

MURRAY
BRIDGE
REGIONAL
GALLERY

deborah prior:
ON THE THIRD DAY



CENTRE GALLERY

10 FEBRUARY—14 APRIL 2024



ON THE THIRD DAY

Blanket and body ecologies: fragile bodies and difficult questions begun 'on the sheep's back'.

Deborah Prior is one of South Australia's most experimental and tenacious contemporary textile artists, with one of the most conceptually rigorous and generous practices.

With her undeniably distinctive voice and ways of interpreting the world, her process-driven, performative and social-minded practice resonates deeply with audiences.

Prior's body-based works are both tender and brutal, engaging us with difficult topics and big feelings.

Her practice proposes critical and poetic understandings of collective conditions, by encouraging us to sit with the discomfort of ethical crossroads in which we are all implicated.

Fulvia Mantelli, Director, Murray Bridge Regional Gallery , 2024

Cover: Deborah Prior, *Grandmothers remembering Acacia blossoms falling after the rain* (detail), 2022, woollen blankets, wool and cotton yarns, eucalyptus dyed wool, glass beads, studio ephemera, 220 x 129 x 150cm. The University of Western Australia, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. Photo: Sam Roberts.

Left top: Deborah Prior, *Pastoral Apocalypse #2*, 2021-2022, linen, orthopedic sling, studio ephemera, woollen yarn, beads, 136 x 102cm. Photo: Sam Roberts.

Left bottom: Deborah Prior, *Pastoral Apocalypse #2* (detail), 2021-2022

1. Visible Mending 2013-14 official jersey the artist wore when competing in the 2023 Tour Down Under Challenge Ride (carrying <i>Squatter blanket #2</i>), wool and cotton yarns, life-size	\$400
2. Grandmothers remembering Acacia blossoms falling after the rain , 2022 woollen blankets, wool and cotton yarns, eucalyptus dyed wool, glass beads, studio ephemera, 220 x 129 x 150cm The University of Western Australia Cruthers Collection of Women's Art	NFS
3. Long sleep in Ityamai-itpina (King Rodney Park) , 2019-21 woollen blankets and yarn, pearl beads, metallic thread, 105 x 74cm	\$2,000
4. Lost Flock , 2022 woollen blankets, woollen yarn, Squatter sheep tokens, pearl beads diptych, each 160 x 210cm	\$6,000
5. White Rambler , 2022 woollen blankets, assorted wool and cotton yarns, Squatter sheep tokens, pearl beads, 7 forms, dimensions variable (4 to 26cm diameter)	\$2,500
6. Squatter Blanket #1 , 2020 Squatter Blanket #2 , 2020 diptych: archive of plant labels, woollen blanket, woollen yarn, Sellotape, #1 170 x 210cm, #2 138 x 180cm Part of <i>Easter in the Anthropocene</i> , an ongoing installation and performative project	POA
7. Griefplain , 2022 pillowcase, eucalyptus dyed woollen yarn, metallic thread, beads 52 x 155cm	NFS
8. Fleece , 2010-2024 assorted yarns, eucalyptus dyed yarn, found chair, dimensions variable Part of <i>Easter in the Anthropocene</i> , an ongoing installation and performative project	NFS
9. Pastoral Apocalypse #2 , 2021-2022 Pastoral Apocalypse #1 , 2023-2024 diptych: linen, orthopedic sling, studio ephemera, woollen yarn, beads, #1 approx. 180 x 120cm, #2 approx. 136 x 102cm Part of <i>Easter in the Anthropocene</i> , an ongoing installation and performative project	POA

ON THE THIRD DAY

In 2020, Prior commenced work on a long-form climate focused project. Then a global pandemic began. In the same year she suffered multiple injuries after a cycling accident. As she found herself immobilised with her injuries – much of the world was also resigned to a similar state of lockdowns, isolations and infections.

Prior's work is embedded with empathy for those who are immobile, unable to escape the physical impacts of disasters and conditions of poverty, famine and conflict exacerbated by climate change. *On the Third Day* continues the artist's reflections on body fragility within fragile landscapes.

In 2021, Prior was the recipient of the Grindell's Hut artist-in-residence, a three-week residency in the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park, awarded annually by Country Arts SA. Her time spent on Adnyamathanha Country was a period of contemplation and recovery.

In this body of work, Prior addresses our urgent ecological and social crises while interrogating the uncomfortable realities of colonisation in Australia.

Rebecca Freezer, JamFactory 2022

Deborah Prior is an Adelaide-based textile and performance artist whose Feminist practice explores themes including bodily agency, chronic illness, climate justice and the personal and social histories of domestic work. She meticulously knits, stitches and unpicks threads to address the deeply anxious state of attempting to live well on an unwell planet.

Woollen blankets are a recurring material and motif within Prior's practice. *On The Third Day* is a body of blanket-works that share an intimate relationship with the (artist's) body – alluding to the vulnerable states of illness and sleep.

