

ALICE KETTLE

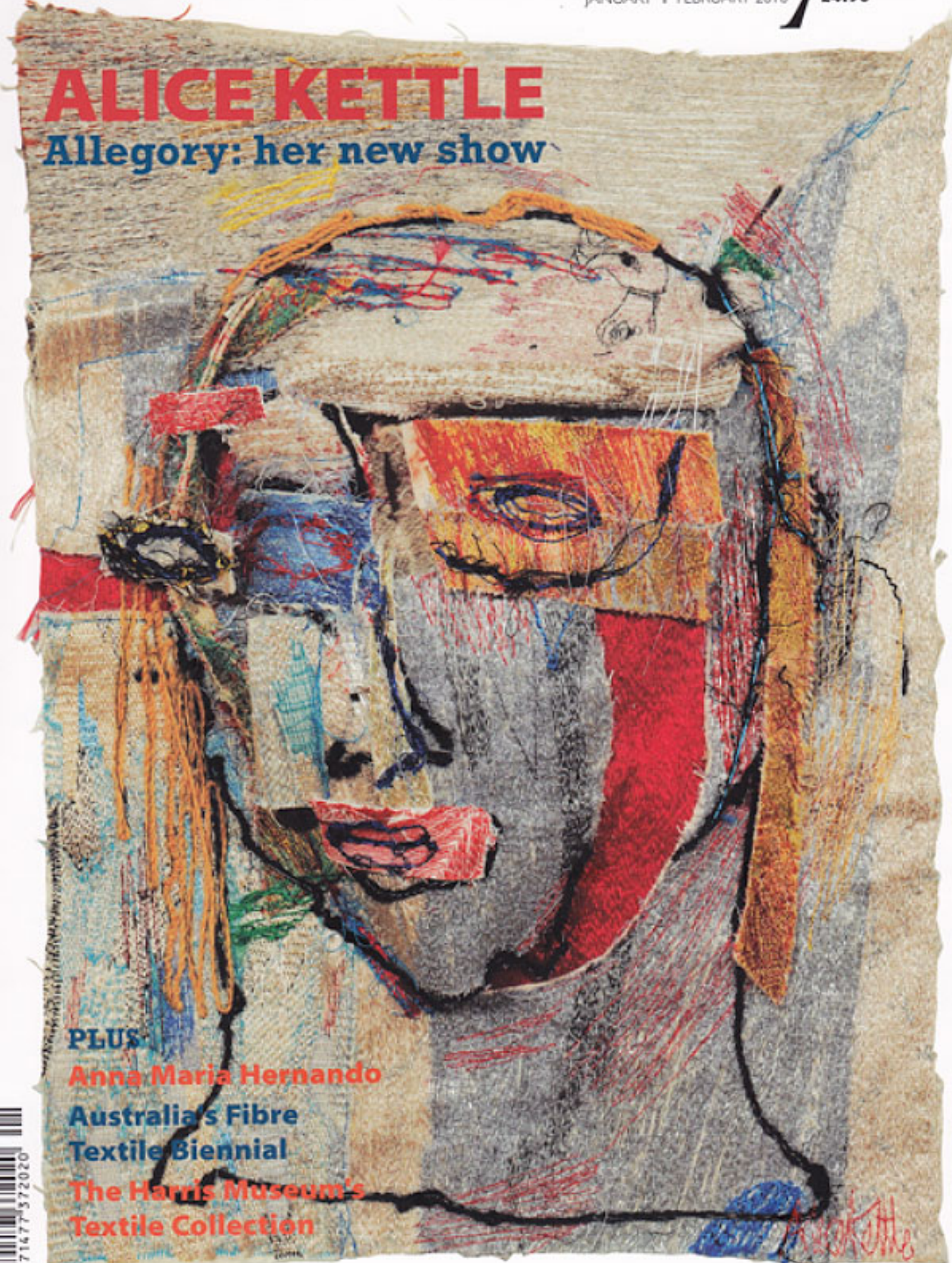
Allegory: her new show

PLUS

Anna Maria Hernando

Australia's Fibre
Textile Biennial

The Harris Museum's
Textile Collection



Alice Kettle

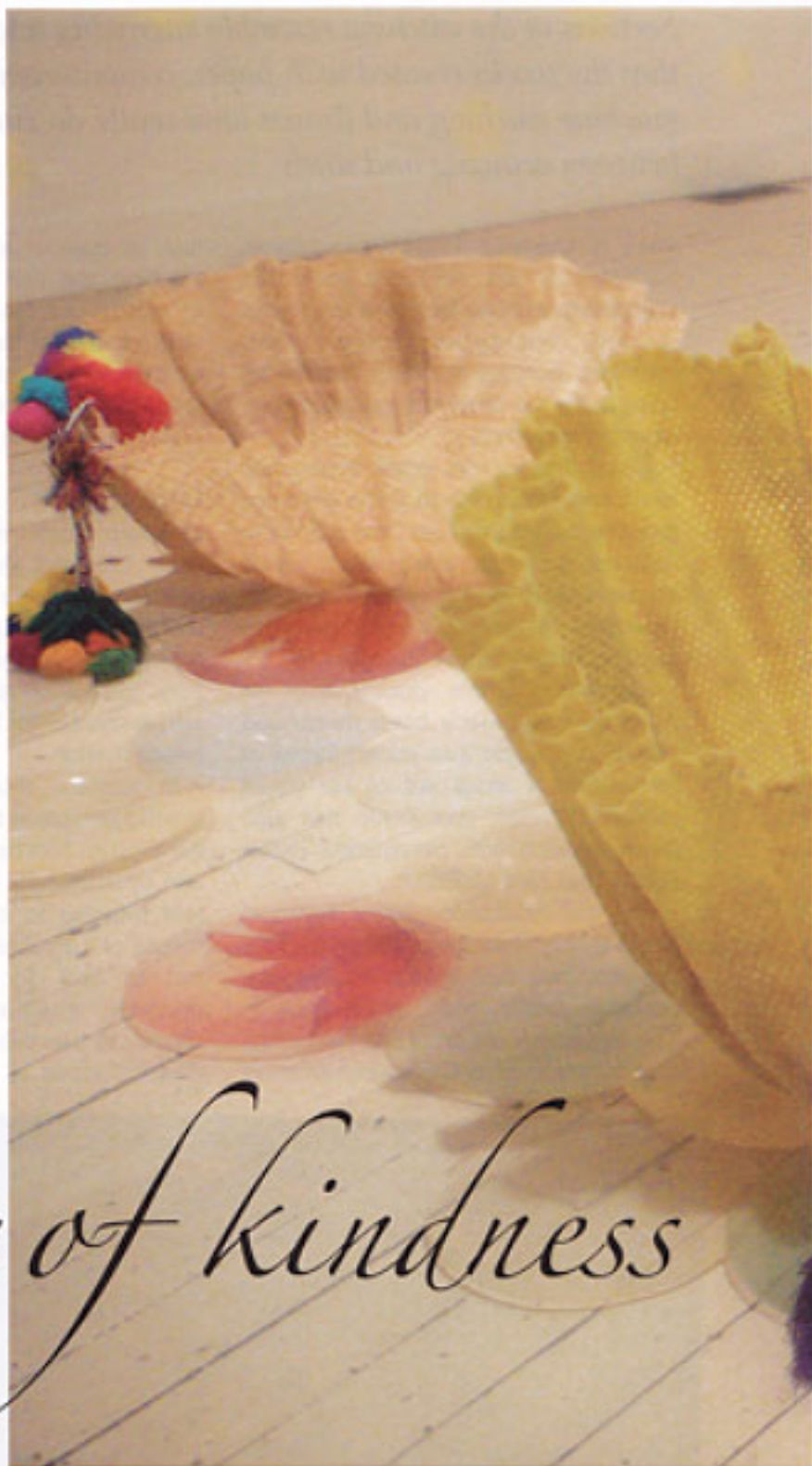
profile

Ana Maria Hernando's textiles investigate the transparent acts of humanity that hold our lives and communities together

'I FIND TRANSPARENT ACTS EVERYWHERE,' explains Ana Maria Hernando. 'My most pressing image would be that of women embroidering tablecloths, washing, ironing. Later these embroidered beauties are stained, and covered with food. Hours of loving work have become the background. These acts of transparent love that make no sense, and have no place in accounting books, inspire me.'

Working from her studio in Boulder, Colorado, Hernando assembles installations to celebrate these 'transparent acts'. Her materials are commissioned and purchased from women in Argentina and Peru. It is a working process driven by pragmatism (the scale of her work rules out production by one person) and philanthropy ('it is important that these women earn a fair wage') in equal measure.

