

# MARION WASSENAAR



*DIAMOND MINE*

**RDS Gallery  
2021**



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## *DIAMOND MINE*

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition  
Held at RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin,  
19 March – 10 April 2021

Occasional Essay Series

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: Marion Wassenaar, *Diamond Dust X* (2021)

Note: all works referenced are mixed media (carbonised cotton thread, Hahnemühle paper, nori rice paste), 500 x 370 mm.

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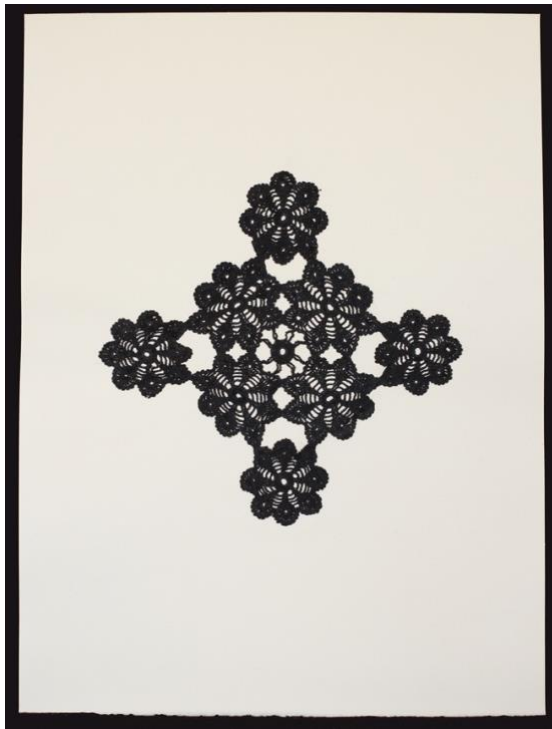
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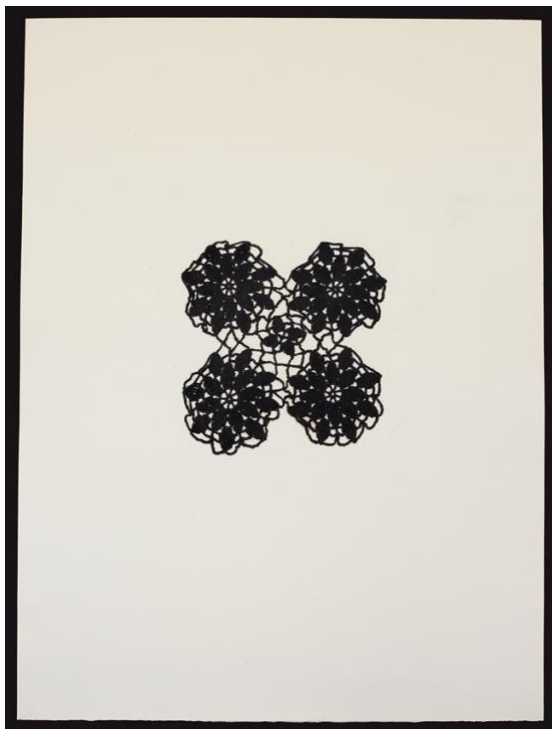
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Marion Wassenaar, *Diamond Dust III*, 2021



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# 1

## **Marion Wassenaar's *Diamond Mine***

*Hilary Radner*

Marion Wassenaar explores the use of carbonised objects as an integral part of her project as an artist. To create the works exhibited in *Diamond Mine* (RDS Gallery, 19 March through 10 April 2021) she carbonised crocheted doilies and then put them through a printing press, by which process they become images on paper that we perceive as two-dimensional. She thereby highlights the visual complexity of these mundane objects, many retrieved from op shops – discarded remnants of past lives that are recycled through these prints, recalling the Arte Povera movement inaugurated in the 1960s. Associated with the Italian city of Turin, Arte Povera artists explored the use of discarded materials ('trash') as a sustainable alternative to the fine arts tradition that privileged rare and costly media, from gold to marble.

In so doing, Wassenaar obliges us to consider not only the ecological implications of contemporary art and fashion practices, but also the aesthetic dimensions of these deceptively humble

household adornments, all too frequently (and unfairly) relegated to the category of tacky, ironic nostalgia by contemporary high-culture tastemakers.

Furthermore, these prints, through their complexity, suggest the affinities of knitting and crochet with what have become known as STEM disciplines – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Asked to comment on Wassenaar's images, mathematician Ami Radunskaya remarks:

These are beautiful images.... Knot theory is at the forefront of mathematics now, with applications to understanding DNA, drug targeting, and chemical bonding, in addition to more theoretical applications in computer science and mathematics. These two-dimensional projections of knots are fodder for knot theorists, and they have been an object of study at least since Gauss (1794).

The poetry of these figures produced by a series of simple knots, now presented in this exhibition as 'flat' patterns, invokes the deep and sustained relations between science and art, revealing how both are the product of the creative and imaginative capacity that we all share as human animals.





Marion Wassenaar, *Diamond Dust IX* (2021)



Marion Wassenaar, *Diamond Mine IV* (2021)

## 2

### **From Carbon to Diamond**

*Bridie Lonie*

In a developing synthesis of approaches, the postmodern focus on semiotics emerges in a new context when artists consider the relations between the commodity, the materials that through extractive processes produce the commodity, and the environmental degradation that underpins the once-liberatory promise of a flourishing consumer culture.

