The exhibition ‘Cultural Threads’ presents exceptional pieces by contemporary artists who use textiles as a tool to address socio-political issues. They use textiles to unravel histories and outline future perspectives or they link them to their own search for identity in a globalising world.

In these essays, the authors explore and underline the role that artists play in the representation of global history, identity and cultural interweaving.
The artists included in the ‘Cultural Threads’ exhibition share an interest in understanding how the past global trade of textiles portends many current realities: gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth; material value exceeding the cost of human life; and the restless movement of materials, people and labour that underpins textile production. Contemporary textile practice cannot escape the realities of the proceeding centuries, realities Joseph McBrinn observes were ‘marked by both a rampant and ruthless European imperialism as well as an astonishing revolution in textile facture and consumption.’ Today the long shadow of the colonial era continues to play a significant role in the complex meaning of contemporary textiles. McBrinn warns that historical advances in textile production ‘often masked appropriation or exploitation’ of textile labour, concluding that ‘in the modern age any, and indeed every, textile became inscribed with the entwined histories of colonialism and capitalism.’ The production and trade of textiles has both fuelled and communicated human desire for wealth, expansion and change for centuries.

Today the textile may be one of the most articulate ways of communicating complex contemporary realities. The ease and frequency with which the textile travels mean that they often accompany our increasingly peripatetic lives – migrations admittedly of choice and opportunity only for some, but for a large portion of the world journeys not of choice, from homelands now lost. As I wrote in the introduction to Cultural Threads: transnational textiles today, ‘ideas about belonging to more than one place, which in reality results in a sense of connection to everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, are pertinent to society today more than ever.’ To my mind, it is the textile that helps us understand and express these complexities. While the legacies of history that the contemporary textile has inherited are often fraught, many of the ‘Cultural Threads’ artists deploy the beauty of the textile to now communicate these difficult histories.
In contemporary life the textile helps us communicate the multiple influences that make up so many of our personal and cultural points of reference. While long overlooked as part of women's contribution to society, the textile acts as a physical record of what may otherwise become historical amnesia. Elsewhere, traces of these very textiles are no longer available. Several artists in the exhibition draw inspiration from textiles that offer little remaining physical or biographical material: Jennifer Tee and Vincent Vulsma both draw inspiration from textile traditions of which little physical trace remains; Fiona Tan looks to historical textiles to assist in constructing the biography of a woman history has overlooked.

The textile also plays a central role in artistic practices built around family histories. Mary Sibande, Aiko Tezuka and also Jennifer Tee use personal history as the starting point for their work. As curator and academic Christine Checinska has noted, 'there is an accessibility when we work with textiles in a curatorial setting [...] visitors can come in and recognise, or begin to recognise, themselves and their own stories because we are working with cloth.' From these textile traces and family histories the 'Cultural Threads' exhibition teaches us not only of the histories the textile has witnessed, but also allows us to reimagine those histories that have gone unrecorded and overlooked.
Jennifer Tee, Tampan
Tree of Life, Tampan
Womb of Time and
Tampan Mirrored Ship
#3, 2016, photo: Josefina
Eikenaar/TextielMuseum
Jennifer Tee describes ‘the act of travelling, both physically and mentally’ as ‘an important metaphorical binding thread’ throughout her artistic practice. Indonesian tampan and palepai textiles, known as ship cloths by Europeans, and the heritage of her Chinese-Indonesian father who travelled by ship with his sister and parents to the Netherlands in the 1950s prompted Tee to recently travel to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Centuries before Tee’s trip, wealth generated through the trade of pepper brought prosperity to the Lampung region of southern Sumatra where small, square tampan and larger, more ornate palepai were originally produced. Writing in 1979, textile historian Mattiebelle Gittinger explains, ‘Tampan were made and used by all levels of society, but this was not true of the palepai’ whose use was ‘essentially restricted to the aristocracy.’ But Gittinger observes, ‘the skills needed to produce them are now completely lost and apparently have been for three quarters of a century’ concluding that ‘it is doubtful any significant number remain in use in Sumatra today.’

