

EVELINE KOTAI BOOK LAUNCH
John Cruthers' Speech Notes
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I'm delighted to be here today to launch the book *Eveline Kotai: Invisible threads*, which is the third publication by Art Collective WA on its member artists, following books on Trevor Vickers and Jeremy Kirwan Ward.

Felicity emailed me a PDF of the book last week, and I have to admit I spent most of Thursday engrossed in it. I've followed Eveline's work for almost 20 years, but the essays in the book fleshed out her family background and the development of her art, and it was great to see the earlier work I was less familiar with.

The essays include one on Eveline's family's experiences in her home country of Hungary by Helen Thurloe, and an overview of her life and career by Nyanda Smith. The central essay is by Julie Ewington, formerly deputy director of the Queensland Art Gallery. I think the choice of Julie to write on Eveline was inspired. Julie was a voice for feminism in Adelaide and later Sydney in the 1970s when this was not a fashionable position, and over her working life she's shown a continuing commitment to women and their art. More recently her time at the Queensland Art Gallery gave her deep exposure to the art of our broader region through the Asia Pacific Triennials. She brings this breadth of experience to her essay, stretching out to explore and weave together the various threads in Eveline's work, ranging from Hungarian folk needlework to the local south west landscape to the modernist grids of Agnes Martin and Eveline's interest in Buddhism.

Through this careful build up Julie is able to arrive at a really cogent analysis of Eveline's mature work, the paintings made by sewing strips of earlier paintings onto a new canvas. Just as they show a delicacy and lightness in their construction, they carry a real weight of feeling and emotions. Standing in front of them, I often find myself asking: "How did the artist make me feel this?" They appear effortless, but they're anything but. They're the product of almost 40 years of thinking and feeling, learning and making, and it shows. For me they constitute one of the more compelling bodies of work by an artist in recent Australian painting.

Besides enjoying the essays, reading the book made me think about the difficulties faced by artists from Western Australia. Through the sheer quality of her work Eveline was able to secure east coast representation and in 2012 the shared award of the Blake Prize for religious art. But for many Perth artists, it can be extremely hard to find a gallery or get your work noticed by curators and collectors on the east coast, very few of whom ever venture west of the Blue Mountains. Nor are WA artists often featured in national art magazines or survey exhibitions. Art fairs help, and Art Collective WA works very well in this arena. But it's hard to reach critical mass on art fairs alone.

But WA art is also less visible than it should be for reasons that can be overcome. For example, no major Western Australian collection is available digitally. Compare this to the east coast, where the Art Gallery of NSW, NGV and NGA have put significant resources into making their collections available online. Thankfully, the University of WA has recently

begun a pilot project to digitise and make available online the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, which will be extended to other collections in due course. The further we go into the 21st century, the clearer it becomes that not to be online is not to exist in many spheres.

This is where publications are so important, and I'd like to congratulate Art Collective WA on their publishing program and this book in particular. It's well judged, thorough and scholarly, making it indispensable for collectors and curators wanting to understand Eveline's work. Most importantly, it makes the case for Eveline as a major Australian artist whose body of work can stand comfortably alongside that of artists like Ralph Balson and Yvonne Audette, Howard Taylor and Rosalie Gascoigne. I have much pleasure in launching the book and in commending it to everyone with an interest in art.