

Celebrating man-made craft

By **Frances Atkinson**

September 27, 2019 – 12.00pm

Knit one, purl one, the endless motion of yarn over needle, the knocking of bobbins, or the piston-like motion of the crochet hook. They've all worked their way into the lives of the artists taking part in The Johnston Collection's exhibition *A Boy's Own Story*.

The exhibition challenges the too-often repeated assumption that men can't knit or sew by featuring the work of male artists who have dedicated much of their lives to creating, perfecting and exploring the limitless frontier of a range of mediums traditionally associated with women.

Third-generation textile artist David Collyer can't remember a time when knitting wasn't part of his life. Collyer's mother taught him to knit when he was seven. His first project, a doll's cardigan, was completed a year later in 1956. "Mum taught us how to draft patterns, and miniaturise things, which meant we also learnt a lot of math." Remarkably, Collyer's cardigan survives and is on show, along with more than 30 pieces made by his father and grandfather.

"When my parents married just before World War II, my mother had no idea my father could knit." A. Keith Collyer was stationed at Ravenshoe in North Queensland and, shortly before the birth of his first child, he sent his wife a "whole layette of hand-knitted babies clothes".

Decades later, as a soldier in the Vietnam War, David Collyer found himself echoing his father's frontline craft activities. "We couldn't change our clothes, so in about a week they were rotten. You'd bend your elbow and get a rip from collar to shoulder. I spent a lot of time sewing them up – beautifully - with show-quality



Showgirl, one of Trevor Smith's works. TREVOR SMITH

blanket stitch. I remember darning socks in the jungle, too. You don't see that in the movies."

Collyer went on to design clothes in London, with the encouragement of his late partner Robert Pearce, founder of Melbourne's Fashion Design Council. In 1973 he spent three months camping on a beach in Morocco where, quite literally, he carved out a living. "I carved a crochet hook out of bamboo, bought homespun camel's wool from a local market and supported myself by making beanies for the hippies."



Portland-based textile artist Trevor Smith with some of his works.

Spot a man knitting in public today and there is every chance he will end up on Instagram (#guyswhoknit), but for gay men who defied straight stereotypes in the 1960s, it was a dangerous time. "I was quietly crocheting and someone came up and punched me. That's how it was back then," Collyer says. Today he has a message for men toying with the idea of picking up the sticks. "Just go ahead and do it. It's a different time now. I had to sit through an AGM the other day and I got an inch done."

For textile artist Trevor Smith, crochet offers a unique creative freedom to "increase and decrease and make things turn corners". Based in Portland, Smith is known widely for his strikingly original tea cosies and sculptures made from wool, foam rubber and wire.

Like Collyer's mother, Smith's was a talented craftswoman who baked and made clothes for the family. "Mum loved all the craft crazes: macramé, stenciling, Hobbytex paint – she was always trying something new."

In the 1980s Smith studied a Diploma of Visual Arts and majored in sculpture, which led to quilt making and various other crafts. For more than three decades, he has been a curator at a number of regional art galleries, but his out-of-work hours are dominated by his crochet obsession.

Visitors to the exhibition will have no trouble recognising the inspiration behind many of Smith's tea cosies. "A lot of my work has a storytelling element to it." A commission from a winery in South Australia resulted in cosies based on people who grew up in the region, including Kasey Chambers, Sir Robert Hawke, Sir Robert Helpmann and Adam Lindsay Gordon.

On a personal level, Smith says crochet is therapeutic and relaxing. "I generally crochet in front of the television, but when I have a project on, I can crochet for 16 hours a day. Because I don't use a pattern, sometimes I encounter certain challenges, but that's also part of the process. I rarely give up on something, I usually find a way to solve the problem."

Over the past decade, Smith has made around 400 tea cosies and numerous household appliances including an iron and a toaster oven – all crocheted. On display in *A Boy's Own Story* is a wildly eclectic selection of character cosies including a British Beefeater, a baker, a bishop, Cleopatra, a Roman soldier and Liberace.



Douglas McManus' *Dress Circle*, an opera cape made from printed rubber, latex coated silk and microfibre.

Melbourne-based textile artist Douglas McManus calls himself a "tech-nerd" and credits his artistic grandparents for influencing much of his work. "My parents are not artistic in any way, but my grandmother used to weave baskets, knit and crochet and my grandfather was a sailor, and he made ships out of shells. They both had studios so, as a kid, I spent a lot of time hanging out."

Many of his large-scale installation pieces begin on a computer screen. "I enjoy what technology can do in terms of textile production. I worked at RMIT for many years and we had access to a lot of that sort of equipment. I've always been drawn to it." Since his diagnosis of early onset Parkinson's disease, McManus has had to change his practice, but the technology allows him to keep creating large pieces of work.

For *A Boy's Own Story*, McManus has made three strikingly original pieces based on Guy Fawkes' failed attempt to assassinate King James 1 in 1605. The piece, entitled *gallows chandelier*, is darkly operatic and is made from a range of materials, including rubber painted suits, laser engraved microfiber and resin voile.

While it may not be obvious in every fold, much of his work explores men and their emotions. "Men in general continue to suppress their feelings and I think it causes a lot of mental illness. All the clichés – 'chin up', 'be a man' - stop a lot of men from being emotional beings."

But McManus is also hopeful. "I can see it in this generation; younger men are more comfortable with their feelings and gender barriers are breaking down."

A Boy's Own Story:^[1]_{SEP} Christmas At The Johnston Collection, September 30 - February 4 2020.