While traditional production of the cloth is long gone, Tee instead found traces of the once intricate textile patterns on other local materials such as wooden relief carving, metal gates and mosaics. These traditional textile patterns provided the inspiration for a series of three woven textiles and three embroidered digital textile prints inspired by the palepai and tampan. Originally, the textiles ‘were displayed or exchanged at both birth and death, at marriages, circumcisions, and ceremonies marking changes in social rank [...] a sacred force that bound society together.’ In Tee’s work mirrored imagery plays a central role, which she has adapted to several philosophical themes she explains connect her woven works (2016): Tree of Life is often depicted as a combination of ship and mast that refers to origins and ancestry. Ship of Souls uses multiple layers of the vessel imagery associated first with burial rights but
also later stages of life which suggest a sense of protection. *Womb of Time* depicts two vessels on top of each other in a cell or womb like shape considered to be an image of being part of the world.\(^{13}\)

The original textile patterns also act as the starting point for *Tampan Tulip* (2014 – ongoing) a series of digitally printed textiles based on collages that incorporate the quintessential Dutch symbol. Here too the artist’s family history plays a part, with Tee’s maternal grandfather and great-grandfather working in the Netherlands’ tulip trade that took them on long ship bound journeys of their own, including annual travel to America.\(^{14}\) While an earlier commission for the new North/South tram line stop at Centraal Station in Amsterdam encouraged Tee to work with the Indonesian textile patterns and pressed tulip petals in what she describes as a ‘cheerful’\(^ {15}\) interpretation, her work for *Cultural Threads* suggests a darker commentary. Black tulips were selected for the commission, which occurs during a time when the immigration crisis both across Europe and within the Netherlands is acute. As Tee explains, ‘the figures ‘falling’ in the water also refer to the current migration crisis.’\(^ {16}\)

The *Tampan Tulip* series also travels on additional journeys: the digital prints are produced in the Netherlands, and then ‘travel back to their place of origins’\(^ {17}\) where the textiles are embroidered with gold thread sourced from India and sewn in a small village on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. An ‘interest in the journey textiles take again’\(^ {18}\) continually informs Tee’s strategy, navigating with diverse reference points new routes.

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\(^{15}\) Tee, J., skype interview with the artist June 17, 2018.


\(^{17}\) Ibidem.

\(^{18}\) Tee, J., skype interview with the artist June 17, 2018.
A very different type of journey informs Vincent Vulsma’s interest in the textile, which he explains begins with the ‘history of logistical capitalism and the control over labour processes and circulation.’ Speaking about his earlier woven textile project WE 455 (I-XIII) (2011), Vulsma describes his need to ‘materialise research’. Guinea cloth is one of the starting points for his work exhibited in ‘Cultural Threads’ – a cloth he explains is ‘frequently listed as cargo in the bookkeeping of slave ships, but barely any material evidence is left’. Indian textiles played a particularly important role in trans-Atlantic trade and the cloth’s name anticipates its place of barter in west Africa. Much like the tampan and palepai referenced by Jennifer Tee, Vulsma has chosen a textile that today has few remaining physical examples. He seeks to ‘bypass the visual’ and instead ‘focus on the nature of weaving to […] potentially carry information on a structural level.’

The log books of the eighteenth century Dutch Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie (MCC) record in detail the trade of guinea textiles, gunpowder, indigo, but also slaves. It is here that Vulsma’s data driven concepts turn back to the human – not of family heritage or personal identity – but instead the nameless, numbered individuals recorded with the same clinical detail as afforded other goods for trade. Irene de Craen observes of Vulsma’s recent exhibition In the Hold: ‘the minimal form and presentation draw our attention to that which is missing: the people involved with and caught up in this trade, and the many hours of physical labour required to produce the materials used.’ Vulsma’s attention focuses on the vastness of global trade and the ‘historical processes that shaped world we live in now.’

