



LACE WORKS

CONTEMPORARY ART
& NOTTINGHAM LACE

ARTISTS:

LUCY BROWN,
JOY BUTTRESS,
NICOLA DONOVAN,
CAL LANE,
TERESA WHITFIELD,
TIMOROUS BEASTIES

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Nottingham was once at the heart of the machine lace industry, exporting its lace technology and lace products all over the world. In 1910, according to Swinnerton's *County Geography*, 25,000 people were employed in the manufacture of lace and, in its peak year soon afterwards, over £8 million of lace was exported from the city.

This once thriving industry has shaped the geography and architecture of Nottingham, giving rise to the elegant Victorian buildings of the city centre Lace Market, once home to salesrooms and warehouses for finishing, storing, displaying and selling lace.

The lace industry also played a significant role in the founding of the Museum & Art Gallery at Nottingham Castle in the 1870s. Many Castle Museum Committee members were prominent figures in the lace industry, as well as being Town Councillors. The Museum's expressed intention, on opening to the public in July 1878, was to provide a prestigious showcase for Nottingham machine lace, alongside fine examples of art and craft from the past and present, to inspire designers in the lace industry. Hence, when the Castle Museum & Art Gallery first opened, the Museum housed a permanent gallery where hand-made lace was displayed alongside machine-made lace and the machines on which it was manufactured.

Although the industry declined in the first half of the 20th century, owing to changing fashions, the impact of two world wars and competition from abroad, there is today a resurgence of lace in contemporary culture and art and design practice.

Lace Works taps in to this interest and brings together contemporary artists whose work reveals a continuing fascination with lace, one that goes beyond traditional associations of lace with lingerie, bridal wear and suburban window dressing.

Lucy Brown and Teresa Whitfield have both made new work for the exhibition, which is directly inspired by historical lace from Nottingham City Museums and Galleries' collection. This includes an important collection of nearly 600 lace samples, some of which are included in the exhibition to demonstrate how this early lace has become a catalyst for new creativity.

The samples were donated to the Castle Museum & Art Gallery in 1878, by the Nottingham Chamber of Commerce and so form part of the Museum's founding collection. They consist of a comprehensive selection of many of the known surviving examples of early machine lace, representing a period from 1769 to 1872. The Chamber of Commerce first assembled the collection for display at the Midland Counties Art Exhibition (a temporary exhibition space which was a predecessor to the Castle Museum) and the collection was also sent to the 1873 Vienna International Exhibition.

When carrying out research for their new work, Lucy Brown and Teresa Whitfield were both drawn to this large and important group of samples. Lucy was particularly interested in the 'Fancy Maltese Laces' (see photograph to the right) and the fringed and coloured samples shown alongside, both made from comparatively thick thread. In contrast, Teresa was looking specifically for black lace displaying a greater degree of fine detail.

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CAL LANE

Lace Works includes four pieces of work by Canadian-born, USA-based sculptor Cal Lane, all on loan from a private collection in the UK. This includes reclaimed steel shovels and an I-beam, cut through with lace-inspired patterns, as well as a set of steel 'doilies' and a *Rust Print*. The print was made from one of the doilies, which was laid on canvas and left out in damp conditions until a rust impression of the pattern was left behind. Lane has made other ephemeral lace patterns on gallery floors and on people's bodies by using lace as a stencil, through which dust or soil is sprinkled.

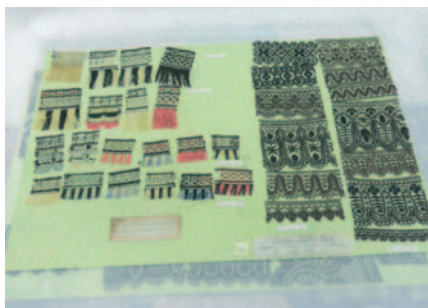
Lane says of her practice:

'I like to work as a visual devil's advocate, using contradiction as a way to create an empathetic image. By comparing and contrasting ideas and materials, my work creates a visual clash but also a sense of balance. This idea of contradiction manifested itself in a series of Industrial Doilies, which examined industrial and domestic life as well as relationships of strong and delicate, masculine and feminine, practical and frivolity, ornament and function. There is also a secondary idea being explored here, of lace used in religious ceremonies such as weddings, christenings, and funerals.'

