

The point of the needle

How Jodi Colella made her "Disobedient Doilies" in "Dangerously Close to Home" at Boston Sculptors Gallery

By Cate McQuaid



Buckets of Swill, handspun/hand-dyed cotton, 14x15 in., 2026

[*Jodi Colella's*](#) textile sculptures hold histories of handwork. Made with labor-intensive processes and intricate, repetitive techniques, they honor makers long gone and poke holes in grindingly eternal power dynamics and gender codes.

[*Textiles have always told stories*](#). Jodi's works embody the unheard voices of countless women, who make up a chorus behind her own pointed messages. For the *Disobedient Doilies*, which will be on view in her show *Dangerously Close to Home* at *Boston Sculptors* she uses direct language, speaking truth to power in ways that lacemakers laboring in past centuries often could not.

She writes here about her lacework *Buckets of Swill* – an image and language that make marked contrast to the doily they're stitched into in, as Jodi puts it, "putrid green." This is not the finery we

associate with tatting. Jodi's work bridges chasms between medium and message, tactility and verbiage, luridness and refinement. It's a wry takedown of old belief structures that have kept powerful men in place for centuries, and women safely occupied by their needlepoint and embroidery.

Now, as the Epstein files expose how such men lose sight of the humanity of girls and women, Dangerously Close to Home seems perfectly timed. Jodi's art, meticulously constructed stitch by tiny stitch, represents an accumulation of needlework that has silently – nearly invisibly – accrued thanks to innumerable hands across time. Maybe all that faithful handwork has steadied women, connected them, and helped lead us to what might be a tipping point – because for sure, the swill is spilling out of the buckets.

Jodi writes:

In 2013 while attending a residency at Vermont Studio Center I found a dusty box of little tags with unusual phrases on them. *A Corpulent Clam*, *A Two Tailed Cat*, *A Dizzy Egg*, are three examples. They were so intriguing and mysterious I just had to take them home. Later I learned that they belonged to a Parker Brothers game from 1925 called *My Mother Sent Me to the Grocery Store*.

The game directs players “to scatter the slips face down in the center of the table and then read aloud ‘My Mother Sent Me to the Grocery Store to get _____.’ ” Laughter ensues with absurd fill-in-the-blank answers like *A Great Fool* or *A False Tooth* taken from the game slips. These quirky phrases influenced the use of language in my work inspiring past projects [Index](#) and [Sampled Lives](#) and now my current exhibition *Dangerously Close to Home* at Boston Sculptors Gallery.



Imagine a century ago when this game was conceived. In 1925 the Jazz Age was in full swing, Mount Rushmore was dedicated in South Dakota and F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*. And, Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, Benito Mussolini solidified dictatorship in Italy and the Scopes “Monkey Trial” challenged the theory of evolution.

It's uncanny how these developments align with 21st century culture and how the game phrases capture today's coded patterns of speech, cleverly bypassing polite norms. Weaving these words into my rag rugs, doilies and towels transforms domestic objects into pointed declarations that

primarily appeal to the senses. They seduce the eye with their tactile materiality and then touch the heart with their wry realities. In this age of censorship and retaliation they combine humor and covert messaging as an act of dissent.

With an intense interest in the techniques and history of handwork I relish the labor of meticulous processes and work to highlight the relevance of these practices. Connecting past to present I identify with the long line of women before me who engaged in needlework to motivate investigation, empathy and change.

In *Dangerously Close to Home* hand-crafted household items employ humble materials, historic tools and quotidian labor to distort what traditionally signals comfort into a means of revealing discomfort. I lace fibers and text with a mix of time travel and humor to speak the truth through cloth. Living through the making of these durational artworks I witnessed both the joy of process and the horror of our new political world order. Made of soft materials they may warm the walls, but they also tell a story, and it isn't always as it seems.

Disobedient Doilies

Traditionally made to ornament and protect furniture, my *Disobedient Doilies* take on purposes for which they weren't originally intended. They look soft and decorative but are borne from tension, sharp points and grueling labor. Each doily requires an immeasurable amount of time to stitch. Performing this process strips the veneer off domesticity, reveals the grit underneath and makes palpable the unseen labor of unrecognized makers.

Needlelace evolved from 16th-century Italian embroidery techniques into a prestigious art form used to display immense wealth and status among European aristocracy. Its history is a microcosm of the female experience representing the shackles of domestic confinement and the tools of economic dependency. For centuries, women were denied formal education and public political platforms. In this context, needlelace was one of the few acceptable forms of expression and women would write their histories into their work. Specific floral motifs or hidden symbols were used to communicate identity, regional pride, or even religious resistance.



One of the amazing needlelace samples I viewed during a recent trip to the [Burano Lace Museum](#) (Museo del Merletto) in Venice, Italy. The museum is the former Burano Lace School (Scuola Merletti di Burano), which operated from 1872 to 1970. At one time it was the only education available for girls.

The Process

Needle-made laces are created using a single needle, a single thread and a variety of buttonhole stitches. It starts with a sketch that is covered with a semi-transparent contact paper before being stacked on top of several layers of fabric. (I'm using white muslin.)

Instead of the customary pearl cotton I'm using thread that I spun on an Indian Charkha and then dyed a putrid green, giving me a fiber that is thick and thin with mottled color. The conventions of needlelace are steeped in tradition and pieces are valued by their adherence to the many rigid rules. The intentional irregularities of my materials and technique run counter to these principles. The imperfections exhibit human frailty and express more in the wrongness of the work than if it were perfectly executed.

