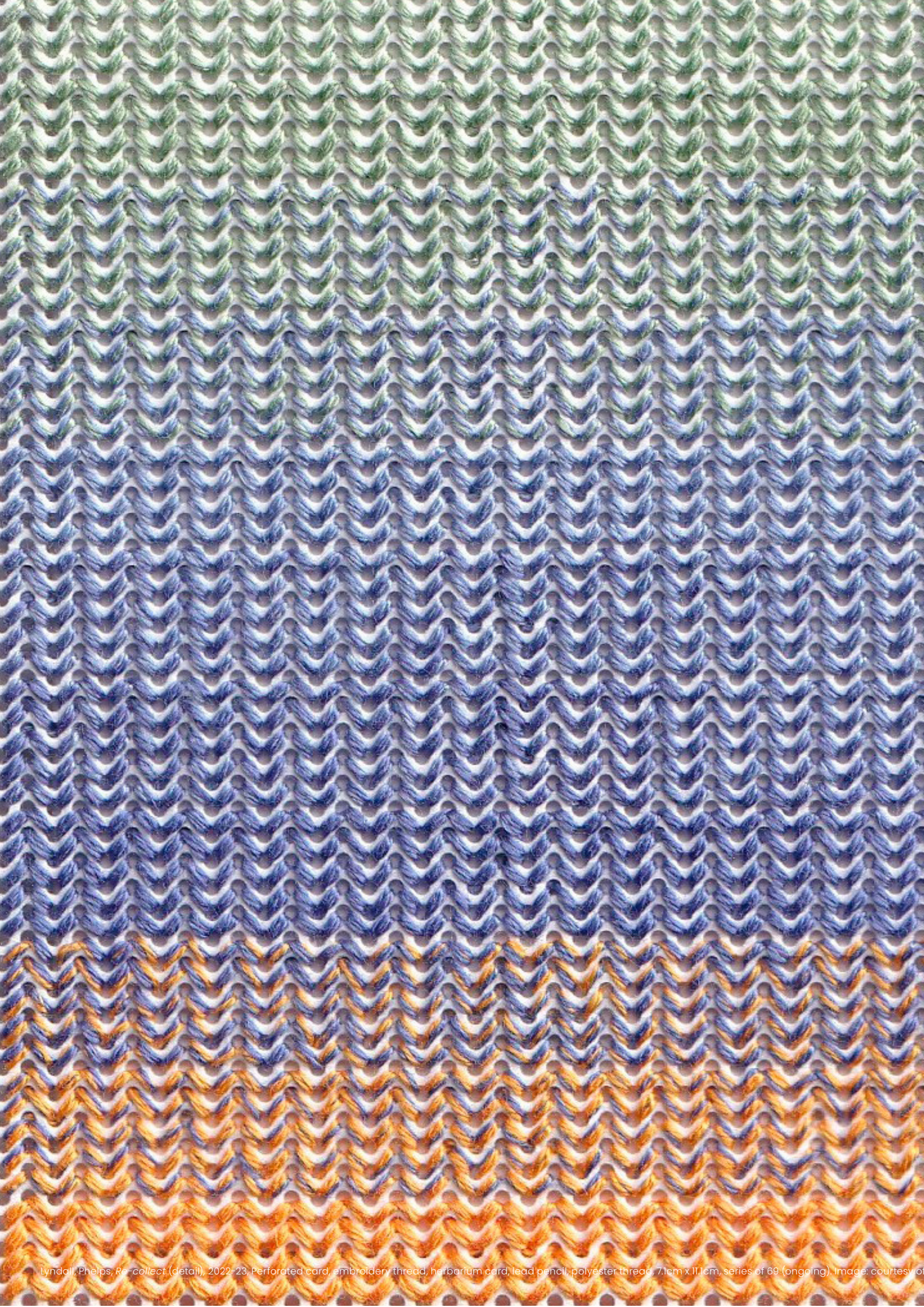


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Lyndall Phelps
The Secret Life of Objects
4 February - 3 March 2023



