Defending our human rights is as critical now as it was when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in December 1948. This document established that the recognition of ‘the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’.

‘The #UDHRquilt Project’ is a collaborative activism initiative using the craft/art of quiltmaking as a way to celebrate and raise awareness of the ways in which the UDHR is infringed and challenged daily around the world. Four quilts, created by 131 ‘craftivists’ representing 45 nationalities are on exhibit at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House in Canberra until late February 2020.

The word ‘craftivism’ was originally coined by writer and maker Betsy Greer in 2003, but making political statements through the creation of art is certainly not new. Artists have used their craft for the purpose of activism for centuries. I find the word ‘craftivism’ awkward, particularly in the light of the history of political statements through art and craft over such a long period. In Australia we simply need to think of the fertile time from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s with the revival of studio craft practice. This opened up a myriad of possibilities for expression in the visual arts. Many things came together to enable this revival. Craft organisations were established that helped ‘shape agendas for the integration of craft training, scholarship, marketing and innovation with the mainstream of the visual arts and design industries’.

‘The #UDHRquilt Project’ builds on another project initiated by Melbourne-based artist Tal Fitzpatrick in 2015, when the Prime Minister Please (PM Please) quilt was given to the newly installed PM Malcolm Turnbull. Here 121 messages received from Australians were hand-stitched onto swatches of suiting fabric and second-hand ties and subsequently made into the work. In 2016, Phoenix, Arizona-based artist Stephanie Dunlap began collaborating with Fitzpatrick to develop this latest project based on the UDHR. Again using social media, they were overwhelmed by the international response.

The four quilts are each made from 30 blocks addressing the 30 articles of the UDHR. They are grouped in coloured borders giving them their
names. Each block, and the circumstances in which it was created, is described by its maker, with a screen beside each quilt on display enabling viewers to see the block in detail, and to read about the makers and their stories. (They also appear on the website.) The words of these 131 contributors are poignant, heartfelt and powerful. Each maker has eloquently described their feelings for, and beliefs in, a just and fair society.

Many of the blocks are intricate, showing family scenes, while others are quite simple with the text of the article they were assigned embroidered on the surface, and not all are in English. This gives them legitimacy, coming as they do from developing democracies and countries where democracy is still being fought for. A particularly moving block in the red quilt depicts the Grenfell Tower, with flames and smoke billowing from the windows. Another from the blue quilt lists the names of men and women imprisoned in British jails who have eventually had their sentences quashed. Through this piece the maker draws our attention to these particular cases but also reminds us that these miscarriages of justice happen everywhere.

A range of techniques have been employed, all using a needle with thread to stitch their message, but the embroidery is uniformly exquisite. This is, indeed, an ambitious project and one which the two collaborators must be pleased with and proud of; the involvement of so many people from around the world is uplifting. Moreover, the display of the quilts at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House is particularly relevant, reminding us that we should all think about our human rights and that we cannot take them for granted in the current political climate.


