

BRITTA MARAKATT- LABBA

WHERE EACH STITCH BREATHES

14.6 – 9.11.2025

MODERNA MUSEET

CURATOR MODERNA MUSEET

Matilda Olof-Ors

FOLDER TEXT

Hanna Horsberg Hansen, PhD, Professor Emerita
of Art History, Academy of Arts, UiT The Arctic
University of Norway



Find out more about our programme
of talks, tours and events here:
modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/



Historjá (detail), 2003–07

WHERE EACH STITCH BREATHES

"To embroider is to engage in an aesthetic of deliberate slowness. It is a voyage in time and space where each stitch breathes experience and insights, forming narratives."

Britta Marakatt-Labba

For almost fifty years, Britta Marakatt-Labba has been creating embroidered narratives. Rooted in the oral storytelling tradition of the Indigenous Sámi people, her works are almost always set in nature. Against backdrops of mountain landscapes and snow-covered expanses, she depicts a way of life in which the spiritual world is ever-present – woven into everyday scenes, historical events, accounts of state oppression, and reflections on a threatened natural environment.

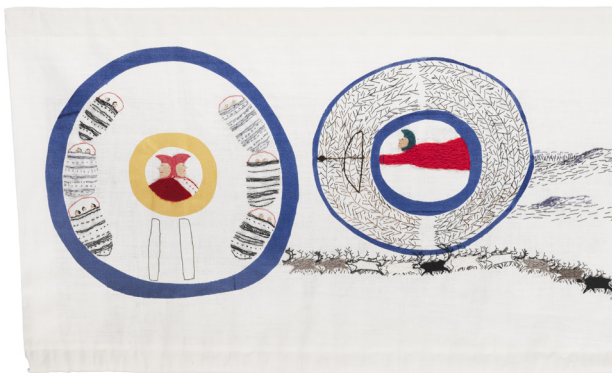
The title of the exhibition, *Where Each Stitch Breathes*, is borrowed from Britta Marakatt-Labba's own words, that describe how all the stories are made up of thousands of tiny stitches, where each stitch breathes experience and reflection. Her creative process is time-consuming and closely linked to the Sámi visual and aesthetic tradition of *duodji*, which she grew up with. Duodji is knowledge passed down from generation to generation. It is based on core values that include both respect for the material and an awareness of the presence of the immaterial in the work.

Britta Marakatt-Labba was born in 1951 in Idivuoma, on the Swedish side of Sápmi, and currently lives and works in Övre Soppero, in the municipality of Kiruna. She grew up in a reindeer-herding family with North Sámi as her mother tongue and learned Swedish as her fourth language, after Meänkieli and Norwegian. After studying at Sunderby Folk High School outside Luleå and at the University of Design and Crafts (HDK) in Gothenburg, Marakatt-Labba returned to her home region in the late 1970s.

As a member of the artist collective *Mázejoavku* (the Masi Group), Britta Marakatt-Labba was actively involved in the resistance to the damming of the Alta River in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her strong social commitment plays an intrinsic role in her artistic practice, and her work remains a vital source of inspiration for new generations advocating for the environment and Sámi rights.

In 2017, Marakatt-Labba's work reached a wider international audience through her participation in Documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany. Since then, interest in her work has grown steadily, with exhibitions in both national and international contexts.

Matilda Olof-Ors, Curator Moderna Museet



MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

In Sámi religion there is a basic understanding of reality as consisting of two dimensions: the visible, material world and the invisible, spiritual realm. The former relates to earthly life, while the latter is inhabited by divine beings such as primeval mothers, gods and goddesses. There is no strict boundary between the two; the Sámi oral tradition contains many stories of how the spiritual realm can have a direct influence on the lives of humans. Britta Marakatt-Labba's life and upbringing have been shaped by these stories as well as by the Sámi visual and aesthetic practice of *duodji*.

