Leslie Moody Castro
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

Warp and Weft

One thread is passed over, one thread is passed under, lengthwise and longwise building a pattern like a web of latitude and longitude that joins individual threads. The pattern grows into a functional fabric indicative of a process of each line of warp and weft from individual threads woven into and over each other, building one to the next like a small ecosystem of memories between each line and layer, one to the next.

The fabric grows stronger and more structurally sound with each layer. The latitudes and longitudes hold the reminiscences of the places that came before, all the places that converge to build this singular pattern, this fabric and ecosystem of memory and genealogy passed from one person to the next, each weft a new arrival, each warp over a new survival, each line a new memory, each pattern a new history.

The weave grows, becomes stronger, a pattern that subverts fleeing, running, a pattern of immigration and generational memory written between each of its lines passed down from one to the next, building strength in stories until it was a carpet, until we could fly.

Evie Evans
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

June 14th

Back in Amsterdam now after spending a week with my parents.

In my childhood home, my bed is raised to the same level as the windowsill. The trees that border our back garden drape into view like a heavy hand beckoning for something, or someone. During clear nights, I could see the stars and moon. In the mornings, birds came to rest in the tree closest to the window and woke me up with high-pitched whistling. I imagine myself back in that room—what can I see? What can I hear? I wish I knew which kind of birds they were—delicate, brown in colour, jumping on the grass before whizzing up at the slightest scare. I wish I could identify different songs and calls. The last time I walked in Sloterpark, a million miles from there, the birds were singing at the top of the trees, out of sight—but their tune travelled down to me, and reminded me of so many moments lying in my bed listening to different ballads. These birds, the trees, the uneven, dry grass, all contribute to an idea of home—an idea of me.

When I returned this time, someone had hacked away at the trees at the edge of the grass, opening a gap that exposed the view beyond. “I don’t like it”, I told my mother. I don’t like this feeling of change in a place that is supposed to stay the same. Because I’m the same, aren’t I? Rather than defining a place or location that binds a particular ‘us’ together, we could represent every part of the ecosystem. But how can place-based communities extend beyond geographical location; from the ground they walk on, to the trees they breathe with, to the sounds they hear. What is missing? How does this work if the bird migrates south for the winter and the pollen from the flowers is spread across the sea? Looking from a distance, what are my symbols of home?

Piret Karro
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

Where Have All the Kookaburras Gone?

In September 1944, 8-year-old Vella Pihlak fled from the island of Saaremaa to Sweden by boat, together with ten thousands of people who were seeking refuge from another onslaught of the Soviet forces. A few years later, Vella and her family moved to Australia since they could not return to Estonia—neither was it safe to stay in Sweden as the Swedish authorities had started to extradite people from the Baltic states. The Pihlak family built their home with a big garden in Sydney where Vella is still living. For her grandson Aksel Haagensen, born in Australia, kookaburras and banksias he saw in her grandmother's garden still symbolise home. When he was eight, Aksel moved to Estonia with his parents and he started to develop life and identity including two different countries and societies with diverse natural environments.

In his artwork, the artist has used textiles designed by his grandmother in the 1980s. Under her artist name Senta Silla, Aksel's grandmother created designs where the motifs of kookaburra and banksia were applied in a repetitive pattern *à la* Marimekko. Haagensen experiments with this pattern in his own designs while emphasising the repetitions and disappearances in the original rhythm of the motifs. When exiting the Palm House of Tallinn Botanic Garden and observing the changes in textile patterns, we can image ourselves to be in the memory landscape that belongs to either Haagensen or someone else having been in transit between various cultures—the landscape where knowledge, memories and experiences are either piling up in layers or leaving gaps. Withdrawing kookaburras from the textiles won't refer to the extinction of the bird species, but rather speaks about the meaning of "home" for Aksel, for whom for years, the little bird on the branch behind the window has been a tit.

By the way, Aksel's grandmother recalls that before the great emigration wave in 1944 there was a group of people fleeing from Estonia to Australia, in order to escape the regime of Konstantin Päts. We can only imagine the possible motifs that the descendants of these people would have created for the biennial taking place in the botanical gardens founded on the territory where once Päts' home farm was located.

Maria Helen Känd
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

When fleeing, you take as much with you as you can fit. When you arrive, you put together new and old items, things that are strangers to one another. These objects do not share a life yet, but out of this moment, we can create a memory, in which they exist together.

