

School of Design and the Built Environment

Lace Assemblages: Extending Social and Cultural Knowledge Through Practice-led
Exploration of the Materiality of Ancestral Lace Textiles

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Acknowledgment of Country

I respectfully acknowledge that this place called Curtin is on Whadjuk Noongar lands from the past, today and in the future. I wish to pay my deepest respects to all ancestors and members of this community, past, present and in the future.

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Abstract

This Master of Research project considers how the materiality of ancestral lace textiles can be creatively explored through textiles and textile processes. I adopt an integrative response to understand the significance of lace as a cloth that is both understood and experienced through sentiment, touch and decoration. The research comprises theoretical analysis, practice-led studio enquiry and a personal narrative centred around my experience with heirloom lace textiles as tangible relics of my ancestral lineages. This exegesis examines scholarly arguments from diverse fields, including textiles, sociology, material culture studies and practice-led knowledge. The interdisciplinary engagement with lace attempts to define and characterise worn, historic cloth objects as stimuli for speculation on personal histories, tools to extend social and cultural knowledge.

In this thesis, a practice-led methodological approach is employed, advocating the placement of this research in the thematic area of Fashion Studies. Here, the materiality of ancestral lace informs creative production. The intention is not to reproduce the artefacts; instead, reactivate the objects by reinterpreting them in a contemporary manner through a study of their materiality. In this project, materiality considers both the visible qualities of used lace: an openwork structure with visible signs of wear, as well as invisible signs of wear, accounting for the translation of narratives into cloth through touch and experience. The textiles and textile processes used are creative, exploratory responses to the laces as artefacts of the everyday, the studio findings disseminated through active documentation and exhibition of the work. The textiles take the form of garments and neo-tapestries to consider the multimodal experience of textiles through wear, use and touch. My role as a creative researcher in this project is to unravel the multiple strands of knowledge that can be obtained through re-creating historical objects, reactivating lace in a voice that gives rise to its rich significance in the past, present and future.

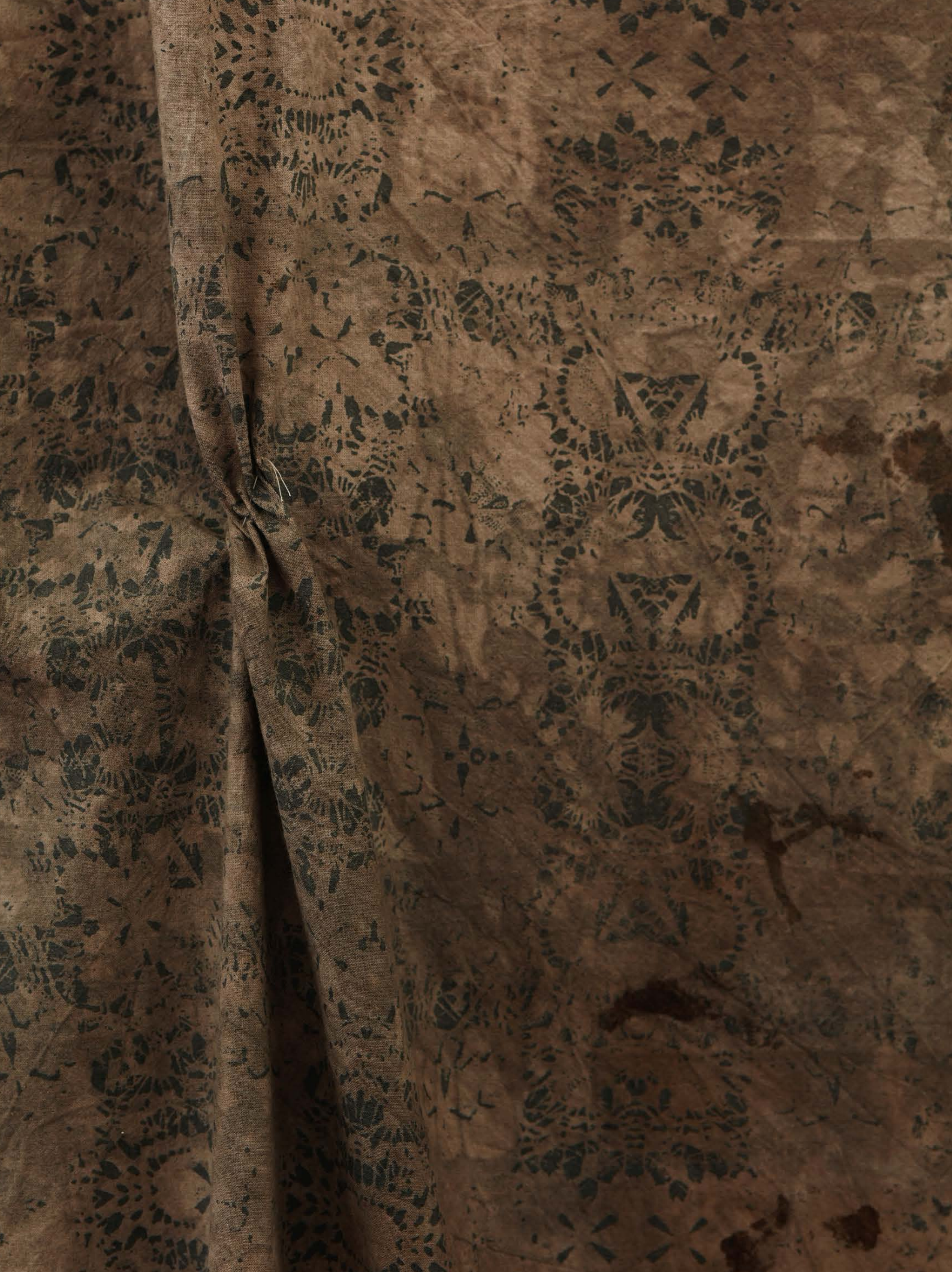


Figure 1. Molly Ryan, *Lace Tessellation (detail)*. 2022, Multi-layered lace motif screen-print using natural handmade ink on naturally dyed calico, cotton thread, 380cm x 150cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

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Introduction

Background to the Research

Lace is a material relic of my maternal and paternal lineages; three heirloom lace fabrics are at the centre of this research project. Each lace bears visible and invisible signs of wear that imbue them with narrative, memories and incomplete memories. The invisible and visible qualities of worn lace combine to become the whole materiality of the cloth. This accounts for the laces as openwork structures with visible signs of wear, alongside the information invisibly hidden within their surface that has accumulated over many years of survival as heirlooms. In this project, ancestral lace is a metaphor and textiles are the medium for driving multiple aspects of the research. I am the custodian of many intergenerational objects; however, the three heirloom laces are significant because:

1. The laces have become animated through generations of use and handling. This observation aligns intimately with John Law and Annemarie Mol's (1995, 276) theory, "relational materiality," where humans and experiences are archived within objects. I link this thinking to the process of information absorbing into the surface of the laces through continued contact with bodies, hands and environment.
2. Unlike other heirloom objects, to borrow from Jules Prown (1982, 4), cloth objects are "less self-conscious, and therefore potentially more truthful" about the people that inhabited and used them.
3. Through this exegesis, I work from Rosemary Shepherd's (2003, 2) interpretation of lace as "a decorative openwork fabric in which the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas." This definition positions lace as a pattern of holes. As this project progressed, the structure of lace became a foundation for articulating the nuances of ancestral, practical, theoretical and reflective investigation.

Kees Dorst (2015¹) argues that lace has laid dormant for centuries and is now starting to reorientate itself within a modern context. In this creative project, I assess the significance of textiles and textile processes as a form of dialogue to observe and articulate the stories the laces have to tell. My role as a maker is to reactivate these intergenerational objects of the past in the present and give them a voice for the future. The works created operate as physical explorations

¹ Originally published in *Lace: Contemporary Textiles and Other Works* (2007) by Cecilia Heffer and republished in *Lace Narratives: A Monograph, 2005-2015* (2015) by Cecilia Heffer (cited source).

that seek to explore, unpack, depict and retain details from my ancestral narrative, as catalysed by the materiality of the lace artefacts². This research focuses on the life histories of lace to examine the diverse vitalities of the familial fabrics as they contain personal and collective biographies. My project asks, *how can the materiality of ancestral lace textiles be drawn on to develop new textiles and extend social and cultural knowledge?*

In analysing laces directly tied to my ancestral lineage, they have become allegories of an ancestral narrative riddled with missing information. In a contemporary rendition, I have tasked myself to explore lace, an innately intricate textile with a distinctive material language (Heffer 2015) throughout this project. Through practice, I delineate the intercultural links these tangible artifacts represent. By surviving generations of use and experience, the laces have become palimpsests. Across cultures, across time, across oceans, today and beyond, the significance of these laces transcends their physical materiality; they have a story to tell. My encounter with heirloom lace is not unique. Cloth has been transmitted as a precious keepsake from generation to generation for centuries (Pallister 1902). In the past, different varieties of lace were bound to bloodlines through the nuances of their pattern and motifs, representing “coats-of-arms or family badges” (Pallister 1902, 66). This tradition is not commonly seen today, certainly not in Australia. However, I argue the value of lace is still recognised, with remaining cloth still being passed down through generations due to its unique language and ties to intercultural identity (Ger and Türe 2016). The laces this research project is based on are all from different regions and periods in time. To borrow from Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (2001, 16), each artefact operates to form the “tools of [my] own culture.” It is vital to advocate for lace to ensure that its material legacy survives into the future. I aim to achieve this by exploring the rich materiality of the three heirloom lace fabrics.

This creative research project comprises an exegesis, a series of exhibitions of garments and neo-tapestries³ and process work, including my 2022 Creative Process Journal. Textiles in this project are intentionally crafted into specific forms. I pay homage to the significance of the laces being everyday objects through the creation of garments and neo-tapestries, the forms representative of cloth items that animate the landscape of daily life. Furthermore, the garment

² Both of my grandfathers passed away within three years of each other. They were valuable sources of ancestral knowledge. Entrusted with a lot of this orally relayed information, revising and depicting the stories through process became an increasingly valuable exercise for me as a descendent of theirs and a practitioner.

³ ‘Neo-tapestries’ describes contemporary presentations of traditional tapestry crafts in this project.

forms explore the ancestral laces ‘embodied’ aspects. Embodied in this project elucidates the physical acts of animating cloth through wear and use. The placement of these works in an art gallery aims to realign the forms within a different context, becoming rarefied artefacts that serve a purpose beyond their physical presence (Geczy and Karaminas 2012).

I covered a lot of practical and theoretical ground in this research and the following three discoveries were revelatory. Firstly, my determination to explore the materiality of ancestral cloth objects intensified after being emotionally touched by Clare Humphries’ PhD dissertation “Material Remains: The Afterlife of Personal Objects” (2014). Secondly, Cecilia Heffer’s contemporary approaches to lace-making in her publication, *Lace Narratives: A Monograph, 2005-2015* (2015), strengthened my ability to articulate the desire to unlock the value of producing knowledge through practice. Finally, being invited to exhibit in the exhibition *AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth*, part of the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial (2022) in October 2021, allowed me to present my findings for public dissemination. This opportunity enabled critical contemplation on the study at that point in time, inspiring the expansion of my research from an Honours into a Master of Research project. These three poignant experiences prompted me to:

- Evaluate the significance of practice-led research in creating knowledge and contextualising theories from relevant fields.
- Examine theories from relevant fields that support the exploration of the materiality of the ancestral laces found in textiles and textile processes.
- Investigate how a practice-led study of the materiality of ancestral laces can extend social and cultural knowledge.

The remainder of this exegesis will introduce the inclusion of this project in Fashion Studies through a thorough investigation of literature that seeks to explore the animating properties of wear and the language of cloth, contextualised alongside lace. Following this, I explore my practice as research, introducing the methodological framework for the project. Next, an in-depth discussion about the methods used to examine the materiality of the laces leads to an overview of the forms that the textiles in the project take. I then focus on the knowledge accrued across different research sites and during exhibitions. Following this, I synthesise the findings with contemporary social and cultural issues to evaluate the project’s significance. This exegesis is not an explanation of the works presented. Instead, it is a document that traverses

the undulating flux between word and making that has helped me link studio findings with theoretical engagement.

Contextualising Lace

Lace became central to my practice when I made my final collection for my undergraduate studies in 2019⁴. Entranced by the beauty, history and craftsmanship associated with lace, I became obsessed with the cloth: researching, collecting and familiarising myself with as many styles of lace as possible. In my search, I began to recognise the visual nuances of different lace styles, quickly realising each piece had a unique language. I was particularly interested in the visibly worn pieces, prompting a deeper inquiry into how people provide a narrative context for things. This fascination with the worn led to the understating that cloth becomes animated by its custodians throughout its life. Humans decorate each space we inhabit with our DNA. Cloth being inherently absorptive does a tremendous job of capturing and archiving these cellular biographies of self. Within the composition of fabric, details of its lived experience become embedded. From a sociology perspective, Ellen Sampson eloquently articulates why I feel so compelled to investigate the laces:

There is, I think, a particular resonance to worn things, a particular sense of awe of their survival, of artefacts and of experiences. We do not feel that same awe for immaculate surfaces, the smooth surface has retained nothing; it has not experienced, learned or survived. (Sampson 2022, 141)

This research emerged from my fascination with lace, which has manifested over three years of referencing it in my research, collecting it and analysing its materiality through practice⁵. Two years into my journey with lace, I was made aware of a drawnwork embroidered lace tablecloth that belonged to my Croatian great-great-grandmother (Figure 3). Unlike the laces I had collected from charity shops, textile sales and personal donations⁶, this piece's connection to my personal history made it more significant. Its role as an heirloom and container that

⁴ See Appendices (1).

⁵ This exegesis and accompanying exhibition were a twelve-month Master of Research follow on from a previous twelve-month Honours project, responding to the strong theme of lace in my research which commenced during the final year of my undergraduate studies.

⁶ I refer to lace not connected to my ancestry as anonymous lace.

collected information about my close and distant relatives who came into contact with it gave it an aura that the anonymous lace didn't possess. Alongside the silk lace tablecloth, I learnt of two other lace objects, a lace tablecloth that belonged to my great-grandfather (Figure 4) and my maternal grandmother's lace wedding dress (Figures 5 & 6). Each lace artefact is intricately unique in structure, feel, age and context. In Tanizaki's words (2001, 30), they each have a "tinge peculiarly their own." While I speculated the biographies of the anonymous lace through stains, holes and fading, the ancestral laces were surrounded by details of their lived experience⁷, increasing their value as artefacts. The following section introduces an interdisciplinary approach to analysing the objects.

⁷ These details have been conveyed to me through orally relayed histories, images, objects and general inquiry into my ancestors.



Figure 3. Molly Ryan, *Paternal great-great-grandmother's embroidered lace tablecloth (detail) circa 1890*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 4. Molly Ryan, *Paternal great-grandfather's lace tablecloth (detail) circa 1910*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 5. Molly Ryan, *Maternal grandmother's lace wedding dress circa 1960*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 6. Molly Ryan, *Maternal grandmother's lace wedding dress (detail) circa 1960*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Literature Review

Fashion Studies

The tangible findings from this research have been said to rest comfortably in contemporary art or interdisciplinary studies⁸. I am not at all opposed to this observation; however, I believe the theoretical underpinnings for this research are best suited to Fashion Studies, a “thematic area of interest” that encapsulates a large scope of textile work to the body (Entwistle 2016, 16). In *The Fashioned Body* (2000), Joanne Entwistle argued that textiles are *worn*, suggesting that researchers and practitioners must recognise that clothing and textiles are seen, lived and experienced. Following its release, Entwistle (2016, 16) observed a vast increase in curiosity around “the fruitful connections to be made between body, dress, fashion, and consumption.” Consequently, Fashion Studies has “complexified and now breaches disciplinary boundaries” (Entwistle 2016, 16). Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (2012) also observe the broad scope of the area, building on Entwistle’s observation to encompass personal identity into the intersection. I advocate for including textiles in the mix of body, dress, fashion, consumption and personal identity, as they are the common thread between each element. This research is based on lace textiles in the form of tablecloths and a garment. Each artefact has been experienced and consumed on and off the body, dressed and fashioned through their lives as personal, sentimental objects. Textiles considered, the interdisciplinary complexity of this area, as observed by Entwistle (2016), Geczy and Karaminas (2012), has fostered theoretical and practical innovation, inevitably leading to the bridging of concepts and the production of knowledge. Investigating the materiality of ancestral laces through the Fashion Studies lens has opened new ways of researching worn cloth objects and depicting the findings. To crystallise my justification of why this research rests in Fashion Studies, I interpret each previously mentioned element that makes up the area as:

- Dress/clothing/cloth: the adornment of the body with cloth, defined by Joanne Eicher as “modifications and supplements for and on the body” (2012, 77). These pieces of cloth become active artefacts through ordinary activities such as wear, use, laundering and mending.
- Body: a human’s bodily structure.
- Consumption: the use of an object through wear and handling.

⁸ Following feedback from Honours thesis reviewers.

- Fashion: transcending “a taste shared by many for a short period of time” (Tortora and Eubank 2010, 8) to instead become a medium that “can magnify the raw emotions within society” (De Wyngaert 2021, 12).
- Personal identity: the exploration of self through process.
- Textiles: the nexus linking each area of the study and the primary medium of exploration in this research.

I have always contextualised textiles on and off the body, frequently oscillating between perceiving my work as either fashion or art (Figure 7). The ongoing debate about whether fashion can be art and art can be fashion influenced my indecisiveness. Deepening my understanding of the area, I have come to realise my work is well situated in Fashion Studies, as its concerns extend beyond ‘clothes’ to explore the constant dialogue between garment, cloth and the body. Ultimately, clothing and textiles cannot be isolated from the body they adorn. Patrizia Calefato (2005, 5) argues that dress functions as a “syntax” that allows cloth near the body to “acquire meaning.” I extend this thinking to include material that is made to be worn *on* the body (i.e. my grandmother’s wedding dress) and cloth that is worn *by* the body (i.e. the lace tablecloths). I am particularly interested in fabric as a bearer of memory. As textiles pass from one generation to another, they become embedded with “symbolic qualities” and “personal memories” (de la Haye 2005, 14). As I leapt into diverse methods of understanding the laces, there were many possible directions to take in this research project. The following review situates this project in Fashion Studies through a thorough investigation of literature that explores the animating properties of wear and the re-creation of cloth objects, contextualised alongside lace.



Figure 7. Molly Ryan, *Imagined Narrative Dress*. 2022, Upcycled, naturally dyed cloth: cotton, linen, silk, lace fragments, felt. Full circle skirt and bodice. Cotton thread. AU women's size 10. Digital image.
Photography: Rob Frith.

