

Handkerchiefs offer a message of hope to the women of Kabul

By [Janice Breen Burns](#)

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This is a complicated story so I will begin with its easy middle when a small flock of rare spotted pardalote birds flew from the northern tip of Bruny Island into Barbara Kameniar's backyard in the remote southern Tasmanian townlet of Tinderbox. It was late 2017. She knew them well, these fragile, near-extinct, seemingly weightless fingerlings; they'd nested under her house before. "Tiny, exquisite things, incredibly brave, unafraid of the larger birds..." Watching them, Kameniar was anxious, thinking about a looming challenge, but calmed as the little birds ducked and fluttered. "They're such bringers of joy and excitement and promise of new life...."



Gali Weiss with examples of the handkerchief artworks created for *Making Marks*. *CREDIT: SIMON SCHLUTER*

Kameniar had been challenged by a friend, the Melbourne artist and printmaker Gali Weiss, to create three artworks for *Making Marks*, the second of an unusual collaboration with women in Afghanistan called Unfolding Projects. The first project, *Two Trees*, a series of concertina-style books with each folded page by a different Australian printmaker artist, had already forged surprisingly close friendships since they were sent in 2011, to a group of women living and learning literacy and vocational skills a planet away in the toughest suburb of Kabul. Despite their constricted and often violent lives, the women and girls put their hard-won basic literacy skills to work, "completing" the artists' pages with their own marks and words before returning the books to Australia. *Two Trees*, its cover a symbolically split panel of native Australian gum one side, a species indigenous to Afghanistan on the other, is now in the State Library of Queensland.

For the second Unfolding Project, which began in 2017, Weiss asked 20 artists, again mostly printmakers, to render their works on what she calls the "deeply symbolic, loaded with meaning" media of handkerchiefs. Each artist; three handkerchiefs, three artworks. And in an odd but visionary afterthought, Weiss also asked Kameniar to contribute as an artist. Kameniar had collaborated on *Two Trees* as a facilitator, lubricating links between the Australian and Afghani women with her contacts in Adelaide's Support

Association for the Women of Afghanistan (SAWA) and the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan, to contribute as an artist.

The request flummoxed and excited Kameniar. "I was so anxious. It's not my field. I'm not an artist. I'm an educator. " To be exact, she works at the University of Melbourne between (pre-COVID) travels back and forth to Oxford University where she is also undertaking a masters degree. Medical ethics are Kameniar's strong point, not art.



The text reads "I wish to participate in the construction of my country". Barbara Kameniar and Afghan woman, name withheld. *CREDIT: SUSAN GORDON-BROWN*

But then the birds. "So beautiful, so incredibly brave, so symbolic of freedom." So perfect a symbol for the women of Kabul. Later, muse in flight, Kameniar would print her linocut of the tiny pardalotes perched with a whimsically spindly rendition of her beloved Oxford - the symbolic

zenith of education - onto three handkerchiefs. Later still, two of the handkerchiefs would return from Kabul with the poignant words of a woman named Hajira and another, anonymous woman, delicately embroidered like scattered seeds around the birds; "I would like to live in a peaceful environment....", "I wish to participate in the construction of my country...."

For Gali Weiss, Unfolding Projects was always about tapping that wellspring of linking words with art. "Back at the beginning, around 2009, I'd just finished a PhD in visual arts and - the timing - I remember there was a high involvement of troops in Afghanistan and a lot of media about the women there, how they were struggling, not only with literacy, with life, some were burning themselves," she says. "It was heartbreaking, amplifying the inequality between us as women. I had to do something."

In the daily flood of news about terrorist bombs and chaos in occupied Afghanistan, there was also a sub-stream of reports, horrifically peculiar to Afghani women living in a hard-wired misogynist society where male relatives have absolute authority, domestic violence is common, education, economic freedom and basic rights are rare, and human worth can still be measured in cows, goats and the ability to breed boys.