Oral storytelling often stay with the listener as inner imagery. Marakatt-Labba refers to both these inner images and to the *duodji* tradition as she visualises, stitch by stitch, her personal experiences and the collective memory of the Sámi people. Everyday scenes from her own life are interwoven with origin myths, historical events, and contemporary issues such as the climate crisis and the relocation of the city of Kiruna. The presence of the spiritual realm is often personified in her work by small female profiles adorned with *ládjogahpir*, the traditional red headdress worn by women, which is crowned by a horn-shaped tip. Banned in the 19th century by missionaries who claimed it resembled the devil's horn, the *ládjogahpir* has in recent years been reclaimed as a powerful symbol of Sámi women's resistance and resilience.

Historjá (detail), 2003–07

THE MILKY WAY

The Milky Way (2022) is a commissioned work for the Storting, the Norwegian parliament in Oslo. In this piece, Britta Marakatt-Labba portrays some of the challenges facing Sámi culture today. In the outer circle, we see sleeping places where small heads peek out from under a rana, a traditional Sámi striped woven woollen blanket. These sleeping places, as well as the forest and the sea where red fish are caught, appear to be under threat from a digger tearing up the land and disrupting the balance of nature. Three figures wearing ládjogahpir are also depicted here. Marakatt-Labba has described this work as goddesses having mounted their snowmobiles to swiftly reach the politicians of the Sámi Parliament in Karasjok on the Norwegian side, its building is visible at the very top of the circle, in order to warn them of what is about to happen. The work can be interpreted as a powerful call to action directed at the elected representatives. In the innermost part of the circle, small and large stars emerge against a blue background. Within some of the stars, a small female head wearing a red ládjogahpir can be seen. One of the stars is significantly larger than the others, and within it are a man and a woman. The motif evokes the Sámi origin myth, in which the Sámi are said to descend from the sun.



The Milky Way, 2022

AN ONGOING STRUGGLE

Britta Marakatt-Labba was born into a nomadic reindeer herding family. She still takes part in nomadic life which involves moving the reindeer in the spring from the Swedish side to the summer grazing pastures on the Norwegian side, in Dividalen, where the does calve. In the autumn, they return to the winter pastures on the Swedish side. Asserting the right to cross the border in this way has been an ongoing struggle.

During the migrations of her childhood, Marakatt-Labba's family lived in a *lavvú* – a cone-shaped tent made of thick cotton canvas stretched over a frame of wooden poles. There is an opening at the top to allow smoke to escape from the *árran*, the hearth at the centre of the *lavvú*. The whole family would sleep together in the *lavvú* during seasonal migrations. A recurring motif in her work – the depiction of a sleeping family – can be seen as a symbol or internal image of nomadic life. It is almost always shown from above, as if someone is looking down through the smoke hole on the sleeping figures below. Family members are often depicted as a row of small heads peering out from under a *rana*. These *ranor* were traditionally woven from wool on portable looms, mainly by Sámi women along the Norwegian coast. Today, many of the places where her family traditionally camped during the reindeer herding season are under threat from logging and wind farms.



Nightmare, 1984

TRANSFORMATIONS

In the work *The Crows* (1981), a line of black birds fly across the sky. Gradually, just as they land on the ground, they transform into human figures dressed in black uniforms and black boots, marching in step. They move towards a group of people in Sámi clothing, seated in front of three lavvús. A commotion breaks out as the line of black-clad figures reaches the group; one person is violently pushed to the ground. The work refers to a 1981 event, when peaceful protesters opposing the development of the Alta River were confronted by six hundred Norwegian police officers. Britta Marakatt-Labba was among those who took part in the demonstrations.

In the Sámi worldview, the connection between animals and humans is so strong that they can become one on a spiritual level, changing shape and form. This belief underpins the depiction of police officers who arrive as birds and transform when they touch the ground. Other works also refer to such transformations – for example, *Nightmare* (1984), in which human-sized rats have entered a lavvú. In *Flying Shamans* (1985), a line of figures dressed in Sámi clothing can be seen flying across the sky. From high above, they drop rats and people into the water below – some of the figures are wearing black uniforms. A shaman, *noaidi* is a spiritual intermediary between our world and the spiritual realm. We do not know the story of the uniformed figures, but it is clear that there are forces here that resist violence and oppression.