The Lace Detective

Invisible Materiality

Objects are never stagnant in consumer culture. Amongst the compendium of physical items that narrate our inhabited spaces, there are often a select few intergenerational relics that have retained their value across generations. When a family member dies, their belongings are no longer contextualised by their presence; instead, they take on new meaning and become the tangible materiality of a life. To quote sociologist Margaret Gibson (2008, 6), “the objects that remain are significant memory traces and offer a point of connection with the absent body of the deceased.” Clothing and textiles are some of our most intimate possessions present through life and death. The role of cloth in death is central to Pia Interlandi’s multidisciplinary practice. Through the creation of dissolvable dresses, Interlandi explores how the garments that adorn the deceased are a literal and symbolic part of the body as it eventually returns to earth (Interlandi 2020). Cloth becomes a tangible thread between the living and the dead.

To Sampson (2022,153), textiles “in touching the skin, mediate our perceptive consciousness and become a site where internal and external experience meet.” Textiles are objects in continuous dialogue with their surrounding habitat. Furthermore, this gives rise to the idea that humans inhabit cloth even when it’s not adorning the body. We are present in worn cloth objects even when we aren’t physically here. Connecting this thinking to items with such a proximal relation to our body positions them to be artefacts waiting to be observed and pondered. Susan Stewart (1993, 152) elaborates on this animating translation of experience into artefact as “objects-into-narrative” through the metaphor of the “collection.” Objects recollecting information from the past do not displace the past; instead, they bring the past to the attention of the present (Stewart 1993). Textiles that have serviced their users well don’t just signify experience; they come to embody it. Worn cloth objects become a detailed portrait of their custodians.

The inhabited world is animated with wear (Gill & Mellick 2011). Extending this to textiles with visible and invisible animations of wear, I return to Sampson’s scholarship. Through the lens of worn shoes, Sampson explores wearing as a practice that annotates objects worn on and by the body. Sampson (2022, 184) argues that while we are “unable to ‘read’ an object, instead we experience it psychically and physically; we cannot silence its insistent murmuring.” Unable to ignore the murmuring of the family laces, it became evident these objects had a

material capacity to hold memories, making their surfaces rich sites for exploration. Over generations of use, these textiles become marked with evidence of their lived experience; they surface past users in the present. It is important to explain that worn objects are not always visually altered through use; instead, they act as repositories for collecting experiences, some of which may not drastically, if at all, alter the surface of the object. Sampson (2022, 141) articulates these minimal but animating encounters as the many ways garments and textiles “show” traces of use. The ancestral laces’ invisible materiality, their lived experience, aligns with this observation of wear, which, although invisible, mobilised a large portion of inquiry in this project.

When extracting information from objects, we cannot render them lifeless. Borrowing from Ingold (2007), the ancestral laces are not inactive; rather, they are active due to being entangled within the happenings of the inhabited world. I argue that the more an object is used, the more active it becomes. Once I understood the laces’ activity as a combination of their visible and invisible materiality, more profound theories about the multiple vitalities of the artefacts emerged. The laces have survived generations and now “materialise personal biographies and bodily practices” (Woodward 2016, 9). To extract and decipher the information contained within these lace artefacts, I looked to Alexandra Kim and Ingrid Mida’s scholarship that navigates object-based research in fashion. Kim and Mida (2018) recommend engaging in a process of observation, reflection and interpretation to uncover the biography of an object. This process considers the *mise-en-scène* of the object to unlock the cultural and personal anecdotes captured within the folds of a cloth artefact (Kim & Mida 2018). This analysis process involves capturing, considering and linking information about the object to produce an integrated image of its history.

In ascertaining information from the ancestral laces, what became clear, is that perceptible data is, to quote Jean L. Drusendow (2018, 8), “only part of the process of understanding a garment.” This statement cohered when conducting an object-based analysis of the three lace artefacts and contextualised Kim and Mida’s aforementioned process of observation, reflection and interpretation. Specifically, the reflection stage of the research that considers the “embodied experience and contextual material” (Kim & Mida 2018, 27) of an object. Throughout this project, I modelled this thinking to the laces, colloquially asking myself, ‘if these laces could talk, what would they say?’ In this research, inquiry into the laces has been narrative and

factual. To echo Solveigh Goett (2018, 125), “narrative is not about facts, order and certainties, but about finding meaning and, therefore [getting] closer to the truth of lived experience.” To support this in relation to object-based research, Goett brings forth Jens Brockmeier’s (2009, 227) term “narrative imagination,” which describes the harmonious flux between the factual and fictitious, the merging of the impossible with the real and possible. Narrative inquiry builds on the facts collected through observation and orally relayed histories, allowing the real and imagined to coalesce. This imagined information synthesises the stories the laces have to tell within today’s context, giving lace a voice to speak in modern society. Considering the different types of information contained within objects, I now extend my search to navigate how to decipher the bricolage of elements that have equipped these laces with rich histories.

Reading Objects

Sophie Woodward’s research is centred around “the understanding that things are not just passive and inert but have agency as they are able to bring about effects” (Gell 1998, as cited by Woodward 2016, 5). Woodward (2016, 8) highlights the necessity of devising processes to navigate the “entangled relationship between people, materials and things.” When undertaking material analysis, what actually happens to the material is only part of its story and emphasis should be on the constructive probabilities that can arise from asking “what might have been and what they might have done” (Woodward 2016, 18). Additionally, Woodward (2016) advocates that the zeal of physical objects is an amalgamation of the materials themselves, the life of the object and changing meaning. To understand these laces, data and interpretation play equally important roles. There is no one isolated method of completely understanding the narrative of objects; it is a culmination of many contributing factors. Jane Whiteley (2007) explores the entangled relationship between cloth and the body and the many factors that contribute to fabric having a human presence. Across years of use and wear, Whiteley understands cloth as a nexus that holds energy and the memory of the body. Whiteley uses cloth as a medium and sculpture as a form to explore this idea. Through this, cloth can express human endeavour, emotion and humanity, and sculpture can suggest a body’s presence or absence.

Jules Prown brings to light the intricacies integral to the process of “extract[ing] information about culture, about mind, from mute objects” (1982, 7) from a material culture perspective. It is essential to acknowledge the ubiquitous illiteracies around interpreting information in things

when decoding the narratives in objects. Prown (1982) suggests that this issue can be navigated by adopting methods to unlock empathetic connections between object and observer. Prown (1982, 7) describes this part of object-based research as “deduction,” which Kim and Mida (2018, 29) remodelled to be the “reflection” phase of research. This method of investigation relies on an intellectual and sensory engagement and emotional response. Annet Couwenberg contextualises Prown’s theory through her textile practice. Through an emotional, sensory and intellectual engagement, Couwenberg explores her Dutch heritage by observing heirloom textiles as objects that offer clues about the people who previously inhabited and used them. Couwenberg explores her understanding of textiles as “a richly coded site” (Scanlan 2007, 48) through various materials and processes. In her work, lace represents her identity as a Dutch migrant in America through the resonance of the fibres she works with and remaining heirloom lace artefacts. *Discarded Ruffle Collar* (Couwenberg n.d.) pays homage to the objects at the centre of her relative’s material legacy by transforming usually disposable paper lace doilies into large, extravagant collars. The transformation of ordinary objects into a form that was once a token of class and elegance explores false perceptions of her cultural heritage.

Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman (2012, 191) argue that occasionally objects can become a “conveyor of soul” through the acquisition of an animating, holistic essence. These ensouled objects demarcate time, connecting the past to the present. Additionally, the perceptions of meaning and value surrounding heirloom objects can equip them with a soul. The idea of people being connected to objects transcends the object’s physical presence; instead, the object generates a “compositional assembly” (Nelson & Stolterman 2012, 196). The assembly foregrounds the “details and relations, connections and systemics, wholeness and integrity” (Nelson & Stolterman 2012, 196) that unite to equip an object with a soul, closely aligned to the aura of an object. Aura constitutes a characteristic of objects with an atmosphere beyond their physical presence.

From a practice-led perspective, Clare Humphries (2014) investigates the aura of objects that previously belonged to deceased family members. The exploration of the material remains of her family parallels Walter Benjamin’s theorisation of aura⁹. Humphries uses different printmaking techniques to visualise auratic experiences with objects “ripe for deconstruction”

⁹ In the “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin (1992, 299, originally published in 1936), advocated “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking one element: its presence in time and space” It is the “presence in time and space” that Benjamin (1992, 299) regarded as ‘aura.’

(2014, 39). Raised around artefacts of deceased family members, Humphries explores her ancestral narrative by engaging with the materiality and stories surrounding inherited objects, recreating these encounters through different forms of printing. Humphries portrays the objects on paper with exaggerated, visible signs of wear, the patina encouraging a narrative inquiry into the objects beyond their physical appearance. Stewart's metaphor of the souvenir aligns with Humphries' auratic examination of her family's material remains. Stewart (1993, 139) advocates that when a body is absent, remaining personal objects can be "intimately mapped against the life history of an individual." Stewart (1993, 137) positions heirlooms as tools that demarcate generational distance, their function to "weave... quite literally by means of narrative, a significance of blood relation." My experience with intergenerational objects aligns with both Humphries' and Stewart's affinity for objects connected to relatives. The opportunity to handle a cloth that my ancestors held enthralled me, people with whom I share DNA but will never meet. The laces materialise a narrative spanning over one hundred and ten years. The following section introduces practitioners whose creative stimulus is drawn from the nuances of cloth.

Recreating Objects

I situate myself in a field of practitioners exploring the re-creation of cloth artefacts through a practice-led research approach. It is clear by this stage of the review that analysing the invisible materiality of the laces is central to this research. The following practitioners are motivated to pursue their intrigue about historical and quotidian textiles through making. In understanding how to assemble the different theoretical and narrative threads that emerge from an interdisciplinary engagement with ancestral laces, familiarising myself with varying renditions of exploration, some involving lace, some not, was foremost important. This part of the review presents examples of making mobilised by the visible materiality and the feelings and sensations evoked by textiles.

Pierre Fouché is a lacemaker (Fouché n.d.). Fouché's respect for tradition, technique and innovation see him recreate historical lace textiles at both an intricate, small scale to grand and awe-inspiring. *The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopian Dreams* (2019) is a multi-faceted installation that pays homage to an eighteenth-century piece of Binche lace (Fouché n.d.).

Featured in the exhibition *Curiosity and Rituals of the Everyday*¹⁰ at John Curtin Gallery (2021), the large-scale, abstract macrame piece is a modern re-creation of the historic lace. Fouché uses thread as a tool to create a network of holes that light then passes through, casting an enticing shadow around the work (Figure 8). The shadow is elongated, creating a sense of yet another re-creation of the four-and-a-half-centimetre historical lace that inspired the work. While I don't make lace in the same manner as Fouché, I also use methods of recreating the network of holes that comprise the pieces specific to my ancestry on a micro and macro level through the application of screen-printing¹¹.

¹⁰ Part of the *Indian Ocean Craft Triennial IOTA21* (2022).

¹¹ I introduce printmaking later in this exegesis (page 47).



Figure 8. Pierre Fouché. *The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopia Dreams*. 2019, Acrylic cord bobbin lace, 350 x 490 x 250cm. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan (2021).

Piper Shepard's installation, *Filigree* (2008) (Figures 9 & 10), was also inspired by historic lace motifs. Shepard explores the physical tolerances of materials through cutting and an acid-etching technique called *devoré* to create large-scale re-creations of lace (Scanlan 2007). In contrast to Fouché, the resulting works do not employ traditional lace-making techniques. However, they reference lace-making and historical objects through the timely cutting process and the resulting fragile, lace-like pieces. The "elusive ethereality of lace" inspires Cecilia Heffer's (2015, 7) practice-led research. Similar to Shepard, Heffer draws on lace's complexities and unique language to experiment and reimagine the process of designing and making lace, resulting in highly innovative works. Heffer's solo show, *LACED* (2006), was a series of works that disrupted and redefined traditional lace structures, looking to explore alternate methods of exploring lace as an intricate openwork composition. *White Shadow* (2006) (Figure 11) was a piece critical to the messaging of the exhibition as it paid "homage to historical lace, while speaking into a contemporary lace language" (Heffer 2015, 19). Alongside careful conservation of historical artefacts, innovation in techniques of reproducing elements of these objects and exploration into new ways of working with the materiality of historical textiles ensures their survival into the future.

Thus far, each of these practitioners explores contemporary interpretations of lace and the qualities it embodies, which allow "lace [to] speak in a voice that fits our contemporary world" (Dorst 2015, 23). Again, my research is also inspired by historical lace artefacts; however, the findings take entirely different forms. As demonstrated by the pieces exhibited in the final display of work for this project, no work eventuated to be lace-like in structure. As the research progressed, my exploration of the invisible materiality, the lived experience of the cloth, intensified and the resulting works became quite far removed from the qualities that lace visually embodies. In Dorst's words, my explorations could be interpreted as having "nothing to do with the original" (2015, 23). Instead, the information I have ascertained from observing and reflecting on the materiality of the laces has allowed me to draw on the original artefacts but translate that information in a different manner. Later in this document, I reflect on the significance of the characteristic structural qualities of lace and how they have manifested into frameworks for generating ancestral, practical and theoretical information through practice.

Piper Shepard, *Filigree*. 2008, Hand cut muslin, gesso, graphite, steel armature, 91.5 x 243.8cm is unable to be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions. The content can instead be accessed via <http://www.pipershepard.com/#!/works/>.

Figure 9. Piper Shepard, *Filigree*. 2008, Hand cut muslin, gesso, graphite, steel armature, 91.5 x 243.8cm. Digital image. Reproduced from: Piper Shepard.

Piper Shepard, *Filigree (detail)*. 2008, Hand cut muslin, gesso, graphite, steel armature, 91.5 x 243.8cm is unable to be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions. The content can instead be accessed via <http://www.pipershepard.com/#!/works/>.

Figure 10. Piper Shepard, *Filigree (detail)*. 2008, Hand cut muslin, gesso, graphite, steel armature, 91.5 x 243.8cm. Digital image. Reproduced from: Piper Shepard.

Cecilia Heffer, *White Shadow (detail)*. 2006, “Venetian braid patterns hand printed onto silk organza, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate” (Heffer 2015, 17), 60 x 300cm is unable to be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions. The content can instead be accessed via <http://www.ceciliaheffer.com/#/laced/>.

Figure 11. Cecilia Heffer, *White Shadow (detail)*. 2006, “Venetian braid patterns hand printed onto silk organza, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate” (Heffer 2015, 17), 60 x 300cm. Digital image. Reproduced from: Cecilia Heffer.

The previously introduced works align with Kim and Mida's (2018, 28) "observation" stage of object-based research, where examining lace as a pattern of holes has been explored in various innovative and contemporary ways. The information displayed here emphasises the "colour, light, texture, rhythm and form," the "visual character" of the objects at the centre of their research (Kim & Mida 2018, 28). In contrast, Solveigh Goett (2018) explores themes of identity and memory through the strong emotions evoked, rather than observed, by humble, everyday textile paraphernalia. I align Goett's work with Kim and Mida's (2018, 29) "reflection" phase of research, where the work manifests from the silent voices present in the textiles that Goett analyses. Examining the power of the ordinary, Goett (2018) uses textiles to draw on material memories, creating artefacts and assemblages that open up new meanings by enticing narrative imagination. Rather than recreating the objects at the centre of the investigation, Goett (2018) explores the untold stories suggested and conjured by the cloth, abstracting these material memories through making textile works. Researchers produce knowledge when creating an object from feeling rather than instruction. This process of collecting and recollecting stories through making introduces new methods and learning models, particularly in the absence of information about the objects.

Everyone with an affinity for lace will have their own narrative about a particular piece. Using lace specific to my ancestry, I weave the theories presented in the previous section of this review to understand how the laces' materiality can be drawn on to produce an integrated image of the artefacts. My role as a creative researcher in this project is to reactivate the materiality of the laces in a voice that gives rise to their significance in the past, present and future. Multiple strands of knowledge can be obtained through remaking historical objects. As I have explained, I didn't intend to reproduce the historical laces; instead, revive the objects by studying their materiality. The following section introduces the practice-led methodological framework I have employed to investigate and display the information contained within these familial fabrics.

Methodology
Practice as Research

How I synthesise the materiality of the lace with the textiles and textile processes I use was always at the forefront of my thinking. In learning to decipher the relationality of practice, I needed to become a reflective practitioner, which I achieved by reflecting on practice “in and on action” (Lindström & Ståhl 2018, 66). There are observable similarities between the nuances of processes used and reflections about the laces and the histories they represent. The layering of time, experience and touch in the laces parallel the ways I subjected cloth to many states and treatments throughout the project. In thinking through process, I observed my studio engagement and the findings that emerged as visual narratives representing the cloth’s structure and rich lived experience.

Here, a practice-led methodological approach established a project in which textiles and textile processes became a form of dialogue to explore the materiality of heirloom laces and extended social and cultural knowledge. Practice-led research in art and design is where “creative practice plays the most important role” (de Freitas 2002, 1). One of the objectives of this project is to evaluate the significance of practice-led research in creating knowledge through the dissemination of studio findings. Practice-led research is intuitive and allows ideas to intermingle, presenting themselves in ways that could have never been predetermined (Heffer 2015). Working from Rosemary Shepherd’s (2003, 2) definition of lace as “a decorative openwork fabric in which the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas,” I draw similarities between practice-led research and the structural qualities of lace. In lace, the areas of integrity are essential in supporting the gaps. Similarly, in practice-led research, the integrities, the ‘known,’ support the gaps, the ‘unknown’ (Figure 12).

