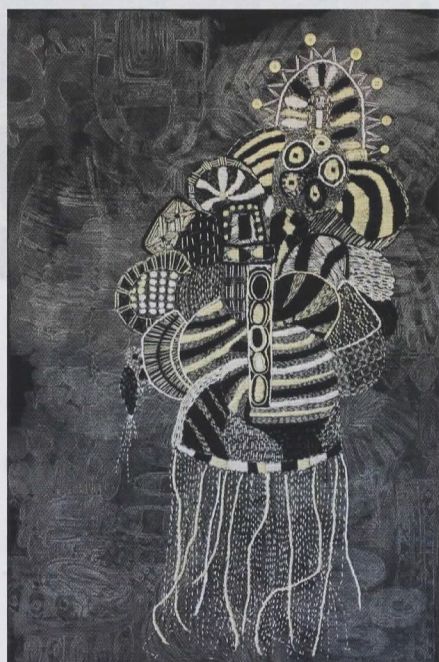
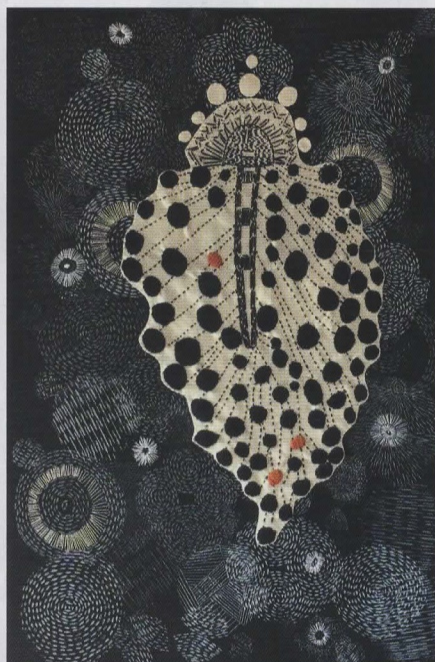


The Tracing Wall

Expatriate Australian artist, Sarah Amos has been based in America for over twenty-five years but maintains her connection to Melbourne with a regular exhibition schedule, and by visiting at least once a year. She remains humbled and inspired by Australian landscape which has long been the backdrop of her work. Amos still nurtures the ambition to work with the Australian Tapestry Workshop in future to transform one of her pieces into a full-size tapestry.



▲ Sarah Amos, *Emperor's Song*, 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm. (Private Collection).



▲ Sarah Amos, *Cloak of Stars*, 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.



▲ Sarah Amos, *Twice Heard*, 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.

Sarah Amos currently works from a 1,700 square foot studio purpose-built by her husband Roger Adkins, a master carpenter and furniture maker, at the back of their home in Northern Vermont, New England. Amos credits the expansiveness of this tranquil and light-filled working environment for a change in how she perceives and interacts with her work; she can now view and assess multiple large-scale compositions on the wall as works-in-progress.

