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Catherine Bertola's focus on lace locates her within a sisterhood of other contemporary practitioners also using lace fabric metaphors to articulate their own concerns. Andrea Stokes' *Butter Net* (2005), for example, provides a 'negative net' of smeary pattern on cool glass inviting the voyeur to peer and breathe and melt and lick. Crisper, perhaps more wholesome, lace inspires the 'precious scraps' of Emma Cassis' jewellery, with its reference to the value system of time-invested charmed embellishment, demure decoration, and domestic decorum. In Linda Lovelace's frothy world, where lacing is tight and Mickey Finn laces ports and lemon, Danica Maier picks out larger-than-life vintage lace representations of porno-classic 'readers' wives' in works like *Knee Trembler* (2005). And finally, Linda Florence's sublime and haunting laceworks are sifted onto the floor of a rural Scottish *kirk* upon which her grandparents dance, deconstructing the lacy patterning while simultaneously weaving their own love-web in space. This work exists only photographically, the memory is delicate, but its impact on my retina and my heart is extraordinary...

So, in this affective gauze of practices resides Bertola: creating a body of work amongst the prim, intricate construction of vintage lace, tiny pricks in the shape of pins, and the landscape of the feminine, the domestic and the fanciful. In this scenario, Catherine Bertola sensitises her practice to interrogate and reflect upon the social narratives and industrial histories of lace-making and lace-materiality. Seeking anchor points in architectural space, fabricated urban landscapes, and the intricacies of human relationships, Bertola activates the metaphorical and meaningful potential of the production processes of industrial and hand-constructed lace, its tough and tender material characteristics, and its resonances for the interconnected discourses around (some) women's work and (some) women's wear.

In *Prickings*, however, it is particularly the tiny spiteful marks of the 'prick' that excites me, the vicious piercing and punitive penetration of the gentle softness of the vellum calf-skin that initiates a very knowing practice. Catherine Bertola's interventions into the domestic arena are notably highly critical, examining the pleasure of the decorative on one hand while simultaneously critiquing the exchange of labour – quite literally measured in blood, sweat and tears – that allows such decadence. I am reminded through her pricking of a tale from historical Derry City, where women stitchers and lace-makers wiped whiskey into their red-rimmed eyes as they created their heavenly confections – a nip and a tuck, a stitch and a slug, and they succumbed all too early to blindness and blind drunkenness. And I am not comforted by the discourses of historical hysterical crafting, the repeat, repeat, repeat of needlepoint, of lace bobbinning, and sampler stitching, where the multiple orgasm of repeat decoration was as near as one came to the 'real thing', and where starched rows of lace, repeated, rippled and raced for impoverished women towards the froth of the only ultimate textile 'money shot'.

In Bertola's previous works, the debris of humanity – decay in the form of dust, of residual traces in derelict spaces – has been used to comment on the sweet and intimate deterioration unto death promised by the human condition. That endpoint shared equally by half-blind lace-maker and fine fashionable lady lace-wearer. Bertola's skeletal-pricked ghosts of garments and

accessories that might have belonged to women now long dead are uncanny reminders of the disembodiment of death. Ferns, flowers, butterflies, motifs of prettiness are so much dust, and lace itself becomes a collection of absence and presence, the holes and gaps as significant as the tissue of intricately entwined fibres.

But what essentially resonates with conscience pricking, skin prickling potency is the status of that baby calf-skin hovering as a delicate interface between the working hands of the feminine anonymity of the lace-maker and the private bodily spaces of the ornamented society woman wearing her status in her lace. I think here of the intimacy of the maid's warming of the lady's pearls on her own neck before she places them on her mistress' throat. A personal relationship of dazzling seductive intimacy is described here by that vellum surface, drawn upon with pleasure, pain and punishment, quite literally pricked and pricked again. Women, historically held apart by codes of etiquette, class and breeding, are permitted union in Bertola's reflection on these prickings, and that is this woman's understanding of their powerful affect.