

Bar Creatives – Knitting with Michelle Painter SC

By Kavita Balendra



Why knitting?

In the far distant eighties, hand knitted jumpers were all the rage – you might remember the woolly sheep jumper which Diana Princess of Wales wore, or the gloriously coloured creations of Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson. It was my ambition to create such items. I have also always been interested in how things work. That, coupled with an interest in fibre arts, meant that at quite a young age I was able to spin the fleece straight off a sheep, dye it, turn it into yarn, and then knit something of my own design with the finished product. But time moved

on, and by about my mid-twenties I stopped knitting and didn't pick it up again for about 20 years.

One day, after I had come to the bar, it suddenly came upon me that I would make a pair of socks. Making socks is somewhat of a rubicon for knitters – fiddly, small needles, fine yarn and the mystical process of 'turning the heel'. But I tried it, and to my eternal wonder managed to successfully knit a pair of wearable socks (that I still have). I re-discovered the joy of being able to create something essentially from nothing. So I continued. I still make socks, and now make my socks from the toe up.

Knitting can be quite soothing, so long as nothing is going wrong with it. I find the process of knitting quite cathartic and I will often knit while watching the news or during long drives in the car. Ultimately, it is just a series of repetitive hand movements. (Until, of course, something goes wrong, and then it isn't.)

In our line of work there's not a lot of room for unstructured thought and for me knitting is a way of allowing your mind to wander. For instance, at the very beginning of COVID-19 I was working really hard and when I needed a break from some tricky submissions I would sit out in the sun with the socks I was knitting, and after a short while, the rhythm of the stitches allowed for free thinking, and lo and behold the answer I was searching for was often there in front of me.

I do like the challenge as well. After conquering socks I decided to do even more intricate work and branched out to lace work. Lace work is basically 'controlled holes' and can be fiendishly difficult. It requires a bit of maths as you need to read off charts. These charts are basically sets of squares with each square translating to a stitch, like a map. You need to learn to understand the charts and diagrams and also to count your stitches.

This sort of knitting requires a great deal of concentration – you have to pay attention. There's also not a lot of room for mistakes. In crocheting for instance, if you make a mistake you can just rip back, but if you make a mistake in knitting you could have 500 live stitches which you have to 'catch'. There are techniques you can use to save a piece of work – for instance you can knit backwards (aka 'tinking'), or you can put a 'life line' (a line of waste yarn) so if you make a mistake you can rip back to your life line. I try to start a lace project every January as I have the time and concentration to devote myself to it – but I can't do much more than an hour at a time.

So knitting for me involves a lot of elements. There's a bit of intellect, an element of risk, there is contemplation but there is also production. You make something from nothing, with your own hands and it's useful. I like the fact that you can take a piece of wool, and start knitting and suddenly you've got a sock.

Besides, my partner likes to wear socks knitted by me, so that's nice.

Knitting Everests

The thing I'm most proud of is probably the lace – because it is so intricate and beautiful. But my favourite thing to knit still is socks. There are different techniques – for instance I like using double pointed needles (four needles with a working needle). Other



Michelle demonstrating double pointed needle technique

knitters prefer 'magic loop' (a long circular needle looped), or even using two circular needles to knit two socks at the same time!

Knitting socks can move in and out of your consciousness. There is a bit of concentration at the start, then it's just sort of mindless, then a lot of interest in the heel as there are a thousand different ways to turn a heel, and then you're on the home stretch and it's just a tube. For me that works as sometimes I have the headspace to concentrate and other times I just want to do something mindless. At the moment I have about five socks going at the one time, each at a different stage. I have even knitted a lace sock – but I can suffer from what is technically called 'second sock syndrome', because after you've done one all the interest and challenge is gone. That's why I often knit socks 'two up' (two at a time).

My next project is a pattern that I found online called 'Dissent' that's inspired by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as it has what looks like a lace collar. It is a particularly clever pattern because it is knitted in one piece and then it is cut. This is a particular Scandinavian technique

involving a 'steek' which freaks everyone out, including me. The pattern also utilises a technique called 'colourwork' where you use two colours in the one row. Years ago I made a vest using this technique – it was very complicated and used seven different colours in the one row. That took me about eighteen months.

