

# Exhibition Guide

**Britta Marakatt-Labba**  
*Under the Vast Sky*

**23 February — 29 May 2022**  
**Second Floor Galleries**

Ikon presents the first UK exhibition by renowned Sámi (Swedish) artist Britta Marakatt-Labba. *Under the Vast Sky* features embroidered pieces, including panoramas chronicling the history, culture and cosmology of the Sámi, the Indigenous population of the northern Scandinavia and northwest Russia. These are combined with other art forms to demonstrate the wide range of her practice. Her work overall strikes a balance between the community, domestic and everyday life and addresses urgent topics, including terrorism and the climate emergency.

Born in 1951, Marakatt-Labba lives and works in the village of Badje-Sohppar, Sampi, Sweden. She studied at the HDK Academy of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg, but grounds her art equally in the *duodji* practices of Sámi crafts and art, learnt through her upbringing. With embroidery as her principal medium, she works with textile art, collage, sculpture and installation. In addition, she has been commissioned to design clothing for the church, theatre sets and book illustrations. Marakatt-Labba was a member of the influential and legendary Mázejoavku/Sámi Artist Group in the late 1970s and early 1980s who exhibited their work within the community – through schools, municipal galleries and libraries – and occasional international exhibitions.

## Gallery 4



### 1. *Garjját/The Crows* (1981/2021) Embroidery

In 2021, a little more than 40 years since the original was made, Marakatt-Labba, having stitched for over a hundred hours, completed this replica of *Garjját/The Crows*. The embroidery – a key artwork in this exhibition and Sámi art history – records the historic moment when a group of activists staged a peaceful protest against the expansion of a hydropower plant in Áltá (Northern Norway). In documenting the event, which the artist participated in, Marakatt-Labba creates a compelling allegory around the character of the crow, which has long been a symbol of authority to the Sámi. In this unforgettable sequence, the murder of crows metamorphose into policemen, who in turn charge at the activists. Whilst the battle was lost in part, the protests opened a path onto political reforms that led eventually to the development of the Sámi parliament.



### 2. *Girdi noaidit/Flying Shamans* (2011-21) Embroidery

The story of protest extends into *Girdi noaidit/Flying Shamans* completed by Marakatt-Labba over a ten-year period. Comprising embroidery stitches and fragments of dyed cloth, it introduces elements of the artist's visual vocabulary – the sea, human, mountain, animal, spirit and sky – repeated across the picture plane. While the violence of the state authorities is unchallenged in *Garjját/The Crows*, here the shamans take revenge, by picking up and dropping the policemen – likened to rats – into the icy waters. By returning to the subject of protest, Marakatt-Labba demonstrates that the campaign for rights and democracy in the Sápmi region continues to this day.



### 3. *Čullon meachcci/Felled Forest* (2020-2021) – *Minerálaroggan/ Mineral extraction* (2018) Embroidery

This grouping of panoramic landscapes documents the ongoing changes to Sápmi landscape and challenges to Sámi culture. Marakatt-Labba's family practices reindeer husbandry, which follows a yearly cycle of seasons. For centuries, herders have taken their animals to graze on lichen in the birch forests. Increased logging and mining practices are making reindeer herding, hunting and fishing unviable and threatening Sami cultural practices as a whole. Throughout the artist's stitched landscapes, we see the heads of Sámi goddesses protecting the herders and countering deforestation. The black outlines of a mine, for the extraction of iron ore, cut through ancestral lands and wounds the environment. Marakatt-Labba's landscapes also make reference to climate change through the representation of storms and cracks in the ice.



#### 4. *Máilmmiávus/Cosmos* (1999-2000) Embroidery

This wall hanging demonstrates Marakatt-Labba's use of appliqué, involving fragments of fabric and embroidery, to create a picture of the Sámi sky, stars and heavens. The work visualises *Lodderáidas* (the Milky Way or 'the bird's ladder', as its Sámi name) as a familial procession of reindeer sleds, led by a golden-horned white reindeer. Other elements of cosmology that recur in Marakatt-Labba's work include the stellar constellations *Sarva* (the Elk) and *Fávdna* (the Hunter).



#### 5. *Historja/History* (2003) Watercolour

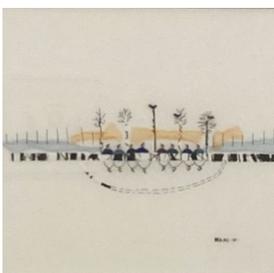
This is the preparatory drawing for part of a 24-metre-long tapestry at the Arctic University of Norway. Marakatt-Labba worked on the piece over a period of four years, detailing Sámi culture, language, history and cosmology. An epic work, it references key historic moments, including the *Kautokeino* uprising of 1852 in which a group of Sámi attacked representatives of the Norwegian authorities. Inspired by a religious revival, the rebels opposed the Norwegian State Church's relationship with the alcohol industry. Members of the group were subsequently executed and imprisoned, starting a long period of unjust control and forced assimilation by the state authorities.