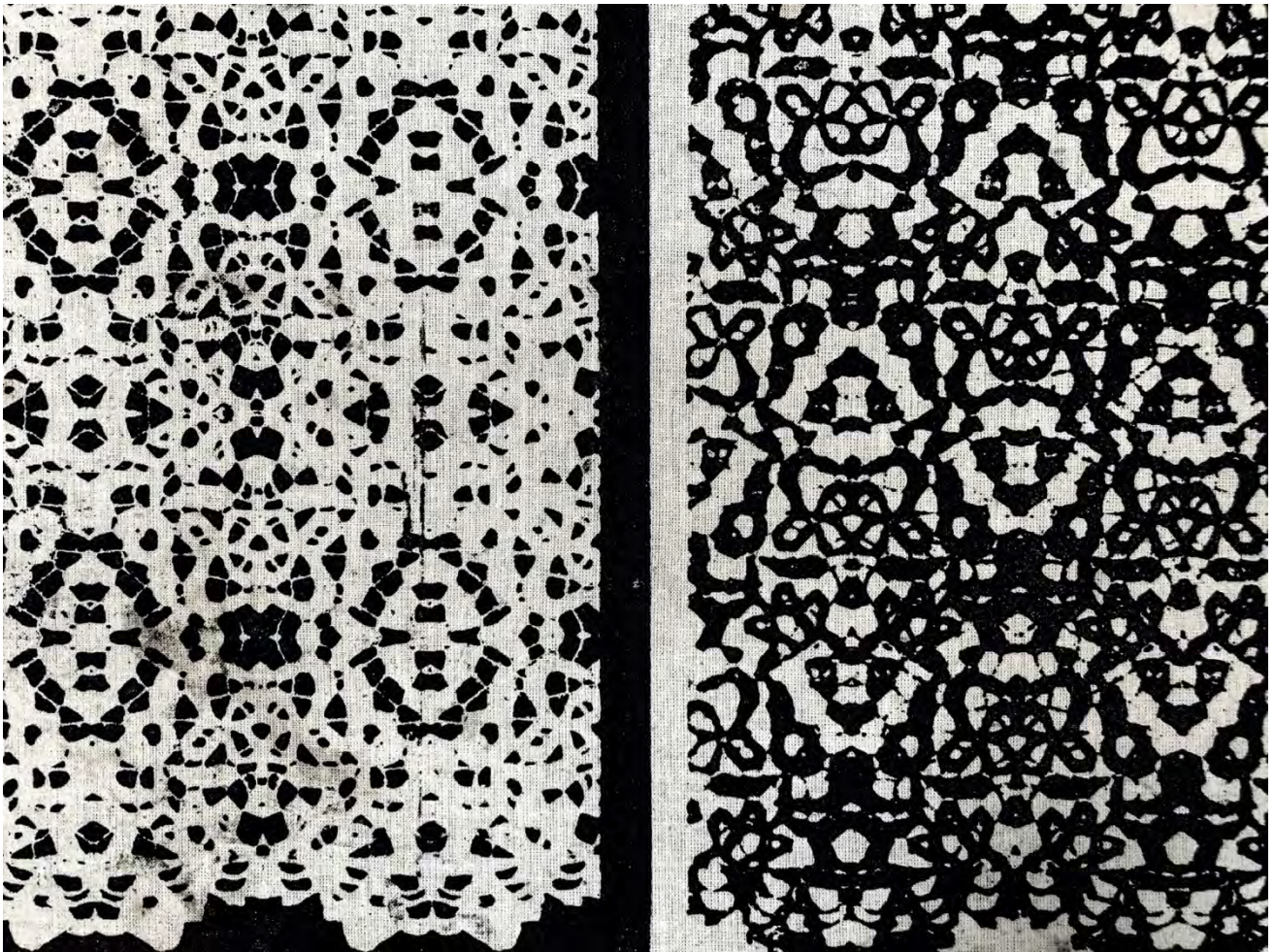


Figure 12. Molly Ryan, *Process work: known supporting the unknown*. 2022, Natural ink screen-print on calico. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Cecilia Heffer's dissemination of practice-led research in *Lace Narratives: A Monograph, 2005-2015* (2015) was a poignant inspiration for my use of practice-led research in this project. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt's (2007, 162) question, "what did the studio process reveal that could not have been revealed by any other mode of enquiry?" guides Heffer's research. In an interview, Heffer (UTS ePress 2015, 05:26) speaks to the importance of the "incremental innovations" that result from persistent studio engagement. A sustained, continual engagement in practice and process generates nuanced knowledge, which Heffer could not obtain in any other way. I noticed similarities in my studio engagement throughout this project. My research method of working between the materiality of the laces and the studio involved working from the laces into theory and practice and from practice and theory back into the laces.

The use of materials already at hand guided my studio processes. This approach was fundamental during the project's first phase, when ideas were still developing. I liken the nuances of my studio approach to contemporary Japanese/Australian fashion designer Akira Isogawa, who engages with materials and processes to manifest his creative practice (Leong 2018). I perceive resolved work as an amalgamation of theory, material and labour. On reflection, the works become abstract patchworks comprised of different materials, using various processes, each taking different forms. Without studio engagement and the flux between the three key research areas (theory, material and labour), creating these abstract patchworks would not be possible. Rosalie Gascoigne (1974, 39) articulates the serendipitous findings that result from approaching materials with an open mind as "lyrical derailments," the surprising tangents that divert you to the unexpected when you engage freely with the process.

Preserving stages of processes through photography became a tool that provided future opportunities to critically substantiate the significance of the knowledge obtained during studio sessions. I found reflecting on processes away from the studio a chance to think through materials and identify the significance of the messy findings through a process of reflective archiving and writing. Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo (2004) argue that the isolation of theory and practice is redundant in practice-led research. Instead, they suggest practitioners adjust their understanding of the relationship as "theory in practice and practice in theory" (Milech & Schilo 2004, 8). Altering my perception of the two aspects of research assisted in synthesising the relationship between practical and theoretical outputs, coming to understand each working part of the project as my 'research ecosystem,' illustrated in Figure 13:

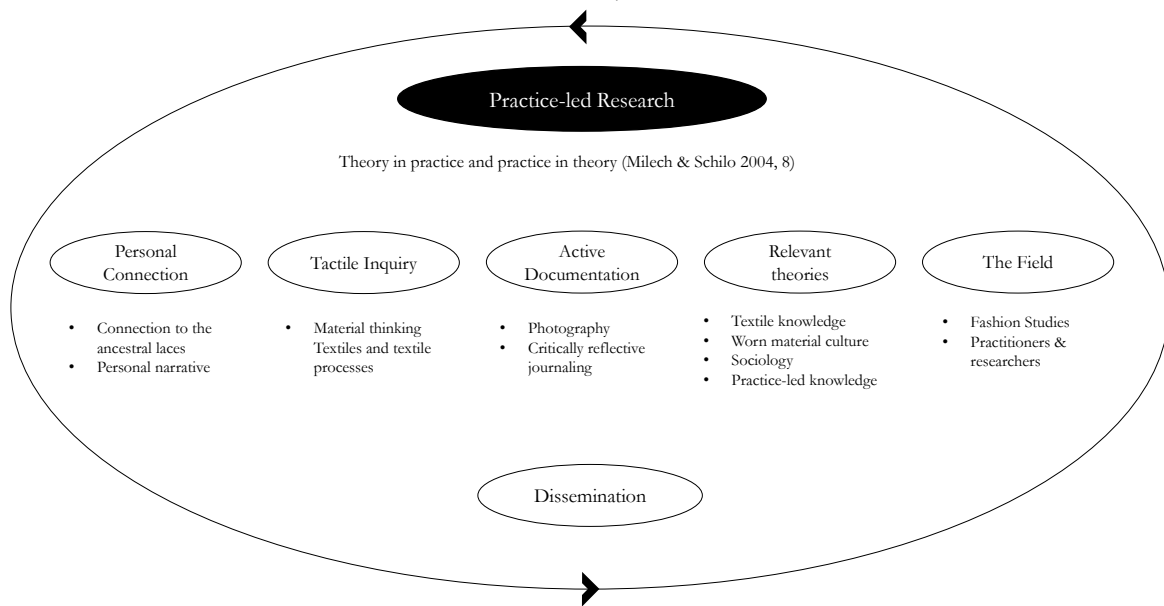


Figure 13. Molly Ryan, *Research ecosystem*. 2022, Digital diagram.

Using the research ecosystem as a framework for practice-led research was a method “to think through the entangled relationship between people, materials and things” (Woodward 2016, 8). The production of data in the studio was a means of exposing the assumptions associated with specific textiles and textile processes. Active documentation of these materials and processes provided an opportunity to reflect on the data and its associated assumptions. According to Stewart (1993, 138), a photograph is “the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance is supplied by means of narrative.” In post-studio reflection, photographs documenting my process allowed me to synthesise the different aspects of research. The findings became critical, creative research when I extended the studio engagement beyond the inceptive theories the work was based on, putting into practice Paul Carter’s “process of material thinking”¹² (2004, 13). This photographic archive is presented in my 2022 Creative Process Journal¹³. By triangulating the data, new links emerged between theory and practice. Upon engaging in this exploratory method, the project progressed and an integrated picture of the materiality of the ancestral laces was revealed.

¹² Material thinking is the process that happens when artists ask questions about materials and processes that lead to intellectual findings about the making of art (Carter 2004).

¹³ See Appendices (2).

Following a thorough course of experimentation with methods, tools, materials and ideas, I developed a framework which was used to undertake the core body of research for this project. Only through engaging in this process did I realise the possibilities of creatively realising my intentions for the research. I spent twenty-four months printing, dyeing, photographing, stitching, sewing, cutting, upcycling, unpicking, ironing, pattern making, exposing, emulsing, mixing, steeping, laundering, planning, pondering, collaging, journaling, reading, editing and deciphering, to come to some understanding about my process and how it answered the questions I asked. The following discussion elucidates how these actions culminated to address the research question.



Figure 14. Molly Ryan, *Process work: repurposed cloth collage*. 2022, Naturally dyed, upcycled cloth. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Discussion

Textiles: The Medium

Before delving into this chapter which unpacks the nuances of different processes and subsequent outcomes, it is important to establish the significance of the medium in this project: textiles (Figure 14). As I mentioned previously, my studio process is guided by the vulnerabilities of materials that are readily available in my immediate environment. I liken my practice to Mona Hessing's (1974, 91) approach to making: "my initial excitement and stimulus comes from utilising basic materials at hand. They activate ideas and provide a palette to visually speak my thoughts." I have been exploring the creative possibilities of textiles for eight years (since I was sixteen)¹⁴. While my familiarity with textiles and textile processes made their selection as my medium to undertake this research the most sensible option, as my search deepened, clarity around their suitability become increasingly apparent. For example, Humphries (2014) explores her ancestry by examining intergenerational cloth objects and interprets her findings through hand-burnished linocuts. The prints on paper are textural and poignant; however, through my investigation of heirloom textiles, I felt it necessary to engage the materiality of the lace from the interpretation (inquiry) to the translation (making) phase of the research. Using textiles provided a substantial basis to achieve this.

Janis Jefferies (2018, 5) explains that "textiles have long provided metaphors for storytelling: a compelling novel 'weaves a tapestry.'" When one considers the ridiculous closeness we have with cloth, the ability for textiles to convey all kinds of texts becomes clear. Goett (2018) describes textile knowledge as something created by and held through unique personal experience. People cannot acquire this tacit knowledge through formal instruction; it must be felt and understood through cloth's contact with our skin. A multi-sensory engagement with material allows for additional information to be unlocked¹⁵. Beyond humans' fundamental need for fabric, textiles can be contextualised as a location where "cultural, social, personal, historical and aesthetic concerns intersect" (Jefferies 2018, 3). Communicating messages about society and culture through textiles is feasible as they are an honest and universally understood

¹⁴ Margaret River Senior High School (where I studied) had textiles in their art curriculum and a working farm. When alpacas and sheep had been sheared, we collected the wool and were taught how to wash, card, felt and naturally dye it with wind-fallen native flora from the school grounds. From this moment, I have remained captivated by the creative possibilities of manipulating textiles.

¹⁵ Later in this exegesis I unpack the significance of the exhibition as a research site, where I speak of the value of experiencing textiles on a multi-sensory level.

medium. To borrow from Heffer (2015, 6), “the qualities cloth embodies resonates with people and helps to convey narrative and enrich our lives.” Both theoretically and literally, memories are archived and new ideas are presented in the structure and through the manipulation of cloth.

Sustainability is inherent to my practice¹⁶. As a maker, I am conscious of the ever-increasing “anonymous detritus of our material culture” (Sampson 2022, 165). I navigate this issue by working to unlock the value in post-consumer textiles. Avoiding the exploitation of virgin resources by sourcing second-hand materials¹⁷ (Figure 15) was deeply engrained in my practice prior to commencing this project. While I had previously understood the significance of working with used fabric as an extension beyond the environmental benefits, during this project, the theoretical sustenance provided by worn cloth galvanised my intentions and justifications for using pre-existing material. Here, the environmental, practical and theoretical benefits are instinctually linked. As contextualised in the Literature Review, wearing is inherent to this research. Through my experience as a consumer and practitioner of cloth, I am familiar with how it changes as it is worn; it is ‘broken in’ over time. Worn cloth’s structure is soft. It responds favourably to different forms of intervention (draping, dyeing, screen-printing, machine appliqué). I believe fabric only becomes interesting once it is worked through either continued wear and handling or drastic intervention (Figure 16).

Patrizia Calefato (2005) proposes that sustenance is drawn from the old; things from the past renew themselves to become critical signs of the present. Karen Nicol is an embroidery and mixed media designer. For the work *Black Forest* (2011), exhibited at the Powerhouse Museum¹⁸, Nicol only used materials sourced from flea markets to ensure that each piece used in the “wall skirt” had character that was unable to be replicated (Nicol 2011, 98). Similarly to Nicol, I relish building on the sustenance already present in worn cloth, drawing technical and aesthetic inspiration from exploring the creative possibilities of items previously deemed as waste. The making of an object results from a series of choices determining the specific actions that will transform a material (McFadden 2007). While these materials find their way into my research through happenstance, their inclusion in works in this project was intentional and considered. When I work with fabric already well into its life as a quotidian object, building

¹⁶ See Appendices (3).

¹⁷ The used materials I work with range from exhausted textiles worn and used by myself, family and friends, scraps and offcuts preserved from previous projects and cloth sourced from op-shops.

¹⁸ Exhibited as part of *Love Lace, The Powerhouse Museum International Lace Award* in 2011.

onto the experience already embedded in its surface through different textiles and textile processes adds additional strands of significance.

This favouring of old over new aligns with Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's (2001, 20) preference of a "pensive luster to a shallow brilliance." The pensive lustre of worn cloth deepened throughout this project as I imbued it with layers of intervention. In the past, I have struggled to articulate why reusing items makes so much sense to me. I came to a deeper understanding of my ancestors by investigating the materiality of the laces they once owned. This study revealed that the preservation of cloth is in my DNA. I attribute my affinity for recycling in my practice to close observation of my grandmother's resourcefulness in her sewing practice, which she inherited through observation of her mother's and grandmother's sewing practices. Frugality has made its way through generations. Initially present through necessity, now, I draw on the significance of recycled cloth in my research to creatively explore the possibilities of retelling the stories of my ancestors. While I will never meet these people, their experiences are still here today, preserved in their remaining material legacy and through my exploration of my domestic heritage.



Figure 15. Molly Ryan, *Process work: a range of hand and mechanically woven textiles, primarily sourced from the op-shop and old projects, waiting to be worked.* 2022, Undyed and naturally dyed cloth, natural ink screen-print, dye and ink made from a range of eucalyptus and Ceylon tea tannins and iron. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 16. Molly Ryan, *Process work: heavily worked, mechanically woven cloth.* 2022, Naturally dyed, upcycled linen, colour extracted from a range of eucalyptus and Ceylon tea tannins and iron, washed with different washing powders and liquids. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Narratable Surface

I drastically altered every piece of cloth in this project through different methods of surface embellishment. The first method I used to alter cloth involved the addition of a layer of natural dye¹⁹ (Figure 17). I pondered how altering the colour of fabric through dyeing could visually depict the stories and experiences embedded in the ancestral laces. Touch and temporality are intrinsic to the natural dyeing process. There are synergies woven amongst the impact time has on this analogue production method and how time determined the strength of narratives contained within the laces. Similarly, connections can be made between the depth of stories embedded in cloth over periods of prolonged, reciprocal engagement and the hue yielded through extensive contact between dye and cloth. The historical textiles' invisible materiality is a concoction of time, touch and experience.

¹⁹ Natural dyeing refers to the process of extracting tannins from flora to create a dye which is then applied to cloth. This method omits the dangerous chemicals often used in other forms of dyeing.



Figure 17. Molly Ryan, *Process work: hand-stitching in the Ceylon and iron dye bath*. 2022, Hand stitched, upcycled linen in natural dye. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 18. Molly Ryan, *Process work: lace in the Indian Ocean photo essay*. 2022, Vintage lace doily, salt water. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Mordanting

I have learnt about my ancestors through poignant events and subtle, defining details of their lives. Consistently present in their narratives is the presence of the ocean. Ocean water is abundant with minerals that lend themselves to the alchemy of the natural dyeing process, making it a technically and theoretically significant mordant²⁰ for this project. Introducing the ocean into my textile exploration as a site-specific mordant represents the layers of my ancestry characterised by the ocean (Figures 18, 19 & 20). Unlike some mordants, which drastically alter the dyeing outcome, seawater is a discrete mordant, only affecting the yielded hue ever so slightly. The presence of the ocean in my ancestral narrative and as a mordant exists in subtle and characterising ways. The ocean is important to consider in this research for three reasons. Firstly, my maternal and paternal ancestral origins are united and separated by the ocean. Secondly, my great-great-grandfather, who was married to my great-great-grandmother who crucially relocated one of the lace tablecloths from Croatia, met his fate while at sea fishing off a boat near Gage Roads²¹ months after arriving in Walyalup/Fremantle. Lastly, including the ocean in my process is important in acknowledging the formation of many of my core memories on the Southwest coast of Australia in the first eighteen years of my existence. The ocean was and still is a poignant aspect of my life²². My ancestral narrative is dispersed across Australia and Europe/England. A recurrent strand I trace across the many cultures, landscapes and generations that comprise the narrative is the ocean. My ancestry is stained by the vastness, beauty and hostility of the ocean.

The ancestral laces have minute stains on their surface. On reflection, connections emerge between the biography of these stains and the act of dyeing cloth. The natural dyeing process is intuitive and the yielded hue is an alchemy of many determining factors. The nature of this process aligns with the stains on the laces. They are unintentional instances where the cloth is dyed and like natural dyeing, the results are difficult to predict. A stain connects the past to the present, simultaneously evoking the place and circumstances in which it originated. I argue that while the stain is usually associated with a visible alteration on the surface of cloth, the

²⁰ Before cloth can be naturally dyed, it needs to be mordanted. This process prepares the fibres to take on colour and can be conducted using many methods and techniques.

²¹ Gage Roads is a deep-water channel and anchorage point in the outer harbour of Walyalup/Fremantle in the Indian Ocean, Western Australia (Mapcarta 2021).

²² I discuss the significance of the ocean as a research site later in this exegesis (page 77).

staining of cloth can also occur when visual evidence is absent. This thinking links the use of ocean water as a discrete mordant and Freud's metaphor of the "Mystic Writing Pad" (Freud 1961, 227, originally published in 1925). In contrast to the application of colour, where cloth is a palimpsest²³, the Mystic Writing Pad alludes to the recording of infinite notes, which leave not always visible, but permanent evidence of use. Salt crystals bind to the cloth's structure when immersed in the ocean (Flint 2008) and while not always visible, they are there. As previously discussed in this exegesis, this research is concerned with both the visible and invisible annotation of cloth over its lifespan. Exploring this idea through the mordanting of cloth in the ocean became a fundamental layer of process.

