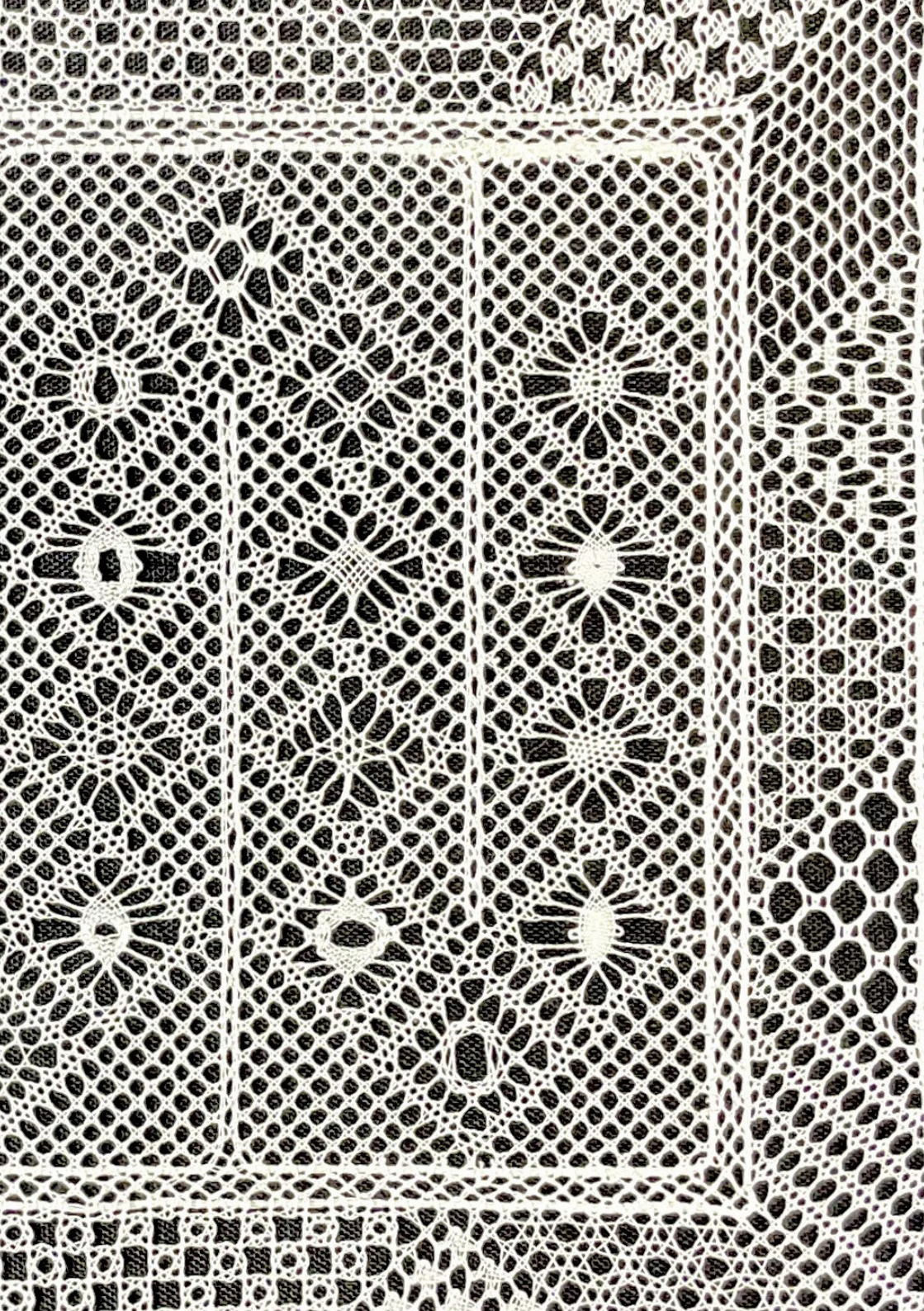

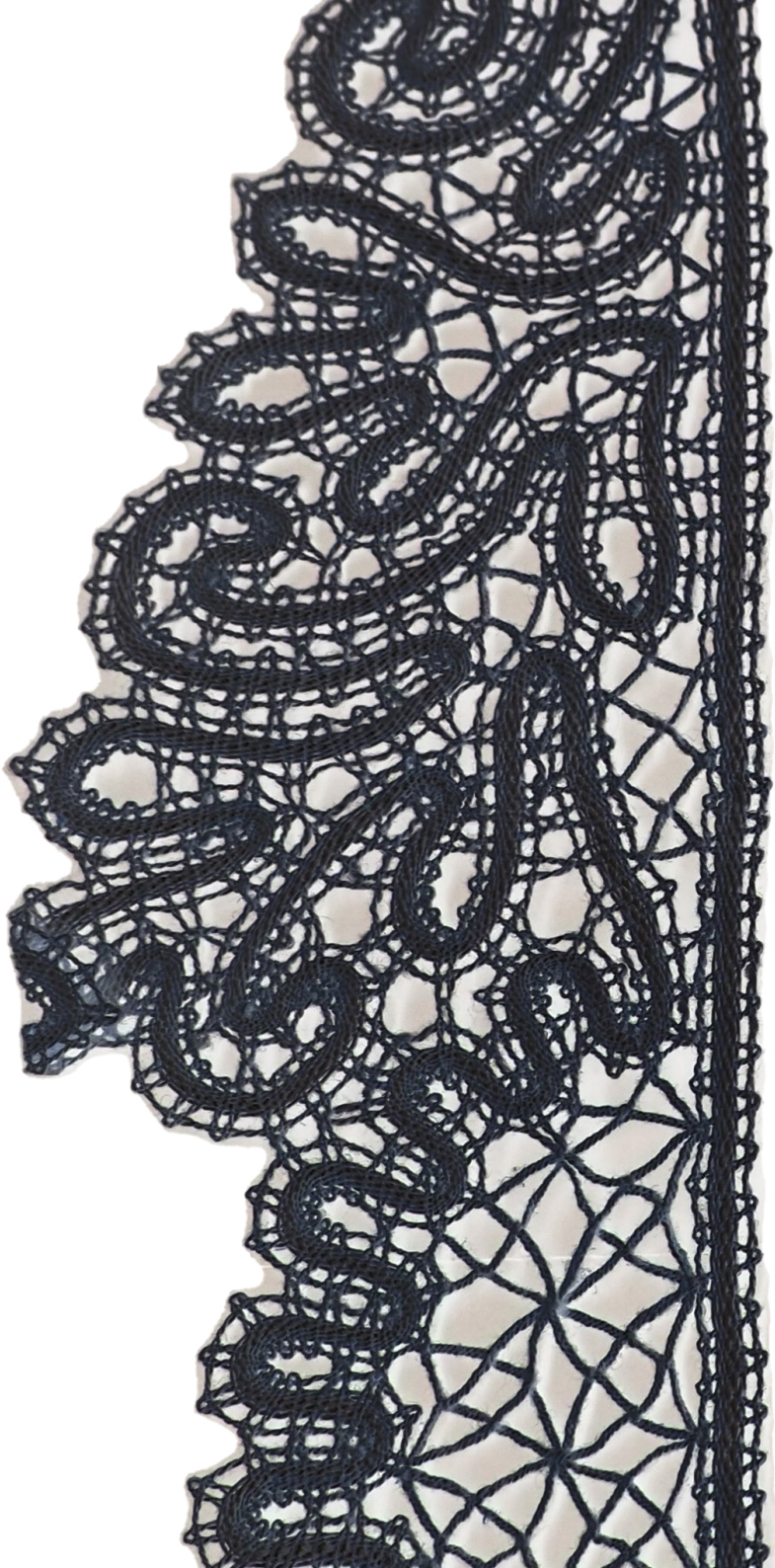

# MAGGIE & THE OWLS: LIGHT IN SPACE



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1

## Something from nothing

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's storied collection of textiles started in 1879 with the acquisition of a small, anonymous length of lace. One of the 300 samples collected by one Susan MacCallum during travels with her English painter-husband in the 1850s and 1860s, the work is Italian in origin and an example of Punto in Aria – meaning 'stitches in air' – a breakthrough lacemaking technique developed during the sixteenth century. The identity of the almost certainly female maker of the work was never, and probably will never, be known. But collectors like Mrs. MacCallum prided themselves on being attuned to alternative measures of value – namely, the skill, time, and style embedded in such an inordinately painstaking art, one which had been largely overlooked by Art History other than as a small feature of the imagery created by old, invariably male, masters. Building their collections as quiet monuments to hundreds of years' worth of the handiwork of numerous, usually anonymous women, lace connoisseurs were alert to the fact that even a modest, locally specific sprig of lace could speak volumes about bigger, global pictures. Power, politics, religion, industry; class, gender, history, place; nationhood and national identity. Motivated by the reality of traditional lacemaking being crushed under the weight of machine-made textiles, early lace collectors sought to preserve evidence of the artform's evolution and lineage. These collections subsequently enabled museums like the Met to offer displays of lace to 'not only give pleasure to the