The Crows (detail below), 1981

BUILDERS OF ORGANISATIONS

As a young, newly trained artist, Britta Marakatt-Labba took part in the demonstrations against the expansion of hydroelectric power on the Alta River, in Finnmark, Norway. The Norwegian state ultimately won the battle, and in 1987, the dam on the Alta River was built. Although the demonstrators suffered a major loss in relation to the river itself, the protests nevertheless brought international attention to the Sámi as an Indigenous people, whose language, culture, and livelihoods are entitled to protection and support. Democratically elected Sámi parliaments were subsequently established by law in Norway (1989), Sweden (1993), and Finland (1995).

Marakatt-Labba was one of the founders of the Sámi Artists' union in 1979, with Lars Johansson-Nutti, Nils Aslak Valkeapää, Aage Gaup, Ranveig Persen, and Synnøve Persen. In 1980 she joined the Masi Group, which consisted of artists Aage Gaup, Synnøve Persen, Ranveig Persen, Berit Marit Hætta, Josef Halse, Trygve Lund Guttormsen, and Hans Ragnar Mathisen. They were young artists with Sámi backgrounds, who lived in the village of Masi, just south of the new power station. They organised group exhibitions and travelled to places in Sápmi where art exhibitions had never been shown before. These artists challenged stereotypes about what it means to be Sámi and to be a Sámi artist, and they dreamed of unified Sámi organisations and institutions across Sápmi that would transcend national borders.

SÁMI PERFORMING ARTS

The Sámi theatre was established in the early 1970s, with the theatre group Dálvadis on the Swedish side. On the Norwegian side, the Sámi National Theatre Beaivváš was founded in 1981, although there were also smaller theatre groups that toured periodically. The theatre became a platform for young Sámi artists' creative rebellion and political protest, where artists worked together to solve common tasks. It provided a space for them to tell their own stories, Sámi stories, in the Sámi language. Britta Marakatt-Labba, along with other artists, made important visual contributions to the theatre, in both costume and set design.

In 1978, the Sámi puppet theatre Somara staged a play by Marry Áilonieida Somby entitled *Stallo and the Three Sisters*. At the time, it was described as a revolutionary, decolonising, and feminist children's play. It tells the story of three girls who meet a little Stallo who suffers from an inferiority complex. A Stallo is a mythological figure – dangerous, but also quite stupid. The Stallo abducts the children, but they manage to outwit him and escape. Marakatt-Labba created the set and puppets for this performance as her graduation project at the School of Design and Crafts (HDK) in Gothenburg. Together, Somby and Marakatt-Labba toured with the performance both in and outside Sápmi.



EVENTS IN TIME

The bombing of the government building in Oslo and the shooting on the island of Utøya on 22 July, 2011, claimed 77 lives. Two years later, the Lofoten International Art Festival (LIAF) exhibited the work *Events in Time* (2013) for the first time. For this piece, Britta Marakatt-Labba used seven flour sacks manufactured in Germany during the Second World War. Marakatt-Labba found the sacks among her mother-in-law's belongings – saved because the fabric was of good quality and might come in handy one day. Marakatt-Labba used them to embroider her image of the Utøya tragedy. We see buildings, weapons, and thin trickles of blood. The sacks hang freely from the ceiling, forming a circle, so that the viewer can see both sides of the fabric, from inside or outside the circle.

The young people on Utøya were attending an annual summer camp organised by the Labour Party's youth organisation. The perpetrator had a clear political motive for the killings. The acts were seen as an attack on democracy. By reusing materials marked with Nazi symbols to portray the terrorist attacks of 2011, the artist also comments on the resurgence of dehumanising ideas. At the same time, she connects to the tradition of reusing materials that is central to duodji.

Events in Time, 2013

TRACKS

Climate change, the expansion of mining and its consequences for people and the world are recurring themes in Britta Marakatt-Labba's images. In *Global Warming II* (2021), an appliqué work with several layers of fabric in different materials attached with embroidery, much of the landscape is covered in snow and ice. Where the ice has begun to melt, streaks of blue water and red lava are visible. The openings in the ice form a circle surrounding a collection of women's heads wearing the red ládjogahpir. Inside the circle, the black outlines of Kiruna's stepped mining terraces can be seen.