The textile methods discussed for the duration of this chapter alter the surface of cloth drastically. Beginning this discussion with the subtle properties of ocean water as a mordant acknowledges the presence of the ocean in my ancestry. Additionally, ocean water represents the present but invisible signs of use in historical cloth objects. In the next part of this chapter, I will introduce the concept of cloth as a palimpsest when natural colour is applied, representing different modes of wear present in the laces.

²³ I discuss cloth as a palimpsest later in this chapter (page 38).



Figure 19. Molly Ryan, *Process work: lace in the Indian Ocean, at Gnarabup*. 2022, Repurposed cotton bedsheet. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 20. Molly Ryan, *Process work: lace in the Indian Ocean, at Gnarabup (detail)*. 2022, Repurposed cotton bedsheet. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Natural Dyeing

As I mentioned previously, every piece of cloth underwent some iteration of dyeing in this project. The ancient process of extracting colour from botanicals to dye cloth is a process I used throughout the entire research journey. Fabric in this project is a palimpsest²⁴, constantly being visibly altered and updated with new information. Immersion in dye was the first step of each palimpsest's journey, with many works returning to the dye pot several times before I was satisfied with the patina obtained. In *In Praise of Shadows* (2001), an essay about Japanese aesthetics originally published in 1933 and translated to English in 1977, Tanizaki brings forth the reverence of patina in the East. I observe linkages amongst ancestral textiles, the natural dyeing process and Tanizaki's debate that material objects are only "enjoy[ed] when [they have] begun to take on a dark, smoky patina" (2001, 18). The life histories layered within the laces is what Tanizaki (2001, 20) expresses as "grime," permeated into and onto an object over generations of use. The desired patina is acquired through an alchemy of considered intervention, patience and time in natural dyeing. Throughout this project, the gentle accumulation of colour introduced an interesting method of visualising the patina accumulating on these laces for over a century. Each time cloth emerged from the dye pot, I reworked it with another layer of colour, an additional stain on its surface.

Robyn Daw (2007, 14) advocates that heavily manipulated cloth is a "site of intense speculation on personal histories." Using natural dye to colour cloth has a low environmental impact; however, it subjects the cloth to many states and treatments through various layers of process. I connect cloth in this project to Daw's (2007) idea of worked cloth during the natural dyeing process: mordanting, soaking, submerged, absorbing dye, lightly boiling, rinsed, drying, laundered, ironed. This process is repeated until the correct depth of colour is achieved. These lace textiles have survived many changes in context over their lives as personal objects. Handed down through generations, the laces have experienced abundant states and treatments to arrive at their current artefactual status. As a natural dyer, I am, to a degree, never in control of the dye result. The process depends on many external factors and obtaining the exact hue twice can be difficult. I have become familiar with the nuances of certain dyestuffs over the years; however, the dye pot gifts a different shade every time. I have primarily worked with Ceylon

²⁴ A palimpsest is "something that has a new layer, aspect, or appearance that builds on its past and allows us to see or perceive parts of this past" (Dictionary.com n.d., para. 2).

tea and eucalyptus leaves in this project. Initially chosen due to their colour potentialities, following close dissemination, these dyestuffs have become an essential aspect of exploring the narratives embedded in the laces.

Two of the laces are tablecloths and I hypothesised that having a cup of tea would be an activity the laces have borne witness to right through their lives as personal objects. The large quantity of Ceylon tea leaves required to yield a decent hue on cloth filled the dye room with a distinctive aroma, a scent that people from every generation the laces represent would be familiar with. The habitual presence of black tea in the daily life of my ancestors and living relatives also pays homage to the laces as worn, quotidian objects. In the work *Steeped in Memories* (2011), Linda Galbraith used tea tannin-dyed doilies to evoke the idea of lace being “drenched in memories,” the stains representing the experiences had over a shared cup of tea (Galbraith 2011, 52). As the ancestral lace tablecloths from my ancestry have moved through generations, details of their lived experience have become immersed in their structure. Many of these experiences would have been as humble as the simple but defining act of having a cup of tea.

While the use of Ceylon tea to dye cloth represents the experiences archived in the fabric, the lace tablecloths also have some visible stains, of which I can only speculate their origin. Paralleling Galbraith’s (2011) use of staining, Sampson also explores the significance of the stain. For Sampson (2022), a stain is the most definite relic of our intermingling with the world, an index of a previous moment. The stain is a visible mark on the surface of cloth that bridges time. In this project, the dyeing of fabric acts as a tool through which I consider temporality. Staining cloth through natural dyeing methods became a method to evoke certain moods and memories through colour, smell and feel. Firstly, speculating on the biography of the stain connects me to a time in the past, demarcating generation distance. Secondly, the stain asserts itself in the cloth over time. Similarly, the longer that cloth is left to be ‘stained’ in the dye pot, the deeper the yielded hue. In this project, Ceylon tea leaves have been used to dye cloth and simultaneously consider the steeping of memories in fabric over time (Figures 21, 22 & 23).



Figure 21 (top). Molly Ryan, *Process work: Imagined Narrative Dress (reverse)*, fresh out of the Ceylon dye pot. 2022, Repurposed cotton bed sheet. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 22 (left). Molly Ryan, *Process work: various laces just pulled from the Ceylon dye pot*. 2022, Repurposed laces. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 23. Molly Ryan, *Process work: cloth being naturally dyed in a pot of Ceylon tannin and iron before machine appliquing*. 2022, Various upcycled fabrics. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Barbara Baert (2017, 273) also explores staining theory and advocates that the “relationship between time, memory and place is not peculiar to the stain.” Previously, I advocated the links between dyeing as a method of staining cloth to consider time and memories. The use of eucalyptus leaves to dye cloth built on this, contemplating time, memory *and* place. As a settler artist working in Western Australia, I have always been conscious of my relationship with my surroundings. I cherish my time in this landscape. My maternal ancestors arrived on South Australian shores in 1849 from Cornwall and my paternal ancestors in Western Australia in 1913 from Croatia. In 2023, I am experiencing a very different landscape. Like the Ceylon tea, one consistency between their experience in this land and mine is the distinctive native Australian flora. Despite the rapidly changing built environment, the natural environment remains (although not as abundant). Using wind-fallen eucalyptus leaves to dye cloth contemplates the tangible threads between their lived experience and mine, again drawing a link between generations, as represented by the laces (Figures 24 & 25).

Time is essential in the process of extracting colour from eucalyptus leaves. When I steeped wind-fallen leaves in water during the warmer months, rapid changes in the depth of colour occurred. I closely monitored the dye concentration in the vat increase as the water level decreased. Each day a new evaporation mark adorned the pot’s side. Returning to Tanizaki, I link this process to his concept of “grime” obtained on an object through handling as a “sheen of antiquity” (Tanizaki 2001, 20). Over time, the lines of grime observed on the edge of the pot came to visually illustrate the layers of my ancestral narrative (Figure 26). Grime can also be attributed to the dyeing of cloth. I leave fabric in the dye vats to steep over time. As the days pass, the absorption of dye into the cloth links back to the idea of “relational materiality” (Law and Mol 1995, 276), a theory raised in the introduction of this exegesis²⁵. Like the laces, which have absorbed details of their lived experience over time, dyeing cloth reflects this idea. I stretch this idea of grime being acquired on the laces during continued touch over generations by using site-specific dyestuffs to reference the places where these encounters occurred.

Debbie Lyddon (2021, para. 1) is a textile artist whose work “originate[s] from thoughts and memories that are a consequence of experiencing place and paying attention.” Lyddon omits her own narrative from the work; however, her use of foraged, naturally occurring materials to alter her textile works reflects my rationale to encapsulate place into my work through materials

²⁵ See page 1.

and processes. Similarly, India Flint, a botanical alchemist, used a piece of calico to document the layering of process, creating a “map of the place where [Flint] lives” (2021, 16:10) in the film *A Piece of Cloth*. Over weeks, different submersions in dye and layers of process culminated in creating a palimpsest. Like Flint and Lyddon, over the course of this project, I have endeavoured to develop a language on cloth through the accumulation of dye, to visually ponder the time, memories and places archived within the structure of the laces (Figures 27 & 28). Furthermore, the major alterations made to the cloth’s appearance during the dyeing process represent both the visible and invisible signs of use that have drenched the laces specific to my ancestry with an opulent history.



Figure 24. Molly Ryan, *Process work: experimenting with colour extracted from dried and fresh eucalyptus leaves*. 2022, Wind-fallen eucalyptus leaves. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 25. Molly Ryan, *Process work: dried eucalyptus leaves steeping in the pot months after collection*. 2022, Wind-fallen eucalyptus leaves. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 26. Molly Ryan, *Process work: lace being naturally dyed in a vat of eucalyptus dye*. 2022, Various upcycled lace borders. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figures 27 & 28. Molly Ryan, *Process work: eucalyptus tannin dyed lace*. 2022, Various upcycled lace borders. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Printmaking

Across this project, I relished the nuances of photographic screen-printing to depict the visual materiality of the laces²⁶. I worked with both images of the ancestral laces and digital collages²⁷, created using fragments of the images of the laces. Translating photographs of the laces onto silkscreens and then to heavily worked cloth decoded a method of factual transcription of information. Humphries (2014) speaks of a similar sensation when translating images onto relief prints; the indexical translation of material with the hand becomes an autobiographical recount. Exploiting the full potential of transforming the laces from image to print could sustain my print practice well beyond this project. The theory I linked to the previously discussed methods dove mostly into the imagined materiality of the laces. For this part of the project, I used screen-printing to engage with both the visible qualities of the laces and the invisible narratives embedded in their surface. Through print, the laces were visually presented on cloth, paying homage to the pattern of holes that characterise their structure. As I investigated my ancestral narrative further, the structure of lace became a metaphor for incomplete histories. Inconsistencies riddle my ancestral story. While known facts support some information, significant pieces of information are missing. A building of process and narrative transpired through the pull of a squeegee, the action and result materially and visually honouring the laces and the histories they represent through a re-creation process. Borrowing from Sandra Leveson (1974, 19), screen-printing became a tool to “exploit [my] ideas” of recreating the materiality of lace. While the result of the print process can be somewhat predetermined, the results always vary slightly. Guided by Leveson’s warning of adhering too rigidly to the initial idea during this process (1974), I allowed myself to explore the medium’s creative possibilities and through that, knowledge emerged.

I was constantly reimagining the application of the lace prints on cloth. The print result from one silkscreen varied hugely through changes in the fabric collecting the print, the colour used to create it and the print orientation. As tessellations of the prints emerged, screen-printing became a method to visualise the bricolage of elements (Figure 29) that have created the current ancestral narrative. Before engaging in this process of recreating the laces, I hadn’t considered how the presentation of fragments of the lace on cloth could be linked to the areas of integrity

²⁶ See Appendices (4).

²⁷ See Appendices (5).

and gaps in knowledge that construct my ancestry and, on reflection, how lace-like the narrative is. Like the laces used to create the stencil on the silkscreen (Figure 30), each image holds a unique language, as characterised by their motifs and specific arrangement on the cloth—drawing closely to the broad array of circumstances, people and experiences that have created the rich narrative held in the ancestral laces. Responding to Hilary Davidson’s (2019, 18) theory that remaking “creates knowledge on many levels,” I explored a wide scope of re-creation through different applications. In the process, I obtained knowledge through technical proficiency and dissemination of findings. I opted for small and large silkscreens to allow various applications. Embellishing a piece of naturally dyed cloth with a tessellation of lace prints unveiled a restorative image of the laces. A depiction of the lattice of memoirs the laces contain was translated onto cloth.



Figure 29. Molly Ryan, *Process work: creating a collage with images of lace, in the exposure room.* 2022, Paper, oil, emulsed silkscreen. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 30. Molly Ryan, *Process work: lace images exposed onto silkscreen.* 2022, Exposed silkscreen. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

I interrogated how screen-printing expressed the lace's authenticity during this project. The translation of the historical laces through the exposure of images onto silkscreens then printed onto cloth enabled concurrent preservation and re-creation of the heirloom textiles. Stewart (1993, 91) suggests that print introduces "repetition, in fact, create[ing] a reproduction which initiates the very aura of the real." Unlike the mono-printing process²⁸, where the lace is sacrificed to the process, photographic screen-printing allows the actual laces to be incorporated into the process without destroying them. This was a crucial concern as the preservation of material culture is paramount to this research. Earlier, I introduced Humphries (2014), who navigates the aura of inherited objects through various printmaking techniques. While Humphries' prints successfully engage with the aura of the intergenerational objects depicted, the print process omits the object from being tangibly incorporated into the work, rather re-created through observation and feeling. I believe that including the laces in the prints by translating them into a stencil on a silkscreen reinforces the integrity of the prints and consequentially, the portrayal of the laces in narrating stories about my ancestry.

Returning to cloth as a palimpsest, I continually reworked printed fabric (Figure 31). By laundering printed cloth, the print quality changes. The print definition softens and the remaining motifs create a subtle ground for future prints. The fabric becomes an active surface through washing, drying and ironing, constantly being built on through additional print layers. This layered process draws closely to Leveson's (1974, 19) explanation of the surface of cloth annotated through print as being "mechanical in nature." Elizabeth Vercoe (1974, 35) situates print as a technique that is "merely a vehicle to convey values through textural build-up of ink and varying intensities through the overlaying of shapes." On a practical level, I resonate with this; however, across the extended period it takes for a piece of cloth to become multi-layered, the significance of printing surpasses this reflection to instead become a method "to inscribe ideas into matter" (Martinetti et al. 2018, 39). Through process, what started as a placid piece of cloth has acquired a unique language that speaks to the layering of narratives, touch, time and people present in the laces. The laces were reactivated through the patchworking of prints (Figures 32, 33 & 34).

²⁸ See Appendices (6).



Figure 31. Molly Ryan, *Lace: Micro, Macro*. 2022, Multi-layered lace motif screen-print using natural handmade ink on naturally dyed calico, cotton thread, 280cm x 175cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.



Figures 32, 33 & 34. Molly Ryan, *Process work: print drop sheet over printed, print series*. 2022, natural handmade screen-printing ink on calico. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

I also worked to eliminate toxins from my creative practice. While I enjoy the prolific productivity and graphic results that the screen-printing process produces, I am conscious of the impact the process has on the environment and my health. I endeavoured to offset the impact of the toxic emulsion used to translate images onto silkscreens by extending the life of the silkscreens. I navigated this by working with a small selection of screens and exploited their creative potential by changing the fabric, inks and arrangement of prints. Additionally, I experimented broadly with developing my natural dye recipes for application to screen-printing²⁹. Adding natural gums and mordants to the dye creates an ink with a consistency appropriate for the process (Figure 35). These unorthodox print methods presented creative challenges that added to the research's technical and theoretical significance. Returning to the "lyrical derailments" proposed by Gascoigne (1974, 39) that are integral to the practice-led research process, I opened a space for honest inquiry in surrendering myself to the process, which led me to unexpected and exciting discoveries.

²⁹ See Appendices (7).

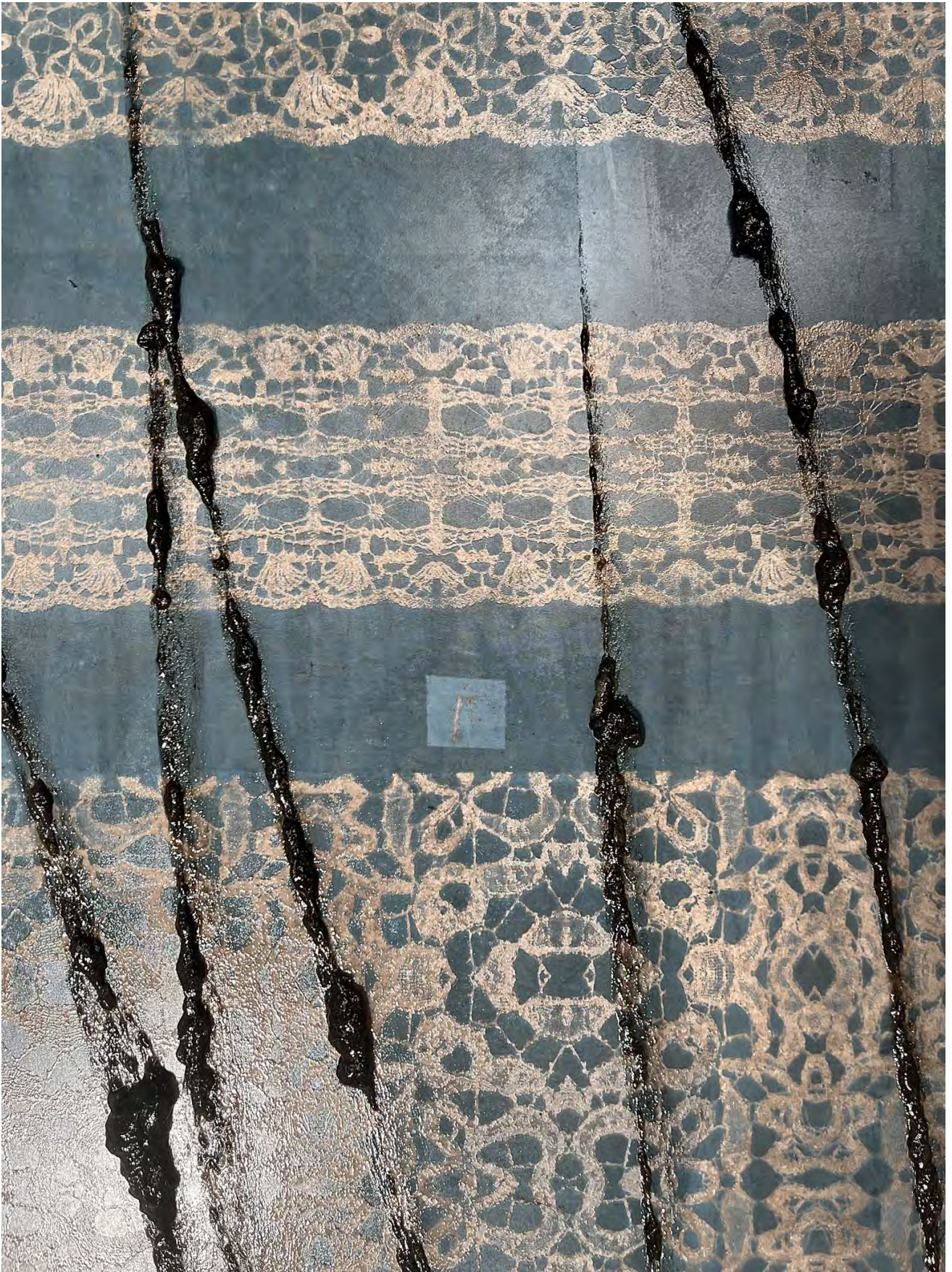


Figure 35. Molly Ryan, *Process work: lace repeat prints*. 2022, Exposed silkscreen with natural handmade ink. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Free-motion Appliqué

Free-motion appliqué³⁰ is a method I have utilised to build on my depictions of the rich life experience embedded in the ancestral laces. The creation of dense, heavy and highly textural cloth is a culminative reflection of narrative, process and material. The resulting textile is an assemblage of many fibres, reminiscent of the contributing elements that have imbued the ancestral laces with a rich identity that has manifested over time. The fragments of cloth I used were garments no longer fit for wear, remnants of previous projects, small offcuts and scraps, all collected since commencing my tertiary studies in 2016. At the time of collection, they didn't seem helpful. However, I held on to the scraps until they "prove[d] useful" (Pengilley 1974, 131). Textile artist Jen Pack (2015, 255) creates large textile-based works as a means of "assembling [their] own identity through the process of making of work." The physical assemblage of scraps to portray ancestral and personal narratives is integral to Pack's and my investigations. Similar to Pack, I interpret a basket of textile scraps as a multiverse of creative potential. This excitement emanates from a strong love for pre-worked cloth and the prospect of reinvigorating past experiences through discrete reminders conserved from previous journeys. Pack interprets the pieces "constructed of scraps [as] tapestries that embrace and subsume memory" (Pack 2015, 258).

