

Young artists embrace their inner nanna

Age-old crafts are being given a hard new edge, writes **Louise Schwartzkoff**.

Tim Moore is the first to admit he can't match the average granny with a needle and thread. But there are things he can tell you about embroidery that no grandmother would know. Which shade of pink thread you should use to depict a woman's nipple, for instance. How many stitches it takes to embroider a belly-button. What your mates will say if you pass up a night at the pub to catch up on your needlework.

Everywhere Moore goes, his embroidery goes with him. On the couch, on the bus and on the toilet, he crouches over his embroidery hoop, making tiny stitches in a linen square.

Instead of the traditional roses and butterflies, he embroiders middle-aged nudists. There are naked abseilers, gardeners and ping-pong players. In his latest series, which goes on show next month at the Chalk Horse Gallery in Surry Hills, the nudists appear in fancy dress. One woman wears nothing but a Pink Panther mask, each body part lovingly depicted stitch by stitch.

"When old ladies embroider, they have a different stitch for different effects," he says. "Mine's not really that technical... I just think it's a nice way of making art."

He is not the only one. Embroidery, crochet, knitting and cross stitch – once as unfashionable as mothballs and doilies – have become a contemporary art form. Several artists have taken up the thimble, with results that might shock their grannies.

There is Melbourne's Louise Weaver, who crochets woollen coats for stuffed birds; Bronwen Sandland, who once covered her Canberra house with large knitted squares; and Sydney's Silke Raetze, who makes cross-stitch samplers bearing slogans such as "My folks wish I made money not art".

Long belittled as a mere craft, needlework is being taken seriously in galleries. A stitched drawing in pink paper by Fiona Fenech made the finals in last year's Dobell Prize for Drawing. The Art Gallery of NSW is exhibiting Narelle Jubelin's minutely worked petit points.

It is not just artists digging through their sewing baskets. The trend has gained momentum outside the galleries, with celebrities from Madonna to Russell Crowe admitting a penchant for knitting. Sewing machine manufacturers such as Bernina and Brother have reported an increase in sales, and attendances at Australia's Craft and Quilt Fair have risen by 15 per cent in recent years.

But for artists, the intricate, time-consuming processes of needlework are particularly satisfying.

Moore discovered his passion on a flight from his native Britain. He had forgotten his sketchbook and instead "sketched" using the airline's sewing kit and a sick bag. "I'm a little bit obsessive, so I do enjoy the process," he says. "It's like drawing in tiny strokes with a hairline pen."

Some say the roots of the trend go deeper. To make objects by hand is to rebel against mass-production and consumerism.

The sculptor Kate Just first picked up a pair of knitting needles at 26 and from her first scarf she was hooked. "Children of today are raised in a consumer-focused environment and then as adults they can't sew or cook or make things," she says. "They feel a loss so they seek out those skills-based experiences to feel a sense of self-reliance and ability."

Her knitting habit soon bled into her art. She started knitting interactive landscapes and human figures. One early effort, a life-size sculpture of her father in a police uniform, stands in her hallway.

"The act of knitting does have



Collector items ... a Silke Raetze cross stitch, and right, Kate Just with a knitted life-size sculpture of her father dressed as a policeman.

Main photo: Rebecca Hallas

those references to the domestic environment. To your mother, your grandmother, to home, family and gender... When it's used in art, it has so many levels of meaning," she says.

Raetze's cross stitches, which are on display at Michael Reid's Elizabeth Bay gallery until May 9, are anything but old-fashioned. She began sewing shortly after her marriage fell apart, making a series of underwear sculptures by stitching together old love letters. The work evolved into the cross stitch series with their brutally modern messages: "My first marriage f---ed up" and "One day I forgot to be pretty".

"Some people are shocked because they're drawn in thinking it's all sweet and lovely and then you hit them with something that's edgy and unexpected," she says.

"It's a medium that's loaded with ideas about tradition and femininity. Maybe that's why everybody seems to be stitching or knitting or doing crochet... or perhaps we're embracing our inner nannas."

