

Ema Shin

Hearts of Absent Women (Tree of Family), 2026

wool, cotton, bamboo yarn, acrylic yarn, cotton pearls, glass beads, polyester ribbon, aluminium

Courtesy the artist and Gallerysmith, Melbourne

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Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney and BEEAH Group with generous support from National Center for Art Research, Japan and assistance from Tapestry Foundation Australia and Australian Tapestry Workshop (ATW). Woven by Ema Shin and ATW weaver Saffron Gordon

Education Resource (7-12)



Hearts of Absent Women #12, 2023

Photography Photography Narelle Wilson.

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Overview

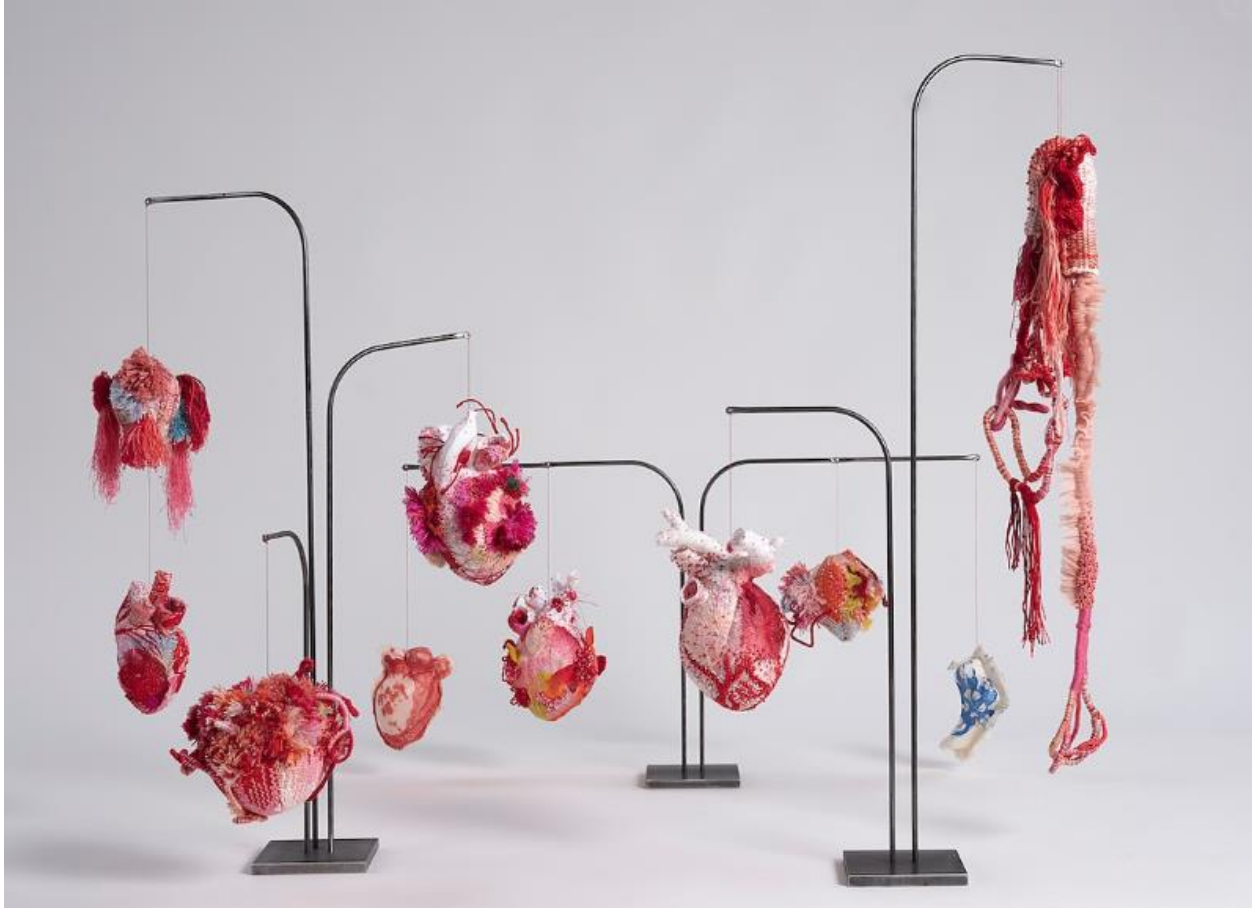
Ema Shin, a Japanese-born Korean artist living in Naarm (Melbourne), creates work that asks powerful questions about femininity, identity, and womanhood. A key catalyst for her practice was discovering her own 32-generation family tree. As she traced this lineage, she was confronted with a stark reality that the names of women who had not given birth to sons were absent, erased from her family's official history.