In my project, every fragment that made its way into the assemblage was previously worked. Each piece possessed subtle insights into the previous life of the cloth, evident on close inspection. Visual signifiers of the textiles' previous life offered a point of connection with past moments. The motifs and visual clues of the scraps instigate nostalgia and reflection on close inspection of the heavily worked cloth (Figures 36 & 37). Dutch textile artist Femke van Gemert also works with scraps. Gemert has developed her approach from "sentimental encounters and an intimate connection to other people's garments" (Edelkoort & Fimmano 2021, 117). The act of assembling works from textiles once deemed as waste creates a strong visual language and a human-centred message. Similarly, I interpret scraps co-inhabiting one space as a visual expression of an exchange of ideas and the fabrication of a new allegory about the people connected to the ancestral laces.

³⁰ The creation of decorative patterns and textures through piecing different fabrics onto a base fabric is appliqué (Isogawa & Safe 2018, 169).



Figures 36 & 37. Molly Ryan, *Process work: appliqué in the light*. 2022, Naturally dyed scraps stitched to an upcycled bedsheet. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Prior to appliquéing, the scraps were naturally dyed to create visual unity amongst a chaotic pile of materials. Before the timely stitching began, the fabrics had hours dedicated to them. Each stage of intervention is a layer of process and meaning, like the layering of experiences, touch, time and people the laces represent. Lace fragments are scattered throughout; their subtle presence is significant in creating a common visual cue between each free-motion appliqué work and referencing the central position of lace in this project. The tucking and weaving of the wool, silk, cotton and linen pieces created narratable surfaces, with each piece reaching completion after a hefty investment of time. As I hand-operated my sewing machine, I observed each fragment creasing into one another. The process of affixing the scraps with cotton thread began referencing Ellen Sampson's (2022, 144) observation of creased cloth as "the transportation of the movements of the body, into and across material things." The method is impetuous but considered; the order in which I stitch each piece is decided seconds before being adhered to the base cloth. The fortuity of the lived experience that the laces embody is analogous to the gestural placement of the materials on the base cloth. The thousands of scraps mechanically bound into place with kilometres of cotton thread visually represent how I imagine the stories exist in the laces—each supporting one other, constantly engaged in a dynamic conversation.

This method of visualising the many elements that comprise my ancestry and bringing them into one unanimous textile aligns closely with Akira Isogawa's interpretation of appliqué as a collage method. Isogawa has extensively used appliqué to collage textures to create depth in wearable garments (Isogawa & Safe 2018). I interpret my use of appliqué in the project as haphazard collaging; the result is harmonious through colour and technique. Similarly, India Flint (2011) describes how the careful conservation of cloth can result in works where previously overlooked scraps are layered and reinforced with stitches, transformed into objects rich with narrative. The ancestral laces have operated over time as containers for collecting information about their lives as personal objects. The assemblage of many different fibres and compositions, some more graphically explicit than others, seeks to visualise the 'contents' collected in the containers. The process of collaging cloth is a poignant musing exploring the assemblage of information that exists within the laces. The creasing and contouring of the textile fragments into one another create a unique historical map of recorded anecdotes. The laces bridge intergenerational distance and depict the stitching of stories across generations, as expressed through this method (Figure 38).



Figure 38. Molly Ryan, *Stitches in Time (detail)*. 2022, Upcycled cotton base cloth. Naturally dyed, upcycled garments: cotton, silk, linen, wool and lace, adhered to base cloth with cotton thread, 260cm x 205cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Paper

While a majority of exploration in this project was around the manipulation of cloth, I also experimented with paper. Paper becomes inherently cloth-like when stitched, scrunched, ripped, dyed, ironed or printed. The experimentations were the result of spontaneous studio engagement, loosely responding to the research intentions through the manipulation of materials at hand, which at that moment in time, was paper. I worked with paper in three capacities: making lace³¹, creating paper³² and as a ground for screen-printing. Each method responded to the research question by exploring how different processes considered the ancestral lace textiles' materiality. While the research is inherently centralised around cloth and the properties it embodies, working with paper in unconventional ways presented new ways of engaging the materiality of lace through process and medium.

For the paper lace, I ripped large pieces of paper down into smaller fragments, pinning the pieces onto a dissolvable chemical substrate. I used this method of making cloth extensively when producing my graduate collection, *Anecdotes Le Femme*³³, in 2019. Once pinned, I fixed the fragments to the substrate with cotton thread and placed the substrate fabric into water to dissolve. The remaining material was inherently lace-like; each piece of paper close in proximity but not touching, creating a network of irregular holes. The mechanical nature of cotton thread reinforced the delicate structure into one piece, the work becoming an embroidered paper lace. Sharon Peoples explores the creative possibilities of making lace with thread using a similar machine embroidery technique. *Golden Pomegranates* (2011) reflects the textile artists' use of "embroidery as a metaphor for storytelling" (Peoples 2011, 103). While my approach differs from Peoples' in that I use paper fragments in the network alongside thread, the techniques both explore embellishing, decorating, stitching over and unpicking details of stories through process (Peoples 2011).

The second experimentation, paper making, involved repurposing waste fashion pattern paper into a new material. Working with paper softened in water, I blended the fibres into a pulp, which I poured into a mould. I placed silk hankies on the wet pulp to create texture and left them to dry. Once dry, the silk fibres were loose on the surface; I affixed them to the paper

³¹ See Appendices (8).

³² See Appendices (9).

³³ See Appendices (1).

base with a free-motion embroidery technique. Similarly to the paper lace method discussed previously, this process also explores the amalgamation of fragments of materials into a cohesive form. The role of cotton thread is again integral to the structure. Unlike cloth, a permanent hole remains when paper is pierced with a needle (Figure 39). For both paper methods, I began visualising how the transmission of light through the network of holes could create my own lace. While I enjoyed the outcomes of the paper explorations, at this time, I was also experimenting with other cloth-based techniques, which I felt responded to the materiality of the ancestral laces more effectively.

Before screen-printing onto usually laboriously prepared cloth, I always did a print proof on paper to test the silkscreen and ink. Throughout the project, I accumulated many print proofs on paper. I worked with butcher's paper for large prints. The application of natural ink on the paper caused it to pucker, similar to how fabric shrinks when printed (Figure 40). The thin paper is delicate and quite cloth-like in appearance in comparison to the smaller prints, which I did on much thicker paper (Figure 41). I chose to display a selection of the print proofs in my final exhibition of works as the large, screen-printed lengths of cloth were so layered that sometimes the print's detail was lost. Again, I enjoyed the screen-printed paper, however, cloth lent itself more favourably to exploring the materiality of the ancestral laces.



Figure 39. Molly Ryan, *Process work: handmade, stitched paper*. 2022, Waste fashion paper, silk hankies, cotton thread, textile medium. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

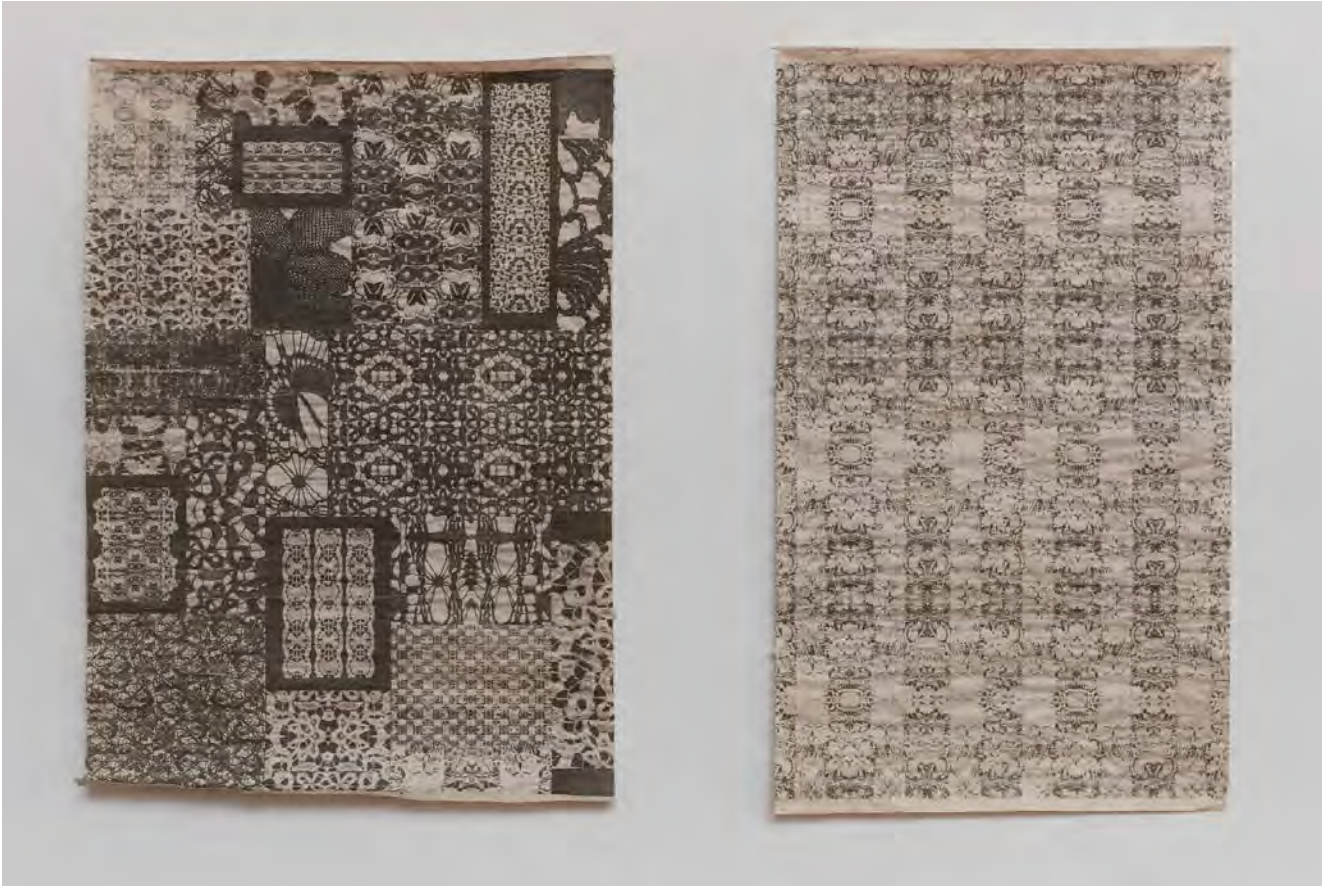


Figure 40. Molly Ryan, *Print proofs*. 2022, Natural handmade ink screen-prints on butcher's paper. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Figure 41. Molly Ryan, *Process work: print proofs*. 2022, Natural handmade ink screen-print on paper. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Corporeal Constructions

The excitement accompanying the transformation of materials through different processes is a key motivation for many people who create. Janet Brereton (1974, 55) articulates what I know to be a broadly understood mindset: “I am constantly envisaging designs which I have not yet tried.” The creative possibilities of transforming cloth through various processes and then giving it form is a significant driver of my inquiry. Working across fashion and textiles, I am comfortable contextualising cloth on and off the body, constantly visualising possibilities in my mind. The critical crossovers between fashion and art and whether they can co-exist have long been argued and the discourse is limited and conflicting (Geczy & Karaminas 2012). The scope of this project is not to formulate an answer but rather explore how the forms that textiles take in this project (which, in isolation, some could be viewed as fashion or art) operate to examine the materiality of the ancestral lace textiles. The two seemingly disparate but intrinsically linked worlds have, for a long time, existed in a symbiotic relationship, drawing inspiration from one another in a zestful reciprocity of ideas (Heinemann 2012). For this project, the flux between the two forms has generated an interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge.

I gauged a loose idea about what forms the textiles I made would eventuate into during various exhibition points throughout the project. While I worked with a plan of creating wearable garments and two-dimensional forms to pay homage to the animating properties of wear and the forms of the ancestral textiles, I didn’t let this dictate the direction of the studio inquiry. Cloth is fluid and fabrics often suggest which form they want to take. Furthermore, the making processes (printing, machine appliqué, patching, garment construction) have altered the surface of cloth so drastically that they no longer sit flat. Instead, they now rest in drapes and folds (Figure 42), “invit[ing] the conceptualization of abstract thought” (Pajaczkowska 2018). The following section unpacks the methods used to transform worked cloth into forms that build on the exploration of the materiality of the ancestral lace textiles.



Figure 42. Molly Ryan, *Lace Assemblages installation shot*. 2022. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Patchworking

In 2021, I worked with patchworking in a far less formal capacity, piecing silk fragments of various sizes into a larger cloth³⁴. I used screen-printed fragments of silk, reinforced into one piece with hand-stitching, to contextualise the intercultural patching of people, time and experience that eventuated into narratives about my ancestry. In contemporary literature, the patching of smaller pieces of fabric is frequently used interchangeably as a method to create quilts (Porter 2019; Robertson 2018; Miller, Cabrera-Lafuente & Allen-Johnstone 2021). The act of piecing fabric to form a larger cloth has its foundations in frugality and conservation, extending the life of the material for as long as possible through reinforcement. The ability to use anything at hand, including working with the ever-increasing detritus of ill-considered consumption, has since extended the fundamental necessity of patchworking to make cloth last to become a means of communicating and commemorating (Porter 2019; Andrews 2021). The *AIDS Memorial Quilt* is an ongoing work of over 50,000 individual quilted panels that memorialise lives lost to HIV/AIDS (National AIDS Memorial n.d.). The quilts constructed include clothes of the deceased, the fabric reworked into patchworked quilts by people connected to those being remembered. This work is just one example of the grid-like patchwork method being used to compile information, telling the story of humanity at particular moments in time (Robertson 2018).

The method of patchworking I followed to complete *Patched Narrative* (Figure 43) was a response to thinking about how many elements amalgamate into one to form an ancestral narrative (Figures 44 & 45). I had considered this in previous methods, but in a much more fluid, informal capacity (natural dyeing, machine appliqué, printmaking). This large-scale patchwork was a more mathematical and structured contemplation of my ancestral narrative. Robertson (2018) addresses patchworking as a process that draws knowledge, images, facts and artifacts into a whole. The process investigates how small patches of information or objects can be consolidated through stitching. Working in sections, the scale of the piece demanded that I spend more time with it, allowing for more intense dissemination and the extraction of additional information during the process of making the work.

³⁴ See Appendices (10).



Figure 43. Molly Ryan, *Patched Narrative*. 2022, Upcycled cloth: cotton, linen, silk, naturally dyed with lace motif screen-prints using natural handmade ink, cotton thread, 510cm x 430cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

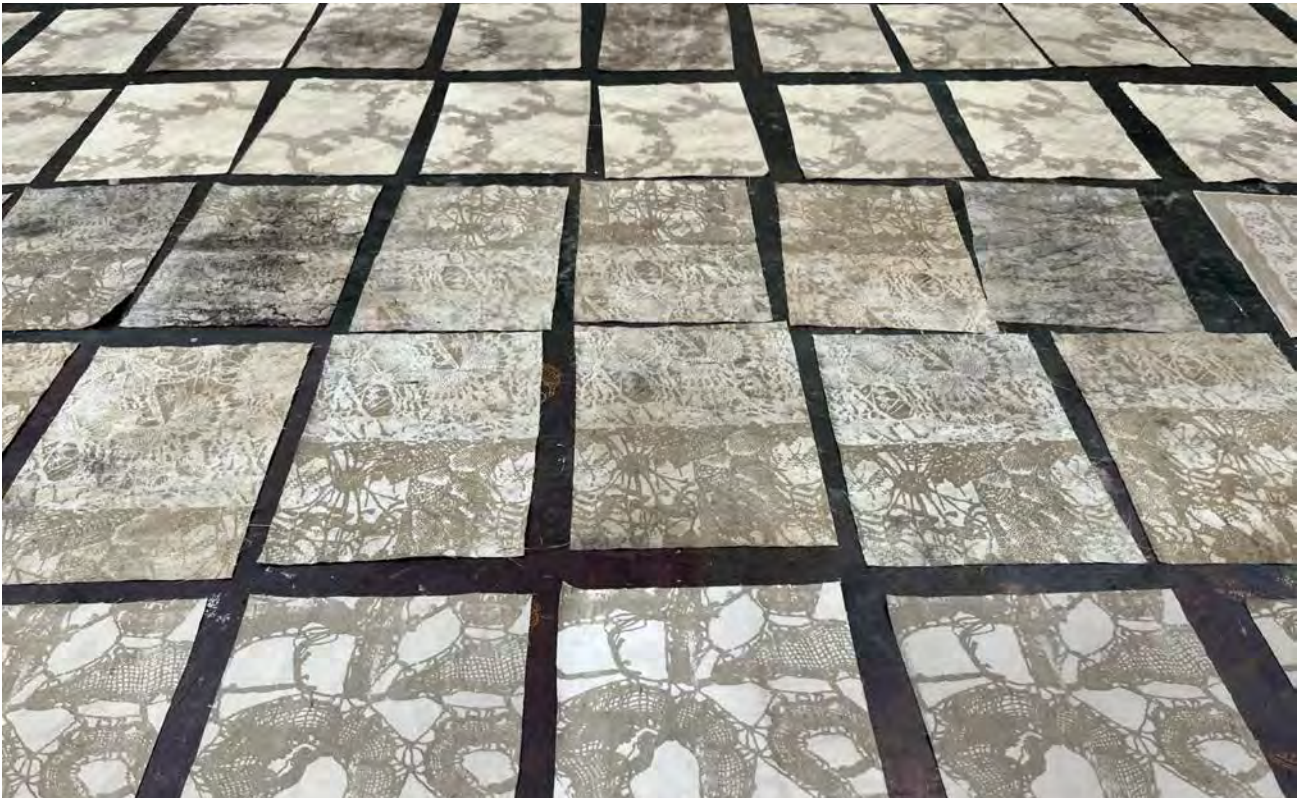


Figure 44. Molly Ryan, *Process work: screen-printed patchwork panels*. 2022, Natural ink screen-prints. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 45. Molly Ryan, *Process work: screen-printed patchwork panel*. 2022, Natural ink screen-print. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

In thinking about my ancestral narrative through remaining material relics, I had only traced back five generations, admittedly not thinking about the multitude of people required to make my narrative possible. As the patchwork grew in scale, I continued to consider how many people were needed to arrive at the current situation. The four hundred and forty-eight panels comprising the work don't accurately represent the number of people in my ancestral lineage; however, they reference the magnitude of emotions, feelings, decisions and people that ultimately determined my existence. Although the dimensions are reduced, there is no "corresponding reduction in significance" (Stewart 1993, 43). Figure 46 indicates how the number of people you are connected to increases the further history is traced. All of these individuals I share DNA with but will never know.

