

# MAGGIE & THE OWLS:

## *LIGHT IN SPACE*

Lewers House Gallery  
15 MARCH - 11 MAY 2025

*Light in Space* is an exhibition that honours the traditions and evolving techniques of lacemaking: a practice historically overlooked as a domestic, decorative and amateur craft. Taking shape as a conversation between local lacemaking collective the Outer West Lacemakers – known as the OWLS – and contemporary lace artist Maggie Hensel-Brown, *Light in Space* bridges the traditional and the contemporary to reaffirm lacemaking's cultural significance, enduring legacy, and dynamic potential as an artistic medium.

Presented in Lewers House Gallery, the former home of artists Margo and Gerald Lewers, *Light in Space* speaks to the spirit of this site as a place where creativity seamlessly intertwined with everyday life. Lewers House is reminiscent of a certain duality: where tradition meets modernity, passion and unbridled experimentation. *Light in Space* recalls this very same dualism, celebrating the traditions and origins of lacemaking while exploring the many ways in which its practitioners continue to extend and reimagine our ideas about lace.

The title of this exhibition, *Light in Space*, is drawn from a quote by Margo Lewers, the full quote reading: 'light through colour; light through the garden; light in space.' Though emulative of Margo's own practice, this phrase holds special pertinence to the practice of lacemaking. In lace, images are delineated in thread, and it is the light passing through the gaps that brings the patterns to the surface. Shining a light on – or through – lace punctuates the image, and it's this that reveals the intricately woven connections that make lace what it is. *Light in Space* invites us to see lacemaking with renewed clarity— bringing an overlooked practice into new light to examine the stories it tells, the histories that have shaped it, and the possibilities it holds for the future.



## INTERWEAVER

In 2015, Maggie Hensel-Brown attended the annual general conference of the Australian Lace Guild, where she first learned the needle lace technique. Since then, she has focused entirely on needle lace, 'the kind of lace that is made out of nothing: all you have is a needle and thread.' Travelling extensively to study, teach and learn, Hensel-Brown has become part of an intricate and passionate network of lacemakers who share in the ambition to keep lacemaking active and relevant in our contemporary world.

The work shown here, *Radiance*, was made as part of a community project led by Hensel-Brown, who in 2023 and 2024 hosted a series of sewing circles, in person and online, to introduce the fundamentals of needle lace to new makers. Over 400 participants made a small needle lace motif, later contributing their piece to a large-scale tapestry designed and assembled by Hensel-Brown. The names of the many contributors to the work form the basis for the drawings Hensel-Brown has made on the walls in this room—formerly Margo Lewers' bedroom.

## SAMPLER

Handmade lace—defined as openwork fabric whose pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas—first appeared in the sixteenth century, with bobbin lace and needle lace emerging from braiding, knotting and embroidery techniques of earlier times. Bobbin lace, derived from weaving, involves the plaiting and twisting of multiple threads wound onto elongated bobbins or weights. Needle lace is akin to drawing with needle and thread, with the many individual stitches forming the lace itself. Both methods were—and are—incredibly painstaking. A lacemaker might spend hours on a single square centimetre, a characteristic that originally made lace prohibitively expensive and therefore a strictly controlled signifier of status and wealth.

Lacemakers were, and often still are, mostly women. Created in homes, convents and other closed settings, lace was seen as having a purely decorative function—another factor which mitigated against the names of its makers being recorded or known. Though poorly paid, lacemaking was a means of support for many women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as such offered a degree of autonomy despite the absence of the artist's identity from the work. But with the rise of machine-made textiles in the nineteenth century, exponents of this delicate, dextrous craft declined in numbers. With handmade lace becoming a rarity, museums sought to establish collections demonstrating its history and complexity, providing a resource for subsequent generations of lacemakers. This room—which was once Margo Lewers' studio—presents an overview of some of the various types and techniques of making lace by hand, celebrating these rich traditions while also showcasing the capacity of the artform for continued invention and evolution. The practice endures today through the dedication of contemporary practitioners who sustain lacemaking through their research, passion, and commitment to connecting the practice with others around the world.

## PRACTITIONER

The OWLS are a Western Sydney-based lacemaking collective whose association with Penrith Regional Gallery extends back to the Gallery's founding in 1981. The OWLS meet fortnightly in Penrith and Springwood to make, discuss and share knowledge, continuing the long-established traditions of lace guilds in elevating and maintaining the many different lacemaking techniques.

This room reflects over four decades of creativity by the OWLS as practitioners of lacemaking, and the remarkable artistry of an often overlooked yet complex and enduring artform. Here we can appreciate not only the functionality of lace as a fashion embellishment or a decorative and purposeful craft, but also the artform's long, international history along with its creative skill, integrity and value. A lace collar, or a scarf, are simultaneously an exquisite interplay of light, lines and tactility, as much as a tangible memory of its wearer. These delicate objects represent centuries of tradition, skill, and artistry.

The OWLS embody and continue a remarkable legacy of women's creativity, safeguarding the vast and varied techniques of lacemaking to shine a light on—or through—the forgotten histories of this practice. What remains is an unwavering celebration of the hidden work of women, and the longevity of lacemaking as not just a craft, but an art in its own right. In 40 years of learning and developing skills to share across communities and generations, the OWLS highlight and amplify the beauty and delicacy of these works of skill, labour and love, prompting us to reflect on and rethink the meaning and significance of lace.

## STORYTELLER

Lacemaking was used to create pictorial panels as early as the sixteenth century, but as a practice shrouded in anonymity, the hands behind these lace panels are rarely given recognition. These panels depicted grand biblical tales and moments of royal grandeur; scenes that held reverence and recalled the mythological, ethereal and sublime. The identities of the highly skilled, most-likely female makers of these panels were consequently incidental to the significance of the stories depicted. 'There must be so many Michelangelos of lace, but we won't ever know who they were,' artist Maggie Hensel-Brown says. Hensel-Brown and Elyn Brey, however, are actively subverting this tradition of anonymity.

This selection of works reflects scenes of quiet solitude, contemplation, boredom, bliss and frustration, moments we wouldn't generally pair with ideas of the grandiose, picturesque or monumental. Turning the historical expectations of the lace medium on its head, Hensel-Brown and Brey instead offer weight and gravity to the fleeting and the mundane, to the 'unsightly', unspoken and unkempt.

The telling of personal narratives allows Hensel-Brown and Brey to reveal themselves as the artists behind the lace panels, inviting us to reconsider and elevate the surprisingly small moments that hold significance in our modern lives and personal worlds. Here are moments of disarray, mess, guilty pleasure and fragility, adorned in a practice known for its precision, delicacy and painstaking labour. Moments too-often lost to the label of 'mundanity' are recalled, elevated and immortalised, as Hensel-Brown and Brey show us exactly how it is behind the needles and thread: themselves.

