

LACE
NARRATIVES

A MONOGRAPH: 2005 – 2015

Cecilia Heffer



— DEDICATED TO —
my mother,
Edith Du Moulin Peters

— ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS —

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'Drawn Threads: A process video' can be viewed via:

vimeo.com/143092915



The limited edition of *Lace Narratives* is made available to the public through library collections. Check where the books are located:

mediaobject.net/

ABOUT THE PUBLICATION MODEL

This Open Access ebook is part of a hybrid publication designed by Zoë Sadokierski, to communicate Cecilia Heffer's innovative lace-making practice. The publication is the result of a two-year collaboration which unfolded through multiple discussions in Heffer's studio, searching her archives to conceive ways to visually communicate her tacit design process. To understand Heffer's practice we need to observe her creative process, to hear/read her critical reflections and to handle the textiles. To achieve this, the complete publication includes:

- a seven-minute video documenting Heffer's lace-making process;
- a limited edition of ten books which include six lace samples bound into the pages titled *Lace Narratives: A monograph 2005–2015*;
- an unlimited print-on-demand edition (without the lace samples) and an open access PDF (this edition) of the book, both available via [UTS ePress](https://www.uts.edu.au/press).

This hybrid publication model provides a complex account of Heffer's practice that could not be achieved through a single publication.

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Introduction

OVER THE LAST DECADE the perception of lace as a decorative accoutrement has changed. Designers from across disciplines are now exploring lace structures and applying unconventional materials and approaches to traditional lace-making. This is evidenced by international lace exhibitions such as: *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2007); *Lost in Lace*, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, UK (2011-12); *Love Lace*, Powerhouse Museum Sydney (2011). These exhibitions bring together lacework by practitioners from diverse disciplines such as textiles, interaction design and architecture.

Lace Narratives is an artist monograph that covers a ten-year contemporary lace-making practice. Projects presented include solo exhibitions, research grants and the To Furnish a Future commission to design the lace curtains for the State Rooms of Government House, Sydney.

The aim of this publication is to open a dialogue around alternative ways in which we can present and disseminate practice-led research. To understand practice as research, it is important to first gain an understanding of the practitioner: the person and their process (Gray 2004). Throughout the writing I use personal reflections and auto ethnography to provide an insight into my experiences as a designer and to discover what can be revealed through studio process. It is written in the spirit of an open studio and responds to the question posed by Barrett and Bolt (2007):

What did the studio process reveal that could not have been revealed by any other mode of enquiry?

The discursive nature of practice-led research allows us to reflect upon ways ideas present themselves in a non-linear way, oscillating and unfolding around each other. Professor Marcello Stamm (2013) compares practice-led research to a moving Calder mobile: circling groups of ‘messy findings’, ideas and contexts that are constantly spinning and moving in a non-linear argument, a process of drawing seemingly disparate stories together as a means to engage in discursive reflective practice.

Public dissemination of my research practice takes the form of solo and curated exhibitions, lectures, symposiums and conversations. As a result of this engagement, I discovered that people are genuinely curious about narratives regarding the creative process. As I started to reveal my process, I also realised that in sharing my process and the insights gained from practice I was contributing to an argument for the value of practice-led research.

LACE: A MATERIAL LANGUAGE

Storytelling is an essential part of the way humans make sense of the world around us. Over time textiles have been embedded with meaning and story, passing from one generation to another. History shows us how humans communicate through textiles, from the 9th Century pre-Columbian Andean’s use of complex knotted threads as a storage system through to today’s high speed optical fibre filaments that carry volumes of digital information in less than a second (Gordon 2011). The qualities cloth embodies resonates with people and helps to convey narrative and enrich our lives. A question I am frequently asked is why, of all the textiles to explore, have I chosen lace?

My textile practice spans thirty years. In that time I have witnessed extraordinary changes to the tools and technologies with which we design, think through and re-frame our collective stories. For example, I started designing textiles through the use of hand-printed silkscreens to generate imagery onto cloth. Today, through direct digital printing, 30,000 colour pixels can be printed onto a textile surface. This allows for unlimited aesthetic expression, including the use of photographic imagery on cloth. Moving between hand-generated and digital print technologies is now intrinsic to my textile practice.

Originally my education was in visual communication and fine art painting; my training was grounded in principles of visual language and abstraction. I discovered textiles by chance in an evening course on silkscreen printing. One pull of the squeegee

revealing repeated pattern on a bolt of cloth completely captivated my imagination. Textiles made sense to me and I was compelled to learn more. After completing a Masters in Textiles at London's Central Saint Martins I spent several years working in leading textile studios in London and New York. I worked with designers from the UK, Denmark, Spain, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. I found that my former art and graphic design training provided a unique lens with which to approach textile design and proved to be a point of difference in a competitive studio. After relocating to Sydney in 2000, my practice has shifted from client-based briefs to research, exhibition work and teaching. My research focuses on innovative textile practices that explore the integration of the handmade with emerging technologies.

My fascination with lace started when I came across the 2nd International Lace for Fashion Award Exhibition hosted by the Powerhouse Museum in 2002. Inspired, I began to explore philosophical and metaphorical definitions of lace, based on lace historian Rosemary Shepherd's 2003 definition:

*An openwork surface where the pattern of space
is as important as the solid motif.*

This definition continues to drive my research practice, through which I aim to discover new ways of redefining and experiencing textiles. Lace has proven to be a complex textile with a unique material language enabling me to innovate, play, or subvert the design process to create new work. Lace enjoys a rich cultural history which provides a lineage of technical and material production (Schoeser 2012). This is a valuable resource to draw from as I continue to explore new work through the integration of handmade and emerging technologies. The elusive ethereality of lace continues to inspire and motivate my curiosity and has become a genre for poetic expression, metaphor and narrative.

EVIDENCING PROCESS

This monograph has been two years in the making with many visits and conversations around research practice with editor Zoë Sadokierski and video artist Chris Caines. Equipped with video cameras and audio recording equipment

they visited my studio to interview me and record my lace making process.

In opening my practice to colleagues I found that my ideas were challenged, discussed and refined. From the perspective of their own disciplines, they surprised me with questions and observations about my work, helping to me draw out tacit knowledge embedded in the making process. The interviews became a method for reflective thinking – they serve as a means to reveal the conceptual process underpinning my lace-making practice.

In addition, the MediaObject publication format enables me to present my research in a non-linear way. This is a unique publication in that it includes a video of my creative process, which provides the opportunity for myself as a practitioner to reveal, and for viewers to engage with, the highly detailed making processes of my design research practice. It also includes samples of my lacework, so readers have a tactile understanding of the work.

The title *Lace Narratives* highlights the importance of storytelling in my work. It is my hope that the following narratives unfold and do justice to the many stories, people and experiences that have come to embody my practice. This publication aims to contribute to larger dialogues around practice-led research. It offers an in-depth reflection on a sustained textile-led process. In revealing the tacit knowledge embedded in material practice, practice-led research can potentially advance knowledge in its field (Leon Van Schaik 2003).



.....
ABOVE AND LEFT:
Chris Caines documenting
Drawn Threads in my studio and
Zoë Sadokierski recording
additional audio for the *Drawn
Threads* process video.

.....
FAR LEFT (FROM TOP):
Cutting circles from digitally printed silk.
Pinning silk circles to soluble substrate.
Stitching silk circles to soluble substrate.
Dissolving substrate in a tepid bath.
Ironing lace length.



Laced

10

SHEFFER GALLERY
SYDNEY, 2006

NEXT PAGE:

Reticella Lace, 2006

MATERIALS: Venetian braid patterns hand
printed onto shantung silk, machine stitched
onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: 600 x 1700mm