Theorized in different ways, this changed focus underlies new approaches to representation and abstraction. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter, A Political Economy of Things* (2010) offered an early access to this mode of thinking. Her very title is an insight into the focus placed on materiality as artist after artist ties their projects to the empirical sciences once challenged by postmodern thought. It is a curious and often rebarbative dialectic, but it offers a new way of tracking the relationships between people and things, and people as things. Not that anything is entirely new in the histories of ideas: Bennett draws on the writing of Albert North Whitehead's

interest in the ways we respond to the inorganic, and Henri Bergson's concern for the long durée, the extensions of time and space. In so doing, Bennett produces interesting confluences for artists schooled in the postmodern re-appearance of the thinking of Gaston Bachelard, the cultural theorist and biochemist, whose psychoanalytic work on spaces and elements enabled an access to the thinking of the phenomenologists of the 1930s and 1940s.

So, the empirical nature of the scientific approach to the elements and the phenomenal /psychoanalytic approach to human engagement with things informs the urgent political concern with the spectre of carbon. For some artists, the geological aspects of carbon and its associated forms have led to exhibitions in science museums, experiments with, and representations of, extractive capital's dependence upon the "free" resources of oil, coal, and gas, which cost only the expense of getting them out of the earth.

Marion Wassenaar has exhibited representations of coal's commodification and the toxicity and impacts of its production in the Dunedin Gasworks Museum, drawing on the politics of the multiple, with its potentially infinite expansion. She, however, is also interested in the reduction of complex materials to their constituents, which will almost always involve carbon. She has developed a means of reducing things to their elemental forms, slowly turning them to charcoal. At the Museo de prehistoria y arqueología de Cantabria [MUPAC], Santander, Cantabria, Spain, she exhibited a jar with the carbonified ashes of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1901), a demonstration of his notion

of *Nachträglichkeit* or the retrospective assignation of meaning. Wassenaar's work referred to our belated realisation of the intractable and unintended destruction of our culture's stability through its dependence on the use of fossil fuels.

The carbonized objects Wassenaar makes are both material and simulacra: a book is extraordinarily fragile and absolutely unreadable except as an indication of a meaning that was always present but now only haunts its presence. Last year at a workshop on weaving, *ti kouka*, or cabbage tree, Pam McKinlay made a solid, stable vessel, which Marion then carbonized. Now, it holds the capacity to contain only again as a simulacrum: it looks robust, handleable, but will fall to pieces should one grasp it.

This time, Wassenaar has turned to the labours of her mother's generation as they beautified the homes that were to be the focus of the consumer economy, as it turned towards them for its greatest expansion into the private imaginaries of its target. Many of us visit op-shops to retrieve the labours of these women, collect them, try to honour them by an accumulation that would have made no sense to the women who made them.

For the same generation, diamonds were the common coin of marriage: they signified durability. Indeed, they are as obdurate as death itself. Today, one of the ways one can deal with the cremated ashes of one's forebears is to turn them into diamonds through a compression that replicates the strongest forces that the earth has to offer.

Carbon as a constituent in the living form of human activity, is fragile; once it leaves those forms and becomes compressed any turning back will take millennia. These doilies mimic the ever-increasing complexities of the structures that while inert now may, eventually, result in a return to living matter. For the present it can be comforting to remember that we are all stardust.

## References

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# 3

## **Artist's Statement**

*Marion Wassenaar*

In a time of planetary instability and strain on natural resources, this body of work questions value by associating doilies with diamonds. Doilies can be readily sourced at Op shops. Their creation stems from meticulous, dedicated hours spent in the hands of unknown makers, usually women, for the comforts of their homes. Regarded as desirable, diamonds, in contrast, can pass down family generations holding their value. Through both recreating (Diamond Mine series) and recycling second-hand doilies (Diamond Dust series), they go through a process of carbonisation. Diamonds bond as carbon under immense pressure, time and heat. This experimental work producing carbon by fire and subjected to pressure through a printing press, as I see it, simulates the elemental process that produces diamonds.

# 4

## Notes on Contributors

**Marion Wassenaar**, already having a background in commercial printing, gained an MFA with distinction in 2013 from the Dunedin School of Art, with which she is now affiliated. In her own words, she “specialises in print practices with a research interest that focuses on the collision between humans and their environment, either through social justice or ecological concerns.” She elaborates, “I lecture in the Print Studio (Print Laboratory) at the Dunedin School of Art, and curate the Otago Polytechnic Art Collection.” Associated with a number of art practices – print, installation and photography – she is particularly known for her work with carbonised objects. In 2018, she was awarded the Estuary Art and Ecology Prize for her repurposed and carbonised book work “Unplugged”.

**Bridie Lonie** holds a Master of Arts (Art History and Theory, 1998) and PhD (2018) from the University of Otago. She has published widely in such outlets as *Art New Zealand* as well as contributing numerous exhibition essays over a thirty-year career, which she began as an artist. Her book with Marilyn Webb, *Marilyn Webb: Prints and Pastels* (2004) was published by University of Otago Press. Her research interests include climate change and art in the public arena. She is currently preparing a manuscript on art and climate change.

**Hilary Radner** began her career as a video artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with work shown at MOMA (1981), and the Biennale of Sydney (1982). In 1988, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas, Austin and was awarded the position of Assistant Professor, and later Associate Professor (1995), at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. In 2002 she accepted an appointment as Foundation Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago. She currently holds the title of Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, and has published widely in the areas of visual culture and cinema studies, most recently *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image*, with Alistair Fox (Edinburgh UP, 2018). She currently directs RDS Gallery, Dunedin.