casual visitor,' but – critically – to 'be of service to those who desire to study the fabrics from a technical and historical standpoint,' thereby helping to keep the threatened art alive. The silences and secrets of historical lace were part of its appeal. Here was a tangible trace of an otherwise invisible long-dead maker, communicating with the future via the constant, meditative repetition of stitches that, for centuries now, have been transforming filaments and nothingness into objects of timeless, and often ineffable, delicacy and beauty.

That what is essentially 'a lot of holes surrounded with thread' is also something that transcends time and geography is one of the things about lace that has been inspiring a particular group of western Sydney women for the past 40 years. The Outer West LacemakerS, known as the OWLS, specialise mainly in the art of bobbin lace – that is, lace formed from the plaiting and twisting, by hand, of multiple threads wound onto elongated bobbins or weights, which are attached to a pillow support. Bobbin lace, one of the two primary categories of handmade lace in the European tradition, originated in the early sixteenth century, but making it still employs the same two basic movements. 'In bobbin lace we have what are called a cross and a twist – and everything is built from that,' as OWLS member Stephaney Packham puts it, 'but the way those stitches are combined gives different results'. Subject to multiple variations and inflections, determined originally by the lacemaker's location, bobbin lace encompasses the elegant, presciently modernist geometric designs of torchon lace to the elaborate pictorial motifs historically associated with the lace traditions of countries including Belgium, Spain, France and the United Kingdom.