In *The Environment Cannot Wait* (2019) we also see female heads wearing the ládjogahpir, this time rising above the surface of the river. On the riverbank, a herd of reindeer is moving rapidly towards another group of figures holding up a cloth, seemingly to guide the herd into a reindeer enclosure. In the background, the silhouette of the mining mountain can be seen once again.

In the diptych *Tracks* (2023) we return to Kiruna once again, both above and below ground, where the old Sámi sleeping places have now been replaced by the stepped slag heaps. The city has undermined itself and must be relocated. People, animals, and the invisible world are displaced by the wind turbines and fall straight underground. Reindeer tracks in the snow transform into railway tracks and disappear.

A HOME

In the installation *The Door* (2012) we also find reused materials. It has been patched and repaired and then embroidered on both sides. The textile hangs from the ceiling to the floor and forms a floating arch. On the floor behind the fabric is a ring of stones, with different place names carved into them. Wooden slats are mounted on the wall, which together with the textile may have once formed an *uksa* (door) to a lavvú. On the wall next to it, we see two small photographs showing the back of a child lifting the uksa aside and leaving the lavvú. In Sámi, the word for door, *uksa*, is associated with the goddess Uksáhká, who guards the threshold and the passage between inside and outside. The ring of stones is reminiscent of the árran, the fireplace in the lavvú. Another goddess, Sárahká, watches over the fire and dwells in the fireplace. The two were sisters, and along with a third sister, the hunting goddess Juoksáhká, they belonged to the deities who stood closest to humans.

In the installation, Marakatt-Labba tells us about the invisible world that coexists with our material world and everyday life, and how it exists, for example, in a lavvú during a migration. Each time a lavvú is set up, it creates a home for people and a home for the invisible but ever-present goddesses.

MEASURINGS

Cracked (2014) tells the story of how nomadic reindeer herders on the Swedish side of the border had to obtain a kind of border residence certificate in order to move their reindeer herds to the Norwegian side when Norway 1940 to 1945 was occupied by Germany. Here, too, Britta Marakatt-Labba reuses the sack material from this particular time, as in the work *Measurements* (2021–22). The latter tells the story of racial biology and the humiliating skull measurements that the Sámi were subjected to in the early 20th century. The method was used to categorise and rank human groups and was based on the racist idea that certain peoples were inferior. This provided an ideological basis for the suppression of the Sámi religion, language and way of life.

In *Measurements*, we see the measuring instrument used on the eagle in the Nazi emblem. Above the swastika itself, Marakatt-Labba has embroidered barbed wire, behind which a multitude of faces appear, representing those who ended up in Nazi concentration camps. Below them are more faces, some of which are also measured. From the heads, a railway track stretches, reminding us of how Sweden allowed the railway to be used for the German troop movements. A line of reindeer comes from below, but disappears behind the embroidered certificates that gave the artist's father-in-law, Johan Johansson Labba, permission to use his old migration routes between Sweden and Norway during the war years.

THE LANGUAGE OF MATERIALS

In a semi-circular room in the exhibition space, are seven small sculptures, each placed on a wooden pedestal. The wood of the pedestals is reused material from a farm that was demolished near the artist's home. The sculptures are made of wood, stone and metal. In two of the sculptures, entitled *Primordial Mother* (2019) and *Primordial Mother I* (2019), we recognise the shape of a head with a ládjogahpir. In *Primordial Mother I* the small head is wedged between the parts of a stone that has been split in half. There are also two sculptures called *We Two* (2019), both consisting of an arched form crowned by two human torsos joined at the waist. *Sieidi* (2019) is made of stone and metal and resembles the shape of a *sieidi*, or *sejte*, a cultural item in the form of a stone or other natural form that is used as a sacrificial site in the Sámi religion.

