



MAITLAND REGIONAL GALLERY

Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran



title ■ *Twice Removed*

artists ■ Anne Brennan
Anne Ferran

venue ■ Maitland Regional Gallery

dates ■ 13 February–28 March 2004



Twice removed

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The people known today as the Lacemakers of Calais were English mechanics and artisans who had, in the early nineteenth century, taken up residence in Calais as workers in the burgeoning French mechanised lace industry. When Revolution broke out in France in 1848, they were forced to leave the city in which they had forged a life and a trade for nearly forty years. However, they were an enterprising group, and, having surmounted some major hurdles, managed to persuade the British Government to assist them to emigrate to Australia. During the course of the year 1848, three ships, the *Harpley*, the *Fairlie*, and the *Agincourt*, delivered the emigrants to their new lives in Adelaide, Bathurst and Maitland. Divested of everything that made up their former lives—their trade, their homes, and in some cases, their first language, they commenced their new lives with little more than the required emigrant's kit of clothing and equipment.

It seemed inevitable that we would be drawn to their story. Who could not be intrigued by the particulars of the Lacemaker families and the tale of their great journey? Who could not empathise with their wet and exhausted walk from Morpeth to Maitland or rejoice in the incremental triumphs of their early years in the colony, recorded for us in letters, journals and newspapers? At the same time, their story touches us in part because of its contemporary resonances. Their journey has become part of a bigger story of displacement and migration that continues into the present, propelled by the same motors of technological and political change. It is a story that cannot be tidily consigned to history:

on our television screens, in our newspapers and in our own suburbs, it continues to break in upon our lives and remind us that none of us are immune to the consequences of change.

In *Twice Removed* we remember the experiences of one specific group of people. However this exhibition is not about the Lacemakers of Calais in any strictly historical sense. As artists, we are at liberty to interpret the past with a freedom the historian doesn't have; our connections with the story can be as selective and partial as we want them to be. Working with the story gives us a particular kind of claim on it. It is not the direct claim of the Lacemakers' descendants, who are still numerous in the Maitland area: it is more like an imaginative shadowing. If this is somehow permissible, it is because of the way individual histories have of flowing through time, rippling out to touch the wider community, becoming part of everybody's history.

We are particularly indebted to Gillian Kelly, the author of *Well Suited to the Colony*, a history of the Lacemakers, for the generous way in which she shared her research with us. In particular, her wonderful collection of postcards of nineteenth-century Calais played an important role in the development of this exhibition. One image seemed particularly apt. In it, a group of women are sitting in a factory in Calais, their bodies emerging from a frothing sea of lace as they repair by hand the tears and irregularities in the fabric that has come off the machine. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see the fabric of history as being like the fine tulle mesh they are stitching, but with gaps that are ragged



and irregular. If so then we, as artists, are doing something similar to the women in the photo—drawing together loose threads, embroidering into its spaces.

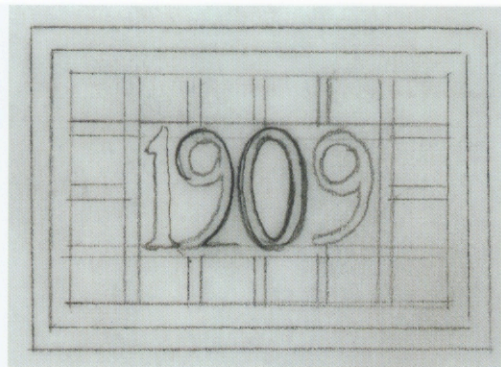
1848; 1909; 2004. These three years are marked in *Twice Removed* by three tiny samples of handmade lace, made for the exhibition by three local lacemakers. They are a vestigial chronology connecting the time of the arrival of the Lacemakers to the history of the building that houses this exhibition and to our own time. The lace is a tenuous link between the Lacemakers' story and ours, but one that metaphorically places them in the civic and social fabric of Maitland. It is a particularly happy coincidence that an exhibition that celebrates the story of dispossessed English mechanics and artisans should take place in what was Maitland's own former Mechanics' Institute.

It was a condition placed upon the Lacemakers that they would give up their former profession in the colonies. Whatever the reason for this, they do not appear to have objected. Clearly for them, emigration represented a new start, and they reinvented themselves swiftly as shepherds, gardeners, house-servants, shopkeepers, publicans, hairdressers. And yet, to us, the disappearance of lace from the lives of the Lacemakers can seem both symbolic and poignant. It is a rent in the fabric of their individual histories, certainly, but it is also an amputation from a trade bound up with a complex material history and culture.