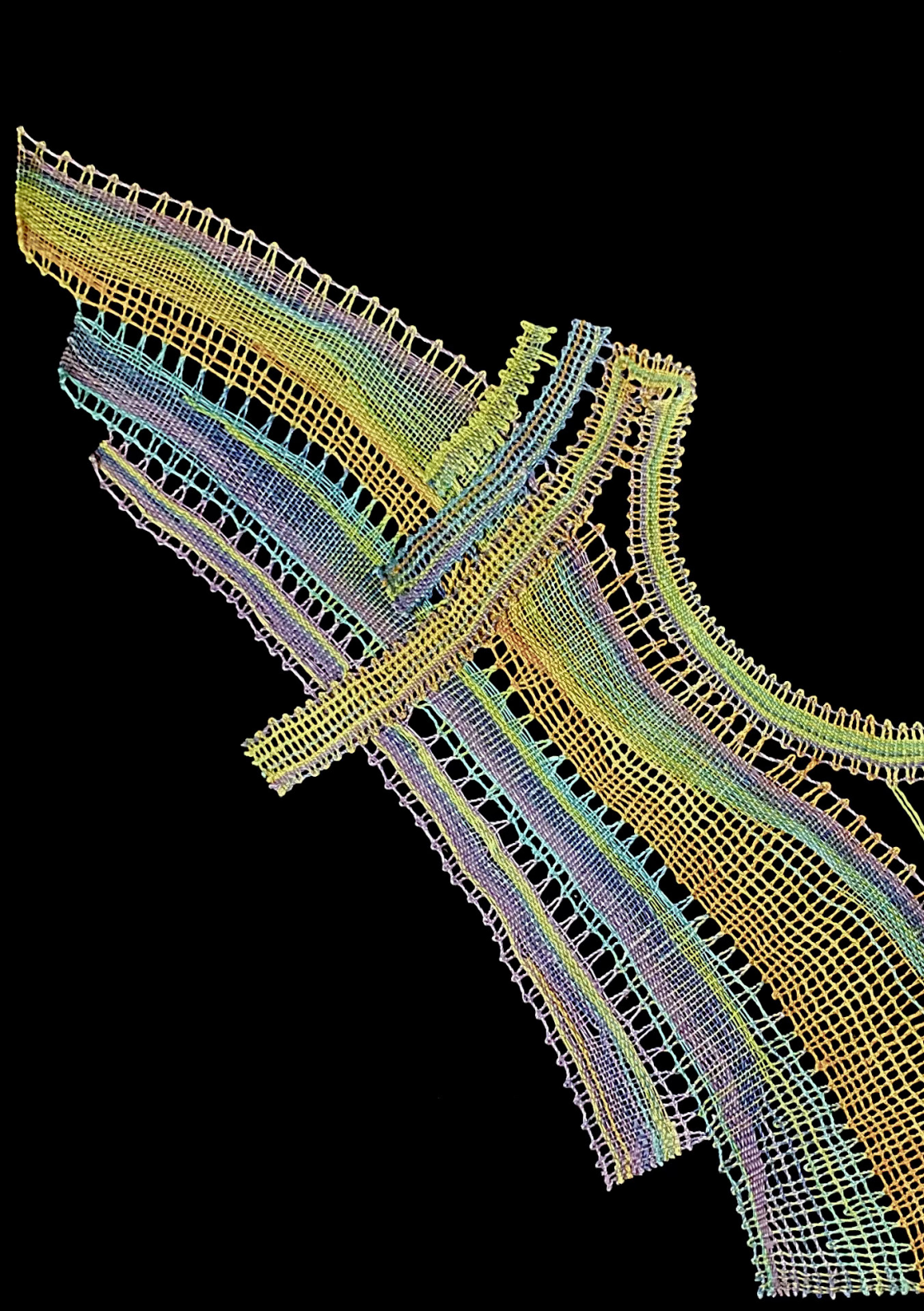
'Most lacemakers are still working from traditional patterns, but like everything else it moves on,' Packham explained in 1996, when the OWLS exhibited at Penrith Regional Gallery, 'and there are many lacemakers doing more contemporary work, that the traditional folk who made lace two or three hundred years ago wouldn't recognise'. In the hands of OWLS artists including Helen Mewett and centenarian Patricia MacDonald, lace collars – immortalised in portraits by Dutch masters like Rembrandt, Rubens and Van Dyck – are created from colourful fibres and decorated with Australian motifs. Flowers, insects and owls are executed in vivid detail; portraits, landscapes and sculptures are rendered in lace of extraordinary texture, tone and depth. One of the OWLS members, Elyn Brey, works in needle lace to confront the physical and emotional effects of her cancer diagnosis and treatment, recreating a CT scan of one of her vertebrae in thread and glittering beads, for example, and making lace that references her symptoms and compromised immunity. The OWLS nevertheless remain equally aware

