

## The Map and The Mantle

— Dr. Phillina Sun

Having previously worked together on the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment (2015-18), Rachel Fallon and Alice Maher later extended their collaboration to create *The Map* (2021) and *The Mantle* (2024)—two large textile works which use the sympathetic medium of cloth to address Irish history with activist energy. Stitching is cheap and accessible, requiring little space and basic tools. Pliable and portable, it has been practiced in even the most adverse places—asylums, prisons, and POW camps. Yet as 'women's work', stitchwork is not seen as a significant form of expression, marginalised as merely decorative or functional. Drawing upon its bound histories of domesticity, labour, and femininity, the artists deconstruct social and political systems, wielding their needles as soft power.

Throughout history, clothing has carried the political and social values of communities. Worn next to the skin, clothes mediate between the wearer and the external world, telling others who they are and where they belong. In medieval Ireland, the mantle, or brat, was a long, heavy, woollen cloak, usually composed of small scraps of cloth sewn together. In the 15th century, the English banned the wearing of the mantle because it was considered 'too Gaelic'. Moreover, the mantle was associated with native resistance, as it could potentially disguise a person and conceal weapons. By banning the mantle, the English attempted to suppress Irish identity, community, and tradition, in order to facilitate native assimilation into the colonial order.

Hung above the staircase in The Dock—a former courthouse which connects to the nineteenth-century gaol and gallows nearby—*The Mantle* is a large, handsewn textile work in

vibrant pink and yellow silk. It is a bold and unmissable response to the mantle's outlawed history in the form of a banner. For centuries, banners have been used as proclamations of social and political identity, deploying textiles as the raw materials for solidarity and protest in the public arena. Embroidered with knotwork and heraldic emblems, two yellow columns are suffused with an earthy, fecund sensibility. Arterial roots rill along the surface and drip from the hem, while other patterns recall mitochondria (cells that produce energy in the body); the lowly fly is also enshrined, further symbolising the transformation of matter. The central, large, pink rows are stitched repeatedly with a phrase from Gaelic script: Scaolimis Gac Snaidhm, which translates into "Let us untie all the knots." A knot links or anchors skeins in place, as in embroidery or crochetwork; a knot is also figurative, denoting a difficulty, perplexity, or problem. Repeated again and again, the phrase invokes the desire to be free from constraints—it is a protest chant, incantation, or magical agent against historical amnesia.

While *The Mantle* reckons with the politics of clothing, *The Map* uses an arsenal of stitchwork as a political tool to grapple with the legacy of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland. Originally commissioned by Rua Red, and constructed over two and a half years, *The Map* draws inspiration from the medieval mappa mundi, commonly painted on cloth and illustrated with distant lands, stories, history, mythology, flora, fauna, and archetypal figures. In its fullest form, the mappa mundi functioned as an encyclopedia of medieval knowledge, coupled with religious and symbolic messages about the order of a world construed as God's creation. Maps concern borders and territories; they impose limitations and definitions, naming things to draw them under the control of their makers. Through a needle's eye, *The Map* names a social order in which the control of women by the Catholic Church was facilitated through the collusion of State and society.

Monumental yet soft, *The Map* is hung in the centre of a dark space, with three spotlights trained on the front. The viewer is invited to approach *The Map* as a sculpture and situate their body in relation to it: walking around or back and forth, crouching low, or standing on tiptoes to look closely at details. Looking is active, required to make connections between its abundant elements.

Approached from behind, the surface is mottled by a shadowy, nascent cartography. Red crochetwork bubbles from the hem, as if expelled from the map, lending it volition. At the top, red tresses fan out behind Mary Magdalene's head, whose back is turned; she is a cipher, an archetype, who has been inscribed with female sinfulness. Deep blue silk borders suggest the night sky. Constellations summon associations with the Magdalene Laundries: Pecatrix Major (The Big Sinner), Pecatrix Minor (The Little Sinner), The Seven Devils, Death and the Maiden, The Little Laundress. Heraldic shields are stitched with Acts, bearing on the bodies of women and children in Ireland. Associated with defense, the shields are emblems of social and political battles over moral ground. Winds bluster: The Squall, the Tempest, the Wind of Change. The map's interior discloses appliquéd continents, archipelagos, and peninsulas in aquamarine seas, painted on crepe silk. The way is uncertain and turbulent: here be dragons.