Mending the lace, Calais (detail)
19th century postcard, collection: Gillian Kelly

Argentan, Brussels, Calais, Chantilly, Genoa, Limerick, Madeira, Nottingham, Valenciennes, Vologda ... In 1848, lace was still a precious commodity. The links between lace and the places where it was made are so strong that a litany of lace types might also read like a map of Europe. At the same time, lace was the most mobile of artefacts: an object of trade, so valued for the skill and time that went into its making that for many centuries it was considered an heirloom, and handed down across generations. Lace is light and therefore able to be carried easily, it moves across seas and continents with its owners to new places, new beginnings. In this sense, it appears, our Lacemakers were no different. Gillian Kelly reports that in cases where families had forgotten their Lacemaker antecedents, the existence of a box of lace fragments sometimes provided the last tangible link to their family's origins.

The rediscovery of the Lacemakers' story is part of a popular renewal of interest in the past, in the stories of individual families and of communities. These kinds of histories present challenges to the historian—the lives of everyday people are not always well recorded in the conventional historical sense. Public records are the most likely source of information—registers of births, deaths and marriages, title deeds, wills. It is here that the specifics of an individual life can suddenly erupt into the reader's consciousness in an unexpectedly vivid way.



Anne Brennan
Drawing for *Twice Removed: a chronology* 2004
1909
graphite pencil text on tracing paper, 4 x 6 cm

The names in the shipping lists of the *Harpley*, the *Fairlie* and the *Agincourt* are solid and concrete in a way that is at odds with the disappearance of the Lacemaker's story from public consciousness. James Bannister, Sarah Greensmith, Thomas Duck, William Gascoigne are brought before us in a curiously immediate way, and the repetition of their names through as many as three generations of one emigrating family brings home a sense of the scale of this mass-emigration.

Embedded within this piece of commonplace maritime bureaucracy are hints of more private narratives. The list of birthplaces entered against the names of the passengers links them to other places, other experiences and other histories. But most dramatic of all is the handful of names that bear the legend "born at sea". Reading this, you think at once of the epic and precarious nature of travel then, and the courage of pregnant women undertaking such a risky journey. No wonder that a number of thankful parents, having survived the ordeal, gave the name of their ship as middle names to their newborn infants, linking their presence in the world inextricably and permanently with the journey to their new lives.

The wall-drawings in this exhibition respond to the experience of reading these lists of names. They are simultaneously a pattern, drawn from samples of lace made in Calais on the same kinds of machines the Lacemakers used, and a roll call of names of those who made the journey. Writing their names onto the walls of the gallery constitutes a kind of memorial in which the Lacemakers as individuals are re-inscribed in public consciousness.

Anne Brennan
Drawing for *Agincourt Florilegium* 2004
graphite pencil text on paper
29.7 x 42 cm

In Gillian Kelly's vast collection of postcards, we were also drawn to pictures of the fisher-women of Calais wearing a headdress made from embroidered machine-made tulle. These lace 'bonnets' (for want of a better word) were particular to the region around Calais. They were fashioned so as to surround the face with a wide circle of pleated white lace. The effect was so beautiful and serene that these ordinary women could almost have been saints in mediaeval paintings.

It was only a short step from admiring those photographs to conceiving of a group of similar ones for the exhibition. In these brand new portraits women and girls of Maitland wear a lace bonnet identical to the ones in the postcards. Behind them the Barrington Tops rise in the hazy summer sky; horses graze the Hunter River flats; railway lines curve away behind an embankment. The headdress, seemingly so emblematic of another place and time, looks strikingly foreign in its new setting but no less beautiful, the mainly very young women wearing it every bit as self-possessed and calm as their nineteenth century counterparts.

There is something about the way in which these images reach back into the nineteenth century and yet are so obviously of the present. In them it is possible to glimpse the ways in which time passes through our individual lives and through the lives of communities. If the headdress can be seen as a relic of another time, it is also re-animated by its young wearers, re-invented as a celebratory symbol of a new generation and a new future. There

is a disparity between its nineteenth century references and the contemporary look of the young models who wear it. We embrace this disparity as something that forms the heart of this exhibition, reflecting the way in which every engagement with the past takes place from the vantage point of the present.