Vincent Vulsma, Guinea (1756-1773) [1.9 MB], 1239x170 cm, (based on logbooks of the ship Vliegende Faam, 1756-1773) Guinea (1786-1795) [957 KB], 2017, 620x170 cm, (based on logbooks of the ship Vergenoegen, 1786-1795) Guinea (1778-1779) [283 KB], 2017, 183x170 cm, (based on one logbook of the ship Viegelantie, 1778-1779), 2017-ongoing, photo: Josefina Eikenaar/TextielMuseum

24 Craen 2018, n.pag.
25 Vulsma, V., skype interview with the artist June 18, 2018.
In addition to jacquard woven cotton textiles that carry data from the MCC logbooks (Guinea (1756-1773) [1.9 MB], Guinea (1786-1795) [957 KB], Guinea (1778-1779) [283 KB], (all 2017), Vulsma’s Voyage #7 (1763-1765) (2017) uses a historical hand woven and hand spun indigo fabric from Pondicherry, India which he laser etched with a representation of the coordination points along the journey the MCC ship Vrouw Johanna Cores travelled. The laser burns out the dye of the fabric in a gesture he sees not as destructive but instead exposes the latent value of indigo held in the cloth.

Rhetorically he asks, ‘What is the work of the artist?’ Vulsma’s insistence on acknowledging his ‘dependence on other people for the materialisation of the work’ is a reality that for many is ‘repressed in contemporary life’. Trips to India allowed him to visit indigo plantations, observe the labour-intensive extraction process and the lives of the workers who continue to depend on this work. Return (2017 – ongoing) is in part a response to these travels. He commissioned solid blocks of dried and compressed indigo powder each 26 kilograms in weight. ‘The volume of raw material required for each sculpture (which represents 24 hours at sea) requires modern-day indigo workers to carry out 96 hours of manual labour.’

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Vincent Vulsma, Detail Voyage #7 (1763-1765), 2017-ongoing, photo: Josefina Eikenaar/TextielMuseum

26 Vulsma, V., skype interview with the artist June 18, 2018.
27 Craen 2018, n.pag.
The labour Vulsma commissions from the indigo workers is not the artist's labour. That is precisely the point. Instead, Vulsma navigates difficulties of production from a distance in his Amsterdam studio. Cultural difference and the considerable production time required during the indigo extraction season become intrinsic values of the eventual indigo blocks. Each block is then named after a subsequent point on the MCC shipping route in a gesture Vulsma describes as a 'small fragmentation of the larger route'. He has also imposed a conceptual rule for the ongoing work: new commissions require a new set of indigo blocks. After exhibiting the works (unless purchased by a museum or gallery archive) the blocks are removed from circulation.

New commissions trigger another exchange of labour, for remuneration to the indigo workers by the artist, followed by an eventual journey of raw material from the site of production to the site of public display. This desire to pause goes directly against our contemporary attraction to speed (success requires movement) instead quite literally buying time to fix a point. Vulsma concurs that the concept of the project intentionally ‘goes against the logic of contemporary art circulation’. It is a project that in many ways can never complete its record of the trans-Atlantic journeys plied by the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie. And as Sven Beckert observes, the very same enslaved lives on the cotton plantation were often traded for the very commodity their labour harvested: cotton.

28 Vulsma, V., skype interview with the artist June 18, 2018.
29 Vulsma, V., skype interview with the artist June 18, 2018.
30 Beckert 2014, p. 36.
Vulsma reflects, ‘Perhaps the complex (and perverse) logic of how these ‘goods’ relate to one another in this cycle of exchange is the real starting point for my project. The enslaved Africans exchanged for Indian cottons were not only a commodity bartered for plantation crops, but also the workers necessary to produce these raw materials, a perverse logic to maximise profit.’

Textiles find themselves rerecorded in the work of Fiona Tan and Mary Sibande who capture the textile – particularly the power of dress – through still and moving images. While both artists are arguably motivated by a significant element of personal biography, the boundaries they draw between public and private and their engagement with the autobiographical differs. Sibande mines her family history, explaining of her artistic alter ego: ‘Sophie is a storyteller. Sophie is me. Sophie is the women in my family who were all maids, from my great-grandmother to my mother. And I felt the need to celebrate these women.’ In contrast, Tan has expressed frustration at her artistic practice being read exclusively through her personal identity.