I am an enthusiast of many things, with an inquiring mind and a working methodology similar to an amateur Victorian collector. —Lyndall Phelps¹

As our twenty-first-century, screen-based obsessions and increasingly short attention span robs us of an ability to really look and wonder outside of this addictive realm, the significant role played by the vast array of objects stored in our archives, museums, historic houses and historical societies is potentially in peril. Without the minds of curious audiences to activate their physical presence, bringing them into dialogue with contemporary life, what use do they serve? This is the space in which the work of Lyndall Phelps resides. The practice and process of research is central to her art, yet the outcomes are in no way dull or didactic. In Phelps' hands, immersion in various collections result in imaginative, whimsical and occasionally surreal works that re-present history and science in ways that are both tangible and distinctly human. She often invites communities to share their stories and participate in the journey and joys of research and making, and creation of the work itself often employs skills more associated with the hobbyist than contemporary artist. At every stage, the work feels of and part of our everyday, and this remains fundamental to both its nuance and charm. In creating work that includes and embraces its audiences, dissolving the distance between the present and the past, Phelps is the type of artist that every curator, historian or scientist working with an historic collection—be it of archival documents, botanical specimens, Lepidoptera, militaria or ornithology—wishes they had on their side.

The Secret Life of Objects brings together a selection of Phelps' recent art and a condensed survey of work created by the artist between 2008 and 2018, when she lived and practiced in the United Kingdom. What becomes immediately apparent in showing this work together is that the length of time it takes Phelps to research different series is often matched (or indeed, exceeded) by the labour-intensive, repetitive processes that are central to the creation of her work. Deliberately recalling the derogatory categorisation and historical disregard of “women's work”, the actual making of Phelps' art demands a level of dedication, commitment and, at times, sheer fortitude, as she knits, crochets, embroiders and embellishes, employing cheap and readily accessible materials in order to transform her “historical pieces” into hand-crafted, jewel-like objects.²



¹ Lyndall Phelps, artist statement, <https://www.lyndallphelps.com/about/>, accessed 12 January 2023.

² For example, the artist's ongoing work *Rope* (2001-) is a series of hand-knitted monochrome ropes, each 100 metres in length. When combined, on completion, they will measure a kilometre. Comprising thousands of stitches created over many hundreds of hours, the first five ropes—which are red, blue, yellow, orange and green—are complete; the sixth, a purple rope, is fast approaching 100 metres.

³ Michael Stanley, “One and One and One and One”, *Enigma*, <https://www.lyndallphelps.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/One-and-One-and-One-and-One-Essay.pdf>, accessed 12 January 2023.

Image (above): Lyndall Phelps, *Entrap, conceal*, 2011, Glazed antique mahogany entomology drawer, brass plaque, embroidery thread, glass beads, 45.7cm x 45.7cm x 58cm. Photo: Peter Mennim.

Aptly describing Phelps' practice as "archaeological digging in a scrapbook of fragmented lives", Michael Stanley has also noted the quiet subversion of her work:

It is an act of accumulation and continual investment. It is an evolving document that bears witness to a practice that is often solitary, refined and possessing a modesty that belies the profundity of its engagement with the very heart of human experience.³

This subversion is a form of resistance that sharpens our attention, demanding that we reconsider and reassess conventional histories and what we think we know of our past.

