

INFORMED SOURCE

Obscuring for Clarity: The Laceworks of Pierre Fouché

by matt lambert

South African artist **Pierre Fouché** is a self-described appropriation artist, using images from archives and pop

culture, with an aspiration to create visibility and collectivity for queer bodies in his direct community. With a desire to be a painter, Fouché found himself instead leaning into sculpture, which led to learning needlepoint, then crochet, and finally bobbin lace. He has expressed this as a logical progression.

Fouché works in many mediums and techniques and does not always reference the body, but here I am most interested in his lace works as forms of documentary and portraiture. I see clear connections between this work and painting, as Fouché creates portraits and landscapes while grappling between two and three dimensionality.

Today there is active discourse on the politics of visibility. There is a tension that sits between the desire to be seen and potential for greater exposure to violence and other forms of subjugation. While not a new conversation, these ideas are constantly reshaped by technological development and the evolution of cultural and political discourse.



Pierre Fouché, *The Little Binche Peacock and Other Utopian Dreams*, 2019. Panel: Acrylic cord bobbin lace with *Tagetes Minuta* (Khakibush), *Lapsang Suchong* and *Cape Snowbush*. Centrepiece: Silk floss bobbin lace (in progress), *Binche* style wooden lace bobbins in a turned *Zambian Kiaat* wooden display case. Centrepiece: 75.6 x 63 x 20.9 inches, panel: 137.8 x 307 inches. Photo: Haydn Phipps, venue: Whatiftheworld Gallery, Cape Town.

In *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen*, **Shawn Michelle Smith** unpacks the progression of photography and the documentation of the body. What once took day-long exposure times and hours of labor in production has developed into rapid production of so many images that it is not possible to see them all. The desire to document and create visibility has produced so many images that it has re-produced “its own vast realm of the unseen.”¹

In my interpretation, Fouché’s work directly plays with these discourses and bounces off the historical timeline of photography, taking images that were often produced through fast-paced processes and reinterpreting them through the slower process of lace making. This method results in blurred or unfocused images which asks the viewer to slow down. Reducing the detail of the image through the detail of lace and pattern solicits one to fill in the physical gaps. As Fouché states, “By rendering a found image in a new medium, I invite the world to pay a little more attention to it. It ‘turns up the volume,’ so to speak, of the image’s broader meanings, including those that even I cannot conceive of.”²

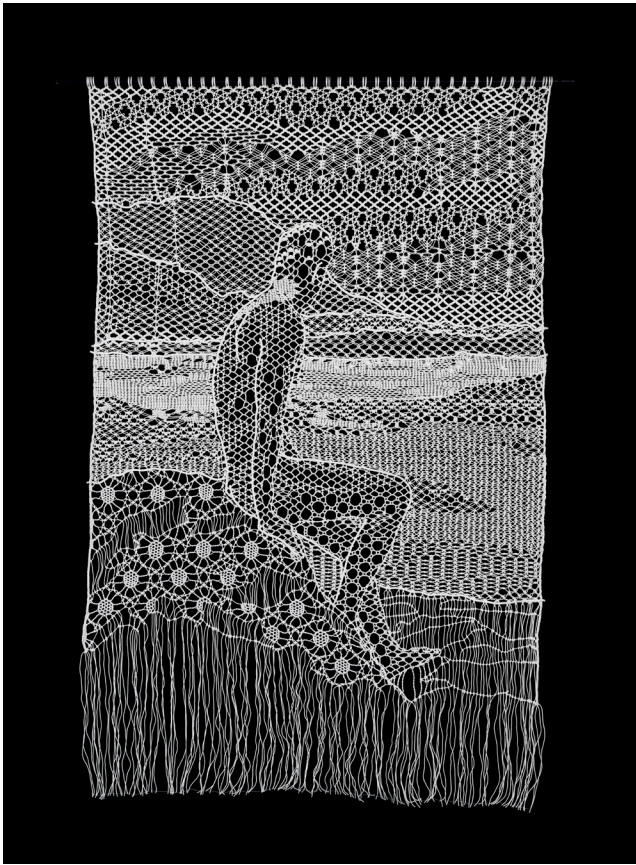
This broadening of meaning allows for projection by the viewer, a chance to use personal reference to find relation to the depiction of a body. This work plays with subversion. By abstracting, clarity can be developed. Larger concepts and narratives are allowed to take precedence. Asking the question of how long something took to make, and why would the artist take the time, is valuable. It stresses the value of depiction and the choices made of who and why these depicted bodies were chosen. Some works are shown with pins or bobbins still attached, creating a curiosity around process and signaling the presence of the hand.

Fouché’s desire to connect with the community extends beyond the display of his own work. He is an active contributor to a network of lace makers online, creating **The Adventurous Lacemakers**, a Patreon co-created with **Jane Atkinson**, **Dagmar Beckle-Machyockova** and **Denise Watts**. It offers information and courses for the inexperienced as well as masterclass level, alongside a companion website which offers digital publications with video link supplements. When I asked how teaching contributed to his practice, Fouché replied:

Teaching has helped me to understand the fundamental structure and geometries of lace far better than simply practicing it. The joy that I find in designing and making lace satisfies a very deep yearning for meaning and self-expression, and it is wonderful to encourage and see it happen for others. As the world is beginning to take stock of worthy pursuits, healthy obsessions and vehicles for forging personal spiritual journeys, lacemaking ticks all the boxes.³



Pierre Fouché, *The Judgment of Paris (after Wtewael) III*, 2018. Bobbin lace and macramé in polyester braid, 81.9 x 31.5 inches. Photo: Haydn Phipps.



Pierre Fouché, *'n Versameling Ontelbare Oomblikke (Aggregate of Countless Moments)*, 2022. Macramé and bobbin lace with polyester rope, 62.2 x 90.5 inches. Photo: Whatiftheworld Gallery, Cape Town.

Lace as a material is often put into stereotypical categories, associated with aging and women's work. But lace also has clear connections to domestic work and collective labor that incorporates social connection which can flow into conversations of politics and cultural affairs. As a skill that is passed down, lacemaking has a tradition in connecting humans and building community. Fouché is building on these ideas and pushing them into technologically developed spaces still grounded in their histories. His work shows us that not everything has to be clear and in focus to be relatable. The acceptance of not understanding sometimes requires us to just slow down.

¹ Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2013), 215.

² Pierre Fouché, email exchange with the author, 2023.

³ Ibid.



Pierre Fouché, *His Foam White Arms*, 2015. Bobbin lace in cotton, with a queered poem by Crosbie Garstin encoded in the pattern, wrapped around wood with steel pins, 22.4 x 2362.2 inches. Photo by the artist, collection: Spier Art Trust.

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—*Pierre Fouché (he/him) received his Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Stellenbosch in 2006. Fouché represented South Africa at the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial in Perth (2021) and was the featured artist of the Andorran city of Escaldes-Engordany's 12th Textile and Glass Symposium (2018). His work is represented in the public collections of the Iziko South African National Gallery, The Norval Foundation and the Artphilein Foundation, Switzerland.*

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Top: **Pierre Fouché**, *James* (in progress), 2014. Silk bobbin lace, midlands bobbins spangles with glass and lapis lazuli, dimensions vary. Photo by the artist.
Bottom: **Pierre Fouché**, *James*, 2015. Bobbin lace in silk floss on wood with brass pins, 5.7 x 12.9 inches. Photo: Whatiftheworld Gallery, Cape Town.