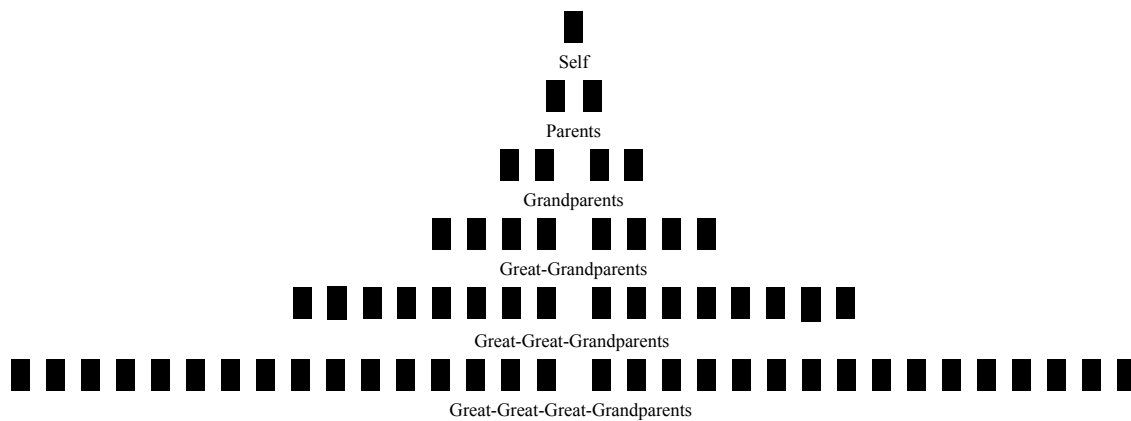


Figure 46. Molly Ryan, *Ancestral lineage tree*. 2022, Digital diagram.

My ancestral lineage has many gaps in knowledge and much of this information has been lost in time. Synthesising the available data into a monumental cloth from a variety of small, screen-printed fabrics has allowed me to take the information at hand and put it into new relations (Lindström & Ståhl 2018). In the context of my project, I draw on the storytelling capacities of patchworking and the familiarity of cloth as a medium to convey the meaning behind the work. Cotton, linen and silk are broadly understood through tacit knowledge gained over a lifetime of interaction with cloth. The fabric used in the patchwork is soft from previous wear and heavy working through process. Communicating highly personal ancestral narratives through an intimately understood medium attempted to synthesise the significance of the meaning behind the work into other people's understanding of their own ancestry. The dark panels are upcycled,

naturally dyed silks integrated amongst screen-printed cloth of varying graphic intensity. The sporadic placement of the silk panels is a nod to the materiality of the silk lace textile transported by my great-great grandmother in 1913; the infrequent arrangement speaks of the emotional value of silk (Miller, Cabrera-Lafuente & Allen-Johnstone 2021). Visual harmony was an important consideration when creating work on such a large scale (Figure 47). Intentionally omitting screen-printing from the silk panels allowed the qualities of silk to be creatively juxtaposed with the cotton and linen panels.

The naturally dyed cotton and linen panels were screen-printed with images of the laces and digitally constructed collages, created by reworking small sections of the images into a ‘new’ lace. Here, the process of collaging information through patchworking contextualises Brockmeier’s (2009, 227) theory of “narrative imagination,” the bringing together of fact and fiction. Presenting the images of the laces on cloth was a factual depiction of the artefacts through a direct replication of the image through print. Meanwhile, the digital collages contemplate blending fact (the images) with fiction through the fabrication of a new lace, a new narrative. The amalgamation of screen-printed fabrics into a whole blends fact with fiction and brings the stories embedded within the twisted and knotted structure of the laces into the context of a gallery.



Figure 47. Molly Ryan, *Patched Narrative (detail)*. 2022, Upcycled cloth: cotton, linen, silk, naturally dyed with lace motif screen-prints using natural handmade ink, cotton thread, 510cm x 430cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Garments

I have made textiles into wearable garment forms to investigate wear in my exploration of the lived experience of the laces. I intended to exhibit garments to introduce theories that surpass those purely concerned with attire (Maynard 2012), to build on a developing methodology that navigates the entangled elements that comprise Fashion Studies³⁵. In the context of an exhibition, garments can often realign within a new value system to become rarefied objects rather than paraphernalia of the quotidian. Exploring the animation of cloth through everyday use is a large part of this project and while the display of garments in the Old Customs House is dramatic, I have endeavoured not to isolate garments from the everyday by creating dresses that fit me, displayed on mannequins (Figure 48). Additionally, I presented garments draped over furniture to link them to the landscape of everyday life, as if in situ in the home (Figure 49). Upon completion of the dresses, I spent some time wearing each. The experience was kinaesthetic and tactile—the weight of the dresses impacted their response to moving whilst on the body. With each step, the drape of the cloth undulated. Through my use of garment to explore people entangled within cloth, the dresses became a metaphoric etymology as bearers of familial history and memory contained within the ancestral laces.

Moira Bateman works with garment forms from a fine art perspective in the exhibition *Momenta Animale: The Hungry Girls*. The installation portrays the giantesses in Patricia Eakin's short story, *The Hungry Girls and Other Stories* (1989), by creating eight-foot-long nightgowns (Bateman 2021). Bateman describes the garments as visual references to the wild nature of the giantesses through scale and site-specific materials (Minnesota Original 2015). The resulting garment forms are hung from repurposed horse yolks, further reducing the 'humanness' of the installation. I also make garments from highly textural textiles; however, in my project, contextualising the dresses on the body was vital in ensuring the presence of the human in the act of annotating cloth. I also argue that when analysing worn clothing, you can't isolate it entirely from the body it adorns. Therefore, displaying the dresses on mannequins was essential in ensuring the delineation of wear in the project.

³⁵ Dress, body, fashion, consumption, (Entwistle 2016), personal identity (Geczy & Karaminas 2012) and textiles.



Figure 48. Molly Ryan, (right-left) *Memory Fragments*, *Memories: Assemblage of Scraps*, *Embodied Lacescape*. 2022, Garments comprised of densely appliquéd, naturally dyed scrap textiles, AU Women's size 10. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.



Figure 49. Molly Ryan, *Lace Bricolage*. 2022, Naturally dyed upcycled silk garments, appliquéd cotton lace fragments, cotton thread. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Findings and Analysis

Research Sites

Practice-led research for this project took place in different locations, with each site contributing uniquely to investigating the research question. Creating spaces to separate the various working parts of the project was integral in understanding how they inform each other. In addition, unlocking each research site's value helped create a language to explore the importance of worn material culture.

Studio

The studio is where I translated my energy and ideas into cloth over weeks of involvement and intervention. As a research site, the different activities that took place in the studio each had a unique language and subsequently produced various forms of knowledge. I worked across my home studio and the print and wet studios at Curtin University. As this research was highly personal, I became totally involved in the project's progression. There weren't many moments during the last two years when my research wasn't at the forefront of every thought. Heirlooms decorate my home studio (furniture, jewellery, ornaments). Particularly at the start of the study, being surrounded by the compendium of relics clouded my thoughts.

While the presence of the objects eventually enhanced my dissemination of the findings, initially, I found it easier to focus on the materiality of the laces when I physically removed myself from the other heirloom objects. I achieved this by frequenting the print and wet rooms with a select arsenal of materials, focusing on one method at a time. I could address the details of the laces more effectively when I was away from clutter; in this way, the studio became a blank canvas. Being away from the objects themselves allowed me to think more critically about the entangled relationship between objects of the past, practice in the present and possibilities for the future. Returning from the studio following total, uninterrupted engagement, being surrounded by the heirlooms in my home assisted in reflecting on and synthesising the knowledge gained through process. This method of working between two places became, to again borrow from Carter (2004, 13), my procedure of "material thinking." There is no linearity to this research. The research ecosystem I established relied on a holistic circular approach. Constantly engaging, disengaging and re-engaging with the multiple strands of the project allowed for knowledge to emerge. At times, the significance of the processes

used was revealed instantly in the studio and sometimes the significance wasn't realised until the findings had been disseminated days or months later (Figures 50 & 51).



Figure 50. Molly Ryan, *Process work: on the sewing machine*. 2022, Ancestral lace over-lay digital collage. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 51. Molly Ryan, *Process work: screen-printing*. 2022. Digital image. Photography: Georgia Hillas.

Beach

It was a busy schedule working between theory and practice in this project. I found that being away from making, books, images and writing, a chance to think more critically about the broader significance of my findings. As I mentioned previously, the ocean is a large part of my identity. The meditative process of walking on the beach allowed my mind to envisage ideas I was unable to manifest when in the studio or at the computer. Being in the fresh, salty air, new links emerged between theory and practice, and I did my most effective visualising of forms, textiles and planning of critical steps in the project. The ocean simultaneously enthralls and terrifies me. I find being at the beach an experience where I traverse two worlds: land and sea. One world is well explored and one is still broadly a mystery to humans. Like lace, our knowledge of the ocean and the land is a network of known and unknown. Similarly to my practice, the known supports the unknown. Being physically away from the project, the known, allowed me to think freely about the unknown without any pressure of actioning the reflections through the production of work or penning my thoughts on paper. Like the knowledge produced in the studio, these ‘ocean-induced’ thoughts subconsciously resurfaced in my research months later (Figures 52 & 53).



Figure 52. Molly Ryan, *Process work: thinking through walking, C Y O'Connor Beach*. 2022, Lace over-lay digital collage. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

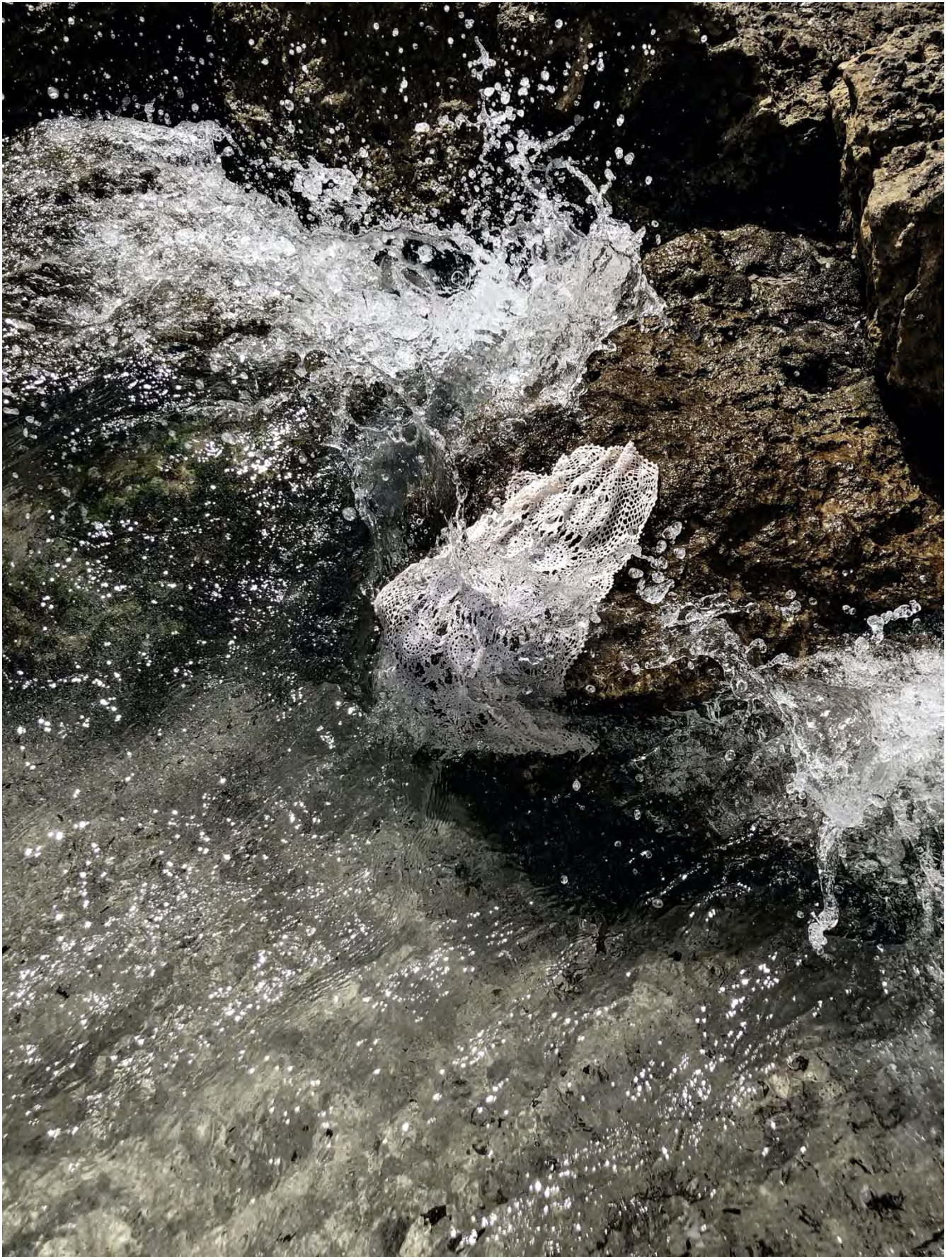


Figure 53. Molly Ryan, *Process work: mordanting lace in the Indian Ocean, C Y O'Connor Beach*. 2022. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Exhibition

Exhibition of work in this project became another site for reflective research. Presenting my work for public dissemination connected the findings to different audiences, perspectives and interpretations (Figures 54 & 55). In the gallery, I had many poignant conversations with visitors, which surfaced fresh perspectives on my processes and work, allowing me to consider things I may have previously overlooked. The knowledge obtained during this process was completely different from the knowledge created during other engagements. The visual signifiers of lace in the physical works became a point of connection between my experience with lace and that of the viewers. In opening my highly personal research to strangers, my understandings were challenged, refined and propelled into new and exciting territories. Throughout this project, I exhibited my work publicly on four separate occasions. Each exhibition was unique; subsequently, the knowledge produced during each experience differed. Learning how people connected to the presentation through their pre-existing experiences with ancestral laces was one of the most poignant takeaways from the exhibition. Working with a material that is common among so many heritages, for so many people around the world, but still holds an innately personal connection to the owner and their ancestral lineage connected unassuming people to my work. We experience textiles through a multi-sensory engagement. The exhibitions engaged the senses, encouraging viewers to reflect on their relationship with lace through sight, orally relayed communication, touch, memory and reflection.



Figure 54. Molly Ryan, *Lace Assemblages installation shot*. 2022. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.



Figure 55. Molly Ryan, *Lace Assemblages installation shot*. 2022. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth

6th– 10th October 2021

AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth was a group show at Kidogo Art House in Walyalup/Fremantle, part of the *Indian Ocean Craft Triennial IOTA21*³⁶. This exhibition brought together the work of six artists who explored how cloth is elevated from a “mundane, everyday item to significant personal possession” (Steiner 2021, 2)³⁷. From the outset of this project, I determined that I didn’t want to remake the laces. Consequently, my work for this exhibition primarily focused on the lived experience of the laces, to a degree, omitting the lace’s structural qualities from my investigation. This initial research resulted in the creation of textiles that explored the rich lived experience of the cloth through the layering of processes and materials. I displayed the resulting works as neo-tapestries and ghostly garment forms (Figure 56). At this stage of the research, I was still refining my articulation of the significance of drawing on the embodied, lived experience of the lace as a point of departure for the study. Presenting my work for public dissemination assisted in refining my pitch and unlocking new avenues to pursue.

This exhibition became a productive discussion in the form of nostalgia and material reflection. Since the project began, a fundamental tension has been the inclusion of my ancestrally significant lace and anonymous lace. I justified the use of anonymous lace as an exploration into the materiality of the cloth and how that was significant in unpacking the lived experience of lace from *my* ancestral lineage. On the other hand, I always wondered if I was doing the anonymous lace a disservice by working it into something new and compromising the integrity of the laces specific to my ancestry. The chance to present my work for public dissemination created a space to ponder the significance of these assumptions. The subtle visual signifiers of lace, ancestral or anonymous, encouraged viewers to physically move closer to the pieces, instigating a conversation about the work, in which the authentic intentions of the project were revealed.

While the physicality of the lace has since become a significant element of the research, understanding how the methods and materials used focused on the life history of the lace was

³⁶ See Appendices (11).

³⁷ See Appendices (12).

a new method of investigating lace to many viewers. Discussing my findings with a broad audience assisted in understanding how the research explored themes of a shared cultural allegory. A frequent response from viewers was the feeling of oscillating between distant cultural traditions and their life in Australia. Like myself, these people spoke of the presence of heirloom lace in the home as a reminder of their mixed heritages. It was clear my strong affinity for lace was not an isolated feeling. Reflecting on this, I began to draw connections between the collective feeling of fragmented ancestral narratives and the structure of lace. This prompted me to expand on the objects' invisible narratives and assess the structural qualities of lace, and how it enhanced the use of lace as a metaphor for familial anecdotes. The installation I presented, depicted in Figures 56 and 57, was dark and moody, the lace details only visible on close inspection. While I enjoyed the way the subtle details encouraged close and considered inspection, introducing a different colour palette and more graphic depictions of the lace emerged as a way of paying homage to the laces at the centre of the research in a more explicit than implied manner.



Figure 56. Molly Ryan, *AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth* installation shot. 2021, Digital image.
Photography: Rob Frith.