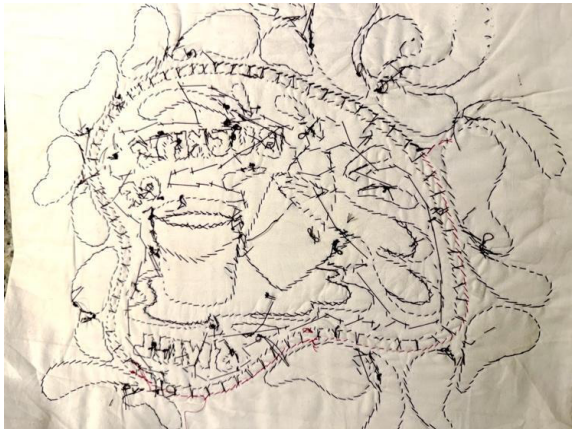


Here is the early sketch version before I edited the phrase to *Buckets of Swill* (two buckets just doesn't seem to hold the volume of what we're dealing with). Covering the sketch with the contact paper forms a strong foundation that can sustain the hundreds of perforations by the needle. The white muslin is folded in two layers and placed beneath, which will help with the unstitching that happens later.



A tracing thread called a *cordonnet* is laid on top along the outline of the pattern and fixed with a *couching stitch* through all the layers of fabric and paper underneath. Couching is a technique of attaching a free thread laid on the top to a foundation below with small stitches.

The photos above show the cordonnet being tacked down with a dark blue thread. The cordonnet becomes the framework, or scaffold that the buttonhole stitches attach to when filling the shape.



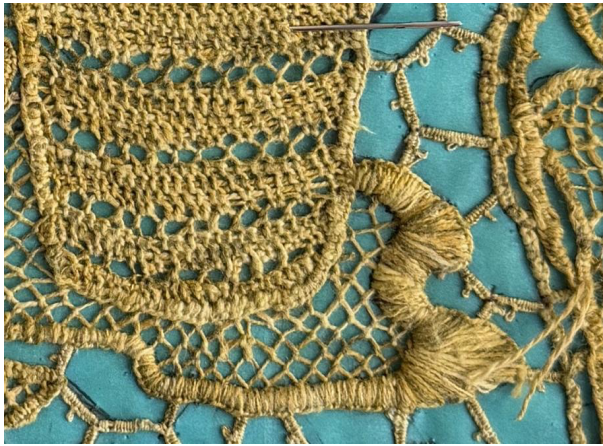
The couching stitches perforate all layers to firmly hold the cordonnet in place. Here is the back after all the outlines have been tacked down.



There is an order to the process of creating the lace. The connecting groundwork, or *brides*, are done first (left). Then a lacy mesh is formed with the *filling stitches* within the outlined shapes. The filling stitches can vary in pattern by adding extra space or twists but are essentially only the buttonhole stitch.



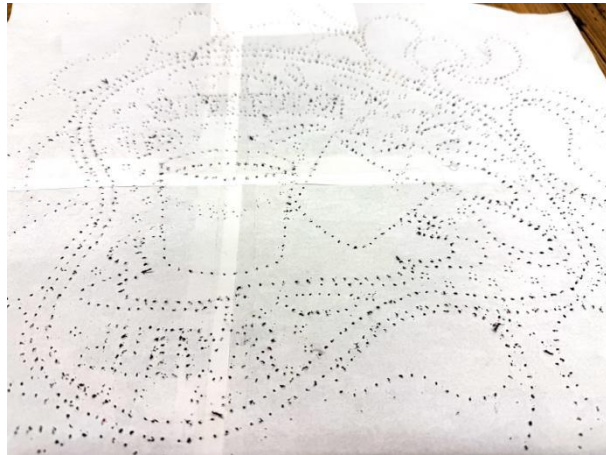
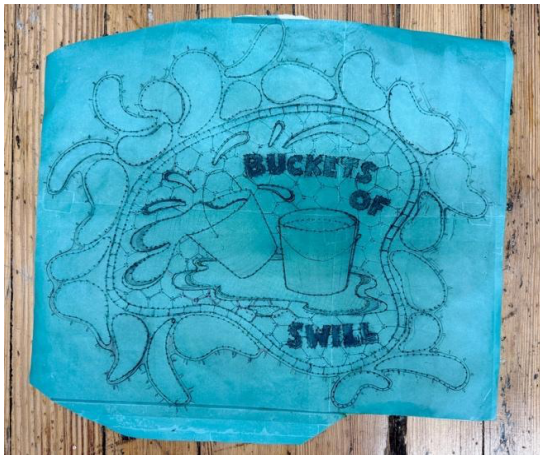
Eventually when all the shapes are filled it's time to outline the trim both for decoration and containment of the edges.



The final step is to add padding to emphasize a form with dimensional stitching as seen here with the spilled swill.



Once the lace is complete, the couching threads are cut from the underside (between the layers of the fabric). This releases the finished lace allowing it to be lifted away from the base.



When all the couching threads are cut the lace releases and becomes a doily. Pictured is the front and back of the original foundation sketch after disconnecting from the fabric. Notice all the needle holes.



It was a challenge to figure out how to present the power of these diminutive objects. I want them to be sculptural. Hanging them on the wall doesn't reference their domestic function. Laying flat on a surface diminishes their strength. I decided to present them vertically on traditional tilt tables. I purchased several on ebay and reconstructed them to different heights, assigning the tops to fit the doilies. The doilies are attached floating above the surface to highlight their shadows.

To read more of Cate McQuaid's Substack, please visit:
<https://catemcquaid.substack.com/p/the-point-of-the-needle>

Other *Disobedient Doilies*



(top) *Bloodsucker (An Insane Bedbug)*, DMC cotton, 9x8.5 in., 2025

(bottom) *All Belly No Brain (A Corpulent Clam)*, DMC cotton, 5.25x7 in., 2025

(right) *A Swarm of Flies*, DMC cotton, 12.5x13.5 in., 2026