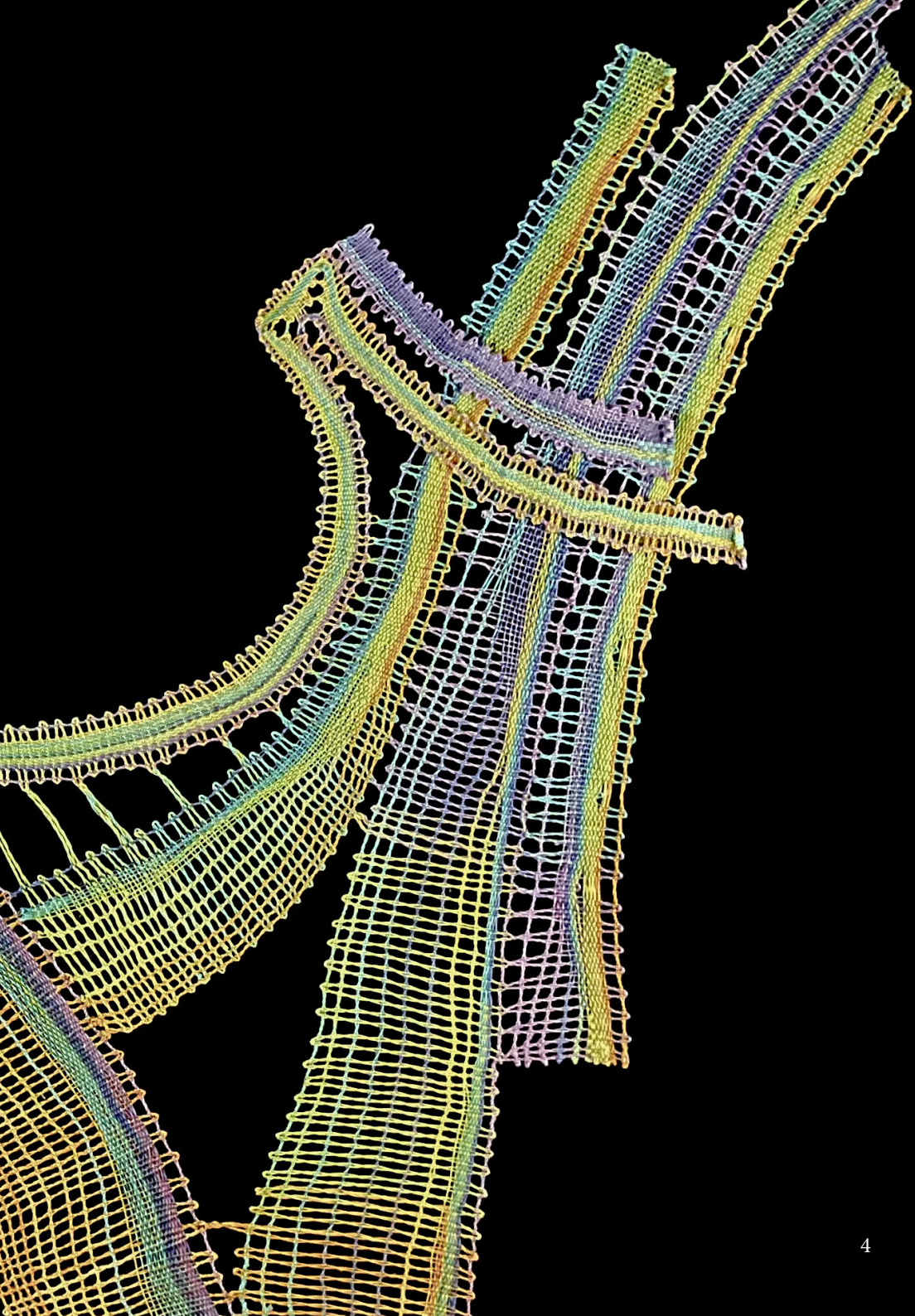
of themselves as custodians and exponents of a centuries-old tradition and make it one of their primary goals to ensure that the exquisite, infinite potential of those same two basic movements continues to be celebrated and explored.

