aART WATCH

ANGELA ELLSWORTH

Much of the work of US-based artist Angela Ellsworth is about converging lines: in her action drawings and stitch portraits, in her interest in lineage — both of her Mormon heritage and her connection to earlier seminal female performance artists. There is a sense of convergence, too, in Ellsworth's numerous collaborations, in particular with the LA Art Girls, and in her use of diverse disciplines including photography, video, performance, sculpture, sound, installation and drawing.

Strong personal threads run through Ellsworth's work. Her 1993 collaborative photographic project *Imag(in)ed Malady* was begun in response to her diagnosis of lymphoma. Here Ellsworth and fellow artist Tina Takemoto produced a series called *visual rhymes*. Ellsworth photographed the changes that occurred on her body during the course of treatment, including biopsy sites, lesions, bruises and rashes. She sent these images to Takemoto, who coupled them with images she made of the same, though simulated, marks on her body, so creating the visual rhyme, an empathetic phantom. Like much of Ellsworth's work, this project is ongoing — part of a greater tapestry concerning continuous and continuing process.

Ellsworth's lines map bodily experience: in the repetitive actions of fitness regimes traced directly onto paper, in the meditative action of sewing stitch portraits and constructing Seer Bonnets from thousands of corsage pins, and in the configurations of her sister-wife performances. These lines become an impression of experience — a memory.

Ellsworth's *Stitch Portraits* (2003–2008) are sewn on fragile embossed napkins — the ancient craft speaking of the domestication of women — as well as fashioning a fragmented and stark weave, creating something transitory and beautiful. The portraits are sewn from memory, without sketches, each positive image juxtaposed with an underside — the back of the portrait. Exposing knots and dark pools of thread, these abstract figurations say something of hidden complexity and nuance.

This dual effect is also manifest in Ellsworth's Seer Bonnets, which featured in the seventeenth Biennale of Sydney, 2010. Here the nine nineteenth-century Mormon bonnets represent the nine wives of the fifth Mormon President, who was Ellsworth's great great grandfather. She estimates that she embedded around 20,000 pearl-headed corsage pins into each bonnet. From the outside the bonnets are a shimmering bed of pearls, each embossed with its own mystical Masonic pattern.

On the inside, thousands of long pins render the bonnets ornamental and dangerous.

Ellsworth's potent commentary on the subjugation of women in Mormon polygamous lifestyles is carried into her series of four performances *Sister-Wives* (2008–present). In *Compounded*, a family of sister-wives dressed in fundamentalist Mormon gowns and wearing classic long braids tote machine guns and don false beards. The gestures and imagery are drawn from iconic performances of earlier female artists, in this case the image of VALIE EXPORT in crotchless trousers holding a machine gun, based on her 1968 performance *Action Pants: Genital Panic*. Through this inversion from invisible housewives to seminal female performers, Ellsworth pays homage to and empowers the sister-wives.

In *Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch* (2010), presented at the Sydney Biennale, the sister-wives performed a popular 1980s line dance, making non-verbal gestures through touch and dance moves. Using social ritual, Ellsworth draws together mainstream and alternative threads, and in doing so collapses boundaries, acknowledging the common bonds of humanity.

Ruth Learner
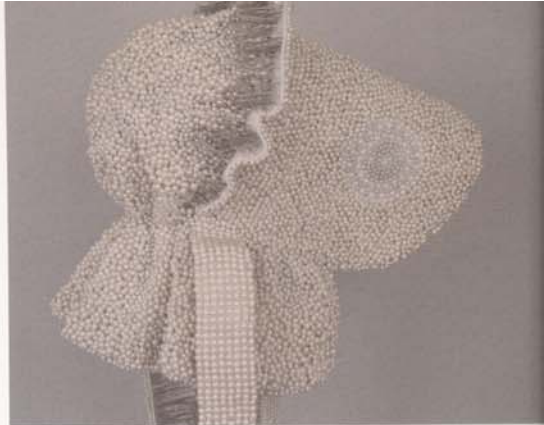
Top: Angela Ellsworth, **Bonnet Q**, 2010, 14,838 pearl corsage pins, fabric, steel, 78cm x 22cm x 33cm. Courtesy the artist and Fehily Contemporary.

Above: Angela Ellsworth, **Joelle**, 2006, black thread on paper napkin, framed, 22cm x 20cm. Courtesy the artist and Fehily Contemporary.

Left: Angela Ellsworth, **Seer Bonnet Lucy Anne**, 2011, 15,612 pearl corsage pins, fabric, steel, 73.6 x 33 x 40.6cm. Courtesy the artist and Fehily Contemporary.