Tan’s three-minute video Nellie (2013) imagines the life of Cornelia van Rijn, the illegitimate daughter of the celebrated 17th century Dutch painter Rembrandt. Details of her life are scarce: Nellie, as she was known, travelled in 1671 as a married 16-year-old to Batavia (today the Indonesian capital city of Jakarta) after the death of her father in 1669. She died at the age of 30 after the birth of the couple’s third child. Nellie narrates an almost silent view of Cornelia’s life. Dressed in a printed blue and white Toile de Jouy inspired by chintz that matches the wallpaper surrounding her, Cornelia very likely lived her life trapped within the confines of her Batavia home. We watch a young woman gazing towards an external world beyond the frame of the camera, restlessly pacing while the sound of tropical rain falls, rereading a letter and idly slumped over a desk drawing. In the closing scenes she falls into a fitful, feverish sleep. Tan explains, ‘In Batavia [Cornelia] probably suffered from malaria. She would never have been able to go outside on her own, to go to the market or see her surroundings.’

Tan filmed Nellie in the Bird Room of the Van Loon Museum in Amsterdam. The building was first constructed in 1672, a year after Nellie left the Netherlands for life. Its first resident was the painter Ferdinand Bol, a pupil of Rembrandt. The fortunes of the Van Loon family were made financing trade with Batavia through the Dutch East-India company. Indonesia is also Tan’s place of birth. Although reluctant to encourage a narrow biographical reading of her work, the
Top: Fiona Tan, Nellie, 2013, photo: courtesy of Fiona Tan and Firth Street Gallery, London

Bottom: Fiona Tan, Nellie, 2013, photo: courtesy of Fiona Tan and Firth Street Gallery, London
artist’s website acknowledges that her recreation of Cornelia’s largely unknown biography draws on themes about an exoticisation of the Far East that recur throughout Tan’s work.38

Writing about Nellie Dawn Chan observes, ‘The video’s inviting visual evocation of Dutch golden-age portraiture makes its subject’s inscrutability, by contrast, seem all the more acute – and it poses an apt question about Cornelia van Rijn: Given that her half-brother Titus appears regularly throughout their father’s oeuvre, to what extent was patriarchal bias to blame for her eventual obscurity?’39 Cornelia’s delimited existence is made clear throughout Nellie where the flora and fauna of her wallpapered walls seem to be her only constant companions and observers. Despite the suggestion of material wealth there is more pressingly a sense of a home she may not be free to leave. German historian Maria Mies’ research of the domestic context and colonial power proposes the concept of ‘housewifization’.40 Mies observes, ‘This is not only the reason for the lack of women’s political power, but also for their lack of bargaining power’41 – a power Tan seems to cast as Cornilla’s most acute lack from within the confines of her Batavia home.

Unlike Fiona Tan, Mary Sibande actively encourages a biographical reading of her work. The women of Sibande’s past lacked the bargaining power Mies coins as ‘housewifization’ but Sibande differs from Tan in her attempt to suggest contemporary, albeit fraught, alternatives. The artist’s photographic series Long Live the Dead Queen theatrically stages mannequins dressed in a hybrid garb of enlarged gown and South African domestic worker’s uniform. Sibande’s women always have their eyes shut – refusing perhaps to witness the present in order to dream. As the artist explains, ‘I don’t

39 Chan 2014, p. 298.
40 Mies 1986, p. 110.
41 Mies 1986, p. 110.
Sibande uses her family history as the starting point of her practice. Confronting the contradictions this presents, she exclaims:

I am looking at history. I want to distort it, to turn it upside down. I want to question it. I want to punch it. I want to love it [...] The work borrows from history. And it borrows from my stories, from my being. And, of course, for me to look at me, I have to look back at my geography – whose surrounding me and look at my race. Who am I: a black woman in South Africa post-apartheid. My work is paying homage to the women in my family who were all maids. I felt the need to celebrate these women because they were limited as black bodies, as black female bodies.43