In a country said to have 'begun on the sheep's back', Prior's work also addresses our urgent ecological and social crises, while interrogating the painful realities of (ongoing) colonisation in Australia.

I salvage and translate fabric relics to explore the wonder and fear of corporeality. I'm interested in ordinary domestic textiles and the role they play in the rhythms of homes past, present and future; and how they might form part of a rich tapestry of domestic craft, care and material experience.

Prior won the 2023 Hospital Research Foundation Group – Creative Health Art Prize. The Artist Statement for her art prize entry, *per grazia ricevuta*, gives an intimate insight into a key conceptual underpinning of her practice and aspects of *On The Third Day*:

What does healing feel like when you live with chronic pain?

I want to knit the invisible, because if I can capture what it feels like – the taste, the temperature, the texture – perhaps it might feel less.

Sometimes my pain is softly radiating. It's a murmuration of winged creatures rising and falling in a rhythmic dance. Other times it's a raw, shambolic mess. I'm all sharp edges and bright hot filaments.

Pain is a smothering blanket of fatigue. It's slightly frayed edges, deflated plans, and salty tears of missed and missing time. It's working from bed on little pieces that you can stitch slowly, setting down / picking back up as your body allows.

If I could hold each fuzzy pink pain in my palm as a contained offering to the Gods, it might hurt less. How many anatomical votives do I need to offer them for my healing?

On mornings when I wake up and I am not in pain, it feels like a small miracle. I knit another offering for grace received. There is plenty of room to spare here. Perhaps healing is recognising a fellow pilgrim at the sanctuary: Your pain is not my pain, but I feel you all the same.

Easter in the Anthropocene is the collective title for an ongoing project that encompasses a performative aspect of Prior's practice — research in the form of marathon-length walking and cycling — together with five works in *On The Third Day*: ***Squatter Blanket #1*** and ***#2***, ***Pastoral Apocalypse #1*** and ***#2*** and ***Fleece***.

Prior describes this project as being about the cycle of “trying and failing and trying again and failing again. These works are all designed to wear, to carry, to weigh me down, both as baggage and protection.”

The Anthropocene is a geological epoch of our own making. Humankind has caused mass extinctions of plant and animal species, altered the atmosphere and polluted the oceans. Prior articulates how: *This virus too, is a consequence of the Anthropocene; one of many catastrophes that await us. As I wash my hands – water running for twenty seconds—I wonder how you stay safe once the river runs dry?*

Rebecca Freezer, JamFactory 2022



Deborah Prior, *Fleece* (detail), assorted yarns, eucalyptus dyed yarn, found chair dimensions variable.
Photo: Sam Roberts.



Deborah Prior, *Squatter Blanket #1*, 2022, archive of plant labels, woolen blanket, woolen yarn, sellotape, 170 x 210cm. Photo: Sam Roberts.

On The Third Day

Deborah Prior's grandmother Joy was raised on a dairy farm; her grandfather Mel grazed sheep. Her mother grew up on a Mildura/Merbein fruit block, meeting her father in Pukatja /Ernabella where they were advising Anangu communities on climate appropriate western food crops. Both became ministers, imparting pastoral care to Protestant flocks. This connection to cultivation and Country, witnessing the power of fire, water and spirit to change fortunes for a season or a decade, has impressed upon Prior the unpredictability of our lives, and precarity of life on our planet.

But it has also instilled strength and resilience – planted a seed of faith that if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Her art practice, a primary industry of embroidery, beading, knitting and durational performance, initially focused on the body – her body and by extension women's bodies. Desire and disgust, intimacies and saintliness, domesticity and aspiration, science

and religion, all contain and constrain women's lives. Over time her recurrent motifs and votives have expanded to embrace the inherent fragility of living with chronic pain, the enormity of colonial dispossession, and the incessant climate crisis.

Like her forebears, Prior is in it for the long term – having knitted, unravelled and reknitted the wearable work *Fleece* for 15 years. *Fleece* is both a nod to the fleece of the sheep upon which colonial Australia was built, and the comforting, caring, nurturing cocoon of knitted woollens. Part of the ongoing project *Easter in the Anthropocene*, in Prior's walking/knitting performances – her 'Lenten penance', she knits herself deeper inside the part animal, part vegetable, part mineral artwork. Foraged eucalypt leaf dyed yarns deepen *Fleece*'s geological strata; and as she ages, travels and plants herself into new rural, urban and gallery environs, the skirt rings grow with her.

Familial nurturing and spiritual sustenance are embodied in her woven woollen blankets. Vintage Laconias and Onkaparingas become painterly topographical and memory maps, companions for a journey, with Prior taking some to her 2016 Rome residency. The first in her series on grandmothers, *An Incomplete Family History* (2017), is a meditation on maternal lineage, women's work of reproduction and care, while *The Shortest Day of the Year* (2021), visually unravels and reassembles dementia's memory loss. Here, in beauty and sadness, *Grandmothers remembering Acacia blossoms falling after the rain* (2022), a glowing cascade of tendrils signal the relief and renewed hope of a cloudburst.