Anne Ferran
Twice Removed: Amy at Veteran's Flats 2004
inkjet print
60 x 86 cm

courtesy Stills Gallery, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

This exhibition would never have come to fruition without the involvement of the Maitland community. In the part of the exhibition entitled *In the palm of your hand*, our idea was a simple one: invite as many people as possible to lend a personal possession, chosen on the principle that it is the thing they would want to take if they were leaving tomorrow for a foreign country, and that is also small enough to carry in the hand. Apart from these two conditions it could be anything at all.

An object that is small enough to carry in the hand might be something as valuable as a diamond ring or an entirely ordinary thing like, say, a dry biscuit. It could be a source of nourishment for the body, food for the spirit, a cherished memento, a practical tool. We were mindful of the Lacemakers' experience of having to choose what to take on their journey, but also deeply interested in the kinds of decisions people would make in a similar situation today.

There is something eloquent about the objects people choose to surround themselves with. They speak—in a quiet way—of their owners' private lives: of daily routines, events long gone, hopes for the future. Our words for these objects—belongings, personal possessions—suggest that special quality of relationship. For someone undertaking a long journey, especially if it is a journey of no return, the objects they take with them will have an importance that goes far beyond the practical; they become reminders of the old home and an assurance of continuity in the new one. In fact, it is only at the beginning and the end of our lives that we could be said to be truly empty-handed.

Many people were initially puzzled by our unusual request but were kind enough to respond anyway. For us the element of anticipation (what will these things turn out to be?) was only matched by the element of fascination when they finally started to arrive. As the objects began to accumulate in the gallery it started to seem like a gathering of sorts, almost as if each item were marking the place of its absent lender. It was then we decided that the invitation should remain open for the duration of the exhibition and that more objects, as they were offered, should go on being added to the work.

No one could have predicted the wayward path this exhibition has taken. Our circular journey has taken a year, starting in one hot summer and finishing in the next. If we started with nothing, we have, along the way, gathered new places, new communities, new experiences and new friends. It has been a slow collecting process that has set its stamp upon the exhibition, which could be said to be the sum of these encounters.

The work in *Twice Removed* has developed from modest beginnings: a postcard image, the ventilation grille in the wall at the entrance to the gallery, a list of names, a particular view of the river coiling away into the distance. Many of these things seem to have little obvious connection with the Lacemakers themselves, but have operated like small, inviting and often unexpected paths along our imaginative journey with them."

For this reason, the links between the various works have been kept deliberately loose, since we want to keep the experience of the exhibition equally open for the viewer, allowing them to use the works as way-stations in their own imaginative journey, one which can be as different and particular as each person who enters the gallery. Far from offering a conclusion, therefore, the exhibition waits expectantly for individuals to complete it by way of their presence, their recollections, their reactions.

The title of the exhibition, *Twice Removed*, suggests many possibilities. In it we can glimpse the story of the Lacemakers themselves, twice removed from first their English and then their French lives to start afresh in a new country. Or we can see the artists, exploring this story, removed from the Lacemakers in place and time. Above all, however, it suggests a connection across generations, one that encompasses notions of both family and community. This is the connection of memory and shared human experience, as fragile and as durable as lace itself, persisting across time, in the face of time's exigencies, to reassert and remake itself in our present.

Anne Ferran
Twice Removed: Kaylene at Morpeth 2004
inkjet print
60 x 86 cm
courtesy Stills Gallery, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Catalogue of works

Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran
Twice Removed: a chronology 2004
1848, torchon lace, 4 x 6 cm, lace maker: Jill Waite
1909, halas needlepoint lace, 4 x 6 cm, lace maker: Marie Laurie
2004, filet lace with torchon edging, 4 x 6 cm, lace maker: Sheila Price
vitrines by Trout Design, Canberra

Anne Brennan
Agincourt Florilegium I, II, III 2004
graphite pencil text on walls, variable dimensions

Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran
In the palm of your hand
various objects, variable dimensions, for the duration of the exhibition

Anne Ferran
Twice Removed 2004
inkjet prints
6 @ 60 x 86 cm; 8 @ 30 x 30 cm
Alana at Tenambit, Amy at Hinton, Amy at Morpeth, Amy at Veterans Flat, Genevieve at Morpeth Bridge, Hayley at Belmore Bridge, Kate at Dungog, Kaylene at Morpeth, Kim at Telarah, Lara at Wallis Creek, Margaret at Wallis Creek, Rebecca at Hinton Bridge, Sally at Clarence Town, Skye at Morpeth
courtesy Stills Gallery, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

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