There is a stark contrast between the soft materials the artist usually works with – textiles and coloured embroidery thread – and the materials she uses here. Yet the materials are closely connected to the Sámi aesthetic tradition, as well as to Sámi mythology and worldview. Metal was used to ward off evil forces and to protect children from being abducted. Stone was the material of the *sieidis* where offerings were made for luck and prosperity. Wood was ever-present in everyday Sámi life: it formed the frame of the lavvú, kept the fire alive in the árran and was shaped into all sorts of everyday objects.

PARALLEL WORLDS

Migration Path Cut-off (2022) shows us several worlds at once, as well as several layers of time. In the centre of the image, we see two large, stepped mining terraces, reminiscent of those at the Kiruna mine. The reindeer herd in the foreground is about to pass two small heads of red ladjogahpir. The title, *Migration Path Cut-off*, refers to how mining operations in Kiruna were conducted without regard for the nomadic Sámi's use of the area for migration, grazing, hunting and fishing. The stepped terraces and the reindeer herds exist in different times, but by placing them side by side in the image, we are reminded that the past exists as a memory in the invisible world and that someone with a red ladjogahpir is cherishing this memory.

In *We Negotiate* (2023) we see a group of five women wearing red headdresses and two men wearing blue hats. Each person has a reflection of their own outline below the line on which they are standing. Here we sense how our world and the invisible world can be present at the same time. What they are negotiating is not revealed, but the reflections seem to offer the people support and strength from the invisible world.

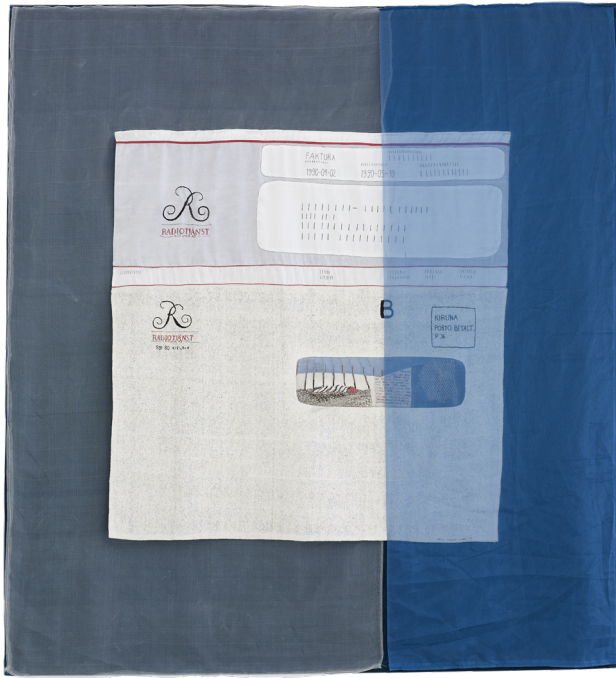


We Negotiate, 2023

EMBROIDERED LETTERS

Depictions of letters, in embroidery and appliqué, was a theme that Britta Marakatt-Labba worked on throughout the 1990s. It began with the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986. The accident had a major impact on reindeer husbandry and Sámi life, as radioactive fallout contaminated the environment and accumulated in the lichen that reindeer eat. Those most affected by the disaster were far removed from the centres of power, and their voices did not always reach those in charge.

Everyone had to pay a fee to Radiotjänst (now Swedish Radio) to hear the news, but not everyone got to hear about their own reality on the radio. “Writing” letters became a way for Marakatt-Labba to try to get in touch with the authorities and give them an understanding of her own situation. One of the three pieces of the work *Kiruna* (1990), for example, looks like an envelope with an invoice from Radiotjänst. Instead of the address, a sleeping place in a lavvú is embroidered – as if to show the difficulties of communication between two different worlds. The nomadic sleeping place in the tent or lavvú is simply illegible as an address – and a way of life – for the Radio Service and others, and at the same time fully comprehensible for those who live or have lived in this way.



