



Lace:

CONTEMPORARY TEXTILES
EXHIBITION + NEW WORKS
CECILIA HEFFER 2005-2007



Lace: DAB DOCS 5

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06: faint imprints

LYCIA TROUTON | DCA



Cecilia Heffer's *Laced* translates 15th and 16th century lace design into the digital age. In her textiles, Heffer uses photography, together with an exploration of direct digital print (DDP) technology, in a collaborative research process that she has developed over several years through links with industry in Sydney.

I wish to focus on Heffer's inventive combination of contemporary lace-making techniques as a way to alter traditional techniques, create original work and thereby translate society's accepted notions of time and labour. Her art also alludes to textiles as a commodity in gift-giving exchanges and in commemorating important life passages. More specifically, I discuss the significance of the gallery context in which *Laced* was placed. Also examined is the basic printed unit with which Heffer works, which I term a 'medallion-coin', a sign of 'visual language that contains encoded fragments of information.' Finally, I make a comparison between the contemporary, chemical lace-making process and 19th century wet-plate photographic practice which Heffer researched in relation to this work.

third space/third lace:

heffer's commemorative medallion

*This new map of human movement and experience – relocation, travel, migration and diaspora – spills over into the world of visual and material culture [including textile, cloth, thread, and fabric]*⁷

The basic building block in Heffer's lace lengths is a circular cut-out which I term a medallion-coin. A medallion is a marker, a sign, a commemorative object or family crest. A coin is a sign for commodity exchange and is usually inscribed with national symbols. It is interesting that Heffer used coins as a measuring device in her work process. In order to maintain a uniformity of scale coins were placed onto silk lengths and traced to produce hundreds of circular discs. Used as a thematic, linking device, the coin-medallion serves as a backdrop design unit for the overall drapery panel. When the artworks are viewed close-up there are faint imprints of a black and white portrait and an image of a figure alone in a cornfield. The images on the coins are photographs taken by Heffer's great grandfather, Obder Heffer, a professional photographer, working in the 1860s in Chile.

Heffer is a contemporary, conceptual artist whose first medium and love was painting. Tracing the provenance of her choice of image and its use in this design context is, therefore, highly relevant. Heffer intends the medallion-coin to be an iconic, yet vague, reference. The repetitive device of the medallion represents Heffer's preoccupation with both an historical connection to her family's artistic legacy and as a conceptual design reference to the invention employed by her great grandfather to make his art: 19th century Collodion or wet-plate photography, a revolution at the time of its invention in the 1850s. My interpretation of the picture of the cornfield is that it represents 'sun', 'fertility' and 'family'. The hand-cut,

24 textile 'coin' represents material culture and constitutes a *third space*, which in postcolonial terminology refers to notions of trade and colonial gift-giving practices, as well as migration, and both cultural, social and economic exchange.

the contemporary 'guipure' lace process +
19th century wet-plate photography

Heffer was drawn to the photographic techniques of her great grandfather both as family history and because 19th century historic wet-plate photographic processes bear comparison to chemical lace-making. The elaborate, laborious methods of photography and print processing are reminiscent of the time and effort involved in lace-making. Heffer's contemporary lace is created through machine-stitching medallions onto a soluble substrate, a translucent fabric that is later dissolved in water to create open-work lace. These new lace pieces are then re-worked into larger, digitally printed lace lengths. In this way, for this exhibition, has Heffer subverted the extremely protracted process of handcrafting lace by using digital print technology. This new knowledge has become part of the production and creation of her *chemical* lacework-fabric.

From the perspective of art theory, photography and lace-making are connected through their role as commemorative rituals, part of the 'art-of-memory' and also through the ways in which they form a connection between people as gifts. Both art forms, photography and needlework, capture an image for posterity, one is printed on paper while Heffer's contemporary one is printed on fabric. The theoretical subtext in Heffer's

lacework includes a re-reading of the place of photography in the great scientific leap forward during the 1850s–1880s and in the digital print revolution of the post-millennium. Both Victorian lacework and photography capture 19th century notions of time and commemoration of life's moments-in-time. Heffer's new digital-lace 'paintings' demonstrate how she employs contemporary pictorial imagery (solids) and placement in lace (net-backing) to illustrate her particular artistic heritage and to capture concepts of memory and/or the exchange of material-cultural goods.

sheffer gallery, contemporary context:
lace as painting with light

The exhibition *Laced* was held in the Sheffer Gallery, a contemporary alternative art space in Darlington, Sydney. At one time Heffer's art practice would not have been acknowledged in such a conceptual gallery space. Her genre of painting and sculpture, which references textiles in order to 'critique culture', was not accepted before the 1970s into the mid-1990s. Second-wave feminism valorised domestic crafting processes; then the installation art boom of the mid-1990s put 'the art of textiles' from artists-of-migrant-backgrounds 'in the centre'. The exhibition of Heffer's work in a gallery context changes the focus of its decorative imagery to engagement with serious cultural questions.

Aspects of the interplay of light with the artwork are important to Heffer's art in this exhibition. When the natural light from

the skylights and doorways of the gallery streams through the freely-hanging draperies the viewer's attention is brought to bear on the relationship between complex positive and negative spaces. Only when carefully positioned with concern for the lighting do the diminutive, floral details and the luminous metallic focal points of the lace openwork come to life. I imagine Heffer to be in the beginning stages of a painterly and/or sculptural exploration of *light* as a design element. Throughout the history of contemporary installation art, artists such as Heffer have explored the relationship between light and the object or site, particularly in reference to the viewer's perception of the artwork, architectural environment and certain aspects of time.

conclusion

Heffer's 'art-of-textiles' in an installation context is part of a global sculpture movement. Her contemporary lace-making explores new ways of making and alludes to methods of documenting or archiving memories, as in photography or needlework. Heffer's digital-imagery production is based on scholarly research while remaining poetic and subtly imaginative.

Heffer showcases both historical and avant-garde, contemporary photographic processes for *Laced*; she also integrates her training as a painter into another context. The result is that Heffer is a researcher-practitioner who encourages her viewers to construct new narratives about the 'useful' or decorative arts of textiles and design.

footnotes

- 1 Brennand-Wood, M. artist's statement in *Pattern crazy*, n.p.
- 2 Jefferies, J. p. 1.

references

Jefferies, J. 'Midnight's Children: Salman Rushdie and the translations of hybridity in the artworks of Zarina Bhimji, Hew Locke and Yinka Shonibare', in Sharrad, P. & Collett, A., *Reinventing textiles Volume 3: postcolonialism and creativity*, Telos Art Publishing, Bristol, 2004, pp. 1-24.

Pattern crazy, (exhib. cat., curated by Julia Pitts), Crafts Council, London, 2002.

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Odber Heffer, archival photographs, approx 1890, Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Santiago, Chile; Cecilia Heffer, lace curtain for Government House Sydney, detail, 2007, Nottingham Lace cotton