[Cal Lane; artist's website]

Middle row, right:
Cal Lane
Doilies, 2002
oxycetylene-cut steel plates
Courtesy Art Mür

Below:
Fancy Maltese Laces (machine-made)
1869-72
NCM 1878-252
Nottingham City Museums & Galleries



NICOLA DONOVAN

Nicola Donovan has made three pieces of work for the exhibition, which have emerged from her PhD research in to the history of Nottingham lace.

Lacework (2011), which inspired the title for the exhibition, is an audio recording of one of the last Nottingham Leavers lace machines at work in the UK. This piece was first staged in the Edwardian bandstand in the grounds of Nottingham Castle in April 2011. It was made thanks to the Mason family at Cluny Lace and Tom Watts.

Nicola has said of the piece:

'To be in the presence of a working Leavers lace machine is a unique and exhilarating experience: the 'wall of sound' and rhythmic vibration that several tons of fine Victorian engineering produces, is reminiscent of a variety of stirring musical genres. Lacework is a sonic ghost representing those machines...'

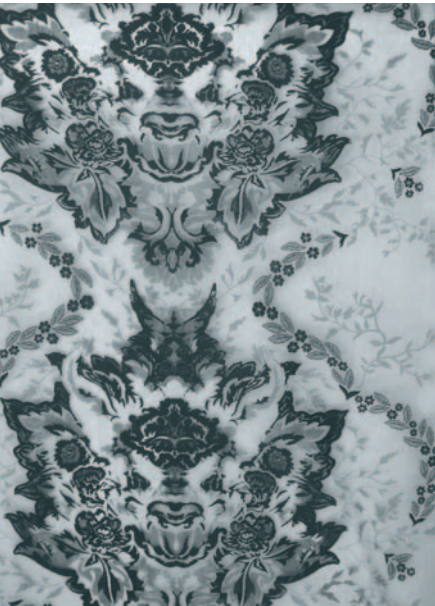
Her interest in the heavy machinery behind this most delicate of textiles, lead to *Still* (2012), a new piece of work pinned in to a corner of the gallery, which is made from thread and lace machine parts (lace carriages and bobbins borrowed from Nottingham Trent University's lace archive). The metal parts are like quotations from the large machines to which they once belonged. In *Still*, they are silenced and frozen in time, held captive by a tangle of threads.

Bloom (2012) is Donovan's third work, grafted on to the walls in nooks and corners of the gallery, so that it creeps up on us as we walk round the exhibition. Inspired by the gift of a bag of Nottingham lace scraps and floral motifs, and by her observations of mould in damp interiors, *Bloom* seems almost to seep from the walls of the Castle - lace has become integral to the fabric and history of this place. The title of the work is open to a number of possible readings, beyond the floral. Bloom is sometimes found on grapes and other fruit, and also refers to a milky deposit that appears on the surface of oil paintings in damp conditions.

Top row, left:
Nicola Donovan
Bloom, 2012 (detail);
Nottingham lace, paint

Bottom row, right:
Nicola Donovan
Still, 2012 (detail); thread,
Nottingham lace machine carriages & bobbins





TIMOROUS BEASTIES

Noted for surreal and provocative textiles and wallpapers, the design studio, Timorous Beasties, was founded in Glasgow in 1990 by Alistair McAuley and Paul Simmons, who met studying Textile Design at Glasgow School of Art.

Their work could be seen as a wayward take on the often 'twee' world of textiles, with heavily illustrative insects, 'triffid'-like plants, birds and other animals. They are also known for their contemporary take on the 'Toile de Jouy' fabrics of Napoleonic France, and have designed a number of toiles based on different cities around the world. The original 'Toile' designs are viewed today as very traditional but in fact depict scenes of drinking and womanizing that reflected the society of the day. Similarly, Timorous Beasties' toiles reflect the under-belly of urban social realism against a back drop of familiar, landmark buildings.

Devil Damask follows in the same spirit; the unsettling and unexpected image woven in to the lace reveals itself slowly and is accentuated by the shadows it casts on to the gallery wall behind. It is one of a collection of designs developed for the Leavers lace machine.

Middle row, left:
Devil Damask
Lace fabric designed by Timorous Beasties and produced on a Nottingham Leavers lace machine by Morton, Young and Borland in Newmilns, Ayrshire, Scotland

JOY BUTTRESS

Joy Buttress has created a new body of work for *Lace Works - Worn* (2012) - which uses lace to explore the disparity between women's class, status and wealth. She has taken historical lace motifs from the Nottingham Trent University School of Art and Design's lace archive and translated them through digital and hand embroidery to suggest beauty, fragility and sexuality.

