

JHANA MILLERS

Ahoy!

That time at Hanmer Springs, Erica van Zon was wearing a second-hand swimsuit and her boob slipped out. Now she's made an embroidery about it. "Everyone has a pool story," Erica said and I paused. Does everyone have a pool story? Hold that thought. Don't let it slip out.

Deep Deep Icy Blue is an exhibition by Erica van Zon. Contents: twenty-one artworks that depict swimming pools, their décor and discontents. E.g. A picnic sampler of pool floats including a pizza slice, hot lips and a pink iced donut. *My hand in front of my face at the Szechenyi Baths Sauna, Budapest 2003* is about that time Erica walked into a steam room, held her hand in front of her face and watched it disappear. When the steam parted the spa was full of naked bodies. Now look closely at *That Time at Hanmer Springs*. One pale pink tit floats, nipple skyward in the foreground. Come on in, the water's long-stitched.

"An embroiderer would call it long-stitch," Erica said. "I really struggle to do things the traditional way. I can't follow a rule."

Erica is a mixed-media artist and self-taught crafter. Her shows combine charming intersections of modernist design and domestic tableau. She grew up with a season pass to Waiwera Hot Pools and it's the romance of the swimming pool that appeals to her. *Deep Deep Icy Blue* revels in modish lines and waves of refracted light. Close-up photographs of public pools, in brightly coloured frames, sidle up next to examples of her embroidery and beadwork. *Silk Floats* is an image of Kilbirnie Swimming Pool printed on a scarf, so you can run it through your hands like water.

But I moot her overarching theme is "boob incidents." That moment in the pool story when something wobbly slips out.

Also, her parents are Dutch.

"In Dutch culture it is very important to feel welcome in a space," Erica said. She explained the Dutch term *Gezellig* — pleasant, inviting, sociable. A person can be *Gezellig* but a party can be too. And *Deep, Deep Icy Blue* is *Gezellig*. It's a pool party and Erica is the host with the most. Her compositions are empty of swimsuits but warm with humanity. *In the Poconos* a heart-shaped pool and a champagne glass are stitched up together, on a black background. It's vintage van Zon, camp as a Las Vegas wedding. Never the twain shall meet and when they do it might be twee.

Hospitality is everywhere in her art — as is food. I always get the feeling Erica would love to thread cheese and cocktail onions onto toothpicks, skewer them into an orange and turn it into a hedgehog. Then serve it next to a bowl of fondue, just for you. Her work is delightful. Her defining realisation: "I wanted my artwork to reach a lot of people." But that doesn't explain her retro penchant, her affection for the décor and design of the Sixties and Seventies, that fetishised era of

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pool parties and lost optimism and great Hollywood films.

Does everyone have a pool story?

The most famous one I know was written by John Cheever and turned into a classic movie. *The Swimmer* (1968) starred Burt Lancaster as Ned Merrill and begins at a pool party. Buoyant, alcoholic Ned decides to swim his way home one bright American morning. “In his mind he saw, with a cartographer’s eye, a string of swimming pools, a quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county.” But by the time Ned gets home, after taking a dip uninvited in each of his neighbour’s pools, too much time has elapsed, his family home is abandoned and it is obvious that Ned is broke, his life in ruins. *The Swimmer* is deeply sad.

But *Deep Deep Icy Blue* isn’t that story because Erica’s mind is too glad. Thank god. This pool story has a female author. At night, in the spare room of her home in Berhampore, with an embroiderer’s eye, Erica has created a string of swimming pools—quite literally. “I find pool water is visually very likeable, like the images of the glittering Bondi Icebergs Swim Club pool.” She has stitched on to four layers of cotton an aerial view of the most photographed pool in the world. Waves crash and overlap in blue, silver and white thread. Erica often works after her daughter has gone to bed.

Childhood is another recurring subject. *The Pool Crew* celebrates the anthropomorphism of pool toys—two seals and an octopus, all wearing goggles. Memory looms large. The grow-your-own mermaid Erica once plopped into a Para Pool that grew and grew and grew, until it became distended and slimy. Look, now look again. *At the bottom of the pool (plaster)* is a tender maternal portrait of a drifting Band-Aid. The pool is a childish delight. You have a pool, cool!

Let’s not forget Erica van Zon the canny interior designer, fixated on Mock Tudor details like Qualage glass. I love the way she throws a Florentine Pink kidney bean shaped frame around a photograph of a pool in Fiji. Erica never skimps on the garnish. *From the bottom of the pool (cat)* is framed under textured glass to enhance a play on perspective. The viewer has become the swimmer staring through chlorinated water at that quizzical beaded cat.

The moral of the pool story? You might get pushed in.

SPLASH!

‘What did Hockney’s pool actually look like?’ Erica wondered.

She has crafted a bird’s eye view of the most popular work at Tate Britain.

“Beads dictate the scale. I couldn’t just wing it.”

And the Czech Republic has the best beads. “It’s an unforgiving medium. I use a toughened string. A lot of my process involves picking and unpicking beads.”

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Hockney's diving board is a golden rectangle. The splash is now a dainty spray of white pearlescent beads that the blue pool water splays out from in mind-boggling detail. Her contour beadwork captures the beauty of shimmering water slipping through your fingers. Hockney said, "I believe that the problem of how to depict something is...an interesting one and it's a permanent one; there's no solution to it. There are a thousand and one ways you can go about it. There's no set rule."

Deep Deep Icy Blue is a dip into the swimming pool and its endless surface appeal. The pool has a shallow end and a deep end too. "I love lanes. When the light hits the lane and you're in this magical world. It's the one time of my life I've experienced flow. Your body is just in the world. You're not thinking in that state. I could keep on going forever," Erica said.

Megan Dunn, 2022