The one bit of lace that I've never tried is Latvian Lace. Latvian Lace is renowned as it utilises a technique called 'Nupps' which are like little bumps created by a lot of stitches turned into one. But it's a big lace project and I'm not sure that I have it in me to try it.

Competitive Knitting

There is a bit of a hierarchy in that the more complicated the pattern is the more kudos you get. Though sometimes you really do need to be a knitter to appreciate some things, like a particularly fabulous decrease.

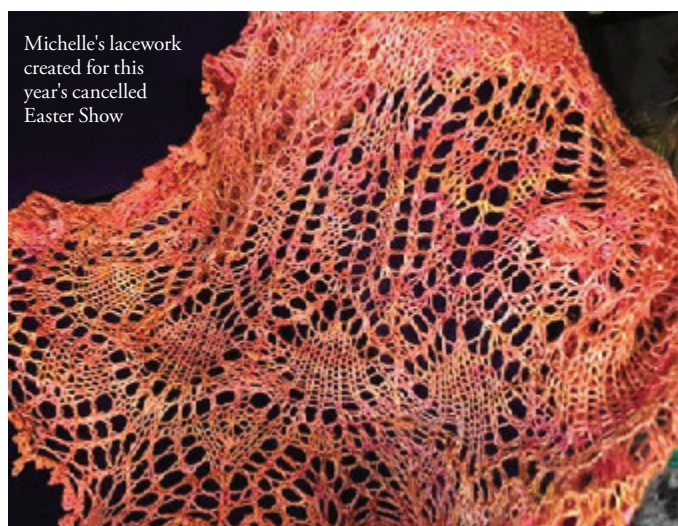
One of the projects I did was a baby jacket for my partner's nephew's new baby. During the course of that project I had to teach myself to knit backwards as I got sick of turning it around. I put the jacket in to the Easter Show.



Some of the types of needles used by Michelle with examples of completed lacework and incomplete socks



A vest created by Michelle to demonstrate colourwork



Michelle's lacework created for this year's cancelled Easter Show



Socks

I went to the show and saw a sea of pastel baby jackets and, in the middle of the display, with a second place ribbon was the glowing orange with black trim baby jacket which I had knitted. I squealed with delight!

Now I try to have something for the show every couple of years. I wasn't able to do the last show and this year I had everything ready but the show got cancelled because of COVID-19.

For the really committed knitter, there is also a proper formalised knitters guild, but I haven't joined yet.

Notwithstanding my entries into the Easter Show, I'm a bit torn, as I believe that, there is enough competition in our daily lives and there is no need to add to it. And then I enter and am thrilled or devastated to see or not see a ribbon!

For new knitters

There are some extraordinary resources available. Technology has certainly moved along since I was spinning and knitting in the eighties. You can now buy ordinary wool, silk and cotton, but you can now also source

things like quiver, and buffalo and fibres made of pineapple and milk, and even pearls! There are also wonderful internet resources. A case in point is the website 'Ravelry', sort of like Facebook for knitters. It has hundreds of thousands of patterns on it which designers place on the website. Some of them are paid, but there are lots of free ones.

There are also some fabulous local yarns shops where you can get some wonderful yarns as well as entry to the world knitters groups. I know that there is at least one member of the Bar knitting group who has taught herself to knit while watching YouTube.

The Bar community of Knitters

One of the things I'm most proud of achieving at the bar is the formation and continuation of the Bar Knitting group. It really came out of the idea that it is good and desirable to have an interest or an outlet other than work. For lots of people that is something physical – football or running marathons. But for me it is doing something creative.

We have been going for over 10 years and really could not have done something like this 20 years ago. So many people would have been reticent to admit to doing a traditionally female craft. Of course the Bar has a great tradition of knitters – I'm told that in the Bar Association archives there are old photos of barristers [men, of course] knitting during the Second World War.

I like to think the Bar Knitting group are a welcoming group of like-minded creatives, and anyone of any level can join. There are non-knitters as well, for instance we have really fabulous embroiderers in our group and we even allow crocheters!

It's a craft which I definitely encourage people to try – after all, what's the worst that can happen? If you wind up making something that's rubbish you can just make it again!

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The Bar Knitting Group meets regularly. Please contact Lisa Allen, lallen@nswbar.asn.au from the Bar Library if you are interested in joining.