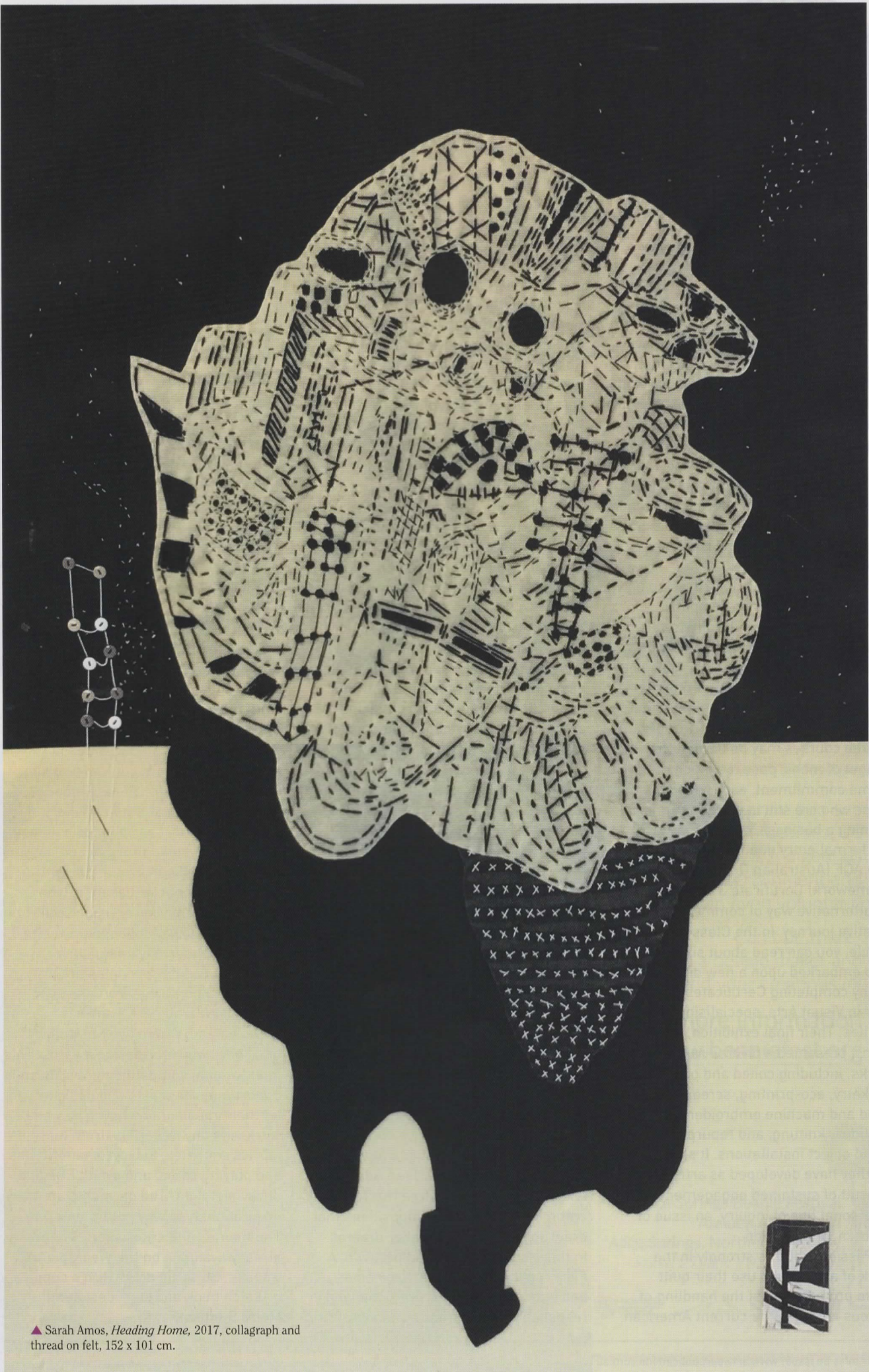
Amos has a distinguished career as an arts educator, collaborative printmaker, and as a master printer working across lithography, collagraph, multi-plate mono-printing, woodblock, mural printing and etching techniques. A compulsive image-maker, who uses her work as the medium for processing and digesting new ideas, her abstract landscapes blur the distinction between painting and printmaking. In November 2013, Amos was awarded a Painters and Sculptors Grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation (established in 1993), and

endowed by the pioneering American abstract painter (1925-92). The grant came when Amos was weathering a difficult period within her artistic life, and wondering whether she could continue to live and work in America. It gave her the confidence and the financial support to diversify, study, and experiment with other materials, expanding her practice into the textile field, which she views as a 'natural shift'.

With this more recent direction, Amos has lost her 'interior seam', as she calls it. This was the self-described 'Achilles' heel' of her printmaking; her large-scale artworks had always been constrained by paper size. Amos was always interested in producing what she calls 'hybrid prints', and describes her previous works as 'printed tapestries'. She considers the transition from paper to fabric as 'easy', owing to her desire to shift to a very tough but stable material for her collagraph plates. Amos has combined the collagraphic process with collage pieces, hand-stitching, and

appliquéd elements that are rendered three-dimensional with padding. This gives the surface a subtle, undulating, and almost topographic quality. The layers of dimensional line drawings Amos has employed replace the gouache and watercolour of her past works with different weights of thread and subtle colour shifts contributing to the vitality of the overall panel.

The acrylic felt Amos has sourced mimics the qualities and strength she admires in the Japanese paper. Another, perhaps more surprising, influence was the Fuzzy-Felt fabric toys Amos had as a child in the 1970s. Invented by Lois Allan in 1950, the simple but versatile sets were an inexpensive and portable way in which to encourage children's picture-making and creative abilities. The idea of using cut-out shapes applied to a surface to compose and inter-change various visual elements resonated with Amos; as did her interest in the dimensional possibilities of adding the thread onto the surface to create more of a

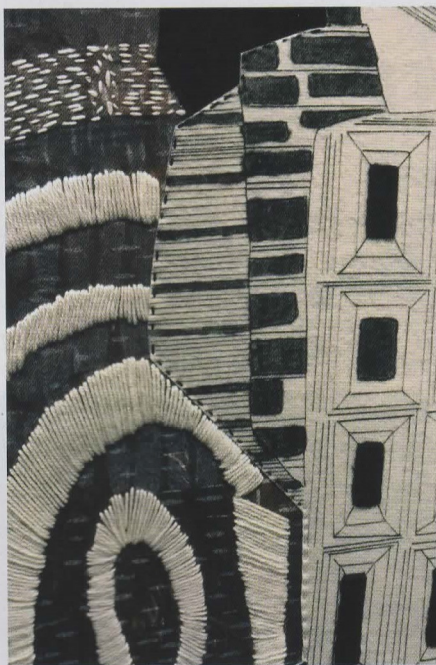


▲ Sarah Amos, *Heading Home*, 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.