ABOVE

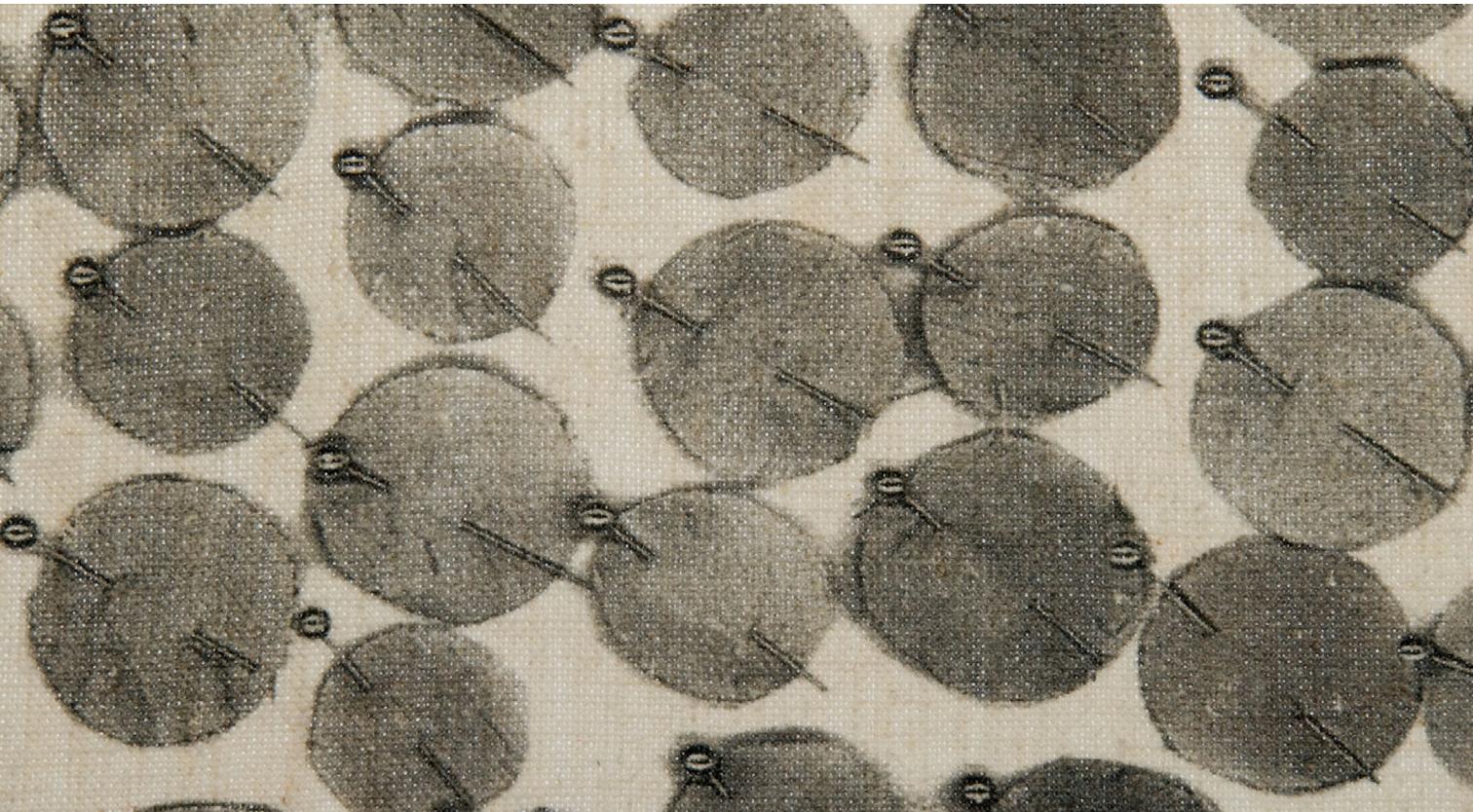
Process work, 2006

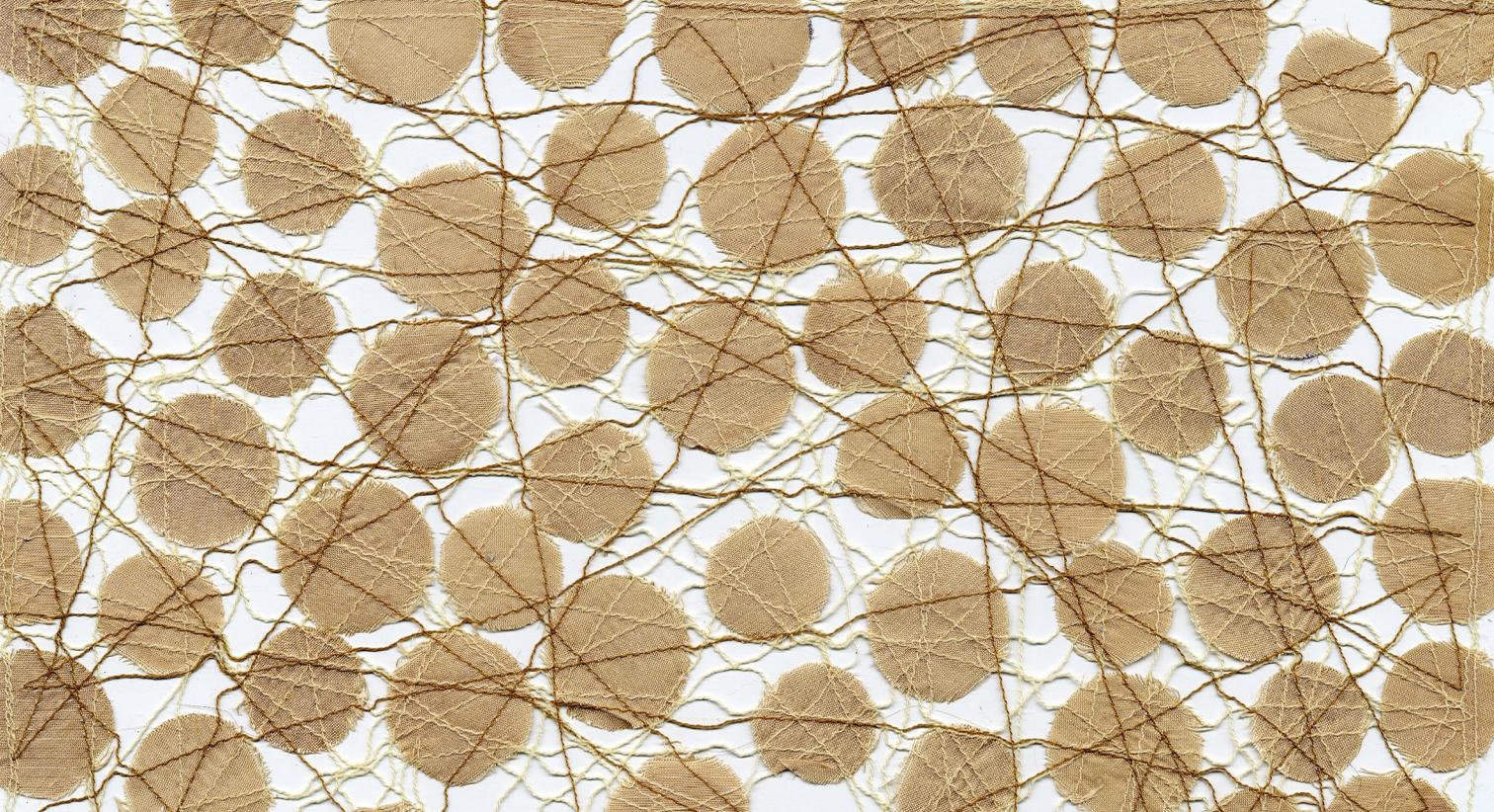
*MATERIALS: Silk shantung hand cut circles pinned onto a soluble substrate.
DIMENSIONS: 600 x 1700mm*

BELOW

Digital Lace Suite, 2006

*MATERIALS: Digitally printed lace pattern onto linen cotton
DIMENSIONS: 115 x 5000mm*





ABOVE

Reticella Lace, 2006

MATERIALS: Shantung silk, machine
stitched onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: 600 x 1700mm

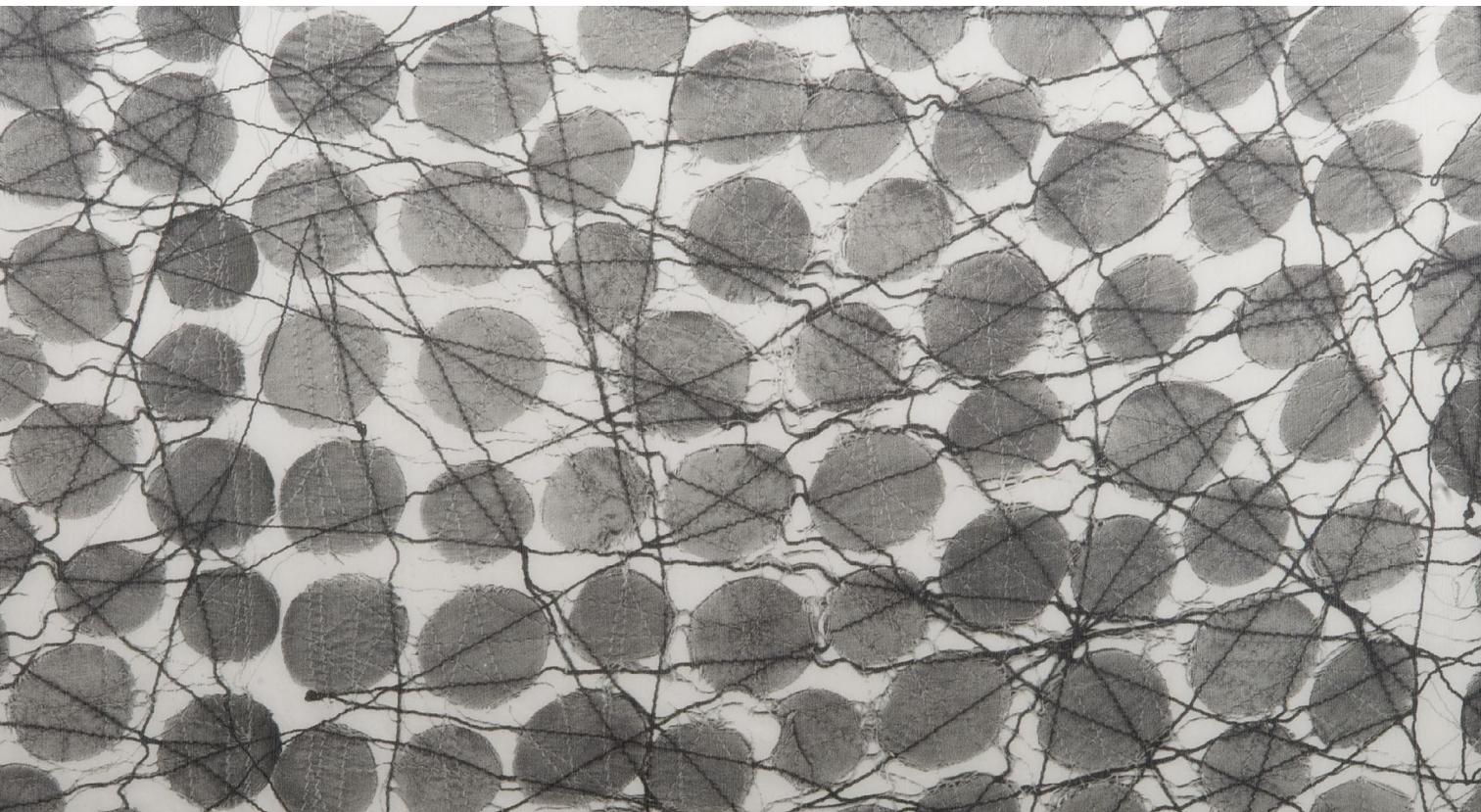
BELOW

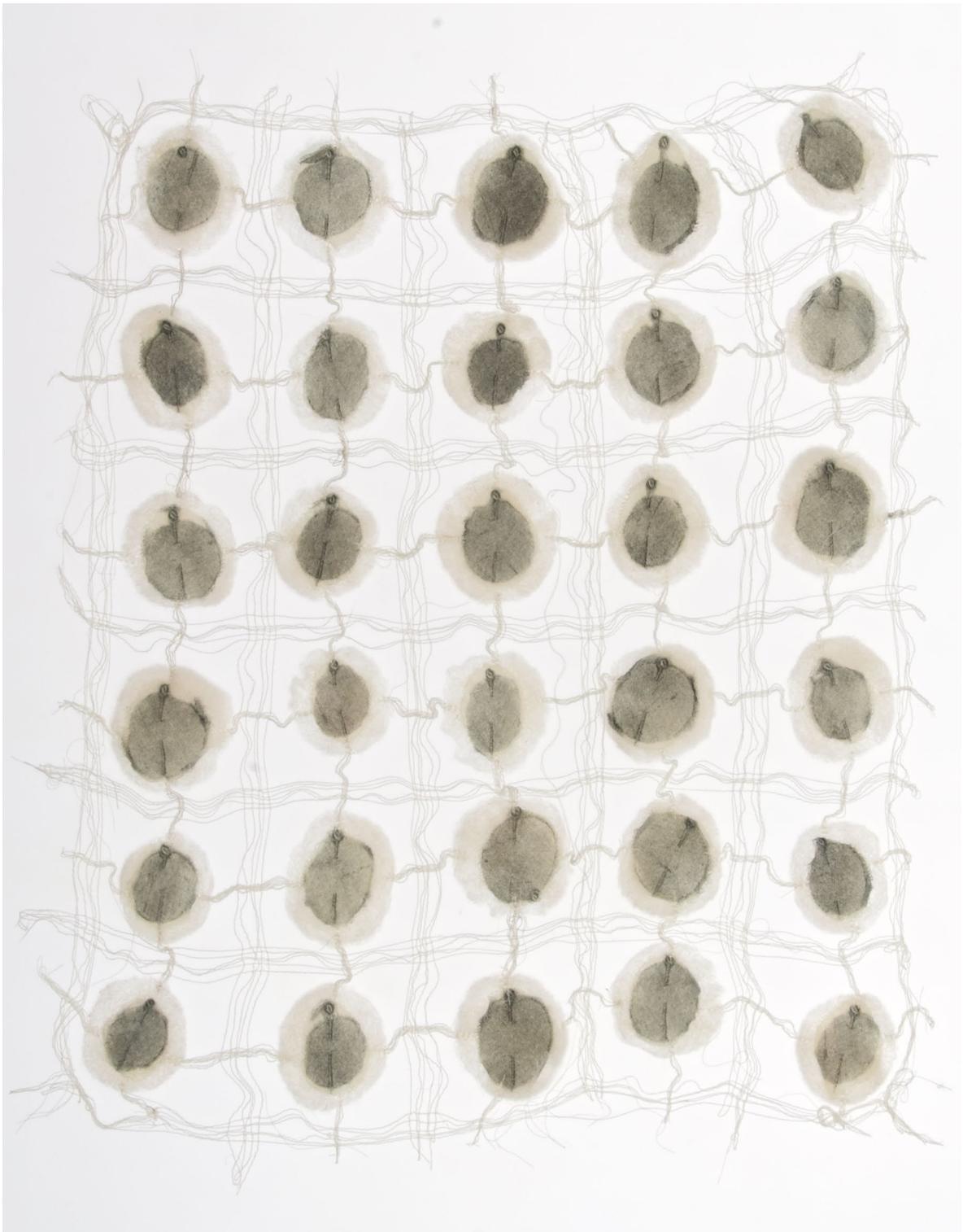
Digital Lace Suite, 2006

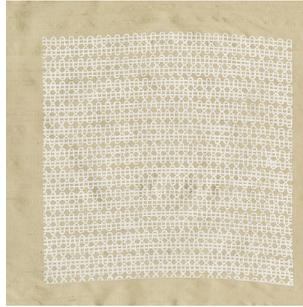
MATERIALS: Digitally printed lace
pattern onto silk habuti

DIMENSIONS: 640 x 3000mm

This piece was produced after the LACED
exhibition for the Sydney Esquisse
exhibition at Customs House, as part of
Sydney Design '06.







PREVIOUS PAGE

Felt Lace, 2006

MATERIALS: Digital lace print
onto wool jersey, machine
stitched onto a soluble substrate
DIMENSIONS: 270 x 340 mm

This work was shown in "Integration:
The Nature of Objects" at the Ivan
Dougherty Gallery, UNSW College of
Fine Arts, 2007, curated by Liz
Williamson.

TOP

Digital Lace Suite, 2006

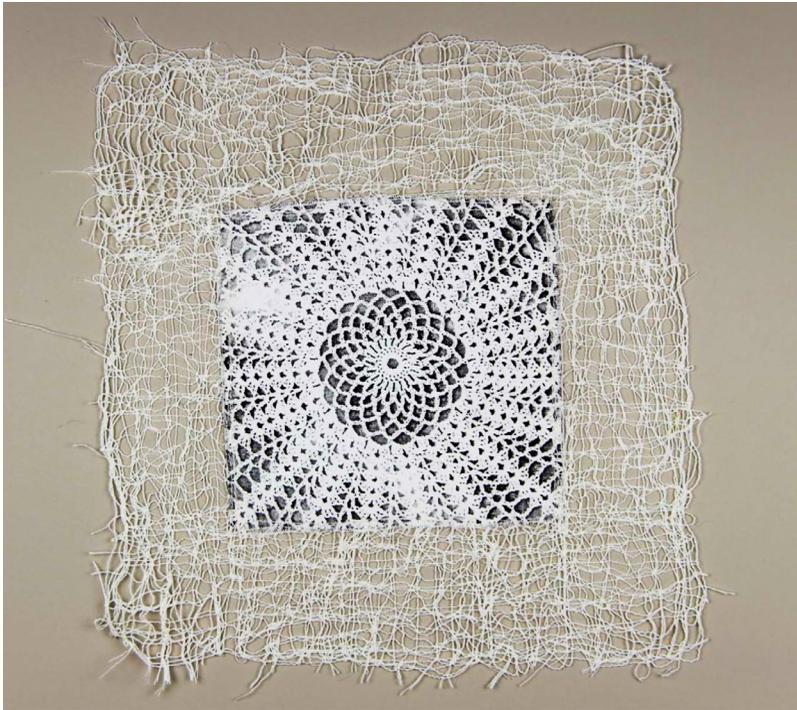
MATERIALS: Digitally printed lace
pattern onto velvet, devoré burnout.
DIMENSIONS: 1150 x 2000 mm

ABOVE

*Process work for reticella lace
series, 2006*

MATERIALS: Venetian braid patterns
hand printed onto silk organza
DIMENSIONS: 150 x 170 mm





Reticella Lace Suite, 2006

MATERIALS: A combination of Venetian braid patterns hand printed onto organza and shantung silk, digital photographic transfers, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate

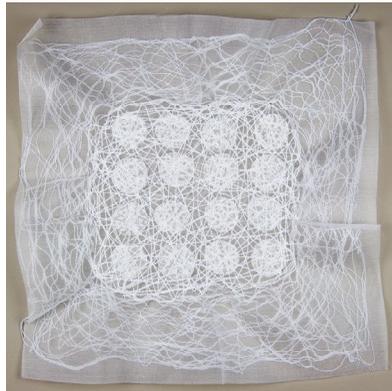
DIMENSIONS: approx. 230 x 240mm

NEXT PAGE:

White Shadow, 2006

MATERIALS: Venetian braid patterns hand printed onto silk organza, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: 600 x 3000mm





LACED WAS MY FIRST solo exhibition of contemporary laceworks. Held in 2006 at the Sheffer Gallery in Sydney, it was funded by the Australia Council for the Arts through a grant for emerging work. It marks an important turning point in my career, shifting from a commercial design practice to a creative arts practice.

The experience I gained working in international textile studios contextualises and motivates my practice to this day. However when I returned to Australia, I wanted to break the rules: push techniques and concepts into new territory outside the confines of a commercial textile brief.

In the year leading up to the exhibition I engaged in a range of research play, testing and workings out. This experimentation moved my practice away from designing print for the body (my commercial practice), to exploring lace as an embodied presence within an interior space. Research was informed by visits to the lace collection at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and evolved conceptually out of a mentorship with lace historian Rosemary Shepherd. The aim of the research was to explore the integration of the hand (traditional textiles) with emerging technologies. Consequently *LACED* can be viewed as a conversation in the form of material questioning.

The significance of this research was that it redefined the complexity of traditional lace structures and looked at alternatives for future lace as an openwork surface. I developed alternative processes of machine stitching onto a soluble base. This process is unique; rather than replicating traditional lace, it arrives at a new method of creating lace. It is significant in that it has relevance to contemporary production technology.

WHITE SHADOW

White Shadow is one of the critical pieces in the *LACED* exhibition because it best conveys my homage to historical lace, while speaking into a contemporary lace language. When I began my research I visited the Lace Study Centre at the Powerhouse Museum. The Lace Study Centre is one of Australia's largest lace collections, known for its bobbin lace volunteers who sit and demonstrate lace making on raised pillows, with dexterous hands moving multiple lace bobbins and threads.

Feeling overwhelmed by the task ahead of me I approached lace historian Rosemary Shepherd who has overseen the collection for twenty years. After what I felt was an inarticulate conversation on my part, I returned to my office, stared at my computer screen and still felt overwhelmed. Like the positive and negative spaces in lace, research

can also be defined by what you can't or don't want to do. I didn't want to recreate lace, I wanted to explore conceptual materialisations of space and structure. I realised that to undertake a solo exhibition based on an exploration of contemporary lace I needed to be supported through a mentorship. Rosemary graciously accepted. As a starting point I visited her studio for a number of weeks to learn bobbin lace making. It was through many conversations with this master that I came to learn the fundamental characteristics of lace, as articulated by Shepherd (2007):

*... namely the spaces created by the 'little thread'
or threads. In other words, without the spaces
there would be no such fabric as lace.*

Learning bobbin lace involves concentrated movements of weaving bobbins over and under each other in mathematical sequences. Much to my consternation, in the midst of concentration Rosemary would wryly ask me questions and try and get me to speak. Why? *Once you can talk at the same time as making lace I will know you have mastered the technique.* Sadly I didn't gain that degree of tacit knowledge (it would take years) however it gave me an understanding of lace as a system. I now understand how threads weave in a ballet of movements to construct space.

My breakthrough came when I returned to the Powerhouse Library and discovered pattern books on Venetian braids in the 1600s. The invention of print made these designs easier to distribute than word of mouth. From there I printed braid patterning on silk organza. Over that summer, like a slow-moving road trip, I 'drove' the sewing machine over kilometres of stitching onto a soluble base and created my first contemporary lace, *White Shadow*. The time invested in making lace imbues it with a reverential quality. It is the timelessness of the work and the time invested in the making that people seem to respond to.

Placing the laceworks in the Sheffer Gallery required careful consideration of how the works would interact aesthetically in the space. This process looks to the experience of an exhibition as an encounter. The aim was for the viewer to experience the ethereal qualities of light and shadow suspended in space. *White Shadow*, with the other lace lengths, resonated with a quiet but strong presence. Moving gently in space it contained its own visual language, embedded with narratives old and new.

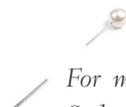
LACED was presented at the Inform Symposium, held at the Powerhouse Museum in 2006. The symposium fostered interdisciplinary discussions around scholarly practice-based research.



LACED at Sheffer Gallery 2006

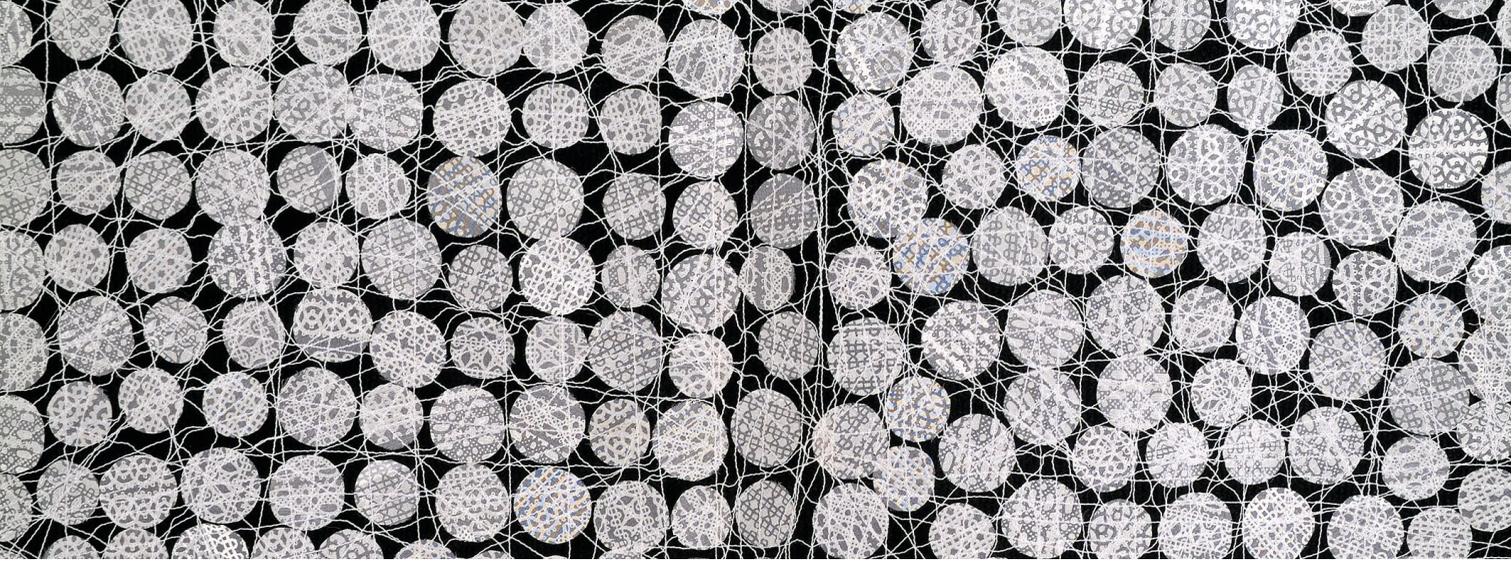




 For me LACED encapsulated my twelve years of travel away from Sydney; an Australian rite of passage or a very long sabbatical? I studied and worked throughout that period, learning Spanish in Madrid, eating tapas and becoming a Prado Goya-file. In London I spent hours in the British Library and scrutinised final year textile shows in order to complete my Masters at Central Saint Martins. LACED bases its explorations on my experience working for the renowned London studio Timney Fowler with a stable of designers from around the world. Like the worst house in the best street, I managed to be a part of a wonderful field of international textile royalty.

On a trip to New York I fell in love with the city and started all over again working in textile studios in fashion precinct, 35th Street and 7th Avenue. The studios were made up of Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese designers and it was there that I learnt about Shinto design philosophy. One story that fascinated me was of a Japanese designer who trained in Tokyo. Her teacher instructed her sit in the snow, drawing a flower from life, because cut flowers lose their essence; the lack of connection with true nature affects the authenticity of the design. Maybe this story was fictitious, they were all terrible teases, but I keep it with me anyway.

Detail of Reticella
lace at Sheffer
Gallery, 2006



White Shadow, 2006

Extracts from two essays first published in *Lace: Contemporary Textiles and Other Works*, a catalogue following the *LACED* exhibition in 2007.

LACED MESSAGES

Professor Kees Dorst

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Lace is beginning to speak to us again, after sleeping for hundreds of years. And it has important messages for us, now — yet in the chaos of modern civilisation it is all too easy to ignore its voice. Its whisper is drowned in the deafening noise of our hyperactive media-mad lifestyle. And we have little time to listen to lace: like balls in a pin-ball machine we run madly running from experience to experience. Our senses need to be stretched to breaking point before we are able to sense anything at all.

To remedy this condition we must look for the eye of the storm, something that speaks to us with a soft and subtle voice about qualities that are almost forgotten. The qualities that lace brings us are in themselves firm and strong, and they will never disappear because they

are so deeply human. We just need the time and sensitivity to listen.

This publication is an exploration of the qualities of lace, an endeavour to let lace speak again in a voice that fits our contemporary world. The translation of the qualities of lace into the present is an incredibly subtle thing: the voice of lace can easily be distorted beyond recognition. We have seen examples of this in our contemporary design scene where designers have taken an aspect of lace (say, the floral pattern) and have blown it up to a gigantic scale. A beautiful visual effect, but it has nothing to do with the qualities of the original. That is not the aim of Heffer's exploration. Her aim is to see how we can translate the qualities of lace into the here and now.

The qualities of lace... what would they be? Lace is ethereal, with a restrained and controlled aesthetic. It is delicate, intimate, quiet. It is also feminine, closely tied to the lives of the women who made it, wear it, handle it. The incredible patience and dedication needed to

LACED: AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rosemary Shepherd OAM

LACE-MAKER, LACE HISTORIAN

produce lace and its precious aesthetic render it beyond the utilitarian. So it is also, in a sense, completely frivolous. Its aesthetic is its own subject—an autonomous craft that pre-dates autonomous art by centuries.

These qualities are seldom seen in our hectic existence. This lends a real urgency and importance to the expression of these qualities. We need the values that lace embodies, and the emotions that it can spark within us. Yet that may be difficult. Lace is a sleeping beauty that does not look so young anymore. Our perception can easily be reduced to regarding it as an example of a now extinct craft, like so many others. The development of lace appears to have stalled. That is, until recently.

Cecilia Heffer has taken on the formidable challenge of translating the qualities of lace for our time. She has taken Rosemary Shepherd's definition of lace as 'an openwork fabric in which the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas' as the starting point for a fascinating exploration of the qualities of contemporary lace. This is a subtle thing—as she said, 'it is almost like designing something that is not there'. In her extensive explorations, which are both playful and thoughtful, she gently but firmly pushes the boundaries of what lace can be. And each line of exploration and investigation ends by achieving a new synthesis that is represented by one of the works in this publication.

If you enter this publication with an acute and sensitive mind you will start to understand the nature of lace, the rhythm of fabric and spaces. You will encounter new lace constructions in which Cecilia is even exploring the alternatives to an open-work structure. But while doing this, the work remains faithful to the definition and quality of what lace is—always breaking some rules, but never all of them at the same time. Thus we enter a new world of lace, translated from a traditional craft into a space between art and design.

Thomas Fuller, writing in 1662¹, described lace as 'a little thread descanted upon by art and industry'. This description, however charming, ignores the fundamental characteristic of lace, namely the spaces created by the 'little thread' or threads. In other words, without the spaces there would be no such fabric as lace.

Lace is unusual among textiles because, despite its sensational history, it has never had a useful purpose. In fact, its very existence is owed entirely to the pursuit of fashion. The decorative role of lace began with the embellishment of seams in garments or household textiles more than five hundred years ago. In the early 1500s it emerged as a fashion accessory and by the late 1500s it was an essential part of fashionable dress for both men and women throughout Europe.

From the beginning lace was associated with wealth and status and this remained so until the early 1800s. At various times in its complicated history the wearing of lace was frowned upon or legislated against for its frivolity and extravagance. During the 1600s, when men wore more lace than women, many were on record as mortgaging, or selling property outright to raise the money for the latest lace fashion. Collective spending on Venetian lace and other luxury fashion goods almost bankrupted France at this time and seriously damaged the economies of other European countries.

The first half of the 1700s—the age of elegance—could be regarded as the golden age of lace. Flemish bobbin laces, in particular, are some of the most exquisite textiles ever produced—a triumph of mental agility and manual skill that produced laces so fine and intricate it is hard to believe they were made by mere human beings. Fortunately its intrinsic and artistic value has ensured

the survival of large quantities of lace in museums and private collections around the world where they will always inspire contemporary textile designers.

At the start of the 1800s the first experiments with lace-making machines had already taken place and, by the end of that century, most fashion lace was machine made. Nevertheless the hand-made lace industry continued, though much reduced, until the 1930s. Lace has been almost exclusively associated with women, babies and household textiles throughout the post-industrial period.

Today, although very little hand-made lace is produced commercially many lace-makers and embroiderers continue to make lace for their own pleasure, using techniques that first came into common use well before the 1500s. The most important of these are the embroidered, needle and bobbin laces.

Embroidered lace was probably the earliest development, being an extension of the role of the seamstress who was an important person in every household at a time when all items of clothing and household furnishing were hand-stitched. As the name suggests embroidered laces are based on a woven fabric, or other fabric construction, and include cutwork, pulled and drawn work, and embroidered nets of various kinds. Heffer's work directly references embroidered lace, particularly reticella and cutwork.

Needle lace is constructed entirely free of a base fabric. It was a logical development from cutwork in the late 1500s when the holes in the fabric became so large that the work needed to be stabilised over a parchment pattern upon which the design was drawn. Designs for needle lace became much freer without the constraints of fabric. Buttonholed needle lace is the largest single group of needle laces.

Bobbin lace is plaited and woven over a pattern attached to a firmly stuffed pillow. The technique probably emerged first in Italy in the very early 1500s, influenced by the different metallic bobbin-made braids which were then in production. Initially bobbin lace was

a cottage industry; the makers were often poor women and men who supplemented their agricultural income by making bobbin lace at night or in the winter. Bobbin lace didn't require smooth hands as did needle lace because the thread was manipulated with bobbins. Heffer has used woodblock designs from a 450-year-old lace pattern book as a starting point in several of her pieces.

From the early 1800s every possible combination of lace-making technique was tried by women at home, and others emerged for the first time. The most enduring and best-loved of these is crochet which remains enormously popular today. In the 1970s it also became something of a feminist icon symbolising the unsung creative efforts of generations of women who were immortalised in the 'Doyley Show'² exhibition. It is interesting that Heffer has referenced crochet and doyleys in several pieces.

In Switzerland in the 1880s the Schiffli embroidery machine was invented and was to have a powerful influence on contemporary textile practice almost a century later. Originally the machine embroidered over a base fabric which was later removed leaving only the embroidery. In the beginning the name 'chemical lace' was coined for this fabric because of the toxic method used to dissolve the base fabric. Eventually the process became more benign and the name gave way to 'guipure lace' by which it is still known today. In the 1970s a water-soluble base fabric became available for the domestic market. This was taken up enthusiastically by studio embroiderers and has resulted in some wonderfully creative work. Cecilia Heffer has used this technique extensively.

Although there have been enormous changes in fashion and technology in recent decades, today's mainstream lace production has conceptually changed little in 500 years.³ The all-over pattern may predominate over compositions of different elements, but the motifs remain mostly floral and are often direct copies from historic designs. In view of radical changes in the design of almost every other artefact in our lives it is surely surprising that lace remains fixed in the past, as if it were

too 'sacred' an icon with which to tamper.

Nevertheless, exciting developments are now occurring in the production of studio textiles for furnishing and fashion. Several talented artists are taking the idea of lace and transforming it into fabrics that play with the positive/negative elements of traditional lace motifs, while expressing these in a different way using new technology and tools.

Cecilia Heffer's subtle and inspirational work *White Shadow* exemplifies this approach perfectly. She has screen printed 16th century bobbin lace patterns in white onto translucent fabric in a way suggestive of 'the ghost of laces past'. This fabric was then laser cut into circles, reassembled and machine stitched into a grid pattern. In other words, using contemporary technology in place of needle or bobbins, she has deliberately destroyed the original meaning and created another more relevant to our age, while still acknowledging its (delicate white) history.

ENDNOTES

1. Levey, S. 1983, *Lace a History*, Victoria and Albert Museum and W.S. Maney & Son Ltd.
2. The Doyley Show held at Watter's gallery in 1977 was an initiative of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group.
3. This was the thinking behind the launch of the Powerhouse Museum's 'International Lace for Fashion' awards. The definition participants embraced removed the focus from the means of production to the finished fabric.



To Furnish a Future

27

HISTORIC HOUSES TRUST COMMISSION:
LACE CURTAINS FOR THE STATE ROOMS
AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE

Government House Lace, 2007
MATERIALS: Cotton lace netting
DIMENSIONS: 1500 x
100,000mm





The State Rooms at Government House.

IN 2007 I WAS COMMISSIONED to design a contemporary lace curtain for the State Rooms of Government House. The project *To Furnish a Future* was part a five-year refurbishment plan led by the Historic Houses Trust to redesign the interior of the House. There were five design briefs commissioned including the redesign of the carpet, upholstery, table and chairs and lace curtains. The Trust required artists to be from New South Wales and ideally for the work to be produced in Australia. Artists in each category were invited to present their work to a judging panel consisting of leading architects, historians, curators and design experts. The final designers commissioned were Valerie Kirk, Head of Textiles at Australian National University for the carpet design, Liz Williamson Head of Textiles at the College Of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales for the upholstery, and designers Charles Wilson and Caroline Casey for their table and chair designs.

Rather than the usual competition process, the selection for the lace curtains was a little different. It involved a three-year interview period over which I presented new concepts and methods for the lace design. The original portfolio I presented to the panel included textiles I designed for the fashion industry at studios in London and New York. The panel had concerns: they needed to know I was engaged in an arts practice in Australia, not commercial design. It was only when I received a 2005 Emerging Artist Grant from the Australia Council for the Arts and completed my first solo exhibition *LACED* at the Sheffer Gallery in 2006 that my work could be placed within this fine art context. These events marked a turning point in my career from studio designer to a practice-based researcher.

For me, there is a knowledge exchange between the disciplines of art and design, a back and forth between knowledge and experience as both a designer and an artist. The Trust commissioned me as an *artist* to design the curtains however it was also my *design experience* in industry that I drew from to advance and materialise my work. I now see that my original contribution to this commission was the experience I offered in both these roles — as artist and designer — and how knowledge exchange is inextricably linked between the two.

The three-year interview process took place at Government House over cups of tea in the State Rooms and walks around the grounds. These visits began to shape my sense of the house, and inform my ideas for the lace design as I collected details through observation. The State Rooms are a working venue, not a museum; many dignitaries are entertained within and enjoy these rooms. In visiting the space over a prolonged period of time I gained the experience and feeling of the room as a functioning space. I was able to observe how light worked in the space and consider the high windows that were to frame the lace curtains. I wanted to pay homage to the existing decorated ceilings with their historical detailing and to bring the timeless quality of the surrounding garden into the space. Ethereal qualities of lace serve as material boundaries and thresholds, enabling us to move through the spaces in which we live and work (Millar 2011). The intention for the lace design started to take shape; to pay heed to the past, speak into the present and still have relevance for viewers in the future.

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN FLORAL

A major consideration in designing the lace was that I was asked to work closely with the original floral damask design, provided by the company Lyon, Cottier & Co. in 1879. My intention was to design a contemporary Australian floral motif for the lace that would compliment the damask. The floral motif has been an integral cultural and social symbol in textile design since the early 17th century and serves as a universal symbol for systems of social organisation (McNeil 2005).

One of the most enduring images of Australian history is that of early settlers taking pencil to paper to record the unique native flora and fauna. Within the lace, I particularly reference the botanical studies of the Scott sisters who resided in Roslyn Gardens, Sydney in the early 1920s. I was introduced to the work of the Scott sisters through a catalogue of their watercolour images which I saw while visiting my digital printer, Penny

McIntyre. The detailed account of New South Wales (NSW) flora and fauna within these illustrations resonated with me. My lace honours the legacy the Scott sister left with their exquisite native botanical studies. Other references are sourced photographs from the Botanic Gardens Herbarium Library, as well as eucalyptus and grevillea leaves collected on my walks around the garden. Research also included studying the original lace documented in early photographs of the Government House State Rooms, and viewing the original designs for blinds held in the Historic Houses Library (The Mint).

Alongside design development, initial research also concentrated on establishing *how* the lace could be produced. Practical considerations such as cleaning the textile over time needed to be taken into account. For several months design consult Bruce Carnie and I tested possibilities. Originally the Trust required that the lace be produced in Australia. Unfortunately this proved to be unrealistic because textile manufacturing in Australia has declined over the past two decades. Ultimately, one hundred meters of lace was woven for the commission by the Scottish mill Morton Young and Borland. The mill is known for its woven lace nettings and houses one of the widest lace looms in the world. It is a wonderful example of integration between hand-generated and digital technology; the fourteen-foot traditional manual loom is linked to a commuter system that reads the designs. The past and present ‘speak’ to each other to create beautifully complex lace textiles.

Scale and imagery are critical to the design. The width of the loom was key to the design process as it enabled the design to be large in scale and repeat. This enabled the lace to occupy the grandeur of the space in the house with ease. Increasing the scale in the floral patterns broke from traditional intricate floral patterning normally associated with lace designs and brought a contemporary aesthetic, which speaks to our unique experience of space in the vast Australian landscape. In the final piece, ethereality is created through the organisation of complex woven structures; woven opacities give the illusion of a three-dimensional motif.

The significance of this research is that it results in an Australian lace innovation, that is unique to our culture and times. It breaks from the traditional European floral motif normally associated with lace design to reference botanical illustrations specific to NSW. The scale, composition and repeat of the design completely breaks from the high decorative style associated with traditional lace design, giving it a uniquely Australian aesthetic of light, space and scale for future generations to enjoy. The permeable boundary between past histories and the present merge as visitors enjoy the interior and exterior of the grounds and learn the stories of the house and of our native and flora woven in the lace.





LEFT

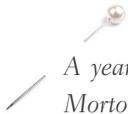
Final digital design for lace production,
produced Morton Young and Borland.
Half drop repeat.

TOP

Pencil sketch for lace design based on
grevillea leaves.

ABOVE

Detail from final lace.



A year after the lace curtains were installed I had the opportunity to visit the Morton Young and Borland mill in the sloping green hills of Preswick, Scotland. I was on a research sabbatical and wanted to see first-hand the workings of the mill. Carole Collet, Director of the Masters of Textiles Futures at Central Saint Martins joined me on the trip, also curious to understand how lace is made.

The company were gracious and led us on a tour from design to floor production. Their early archives of hand-painted lace designs were extraordinary feats of human ingenuity and skill. The designer had been with the company for twenty years. When she started designing lace the intricate patterns were hand-painted in gouache onto acetates. Today lace is designed on CAD software. When the older generation of designers retire from the company, all that traditional knowledge will be almost impossible to replace. Consequently, training new designers is critical to the survival of this specialised industry. We toured the factory looking at the hanging cardboard punch card systems and seeing how the machines were threaded and in operation. I particularly enjoyed meeting the people working the machines (curiously, mainly men).

There was a room dedicated to inspecting the lace for flaws. Women with sharply trained eyes were pulling meters of lace over tables, or knees in some cases, to inspect for inconsistencies. In an age of fast fashion we are completely removed from an understanding of how cloth is made and who makes it. My visit helped me experience the human beings and stories behind production and fostered a deeper understanding of the history of making behind this mysterious, complex textile. It has sustained my ongoing motivation to explore technical and aesthetic innovation in textiles.

Photographs taken at Morton Young and Borland in 2008.

NEXT PAGE:
.....

Lace panel
(grevillea lace), 2007
MATERIALS: Hand-printed silk organza, stitched onto a soluble substrate. Lace length acquired by the Powerhouse Museum, based on grevillea motif created for the Government House lace.





ABOVE:
.....

Shadow Traces (Ebony and Ivory), 2008

EXHIBITION: *Momentum, 18th Tamworth Textile Biennial, Tamworth Regional Gallery 2008–11 (national tour) curated by Valerie Kirk, Head of Textiles, ANU*

MATERIALS: *Silk organza, screen printed image overlaid onto digital printing, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate.*

DIMENSIONS: *670 x 2100mm*

NEXT PAGE TOP:
.....

Process work for Shadow Traces

NEXT PAGE BOTTOM:
.....

Shadow Traces, Ebony





Lace Narratives

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DAMIEN MINTON GALLERY
SYDNEY, 2010

FROM THE *Passport Suite*, 2010
MATERIALS: Silks, cottons, linens,
digital photographic transfers,
machine stitched onto a soluble
substrate
DIMENSIONS: 180 x 140mm



Lace Narratives exhibition at the Damien Minton Gallery, Sydney

LACE NARRATIVES WAS A SOLO EXHIBITION held in 2010 at the Damien Minton Gallery, and linked to the Sydney Design Festival. The exhibition presented over 70 contemporary laceworks divided into a number of ‘postcard suites’ and lace lengths. In these works lace became a genre for place making, exploring themes of cultural memory and identity drawn from my own experience of migrating from Chile, South America to Australia as a young child. As my memory of the past receded, the new Australian landscape—at first so foreign, even frightening—became familiar, beautiful and finally a symbol of home.

The aim was to convey the experience of being suspended between two cultures. Materials and techniques such as rust, natural dyeing, digital printing and machine embroidery were explored to evoke notions of home, both past and present. The spaces in the lace signify fragmented cultural histories and incomplete memories of a previous life.



FROM THE *Rust Suite*, 2010
MATERIALS:
Silks, cottons,
linens, rust and
natural dyes,
digital photographic
transfers, machine
stitched onto a
soluble substrate
DIMENSIONS:
180 x 140mm
approx.

THE POSTCARD SUITES

The postcard suites comprises of thirty-six laceworks that were divided into four main stories titled: Passport, Rust, Colour and Antique Lace. In these works the idea of connecting language and landscape was inspired by Murray Bail's novel *Eucalyptus*. In this novel Bail compares a paddock to a paragraph, and describes how paragraphs can be a device to help to fence in wandering thoughts. This led me to explore ideas around textile paragraphs as a type of material postcard. Each paragraph organises wandering impressions and contains histories of migration, to signify connection to country and place.

The lace postcards are made up of recycled fragments of natural dye samples left over from my teaching workshops. The dyed silk, cotton and linen squares are reassembled with photographic transfers of my great grandfather's photography, and rusted cloth. The works reference the colonial 'making do' using reclaimed materials that are embedded with personal narratives. Utility and thrift, the beauty of making do can also be demonstrated in the Wagga Rugs of the Great Depression where flour bags and old clothing were sewn together for use in the home or for camping (Mitchell 2015).

The following suites explore various ideas around, migration, place making and memory.

PASSPORT SUITE: MATERIAL LANGUAGE

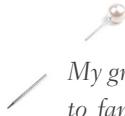
Passport explores text as a visual language to convey the fragmented experience of migration and loss. The work draws inspiration from the work of Australian artist Rosalie Gascoigne. Gascoigne is known for her original vision in reinterpreting Australian landscape through abstraction. Found objects such as road signs and milk crates are reassembled into minimalist grids that evoke a sense of boundless space (Edwards 1997). In the *Passport Suite*, travel documents such as my Chilean passport and birth certificate were photographically transferred onto cloth and reassembled as ‘material lace letters’. Combinations of font and letters are placed in uneven grids to break repetitive pattern, playing with the notion of a language of spaces and silences.



Travelling in and out of Chile as a small child in the early 1970s was a serious business with rigorous border control. Documents came to be a ticket to freedom and were carefully examined at each destination. As a child I didn't understand why we had to leave our country but came to understand the silence around what was at the time a fraught adult world. Like a puzzle that is incomplete, the spaces in these laceworks refer to the gaps in our collective silence. Over time these silences are pieced together to form an abstract fragmented understanding of the past.

RUST SUITE

In these material assemblages rust comes to signify 'place'. The strong burnt oranges are indicative of Australian soil, rocks and landscape. In the rust process the textiles have undergone a type of ageing and decay. Rusted nails are buried with the silks and left for three months. When unrolled a form of erosion and mark making takes place. The rust process eats away at the fabric, creating lace-like perforations similar to the chemical burn out process used in commercial lace making today. Wendy Feldon (2015) wrote about the use of rust in textiles, and included my *Rust Suite* as an example of this technique. Rust dyeing is a means to imprint a memory (a melancholy?) onto cloth. As a form of bricolage, Australia and Chile merge as rusted linen squares are combined with photographs taken by my great grandfather Odber Heffer Bisset in 1860s Chile.



My great grandfather Odber Heffer Bisset has a colourful history. According to family lore, he ran away from his home in Canada in the 1800s and moved to New York where he was taken in and trained to be an assistant photographer at 18 Broadway Avenue, New York. I must have walked past his old studio when I worked NYC. He was sent to Valparaiso, Chile on a photographic mission and was hired by Felix Leblanc, owner of the prestigious Foto Garreaud studio in Santiago. In Chile he set up his own studio 'Casa Heffer' and flourished in portrait photography. He is regarded as one of Chile's founding photographers, leaving a legacy of photographs including his highly regarded portraits of the Mapuche Indians of Southern Chile.

In the 1860s photographs were created using glass plates with a photographic emulsion of silver halides suspended in gelatin. It strikes me that the way my great grandfather would have seen his images suspended on a glass plate is similar to the process my lace undergoes when submerged in water – the image rises to the surface as a new lace.

A lineage of print production and knowledge passing from one generation to the next is repeated as my father continued the tradition when he took over Casa Heffer in Chile. When we came to Australia he set up his own offset printing business in the Strand Arcade in Sydney.



Rusted Lace Suite, 2010

MATERIALS: Silks, cottons, linens,
rust and natural dyes, digital photo-
graphic transfers, machine stitched
onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: approx. 180 x 140mm

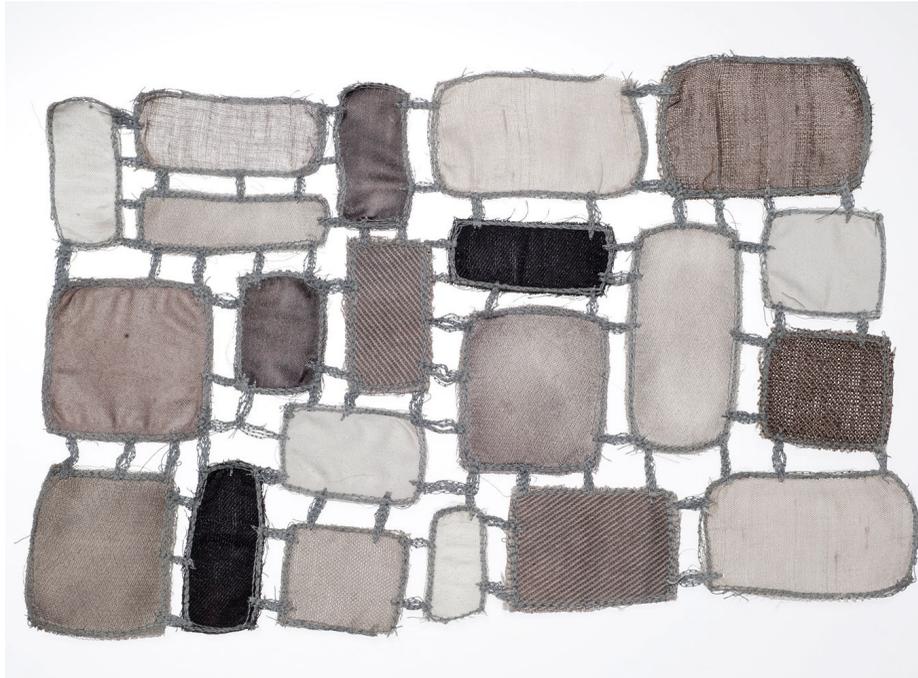


COLOUR SUITE

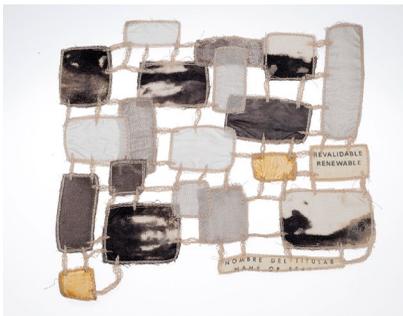
When flying I always follow the geometric patchwork of fields and paddocks below, intrigued how each rectangle seems to be a distinct colour. The *Colour Suite* references patterning found in aerial landscape flying between Sydney and Tamworth. It plays with the notion of flying as a physical enactment of lace; in flight you are suspended in a temporal space between destinations. The work draws from my training in fine art painting and is a study of abstraction, pattern and colour.

Natural dye samples collected from my teaching workshops have been reassembled into 'aerial colour paddocks'. The natural dyes include local eucalyptus leaves, tea, turmeric, madder and onion skins. Using natural dyes is a way of understanding local ecology and coming to a closer understanding of its landscape (Gordon 2011). Australia has a strong history of artists working with landscape as a genre to express a deep connection to place.

A contemporary example that resonates with my work is Australian glass artist Giles Bettison. Bettison has mastered a traditional Venetian glass blowing technique known as 'murrine' to create a unique glass language that is distinctly Australian. His glass works known as Paddock and Vista demonstrate his innovation in colour and glass. The irregular patchwork patterning draws from his family farm Kapunda in South Australia and link to textiles through his study of African weave structures and material (Osborne 2015).



Colour Suite, 2010
 MATERIALS: Silks, cottons, linens,
 natural dyes, machine stitched
 onto a soluble substrate
 DIMENSIONS: approx. 180 x
 140mm





ANTIQUÉ LACE SUITE

In these laceworks the antique lace has been deconstructed and reassembled to form an 'up-cycled lace', a new fabrication. The works are as intriguing as they are difficult to read; people look closely to see how they were made. The new lace conveys the delicacy of its former life and references the sustainable practice of recycling.

Part of this suite was selected for the *Petite Miniatures Textiles* exhibition at Wangaratta Regional Gallery, Victoria in 2012. They were subsequently acquired by the gallery for their textile collection.

 Once people came to know my work they started to donate their family lace. Although I am always appreciative of this kindness, it feels like a big responsibility to inherit. In the past these gifts would be part of a handsome dowry; now people don't know what to do with them. We readily discard fabrics bought from chain stores however the time invested in the handmade has a human value. It is disrespectful to throw out lace made by a family member.



Antique Lace Suite, 2010

MATERIALS: Antique laces, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: approx. 180 x 140mm

LACE AS CODING: A COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF MAKING

These works are a departure from the circular patterning in previous lace lengths, exploring new lace structures as 'slatted lace'. Space is reconfigured through a series of line work—drawn, printed and machine stitched. This engagement with lineation can be seen as a way to describe a physical manifestation between inside and outside, and between knowable and unknown space (Bates & Davidson 2009).

Imagery for this work was developed as irregular line traces from stones collected on my walks on remote beaches in the York Peninsula, South Australia. These tracteries were then hand printed, white on white, with additions of black onto silk organza to reference the abstract markings found on the stones. The lines were further abstracted by a system of slicing thin strips of silk against the grain. These were reassembled and pinned onto a soluble substrate. Patterned line is further reworked by repetitive mark making created through machine stitching. When the piece is submerged into water the backing dissolves and a delicate patterned lace emerges as a floating suspended lattice.

Do we view work from a collective memory of making? These laces resonated with people as a DNA code, their abstract patterning also reminded them of musical scores. These observations draw links to automated Jacquard lace looms and how they use a punch-card mechanism similar to a binary code to weave the complex lace patterns. The Jacquard automated loom was invented by Joseph-Marie Jacquard and is one of the first computers. Pianolas also use these types of perforated codes on rolls of paper to create music. I mused whether there is a way to create 'lace music' with the spaces in the score punctuated by lace silences. I keep toying with this idea, which emerged through conversations about my work, for a future project.

Dye Binary Lace Suite, 2010

MATERIALS: *Hand printed silk organza,
machine stitched onto a soluble substrate*

DIMENSIONS: 350 x 450mm.





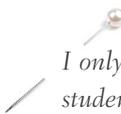
Rusted Lace Suite, 2010
MATERIALS: Rusted silk organza,
machine stitched onto a soluble
substrate
DIMENSIONS: 350 x 450 mm



NGV: NEGOTIATING THIS WORLD

A suite of six postcard works together with two lace panels were acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), an acquisition was funded by the Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists.

These acquired laceworks were included in the exhibition *Negotiating This World: Australian Contemporary Art*, celebrating the centennial of the Ian Potter Centre at the NGV in 2012. More than 100 works by Australian artists from diverse cultural backgrounds and practices were exhibited to reflect the breadth of artistic practice in Australia. The work reflected their response to issues of identity, modernity, history, conflict and environmental concern (NGV 2012).



I only came to know of the Negotiating This World exhibition through an email from a student who had seen my work there. When I heard about the exhibition I was honoured to have my work included in the NGV among esteemed Australian artists, while at the same time experiencing a naïve indignation at not being told about the exhibition. Upon visiting Negotiating This World I was further taken aback by a small sign announcing a floor talk on the artist Cecilia Heffer and her work. Panic set in: had I missed an email, was I meant to have given this talk? At a second glance I saw that the floor talk had been presented by one of the exhibition curators a week earlier. Why hadn't they contacted me for more information about my work? I puzzled over this conundrum in the NGV café while pouring tea from an attractive Japanese wrought iron pot. Much like the slow moving ritual of a tea ceremony it dawned on me that I was experiencing my own mortality. These types of realisations often come while engaged in another form of physical activity, as opposed to sitting and thinking. I am aware that I may sound inflated and melodramatic, however on reflection lace is about absence and presence. As I submissively sipped on my tea I realised that I had become irrelevant to my own work. As I pass through this life I will dissolve like the backing of my lace. The lace has already emerged with its own story and life beyond my time and control. Like a game of chess it has jumped over and replaced me. As a result I gained a more mature perspective about knowledge as an ongoing cultural process and my passing place and contribution to the field.

NEXT PAGE:

Homeland, 2010

MATERIALS: Silk Shantung and organza, natural dyes machine stitched onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: 700 x 2200mm



EXHIBITION AS RESEARCH SITE: CURATORIAL INTERPRETATIONS

Homeland is one of the critical laceworks in the *Lace Narratives* exhibition, and was one of the pieces acquired by the NGV. In this work I shifted from referencing traditional lace patterning to an enquiry into ephemeral qualities experienced in the unique Australian landscape. The work continues to explore lace as a complex structure referencing the historical *punto in aria* method of materialising space as ‘stitches in the air’ (Millar 2011). This work introduces the notion of an atmosphere of layers as experienced in nature, as eloquently described by Professor Robyn Healy (2014):

Lace has always had this thing about how to read it. You never have it isolated and get a true reading of it as it is always layered with something else, such as a garment, skin, a body. It is very hard to read lace on its own, you always see it with a surface underneath, or as a pattern. Always think about how you read lace as it always has a layer underneath, you never get it on its own.

Healy’s point about lace needing a layer underneath to read it is a poignant one. Before this, I had never thought to present the lace with another layer, always exhibiting it as single panels. The wall or the space around the hanging lengths served as a second skin. In *Negotiating This World* a set of different curatorial eyes placed the two lace panels strategically one in front of the other allowing for a new reading of the work. This placement generated three-dimensional layers of light and shadow (an atmosphere) and pattern. These unexpected breakthroughs for an artist evidence the importance of exhibition as a research site (Smith 2004). The exhibition space not only provides a forum for public dissemination it is an important component of reflective research practice.

In the NGV the work was meticulously hung under the rigours of a professional installation team. Translucent archival tabs were evenly placed along rods so the textile didn’t bow in the space. The lighting was soft and low with a spotlight at the perfect intensity or light level. This created an atmosphere and drew attention to the complex surface structure of the lace while at the same time created a beautiful shadow. Viewing the work translated through a different set of curatorial eyes provided me with an oppor-

tunity to extend my aesthetic experience of the lace in a controlled space, and has opened up ideas for future work in exploring 'shadow lace' as atmosphere. Inspiration can be drawn from the Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki in his work *In Praise of Shadows* (2001:33):

This was the genius of our ancestors, that by cutting off light from this empty space they imparted to the world of shadows that formed there a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament. The technique seems simple, but was by no means simply achieved.

During Sydney Design Week the Damien Minton Gallery hosted an artist floor talk in which designers, curators and writers were invited to respond to a selected lacework from the exhibition. Lindie Ward, curator of Decorative Arts at the Powerhouse Museum, presented a curatorial overview of the upcoming international *Love Lace* exhibition. Designer Dr Zoë Sadokierski responded to the lace and my process through a series of graphic experiments on paper. Poets Astrid Lorange and Tom Lee presented a 'lace poem' through conversations across time zones; Tom was in Australia and Astrid in New York at the time.



Stones collected from the York Peninsula, South Australia and one from Dublin.

NEXT PAGE:

Tide (detail), 2011

MATERIALS: Silk organza screen print and eucalyptus dye, machine stitched on a soluble substrate.

DIMENSIONS: 650 x 1600 mm

This work was exhibited in the Wangaratta Contemporary Textile Awards in 2011 and the 7th International Fibre Art Biennale Exhibition, Beijing, China



CONCLUSION

The gaps in the work represent perfectly the silences and unanswered questions in any story we can tell about another person. There is so much we don't know, even about the people closest to us. To me, memoir is about creating an authentic story with all the information available to us and accepting those gaps that will never be filled. — Rebecca Huntley, 2012

One of the most rewarding outcomes of *Lace Narratives* was people's response to and connection with the work. It seemed to resonate, and in some cases move people, as they saw their own stories reflected in the lace postcards. The exhibition and artist event provided an opportunity to engage in many conversations around how textiles convey unspoken human experience.

Through this new understanding of how textiles serve as cultural narrative, combined with the intense making process for *Lace Narratives*, I explored Shepherd's 2012 definition of lace as:

*... an openwork structure whereby
the pattern of spaces are as important
as the solid motif.*

Through this exploration of Shepherd's definition, I developed new lace making methods as a vehicle for expressing cultural memory. These methods are unique in that they stand apart from traditional patterning associated with lace, their irregular structures also break away from traditional definitions of patchwork, quilts, lace, weaves or knits. Through my exploration into materiality, a new set of methods have emerged that enable the expression of cultural histories and contemporary memoir, through material language.



The Italian Girl, 2012

MATERIALS: Photo-transfer, cottons, silks, handmade lace by
Rebecca Huntley's nonna, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate
DIMENSIONS: 350 x 450 mm

THE ITALIAN GIRL

These ideas were further tested and developed through a commission by writer Rebecca Huntley. In response to my postcard series Rebecca approached me to create a piece of lace as a memoir of her Italian nonna (grandmother). In 2011 Rebecca finished writing *The Italian Girl*, a family memoir published by University of Queensland Press in 2012. The memoir followed a decade-long search for the story of her nonna's experiences during the Second World War, when the men in her family were interned in the South Australian desert for being enemy aliens. As part of the research for the book, Rebecca sifted through various collections of family photos as well as numerous piles of immigration documents and other government files. Her nonna was an accomplished lace maker and embroiderer and Rebecca wrote about her handiwork in the book.

The story resonated with me and I met with Rebecca numerous times over the following months. I was given a number of different samples of her nonna's work – everything from torn and stained pillow slips and silk camisoles to an extraordinary detailed piece of her lace making – for use in the piece, along with birth certificates and immigration papers and small, faded sepia-toned photos of the women in her family on the cane farm in North Queensland. For me it was an inspiration to listen to the stories associated with the Huntley family and to be able to construct a contemporary material memoir of this incredible woman, to serve as a future family heirloom.

The commission concluded a large body of research in a personally fulfilling way. From a research perspective it helped me test out the ideas I had discovered through *Lace Narratives* around cultural memory and how these can be interpreted through material narrative in a new and unique way.

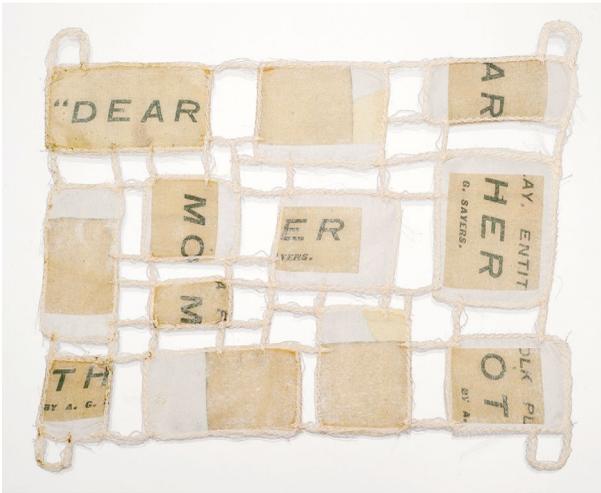
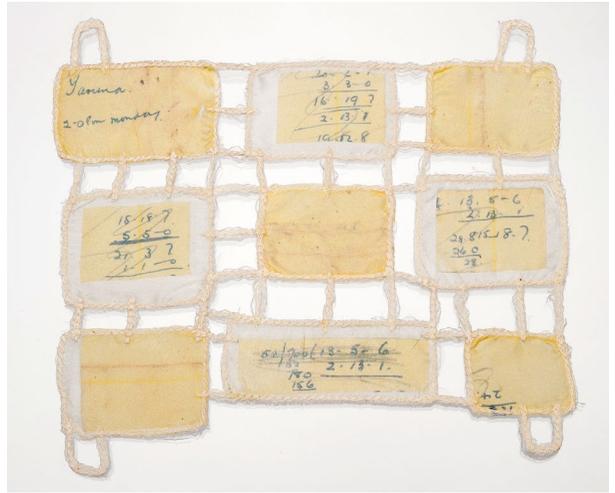


THIS AND FOLLOWING PAGE

Aerial Lace, 2011

EXHIBITION: *Sensorial Loop: First Tamworth Textile Triennial, 2011–2013* (national tour), curated by Patrick Snelling, Head of Textiles RMIT

These works were shown at Damien Minton Gallery in 2013 at the 'One Night Stand' show





Drawn Threads

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14TH INTERNATIONAL TRIENNIAL OF
TAPESTRY, LODZ, POLAND, 2013

NEXT TWO PAGES:

Drawn Threads, 2013

MATERIALS: *Digitally printed satin silk,
machine stitched onto a soluble substrate*

DIMENSIONS: 700 x 2200mm





ABOVE

Drawn Threads, 2013

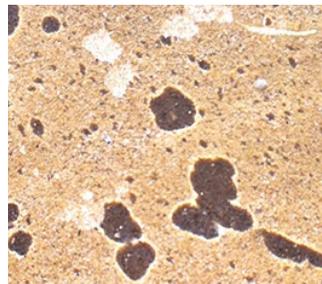
MATERIALS: Digitally printed
satin silk, machine stitched
onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: 700 x 2200mm



LEFT

Photographs taken at
Wamberal Beach





The White Factory,
Lodz, Poland.

DRAWN THREADS IS A CONTEMPORARY LACE installation created for the 14th International Triennial of Tapestry in 2013. Hosted at the Museum Central de Textile in Lodz, Poland, the Triennial is one of the most esteemed exhibitions to promote contemporary international textile art.

Participation in the event is by invitation only. The Museum invites National Cultural Consultants from each country to select three works for inclusion in the Triennial. For this event Australia's consultant was Valerie Kirk, Head of Textiles at the Australian National University who invited me to participate and represent Australia along with artists Gabriella Hegyes and Treahna Hamm.

Researching the Triennial I was drawn to the extraordinary image of the Museum Central de Textile itself, an impressive building rising from the banks of a lake. Housed in a converted textile mill known as the White Factory, it alludes to a manufacturing age of prosperity and great wealth dating from the early 1900s. Within this industrial setting, three main galleries with beautifully controlled lighting serve as contemporary spaces for textiles. The Museum is also recognised for its international textile collection, archives and library.



The exhibition space as 'site' is integral to my research process. Before starting on any project I consider how the lace will intervene (how it will be read) in the space as both a physical and ethereal presence. These considerations become imbued in the lace making process. For the Museum Central I kept going online to view the majestic building and the high ceilinged gallery with childlike wonder. I was conscious of how an Australian lace would be perceived in the context of a European Museum and community whose very walls celebrated and spoke of rich textile histories gone by.

Lodz has a rich history of textile manufacturing, material prosperity, architecture and classical music. Along with this history there is a harder story of the devastation that war brings and the story of the spirit of a people who rebuilt their historical city and palace brick by brick.

WALKING: A THINKING PRACTICE



Drawn Threads aims to convey ephemeral light and shadow as experienced in the Australian landscape. It speaks of an Australian preoccupation; our relationship to geography and place making. The work is situated in current design thinking that aims to explore ways to enhance experience engendered by the artefact (Chyon and Sadar 2013).

The start of the research process involved choosing a site that resonated with me as a means to record and experience the ephemeral qualities of an Australian landscape. I chose Wamberal Beach located on the Central Coast of New South Wales. I have been coming to the area for the past twenty years and feel attuned to the variations in this landscape, weathered over time by an impartial mother nature. Wamberal is its Aboriginal name meaning 'where the seas meet'. Locked by a lake, divided by rocky outcrops it has long stretches of shallow water.

My lace-making process began by walking for hours up and down Wamberal Beach, collecting, recording and observing light and sound. This walking routine became integral to my design and research process. Walking along Wamberal enabled me to *physically think* through ideas. The repetitive nature of my walks could be likened to a meditative practice. It parallels the way I physically 'draw' with the sewing machine



to make my lace. Stitching lines and pathways back and forward with the machine eventually creates lace netting. The mechanical repetition is similar to the process of cloth making, such as weaving and knitting. Through my walking I have become a physical bobbin in a landscape, creating lace tracks (threads) backwards and forwards on its ephemeral shore.

On these walks I started to notice how the subtle variations of light and sound in the environment are layered. I began thinking of ways to translate these ephemeral experiences into an ethereal, layered lace. I recorded the landscape, creating sound recordings of water and waves, videos of light and pattern, reflections, markings on rocky outcrops, marine life in rock pools. I took countless photographs in for a period of a year, documenting each changing season.

LACE CORAL



While documenting the beach I was drawn to clusters of coral that had been washed up around the rocky outcrops. The coral was exquisitely lace-like in form: delicate, white and cream in colour. Fascinated with these fragile sculptures I started to collect and group them. To support this research I looked into the history of lace-making in Europe. Through this I discovered that as early as the 1500s women from fishing villages around the Devonshire coast made lace as a living. The women found the wooden bobbins needed to make lace too expensive, as an alternative they fashioned fish bones into pins for lace making. The lace became famous, known as Bone Lace and gained popularity with nobility and the courts (Palliser 1976). I was struck by how human ingenuity could adapt fish bones to tool as pins and started to draw parallels with the lace like corals I was collecting on the shore. The complexity of the coral started to serve as a visual metaphor for the complexity of lace making. In this sense the coral becomes a metaphor for a lineage of lace making past and present and became the key motif in *Drawn Threads*.



CULTURAL NARRATIVE: CONTEXTUALISING HUMAN STORIES

My finished product of writing: what I call the novel, is one site of what I have created, but not the only site; the rest of what I have created seems to lie just beyond or beside the novel, and for me, this is a series of autobiographical traces. (Perry 2010)

Alongside researching and making *Drawn Threads* I spent a lot of time that summer with my mother who lived in the area. I would visit with stories of the beach, photos to distract and ideas about the lacework. The fact that the work was to be exhibited in Poland was of great interest to her and triggered memories of her life and experiences in World War II. Aged seventeen, a young girl from Dublin, she joined the Wrens (Women's Royal Naval Service) and was trained in Morse code (a form of lace making?). Once the war was finished she was stationed in Dresden, Germany. Over this precious time the stories of her experience in the war gathered form and became a bridge to my understanding of the history that Poland had suffered. History and personal narrative started to weave the context for *Drawn Threads*, moving between permeable boundaries, crossing cultures and time zones past and present. These stories embedded the lace with its own unique understanding of place and exchange. The lace coral developed a deeper symbolic role, the coral silk circles came to serve as poppies offered up in remembrance to lives past lived.



These shared stories take time to emerge. They slowly reveal themselves over endless cups of teas and visits. Often as I was about to get into the car to go back to Sydney another interesting story would be pulled out as a way of extending my visit. My intention was to spend time with my mother however these shared personal narratives became autobiographical essays that contextualising the work. I see her as collaborator, helping to evolve and embed meaning into the essence of the piece. Sometimes research emerges in the least expected form; as Perry alludes, it exists on the sidelines of the main work and usually when you aren't consciously looking for it.

PROCESS: NEW LANGUAGE

The textile artist by the nature of his or her practice concern themselves with making processes and exploring the nature of materials, many of which have a lineage back through the centuries. (Grayson 2013)

What are the tools contemporary lace makers engage with? As a textile designer I am drawn to how textiles are produced and to the technologies that produce them. In understanding these tools I can then subvert and play with process. In the past, lace motifs were first drawn and then created by hand or machine. Today we have digital software, photographic scanning, digital and 3D printing to explore new forms of lace making.

To start the design process I began by scanning the coral. I discovered that scanning magnified and highlighted the coral's extraordinary complexity and detail. Magnification reveals a series of joining segments or units that form a whole. This was an unexpected surprise. I observed that this joining mechanism could be likened to joins in lace making. Traditionally lace is produced through embroidering floating motifs together with a threaded technique, a bridge. In my own lacework this process has been reinvented through machine stitching hundreds of circles onto a soluble backing to form an open work structure. This unique process intensifies the similarities I've observed between coral structure and lace making.

Once scanned the coral lace motifs were developed into a digital printed textile and hand cut into hundreds of circular shapes. The digital photographic quality of this process allows for over thirty thousand pixels of colour to be laid onto the surface of a cloth. Design academic Bruce Carnie speaks of digital pixels as another way of representing a stitch (Carnie 2007). Consequently the digital printing process can be likened to a contemporary form of embroidery.

The digital print is then hand traced and cut into hundreds of circular coral motifs to be pinned and stitched onto a soluble substrate backing. Through this process it has occurred to me that the repetitive act of cutting and placing is to re-enact a form of place making. The activity is not dissimilar to collecting and grouping coral on a beach.



In her book on glass artist Giles Bettison, Margaret Osborne (2015) writes about the relationship between micro-patterns and the macro – the overall aesthetic – of a final work. The perception of pattern in my final lace length also relies on the relationship between micro details the printed circles and macrocosm as length for the eye to zoom in and out.

An intense, machine-stitching process follows as a means to create complex netting. The repetitive action of drawing or driving the sewing machine over kilometres of silk notates pattern and ultimately organises relationships (pathways) of structure and space. In the final process the stitched textile is submerged into water; as the soluble backing dissolves a new lace emerges.



Zoë and Chris came to my studio to video the crucial stages of my lace making process. It occurred to me that this was the first time anyone had witnessed how I make lace. Through video they were able to capture the defining moment when the piece becomes a lace. I was nervous about their visit. I found to my surprise however that being interviewed/videoed whilst engaging in the physical activity of making made it easier to articulate an unusually complex process. A traditional interview situation wouldn't have been as successful in disseminating embedded (tacit) knowledge revealed through practice.

DRAWN THREADS AT THE TRIENNIAL

In May 2013 I travelled with great anticipation to Lodz to visit the Triennial. The experiences I had in Lodz during those four days concluded the final chapter of *Drawn Threads*.

My first impression was of a city with a rich textile history. At the beginning of the 19th century Lodz became one of the Europe's biggest and fastest growing textile industrial centres. Today in a revitalisation process post-industrial areas have become new spaces for cultural centres. The hotel I was staying in was a converted textile factory situated in the heart of Lodz city, close to the main tourist attractions including the famous Piotrkowska Street. From there I set off to visit *Drawn Threads* at the Triennial.

On my arrival I found the White Factory where the Triennial was held completely closed. In a highly mimed, animated exchange with an obliging Polish couple I discovered that it was 'Museum Night', which means museums across Europe close during the day so they can open from 6pm to midnight.

Having some free time I found a taxi driver and asked if he could take me to the Jewish ghetto, an important landmark in Lodz. He couldn't speak English but called his daughter on his mobile. I spent the day visiting the Jewish Cemetery, ghetto and memorial sites. It was a moving experience, learning the history first hand and being able to talk about the sites with his daughter. It made it more poignant as I also remembered the stories my mother told me of her experiences as a Wren in the war. The history of Lodz added a rich dimension to the layered narratives in *Drawn Threads*.

When I returned at six the Museum was full of families, young students and other artists. The atmosphere was like a festival, doors were thrown open and people meandered around the complex in the European twilight. I stayed in the Triennial for hours looking at the work of the other artists and watching people engage with *Drawn Threads*.



Exhibiting *Drawn Threads* in the Museum Central de Textile provided a unique opportunity to view the installation in a museum environment. Unanticipated, the cultural exchange between the work and Poland turned out to be the ephemeral play of natural light between two countries; *Drawn Threads* was transformed within the space through a soft Polish twilight. The subtle shifting movement of the lace 'breathing' in the space generated a delicate patterned environment. It conveyed the notion of textiles embodying a 'living' presence (Gordon 2011). The shadows cast from the installation warmed by the Polish afternoon light introduced a fleeting dimension to the work, a third gentle space for the viewer to inhabit and experience. In this space the museum became a European site for Wamberal Beach.



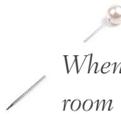
Drawn Threads was donated by request to the Museum Central de Textile in Lodz. In making the work I was able to reflect on the nature of impermanence and the notion of place making. Through the donation process, I have come to realise that the work itself is not necessarily the end goal. More valuable is what can be revealed through reflecting on practice and process.

Reflection has brought me to a clearer understanding of the slow and layered processes required to create meaningful work. Through an in-depth review of my textile process I have begun to make sense of a pattern of influences that inform my methods. Initial research considers how the lace will be read in a physical space and is integral to the conception of the work. Conveying the ephemerality of the unique Australian landscape in the form of a contemporary lace is the key motivation behind the work. However to my surprise, the work took on its own trajectory. Parallel to the making process the stories of the war my mother shared with me during that time began to make sense of the cultural and social history of Poland and contextualise where the work was to go. Autobiographic narrative provided a deeper meaning to my making process; it made sense of my intention to translate the presence of a landscape into a cloth, as an act of cultural exchange.

Within the design process, digital print technologies created a contemporary aesthetic through the use of photographic images of coral. The coral, translated through current production technologies, became a metaphor for lace making histories past and present. My experience of the commission was complete when I personally went to the city of Lodz and saw first-hand the work in the museum, amongst its peers. A special day learning about the history of Lodz with a taxi driver and his daughter completed the story and the rich learning I have gained from an engagement with this work.

The lace now serves as a manifest for memory, a genre for storytelling. Embodied histories transcend time, therein lies the infinite nature of human experience translated through narrative, the ties that bond. It exists as an homage to my mother's experience in the war, to our time at Wamberal Beach and to the rich histories embodied in the city of Lodz. It sits amongst other international textile art works and will now enjoy basking in a translucent European light.



 When the piece was finished I drove it up to my mother's and hung it in her living room window so that the light could shine through the lace. We sat back on the sofa with a cup of tea. Looking at the piece, it had become its own entity. I started explaining how the museum approaches artists to donate work to their textile collection. Should I donate the piece (all those hours of work)? My mother kept looking straight at the lace, her response made my decision very clear:

‘They were bombed and devastated by the war,
they lost everything.’

Receiving the museum's thank you letter completed the cultural exchange. They thanked me for my generosity and also made the point that my gift meant a lot to them in that it demonstrated how much value I had for the work they did, both through the Triennial and textile collection.





ABOVE AND PREVIOUS PAGE:

Wamberal, 2013

MATERIALS: Digitally printed satin silk, machine stitched
onto a soluble substrate

DIMENSIONS: 700 x 2200mm and 700 x 500mm

*This work was exhibited at the Wangaratta Contemporary Textile
Awards and the group show 'One Night Stand' at Damien Minton
Gallery in Sydney, both in 2013*



Conclusion

Laced Narratives: A Monograph 2005–2015 follows my contemporary lace making practice over a decade. It reveals ways my research practice responds to changing ideas and technologies as a means to extend our perception of textiles. The publication presents an in-depth reflection on studio practice including major exhibitions and commissions in a discursive spirit and responds to the question: *What has the studio enquiry revealed that could not have been revealed through other modes of research?* (Barrett & Bolt 2010)

Underpinning my studio enquiry is an exploration of the unique qualities textiles offer as a medium for contemporary cultural narrative. Challenging these qualities through an exploration of existing techniques has proven to be an important aspect in my experimental practice. What can be revealed through studio practice? Skills developed from

my years in industry inform my approach to subvert and reinvent techniques in new and unexpected ways.

Bringing the work together for the monograph has been an opportunity to review the trajectory my practice has taken over a ten-year period. Over time the imagery in my lacework moves away from traditional lace references, to abstract Australian flora. For example, imagery from the *LACED* exhibition references Venetian lace braids, using screenprinting as a technique to imprint motifs onto cloth. The imagery and techniques evolve, from native florals in the Government House lace commission through to more abstracted imagery, as seen in the later *Homeland* and *Grevillea Lace* pieces. *Drawn Threads* explores the digital medium through scanning coral and direct digital printing. Through this technology the abstracted coral lace takes on a photographic aesthetic and comes to signify a rich lace making history. The relationship between digital and hand-generated imagery continues to be intrinsic to my experimental studio practice as a means to explore contemporary textiles.

Throughout the monograph the unique qualities of lace are explored as a genre for storytelling. The narrative emerging from this body of work reveals notions of identity and place making. In the *Passport Suite* conceptual explorations of lace became a metaphor for absence, expressing the process of cultural assimilation. The spaces in the commission *Italian Girl* come to represent the spaces in our collective memory that we may never understand but over time come to accept.

In this monograph auto-ethnography plays an important role as a method to reveal the thinking and human stories behind complex material processes. As a devise, it has revealed the stories and events that take place alongside a work and how these become the work itself (Perry 2010). Throughout the monograph personal insights create additional layers of meaning and context to enrich the final outcomes. In the case of *Drawn Threads*, my mother's stories of the war enabled me to contextualise the history that Poland had suffered and the importance of rebuilding its cultural heritage.

My approach to research has stepped outside the conventions of a studio. The research for my first solo exhibition *LACED* took me to the Blue Mountains to learn traditional bobbin lace-making through a

self-initiated mentorship with Rosemary Shepherd. Despite my dismal failure at the technique, through the experience of making I gained an understanding of Shepherd's definition of lace as a 'pattern of spaces'. This definition has sustained my philosophical enquiry into contemporary lace for the past decade.

Walking also came to redefine my research practice. Walking the landscape enabled me to physically process, think and conceptualise ideas in new ways. The repetition of walking Wamberal Beach created the sensation of becoming a physical lace bobbin in the landscape, making tracks up and back on the beach's ephemeral shore, akin to the ways I machine stitch and draw lines to create my lace.

Re-making the lace samples for the limited edition artist's book, I discovered that copying the lace provided an opportunity to rethink the work in the light of scholarly research – it gave me an 'in' to the material knowledge embodied in the textile. Musician John Cage explores the relationship between writing and copying as a means to stimulate new work and ideas (Currey 2013). This approach will have great relevancy for my future reflective practice.

What does the next ten years hold for my practice? The intention behind my practice follows a clear aim – to expand the field of textiles. I foresee forming connections with disciplines outside of the field of textiles to drive my future explorations into contemporary lace. New expressions of lace will explore notions of absence and presence as immaterial form. While we engage with cloth physically, how can we extend our spatial experience of textiles in the future?

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ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

CECILIA HEFFER is a Senior Lecturer in the Fashion and Textiles program at the University of Technology Sydney where she combines her teaching with research and art practice. Cecilia gained her Masters in Textiles at London's Central Saint Martins and has spent numerous years in leading textile studios in London and New York. Now based in Sydney, Cecilia has shifted her practice from client-based briefs to research and exhibition work, focussing on innovative textile concepts and commissions that explore the integration of the handmade with emerging technologies. Her commissions include designing the lace curtains for the State Rooms of Government House, Sydney and commissions for the Art Gallery of NSW. She has received a number of awards including research grants for the development of her work from the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. Her work is in both private and public collections including: Centralne Muzeum Wlokiennictwa, Lodz, Poland; Art Bank; The Powerhouse Museum Sydney; the National Gallery Victoria; Tamworth Regional Gallery; Wangaratta Regional Gallery and the William Dobell Foundation. Her work is exhibited and published regularly nationally and internationally.

Cecilia is the guest curator for the 2nd Tamworth Textile Triennial, 'Group Exchange', which will tour nationally 2014–2016.

EDUCATION

2013 – present, PhD candidate RMIT
1994 – 1993, MA Textile Design, Central Saint Martins
College Of Art & Design, London
1986 – 1984, Fine Art Painting Higher Diploma, National
Art School, East Sydney

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

2005 – present, Senior Lecturer, Fashion & Textiles,
University Technology Sydney
2001 – 2004, Textile Lecturer, Sessional, College of Fine
Arts, School of Design, UNSW

EXHIBITIONS / COMMISSIONS / GRANTS

2015

— *Embedded and Embodied Interactions TEI*, Stanford
University, CA, USA
— Wangaratta Contemporary Textiles Awards, national
group show, Wangaratta Regional Gallery, Victoria

2014 – 2016

— Guest Curator: 2nd Tamworth Textile Triennial, group
exchange, Tamworth Regional Gallery; national tour of 8
regional galleries

2014

— *Embracing Innovation, vol. 4*, group show, Craft ACT,
Canberra
— *Bespoke: Design for the People*, the Museum of Australian
Democracy, Old Parliament House Canberra, Canberra
Design Festival in collaboration with Craft ACT

2013

— *14th International Tapestry Triennial*, group show, Museum
Central de Textile, Lodz, Poland (museum acquisition)
— *Wangaratta Contemporary Textiles Awards*, national group
show, Wangaratta Regional Gallery, Victoria

2012

— *Negotiating This World: Contemporary Australian Art*,
group show, Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne (museum acquisition, National Living Artist Fund)
— *7th International Fibre Art Biennale Exhibition*, group
show Beijing, China, (honorary mention)
— *Petite Miniatures*, group show, Wangaratta Regional
Gallery, Victoria (museum acquisition)

2011 – 2013

— *Sensorial Loop: 1st Tamworth Textile Triennial*, Tamworth
Regional Gallery, curator Patrick Snelling, national tour 2011–13

— *Love Lace*, Powerhouse Museum International Lace
Award, curator Lindie Ward (Highly Commended in the
Digital Lace category) 2011–13

— Wangaratta Contemporary Textiles Awards, national
group show, Wangaratta Regional Gallery, Victoria

2010

— *Lace Narratives*, solo exhibition, Damien Minton Gallery,
Sydney
— *RE-loved: Designer Stories*, group show, Sydney Design
Week, curator Jane Latief, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
— *INSIDE-OUT Rapid Prototype Sculptural*, group show,
Object Gallery, Sydney

2009

— *Fashion Craft: Fashion Technology*, group show, UTS
Gallery, Sydney
— *Wangaratta Contemporary Textile Awards*, group show

2008

— Artist in Residence, Central Saint Martins College of Art
& Design, The London Institute, London.
— *5th International Fibre Art Biennale Exhibition*, group
show, Beijing, China (recognition award)
— *Momentum 18th Textile Biennial*, Tamworth, Australia,
group show (museum acquisition, Tamworth Regional
Textile Collection)

2007

— *Lace: Contemporary Textiles and other works*, solo
exhibition and catalogue launch, DAB LAB, University of
Technology Sydney, funded by the Australia Council for the
Arts Established Artist Grant. The Powerhouse Museum
acquired 'Grevillea Lace'.
— Commission to design lace curtains for the State Rooms
of Government House, Sydney, part of the *To Furnish a
Future* program, the Historic Houses Trust
— *Integration: The Nature of Objects*, group show, Ivan
Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, curator Liz Williamson
— Participant in *reSkin, The Future of Wearable Technology*,
an Australian Network for Art and Technology initiative in
partnership with Craft Australia and ANU

2006

— *LACED*, solo exhibition, Sheffer Gallery, Sydney,
funded by the Australia Council for the Arts
— *Sydney Esquisse*, group show, Customs House, Sydney

2005

— *New Emerging Works Grant*, Australia Council for the Arts