In this, the OWLS embody the spirit characterising artist Margo Lewers' wish that her home at Emu Plains would continue as a site for creativity, learning, experimentation and exchange after her death. When Margo (1908–1978) and her husband Gerald acquired it in 1942, 86 River Road Emu Plains was a former pig farm, comprised of ten acres, two trees, a few outbuildings and a hip-roofed brick bungalow which Margo thought 'the ugliest house I had ever seen'. Consequently, after moving permanently to Emu Plains a decade later, she and Gerald set about transforming the property according to their belief in the indivisibility of life and art, and their conviction that just because things had to be practical and functional didn't mean that they couldn't also be beautiful. For Margo, the move to Emu Plains was especially critical, providing her with the time and the space – literal and metaphorical – to work, experiment, and extend her practice, following a period of more than a decade during which she had been a full-time mother to her daughters, Darani and Tanya. 'Previously, I had painted perhaps two or three paintings a year, when I could fit them in,' she explained in 1962; 'but it was [at Emu Plains] that I really started to paint rather more consistently'. Gradually, the formerly plain cottage and its stark surroundings were radically altered. Her daughters recall that Margo 'painted each slat of the Venetian blinds in a different colour. She dyed the carpet, she dyed the bed covers, she dyed the pillows ... And then she grew the garden, and the garden came in through the windows'. Margo shaped the garden according to her idea of 'controlled wildness', creating a series of linked, large, open spaces and smaller, more intimate, enclosed areas, and thereby expanding beyond the frame the preoccupations she explored in her painting: devising relationships between form and colour to create light and depth – and light in space.

'A creative dynamo [who] couldn't stop herself experimenting with new forms,' Margo's practice encompassed sculpture, mosaics, public art, tapestry, ceramics and textiles as well as painting. In their previous collaborations with Penrith Regional Gallery – notably the 2023 exhibition project *Parlour Parleur* – the OWLS have continued Margo's interest in cross cultural, cross disciplinary and intergenerational dialogue, honouring and maintaining lacemaking's histories and traditions while acknowledging its capacity to challenge, influence and extend concepts of lace. Embracing the digital, climate-change and COVID generations' awareness of lacemaking as a slow, sustaining and sustainable artform as well as a powerful connector, the OWLS and other lace artists emeritus seek opportunities to work and share skills with younger and emerging lace practitioners, and in their own work evidence the fluidity, vibrancy and innovation inherent in a medium that is simultaneously traditional and contemporary.


3





Maggie Hensel-Brown is among the contemporary textile artists helping spearhead the reclamation of lace instigated by artists like the OWLS in the 1980s. Based on Awabakal country in Newcastle, New South Wales, Hensel-Brown is known internationally for her work in needle lace (the second of the two main categories of lace), a practice entailing only a single needle and thread and a gesture akin to drawing or embroidery. Hensel-Brown's introduction to needle-lace making came in 2015 when, having attained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Newcastle, she attended the Australian Lace Guild's annual conference and took a class in the Reticella technique. A precursor to Punto in Aria, Reticella – which translates as 'little net' – involves the removal of threads from an existing piece of fabric to create a void or window for the insertion of new, decorative stitches. From there, facilitated by further studies in England, Italy, the USA and the Netherlands, she began practicing 'the kind of needle lace that is made out of nothing ... and all you have is a needle and thread'. Hensel-Brown has since dedicated her practice entirely to needle lace, finding especial inspiration in revered, historical pictorial needle lace panels in which daintiness and grittiness weirdly coexist. The Victoria & Albert Museum's vast textile collection, for example, includes a needle lace rendition of the biblical story wherein King Solomon decides a baby boy should be cut in half as a way of determining his disputed parentage. And Sydney's Powerhouse Museum holds a panel of needle lace that Hensel-Brown cites as the object that 'changed the way I work'. Depicting another Old Testament tale – that of the widow Judith saving her home city by decapitating Holofernes, the General of an invading army – the panel dates from the mid-seventeenth century yet exudes a decidedly punk sensibility. At left, Holofernes' lifeless, headless body exsanguinates in six vertical filaments of once-red silk; at the centre of the composition, Judith, sword in hand, casually drops the severed head, with its subtly stitched deathly expression, into a carry bag held open by her servant-accomplice.

