

© Catherine Harper

Review: Catherine Bertola: Prickings (Fabrica, Brighton, 2006-07). selvedge 2006, Issue 13, p.88, ISSN:1742-254X

Catherine Bertola's *Prickings* were exhibited at Fabrica, Brighton in May - June 2006, but the exhibition will tour to the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham (9 September 2006 – 29 April 2007, selected works only), and Nottingham Castle (10 February – 15 April 2007). At each, we are promised an evolved show, reconfigured or augmented in some way to converse with the particularities of the venue. At Bowes, Bertola's work will figure in relation to the *Fine and Fashionable* exhibition of exquisite antique lace from the Blackborne Collection. At Nottingham, it will resonate with the important historical collections from the lace industry, which was so important to that area. As with its Brighton incarnation, very particular aspects of Bertola's complex body of work will be reflected: women's narratives and their place in textile culture; class hierarchies and the relationship of textiles to dominion; the labour of lace-making via hand or machine...

At first encounter the work initially seems rather minimal and cool. A series of small parlour tables are dotted through the space. On each, on a deep red velvet pad, is a pale cream vellum shape – of a glove, or a collar, or a cuff – each pricked with an intricate pattern. A magnifying glass on each table invites closer scrutiny – and implies involvement – by the viewer. A discreet series of photographs of Brighton women of historical repute is aligned on one wall. In Fabrica's deconsecrated and reflective space, this is very demure, very quiet, very understated...

But dig a little deeper, and this exhibition reveals archaeological layers of meaning, resonance and subtle, multiple inter-connections. The prickings of the exhibition's title and substance are those of the papers – or, in this instance, calf-skins – used as 'maps' for the pins that hold and position intertwining threads creating the patterns of hand-made lace. Bertola has made these ghostly forms as some kind of intimate 'portraiture' relating to the women represented in the photographs. These women – representatives of the variety of classes, experiences and knowledge of local women of the 19th century – activate the bodily associations of the vellum forms, and locate them in the territories of 'feminine narrative' rather than in sterile modernism. By showing us the prickings, rather than lace itself, Bertola locates her interest as 'at the margin', within the landscape of the feminine, the domestic and the fanciful. She seeks to reference the social histories of lace-making and the human stories enmeshed in its materiality. Remember, some women wore lace, others only manufactured it, and the gap between those is signified in the delicate pricked membrane of the vellum presented for our appreciation. That gap – of class, status, refinement and value – will echo somehow differently in the venues at Bowes and Nottingham (and it is my intention to follow this exhibition to both, as I encourage you to).

I became especially fixated by the signature markings of pin piercing calf-skin in *Prickings*. Small spiteful pricks trace delicacy and fineness, but underline some sense of the punitive and penetrative, with all its gendered readings. Bertola's work is a knowing and critical practice: she is aware as much of the pleasure of the decorative as she is of the pain of labour. Women making lace for their survival – for we are thinking here of working women rather than hobbyists – measured that work in blood, sweat and tears, but kept their lace pristine white for

the perfect throats and wrists of women they would never meet. But their 'gendered labour' in turn activates the alternative 'gendered labour' of 'being a lady', of using the froth and gauze of lace to reveal, but not quite reveal, the dazzling prize of the body.

This 'working woman', this 'lady', highly recommends Catherine Bertola.