Figure 57. Molly Ryan, *AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth* installation shot. 2021, Installation shot. Photography: Rob Frith.

Narratives in Lace: The Process

9th – 13th of May 2022

Narratives in Lace: The Process was a solo exhibition held in building 418 Exhibition Space at Curtin University as part of my Masters Milestone 2 presentation. This opportunity presented itself early in the research project's second half. At this stage, I hadn't produced many resolved works since the previous exhibition. I, however, had been making small textile samplers to discern what I would pursue for my final pieces. Serendipitously, I had always envisaged an exhibition where the research process became a crucial part of the display. Rather than reflecting on just the resolved works, through the samplers, viewers became critically engaged in the creative potential of the work, instigating meaningful conversations about the forms the textiles could take, scale and potential combination of techniques. This exhibition was productive and insightful in touching, talking and grouping samples together (Figures 58 & 59). Critical reflection on the combination of new and old pieces, alongside the textile samples in the gallery context, resulted in important decisions about the form and scale of future work. These decisions emerged through conversations with viewers and solo reflection time in the gallery. While the final pieces are an assemblage of many different methods and materials, time and dedication, having the opportunity to exhibit process work alongside a collection of pieces was poignant. At the time, I considered the pieces exhibited alongside the samplers resolved; however, as the year progressed, they also eventuated into process works themselves, primarily informing the direction of larger pieces (Figure 60). Through this exhibition, what became apparent was the information that emerges when practices and process are reflected on in the context of the gallery. Typically, resolved works are the focal point in an exhibition; however, displaying the process work created space for critical reflection, which over the course of the project, manifested into a necessary step in creating considered work.



Figure 58. Molly Ryan, *Narratives in Lace: The Process, textile samplers*. 2022, Various textiles, paper and cotton thread. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 59. Molly Ryan, *Narratives in Lace: The Process, textile samplers*. 2022, Various textiles, paper and cotton thread. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 60. Molly Ryan, *Narratives in Lace: The Process (detail)*. 2022, Naturally dyed, screen-printed silk. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Memories: Assemblage of Scraps

22 October - 12 November 2022

Memories: Assemblage of Scraps was selected as part of the Western Australian Fibre and Textile Association's juried exhibition, *TwentyFIVE+*, held at Holmes á Court Gallery. This piece was an outcome of this research project: a wearable garment constructed entirely of naturally dyed scraps (Figure 61). I used the previously discussed free-motion appliqué method to adhere the scraps to upcycled linen pants, creating dense and heavy textiles (Figures 62 & 63). Through an artist talk, it was revealed that viewers responded positively to the sheer obsessiveness and determination required to see this piece come to life. Like the significance of intergenerational time that creates a value system around ancestral lace, the time taken to create the garment was necessary when viewing the work.

Like the translation of vibrancy into objects through time, the total involvement of self in the production of work is a transfer of energy from one source to another—energy from myself into my work. The prospect of commencing one of these stitched pieces is simultaneously overwhelming and exciting. An example of this energy translation into objects through process is seen in Australian contemporary jewellery maker Verlie Just's practice. Just explains that nothing has brought her more challenge, excitement and satisfaction than the production of creative jewellery (Just 1974). Admittedly becoming elated from the process of manipulating materials through intuitive feeling and process, Just is exhausted when the “fire consuming [her] has been transferred to the object which then has its own identity” (Just 1974, 143). The total involvement in process is evidenced through the highly textural wearable forms produced. In the resulting works, stacked metal is mountainous in appearance, a visual and symbolic exploration of time through process, form and texture—forging forms from precious metals older than millennia through power, energy and time.

The process I use to explore the medley of experience, time and people in the ancestral laces through the creation of dense textiles is also a total involvement. Waste is collected, naturally dyed, cut and affixed to a base cloth with cotton thread through days, weeks and months of investment. With this process, hours can pass and the progress feels minimal. I need to take regular breaks to stretch and recalibrate. Enhancing this is the gestural placement of the scraps on the base cloth, evidence of the hand in the process. The kilometres of cotton thread holding the thousands of textile fragments into place was hard for viewers to fathom. Linking the layers

of this highly involved process to the richly coded memory scape embedded in the ancestral laces brought lace into the gallery space in a new way.

So far, every exhibition became a research site through the adoption of a curatorial lens. It is hard to visualise how something you have been working on for months will be transformed by being hung in a gallery. Having the opportunity to have three separate exhibitions opened a space for critical reflection on the form and display of work and how that could be poignant in how the work is read. The more I presented my work, made and explored my ancestral narrative, the clearer it became that textiles could serve as anecdotes of experience and memory and lace as a metaphor for collective cultural memory.



Figure 61. Molly Ryan, *Memories: Assemblage of Scraps*. 2022, Garment comprised of naturally dyed scraps appliquéd to upcycled linen garments. Digital image. Photography: David Chong.



Figures 62 & 63. Molly Ryan, *Memories: Assemblage of Scraps (detail)*. 2022, Garment comprised of naturally dyed scraps appliquéd to upcycled linen garments. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Lace Assemblages
10th – 18th December 2022

Lace Assemblages was a solo exhibition at the Old Customs House in Walyalup/Fremantle, this project's final exhibition and Milestone point. The title, *Lace Assemblages*, reflected the different textiles and textile processes used throughout the project; each worked to assemble information about the materiality of ancestral lace textiles (Figures 64 & 65). The forms that the findings took were site-specific. Reflecting on the *Narratives in Lace: The Process* exhibition, I was determined to take on the challenge to respond to the overwhelming grandeur of the Old Customs House (Figure 66). While the scale of the works initially responded to the space, the significance of the forms that the works took in the space emerged through conversations with visitors and personal reflection. I exhibited four forms: a large-scale patchwork and prints, garments and process work in the form of my 2022 Creative Process Journal.

Commencing this research, I had been thinking about how 'life is lace,' working from Rosemary Shepherd's definition of lace as "a decorative openwork fabric in which the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas" (Shepherd 2003, 2). As I have frequently referenced through this exegesis, influenced by Shepherd's definition, I interpret lace as an arrangement of holes. Once I started to think about the fundamental structural underpinnings of lace, I quickly found myself experiencing the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon (Pietrangelo 2019), also known as a frequency bias. For a period of the project, everywhere I looked, lace surrounded me. Micro and macro, natural and man-made, I experienced the world around me through the 'lace lens.' Deborah West (2011, 139) also describes this as the "repetitive patterns [that] exist all around us," which she contextualises through the making of lace. At this point of the project, I was workshopping the idea of making lace. I found other ways to engage with the materiality of the structural qualities of lace through screen-printing; however, the theory stayed in the back of my mind.



Figure 64. Molly Ryan, *Patched Narrative 2*. 2022, Naturally dyed and screen-printed upcycled cotton bed sheet, cotton thread, 225 x 127cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.



Figure 65. Molly Ryan, *Patched Narrative 2 (detail)*. 2022, naturally dyed and screen-printed upcycled cotton bed sheet, cotton thread, 225 x 127cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.



Figure 66. Molly Ryan, *Old Customs House atrium* (12 meters high). 2022. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

The frequency bias theory resurfaced in the gallery between conversations with guests and preparing a paper that explored how lace could assemble links between the past, present and future. Reflecting on the *Patched Narrative* (Figure 43) work and other screen-prints, I frequented the idea of lace as a pattern of holes and, consequently, found myself revisiting the idea that I was surrounded by lace. The patchwork comprises four hundred and forty-eight panels, with eighteen variations of the ancestral laces. The variations are a range of zoomed images on parts of the lace fabrics and digital collages of elements of the laces. Each has their own unique qualities; however, they have a common origin. This large-scale patchwork eventuated into a map that explored the necessary assemblage of people over time to create my ancestral narrative. When explaining the work to viewers, I observed that the lace screen-prints looked inherently DNA-like. The significance of lace as a metaphor to explore my ancestral story emerged as the DNA double helix that binds generations of people together was, on inspection, recognisably lace-like (Figures 67 & 68). While I had previously considered how the structure of lace could be used to depict the gaps in knowledge that my ancestral narrative is riddled with, the observation of DNA being a lace-like arrangement of holes added a layer of substance to the use of lace as a metaphor for ancestral inquiry. I had patched together my ancestral narrative through the making processes, visualising the links between DNA and lace (Figure 69).

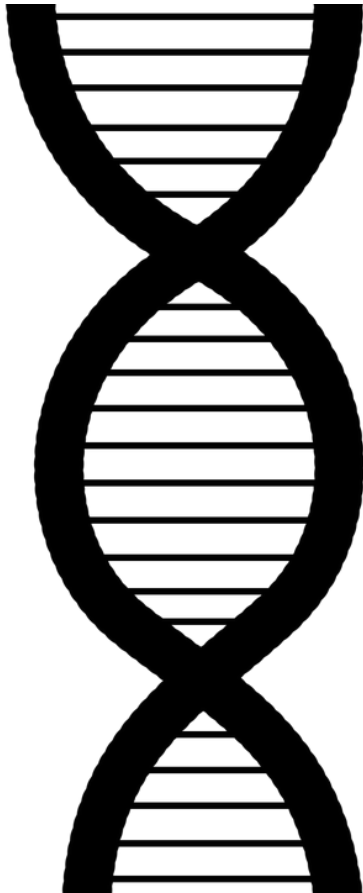


Figure 67. ElisaRiva, *DNA double helix*. 2017, Digital image. Reproduced from: Pixabay.



Figure 68. Molly Ryan, *Process work: print proofs*. 2022, Natural handmade ink screen-print on butcher's paper. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 69. Molly Ryan, *Patched Narrative (detail)*. 2022, Upcycled cloth: cotton, linen, silk, naturally dyed with lace motif screen-prints using natural handmade ink, cotton thread, 510cm x 430cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

The garment forms I created for this exhibition comprised densely stitched textiles. Presenting the garments on mannequins suspended from the twelve-metre-high atrium ceiling evoked a range of responses; intrigued, disturbed and questioning. Of the information available about my ancestors, I am most intrigued by the life stories of women. I feel that I subconsciously reference my female ancestors through Victorian silhouettes and richly coded textiles. My great-great grandmother set foot in Walyalup/Fremantle in 1913 and her first step in Western Australia would have been in the Old Customs House (where my work inspired by her lace textile was exhibited 109 years later). I hadn't considered the full circle narrative that would be illustrated until I had some time to myself in the gallery. When she left Korčula, she exchanged her money for gold, an internationally recognised currency. In tow were her young children and, in her hand, would have been a small suitcase containing the gold and the lace textile which activated this research project. When her husband drowned at sea months after her arrival, the gold became the currency supporting the family in the father's absence. No gold remains; however, the same lace textile adorns my grandmother's table to this day. I think about the other personal items she would have left in Korčula and why she chose to bring the lace. Perhaps due to its transportability or the lace's unique language that reminded her of home. The integrity of the lace reminiscent of her origins and the gaps representative of her new, unfamiliar life on distant shores (Figure 70).

The building (Old Customs House) adds another layer to the investigation. Fragile pressed tin and peeling paint parallel the space's brutal steel features and ecclesiastical grandeur. On reflection, the pressed tin sports a fragile lace-like motif. As the afternoon sea breeze drifted through the gallery each day, the ghostly garment forms suspended from the highest point in the space caught the wind, giving them a haunting presence. In the foreword for *In Praise of Shadows*, originally published in 1977, Moore (2001, 1) argues that loosely captured breezes "can connect us with the very edge of the infinite." The swaying of the mannequins adorned in densely imbued textiles suggested an auratic encounter with the histories embedded in the building itself. It brings me a great sense of connection to be fortunate enough to have tangible remains of my ancestors. The lace fabrics have encouraged critical reflections on subtle signs from my surroundings that I would have previously overlooked, which, in turn, have enhanced my understanding of my own ancestral and personal narrative.



Figure 70. Molly Ryan, *Paternal great-great-grandmother's lace tablecloth (detail) circa 1890*. 2022, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Significance
Material Culture

Material objects matter because they are complex, symbolic bundles of social, cultural and industrial meanings, fused onto something we can touch, see and own. That very quality is the reason that social values can so quickly penetrate into and evaporate out of common objects. (Ann Smart Martin 1993, 141)

I have advocated for bringing ancestral lace textiles into a contemporary space by exploring their materiality. Breaking away from traditional lace-making has allowed me to understand how lace textiles can inform practice-led research. Deep diving into the materiality of these laces has opened a space for social and cultural knowledge to surface, ideas I could not have conjured had I dismissed in-depth practice and dissemination of the findings. A new set of processes of exploring cultural memory through practice-led exploration of worn material culture emerged. My autoethnographic anecdotes provided sustenance to my making, thinking about the significance of process and materials and how they linked to my ancestral story (Figure 71). Several key takeaways from this research add to an emerging methodology through which textiles and textile processes can be used as a dialogue to explore relics from the past and extend social and cultural knowledge.



Figure 71. Molly Ryan, *Lace Assemblages installation shot*. 2022, Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Value

Material culture offers clues about the past, while worn material culture provides a deeper insight into the people who inhabited the objects. Valuable information can be ascertained from objects with signs of wear. In the past, museums have omitted worn objects from their display. However, fashion historians have increasingly advocated the significance of the biographies of objects, evidenced through signs of wear that offer intriguing insights into the people who created them. Emphasising these human interactions with cloth can assist in teasing out the physical and deeply personal connection we have with clothing and textiles (Hill 2018). Living in a capitalist consumer society, adjusting our perceptions of clothing (worn and new) as collectors of energy, memory and narrative, could help build better value systems around textiles and clothing, extending their lives as personal objects. In this research, I have advocated the important role practice-led research plays in presenting lace in a contemporary voice. In creating a methodological framework to decipher the information contained within ancestral textiles, I have campaigned that cloth objects are rich cartographies of experience. Ultimately, this research framework could be applied to a broad spectrum of cloth objects. Extending this thinking to align with the everyday consumption of clothing has never been more necessary or timely³⁸.

Fashion and culture journalist, Dana Thomas (2021, 246), presents an interesting perspective on “soulful fashion” in the recent publication *Emotion: Fashion in Transition* (2021). Thomas relays a story about gems worn against the skin absorbing our energy. Extending this thinking to the fast fashion chain, Thomas links this translation of energy from human to object by illustrating the long journey a garment takes from field to store and all the hands it passes through before it arrives at the consumer. Thomas asks (2021, 256), “could all of them leave a bit of themselves in [the clothing]?” This perspective is adjacent to my investigation of the invisible materiality of the ancestral lace textiles, which aligned with Law and Mol’s (1995, 276) theory of “relational materiality”³⁹. While this research is highly focused, it broadly advocates that textiles’ value can be unlocked if we are willing to take the time to do so. I resonate with Thomas (2021) in saying that the humans that make our clothes are intrinsically

³⁸ The current textile waste crisis is one of the most pressing contemporary issues facing humanity.

³⁹ See page 1.

embedded in their surface. Equipping clothing with the animating properties of humans gives them a sentient aura.

Trend forecaster Lidewij Edelkoort hosts a webinar, *Animism: Spirited Lifestyles and beyond*, which I attended in 2020. Animism gives presence to the soul that exists beyond the presence of natural objects, phenomena and the universe. Edelkoort (n.d, para. 1) links animism to design and consumption to preview “how everyday objects can become animistic icons of veneration.” Additionally, Edelkoort’s recent publication, *A Labour of Love* (2020), with co-author Philip Fimmano, further advocates the energy present in objects. The pair forecast a world where materials are alive and deserve the right to exist. To quote them, “materials seem to become a living emotional element, communicating in an autonomous way, talking through tactility and attracting through energy” (Edelkoort & Fimmano 2021, 5). There is a sense of urgency to the message of both texts, with emphasis on the drastically necessary modifications needed to be made to the widespread unsustainable patterns of consumption if we are to ensure the future survival of our species. Their forecast aligns with broader messaging about the fate of the human race, which is an overwhelming concept for many (myself included). Thomas (2021), Edelkoort and Fimmano (2021) have addressed issues around consumption by raising awareness about the soul of objects. Taking steps to better understand the material world we curate for ourselves can drastically reduce our environmental impact. Starting with cloth objects, our most intimate material relation, to echo Flint (2012, 12), our “second skin,” would be a sensible first step. In this research, I have contextualised these ideas through an interdisciplinary engagement with ancestral lace textiles to establish a value system around textiles from the past, in the present, for the future (Figure 72).



Figure 72. Molly Ryan, *Ancestral Palimpsest (detail)*. 2022, Naturally dyed and screen-printed calico, printed with natural handmade ink. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Past, Present, Future

The methodological framework I set for this project has allowed me to unlock narratives specific to my ancestry by studying worn material culture. The information I ascertained during this project through textiles and textile processes has opened a space for me to visualise new possibilities by drawing on the old. I am not a traditionalist; however, it is clear by this stage in this document that I see sustenance in future endeavours built on the foundations of the past. I have made garments and neo-tapestries to give form to narratives about my ancestry, engaging in a type of material storytelling (Figure 73). The works assemble fact with fiction, observed with the imagined, to present new ways of interpreting the information contained within the cloth heirlooms. Through process, I have collated and illustrated data collected in the form of orally relayed histories, observable facts and narrative inquiry to fabricate an integrated image of the laces. In the gallery space and through this exegesis, I have articulated my intentions to link threads of ancestral narrative through an artistic and academic investigation (as catalysed by the laces) to lines of thought regarding the materiality of lace textiles and how they extend social and cultural knowledge. Coming to understand my work through the narrative imagination lens has opened new territories for my research. In unfolding real and imagined scenarios, I have laced a network of meaning to explore how “the manifold layers of the cultural fabric that weaves together individual, group and society” (Brockmeier 2002, 9) can be contemplated through practice-led research.

The structural underpinnings of lace emerged as a suitable metaphor for many aspects of this project. In visualising lace as a material where the gaps are as integral to the structure as the solid areas, lace became a metaphor for the known and the unknown within the working parts of practice-led research. Upon disseminating the research findings, every aspect of our existence is built on this basis. We navigate the unknown in the world based on our knowledge of the world. From this project, mobilised by three ancestral lace textiles, analysis of the past and present, the known, has manifested into considerations about the future, the unknown. Within the context of lace, Rosemary Shepherd (2011, 9) asserts that “understanding the past is an essential part of moving any endeavour forward.” Using lace, an emotionally charged medium, to disinter information about my ancestral narrative, I have created space for present social and cultural issues to be explored through reflection on process. Through the exhibition of work that visualised these introspections, what became apparent was the ways in which the

materiality of ancestral lace textiles could be drawn on to provide a framework for future considerations about the significance of material culture.