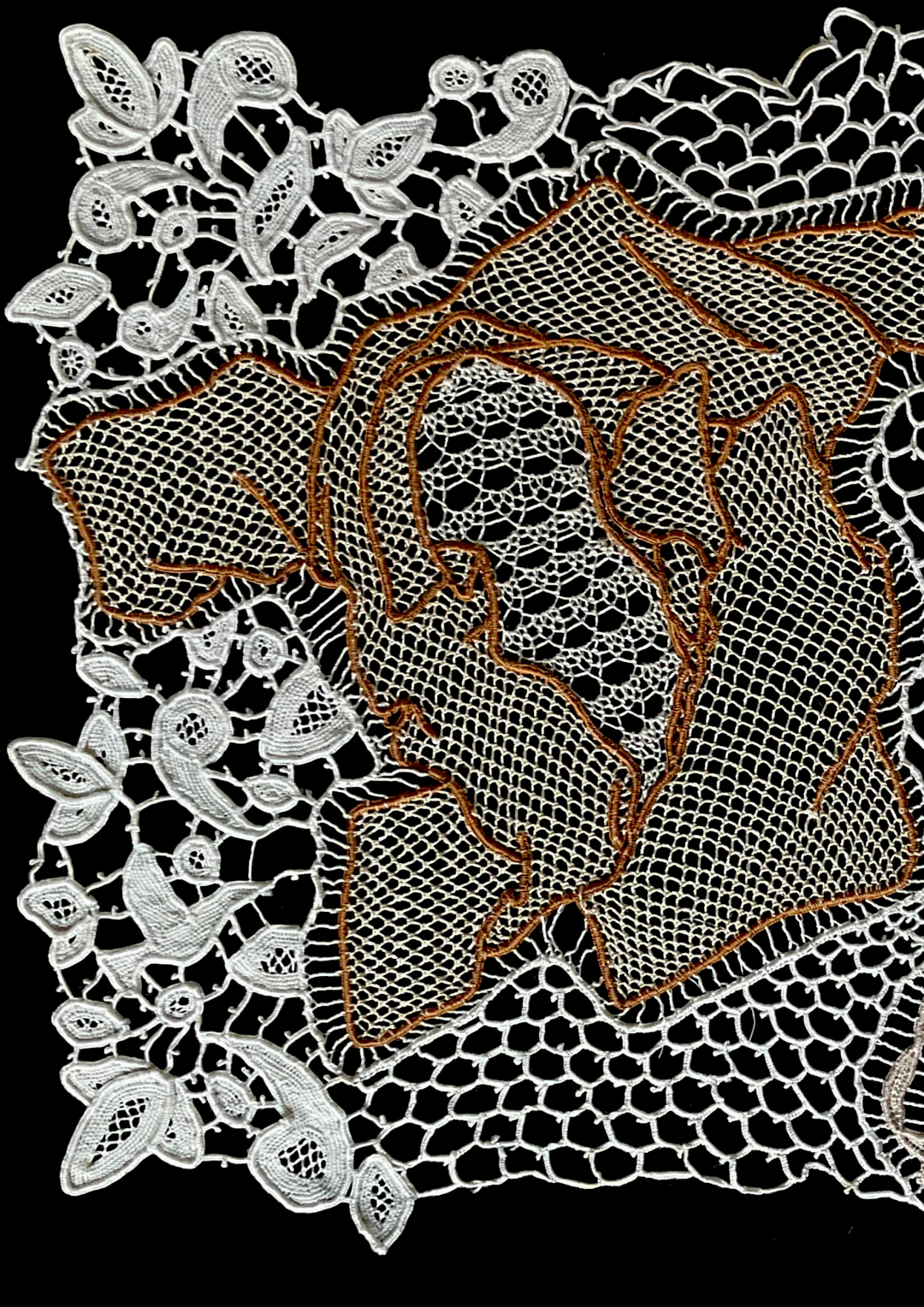
6

'Seeing that piece made me ricochet off into my own kind of pictorial needle lace,' Hensel-Brown says. 'In the history of pictorial needle lace, they were often gifts from one royal family to another; they were big, biblical stories that were being told, or the coronation of different kings,' she explained to the ABC in 2023. 'But my reality is just being a human, and I figured all this care and attention that has been given to all of those big, grand biblical stories and coronations and things like that – I can have that too'. Consequently, Hensel-Brown makes 'precious commemorations of the little things.' Knickers, a bra and Blundstones strewn on the floor; teacups, hot water bottles, unfinished crosswords; portraits of the artist in the bath, in bed, in the middle of a lockdown catch-up on Zoom – all captured in a type of textile that was once so expensive and so integral to demarcations of class and power that there were laws preventing plebs from wearing it; all rendered in endless, maddeningly intricate stitches; preserved and elevated through a famously slow and laborious process. 'In the hour that we watched the progress of one [lace] worker,' reported an American ladies' journal in 1860, 'not more than three-quarters of an inch in length was completed,' and Hensel-Brown reckons it takes her

about the same to make a square centimetre of lace. 'I definitely see myself as being as part of a continuum of lace makers,' Hensel-Brown says, recognising too that her highly distinctive take on the tradition – witty, grungy, relatable subject matter captured in such fine, tiny detail – might facilitate appreciation and uptake of an artform typically encountered as nothing more than the flowery detail on a frock, the edging of a fancy hanky, or the doily beneath a plate of scones.

