

Brenna Maag: *Observation of Wonder: Taxonomy, Conservatory*  
Richmond Art Gallery (2009) curatorial essay by Deborah Koenker

*Observation of Wonder*, a two-part work by emerging artist Brenna Maag, is a wonder in itself. Inside the beautifully proportioned dome that is *Conservatory*, Maag has orchestrated a space of magical stillness reminiscent of a floating world of jellyfish, or a suddenly suspended storm of magnified snowflakes. The structure, formed using an inventive system of steel modules, magnets, cotton fabric and hardware, beckons to the viewer to linger. The dome is covered with hundreds of hand-crocheted doilies rescued from thrift shops and collected as donations to this project. With these materials and light, Maag has transformed the work of forgotten women. Gently lit from outside the space, these lacey patterns based on natural elements---stars, flowers, leaves---dance across the walls and ceiling, casting intricate shadows inside a luminous environment for the observer within. The translucent, weightless quality of light, pattern and arrested movement is utterly transporting. Once used to protect and decorate furniture, doilies are outmoded. De-accessioned as family heirlooms, the stunning complexity of these patterns endures. Each design, produced by a single cotton thread and a simple hook, is worked into a series of thread loops fixed into a chain that is connected both laterally and horizontally. Doily pattern diagrams use a series of letters and numbers that follow elegant mathematical progressions. That Maag has seen the potential in these discarded textiles is no small part of the sense of wonder and amazement this work elicits. *Conservatory* is a space that links the world of Nature with the culturally constructed textile work of more than 700 anonymous women. It references conservation in two senses: both the safekeeping of labour intensive “fancy work”, specifically doilies, and the human impulse to classify, observe, preserve and order the natural world. Math, science, the domestic realm and Nature converge to create a work of unsentimental, unapologetic beauty.

Connecting thread in inventive ways is ancient. Textile historian Elizabeth Wayland Barber writes that when humans of the Upper Palaeolithic or Stone Age were painting the caves of Lascaux and Altamira, they had also invented string and sewing (Barber 43). She refers to the creation of snares, fish lines, tethers, leashes, nets and packaging using string as the “String Revolution”. (45) While the specific origin of crochet is debatable, the word *crochet* derives from the French *croc* or *croche*, meaning *hook* (Gillow, *Sentance* 47). Crochet seems to have evolved from fine lace making, which emerged as a signifier of great wealth in Europe in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Harris 217). Bobbin lace, derived from braiding, is an extremely complex process, potentially using hundreds of bobbins of thread and a high degree of skill. (217) Beginning in the 1800s in Europe, crochet began to be used as a less costly substitute for lace (economic). The minimal method and materials it required were accessible to all classes.

*Taxonomy*, the second part of *Observation of Wonder*, presents multiple series of cyanotype prints that document and sort 146 doily patterns according to their similarities to patterns existing in Nature. Maag’s invented classification system is

loosely based on the Latin nomenclature used in scientific taxonomy, the orderly classification of plants and animals according to their presumed natural relationships. In a subtle play on the domestic, Maag has organized the doilies into 'families', assigning each a double Latin name indicating a 'genus' and 'species'. The lives of women ordering the chaos of families echo through this categorization. These patterns are recorded by Maag using the cyanotype printing process. Cyanotype, also known as the blue print process, was invented by Sir John Herschel in 1842, but was brought to prominence by botanist Anna Atkins, who used the process to record specimens for her 3-volume work *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*. Noteworthy as the first book to use photography as a means of botanical illustration, this was a landmark in publishing. In the cyanotype process, a paper is coated with chemicals which become light sensitive when dry. Similar to the photogram process used by Atkins, Maag has laid each doily onto coated paper and exposed it to sunlight to produce the characteristic Prussian-blue prints. As with Atkins' use of cyanotype, Maag's use of the process is ideal to convey the intricacy and beauty of each doily. The inclusion of the Latin text on each print underscores the connection of women to rigorous scientific investigation.

Atkins keeps company with an extensive history of women scientists, mathematicians and inventors. Prominent among them is Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron; a brilliant mathematician like her mother, Annabella, Lovelace is credited with writing what is essentially the first software program for the first computer: Charles Babbage's 'Analytical Engine', itself based on the binary 0-1 punch card system of the Jacquard loom. In 1959 when Ruth Handler invented the *Barbie* doll, she couldn't have imagined the national debate on girls and education that ignited in 1994 when Mattel's *Teen Talk Barbie* uttered the infamous phrase "Math class is tough!". One can only wonder at the commonly held misconception that girls aren't good at math and science, given the mathematical complexity of many hand-textile processes practiced primarily by women. *Observation of Wonder* succeeds in linking ideas and histories as intricate as lace through profoundly poetic connections.

Barber, Elizabeth Wayland. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*. New York, London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994.

Economic Expert. Com, crochet.

<http://www.economicexpert.com/a/Crochet.htm#economic>

Harris, Jennifer ed. *Textiles: 5,000 Years*. London: British Museum Press, 1993.

Gillow, John and Bryan Sentance. *World Textiles: A Visual Guide to Traditional Techniques*. Boston, N.Y., London: Bulfinch Press, Little, Brown and Company, 1999.