In metropoles, different communities live together physically, yet psychogeographically, they might exist oceans apart. Their locality is their flock, their people, because their home is somewhere else. What use is living side by side, when integration is lacking? I don't know why this makes me sad. Probably because nobody leaves for no reason at all. Homes are left behind because it is difficult to live there.

Migrating, that is an art. The global migration routes of birds on the world map are incredibly beautiful and dense patterns. Estonia is located at the crossing of two major migration routes. The first brings to us the arctic coastal birds and aquatic birds from the tundra in Russia. The other, birds nesting in Finland and farther up north.

It is unlikely that birds consider one location more their home than another. Or maybe still—when does a bird realise it is time to migrate? The environment becomes more impoverished in food, and darker and colder—the signal to migrate is the changes in the length of the day, impacting hormonal balance. Before migration, birds experience migratory restlessness and become more active, their daily rhythm changes and they begin to store more fat under their skin. But how to recognise home when the climate catastrophe is radically changing nature?

Dividing your home between several places—that is an art. Aksel only found out recently that his grandmother, a practising artist, used a pseudonym when she created textiles, because curtains and sheets were considered merely applied art. His grandmother used three patterns and three colours and Aksel keeps working with these, he has his own art to integrate these into. Storytelling in textile.

The generations after Aksel might never get to see oak trees. When they look at an image of a squirrel in a book, they perhaps ask, where do acorns come from. Perhaps the squirrels are gone too, they only live in zoos. Or they could visit botanical gardens and look at illustrations of kookaburras perched in banksias. Aksel can show his textiles, combining memories of several people. People may not see that, but the plants are witness to everything changing.

"I don't know if I would wear a shirt with this pattern in Estonia," said Aksel as the last thing before he left. Maybe Estonia will change too when everything gets hotter and more colourful.

Inga Lāce
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

Dear Aksel,

When thinking about your childhood surrounded by the birds and plants in your grandmother's garden, your shared identity between Australia and Estonia, and her leaving Estonia during the Second World War, I am too closely reminded of the current Russia's war in Ukraine and the countless people who have been leaving their homes, fleeing without knowing if and when they will be able to come back.

Thus, before turning towards the banksia plant and the kookaburra bird, companions of your early years and imprinted in your grandmother's textiles in the 1980s, I wanted to stay and ruminate a little on the lived experience of exile and diaspora. In a recent article curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung talks about a conversation between Édouard Glissant and Manthia Diawara on the board of the transatlantic liner Queen Mary II on its way from Southampton, UK, to Brooklyn, USA, in 2009. "Asked what 'departure' means to him, Glissant responds: 'It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me, every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity.'"

I know that often one does not so much consent as is forced to leave, but it makes sense to think about it in terms of multiplicity, regardless of if the departure comes from rupture and division, or from joy. The way you bring your grandmother's textile patterns into your work is one such attempt to work through the multiple histories of you and your family, shared between Australia and Estonia.

While your grandmother had the banksias and the kookaburras neatly lined up in straight rows, you are crowding them together and spreading them out at corners of the fabric. Still, the main question I wanted to ask you is—what do you think it means for the textiles depicting Australian flora and fauna to be next to the plants from Australia in a Botanical Garden, another juncture of migration and shared history between Northern Europe and Australia, and a site of colonial trace?

Warmly,
Inga

1
Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. Black, Queer and Holy: The Many Shapes of Black Multiplicity.—Frieze, June 2020, https://www.frieze.com/article/black-queer-and-holy-many-shapes-black-multiplicity.

Peeter Laurits
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

This is a very nostalgic, delicate and intimate art project. The work has an unusual effect both in reference to the current biennial and to the general context of contemporary art that favours provocations, ideological and declarative expressions while being embarrassed by the personal and the intimate. Even the notion of "beauty" has been rehabilitated quite lately after decades of long exile. Haagensen's installation is directly bound to personal nostalgies and love of nature dating back to his early childhood, now opening up in a form of emotionally loaded, meaningful and beautiful design.

As an expat born in Australia, the artist's homesickness and nostalgia of the past is divided and diversified. He inherited nostalgia for homeland from his grandmother who is also an artist by profession. Now that he lives in Estonia, Aksel is missing his childhood home and grandmother's garden. Grandmother's theme turns to be leitmotif in his artistic practice. The igniting motif(s) for his installation created for the botanical garden are the iconic characters of Australian nature—the kookaburra and the banksia tree, borrowed from the textiles designed by his grandmother. Both images are boldly stylized and strikingly rhyming with each other.