The photographs Caught in the Rapture (Long Live the Dead Queen Series) (2009) and Her Majesty, Queen Sophie (Long Live the Dead Queen Series) (2010) depict the artist wearing an oversized blue dress and white apron. In fact, throughout Sibande’s work versions of the artist, both real and as simulacra, appear. ‘The series includes mannequins of Sophie that have been modelled on Sibande and photographs where she poses as this inert human replica. In this way the act of making her dreams a reality not only plays out in her attire, which displays characteristics evoking a servant’s outfit and regal coronation garments, but is echoed in Sibande’s effort to appear like the mannequin that embodies this dream state.’44

In Caught in the Rapture she stands Arachne-like before a human-size spider’s web. Her Majesty, Queen Sophie includes a prophet-like radiance emanating from her head while lengths of coloured beads drape and dangle from her neck. Anitra Nettleton explains the complex role beads have come to occupy in South Africa recognising that ‘beadwork arts can (and must) also be seen as expressing a personal taste or preference within, as well as of connection to, community, custom and history [...] this history is importantly linked to the hidden work of women who remained at home’.45 Mary Corrigall also reads the domestic in the textile materials Sibande’s photographs, ‘the stiff blue poly-cotton fabric is a cheap material commonly used not only for this kind of mass-produced outfit, but other sorts of workers’ attire.’46 ‘The white apron, collar, cuffs, piping and head scarf, which form the other recurring motifs of Sophie’s

44 Corrigall 2015, p. 147.
45 Nettleton 2014, p. 432.
46 Corrigall 2015, p. 150.
Cultural Threads
outfits, are also stylistic traits of the domestic worker’s uniform, though they are subject to exaggeration: the apron is longer and larger, the cuffs wider.47

Sibande claims all these versions and their contradictions as herself and by extension her female family members. But these women are also anachronisms, dressed in impossible combinations that Corrigall observes include ‘seemingly incongruent period details drawn from various eras.48 Leora Farber has observed of this work, ‘While her fantasies about escaping and transcending her deferential position within these binary systems allow for a relative degree of agency, Sophie’s liberation is illusionary.49

This illusory liberation seems to change in A Reversed Retrogress, Scene 1 (2013), which moves from photographs of mannequins and the artist as model to exhibiting two life-sized mannequins as sculptures. The blue dress, white apron and doek (a South African term for head scarf that originates from the Dutch word for cloth) appear again on one figure, but a second woman seems in the midst of a transformation. Blue clothing is replaced by purple, covered in tendrils and tulle. Sibande explains, ‘This purple is a special colour for me. In Cape Town, when people were marching against apartheid, the apartheid police laced their water cannons with purple dye. So, everyone who was protesting was covered in purple. The idea was they were marked.’50 Sibande describes the two women as her past

47 Corrigall 2015, p. 150.
48 Corrigall 2015, p. 154.
49 Farber 2017, p. 436.
Cultural Threads

Doubling to communicate multiple perspectives also appears in Aiko Tezuka’s two large weavings Ghost I Met (2013). Unlike Sibande’s adoption of the persona Sophie, Tezuka uses the first person to establish her identity in the work’s title as an expression of her ambivalent relationship with the Japanese culture of her birth and her European home today. ‘European friends think that I am Japanese, but I was born in 1976 and contemporary Japan has many cultural influences.’ To explain the changing cultural identity of Japan, Tezuka offers the example: ‘I cannot dress myself in kimono, I need help to arrange the fabric.’ Before moving to Europe, Tezuka completed her education in Japan with a Ph.D. in oil painting. Traditional oil painting arrived in Japan after the 1868 Meiji Restoration opened the island’s previously closed borders. But Tezuka explains that the European origins of this tradition were not discussed during her education. Reacting to this omission, she ‘started untying readymade shop bought textiles as a metaphor for oil painting. The textiles already existed and were in front of me – they are not my creation. Of course, it is not possible to reverse time or go back to the past’ but by unravelling pre-existing textiles ‘I wanted to do something real, not a metaphor.’

