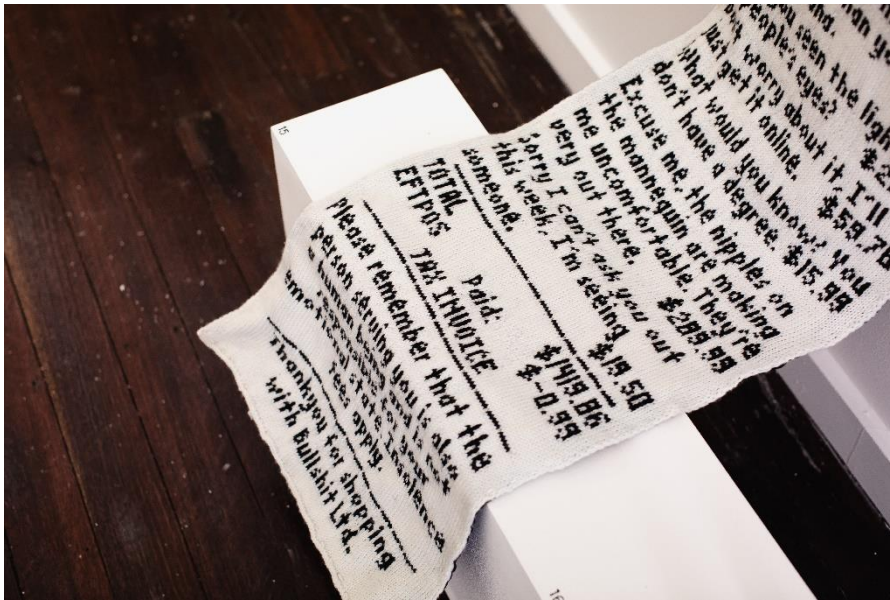


Makeda Duong: I AM UNCOMFORTABLE

Pivotal works from across a decade of a provocative practice exploring aspects of lived experience with perceptions of race, gender, sexuality and mental health.



Makeda Duong, *Shit customers say*, 2021, intarsia knitted merino wool, felt, floristry wire, 207 x 46cm.
Photo: Rosina Possingham, courtesy Post Office Projects. Private Collection, Adelaide

My practice is informed by the history of textiles in the western world, and how the materiality of the medium can be used to convey deeply personal experiences.

I create artworks as antidotes to personal challenges within my life, in order to bring attention to these particular issues. Some of these challenges include mental illness, struggles with racial identity, belonging and the social friction that comes with them.

I represent my lived experience to move beyond stereotypes and shallow misconceptions. If something bothers or plagues me, I am driven to make work about it.

While these works tend to be introspective, they aren't devoid of humour. They invite the viewer to examine their own social assumptions and biases, or possibly to commiserate in a shared experience.

Makeda Duong, June 2023

MURRAY BRIDGE REGIONAL GALLERY

2 SEPTEMBER – 12 NOVEMBER 2023

1. ***Customer care for anarchists*, 2021**
metallic thread embroidery on cotton, 12.3 x 17.5cm.
Private Collection, Adelaide

2. ***Sales tips for red capitalists*, 2021** \$1,499.99
metallic thread embroidery on cotton, 15.7 x 19cm

Combining motivational sales quotes with symbols of leftist politics, this work contrasts the 'radical' values of young westerners looking to Marxist ideals to critique Capitalism, and the experience of older immigrants who have survived oppressive regimes under Communist governments. Makeda reflects on the discord between her own leftist political ideals and the brutal reality of her South Vietnamese father's memories of post-Vietnam War atrocities.

3. ***Shit customers say*, 2021**
intarsia knitted merino wool, felt, floristry wire, 207 x 46cm
Private Collection, Adelaide

This collection of real customer quotes experienced by Makeda and her friends while working in retail, highlights the vitriol and disrespect that customer service workers are exposed to, despite their vital roles in our society. What began as a tongue in cheek documentation of these absurdities, soon morphed to highlight perceived class divisions and fallacies that customer service workers are skill-less, uneducated and inferior.

4. ***Bipolar Disorder*, 2020** \$4,660
indigo dyed cotton embroidery on linen, 32.4 x 49.5 cm

5. ***Makita*, 2020** \$5,320
papier-mâché, sequins, epoxy, 24 x 22.5 x 7cm

"Oh, *Makita*, like the drill?" Makeda's first name is often mistaken for a power tool brand. She sees this as suitable for the hyperactive alter-ego that can dominate her during an episode of hypomania, a condition she occasionally experiences. Symptoms can include euphoria, racing thoughts and hyper sexuality, as well as increased confidence, creativity, ideas and motivation. The eye here symbolises insomnia, while the body mimics the internal structure of the clitoris.

6. ***Mixed race female*, 2017** \$5,320
cotton cross stitch, wool pompoms, 23 x 30.5 x 3cm

Exploring diaspora and racial identity in Australia, this work features pseudo Asian and Australian iconography: a geisha and a cherry blossom appear with a pair of thongs, alongside imagery from the Vietnam War. It investigates stereotypes imposed on Asian and mixed race women, through the lenses of exoticism and orientalism.

7. ***Mixed race sweater*, 2020**
hand knitted merino wool, dimensions variable.
Collection of The History Trust of South Australia (HT2021.0066)

Bearing the colours of the Australian flag on the front and South Vietnamese on the back, with a collection of comments occasionally posed to Makeda about her racial appearance, this work explores the complexities of being biracial and caught in-between cultures. The artist examines her own racial identity and how her sense of belonging and otherness may be reflective of larger cultural anxieties in Australia.