Haagensen experiments with these images on textile, printing them layers by layers on each other, stacking and thinning, layering these as symbolic images of memory. The artist is sporadically breaking the rhythm of images with empty surfaces that has the effect of memory gaps. And then again, he gathers the images on the next piece of cloth like an endless repetitiveness and recurrence of obsessive longing.

The chosen textile, made of cotton and linen, is warm by its essence yet a very technological material that creates a mild contrast with vegetation. When hanging on the banksia trees of the Palm House, these cloths act as an altar representing the artist's search for lost times and the warm feeling of home. The diffused repetition of the textiles on the park trees of the botanical garden creates a haunting atmosphere, symbolising the split state and the omnipresence of longing.

Tamara Luuk
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

„Banksias are Australian plants that have never tasted the soil of my current homeland. I wonder how they would feel here?" asked Aksel, who was born in Sydney but had moved to Estonia as an eight-year-old from himself when presenting his works. Aksel has spent a significant part of his artistic career working with the topic of exile, mostly restoring the memories of his grandmother and himself.

A long list of works by Estonian artists which talk about memory have interpreted memories through ancestors: the life and heritage of fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers, from real life to fantasy and even to bogey tales. Aksel has approached this trend together with Senta Silla (his grandmother's artistic pseudonym) in a direct and live manner, using live footage and speech. "We both are Estonian expatriates in Australia, both artists, both quiet and reserved,"[1] Aksel explained in the text accompanying the film he made for his MA graduation work. The variations he has used in different versions of the film have been measured out as small, well-considered changes, that have that with time have made made the story of the boat refugees more concentrated and generalised, until narrowing it down to the simple use of fabric as a symbol. The story is presented to the viewer using minimal singularity, avoiding the "schoolbook style of remembrance", in a calm and impartial manner that seems to be in accordance with Aksel's nature.

I find this kind of a calm, convincing flow, making an artistic generalisation of the mundane and personal while noticing plants, birds and animals around you and including them into the lifeline of a person[2] sympathetic. I also like how Aksel has learned his lessons[3] and how he seems to be ready for more, that he has arrived to the understanding that the context, which he used in his earlier works as a such, can be created also through a personal story that doesn't necessarily have to talk about belonging to a certain species, nationality or a place of birth—that a good artwork can be born out of the patterns depicting tropical birds and trees drawn by a young man and his grandmother who both are belonging and not belonging at the same time.

1
Aksel Haagensen. Vanaemale külla. Väliseestluse ning Austraalia lapsepõlve jälgi ajamas. (Visiting grandmother. Searching for the traces of the Estonian diaspora and my Australian childhood.) Master's thesis, Estonian Academy of Arts. Tallinn, 2020, https://tase20.artun.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Vanaemale-ku%CC%88lla.-Va%CC%88liseestluse-ning-Austraalia-lapsepo%CC%83lve-ja%CC%88lgi-ajamas_Aksel-Haagensen.pdf.

2
This is how the Nobel Prize in Literature winning Australian author Patrick White has done it also in his novel "The Tree of Man" (1955).

3
The videos and installation works from 2013 to 2022 documented on Aksel's homepage are sometimes remarkably good, reflecting the realities of media and politics but also his own search for the suitable means of expression. They also witness a more self-assured movement towards the personal.

Mattias Malk
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

Aksel Haagensen has studied sculpture, installation and contemporary art at the Estonian Academy of Arts. He has an agnostic approach when it comes to mediums, using a wide range of methods and techniques. The common characteristics of his works are a documentary nature, an attentive sensitivity, straightforwardness, but also a conscious naiveté.

In the biennial project, Haagensen continues his introspective approach to the Estonian diaspora, a subject he has been working on over the last few years. The motifs of the exhibited fabrics were created by the author's grandmother, known as Senta Silla by her artist's name. The two recurring motifs, the kookaburra bird and the fruit of the banksia plant, are endemic to Australia, but are depicted in a Marimekko-ish Nordic style. This is explained by the fact that Haagensen's grandmother became a war refugee in 1944, who ended up living in Australia after escaping Estonia and staying briefly in Sweden. Haagensen on the other hand was born and grew up in Australia but made his way back to Estonia.

The unaltered motifs are placed inside the subtropics house. The coastal banksia (*Banksia integrifolia)* also grows there, and both the plant and the fabrics enjoy the 24/7 moderate weather of their living quarters. The outdoor works on the other hand are at the mercy of the early autumn weather and will probably be quite worn down after their month-long exposure. Their motifs have already been partially erased or overprinted, similarly to the process of memory, which inevitably changes over time.[1] The visitors are invited to combine the originals and the remixes together through a walk.

