

# Amazing Lace – a tale in two parts

**Meryl Richards** finds a harmonious blend of old and new at an adventurous exhibition of lace shown at Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures in Porirua

A contemporary art exhibition which features lace as its subject – a craft, some would say, has connotations of dull domesticity – and which combines historical artefacts and contemporary artworks in the one exhibition, could be described as a bold risk-taking initiative, or as a risky attempt to be all things to all people.

Fortunately for the creators of *Amazing Lace*, which had a three-month run at Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures in Porirua in late 2008, this hybrid exhibition was a resounding success. Pataka showed that it is in step with current thinking in museological circles that encourages the development of new models of exhibiting, as well as the introduction of subject matter often thought unsuitable for museums (such as mainstream craft) and the blurring of boundaries between disciplines, in this case fine art, social history, photography and craft.

## COLONIALISM, SEXUAL POLITICS AND DOMESTICITY

Indicated in the exhibition catalogue, visitors were given the opportunity to view the works of “a new generation of New Zealand artists (who) have liberated lace from the constraints of traditional lace making, giving it an image makeover and using it in fresh, innovative and intriguing ways” (Kedgley, 2008). As well, they could view artefacts, photographs and historical artworks that illustrate “the story of how the European tradition of lace was introduced into colonial New Zealand and found expression in Maori fashion and flax weaving” (Kedgley, 2008).

The triumvirate of themes listed above, colonialism, sexual politics and domesticity, bind this exhibition together, in ways that otherwise might leave it looking like the uneasy union of two disparate parts. Photographs of Pakeha and Maori standing stiffly and severely in their elaborate Victorian and Edwardian garb, as well as domestic interiors, rare examples of muka lace, (lace-making adapted by Maori using harakeke), examples of old European lace, including exquisite sixteenth century Venetian lace, a 1940 commemorative lace tablecloth and kitsch lace-covered coat-hangers, all of which feature in the historical area, are potent talismans of past eras. These artefacts likely to evoke in the viewer thoughts and feelings regarding the colonial expansion into New Zealand, the near catastrophic effect it had on Maori and their attempts to cope with such all-encompassing change. As well, they referenced the European inheritance colonial New Zealanders brought with them and their attempts, particularly women’s attempts, to make life more palatable on a domestic level in the face of, what was for the majority, an extremely harsh existence.

All of these themes were reflected in the contemporary area, although not in every artwork. Nic Moon’s installation of a wedding dress cut down to its very seams, hanging above a wooden block containing native and introduced seeds was cited by the artist as, “an acknowledgement of the early European women settlers, many of whom arrived in Aotearoa with very little in the way of finery” (Kedgley, 2008). Jeff Thomson utilized that most emblematic of New Zealand materials, corrugated iron, to make delicately wrought filigree lace patterns, while Lonnie Hutchison created, “lacy kowhaiwhai-inspired patterns in rose-coloured shower curtains for her installation *Wikitoria’s Room*. The work’s title draws on colonial history, evoking 19th century colonial windows and imported lace patterns along with Maori design” (Kedgley, 2008).

## CONFIDENT HYBRID

*Amazing Lace* was first and foremost intended to be a challenging and intriguing contemporary art exhibition and made no bones about the fact that the historical component to the exhibition was almost extraneous to the main thrust of the exhibition. Paradoxically, however,

to my mind, the inclusion of the historical section became one of the inherent strengths of the exhibition.

A weakness of the exhibition, I thought, was that while physically the exhibition, with its two separate areas, offered the freedom to be entered from either direction (directly into the contemporary art area or into the historical area), the accompanying text gave virtually no indication that one area is linked to the other, but relied almost entirely on the catalogue to make the connection between present and past. However, providing a greater context for *Amazing Lace*, Pataka had displayed a concurrent complementary series of exhibitions of world textiles and weaving exhibitions, thus championing previously under-recognized forms of arts and crafts, which are currently enjoying a revival. By including elements in the exhibition – photography, social history, contemporary art – other than just lace in its pure craft form, the exhibition broadened its audience significantly.

### WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Museum commentator Beverly Serrell (1996) wrote about the importance of having a 'big idea' behind every exhibition that can be described in one sentence. In this exhibition the underlying theme is the indomitability and capacity of lace to survive through the ages. This exhibition tracked the story of lace from its role as a status symbol for the very wealthy in the sixteenth century, to an aspirational form of decoration for the Victorians and Edwardians, a kitsch expression of popular culture in 1960s and 70s New Zealand, to its current revived status as an inspirational material for fashion and high art. One could commend the curators of *Amazing Lace* for focussing on a subject matter that is so ubiquitous and, to a degree, populist, that it acts as a great leveller of class, race and wealth.

### CONCLUSION

So, I return to my original assertion that *Amazing Lace* was a bold, risk-taking venture, which managed to combine successfully two models of exhibition display – fine art, and social history – overcoming difficulties of display and visitor expectations. Perhaps the exhibition's



Figure 1: View of the *Amazing Lace* installation in Pataka. ACKNOWLEDGMENT: PATAKA MUSEUM OF ARTS AND CULTURES.

most significant strength was its fundamental message 'lace survives' which tied the two differing exhibition models together, and allowed visitors to relate to the exhibition on a multiplicity of levels. The diversity of the exhibits on display did indeed fulfil the maxim of 'providing something for everyone' but not in an oversimplified or patronising way.

It is clear that Pataka is concerned with developing positive and meaningful relationships with its various audiences and has positioned itself to a large degree, to giving voice to those who have been marginalised and ignored. It is also aware of its role in telling stories that resonate with New Zealanders. As a visitor to the exhibition commented, "It made you think that yes, we do have traditions... it gives New Zealanders more meaning... it helps us see us as we are" (Personal Interview, September 6, 2008).

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### REFERENCES

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