



1 Much of Marie-Rose's work features faces or masks; this is *L'écouter jusqu'à l'entendre* 2 *Le Jardin dans la Maison* is one of a series of large architectural pieces 3 A detail of the intricate cotton structures, stiffened with sugar, shown at Pallant House 4 *Alice en voyage*, 2016 5 Marie-Rose often combines knitting, crochet and embroidery



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6 *Toujours une petite amoire dans la tête* is an abstract creation from 1983 7 Her series of smart mice in colourful knitted cardigans include *M'as Tu Vue?* and *Souris en habit de printemps*



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IMAGES 1, 6: Marcel Köppen, courtesy Die Städtische Collection; 2: Clowis Prévost, courtesy Radical Craft; 3: Craftspace, courtesy Radical Craft/Pallant House Gallery; 4, 5, 7, 8: Studio Sebent, courtesy Marie Finaz Gallery; Marie-Rose Lortet, photograph © Andy Hood

MEET THE ARTISTS

Marie-Rose Lortet

Marie-Rose Lortet is an 'outsider' artist who uses yarn as her palette. Katy Bevan looks at her imaginative work



BACK IN 2005, I co-curated an exhibition which featured the work of an 'outsider' artist. This was my introduction to the work of Marie-Rose Lortet, who was aged sixty at the time; now, in her seventies, she is still working, and her art is having something of a moment in the spotlight.

The term *outsider artist* means outside the usual educational trajectory of school and art college that artists take, I'm told - although artists using textiles have often not travelled any kind of normal route. Looking at art from sources other than the main 'art world' allowed exhibition curators to look in a different way at folk art, such as carving and quilting - work that would never normally be considered as 'real art'.

Marie-Rose has always knitted, learning from her grandmother and mother; they made more practical things, while Lortet says she wanted to make "flexible images that could follow me wherever I went". Much of her work features faces or masks, with eyes that track you around the room.

She tried working in fashion but ended up making tiny clothes for birds, who, weighed down with comforting but smothering knitted clothes, are not in danger of flying off anytime soon. Proud-looking field mice with heads held high are dressed in delicious cardigans, patterned Kaffe Fassett style, with knitted ears and tails in the finest of gauges.

The work of Marie-Rose Lortet is made up of curious knitted stitches that twist and turn around curves and corners, not following the linear pattern to which knitting generally conforms. Huge wall pieces comprise knitted braids linked by loose ends, colours changing seemingly at random, with faces peering out at the viewer, so the finished pieces look a bit deranged.

The very concept of knitting that is neither for a jumper, cushion nor anything even vaguely useful is alien to many people, and was not taken seriously by those around her. However, released from the tyranny of fashion and fit, no more slavishly following a pattern, freestyle knitting leaves you free to travel in any direction and change colour when you feel like it (and it's great for using up all those odds and ends too). Marie-Rose says: "I never throw anything away, from leaves to chocolate wrappers, since everything can be used in knitting, embroidery and collage to build new discoveries, discussions and inventions."

That she managed to stick at it without any public recognition is a testament to her tenacity and a clear artistic vision that enabled her to keep working against the tide. In 1969 Lortet's work came to the attention of the French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet, who was writing about and collecting what he called L'Art Brut, or raw art. He was instrumental in setting up a foundation of works made by, in his words, "People untouched by artistic culture", now the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Some of her many small heads, part of a series she calls *La Suite Incertaine*, were exhibited in 2015 at Collect, Saatchi Gallery, with the French Craft Project - hung on monofilament, they moved as you walked past as if they were indeed watching you, their shadows dancing behind. In the Craftspace exhibition *Radical Craft: Alternative ways of*

Making, at Pallant House gallery, Chichester, Lortet showed some architectural work. These houses of lace and thread were inspired by the rooftops of Alsace where she grew up, worked in cotton and stiffened with sugar or resin, and were larger than many she has made before.

"Whenever anything becomes too easy," says Marie-Rose, "I challenge myself with bigger projects, and am often surprised by the finished products which sometimes feel like miraculous feats! Hence, over time, architectural pieces have become larger, more complex and more rigid."

It is great to think of the freedom to knit without the dread that it won't suit you when it's finished. Lortet says of her work: "Knitting lets the mind and the imagination take the time to travel and create pictures. My yarn is my palette: I combine colours like a painter." Soon we'll see knitters exhibiting alongside oil painters and with the same cachet - and not before time. ☺

Radical Craft is on until 5 Nov at Beecroft Art Gallery, Southend-on-Sea. Then touring in 2017:
 - 19 Nov-28 Jan, 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe
 - 11th Feb-26th Mar, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle
 - 8th April-10th June, The Barony Centre, West Kilbride
 - 24th June-2nd Sept, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Ceredigion
 - 16th Sept-5th Nov, Walford Mill Crafts, Wimborne Minster
Marie-Rose Lortet: une incroyable histoire 15 Oct 2016-8 Jan 2017, Musée d'Art Naif et d'Arts Singuliers, Laval, France.
 Marie-Rose Lortet is represented by Marie Finaz Gallery www.mariefinazgallery.com

KNITTING LETS THE MIND TAKE THE TIME TO TRAVEL AND CREATE PICTURES