

Angel Hairs in the Architecture

Imagine our ambient interior design unbedazzled by the ubiquitous electric lightbulb – rather a sensuous interactivity with the qualities of the light of luminosity.

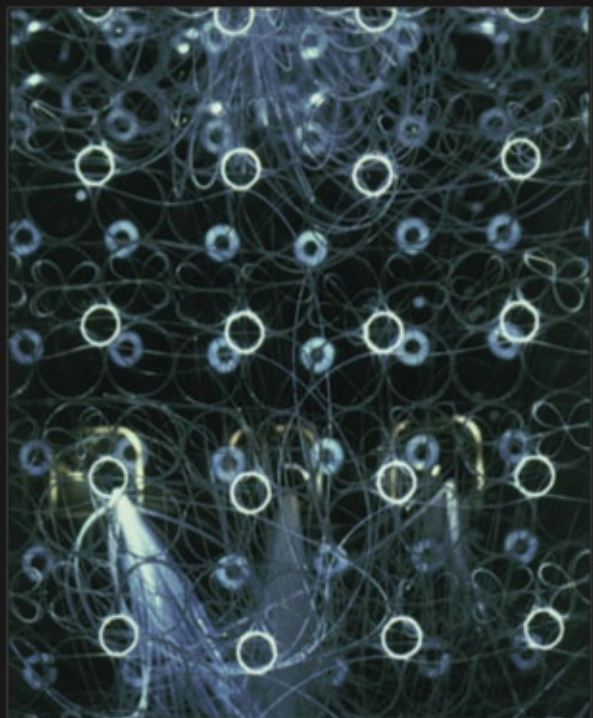
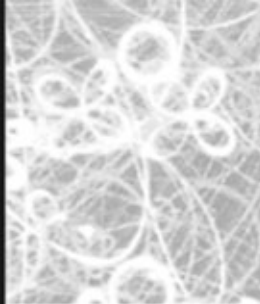


Photo: Helena Hietanen



Sculptor Helena Hietanen fuses native Finnish lacemaking with the light art of glistening fibre-optics. Here Helena discusses its potential for design futures.

Two years ago, at London's Barbican Centre, amidst a strange and rich exhibition of a variety of Finnish artistic and craft artefacts, the strangest, richest, most arrestingly individual piece stood out leagues from its surrounding craft-inflected peers.

As if they were shimmering, glistening light wavelets illuminating a darkened cave; a thousand intricate optical fibre threads gently pulsed light whilst intricately balancing upon a supporting structure. This structure (sitting in the endarkened backwater space the Barbican curatorial staff had decided upon) appeared to breathe as the slow rippling light passed across different parts of its body. Looking into these light wavelets as they moved across and around, their transparent needle-thin fibres illuminating and in continual motion, you became gradually aware of the intricate lace handwork which the piece had been crafted in.

The patterns used for the optical fibre lacemaking were decorations derived from women's lacemaking and, because the piece was originally for 1997's Venice Art Biennale, Venetian architecture. A web of patterns, delicate decorative motifs, circles and flowers became discernible as the light breathed into soft life in one part of the technolace work before fading away, only to reemerge on another segment of the piece.

Helena Hietanen is a young Finnish artist who rather uniquely has developed this remarkable departure in electronic art, which fuses the male aporia for technology with the craft of the lacemaker, so often identified with the feminine realm. Hietanen originally exhibited these light sculptures as part of 'Conceptualism and Handicraft and Women and Technology' an exhibition at Helsinki's Muu Gallery. As the Gallery wrote at the time, technology is as far from women as conceptualism is from handcraft. Turning this on its head Hietanen's work connects all these points, male kinetic light art fused with the (primarily) women's art of handcraft. In so doing it raises questions

and gives answers about creating a technological art which remains women's in feel and style.

These 'Technolace light sculptures' also convey a series of further tensions between otherwise apparently unrelated fields. The relation between craft and light, for instance. Here, the light and kinetic art avant worlds are placed in uncertain if close proximity to a complete non-relation; the female traditions of handcrafts. Another is the relation between perceived tradition and new media technologies and its overflow into an open ended and, as yet, undefined territory of various glistening ambient and sensory design possibilities. This synergy can also be framed in a context of not only intense time-consuming hand-based skill, but also a rootedness in place, at odds with the hands-off and teched-up realm of ambient video and multimedia. Could an immersion in the subtleties of light and illumination, have been so thoroughly and effectively documented anywhere other than a country, or countries where there's effectively darkness at noon for much of a quarter of the year, and sun at midnight over much of the other? This is an acknowledgement that for all their technology humans are still creatures of celestial seasons. And that such experience continues to create remarkable sensitivities to, for instance, the nature of light and the luminous. The emphasis is of an enduring relation to place and environment, even if in only impressionistic and somewhat fuzzy senses, to do with the psychology of temperature and extents of light, rather than the austere mappings of ecologies and watersheds.

Early in her art career, Hietanen had been making sculptures out of silicon rubber with a theme of toys – rubberducks and the like. At one point she squeezed the rubber from its tube and made rubber drawings or 'sort of' patterns with it. The rubber was very similar to yarn and Hietanen began making rubber laces out of a transparent rubber. When these were hung on the wall with light, only the shadow was visible. Later she was visiting a light fair, and for the first time saw optical fibres. They looked very much like her transparent rubber squeezed yarns. From there she began working with the fibre optic. But optical fibre was totally different to work with, so from there new ideas evolved.

Having begun to make Technolace lightworks, Hietanen also continued exploring the culture of women's handicrafts. Whilst studying she was aware that most of her teachers in sculpting were men. In turn, the materials being used were hard. 'I needed a lot of physical strength to be able to build a work. I was wondering at that time why, for instance, can't there be a sewing machine in the sculpting class. I started to look for things that were softer and fitted to my bodily experience.'

'Also I had grown up with a mother and grandmothers who were making handicrafts. So this area of feminine culture is very natural and close to me.'