**Laced with irony**

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While the masses descend on the Harry Potter exhibition, JOHN McDONALD relishes the skill and imagination of a traditional handicraft.

Over the past few years the Powerhouse Museum has attracted plenty of critics. Turn up on a Saturday, though, and the place is full of people. Does this mean the criticisms are baseless - the mere bleating of snobs and elitists? Well, no, actually.

Since its grand opening in 1988, the building has been a labyrinth where one feels like unravelling a ball of string in order to be sure of finding the way out. During the current renovations it is even more of a disaster. Everything seems to have been arranged by lottery. The gallery shop, for instance, now resides in the basement in miniature form, awaiting a new location.

If this sounds like a marketing opportunity going to waste, it actually signifies the low priority assigned to a shop that stocks a decent range of books on art, design, science and technology, as

well as the usual merchandise. The high priority is the Harry Potter exhibition (until March 18), which is the reason the masses are gathering in the foyer. This is basically a cash-in affair

that features props and costumes from the Harry Potter movies,

plus a range of interactives. But wait, there's more! If Harry Potter is not sufficiently inane, there's also a scholarly exhibition devoted to the Wiggles.

Perhaps I'm just one of those people who can't remember what it was like to be a child but five minutes of this show made me want to run screaming from the room. Surely there's nothing more terrifying than something that keeps demanding you have fun. Maybe there should be shows to teach children that fun may be had with a good book and a glass of scotch.

One can only sympathise with the budget cuts inflicted on the Powerhouse by the previous state government and the headaches these caused for director Dawn Casey.

It is a shame that Inspired! - a popular survey of design through the ages - was dismantled because of the building project. There is no denying that all museums today have to make an active effort to attract audiences and generate revenue. But at what point does the pursuit of

audiences become a complete abnegation of the museum's scholarly agenda? At the moment

the Powerhouse is dangerously close to that. When the dust from the renovations has cleared,

the museum will have the task of proving to its critics that it has not lost sight of its original mission and become enshrined as a temple of tackiness.

To see what the Powerhouse does well, one needs to ignore the main attractions and look at Love Lace: the Powerhouse Museum International Lace Award. This show, which includes work by 134 artists from 20 countries, was selected from 700 applications. The exhibition opened on July 30 last year and has recently been extended until April next year. Such an extension is a clear indication of an institution lacking in resources and ideas. On a positive note, it will allow a lot more people to see this fascinating, innovative display.

Curator Lindie Ward set things in motion when she decided to define lace as "any openwork structure whose pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas". This opened the door to a bewildering range of entries across the fields of sculpture, textiles, fashion, jewellery, glass, ceramics, design and multimedia. Even more impressive is that every single work was specially created for this exhibition - or so they say.

Anyone who imagines Love Lace as a collection of doilies will be surprised to encounter Ingrid Morley's Lacie Lorrie in the foyer, right next to the Harry Potter queues. Morley discovered an old truck rusting away in a paddock and cut patterns into the bodywork, creating one of the most unusual pieces ever to be categorised as "lace". There will be many who say this is no more than a gimmick, and I'm half-inclined to agree.

At least Morley did the cutting by hand. A large number of her co-contributors have made use of computer imaging and laser-cutting technology to realise an idea with unnatural precision. This may be perfectly fair in terms of the "anything goes" ethos of the show but it overturns conventional expectations that lacework requires skill and patience on behalf on the maker.

Sophie Weber and Gretel Stent of Monash University would probably argue that their entry required a great deal of skill and patience, albeit of a different order to the lonely lace maker toiling with a needle. Urban Fabric is a small, detailed "plaster print" of a 3D cityscape, made by a laser. In their statement they say "lace is the expression of a complex network of constituent parts" and that it "resembles a city". A philosopher might argue there is a world of difference between "being" and "resembling" but in this case it seems appearances are sufficient to the task.

The curator says this show aims at nothing less than "a revolution in lace design" but "revolution" is a loaded term. One begins to think of advertisements that herald a "revolution" in tea making, or removing stains in the wash. It takes more than an expanded definition to create a revolution, although it can be very effective in blowing the cobwebs off a concept that has become stale and stereotyped. As the title suggests, Love Lace aims to make lace sexy again, even at the risk of embarrassment.

For the most part the successes outweigh the duds, even though certain sections of the show are noticeably stronger than others. Fashion, for instance, is disappointing. This makes one feel some sympathy for Akira Isogawa, who was on the judging panel and, to my untutored eye, is easily the most accomplished fashion designer in Australia.

The first prize of $20,000 went to Anne Mondro for Detroit's Shadow, a model of Henry Ford's first four-cylinder engine, crocheted out of thin wire. This is an engaging work but would have been more so if I hadn't already seen equally offbeat crochet works by Fiona Hall, or the White Rabbit display of a motorbike and sidecar, and the chassis of a jeep, woven by the remarkable Chinese artist Shi Jindian.

Regardless of its revolutionary aspirations, some of the most striking pieces in this show are examples of old-fashioned handicraft. This includes a dazzling, circular piece by Griselda Gonzales of Itaugua, Paraguay; a witty tableau by Alice Vokac, based on an old photo of the opening day of the Sydney Harbour Bridge (itself a large piece of lace, by the terms of this show); and a staggeringly complex shawl called Lace Symphony, by Catherine M. Thomson of British Columbia.

There are contributions by figures better known as fine artists, such as sculptor Michael Snape, that maker of delicate, poetic assemblages,**Shona** **Wilson**, and Helen Pynor, who has woven a model of the uterus out of human hair.

One of the biggest and most imposing works is Third Space II, an installation of machine-woven tapa cloths by Andrea Eimke, who has breathed new life into this traditional art form from her workshop in the Cook Islands. Another strong textile installation is Memory Maps, by Janie Matthews of Perth, which aims to describe a journey "both physical and metaphysical", in complex layers of imagery.

Some pieces rely on unusual natural materials to make an impact, notably a circular relief by Christine McMillan, made entirely from echidna spines, and a curtain of eucalyptus leaves, held together by metallic thread, by Golnar Roshan.

If there is one guaranteed crowd-pleaser, it is A Natural Symmetry, by Daniela Anna Turrin of Sydney, who proves that digital art can be both witty and engaging. On a table-top projection we watch a group of bees gather and weave a child's garment, all to the strains of Be My Little Baby Bumble Bee.

If I were to try to list all the pieces in Love Lace that stand out for their skill or imagination, it would be a long and futile process - futile because these works really need to be examined firsthand. The experience is the antithesis of the typical blockbuster, because while the multitudes were descending on Harry Potter last weekend, I had the Love Lace show almost to myself.

In a perfect world it would have been the other way around. johnmcdonald.net.au

LOVE LACE

Powerhouse Museum, until April 2013