Buttress is interested in the capacity of lace to be both beautiful and repulsive at the same time, particularly when it becomes stained, brittle and discoloured with age.

She has used a selection of vintage French peasants' undergarments as a base for her work because for her they '*embody and represent toil and hardship*' and '*are charged with the memories and traces of the women that wore them. The worn and patched surfaces are beautified through hidden stitch, beadwork and waxed flowers.*' This intricate and seductive patterning is clustered around the crotch and under-arms of the garments, embellishing and drawing attention to those hidden areas which are most likely to become marked and stained.

Buttress has deliberately suspended some of the work high up, out of reach, so that it is difficult to see the details. She wants '*the viewer to be challenged to search for unseen and concealed interventions on the inner surface of the garments, suggesting intimacy, secrecy and suppression.*'

Top row, right & bottom row, left:
Joy Buttress; *Worn*, 2012
Vintage undergarments, machine and hand embroidery, silk/cotton thread, wax flowers, glass beading, gold foil

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF NOTTINGHAM LACE

In 1589, William Lee of Calverton, just outside Nottingham, invented a framework-knitting machine. Initially, it was used to produce hosiery - hence it is also known as the 'stocking frame' - but experiments with the stocking frame lead to the production of the first machine lace: a simple net, to which decoration was added by hand. A number of individuals were credited with being the first to do this, but it was Robert Frost who created the first machine to produce patterned lace, using a carved cylinder to move the loops of thread in order to create a net background. The pattern was then put on in plain knitting, with the outline embroidered by hand. Frost went on to invent point net in 1777.

As with the stocking/knitting frame, early lace net was produced in the home - in the attic or a workshop that was part of the domestic space. Men worked the frame, whilst women and children prepared thread or embroidered the net.

The stocking frame was next combined with the warp of the weaver's loom to produce the Warp lace machine. Though not a local invention, the first factory for Warp lace was set up in Nottingham in 1784. In the early years of the 19th century, John Heathcoat patented the first successful bobbin net or twist

net machine, which twisted the threads rather than knitting them. There were many other competing inventions in the following years, and lace technology was 'hot property'.

Perhaps the most enduring innovation however, is the Leavers lace machine, dating from 1813 and invented by John Leavers. A complex machine to set up and operate, it was initially used for net production but later adaptations increased its versatility. The most important of these was the application of the Jacquard apparatus by Hooton Deverill in 1841, which made it capable of producing sophisticated patterns. By this time, steam-driven, factory machines were gradually replacing hand-operated frames, and once steam power had been applied to the Leavers machine, it dominated East Midlands lace production.

Lace factories were located all over the area around Nottingham and this is where the lace was made; it was then brought to the warehouses of the Lace Market in the city centre in its raw state, where it was dyed, bleached and finished. Finishing involved checking the cloth, mending, separating the lace, (drawing), and cutting out surplus threads, (scalloping or clipping). This labour-intensive and arduous work was largely carried out by women.

Before the advent of the machine lace industry, lace was made by hand, usually by women and children. It took many long hours of painstaking work to produce a lace collar or cuff and, whilst the lace-makers were paid poorly for their work, the lace itself was very expensive and highly desirable. It was a luxury item, available only to the very wealthy: those who could also afford to employ servants with the skills to launder and care for it. For centuries it remained a symbol of status and discernment in taste - a precious commodity to be handed down from one generation to the next.

The innovators and factory owners of the machine lace industry were keen to demonstrate that they could produce lace to the same quality and level of detail as handmade lace, but at a much more affordable price - and on a much larger scale. Lace therefore became more widely available and within reach of the middle classes, who could afford not only to wear it but also to drape it in the windows of their homes. Therefore, as the machine lace industry grew in technological skill and became more and more capable of producing complex and sophisticated patterning, so the centuries-old handmade lace industry fell in to decline.

Deborah Dean

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LUCY BROWN

Lucy Brown has been using second-hand and vintage garments in her work for some time, often wearing them first to get a sense of their history, before deconstructing and re-weaving them in to new and 'un-wearable' garments. More recently, she has stopped short of making 'stand alone' garments; instead she cuts the work loose from its loom, allowing it to spread its tendrils across the gallery space. Alongside three existing pieces made in this way, Brown is showing a brand new commission for *Lace Works*. This combines garments with Nottingham machine lace 'ribbon', dyed grey by the artist to make it less 'bridal and frilly' and to create something more sombre in feel.