In her large-scale, hand-woven anatomical heart, Shin challenges the historical erasure of women's narratives and their contributions to the arts. While hand-crafted from hundreds of soft cotton, bamboo, and synthetic fibres, these materials coalesce into a powerful tension between their delicate textures and the visceral, muscular reality of the heart.

Using reds and pinks to evoke lifeblood and care, she turns the heart, the organ of life, into a symbol of a female bloodline. The dense, complex layers of fibres feel like they have a real visual weight, just like the lineage she comes from. By threading pearls and beads into her work, Shin is reclaiming feminine adornment, using beauty to deliver a sharp message: women *are* valued.

Shin makes us think about where art and craft belong. She takes these domestic crafts that are often part of 'home duties' and shows women's work of mending, weaving, and repairing is as important as any high art. Just like a grandmother fixing clothes, the very act of making becomes a powerful, active gesture of healing and repair for generations past and present.





Hearts of Absent Women, 2021,
embroidery, glass, polyester, linen, cotton, wool, hanji paper, lokta paper
Image courtesy of the artist

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Discussion Questions

Ema Shin uses soft materials (cotton, bamboo, fibres) to make an anatomical heart, which is usually imagined as a muscular human organ.

How does using soft **materials change** how you **feel** when you **look** at the object? Does it look **fragile** or **strong**?

Why do you think the artist chose an anatomical heart (biological) rather than a love heart (emoji/cartoon shape) to **represent** her **family history**? What is the **difference in meaning** between the two shapes?

How does the **structure** of the weave act as a **metaphor** for the **resilience** of the women she is **representing**?

Historically, embroidery was seen as women's work and not high art. How does Shin use the **contemporary practice challenge** the status of these materials? Does displaying a woven heart in a gallery **change its value**?

Shin's practice devolved from discovering her 32-generation family tree and the erasure of women's names. How does her use of **domestic craft** (weaving/beading) culturally **challenge** the **preservation** of history in her **culture**?

Practical Activities

Activity 1

Step close to Shin's work and observe its surface. Take notice of how the threads travel. Are they random or do they follow a path?

Identify the major textures occurring across the piece. Look for where the fibre mimics veins, muscle fibres, or map-like structures.

In a small section on your page, create a micro-map of these dominant patterns.

Capture the directional logic of the threads using only lines and weights.

This box is your structural DNA and it will dictate the various styles of your weave in the next activity.



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Activity 2

You are going to apply the patterns you drew above, but this time using the words themselves to recreate the knots and veins on the entire heart.

Observe the sculpture as a whole and sketch a large, simple outline of the anatomical heart in the centre of your page.

Choose 5–10 words that represent the hidden or unspoken aspects of life Shin explores.

Some wordbank ideas include *Lineage, Resilience, Erasure, Fragility, Pulse, Archive, Maternal, Labor, Trace, Ancestry*.

Fill your heart outline using only these words. The challenge is to apply the "logic" from your micro-map to the whole form.

If your map showed parallel veins, write your words in long, pulsing, continuous sentences.

If your map showed knots, bunch your words together, overlapping and tangling them until they create a dark, dense mass on the paper.

The goal is to build your drawing until the text ceases to look like a list of words and begins to look like a dense, pulsing, woven muscle.





Hearts of Absent Women (detail), 2021
embroidery, glass, polyester, linen, cotton, wool, hanji paper, lokta paper
Image courtesy of the artist