Aiko Tezuka, Ghost I met, 2013, photo: courtesy of Lepkowski Studios, Berlin / Ute Klein
Visiting the Musée des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs in Lyon, France, Tezuka began to wonder what motivations lay behind the production of sumptuous textiles in the past. In the silent and low lit viewing rooms of the museum she imagined what caused people to commission textiles:

When I am in the museums, I feel ghosts speaking to me. They are the ghosts behind the fabric: royalty and rulers, workshop managers, designers, thread dyers and weavers. They speak of hierarchies and processes, of wealth and strict working conditions. In these [past] times, rulers aimed to display their power with the best techniques and the newest patterns. The greater the display of wealth, however, the more we could feel the rulers’ fear of losing power and control of their workers.56

The large two panel weaving *Ghost I Met* is inspired by this thinking. The left-hand panel is a mixture of motifs from Japanese textiles, including ‘ancient embroidery in the 7th century, fabrics and silk shoes in the 8th century, a Buddha statue in the 13th century, Kimonos in the 17th – 20th century and daily-use clothing in the 19th century.’57 The right hand panel draws on motifs from European culture: ‘ancient Greek statues [and] Coptic clothing in the 7-10th century, Celtic patterns in the 7th century, paintings in France and Spain in the 16-18th century, Italian lace in the 17th century, English embroidery in the 17th century, Italian sculptures in the 17th century, women’s dresses in the 18-19th century.’58 While Tezuka arguably establishes a dichotomy between Japanese and European cultural references, she explains that ‘motifs found both on the left and right are collected according to their similarities.’59 Rather than speak of the differences to be found between cultures, her amalgamation of motifs across time and space seek shared similarities. Centred across the two panels is a translucent ghost-like figure, ‘perhaps my self-portrait.
who is torn between Japan and Europe.\footnote{60}

A further site-specific work for the ‘Cultural Threads’ exhibition draws on a little-known moment in Japanese workers’ history. Tezuka explains, ‘At the end of the 19th century, many Japanese immigrated due to poverty to Hawai’i to work for sugar plantations […] Imagine the value and price of sugar: it was once such an expensive food and luxurious symbol of wealth but currently it costs only 1 CHF [1 Swiss Franc, valued today at less than €1 in 2018] at the supermarket in Zurich. How many unrecounted stories of the silent voices disappeared behind the vicissitudes of history?’\footnote{61} Writing about Japanese migration to Hawai’i, the historian Martin Dusinberre offers a useful warning about the seemingly silent voices from the past: ‘there were millions of people who in their very migrations exemplified the speed of change, but who did not have the skills [such as literacy] to depict modernity in political discourse, art, or literature.’\footnote{62}

Amateur photographs taken by Dr. Eduard Arning, a German microbiologist, record some of the Japanese immigrants’ portraits. Working with machine embroidery produced in Berlin where Tezuka’s studio is located, she stitches further ghostly images this time loosely based on Arning’s photographs of the Japanese workers’ lives in Hawai’i. Where Arning’s photographs may be read as yet another example of the Eurocentric gaze, Tezuka’s images take away the dubious clarity of the photograph as an authoritative document. Instead she offers the (often fading) memory of each individual in place of Arning’s treatment of people as objects to catalogue.

It is impossible to know what homesickness or longing the Japanese labourers in Hawai’i may have experienced – or if any of their emotions were similar to Cornelia van Rijn existence, which while materially easier may have shared in the culture shock and sense of displacement her new home in Batavia presented. Both Tezuka and Fiona Tan’s artworks offer a homage reliant on speculation over the centuries. In many cases, the details both of human lives and material construction are long lost. But our capacity for imagination and empathy across centuries and geographies often remains stubbornly alive. The textile traditions Joseph McBrinn notes as ‘inscribed with the entwined histories of colonialism and capitalism’ are now a constant presence.\footnote{63} And while the textile’s ubiquity often causes its power to be underestimated, or unobserved, this same ubiquity allows it to speak eloquently of our varied experiences of contemporary life. Aiko Tezuka’s explanation of her own work holds true across the ‘Cultural Threads’ exhibition, ‘these works project questions about the guilt of oblivion, which everybody in this globalized world might own to.’\footnote{64}


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Jennifer Tee, detail
*Tampan Tree of Life,* 2016, photo: Josefina Eikenaar/TextielMuseum
COLOPHON

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