Gallery 5



#### 6. *Niegadeapmi/Dreaming* (1999) Embroidery

The work contains a complex geometry derived from Sámi cosmology and mythology, which connects the heavens above, the world of the living and the netherworld of the ancestors below. These three dimensions are encompassed by an oval shape of the shaman's drum (only the shaman can access all dimensions). On the left, we see the *arrán* (the hearth) of the *lávvu* (temporary dwelling), which opens onto a stellar dome. On the right, we see sleeping children huddled together beneath the vast starry sky. Suspended between the sky and the sea, they are watched over by the goddesses of Sami mythology.



#### 7. *Mii/We* (2014) Embroidery

A recurring item in Marakatt-Labba's iconography is the *ládjogahpir* (a horned hat), once prohibited under colonial rule. Since its appearance in the artist's work, the *ládjogahpir* has experienced a revival, with women relearning to make and wearing the hat, which has symbolic significance. Worn by Sámi goddesses, *ládjogahpirs* in red signal resistance and protection, halting the industrial exploitation of the land and guarding the integrity of Indigenous culture. In contrast, the blue *ládjogahpir* marks the sorrow and mourning for the wounded earth as well as grieving the loss of a way of life and the knowledge bound within it.



### **8. *Dáhpáhusat áiggis/Events in Time* (2013) Installation**

Large flour sacks hang in a broken circle, simulating a *lávvu* (temporary dwelling). The printed image of the German eagle and a stamped swastika declare the sacks' origin in the Nazi occupation of Norway during World War II. Possibly acquired by barter between the local Sámi population and the occupant soldiers (found in the attic of the artist's aunt), the sacks are now repurposed as the abstracted walls of a traditional abode. Seen from inside the circle, there is an embroidered visualisation of the 2011 Utøya terrorist attacks. The assassin – right wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik – is imagined as a double-headed bird of prey, surrounded by weapons and with bullets extending in all directions.

## Gallery 6



### **9. *Johtin II/The Move II* (2018) Embroidery on burlap (rolled)**

This embroidery on tarpaulin charts the relocation of the arctic city of Kiruna (situated in the northmost part of Sweden in the province of Lapland), due to expansion of the LKAB mine. A rudimentary cartography, this work also recalls the historic Dislocation, ordered by the Swedish government in the 1920s, entailing the forced relocation of hundreds of Sámi families. In mapping the past, present and future, it connects historic settler colonialisation to present-day extractivist capitalism in the Sápmi region.



### **10. *Salasteapmi/Embrace* (2019) Sculpture (granite)**

Recently Marrakatt-Labba has turned towards sculpture. Her visual vocabulary recurs in this series of three-dimensional work, which include the heads of the Sami goddesses carved in wood and reindeer bone.



**11. Máilmmi leigganeapmi/Global Warming (2007)  
Embroidery, collage (rolled)**

This work contains the circle, which is key to Marrakatt-Labba's work, derived from the *yoik*, the song and musical expression of Sámi culture, which has no boundaries, no beginning or end. In *Máilmmi leigganeapmi/Global Warming*, the artist considers the cyclical nature of global events. In a recent interview she explains:

*For me, it's so important to talk about what's happening with the Earth right now. In terms of climate change, I am thinking about the ways that one thing affects another, the cyclical nature of events. When you cut down forests in Brazil, the climate will change here where I live too. Just like my work, it all comes full circle.*



**12. Mon lean darvihan dait buot/I have caught them all (2004)  
Embroidery/Collage**

Through these playful works, Marrakatt-Labba stitches dried fish skins that she has embroidered upon. The fish is sacred in Sámi culture, considered a mediator between the world of the living and the netherworld, which are equally real. One titled *I Have Caught Them All* reverses the expectations of the hunt, whereby the fish is the catcher and the human is the catch.

*Under the Vast Sky* is supported by the Embassy of Sweden.

## Second Floor

Exit

12. *Mon lean darvihan dait  
buot/I have caught them all*  
(2004)



11. *Máilmmi leigganeapmi/  
Global Warming* (2007)

Gallery 6

10. *Salasteapmi/Embrace*  
(2019)

9. *Johtin II/The Move II*  
(2018)

Gallery 5



8. *Dáhpáhusat áiggis/  
Events in Time* (2013)



7. *Mii/We*  
(2014)

6. *Niegadeapmi/  
Dreaming* (1999)

Resource  
room

Lift

Entrance



5. *Historja/  
History*  
(2003)



4. *Máilmmiávus/Cosmos*  
(1999-2000)

3. *Mineálaroggan/Mineral  
extraction* (2018)



1. *Garjját/  
The Crows*  
(1981/2021)

Gallery 4

2. *Girdi  
noaidit/  
Flying  
Shamans*  
(2011-21)



3. *Čullon  
Minerálaroggan/  
Felled Forest* (2018)

# Exhibition catalogue



Britta Marakatt-Labba: *More Embroidered Stories*.

This publication accompanies Ikon's exhibition *Under the Vast Sky* (23 February – 29 May 2022).

The exhibition is curated by Jan-Erik Lundström, former director of the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art, Karasjok, Norway, and Bildmuseet Sweden, with Jonathan Watkins, Ikon Director.

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