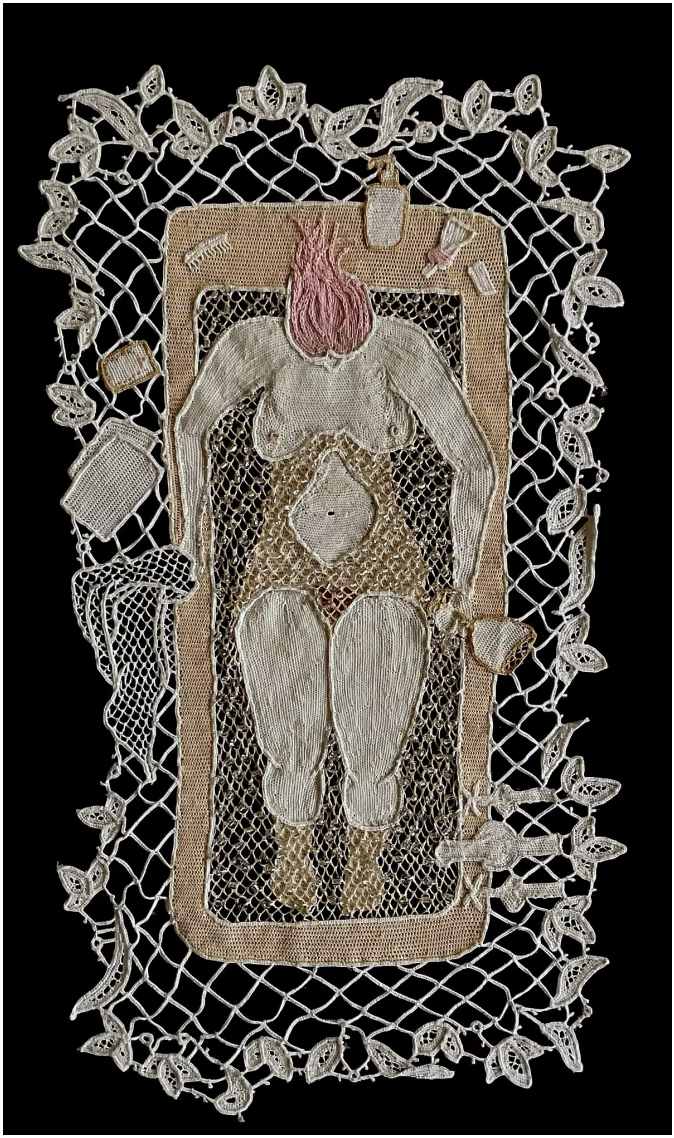
'Make lace, not war' was a phrase emblazoned on merchandise accompanying the Powerhouse Museum's 2011–2013 exhibition *Love Lace*, in which 130 artists from 20 different countries awakened many to the skill and seemingly limitless inventiveness of what some may assume to be a lost or passé historical practice. Like Margo Lewers, they and present-day lace practitioners – the OWLS and Maggie Hensel-Brown foremost among them – create works that give visual form to inner worlds and demonstrate the continuity and contemporary resonance of lacemaking. In their work, what has often formerly been dismissed or ignored as merely decorative, or something engaged in primarily by 'lady amateurs' in domestic contexts, can be seen with renewed clarity – the stories lacemaking tells, the histories that have shaped it, and the possibilities it holds for the future.

Joanna Gilmour and Tia Madden
Curators



# MAGGIE HENSEL-BROWN

**Maggie Hensel-Brown (b. 1990)** is an Australian textile artist who works largely with needle lace, taking inspiration from historical pictorial lace panels from the 16th century paired with pictorial storytelling in the contemporary age, such as through social media. Hensel-Brown graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Newcastle, NSW in 2014, before learning the Reticella needle lace technique at a conference of the Australian Lace Guild in 2015. Her practice has been solely dedicated to lacemaking since then, which she pursues through continued study, practice, and teaching of the artform.



8

# THE OWLS

**The OWLS (Outer West LacemakerS)** are a local lacemaking collective who meet and work fortnightly in Penrith and Springwood. In 2025, they celebrate their 40th anniversary with the exhibition *Light in Space*. The OWLS members exhibited here are: Erica Brooks, Elyn Brey, Heather Plant, Helen Mewett, Helen Talarico, Jill Mogridge, Judith Hawkes, June Ball, Leanne Smith, Marlene Hay, Marianne Erickson, Mary Stevens, Pat MacDonald, Stephaney Packham, Yvonne Murray.

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**Erica Brooks** has been making bobbin lace and has been a member of the National Lace Guild for 22 years, all of them at the Outer West LacemakerS (OWLS). During this time, she has tried Russian Tape Lace, some needle lace, knitted lace and crochet, and she attempted Tatting, unsuccessfully. Primarily enjoying Torchon bobbin lace, Erica has made and gifted pictures, wedding garters, bookmarks and scarfs.

**Elyn Brey (Nell)** is a textile artist specialising in contemporary needle lace, particularly portraiture. Her work has been displayed in exhibitions in Australia and overseas. Elyn uses traditional needle lace techniques in traditional ways, recently exploring autobiographical themes relating to abuse, mental health and her cancer journey. She has been a member of the OWLS for seven years.

**Heather Plant** has been a member of the OWLS for 40 years. She started with bobbin lace and then progressed to needle lace techniques such as Reticella, Amelia-Ars, Limerick, Teneriffe, Filet and Romanian Point Lace, which is mostly what she makes now.

**Helen Mewett** is an original member of the OWLS, attending her first meeting at the old Penrith Library in Henry Street more than 40 years ago. Over this time, she has completed works in bobbin lace, Bedfordshire lace, tape lace, Milanese and Russian lace. She has created works in crochet, filet crochet and hairpin crochet, as well as Romanian Point Lace, Irish lace, Carrickmacross and Limerick lace.

**Helen Talarico** has been making lace and has been a member of the OWLS for 20 years, having discovered lacemaking after attending a Lace Guild meeting by chance. Helen loves all types of lace including bobbin lace and all the beautiful styles including Torchon, Point Ground, Milanese, Honiton and many more. She also creates many types of needle lace and enjoys Tatting, Carrickmacross and Limerick.

