

Every stitch is a second: the labour and love behind new acquisitions and commissions

The State Collection grew richer in 2022, with a number of new acquisitions made as part of State Library Victoria's feature exhibition *Handmade Universe: from craft to code and the spaces between* (24 June 2022 – 26 February 2023). The exhibition's centrepiece is *Stargazing* – a large, knitted tapestry that combines coding and craft to stitch the night sky – by artist and software engineer Sarah Spencer.

Handmade Universe explores the interplay of art, science and technology through the work of artists, designers and makers who engage imaginatively with the world around them. From age-old crafts to new computer codes: creating by hand helps us understand our world and our place in it.

Handmade Universe brings together 68 rare and remarkable objects from the State Collection, as well as new commissions from artists and makers in Victoria and around the world. In addition to *Stargazing*, these include *Dharangalk Biik / Star Country* by Mandy Nicholson, Deanna Hitti's *A is for Alam (pen)* and new acquisitions from artists Atong Atem and Kate Just.

The works in *Handmade Universe* – in most cases, by women – take us into private and domestic realms where creativity and discovery flourish despite a lack of public recognition. They also ask us to look outwards, to explore a world in which the intricate skills of creators contribute to innovation and technology and, in one instance, take us to the moon.

In this article, we hear from some of the artists of *Handmade Universe* about bringing their works to State Library Victoria.



Sarah Spencer at work on *Stargazing* in preparation for *Handmade Universe*, 2022.
Photograph by Tessa van der Riet

Sarah Spencer

Stargazing is a celebration of STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – and it’s knitted on a vintage 1980s knitting machine. Over several years, I’ve been hacking this domestic knitting machine to make it do things it was never designed to do. It now operates more like a knitting network printer.

For the last few months, I’ve been wiring up the tapestry with LEDs – over 840 in total – and I’ve also written an app, so that visitors can come and create their own art, create their own light show through the tapestry and discover the stars for themselves.

By donating *Stargazing* to State Library Victoria, it feels like it’s coming home. It’s been travelling overseas; it’s been seen by millions of people from across the globe online. But it was made right here in Melbourne from locally sourced wool.



Mandy Nicholson with her commission *Dharangalk Biik | Star Country, 2022*. Photograph by Tessa van der Riet

Mandy Nicholson

Marram-bik Wurundjeri Baggarrook ba mundanai Lalal ba Gugung nuegel-ik ba marnang ba ganbu Biik: Biik-ut, Biik-dui, Baanj Biik, Murnmut Biik, Wurru wurru Biik ba Tharangalk Biik.

I'm a Wurundjeri woman and I acknowledge all of my Elders and I acknowledge the six layers of Country: Below Country, On Country, Wind Country, Water Country, Sky Country and Star Country.

This installation at the State Library is one of my biggest installations. I think that the Library is very colonial in its structure, so it was a great opportunity to bring a bit of First Nations culture into the space – to modernise it, but in an ancient way. To make people think differently.

The piece is a story of the stars and it relates to the other pieces in the exhibition. The durt|stars represent Bunjil, the star Altair, with his wives, Gunuwarra, the black swans, on either side of him. The walls envelop all the other pieces, so it creates a really welcoming atmosphere and takes you on a journey.

Putting an artwork from a drawing into a digital work, and then transferring that artwork onto a different material was really exciting because I'd never seen it on such a large scale and on that material. The process opened my eyes to other opportunities.

Atong Atem

Most of my work incorporates portraiture, self-portraiture, and I like to use colour and texture to create narratives about my own history and history in general. My own personal history centres on being a migrant and a South Sudanese person whose access to broader South Sudanese history is pretty limited. So it was a little bit of myth-making as well as an unveiling.

As a predominantly digital photographer, I wanted to explore a more tactile relationship to the work that I make. The process of making the works for *Handmade Universe* was a lot less simple than I'd anticipated. I wanted to make works that weren't immediate, that weren't digital, that weren't about pixels that magically appear on the screen. And the thing I'd forgotten after so many years of doing digital work is that it takes time.

Having my work in a public space in the State Library means a lot to me. My relationship to art has been of existing sometimes on the sidelines or the outskirts. For me as someone making work that is very sentimental, but also comes from a place that the European art canon hasn't focused on, it's amazing to have opportunities to showcase my work to people who have maybe been convinced that there's no place for them within art.



Atong Atem working on a new acquisition that features in *Handmade Universe*, 2022.
Photograph by Tessa van der Riet



Deanna Hitti in her studio, 2022. Photograph by Tessa van der Riet

Deanna Hitti

Cyanotype was one of the first photographic reproductive methods used to record ideas and information. Blue has historically been associated with the Orient. My parents are migrants from Lebanon, and I grew up in a bi-cultural home. At home it was very Lebanese, with solid traditions and language, and then I'd go to school, where it was all European ideas and thinking, as it is in Australia. The Orientalist images I reproduce in my work are representations, or rather misrepresentations, of the Middle East. I bring them into the work to talk about the complexities of Australian identity. I push the cyanotype process to re-tell and re-create the very same ideas in my own personal handmade form of art books.

The commissioned work for the Library, *A is for Alam (pen)*, is my most monumental work to date. Exhibiting the prints in this old, colonial, stunning architecture brings a unique reading to the work. It's a space where we can contemplate our history and where we are headed, culturally and socially, within Australia.

Kate Just

Anonymous was a woman explores the erasure of women from the canon of art history and society at large – how much of women’s time, labour and love is unattributed, unacknowledged and doesn’t register in the same ways that men’s work and labour do.

Hand knitting is a process that I’ve used for 20 years. Particularly in this work, it’s an opportunity to show how much labour and time exists in the act of hand knitting. By knitting the same thing 140 times, you can see what kind of labour women do: care labour, cleaning labour, love. That kind of labour repeats again and again, but you do it with a consistency that matters. Each panel has 17,000 stitches. The whole body of work has over a million stitches. Every stitch is a second – a second of time, a second of one’s life, a breath, a moment.



Kate Just knitting in her studio, 2022. Photograph by Tessa van der Riet