While Prior has described cutting and reassembling blankets as 'picking at the threads of Christian thought and practice', she also interrogates her family history of land ownership and (mis)management. Works such as *White Rambler* (2022), pearl beads and plastic Ram tokens from the Squatter game flower on green *Westringia* foliage blanket strips bound into neat hedges, bearing witness to the transition of a freely flourishing indigenous species into a tightly trimmed westernised border plant.

The rallying cry of *Lost Flock* replays throughout her practice. In its 2022 iteration, landscapes of mixed-use paddocks rise from the last matching pair of blankets inherited from her grandparents. Allotments packed with creamy white plastic sheep spell out a lament for a wounded earth; a glistening blue metallic yarn dam; beaded rocks sprout; plots lay idle in drought yellow, spring into pastel green or drown in Salvation Jane's toxic lavender. This could only be Australia.

Recurrent in her cropping of bodily corporeality are pillowcases. On these intimate sites of sleep, love, sex and illness, delicately stained by tears and sweat, tracings of hair and metallic thread draw contour lines of ambition,

pleasure, exhaustion and failure. Poignantly charting the vulnerability of working from bed, *Griefplain* (2022) also proffers the potential of rising (on the third day?) to the next task.

Plant care labels from Grandma Joy's garden, sown/sewn into earlier works such as #climatebadges, take root en masse in *Squatter Blanket #1* and #2 (2020). Twin green woollen fields visually pop with gridded mis-plantings of the anachronistically labelled Bonnie Prince Charlie, Sunset Boulevard and Mozart. Atoning for the sins of the past while raising awareness of current ecosystem collapse. Prior cycles on, carrying these folded *Squatter* blankets across country in durational events that are part meditation, part protest, part penance.

One performative ride of 2200 km to the 2020 *Tamworth Textile Triennale* ended prematurely with a serious crash. However, Prior returned to ride the 4kg blanket both to her Seppeltsfield exhibition and victoriously finish the gruelling 123 km Tour Down Under Challenge in 2023. Being at one with a body that ages, endures pain and becomes ill, after the accident Prior re-learned to walk and carry *Fleece* and *Squatter Blankets* again during her Grindell's Hut residency on Adnyamathanha Country in the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges. Here, she began to embroider and bead the Pastoral Apocalypse #1 and #2 (2021-24) carriers, which fold origami-like into backpacks to hold and compliment her *Squatter* burdens.

Fashioned on chocolate and candle wax stained linen repurposed from *Eat Your Saints* (2018), the exuberant carrier ecologies encompass orthopaedic slings, vinyl high-vis bicycle flag remnants, leather scraps from Rome, plastic squatter sheep, buttons, studio ephemera and vibrant bursts of blossoming yarn. An attached palm-sized peachy pink knitted anatomical votive (a perennial of her body of work; prolific in *per grazia ricevuta* (2023); and the inspiration for a pink sediment in *Fleece*), attests to a practice that endures, evolves and thrives in harsh conditions.

Continuing to knit, cut, sew and walk, Deborah Prior is stridently feminist, faithful and forthright. We cannot go back, and by ritually addressing our collective physical, cultural and ecological calamities, her *Easter in the Anthropocene* series illuminates a pathway through. Reflecting on the past, folding into the future, Prior's considered crafting is a warm embrace, a conscious inquiry and a healing release.

Melinda Rackham, Adjunct Professor, University of South Australia Creative, 2024



This iteration of *On The Third Day* includes new works since its original presentation at JamFactory Seppeltsfield in 2022.

Murray Bridge Regional Gallery is pleased to present *On The Third Day* simultaneously with the exhibition *Costal Layers* in the Jean Sims Gallery, the first solo exhibition by expert local ceramicist Rose Walker.

Celebratory Event Sunday 18 February 2024

Guest Speaker: Dr Lisa Slade

Assistant Director, Artistic Programs,

Art Gallery of South Australia

Above: Deborah Prior, *On The Third Day*, installation view, Murray Bridge Regional Gallery 2024. Photo: Sam Roberts

Overleaf: Deborah Prior, *White rambler* (detail), 2022, woollen blankets, assorted wool and cotton yarns, Squatter sheep tokens, pearl beads, 7 forms, dimensions variable (4 to 26cm diameters). Photo: Sam Roberts.



Acclaimed as one of South Australia's premier regional galleries and set in the heart of the town's arts precinct, Murray Bridge Regional Gallery is a convenient 45-minute drive from Adelaide, on beautiful Ngarrindjeri Ruwe (Country) near the banks of the majestic River Murray. The Gallery brings enriching and adventurous contemporary arts experiences to the region, with culturally and conceptually diverse projects. The exhibition program and Gallery Shop also showcase local arts practices from across the Murraylands and surrounds, ranging from seasoned to experimental artforms, by leading, mid-career and emerging artists, as well as recreational makers and young people.



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