**Jill Mogridge** has been a member of OWLS since 2000. She has been making lace for over 40 years having discovered lace at Cobbity Markets in 1986 and then attending classes with Rosemary Shepard. Jill explored Torchon, Bedfordshire, Cluny and Russian Tape bobbin laces before transitioning to needle made laces, enjoying contemporary styles in traditional stitches with plenty of colour. She is also exploring Italian Reticella pieces adapted from 16th and 17th century patterns and Aemilia Ars, a more "modern" Italian interpretation from the early 20th century.

**Judith Hawkes** has been making bobbin lace for over 40 years and during this time has explored a variety of styles including Torchon, Russian Braid, Bedfordshire & Cluny, Honiton, Brugges Flower lace and 's Gravenmoerse. In recent years she has fallen in love with the traditional Flemish laces, including Flanders, Paris and Binche and this is mostly what she now makes.

**June Ball** learned to make lace at Penrith TAFE in 1987, then in 1990, taught bobbin lace at Katoomba TAFE. In 1989 she joined the Australian Lace Guild, and the Outer West LacemakerS (formerly Penrith Lace Group).

**Marlene Hay** has been a member of the OWLS for 20 years. A maker of bobbin lace, Marlene enjoys the many different styles. Torchon, Milanese, Flanders and wire lace are her favourites, but she is willing to try any and all types of lace.

**Marianne Erikson** has always loved handcrafts. After recently moving to the Blue Mountains, she discovered bobbin lace when she met an OWLS member at a book club. Joining OWLS about 18 months ago, Marianne is currently learning how to make Torchon Bobbin Lace and is greatly enjoying it.

**Mary Stevens** undertook a course in Commercial Needlecraft at Katoomba TAFE in the 1980s. The course included a subject called Bobbin Lace with teacher June Ball. Bobbin lace was very different from any other handcraft Mary had ever done. She has been a member of OWLS ever since, enjoying the contemplative rhythms of Bobbin Lace, Needle Lace and Crochet. The texture of Hairpin Crochet in its many variations is another favourite activity.

**Pat MacDonald (1923 - 2025)** was a founding member of the Australian Lace Guild in the 1970s and a member of the Manly Warringah Lace Group from its beginning. She became a member of the OWLS in 2008, when she moved to the Blue Mountains. Pat made all things lace – bobbin lace, tatting, knitting, crochet – but her passion was needle lace.

**Stephaney Packham** started her lace life in the 1980s when she was taught to tat by her husband's aunt. After moving to Sydney in 1989 she started bobbin lace lessons with Annette Pollard, joining the Lace Guild and the OWLS in 1991. Over time, Stephaney has tried various bobbin laces and been involved in many demonstrations and lace displays. She has also conducted tatted lace workshops for the Lace Guild and privately. For a number of years, she taught bobbin and tatted lace to students aged from 13 to 80-odd and everything in between. Stephaney has judged tatted lace at the Sydney Royal Agricultural Show and is still judging at the Hawkesbury Agricultural Show.

**Yvonne Murray** has been a member of the OWLS since she started making bobbin lace 20 years ago. Yvonne really loves the challenge of having lots of bobbins to organise, finding the transformation of multiple threads into something beautiful and delicate a bonus to the fun of actually moving the bobbins.

# IMAGE LIST

[cover]
Helen Talarico, *Torchon sampler*, 2017. Bobbin lace, cotton, 20 x 17.5cm. Courtesy of the artist.

1. Maggie Hensel-Brown, *For You*, 2023. Needle lace, silk thread, glass beads, hand-bound paper book, 15 x 25cm. Courtesy of the artist and King Street Gallery on William.

2. Elyn Brey, *Am I Here*, 2019. Needle lace, cotton, 55 x 65cm (image). Courtesy of the artist.

3. Elyn Brey, *The Year the World Changed*, 2022. Needle lace, needle weaving, cotton thread, fabric paint, cotton fabric. Courtesy of the artist.

4. Helen Mewett, *Czech lace collar*, 2018. Bobbin lace, braid, linen, 59 x 67.5cm (overall). Courtesy of the artist.

5. Maggie Hensel-Brown, *Radiance*, 2023 (detail). Needle lace, cotton, silk. Courtesy of the artist.

6. Unknown maker, England, *Judith and Holofernes lace panel*, c.1650. Needle lace, linen, silk, human hair, 8.7 x 15.5cm. Powerhouse Collection. Gift of Christian R Thornett, 1966. Photographer Anthony Potter.

7. Maggie Hensel-Brown, *Covid Floor*, 2020. Needle lace, silk thread, 20 x 28cm (image). Courtesy of the artist.

8. Maggie Hensel-Brown, *Pink Rinse*, 2021. Needle lace, silk thread, glass beads, 24 x 15cm (image). Courtesy of a private collection.

9. Patricia MacDonald, *Lace collar, Australian design*, undated (detail). Needle lace, linen, 21.5 x 41cm (overall).


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