

Dowse exhibition ‘Softy’ threads stories of care and craft

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In ‘Softy’, showing at The Dowse Art Museum, Malcolm Harrison’s large-scale tapestries are testaments to lost loves and the tragedies of living as a queer man back when it was still illegal. At right is ‘Hīnītore’ by Maungarongo Ron To Kawa.

The Dowse Art Museum has been collecting textiles since it opened in the 1970s and has now amassed an impressive collection which tells a larger story about how textiles have evolved and shifted across time.

Within the collection are a range of artists who create textiles in different ways, and use their works to express their unique stories. Curator Milly Mitchell Anyon has delved into this collection and pulled at some of the threads to weave a story of softness and vulnerability in the new exhibition *Softy*.

The name refers to the generosity of the textiles on display, as well as the literal softness of the medium. Textiles are often plush and cosy – *Softy* recalls this plushness, while simultaneously referring to the emotional softness or vulnerability that is brought to light within the exhibition. The artworks hang against soft pink walls, creating the feeling of warmth and cosiness. The gallery space becomes a haven rather than a cold white space.

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Areez Katki breathes softness into the gallery. Katki creates domestic portraits of his family, tracing oral histories and memories, binding together different perspectives with his threads.

Thirty’s Headscarf (2019) – an ode to his grandmother – aims to recreate her lost headscarf by drawing on the memories and stories of his family members. Soft red spirals dance across the cloth, with leafy forms spiralling in and out of the patterns. Katki uses embroidery – a form of creating that is often handed down through generations – as a form of expression that is both highly skilled and also uplifts his whakapapa.

Steven Junil Park’s work *Durumagi hanging screen* (2023) was acquired specifically for this exhibition. Park utilises Korean patchwork techniques known as *jogakbo* to create a red silk *durumagi* (outer garment), recreating a similar one that his grandmother gave him. When *durumagi* are not being worn, they are always lying flat. Park’s *durumagi* is forever suspended flat within a wooden standing frame, paying homage to his grandmother who is now dead.



Steven Junil Park's work 'Durumagi hanging screen' (2023) was acquired specifically for the Softy exhibition at The Dowse

This hands-on, labour-intensive aspect of textile creation is also a key aspect of the work of Daegan Wells. His piece *Local Makers* (2021) is the second work that was acquired especially for *Softy*.

Wells is based in Southland and lives on a farm close to the old Riverton clothing factory. He has learnt how to create chequered textiles from a community of ex-factory workers. Wells rears his own sheep and looms fabrics from their wool, which results in small textile works that are infused with this sense of community, and hark back to a time when the majority of our fabrics were created using these methods.

Another highlight from the exhibition is *Hunatore* by Maungarongo Ron Te Kawa. His works have an unctuousness to them, a velvety softness that makes you want to wrap yourself in his creations and curl up safely. In *Hunatore*, the seven sisters of Matariki take refuge beneath what Mitchell Anyon describes as a "phosphorescent sea". The figures in his work are playful, carefree, and shimmer with sequins and small mirror fragments, creating a kind of magical dreamscape.

But *Softy* isn't just a collection of textiles that soothe our minds. There's elements of humour to the exhibition – brought in by Wellington-based artist Turumeke Harrington, whose work *Wheua Ororite* depicts the joining of two bones (or rather, two boners).

There are also works that have more serious or tragic messages.

Malcolm Harrison's large-scale tapestries are testaments to lost loves and the tragedies of living as a queer man back when it was still illegal. His work *Night Swimmer* (1991) is a record of unrequited love. In the centre of the quilt, one of the two human figures has been crossed out or erased from the story. The words "if you love somebody set them free" sit atop this image. Although the colours of this work are bright and bold, the story behind it is quite tragic.



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Mitchell Anyon mentions Harrison's use of a sewing machine in finishing and creating his large-scale works, which apparently earned him some

criticism among textile artists. This hierarchy within the textile community is interesting — that which is made by hand seems to be more highly valued than the pieces that are made using a machine.

Artists like Jakob Rowlinson actively push against this idea by having his works machine woven and printed based off digital collages that he creates on his computer. Even so, this process doesn't diminish the artistic quality or legitimacy of his works.

At a larger scale, *Softy* is about dismantling hierarchies in the art world. Textile art has often been seen as a craft or a lesser form of artistic expression than painting and sculpture. *Softy* elevates this art form, bringing together artists for whom textiles form a critical backbone of their careers.

Softy: Textiles from The Doxse Collection is showing at The Doxse Art Museum until March 15, 2026.

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