Kiruna III, 1990

INDIGENISATION

Britta Marakatt-Labba's artistic practice can be understood as a form of decolonisation, in the sense that her art resists and criticises colonial and racist preconceptions about the Sámi. Decolonisation means freeing oneself from colonial power structures through criticism and protest, but it also means relating to the colonial in an unequal power relationship, as the inferior. Like many other Sámi artists, Marakatt-Labba has looked at her own culture and explored her own myths, worldviews, and traditions. In this way, her own culture takes a natural place in the understanding of and conversation about the world. Small red *ládjogahpir* and people resting beneath woven *ranor* speak of Sámi life and history without contradicting other lives and stories. This approach can be described by the term *indigenisation*.

They Kept Watch by Night (2009) presents one of the most well-known stories in Western culture, the Nativity. Depicting this story as taking place in Sápmi is one example of indigenisation. A chasuble in blue woollen fabric, embroidered and appliquéd with motifs from the Sámi symbolic world is another example. A third example is showing the presence of the invisible world in people's lives.



They Kept Watch by Night (detail), 2009

THE STORY

When does a story begin? When someone starts telling it? *Historjá* is a commissioned work for the Breivika campus at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø. Britta Marakatt-Labba created the work between 2003 and 2007, and it tells the Sámi story in several ways. If read from left to right, the story begins in mythological time with three goddesses and six groups of sleeping people in a circle. Perhaps we are being given an origin myth, with the goddesses Sárahkka and Uksáhkka lying in árran (the hearth), wearing red ládjogahpir on their heads, while the hunting goddess and archer Juoksáhkka shoots life into them all from another circle.

If we read the story from right to left, it begins in the forest where many small heads wearing red ládjogahpir can be seen up in the trees. A number of wild animals native to Sápmi come out of the forest. We then meet a group of people skiing after a reindeer herd, accompanied by dogs. This is followed by a long reindeer caravan pulling sledges. Finally, we come to some lavvús, to snowmobiles pulling sledges, and to various reindeer enclosures. This is the story of how the Sámi people went from hunting wild reindeer to taming them and becoming reindeer herders.

In other words, it is not a linear narrative, but more like a *joik* – with no beginning and no end. The story may also begin with the burning of the church in Kautokeino, a centrally placed motif that refers to the 1852 Kautokeino uprising against the Norwegian-Swedish authorities. If we look to the left, we see bloodshed and death. The rioters in Kautokeino were severely punished. Aslak Hætta and Mons Somby were executed by beheading. Their bodies were buried at Kåfjord Church in Alta, while their heads were sent to Christiania and then on to Copenhagen to be used as research material for racial biology. It was not until 1997, that the heads were returned and laid to rest at Kåfjord Church in Alta. Further to the left, we come to the Sámi Parliament building in Karasjok, where many have gathered for shelter.

The story is not about heroes or kings, but about the lives of animals and ordinary people, and the presence of spirits, goddesses and primeval mothers. There is no mining or skull-measuring here, but neither is it a pure idyll. It is a mixture of the artist's own life and imagery from the collective memory of the Sámi people, from both the visible and invisible world, that Marakatt-Labba carries with her.



Historjá (detail), 2003–07

The exhibition was initiated by the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, and is a collaboration with Kin Museum of Contemporary Art in Kiruna and Moderna Museet in Stockholm. *Where Each Stitch Breathes* is a revised version of the exhibition made in close dialogue with the artist.

A warm thank you to The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Mannheimer Swartling and The Britta Marakatt-Labba Exhibition Circle: Veronica and Lars Bane, Pontus Bonnier, Mari and Thomas Eldered, Kerstin and Johan Hessius, Agneta and Bo Philipson and anonymous donors.

**MANNHEIMER
SWARTLING**





CATALOGUE

The richly illustrated exhibition catalogue includes a dialogue between artist Britta Marakatt-Labba and curator Matilda Olof-Ors, complemented by in-depth essays from Randi Godø, Gunvor Guttorm, Susanne Hætta, Hilde Hauan Johnsen, Maria Lind, Cato Lejon Myrnes, Anne Sommerin Simonnæs, and Sigbjørn Skåden.

AUDIO GUIDE

Listen to Britta Marakatt-Labba talk about her art in our audio guide:

