

CONTEMPORARY LACEMAKERS

Three Case Studies

by Lindie Ward, independent curator of textiles and design, 2021

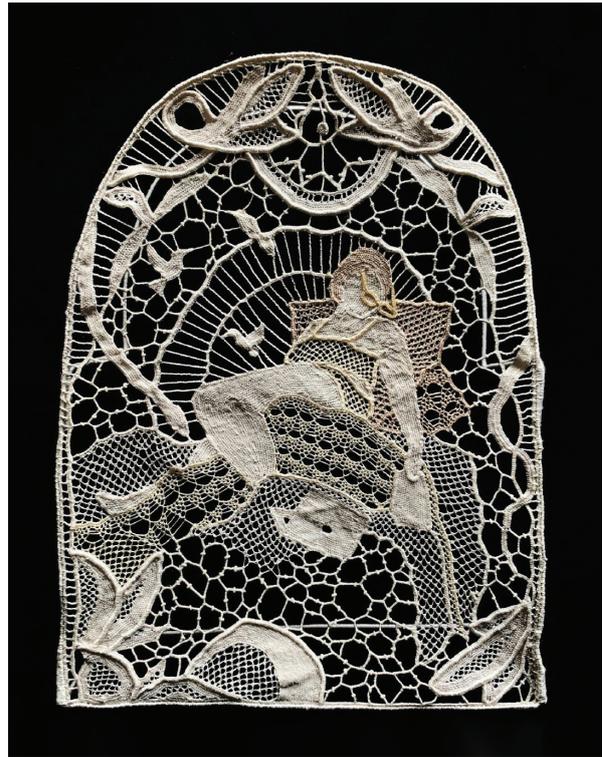
Maggie Hensel-Brown

Despite only recently mastering the art of needle lace, Maggie Hensel-Brown is a prolific lacemaker. A course in Somerset stimulated her enthusiasm for reticella and needle lace. Hensel-Brown completes her work cleverly and speedily and brings to it a respect and understanding of lacemakers of the past. She shows great aptitude and really understands what it takes to accomplish such fine work and why centuries of lace makers have chosen to make exquisite examples. Many people who use their hands skilfully, find activities such as this calming, satisfying and meditative. Hensel-Brown loves the idea of slowing down and creating a work that takes many weeks to accomplish in 'alone time.'

Designing these needle lace pictures requires much skill. Each style of stitch gives a different density and can create outline, light and shade to give a sense of depth and form. Close inspection of antique examples of lace is extremely informative — as she has found on her visits to museum lace collections in Europe.

In contrast to many, but not all lace creators, a distinctive feature of Hensel-Brown's work is her feminist subject-matter. Her work is much more than excellent technique. Coming from a fine arts background, Hensel-Brown has crashed through unstated boundaries in the world of art and lace, delivering unique works of art that challenge our predisposed ideas of both politics and fine workmanship.

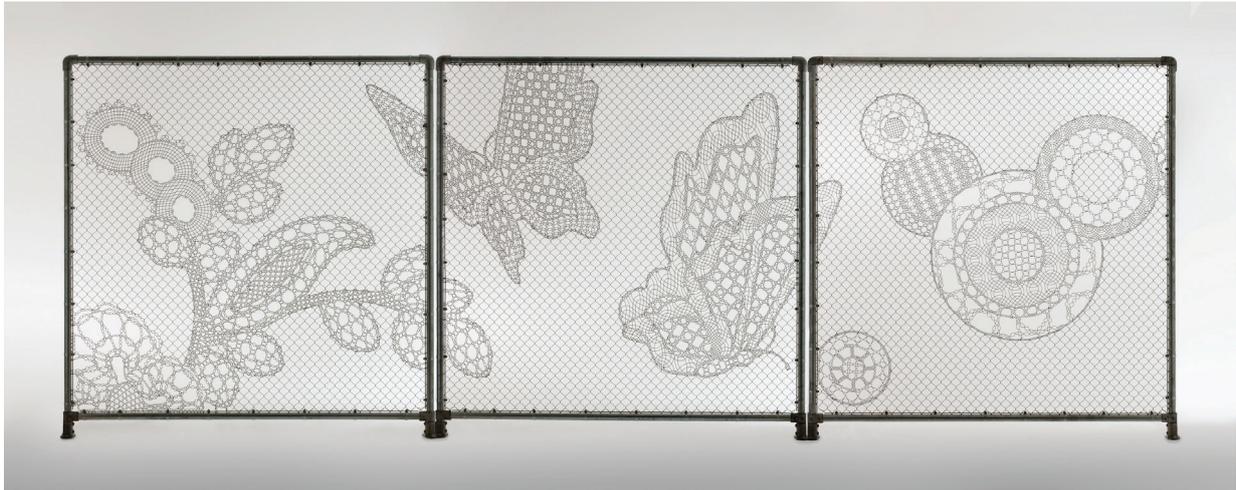
In the past, ancient narratives were often told using needle lace techniques. This work makes unique feminist statements, and depicts the independent young woman, living a perfectly normal, contented life, day dreaming, sleeping, and having informal day-to-day experiences. The young woman is not a heroine of ancient legends, a queen or a lover. The beds, scattered underwear, laptops, fridges and mobile phones that appear in



Caving to Temptation: A Two-Hour Afternoon Nap, silk, needle lace, Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, 2018. Powerhouse collection, purchased 2021

her imagery, are functional, down-to-earth and very much of the present. There is rarely drama or neurosis evident in Hensel-Brown's subjects and plenty of humour.

It is this womanly confidence and acceptance of life in her unique imagery that distinguishes her work from many other lacemakers, who tend to match their perfected lace-making techniques with historical subject matter, such as floral and geometric motifs. In the past, imagery may well have been imposed upon lacemakers by their masters, by commercial considerations or by the restrictive politics of the day. In her medium of lacemaking, Hensel-Brown feels quite free to say what she likes!



Lace Fence, bobbin lace technique, fabricated in Bangalore, India, 2010. Powerhouse collection, gift of Joep Verhoeven, 2013

Joep Verhoeven

The remarkable aspect of *Lace Fence* is that its greatly enlarged scale transports lace from domestic textile into architecture. In 2005, while studying at the Design Academy Eindhoven, Joep Verhoeven spotted a makeshift repair to a chain-link industrial fence. He was inspired to transform this idea into an expressive architectural element, using traditional Dutch bobbin lace techniques and motifs. Joep mastered the art of bobbin lacemaking and experimented with galvanised wire. The result materialised into the most distinctive and popular design produced by his Amsterdam company, De Makers Van (the makers of). He established the company in 2008 with his twin brother Joeren and Judith de Graauw. Their tailor-made *Lace Fences* have been commissioned for architectural purposes worldwide and are their most successful commercial designs. The fence has the advantage of being a barrier, yet attractive, light and airy with beautiful imagery, tailored to each client. Multi-storey buildings, ceilings and sports fields share its joy. *Lace Fence* was highly commended in the built environment category of the 2011 *Love Lace* exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum.

One of the key aspects of production is the employment of workers in Bangalore, India to create the fences. Working from a pattern, they scale up. Instead of pillows, linen thread, bobbins and pins they use wooden platforms, galvanised wire, hammers and nails.

But there is more to this production. The Indian director of their second company, Redfort, is a graduate of the Shanti Bhavan School in Baliganapalli, Tamil Nadu. This non-profit organisation provides the opportunity for very poor children to gain skills and rise out of the most meagre living conditions. As well as a livelihood, Redfort workers and their children are provided with decent wages, schools, social security, pensions and healthcare.

De Makers Van's work prioritises sustainability and craftsmanship. They have experimented with many ideas, especially in lighting. Their famous iridescent solar powered butterfly lamp *Virtue of Blue* is powered by the Sun and the *Wind Vane Lamp* functions outside in a gentle wind. Their most ambitious project was to involve a car manufacturer in the construction of a high gloss curved metal table using car body moulding techniques. Their designs now feature in countless building projects, the Venice Biennale 2019, museums and art galleries around the world. The Verhoeven twins describe their work as 'materialising poetry of life with 21st century craftsmanship.'

Lenka Suchanek

Suchanek's bobbin lace necklace characterises the black silk Chantilly lace popular in the 17th century, during the excesses of French royalty. From 1804, Napoleon I sponsored a revival of the lace. His imperial emblem, the golden bee, is referenced in the centre of the large flower in this piece. The bee stands for diligence, industriousness and orderliness — a perfect description of the work of this artist.

The floral and leaf motifs are worked in half stitch, then outlined with a single black wire cordonnet, which highlights the motifs and holds their shape firmly. The flower petals are laid over each other to create darkness and depth. The six floral centres are worked in honeycomb stitch. A necklace needs rigidity to maintain its shape, something that silk thread alone cannot achieve. The rigid wire outline enhances Suchanek's design to perfection and gives it form.

Suchanek is a dedicated and skilled lacemaker who chose wire as her medium for bobbin lace many years ago. 'Wire is strong and wilful and does not obey as readily as fibre. Despite its strength, wire can break easily when pulled or bent, so even a simple function of a hitch, for securing and releasing the thread, causes a problem.' The feminine beauty and sensuality of Chantilly designs appeal to her. There is an added challenge in recreating the complicated technique in enamelled copper wire. This is considerably more difficult to manoeuvre with bobbins than the traditional fine silk thread. It became clear Suchanek needed to develop a special bobbin for her work. After experimenting with Spanish bobbins, she developed her own perfect wooden bobbin set — a Fine bobbin in 2015 and a Medium bobbin, developed during the 2020–21 pandemic lockdown.

Through persistence Suchanek has achieved a crisp lightness in her wire lace work that few can match. In her words: 'Transcending time in pursuit of beauty.'



Chantilly Necklace, bobbin lace, silk, enamelled copper wire, gold-plated wire, Swarovski crystals, Vancouver, Canada, 2010. Powerhouse collection, purchased 2012