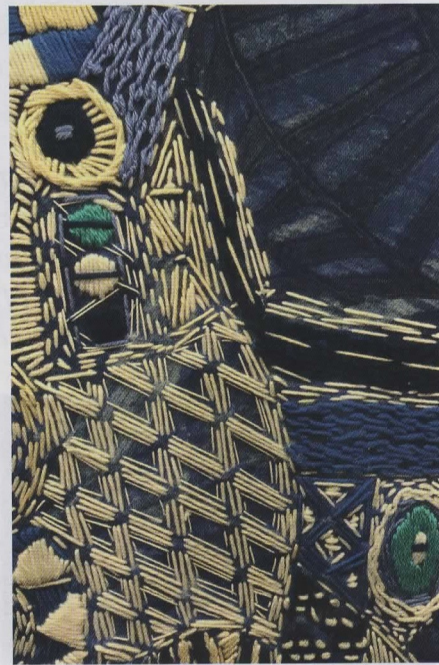




▲ Sarah Amos, *Chalk and Chaos*, 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.



▲ Sarah Amos, *Chalk and Chaos* (detail), 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.



▲ Sarah Amos, *Sanctuary Blue* (detail), 2017, collagraph and thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.

sculptural layer. This drove Amos' current explorations as to the way disparate forms and textures coalesce and spark dialogue within her works. The thread has become the drawing, and the felt, canvas, and linen replace the paper as the technical anchor in her current series.

Amos' latest body of eleven works, *The Tracing Wall*, presented at Flinders Lane Gallery (8-26 August, 2017) saw her further develop the optical complexity of her mark-making, and her interest in untraditional printmaking surfaces. The labour-intensive process Amos employs can result in nearly twelve months work devoted to one piece. Amos' pieces were originally printed with slow drying inks, so the fabric surfaces had to be extensively air-dried for four or five months before they could be worked on, or the appliqué pieces attached. More recently, she has perfected a water-based inking technique, so that process has been dramatically shortened. When the surface is ready to receive another layer of drawing - either from thread or fabric pens - Amos will then compose the collage elements. The so-called 'Holbein stitch' (also known as 'Spanish stitch') was a significant influence within these works. The self-taught Amos was able to learn other free-hand stitch styles from *The Stitch Bible* by Kate Haxell and from classes taken on YouTube.

Although the large-scale drawings and tapestries of South African artist William Kentridge remain a strong influence on Amos' work, here we

see her move into what she calls a more 'anthropomorphic vocabulary'. It is as though the textile medium has liberated Amos to embrace and expand on a variety of references from folkloric traditions that have long fascinated her. Australian Aboriginal artworks, whose narrative imagery she has absorbed and admired over so many years, are joined by more disparate influences, such as Bauhaus weavings, Japanese prints and *sashiko* stitching, as well as masks and shamanistic figures from African, Indonesian and New Guinean tribal traditions. Although her figural forms remain somewhat elusive, Amos has also embraced more parochial points of reference from her time in America, such as the so-called 'Mardi Gras Indians' of New Orleans.

These black Carnival revellers are inspired by the ceremonial dress of Native American tribes. This cultural interaction dates back to the late 1740s and 1750s in the bayous of Louisiana, when many African slaves encountered Native Americans. There are over sixty 'tribes' of Mardi Gras Indians who participate in the parade, and whose full regalia can weigh upwards of 45 kg. Their extravagant costumes and suits incorporate extensive beadwork, feathers, sequins, embroidered motifs, and other identifying tokens of their 'nation'. Conflicts, and the settling of grudges between rival tribes during Mardi Gras time, were immortalised in the song *Jock-A-Mo* (1954) by the R&B musician James 'Sugar Boy' Crawford, Jr. (1934-2012).

Crawford incorporates local patois and insults traded between the groups, which are loosely based on different African dialects; the song was later reinterpreted more popularly as *Iko-Iko* (1964). The inclusion of buttons on Amos's works *Emperor's Song* and *Heading Home* (both 2017) allude to the functional aspect of many hand-crafted textile items.

Amos describes her works as 'landscapes of memory, an amalgam of past and present experiences', that utilise the graphic shapes and symbols gleaned from her ever-expanding scope of interests and inspirations. Amos contends that her approach to contemporary printmaking is one of simplicity and directness. However, her concerted effort to expand the parameters of her practice, and to push into new areas of engagement, suggests that the task of realising her vision is far from simple. Amos is an artist who is determined to work across various artistic platforms. These new works demonstrate the rigour with which she is grappling with this self-imposed challenge.

The Tracing Wall was presented at Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne, 8-26th August 2017. Sarah Amos is represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne: www.flg.com.au and Heather Gaudio Fine Art, New Canaan, Connecticut: www.heathergaudiofineart.com Artist's website: www.sarahamosstudio.com

Inga Walton
Writer & Visual Arts Consultant



▲ Sarah Amos, *Sanctuary*
Blue, 2017, collage and
thread on felt, 152 x 101 cm.