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Opinion: Quilt made to raise funds for Bimblebox Nature Refuge is getting up people's noses

KATHLEEN NOONAN THE COURIER-MAIL AUGUST 08, 2015 12:00AM



ROLL up, roll up, ladies and gentlemen, and see the controversial exhibit at the Ekka that has been banned from other shows.

It was deemed too hot politically to be displayed to the public. Maybe the other show associations feared the public would riot if their eyes even saw this exhibition. Who knows? Trying to read the minds of the banners – the frightened people who jump at shadows – is always dangerous. So, first, let's meet the maker, Maureen Cooper, first-time quilt-maker and bird lover.

She made a quilt, 130cm x 136cm, a combination of material, thread and stitching, using three techniques – applique, embroidery and machine stitching.

The quilt depicts mostly birds and native animals. It is pretty. Yet it threw a cat among the pigeons in regional towns in Queensland for reasons it is hard to grasp. Cooper decided to make the quilt in order to raffle it to raise funds for tiny, fragile Bimblebox Nature Refuge.

"I thought it was pretty harmless," she says.

The refuge in central western Queensland is a biodiversity hotspot threatened by the Galilee Basin coal mining projects including Clive Palmer's massive China First.

Are you thinking what I'm thinking, readers? We don't swallow this "it is pretty harmless" line, do we?

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I asked Cooper for an image of this troublemaking quilt, expecting it plastered with rebellious slogans – you know, you can't eat coal, die all fat capitalist types raping the land slogans – which would have explained why various Queensland regional shows in coalmining areas had problems accommodating the quilt.

When the image arrived, it was a little perplexing. I've seen baskets of newborn kittens that are more political. There were various panels, showing plumed whistling duck, the frill-necked lizard, the brolga, black-necked storks, echidnas, the hanging eucalyptus, bird footprints, a brown quail, an echidna and a great egret.

Oh, and there was some sedge, knotweed, ghost gum flowers, gumnuts, waterlilies and pondweed, too. Ian Hoch, caretaker at Bimblebox, is also depicted, making a cup of tea.

The quilt is ... quietly pretty, rather than loudly political. Like something your nature-lovin' nanna would make.

The Barcaldine Show had no problem with it, displayed it without a fuss, and people said how nice it was.

At Alpha, the show committee did not return correspondence, according to Cooper. Alpha, you must remember, is the shire where the China First mega mine is planned.

Onwards, the quilt went to Emerald where, Cooper says, it was not welcome. Then it arrived in Mackay, a pretty town that once was all about sugar, reef and tourism. Before the mining boom.

The Mackay Show Association had conniptions and banned it. Why? Well, here the stories differ. Patricia Julien, who attempted to enter the quilt, says the woman in charge of the pavilion found a spot to hang it next to the entrance door. By the next morning it was gone.

Julien says she was told it was "political" and had the word "endangered" in the panel with the black-throated finch. Hard to get around that as the finch is, you know, endangered and, with Clive's big hole, will be very endangered, indeed.

I've read through Mackay Show Association's patchwork and quilting regulations No. 1-7 and can't identify anything regarding politics.

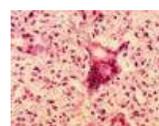
Taking the issue to the Mackay Show's main office, Julien met show manager Steve Gavioli. When contacted, Gavioli denied the quilt was hung up and taken down. He said he has no knowledge of what was said by the pavilion woman, that he did not like the way Julien spoke to him (she alleged mining interests tainted his decision not to allow it to be exhibited) and, finally, that she laughed at him.

When I tried to clarify the real reason the quilt was banned, Gavioli hung up. So, whose version do we believe? Well, the fact remains: the quilt was told to go away. Do we assume it is because Mackay, left with 1500 empty houses after a mining boom, is



Quilts are often made by those without power, without a loud voice, without great wealth.

□ □



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'Nothing fair' about

terrified of anything even remotely anti-mining?

When the quilt was entered at the Ekka's creative arts and crafts section, no one blinked an eye. Most welcome. So what gives?

Quilts, throughout time and across the world, have been quietly stitched as expressions of beauty and love. They define unending patience. They are often made by those without power, without a loud voice, without great wealth. That is their power.

Although this Bimblebox quilt is as overtly political as a grandmother's hanky, quilts do have a long history of getting up people's noses.

In their book *The Power of Cloth*, Jane Benson and Nancy Olson write of the quilt's power for those without power to get their message across. Quilts have fought battles on race, gender and sexism. The best known is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, made to celebrate the lives of people who died of AIDS-related causes. The quilt weighed 54 tonnes and became the largest piece of community folk art in the world.

So, in the face of the unbearable – the possible destruction of Bimblebox refuge – Cooper made a quilt.

Isn't freedom of speech a slippery old thing? It becomes important to you when it suits your purposes. At other times, you couldn't give a flying fig for the other person's right to it.

We use the notion to defend the awful, the bigoted and the racist – as Federal Member for Dawson George Christensen did addressing people draped in Australian flags and dressed in flag boardshorts at a recent Reclaim Australia rally in Mackay.

At other times we don't want to hear about freedom of speech. Silly old show associations. If they had simply allowed the quilt to be shown, a handful of people – stomachs full from waffles and dagwood dogs – would have walked past it and thought, gee, nice birds. End of story. Instead, jumping at shadows, they have ensured the quilt has a bigger audience. The Bimblebox birds say cheers! In life, the quiet truths often ring loudest.

To view Cooper's quilt, visit the fine arts section at Brisbane's Ekka. Or [see it at bimblebox.org](http://bimblebox.org) and judge for yourself. For two bucks, you can even buy a raffle ticket for a chance to win the quilt. (Be warned, readers, shield thy eyes. It might incite you to overthrow the state.)

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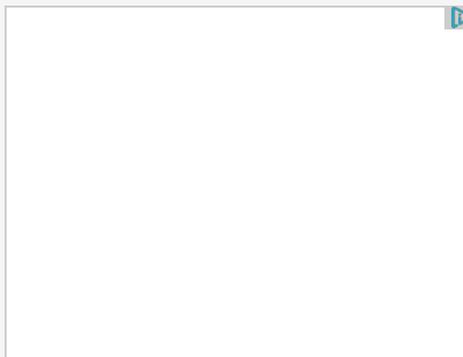
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