During 2021 and early 2022 Michelle Grabner collaborated with the Alice Austen House to create a new series of paintings and photographs inspired by the home, studio and collections of trailblazing photographer Alice Austen. Drawing on her own studio-focused practice and Austen’s photographic documentation of her home’s interior decoration and fabric collections, Grabner’s work re-examines fabric patterns and materiality in doily making, expanding on repetitive design and layering.
GRABNER WRITES ON “UNREMARKABLE HANDIWORK”:

As an inventor, translator, copier and re-articulator of patterns, I predictably embrace Gombrich’s general observation that “the arrangement of elements according to similarity and difference and the enjoyment of repetition and symmetry extend from the string of beads to the layout of the page in front of the reader, and, of course, beyond to the rhythms of movement, speech and music, not to mention the structures of society and the systems of thought.”
When researching Alice Austen and her collections I was most taken with her negligible lace collection, a small box of snippets likely a practical assembly of remnants collected for mending Victorian collars and cuffs. Lace, like doilies and other domestic ornamental handiwork has varied craft and materials qualities but pattern invention is undemonstrative and mostly undeviating. Gombrich notes that decoration “changes slowly.” Domestic ornamental work is practiced, produced and influenced by habit. Moreover domestic ornamental artifacts occupy habitual spaces, punctuating daily routine. “Radical invention is nonexistent, considerable invention the exception, and the gradual evolution of decorative motifs, some of which can be traced back for millenia, the rule.”
It is not for the lack of invention that compelled me to rearticulate and rearrange the excessively ornate patterns of lace and doilies but to challenge my aesthetic aversion to the white delicate complexity of lacework while at the same time pressing on painting’s suspicion of unoriginal abstractions. The works made for this exhibition seek to upend the Gombrichian pronouncement that “painting, like speaking, implicitly demands attention whether or not it receives it. Decoration cannot make this demand. It normally depends for its effect on the fluctuating attention we can spare while we scan our surroundings.”
ABOUT MICHELLE GRABNER

The Wisconsin-born and based artist Michelle Grabner is known for her broad perspective developed as teacher, writer and critic over the past 30 years. The site where it all comes together is the studio. Her artmaking—which encompasses a variety of mediums including drawing, painting, video and sculpture—is driven by a distinctive value in the productivity of work and takes place outside of dominant systems. Grabner instead finds a creative center in operating across platforms and towards community.

Central to the work is process. Grabner uncovers new dynamic relationships through her visionary practice of repetition. With a deep attention to abstract patterns and all the metaphors they conjure, Grabner pushes the limits of compositional structures to discover the tipping point between stability and precariousness; between continuance and wondrous difference.
Grabner states of her work, “I have always been a painter who examines various power structures inherent in patterns and abstract arrangements. Because I believe that all forms are political, I have committed myself and 30 years of painting to re-articulating vernacular patterns in order to shift the unobserved into critical sight. This general overview has been foundational to my studio work since 1990.”

Michelle Grabner (b. 1962, Oshkosh, WI) received her MA in Art History and BFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and an MFA in Art Theory and Practice from Northwestern University. She is currently Senior Chair of the Department of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and was a Core Critic at Yale University in the Department of Painting and Printmaking from 2011 to 2014. In 2021, Grabner was awarded the prestigious Fine Arts Guggenheim Fellowship. She returned to Yale in 2020 as a Visiting Artist. A regular contributor to Artforum, her writing has also appeared in publications including Art in America, Frieze, Modern Painters, and Art-Agenda. Grabner co-curated the 2014 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art along with Anthony Elms and Stuart Comer, and served as the inaugural artistic director
of FRONT International, a triennial exhibition in Cleveland, OH and the vicinity that ran from July through September of 2018. She is also the founder and co-director of two non-profit art spaces in Wisconsin, The Suburban and The Poor Farm, with her husband, artist Brad Killam.

The John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, WI recently commissioned Grabner to create an artist-built environment for their new Art Preserve building. This public project opened in June 2021. Grabner has been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Hedreen Gallery at Seattle University; INOVA, The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Ulrich Museum, Wichita; and University Galleries, Illinois State University. She has been included in major group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Akron Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Tate St. Ives, UK; and Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland. Her work is included in the permanent collection of museums including the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MO; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO; Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN; MUDAM, Luxemburg; Milwaukee Art Museum, WI; Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI; Knoxville Museum of Art, TN; Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE; Daimler Contemporary, Berlin; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Grabner lives and works in Milwaukee.
Alice’s Lace Scraps

Fabric sent to Alice Austen
from Julia Martin March 8, 1892
E. Alice Austen, [Julia Bredt - full length, side face], 1892. Collection of Historic Richmond Town.


E. Alice Austen, [Alice Austen’s bedroom], 1902. Collection of Historic Richmond Town.
“IT IS NOT FOR THE LACK OF INVENTION THAT COMPELLED ME TO REARTICULATE AND REARRANGE THE EXCESSIVELY ORNATE PATTERNS OF LACE AND DOILIES BUT TO CHALLENGE MY AESTHETIC AVERSION TO THE WHITE DELICATE COMPLEXITY OF LACEWORK WHILE AT THE SAME TIME PRESSING ON PAINTING’S SUSPICION OF UNORIGINAL ABSTRACTIONS. “

- MICHELLE GRABNER
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