When she was invited to make work for the exhibition, Brown made several research visits to Nottingham City Museums and Galleries' lace collection. The new work therefore reflects a range of thoughts and ideas suggested by both the collection and the history of Nottingham lace. For example, she became interested in photographs of women lace workers, which typically show women sitting close together, each checking and mending flaws in the lace. She was struck by how this activity remained virtually the same over the years, even though the style of the women's clothes changed. She also began to see the lace as 'a physical point of connection between the women'.

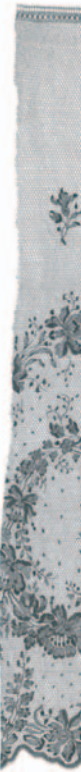
She is interested in the semi-transparent qualities of lace and the way in which it conceals and reveals at the same time. She selected a lace-trimmed chemise from the collection (made to be hidden from view) and two lace 'jabots' (cascades of frills or ruffles worn round the neck). The title of her new work - *the secrets we keep from ourselves* - also hints at what is hidden and the weaving incorporates vintage lace lingerie. Some of these lace garments are used 'whole' and are tangled in to the web of lace ribbon, whilst others are re-woven fragments, which retain just a hint of what they once were. They all appear looped together and suspended in space like trapeze artists caught in mid flight.

Brown has also created a temporary outdoor work - *Veils* (2012) - in response to the colonnade immediately outside the main entrance to the Castle. The colonnade is home to a group of portrait busts - sculptures of writers and poets associated with Nottingham, including Lord Byron, DH Lawrence and Henry Kirke White. Three of these have been shrouded in lace fabric, the folds held in place by cord bindings. They bring to mind the coverings used to protect furniture and precious ornaments in country houses, when the owners are away from home. The bright white of the synthetic fabric stands out against the mellowed stone of the Castle building, yet it assumes a sombre, ghostly appearance in the gloom of a winter's day. The cloth is machine-made lace net curtaining, which Brown sourced from Nottingham's Victoria Market. Net curtains are designed to provide privacy - to screen the inside from outside view, whilst also letting in light. Here, the net forms a translucent boundary that conceals the identity of the portraits but allows us to peep at what is underneath.

Above, left:
Lucy Brown
the secrets we keep from ourselves,
2012
Hand-dyed Nottingham Leavers lace
(manufactured by Douglas Gill),
ribbon, vintage garments sourced
from charity shops, eBay and the
artist's own wardrobe.

Above, right:
Lucy Brown
Veils, 2012
Machine lace net curtains (*brise-bise*)
made from synthetic fibre

Commissioned by Nottingham Castle
Museum & Art Gallery, with funding from
Arts Council England through the
National Lottery



TERESA WHITFIELD

Over the past few years, Teresa Whitfield has made a series of life size drawings of handmade lace, selected from a number of museum collections. Characterised by a close resemblance to real fabric, the highly detailed ink drawings explore the social implications of the historic lace-making process and generate a dialogue with a contemporary audience by connecting historical events with the present day.

For *Lace Works*, she has made a new drawing, following her research in to Nottingham City Museums and Galleries' lace collection. After viewing the collection, she short-listed several lace samples before finally selecting a Leavers machine lace border with an intricate floral pattern, from which to make this drawing.

This is the first time she has drawn a large piece of machine lace and there is something subtly ironic about the fact that she has spent hours painstakingly drawing a piece of machine-made lace by hand - a piece made by an industry keen to demonstrate that machine lace was equal to handmade lace in terms of quality and finish.

The new drawing is shown with the original Leavers lace border and earlier drawings of handmade lace, the largest of which was created as part of an artist's residency at Fabrica in Brighton (2009). For this work, Whitfield recruited and trained twenty volunteers to complete the drawing in a fraction of the time it would have taken her if working alone. She described how *'the project was inspired by the 19th century Honiton lace makers who were commissioned to make the flounce, veil and trimmings for Queen Victoria's wedding dress, the entire commission taking two hundred people over nine months to complete.'*



Above:
Teresa Whitfield
Nottingham Machine Lace, 2012
Ink drawing
Commissioned by Nottingham Castle Museum
& Art Gallery, with funding from Arts Council
England through the National Lottery

Cover image:
Sample of Nottingham Lace c.1910.
Collection of Nottingham City
Museums & Galleries.