The territories testify to the fraught history of the Magdalene Laundries. On The System, laundresses perform their duties in penitence under the watchful eyes of the Virgin Mary. Thick, windowless, stone walls contain the blueprints of laundries, part of the carceral 'architecture of containment' that rendered women invisible. Beside the Sea of Contempt is The Napery. Referring to the household linen washed by the laundresses, the island's ground is a repurposed tablecloth that once belonged to a parish priest, responsible for the incarceration of some women. Surrounded by faintly coloured shamrocks, The Graveyard of

Reports and the Windmills du Mal attest to the State's inaction, following the exposure of abuse in the laundries. Holes in the original linen are patchworked over by a ghostly field of appliquéd cloth from humble fabrics, such as dish rags and nappy cloths, which are stitched using sashiko—a Japanese embroidery technique consisting of 'little stabs'. The landscape is poignantly textured, suggesting attempts to repair after the silencing of women's testimonies, excluded from State reports.

Surrounded by seas in which the monsters of Poverty, Prejudice, and Ignorance lurk, other islands satirise the norms of this society. In Scrubland, one may take in such sights as the Pillars of Society, Outer Sanctimonia, Backbiter Row, and Waving Wood. On Green Island, one must negotiate the Rock & the Hard Place to reach the Wood of Twisted Desires, the Ballroom of Romance, and the City of Lovers, whose desperate inhabitants cling to each other, in gestures made furtive by laws designed to control sexuality.

On Slag Island, housing estates contain the Furies, Jezebel Heights, Strumpet City, Medea Drive, Spinsters Grove, and Fleurs du Mal: names of mythological import from a long history of female transgression. Appearing at one end is Maman (1999), the iconic spider sculpture by Louise Bourgeois. Dedicated to her mother, a tapestry restorer, Maman links spinning and weaving to maternal protection and repair.

Images of rebellious women recur throughout, reverent and celebratory. Miniature pendants contain portraits of mythological and historical female figures (the latter referred to by first names), symbolic of feminine struggles for power and self-determination. Lakshmi, Hecate, Medusa, and Brigid mingle with Rosa Parks, X, Marsha P. Johnson, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, and Nell McCafferty, among others. Each pendant could be worn close to the heart as devotional amulets, offering spiritual protection in times of need. Attached low, each

portrait entices the viewer to get on their knees, like a supplicant before a hallowed altar. An act of restorative justice, *The Map* redraws the borders of the past by reclaiming the histories of rebellious women as part of a millennia-long struggle for female liberation.

Moreover, *The Map* also imagines the future. At the furthest reaches lie Metamorpholis, protected by the Evergreen Sea. 'Imaginal discs' are clusters of cells, found in the larval bodies of insects that metamorphose, which contain the incipient forms of their transformation. The island is an Imaginal Forest, composed of cells, featuring images gathered from the artists' communities. This is an ecofeminist family tree in which a rich, open-ended future is collectively imagined.

*The Map* presents history as constructed by the feeling hands of women; it is social memory made tactile through texture, rhythm, and tone. The artists insist that there is no key to the map; that the map is the key. With beauty and humour, *The Map* recovers the past but also insists on the future's pliability, if the present dares to address it. To this end, the work is complemented by Sinéad Gleeson and Stephen Shannon's moving sound piece in the adjacent Gallery Three—originally the judge's chambers of the former courthouse. Imagined as a poetic journey through the map's kinetic world, it weaves together the voices of women from diverse communities of Irish society, culminating in the multi-voiced, declarative statement: "We are the Map."

Patchwork joins the remnants of clothes, resurrecting the discarded into new and artful relationships. Its power lies in plenitude, in its cumulative effect. Exhibited in The Dock, 'The Map and The Mantle' (1 February — 12 April 2025) salvages the histories of the marginalised, transforming them, stitch by stitch, into prodigious yet malleable visions of collective power and possibility.

Dr. Phillina Sun is a writer based in the Northwest of Ireland. IG: phillina.sun.

'The Map and The Mantle' by Dr. Phillina Sun is published on the occasion of the exhibition titled [The Map and The Mantle](#) by Alice Maher and Rachel Fallon at The Dock, 1 February — 12 April 2025.

