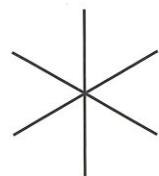


Crochet discs, a Topsy-Turvy doll, a life-sized woollen bicycle ... knitting has taken hold in New Zealand in wildly unexpected ways. **Gina Irish** unravels this sensual and quirky new phenomenon.

WOOLLY WORLD: NEW ZEALAND'S CROCHET REVIVAL



Ani O'Neill, Megan Ruth Hansen-

Knarhoi and Jacquelyn Greenbank are regulars at local charity shops and haberdashery stores. No ball of wool or garish thread escapes their attention. Crochet obsessed, these artists have rescued the subversive stitch from total oblivion, sparking the revival of all things woolly.

During the women's art movement in the 1970s and 1980s, the profile of crochet and other handicrafts was elevated, initiating dialogue surrounding 'genteel' activities and feminine constructs. Over time, this focus has changed, as artists attach new meaning to the homely crafts. While O'Neill, Hansen-Knarhoi and Greenbank pay homage to the generations of women who have continued the crochet tradition, their concerns have moved beyond gender politics to embrace concepts connected to identity, materialism and memory.

In 1995 O'Neill collaborated with Judy Darragh, New Zealand's 'Queen of Kitsch'. An avid collector of all things vulgar, Darragh transforms op-shop trash and undervalued domestic craft into spectacular installations, shrines and wall pieces. Her tacky onslaught elevated kitsch to new status and, since Darragh's emergence in the 1980s, younger artists have adopted and developed her cause.

While Darragh questions the boundaries between high and low art, O'Neill transforms new and used materials into poetic expressions of Pacific pride and identity. For well over a decade, O'Neill has investigated her position as an urban Pacific Islander in her work. *Cottage Industry*, 1997, a collection of bright, woollen crocheted discs exhibited at the Wellington City Art Gallery, was an amalgamation of her concerns. Likened to Rasta hats, O'Neill's crocheted circles challenge ethnocentric stereotypes and constructed realities. With characteristic sensitivity, O'Neill asserts the connection between objects and family, and the survival of knowledge.

For O'Neill, crochet is connected not only to her island ancestry, but also to personal experience and her own sense of self. She has vivid, early memories of her Cook Island grandmother and

groups of women sewing and crocheting. These memories are embedded in O'Neill's handcrafted objects and, more recently, her collaborative work with Hansen-Knarhoi.

In 2001 Hansen-Knarhoi assisted O'Neill with *The Buddy System*, an interactive project designed for the inaugural Auckland Triennial, *Bright Paradise*, held at the Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand. In 2003 O'Neill visited New York as an apexart resident, and in the following year she and Hansen-Knarhoi travelled to New York to further develop *The Buddy System*.

With the assistance of volunteers, O'Neill and Hansen-Knarhoi taught visitors to New York's Art in General gallery how to crochet a flower. All these flowers were then pinned to the gallery wall and linked with coloured wool. After the exhibition, the flowers were removed and posted to a person nominated by the maker. The success of *The Buddy System* positioned crochet as an accessible, transportable and cross-cultural activity. *The Buddy System* was an invaluable experience for Hansen-Knarhoi, having since established herself as an emerging crochet artist and continuing to collaborate with O'Neill.

As a child, Hansen-Knarhoi collected scraps of wool, and early memories of pompoms, woollen braids and hand webs abound. Currently completing her MFA at Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts, Hansen-Knarhoi's decision to work with wool was instinctive. It is a familiar material, often held or worn close to the body and, consequently, a powerful transmitter of memory and nostalgia.

In her work, Hansen-Knarhoi takes advantage of our unconscious relationship with wool. Alluring objects, seemingly innocent at first glance, turn gruesome and repulsive on closer inspection. *eau de toilet*, 2004, an installation that featured nine hand-knitted and crocheted cross embossed toilet rolls and three Tui birds, satirised New Zealand's colonial history: the clean white toilet paper is soiled with native bird droppings. Lost pride, heritage and the clash between Indigenous values and colonial ambitions are considered. Hansen-Knarhoi's woollen sculptures engage the viewer and prompt conflicted feelings: disgust, comfort, warmth, security and confusion.

Crochet obsessed, these artists have rescued the subversive stitch from total oblivion, sparking the revival of all things woolly.



Megan Ruth Hansen-Knarhoi, *Topsy/Turvy*, 2004, wool, cotton, pounamu, wax thread, chain, glass, Dacron and crochet. Photo: Stuart Page

Previous page: Jacquelyn Greenbank, *The Royal Raleigh Watchers* (detail), 2005, wool, cardboard, bike and glue

The useless and downright ugly crochet patterns that fill the pages of women's magazines have been the focus for Hansen-Knarhoi's tongue-in-cheek tribute to domestic handicrafts. Pointless objects amuse Hansen-Knarhoi, and her crochet chicken egg warmers, *Kit(s)chlick(en)*, 2003, allude to the non-essential creations that clutter our lives, cupboards and drawers.

On the flipside, Hansen-Knarhoi honours a wonderful invention: the padded coat-hanger. The beautiful lace, ribbons and scalloping that adorn these practical objects are generally kept from sight, tucked away in a closet or buried beneath clothes. A series of tangled, padded coat-hangers assembled in a glass case on Auckland's Ponsonby Road in June 2005 brought these household instruments into the public eye. The window space Hansen-Knarhoi filled, known as de-part-ment and linked to the Miss Crabb boutique fashion store, provides a space for emerging artists to exhibit their work. Run by Richard Orgis with the support of Miss Crabb, de-part-ment offered the perfect spot for Hansen-Knarhoi's tribute to hangers' hidden beauty; however a sense of melancholy pervades the scene. In this instance, Hansen-Knarhoi subscribes to feminist ideologies, reminding us that women's hobby crafts are marginalised, concealed and sometimes forgotten.