This project evokes thoughts of being a foreign species, adapting to unknown conditions and to the weight of your origin. Haagensen relies strongly on his own introspection. There is also the question of breaking patterns, combined with the inability to abandon one's roots –characteristic to our time, and to the issues of self-definition faced by a globally mobile generation. If that thought seems too meta, one can instead contemplate on how much energy is needed to ensure suitable conditions for foreign species in the Botanic Garden. If we unplug the palm house, the banksia ceases to exist. On the other hand, the Pirita river valley would quickly remix it into something new.

1
Lauren Gravitz. The Forgotten Part of Memory.–Nature 24.07.2019, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02211-5.

Margit Mutso
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

“We have something in common,” I think, when Aksel Haagensen shows one of his early drawings of a three-toed parrot sitting on its tail. A precise visualisation of the absurdist humour which I know well. This image is from the childhood which Aksel will partially bring to the botanical garden to accompany the billowing fabrics.

The textiles, however, recount a significantly longer story than the six years of childhood in the bewildering nature of Australia. The series of memories go back a couple of generations and start with the journey that an eight-year-old girl took from Estonia to Australia. Aksel’s grandmother, along with her mother, father, brother and sister, fled after the war over dark waters to Sweden and from there to Australia where she studied art and decorated her home with motifs of birds, animals and plants that are unique to Australia.

The stylised kookaburras and banksias, which Aksel’s grandmother Vella Pihlak has set into patterns, will arrive now, 78 years after the frantic escape, back to Estonia in their original form where they will be accompanied by Aksel’s reproductions of the patterns of his childhood. Fabrics as the bearers of memories.

In a strange way, this leads my thoughts to my own grandmother who as a young woman and seven years before the little Vella left Estonia had to escape from the other side of Lake Peipsi. She was afraid of deportation because their farm was deemed too large and therefore had to cross the cracking April ice to Estonia. When the Bolsheviks arrived here and Estonia was named a Soviet republic, she had nowhere else to go and remained amidst the fields of southern Estonia where nobody knew anything about Marimekko or all the other pop art designers who inspired Vella’s artistic career.

But my grandmother also liked to draw. As somebody from the countryside, she mostly depicted her own domestic animals. Not in a cool stylistic manner, but with delicate broken lines and as realistically as possible. Oh, if I still had some of them, it would be nice to place them into patterns, print on textiles and hang my memories from childhood to billow in the wind. I would set them up next to a body of water and the reflections would act as double patterns.

It is bizarre that the patterned cotton gowns, which my grandmother bought from her Soviet village shop and which I vaguely remember, had a similar tonality to the colours that Aksel’s grandmother chose to print on her fabrics on the other side of the world. Did the spirit of the era actually manage to penetrate the closed curtain...?

Triinu Kööba, Elisa-Johanna Liiv
AKSEL HAAGENSEN

Between layers

Aksel Haagensen, both 100% Estonian and 100% Australian, as he himself says, has set up his favourite childhood motifs in the botanical gardens, reminiscent of his grandmother's garden in Australia. In the atrium of the palm house and the area of subtropical plants, he has hung original textiles with his grandmother's prints, depicting the kookaburra bird and the banksia plant, seemingly placing the fabrics into their natural environment, surrounded by subtropical plants and bird sounds—a climate they are originally from. Textile has no memory but how about plants? Do the banksias growing in the Tallinn Botanic Garden have root memory of the fact that they are originally from Australia, even though they have never drawn water from the soil of the faraway land nor absorbed carbon from its warm air. Do plants miss the birds that are supposed to fly between their leaves, sit on their branches and build their nests in their canopies. Did the artist's grandmother miss her Nordic roots, as she created her Marimekko-like designs?

In the outside area, hanging from trees, Haagensen has placed textiles bearing his own interpretations. Gaps and repetitions in the patterns hint at the various layers of memories, both at forgetting and their complexity. We carry certain pieces of history with us but are unable to remember the whole story. Walking in the park, the visitor sees a series of textiles with motifs that grow either denser or sparser, depending on their direction of movement. This also applies to our memories that are constantly in motion. As time passes, everything that is not of interest, that is not part of the shared narrative or is not supported by the environment fades. Or vice versa, everything can come alive again, if there is input that makes what is forgotten resurface again, if the environment is supportive. The artist has taken on the task of remembering his grandmother and her designs, laying groundwork for sharing the story of a family and by doing so, leaving a mark in the mind of many people.