual textile art,<sup>1</sup> embodying personal, medical and political responses to death. My 2004 studio work 'Welcome and Farewell' explored concepts of life and death, from a personal and contemporary viewpoint.

Our lives are strung together with welcomes and farewells, most poignantly at birth and death. The work took the form of ritual textiles to cover and wrap the body at birth and death. At birth we wrap the body to warm and protect the infant; at death we wrap the body to contain it and separate it from the living before burial or cremation. The shroud was the starting point for the creation of sets of cloth which consisted of a birth cloth, a shroud and several memento cloths. Techniques and imagery were selected to convey ideas of fertility, sacrifice, light, natural forces, dust, space, time and eternity.

I used a white linen sheet, the simplest form of a shroud which was used to wrap the dead in the Western world for many centuries (and a custom still widely practised in the Muslim and Jewish faiths). However, in this case the material was a white plastic body bag which I purchased from a funeral home. The title of the work is the item description on the receipt: 'One Centre-Zip White'.

This work addresses the concept of death and sacrifice in relation to conflict and war. With it, I register my protest to war and express the hopelessness and futility of warfare, especially in situations where negotiations and patience may have had better human, cultural and environmental outcomes.

For the purpose of warfare, women have been encouraged by their governments to produce more sons to strengthen armies. During the First World War, Reverend Ashley Brown wrote from Belgium in 1917 to inform Mrs Thompson in Tumbumba of the death of her son Driver in Ypres. He added that she 'has been so noble in giving her 3 splendid boys to serve their country'.<sup>2</sup> During wartime, women are asked to give their adult children to the cause. Men who go to war are often transformed into and portrayed as heroes, especially if they are prepared to sacrifice their lives, fighting for their flag, king and country.

Wartime produces victims, injured or dead. The majority of the dead only get the dignity of a body bag. Images of wrapped and bagged corpses lined up have been regularly documented.<sup>3</sup> We are familiar with the body bag in the form of makeshift wrapping of sheets and plastic bags in media reports on conflicts and disasters. In more recent years, the body bag has also been employed as a powerful visual tool in anti-war protests. In 2002, protesters donned garbage bags, tied with string, before lying down on the lawns in front of Australia's Parliament House, to protest about the prospect of war against Iraq. In another instance, small plastic-wrapped bundles were laid out on the lawns to symbolise children dying as a consequence and casualty of war.

Flags inspire strong emotions in people. Symbols and colours on flags show allegiance to a nation and/or religious beliefs. After the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, memorial flags inscribed with names of victims were put on display as part of commemorative ser-

vices.<sup>4</sup> In 1915, W. J. Gordon expressed what flags can embody:

Symbols are sacred things, and one of the chief that every man holds dear is the national flag. Deep down in our nature is the strong emotion that swells the heart and brings the tear and makes us follow the flag, and die around it rather than let it fall into the hands of an enemy.<sup>5</sup>

Flags can bind people together but can also create fear and hatred. Nationalism and religious fundamentalism instill the idea of 'us' and 'them', making people forget how much they are like 'them' themselves.

The body bag used for 'One Centre-Zip White' was cut open at the back and spread out like a sheet with the zip in the centre. I punched holes to create generic shapes of national flags as a patterned background. This noisy process was very distant from the gentle art of stitching with a needle and thread on cloth. The nature of the sound was more that of gun shots, leaving the plastic sprayed with holes. In the foreground I placed the outline of a vulnerable body of an anonymous young man. The body looks awkward, echoing images of execution scenes, of ambush, of starved prisoners of war, returned and injured soldiers. I used a tracing of the body of my son, 19 at the time, making more immediate the pain of seeing a loved-one go off to conflict and war.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Monique Van Nieuwland, M(Phil) Sub-thesis: 'The shroud as a contemporary textile art form in the Western world', The Australian National University: School of Art, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Kenneth S. Ingliss, *Sacred Places*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001, p.99.

<sup>3</sup> Photo of exhumed Australian soldiers awaiting identification and reburial near Vilers-Bretonneux, 1919, cited in Ingliss, op. cit., p.253.

<sup>4</sup> An image of a memorial flag: Susan Long, 'September 11: One year on. Terror alert on day of tears and defiance', *The Straits Times Interactive*, 2003 [cited 01/02 2004]. Available from <http://www.straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/sept11/story/0,1870,142864,00.html>.

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Gordon, *Flags of the World*, London, 1915, cited in Alfred Znamierowski, *Illustrated Encyclopedia, The World of Flags*, London: Hermes House, Anness Publishing Ltd, 2000, p.8.