Weiss remembers in 2009, pausing mid-news stream, mesmerised by a Marie Dorigny photograph in *The Age*, of Malalai Joya. The world renowned Afghani human rights warrior and parliamentarian is pictured kneeling, writing quietly on the floor of her home in Farah, oblivious as a tiny girl watches her

intently through a screen door. "I got quite emotional," Weiss says. "It was the face of the future, looking in on Malalai. It spurred me on to do, even something tiny, to just take some action, anything, to say, 'We support you, you're not alone, we hear you from across the world, keep going.....'" She instigated *Two Trees*.



"I want to become a journalist" by Rosalind Atkins and Fatana, 2018 . CREDIT: *SUSAN GORDON-BROWN*

In 2018, this second incarnation of Weiss' connective art series, *Making Marks, Australia and Afghanistan*, including 60 separate "pages" of handkerchiefs rescued or gifted from grandmothers, mothers, fathers and others and lovingly covered by 20 Australian artists, (Kamanier's Oxford pardalotes among them) was hand delivered to Mursal Rahimi, executive director of Kabul's Organisation of Promotion of Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC) vocational training centre.

The centre is located in Kabul's infamous "ghost district" where Jehadi factions had battled most ferociously. "Almost all the women have symptoms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder," Rahimi says. "They cannot express their pain but if you look into their faces you will see a thousand stories ... The lives of Afghan women are very different from the lives of Australian women and other developed countries. It is very difficult for me to describe."

There are clues in Rahimi's translation of the women's embroidered words. "I hope no mother loses her child in an explosion and suicide" is carefully stitched by Kabul girl Karima, into the graphic echo of a photograph Pacific Islander women retrieved by artist Marian Crawford from her mother's archive. Another girl, Zainab, sewed the hope of most women between the handmade lace edges of printmaker Catherine Pilgrim's work: "May there be peace in our homeland."

There are powerful, clashing juxtapositions of women's experiences in the works, but there is also a *millefeuille* of shared meanings despite their disparate geography and cultures. Artist Jennifer Kamp's graphic rendering of the aftermath of terrifying bushfires in Australia for example, is edged with a simple plea for peace by Madina in Kabul. Gali Weiss's haunting works explore the intimate and exterior worlds of all women in a printed face with eyes

quietly or submissively closed, covered by hands, or with embroidered roses bleeding into their design.



Zakia Arghandiwal holding her and Heather Shimmen's collaboration. *CREDIT: COURTESY OF OPAWC*

Printmaker Rosalind Atkins layered symbols of three generations of women in her family onto her grandmother's handmade lace handkerchiefs. On one, she printed snipped fragments from her mother's wedding gown. For another, she spread the lace-edged cloth under a gum tree in her Alphington backyard, marking where the leaves drifted and slipping an elegantly scrawled print of the word "Life" into the design, a meaningful translation of her mother's name, Vida.

"I wanted to send them that sense of place," Atkins says. "Of my place. And my mother, and my grandmother who was a woman with a strong sense of social justice... I think she would see this as a very appropriate use of (her handkerchiefs)."

Like Weiss, Atkins wishes there were more she could do for the women on the other side of the planet who touched and stitched and marked her artworks. "You can't help but think how privileged we are," Atkins says. "How (comparatively) safe we are. I wish (the Afghan women) could be empowered, and literacy, education, is fundamental to that. If I could change anything for them, it would be to have control over their lives."

In reality, that is dangerously unlikely. February's shaky agreement between the US and the Taliban to withdraw troops, exchange prisoners and recognise the current Afghan government is already halting and volatile and fears are escalating that women's rights could be reduced again, as they were under the Taliban 19 years ago, to that of cattle.

They will need all they can muster of the exquisite strength and bravery of Kameniar's pardalotes. "Afghan women are survivors," Rahimi says, "They are courageous and hardworking... and they will continue to struggle for their rights."

They also have allies on the other side of the world, whose dedication has reportedly amazed them: "The joy and hope (the women) expressed when they received the artworks from Australia was astonishing to watch," Rahimi says.

"They couldn't believe they are sent by people of a different culture and from such a long distance. (The artworks) had an immense impact... they touched a sense of connection and friendship with people of different looks and religion who care and supported them. In this deeply ingrained misogynistic society, this kind of support inspire and encourage(s) them to be resilient and hopeful."

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