Hernando moved to the United States from Argentina in the mid-1980s. Her training is as a painter, at the California



College of Arts and Crafts and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Today her practice sustains two very different approaches. She explains that when creating an installation, 'I can see what I want'. The outcome is part of a plan resolved in her mind long before she begins. In contrast, her approach to painting 'couldn't be more opposite: I never know the plan'. Pleasure is found by painting on a scale so large that cannot see what she is creating. 'I'm short. I love that I can't see what I am doing. My head cannot be that active then. I paint more from body and stomach. I love that I cannot control it. I don't trust my head that much.'

Her use of textiles, on the other hand, often looks to freeze in time a gesture packed with energy or movement. Fabric is draped over a three-dimensional form and dipped in resin, or cast solid to protect the delicacy of the stitch work inside. 'I want to take the textile a step ahead, without me being these women,' she explains of her interest in distancing these



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Ana María Hernández, *La Montaña Trae Barcos de Azucenas. II* (The Mountain Brings Its Boats Full of Lilies), 2009
Detail of installation
Approx 274cm x 11m x 61cm



1. Hernando's Cave Flowers Installation, 2008
- Un Rio de Cantos Blancos (A River of White Songs), 2008.
2. Embroidered flowers by cloistered nuns in resin, grandmother's dollies, acrylic gel, glass and tablecloths
3. La Montaña (Installation), 2009, MCA Denver (and below 4.)
5. La Montaña trae Barcos de Azucenas (The Mountain Brings Us Boats Full of Lilies), 2008

Opposite: Pongoo (Circle of Power), 2007
 Embroidered flowers in polymer resin, 228.5 x 228.5cm

cloths from their original function. Rather than dwell on the details of production herself, she focuses on evoking a visceral response to materials that convey a legacy of functional associations.

'I want people to feel this work in their bodies,' she explains of her textile installations. The desire echoes her approach to painting. In both cases, purely intellectual intentions are not welcome. This concern has led her to eliminate all but the briefest of text from her exhibitions so that viewers 'don't learn through the head but that the first impression is made through the body'. Curiously, this approach captures the way her materials (which she does not make herself) will have been made by others.

When Hernando decided that she wanted to create embroidered work with a monastic community her mother, who still lives in Buenos Aires, suggested the idea of working with the Barefoot Carmelites Cloister Nuns from the Monastery of Santa Teresa of Jesus. The monastery is situated in the centre of the city and Hernando's first meeting in



December of 2001 came in the 'midst of civil unrest, riots, and five presidencies in two weeks'. Despite the unusual restrictions, the process has proven beneficial for both sides. 'I could not have anticipated that all of my interactions with these nuns, to whom I bring textures, colours and shapes to share, would be limited to conversations through an opaque wooden window.'

This limited system of dialogue acts as an eloquent reminder of the ideas at the heart of her practice. 'To pray is their vocation,' she explains of the nun's daily existence. 'What could be a more transparent expression of the invisible?' Today, Hernando commissions such a volume of machine embroidery work from the monastery that some of the sewing is taken on by other women in the nun's families. She sees the expansion as positive: 'I give the pattern, I choose the fabrics but it has to be good for the women sewing money-wise.'

A second element of her current textile practice began five years ago, when she began travelling as a translator in Peru. Located five hours outside the main city of Cusco, isolated communities live without electricity and ward off the cold nights at high altitude by wearing their clothes in layers. An invitation to the village dance allowed Hernando to glimpse the brightly coloured petticoats peaking under the edges of the women's skirts. She inquired and was able to purchase some of the colourful crochet petticoats, later casting them in resin to recapture their volume to create what she refers to as 'a community of petticoats'.

Her work in the region has also introduced a very different form of community living. 'You are never sure whose children are whose,' she laughs. 'Everyone moves like bunches of

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grapes or flowers together – they take care of each other in these communities.'

The textile also enjoys a different identity. Rather than struggling for recognition as is common in many cultures today, weaving is considered to be akin to the act of prayer. In fact, Hernando explains that all the actions she observed within these communities take on a prayer-like quality. Textile production and motherhood are not discrete roles but are integrated into the heart of daily life. Two distinct groups of women – the cloistered nuns of Buenos Aires and the Peruvian mountain women – have provided Hernando with what she refers to as 'two beautiful images of women'. The installations she has created from their textiles are as much a celebration of their skills and lives as they are her own. It is a curiously selfless approach that begins to make visible some of the 'transparent acts' that hold our lives together. ●

Jessica Hemmings

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