Phelps' recent exploration of the important contribution of women in the advancement of knowledge of Australian botanical species overturns the well-known and somewhat tired expression "History is written by the victors",⁴ highlighting instead the role that networks and community most usually play in any major achievement. While Victoria's first government botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller (1825–1896), is heralded as the force behind the establishment of the National Herbarium of Victoria in 1853, the vast number of specimens he gathered were in fact due to the large network of collectors he helped establish across the country. Von Mueller's volunteers, including the 225 women since identified by Sara Maroske and Alison Vaughan,⁵ were often early settlers based in isolated areas across the colony. The artist's new work in this exhibition focuses on the fifty-one women who collected type specimens⁶ throughout Australia, along with the fifty women who specifically collected in New South Wales. Phelps pays tribute to these largely unacknowledged amateur botanists through specimens of her own devising, organised by quasi-cataloguing systems that mimic traditional museological practices. In this way, she introduces both the personal and the feminine through hand-made decorative elements that would normally sit incongruously with records of scientific observation and classification. The ghosting of these women across the centuries is also echoed by the whiteness of Phelps' works. The outline of plant specimens in works such as *Re-collect* (2022) are painstakingly created with white pen, caught, and seemingly held down by tape before they float off. The sensibility of the body of drawings, embroideries, photographs, and botanical specimens comprising this series is one of heightened delicacy, achieved by a combination of patience, accumulated knowledge and close observation that is true to both the study of specimens and the creation of traditional women's crafts. Phelps seems to be telling us here that if we don't take notice, these things will simply disappear.

By knowingly drawing on the specificities (and occasional eccentricities) of museum systems and display, Phelps' work creates a space of possibilities and "what ifs"—a place where we hear whispers not declarations, and where the information we receive is a starting point, but not everything. In her unique way, she is a champion of the unseen and largely unrecognised realm of collecting and collections; through her work, she encourages us to appreciate the role of objects in our scientific and cultural pursuits and the way they help us better understand ourselves and our world.

Kelly Gellatly

³ This quote is often attributed to Winston Churchill; however, its origin is unknown.

⁴ Sara Maroske and Alison Vaughan, "Ferdinand Mueller's Female Plant Collectors: A Biographical Register", *Muelleria* 32 (2014): 92–172. Thanks to Lyndall Phelps for sharing this reference.

⁵ The specimens selected to serve as a reference point when a plant species is first named.

⁶ Image (right): Lyndall Phelps, *Flutter*, 2018, Acrylic mirror, vinyl lettering, 0.3cm x 15cm x 30cm each (24 pieces). Photo: Peter Mennim.

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Glaucopsyche arion
Linnaeus 1758

Neozep
Linn

Carterocephalus palaemon
Pallas 1771

Papi
Linn

Argynnis aglaja
Linnaeus 1758

Polyom
Roi

Melanargia galathea
Linnaeus 1758

Anthoo
Li

Euphydryas aurinia

C
L

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The gathering of large amounts of information, images and objects through intensive research is a core methodology within Lyndall Phelps' art practice. So too is the investigation of collections, both historical and contemporary, in archives and museums. Collaboration is another key element; she regularly engages with diverse specialists who are either professionals in their field or enthusiastic amateurs. These processes have resulted in much of her work being site or context specific, in museums, heritage locations and public spaces.

Phelps aims to unearth less visible material from the past, and re-present it through narrative driven installations. The social history of an object and how it connects to humanity, and the endeavors of individuals are of particular interest, especially when the narrative surrounding them conveys fragility and vulnerability, or alternatively healing and protection. Many works are meticulously hand-made over a considerable period, often requiring the repetition of a single action. Material choices are highly considered, and the media used in each project is influenced by the research. Her art is quiet and contemplative, it invites curiosity and intrigue.

Phelps has exhibited widely throughout Australia and the UK, solo exhibitions include *Re-collect*, Grafton Regional Gallery (2022); *Flutter*, St Albans Museum + Gallery (2018); *Covariance*, Institute of Physics, London (2013); *Softkill*, University of Hertfordshire Galleries (2011); *The Pigeon Archive*, Lismore Regional Gallery (2011) and Milton Keynes Gallery (2009); *Touch*, Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum (2010) and *Knit one purl one*, Canary Wharf, London (2009).

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Cover: Lyndall Phelps, *Birds of Bedford (detail)*, 2013, found ceramic bird figurine, feathers, , series of 7 (ongoing). Photo: Peter Mennim.

Above: Lyndall Phelps, 2020. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Partnered with