Irony gives way to more pressing issues. *Topsy Turvy*, 2004, Hansen-Knarhoi's contribution to *Remember New Zealand*, the home-grown exhibition curated by Tobias Berger for the Sao Paulo Biennial in 2004, established the crochet hook as a political tool. When Hansen-Knarhoi was invited to submit a 'souvenir' of New Zealand, she produced a woollen doll.

Originally made in the United States during the pre-Civil War era of African enslavement, the topsy-turvy doll was black when flipped one way and, when flipped in the opposite direction, the skirt concealed the black figure to reveal a white doll. Hansen-Knarhoi's doll acknowledges racial conflict and New Zealand's turbulent colonial past. The black doll, adorned with a *pounamu* pendant, is joined to a white doll wearing a crucifix and chain. The process of assimilation and our reaction to difference are called to question, as are missionary efforts to save 'the damned' and existing conflict between Maori and Pakeha in search of resolution and cultural respite.

In Christchurch, the crochet craze continues. Jacquelyn Greenbank was studying painting at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, when fellow student and friend, Joanna Langford,

introduced her to crochet. Crochet became Greenbank's passion, and the focus of her 2004 Master of Fine Arts.

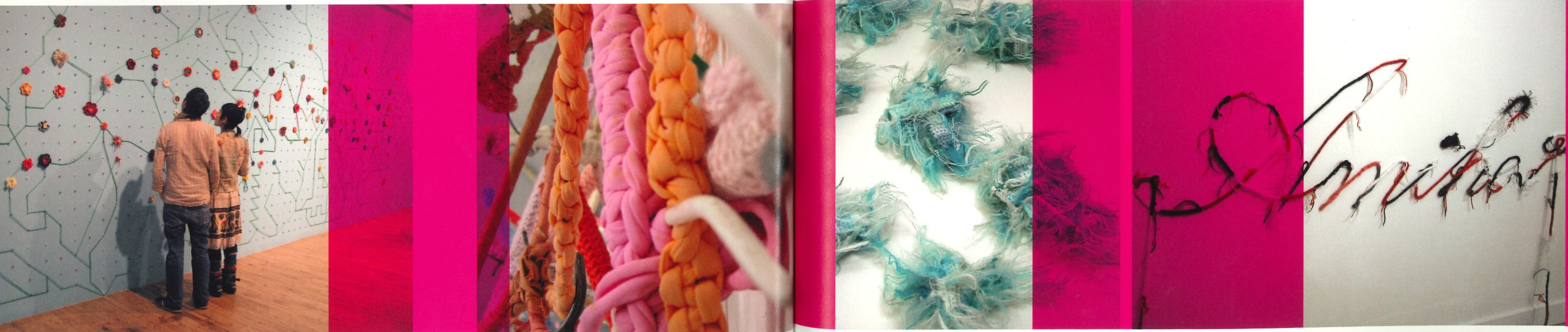
Greenbank indulges in fantasy and the development of narrative. Her storytelling tactics captivate Greenbank's audience, who eagerly await the next instalment of her fictitious 'royal tour'. Tales of the Queen's visit to the dominion, her contact with Maori and her risky excursion to the Pink and White Terraces just moments before their destruction are captivating. Greenbank uses wool as an intermediary, an entry card to a fantastical world.

Crocheted crowns and spurs are just some of the royal memorabilia Greenbank has created. While she does not regard herself as a royalist, she is fascinated with collecting and with the desire to emulate objects we cannot own. She bandages her objects in wool and fabric; even gallery plinths and extension cords are embroiled in Greenbank's woollen cocoon. Like O'Neill and Hansen-Knarhoi, Greenbank favours the accessibility of wool and the familiarity of the materials she brings together. Odd colour combinations and retro, thrift shop wool transport the viewer to a distant time and place. A Raleigh 20 bike, every inch covered with a mixture of yellow,

beige, blue and red textiles, complete with a Union Jack flag, bell and wheels is the latest offering in Greenbank's wacky royal saga. Inside Greenbank's imagination, there are characters to meet and royal galas to attend, which allow the viewer to leave reality aside and delve into imaginary lands belonging to childhood.

O'Neill, Hansen-Knarhoi and Greenbank have removed crochet from the domestic sphere. Their wild and provocative creations push traditional boundaries and use humour to encourage reaction. As a material, wool is familiar, heart-warming, reassuring, a bit old-fashioned, totally hip and, for those who can't stand natural fibres directly against the skin, perhaps a bit scratchy. ■■■■

Gina Irish is a Christchurch-based freelance arts writer, a regular columnist for *Art New Zealand* and the curator of the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology's Artworks Collection.



With characteristic sensitivity, O'Neill asserts the connection between objects and family, and the survival of knowledge.

→ Left to right:

Ani O'Neill, *The Buddy System*. Installation shot, Art in General gallery, New York, USA, 2004

Megan Ruth Hansen-Knarhoi, *Hanger* (installation detail), 2005, wool, silk thread, ribbon, cotton fabric, wooden hangers, sewing, knitting, macramé and crochet. Photo: Stuart Page

Megan Ruth Hansen-Knarhoi, *Peppermint Piety*, 2004, wool, pins, dacron and crochet. Photo: Stuart Page

Megan Ruth Hansen-Knarhoi, *AmiHe?*, 2005, wool, pins, French knitting