Figure 73. Molly Ryan, *Lace Tessellation (detail)*. 2022, *Naturally dyed and screen-printed calico, printed with natural handmade ink*. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

Conclusion

Throughout my project, whilst in the studio and through the exhibition of work, I have encountered many different opinions about the research, the significance (or lack thereof) of lace and the value of worn ancestral textiles in extending social and cultural knowledge. This was a highly personal project mobilised initially by my love for lace and my inability to ignore the rich histories embedded in lace textiles linked to my ancestry. In sharing my research with the public, I have made myself vulnerable. Stephen Scrivener (2002, 6) speaks to this: “the artist provides perspectives or ways of viewing the world, which may or may not be true.” The significance of creative research is subjective and influenced by many external factors. This project was designed to use practice-led research to raise questions and divulge new ways of engaging with the worn material world. In doing this, I advocated the importance of retaining material culture in the form of heirlooms. During my time in the gallery, a visitor positioned lace as ‘valueless.’ It is clear by this point in the discussion that I do not agree with this sentiment; however, I feel comforted in knowing I join a community of practitioners dedicating their creativity to ensuring that lace is not grouped alongside the excess of current consumer culture. This is exemplified by makers such as Luran Sundin and Cecilia Heffer, who both work with lace in a contemporary capacity to give back to the lace-making community. Sundin (2011) advocates that lace is not just a decorative tablecloth passed down through generations but also an artefact with future presence and meaning. At the same time, Heffer (2015) has dedicated a vast portion of her innovative textile-based practice-led research to exploring new ways of working with lace’s structural underpinnings and cultural significance. Overall, I link the findings of this research to broader areas, like valuing textiles, borrowing from designs from the past and why preserving worn material culture is imperative to our knowledge not only of the past, but the present and future.

In this project, I have responded to the research question, *how can the materiality of ancestral lace textiles be drawn on to develop new textiles and extend social and cultural knowledge?* The materiality of lace has informed the theoretical and methodological framework I have followed. I embarked on this research project with the understanding that cloth heirlooms contain details of their lives as personal objects; this theory is supported by Law and Mol’s (1995, 276) idea of “relational materiality”⁴⁰. I situated this research in the thematic area of

⁴⁰ Law and Mol’s (1995, 276) theory of “relational materiality,” is where humans and experiences become archived within objects.

Fashion Studies through the theoretical sustenance provided by assessing how cloth, the body, consumption, fashion (Entwistle 2016), personal identity (Geczy and Karaminas 2012) and textiles, could all become a basis for exploring the materiality of worn material culture through practice-led research. In the future, I am interested in exploring how placing a practice-led analysis of worn material culture in different fields (i.e. contemporary art or interdisciplinary studies) could alter the forms produced and the knowledge unravelled. By basing my understanding of lace around Rosemary Shepherd's (2003, 2)⁴¹ definition of lace, the richly coded textile became a metaphor for theoretical, practical, ancestral and reflective research. I believe I have built on the significance of lace by intermingling it with theories from relevant fields and practice-led research. I will continue to utilise and refine this methodological framework through my future creative endeavours as I work towards producing work that will be exhibited in a range of group textile shows over the next two years.

From this research, I have gauged a firm understanding of my role as a practitioner and how I engage with the world around me through practice-led research. A peer who has observed my studio practice for quite some time recently remarked that I was *still* working with lace, suggesting that my intrigue with the textile had surely dissipated over years of referencing it in my practice. On the contrary, this research has highlighted that my journey with lace has only just commenced. The end of this project does not signify a closing door; instead, it has presented many lace-orientated creative avenues to pursue in the future. I am truly convinced that worn historical textiles are not inactive but, rather, have agency to recontextualise themselves within the present, their encoded messages becoming imperative signs for the future.

⁴¹ I have referred to Shepherd's (2003, 2) definition of lace as "a decorative openwork fabric in which the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas" continually throughout this exegesis.

Appendix

1. Images from my graduate collection 'Anecdotes Le Femme' where I first began referencing lace.



(From left to right)

Figure 74. Molly Ryan, *Alluring Imperfection*. 2019, Machine embroidered lace with vintage lace fragments, naturally dyed wool and silk gauze lining. Digital image. Photography: Georgia Hanson.

Figure 75. Molly Ryan, *Alluring Imperfection (detail)*. 2019, Machine embroidered lace with vintage lace fragments, naturally dyed wool and silk gauze lining. Digital image. Photography: Georgia Hanson.

Figure 76. Molly Ryan, *Adorned Form (detail)*. 2019, Lace fragments machine embroidered onto upcycled naturally dyed cotton and silk top, with naturally dyed wool crepe skirt. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

2. This hardcopy Creative Process Journal follows twelve months of in-depth studio engagement.

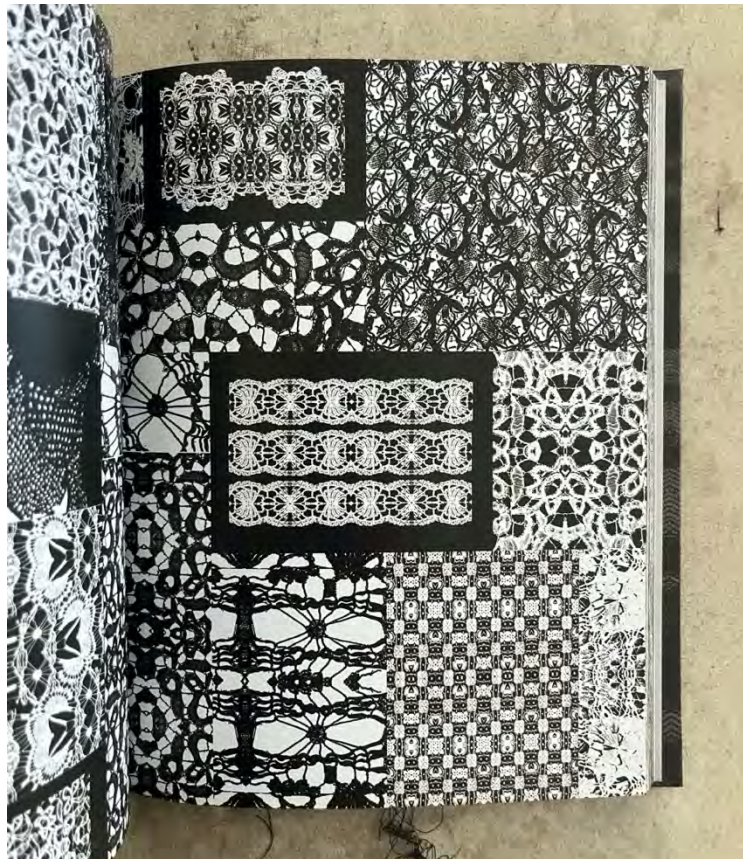


Figure 77. Molly Ryan, *Creative Process Journal 2022*. 2022, Image wrap hardcover book (196 pages). Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

3. Sustainability is inherent to my practice. I contextualise this through the methods and materials I use and the value systems I place around textiles when researching, mending, wearing and advocating their significance. In 2020, I co-founded Fibre Economy, a social enterprise working towards a world without textile waste. We currently work with Western Australia's mining and petroleum sector to develop circular systems to manage their uniform waste. Although the way I contextualise the value of textiles through my role as a director and as a practitioner/researcher is very different, the foundations are the same.

4. Photographic screen-printing involves translating a black-and-white image onto a silkscreen coated with emulsion through exposure to UV light. I worked with black and white transparencies of images of the ancestral laces and digital collages to translate the work onto cloth. The following images illustrate the journey from photo to stencil:

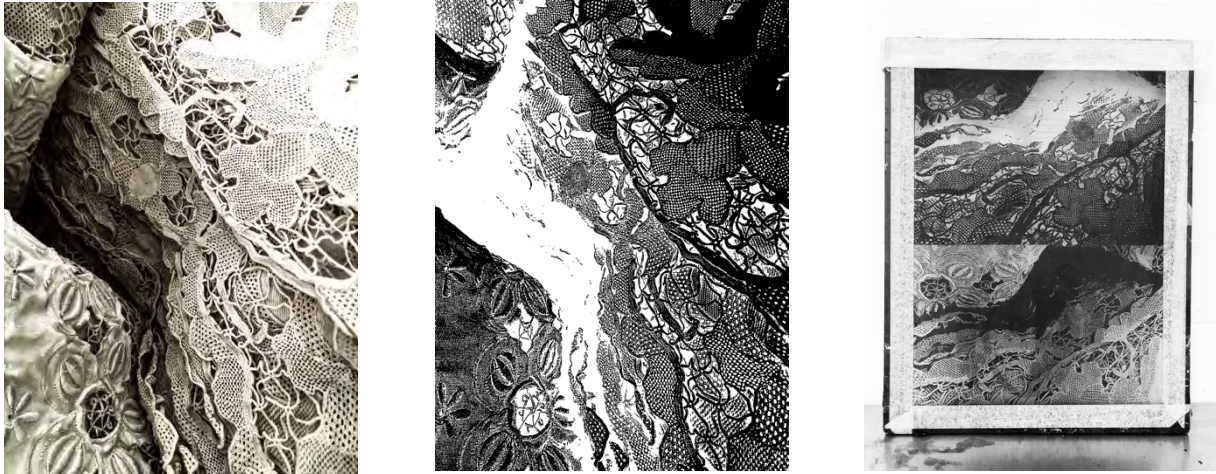


Figure 78. Molly Ryan, *Screen-printing process, image-to-stencil journey of my great-grandfather's lace tablecloth*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

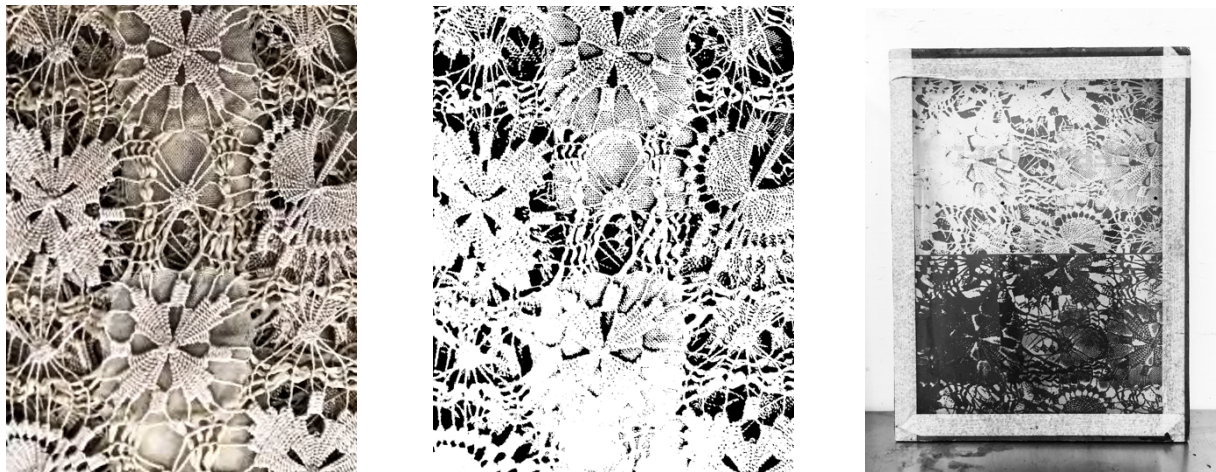


Figure 79. Molly Ryan, *Screen-printing process, image-to-stencil journey of my great-great-grandmother's lace tablecloth*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

5. The following images are digital collages created using fragments of the images of the laces, collaged together to then become stencils for screen-printing:

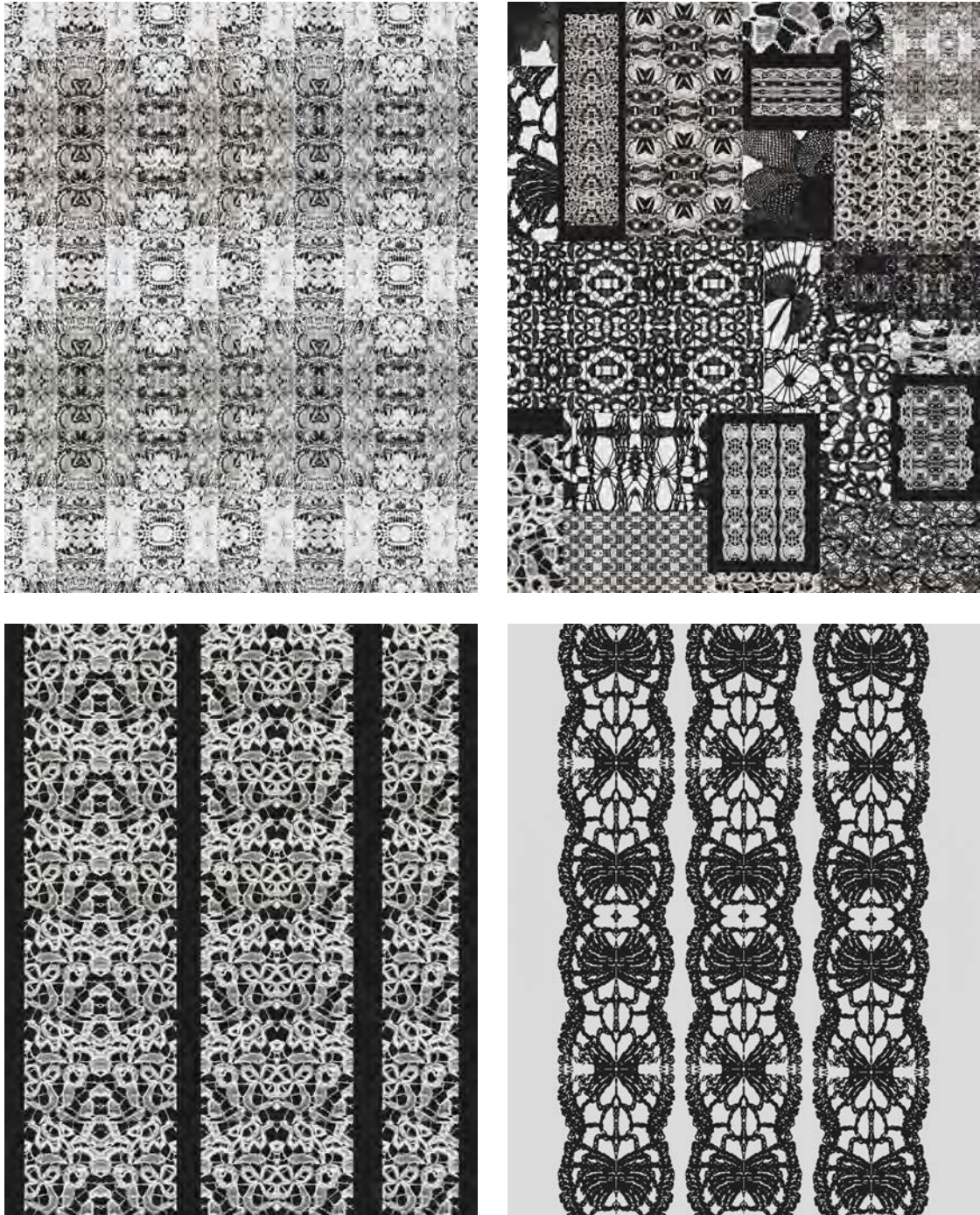


Figure 80. Molly Ryan, *Screen-printing process, digital lace collages*. 2022, Digital collages.
Photography: Molly Ryan.

6. The mono-printing process involves the creation of a print using an object drenched in ink, translated onto cloth using pressure from my hand. It is timely and physically involved, the presence of the hand is evident in the organic print quality.



Figure 81. Molly Ryan, *Mono-printing process*. 2021, *Ink-soaked lace printed into upcycled cloth*. Digital image. Photography: Kelsey Ashe.

7. I made natural screen-printing inks for every print in this project. I extracted colour from botanicals in the same way I would make a natural dye for cloth, then adding a natural gum and mordants to create a light fast paste that would be pushed through the silkscreen. This process omits the chemicals usually present in screen-printing ink.



(Clockwise from top left image)

Figure 82. Molly Ryan, *Natural ink making process, steeping various tea leaves and spices*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 83. Molly Ryan, *Ink in situ*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 84. Molly Ryan, *Natural ink swatches on calcio*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 85. Molly Ryan, *Natural ink swatches on paper*. 2021, Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

8. The process I used to make this paper lace drew closely to a technique a lecturer introduced me to in my final year of Fashion Design (see Figures 73 and 74). I stitched paper fragments onto a water-soluble backing. Once complete, the piece was placed in water to dissolve, leaving behind a network of holes created with paper and cotton thread.



(Clockwise from left image)

Figure 86. Molly Ryan, *Paper lace*. 2022, Paper fragments stitched to a water-soluble backing. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 87. Molly Ryan, *Paper lace (detail)*. 2022, Paper fragments stitched to a water-soluble backing. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

Figure 88. Molly Ryan, *Paper lace in the sunshine (detail)*. 2022, Paper fragments and cotton thread. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

9. Here, I used scrap pattern making paper to make paper. After being soaked in water, the soft paper was placed in a blender to form a pulp, which was poured into the frame. Next, I placed silk hankies on the paper to create textural interest, with the intention of naturally dyeing the piece (cellulose fibres respond differently to protein fibres when naturally dyed).



Figure 89. Molly Ryan, *Handmade paper with silk hankies*. 2022, Paper, silk, textile medium. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.



Figure 90. Molly Ryan, *Handmade paper with silk hankies (detail)*. 2022, Paper, silk, textile medium. Digital image. Photography: Molly Ryan.

10. My first exploration into patchworking was exhibited here as part of my installation for AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth in October 2021 at Kidogo Art House. Naturally dyed silk scraps, screen-printed with ancestral lace motif, hand stitched into a large neo-tapestry.



Figure 91. Molly Ryan, *Intercultural Patching*. 2021, Naturally dyed silk scraps, screen-printed with ancestral lace motif, hand stitched into a large neo-tapestry, 350cm x 185cm. Digital image. Photography: Rob Frith.

11. Indian Ocean Craft Triennial IOTA21 Festival Guide, AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth catalogue excerpt:

IOTA21, *Festival Guide, AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth page*. 2021, is unable to be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions. The content can instead be accessed via purchasing a copy of the IOTA21 catalogue
<https://indianoceancrafttriennial.com/product/iota21-catalogue-curiosity-and-rituals-of-the-everyday/>.

Figure 92. IOTA21, *Festival Guide, AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth page*. 2021. Digital scan. Reproduced from: Indian Ocean Craft Triennial.

12. The AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth catalogue excerpts:

Ella Steiner, *AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth catalogue (Molly Ryan featured pages)*. 2021, is unable to be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions. The content can instead be accessed via contacting the author of this Thesis.

Figure 93. Ella Steiner, *AURA: Memory and the Language of Cloth catalogue (Molly Ryan featured pages)*. 2021. Digital scan. Reproduced from: Ella Steiner.

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