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| <p>8. <i>Relationship status</i>, 2019
metallic thread cross stitch on aida cloth, 33 x 42.5cm</p> <p>A reinterpretation of embroidered wedding anniversary records and marriage greetings crafted by German immigrant women in South Australia, this work explores how young people navigate contemporary relationships via online dating apps. While attitudes towards marriage and matchmaking may have changed significantly, Makeda considers how marriage status can still be viewed within a hierarchy and questions whether married couples still hold a higher social status than singles.</p> | <p>\$2,660</p> | <p>11. <i>Provoked vestibular vulvodynia</i>, 2017
embroidery on cotton handkerchief, 41.5 x 41.5cm</p> <p>Since being diagnosed with the vulvodynia in 2016, Makeda has developed a series of works which challenge the stigma associated with reproductive and sexual health, to navigate the psychological and physical impact of this debilitating pelvic pain condition. She contextualises her personal experience within the broader historical narrative generated by male-centric medical attitudes that characterised female maladies as 'hysteria'.</p> | <p>\$4,950</p> |
| <p>9. <i>Fuckboy</i>, 2017
cross stitch, wool pompoms, 20 x 20 x 3cm</p> <p>A play on internet slang and how it intersects with contemporary sexual stereotypes, this work acts as a criticism of the hypocrisies and double standards that exist in regards to female promiscuity.</p> | <p>\$2,000</p> | <p>12. <i>Crush on you</i>, 2014
cotton embroidery on cotton, 25 x 16 x 4cm</p> | <p>\$2,000</p> |
| <p>10. <i>The vessel</i>, 2018
cotton embroidery on linen handkerchief, 25 x 25cm</p> <p>This work responds to the fight for reproductive rights around the world. Situated within the current climate of menstruation awareness, it explores the expanded idea of the womb as a vital space for knowledge and identity, as much as a vessel for pregnancy or childbirth.</p> | <p>\$3,330</p> | <p>13. <i>Affection</i>, 2014
cotton cross stitch on cotton, hand knitted lace, 21 x 21cm</p> | <p>\$3,990</p> |
| | | <p>14. <i>The duties of a wife</i>, 2015
hand knitted wool, hand knitted lace, dimensions variable</p> | <p>\$5,320</p> |

Galleries are the arena in which the work of art does its work. The bourgeois cultural establishment serves its purpose as the transformation room in which contemporary socio-cultural and economic realities are exposed, informed and (re)ordered. Makeda Duong's *I Am Uncomfortable* brings together ten years of practice that weaves together multiple threads of marginalisation. Duong demonstrates how discomfort is stitched into the fabric of lives that are not white, male, and financially secure. In doing so, she exposes an oppressive matrix of simultaneous discrimination within systems that have been known to be sexist, racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-poor.

The distinctive feature of creative work is that of 'immaterial labour', the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards. Duong combines visual and written modes of communication to influence alternative ways of thinking about discrimination. The soft materials with their delicate, neatly stitched words lure the unwitting viewer in with a sense of feminine subordination that belies their strength. Collectively, the artworks in *I Am Uncomfortable* reveal insidious interactions that enframe an experience of the world that is inflected with mental illness whilst being irreducibly raced, classed and gendered. The works reach their discursive and affective potential as they reveal the presence of an oppressed and exploited class. The core component of the word "oppression" is "press". Those of us who stand in opposition to the normative forces of power can experience the pressure to yield, to give in to

the common will. To stand up is to stand out – a subversive act stitched into the psyche of subjects who reject the threads of invisibility and disagree with being agreeable, who withstand prejudice as racialised, gendered, and classed subjects who are unwilling to be willing. Duong might be considered a 'thorn in the side' or a 'sore thumb', to borrow the phrase from Sara Ahmed's scholarship on *Willful Subjects*, and another reason to be uncomfortable.

The tapestry of textual transgressions testifies to the ways that the responsibility for social justice outcomes disproportionately falls on the cultural labour of groups that are oppressed. In order to shift some of the onus for change from oppressed voices on to more privileged groups we need to understand how differences are structured within systems, institutions, and histories. Racism, heterosexism and homophobia, sexism, transphobia, nationalism, and ableism are pervasive. It is only through recognising privileges that result from oppressive systems that we can create opportunities for transformative change. The radical reconstitution of our world requires that we acknowledge privileges and embrace feeling uncomfortable.

I Am Uncomfortable emphasises the radical incommensurability of differences and discrimination along corresponding axes of disadvantage. The artworks over a decade of creative practice contest systemic

inequality with an approach to agency and resistance that embeds a critique of capitalism. This emphasis is necessary not only to understand but also to change the world. Change can lead to growth, and growth can be painful. For art do its work we have to find ways to live with being uncomfortable.

Yusuf Hayat October 2023

Yusuf Ali Hayat has worked in leadership roles for several international non-government organisations across social housing, social support and Emergency Relief before undertaking postgraduate studies at UniSA School of Art, Architecture & Design. He holds undergraduate degrees in Politics from the University of Leicester (UK), and in Visual Arts from UniSA. Yusuf's PhD thesis "Curries, Kurtas & Burqas" is focussed on post-migrant artistic practices of emplacement. Yusuf has exhibited in Australia and overseas. He is currently the Visual Arts and Community Engagement Lead at Nexus Arts.



Tues to Sat 10am—4pm + Sun 11am—4pm

Closed Mondays + public holidays

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Mixed race sweater (front view, detail), 2020, hand knitted merino wool, dimensions variable. Collection of The History Trust of South Australia. Photo: Photo Radhe Osborn.