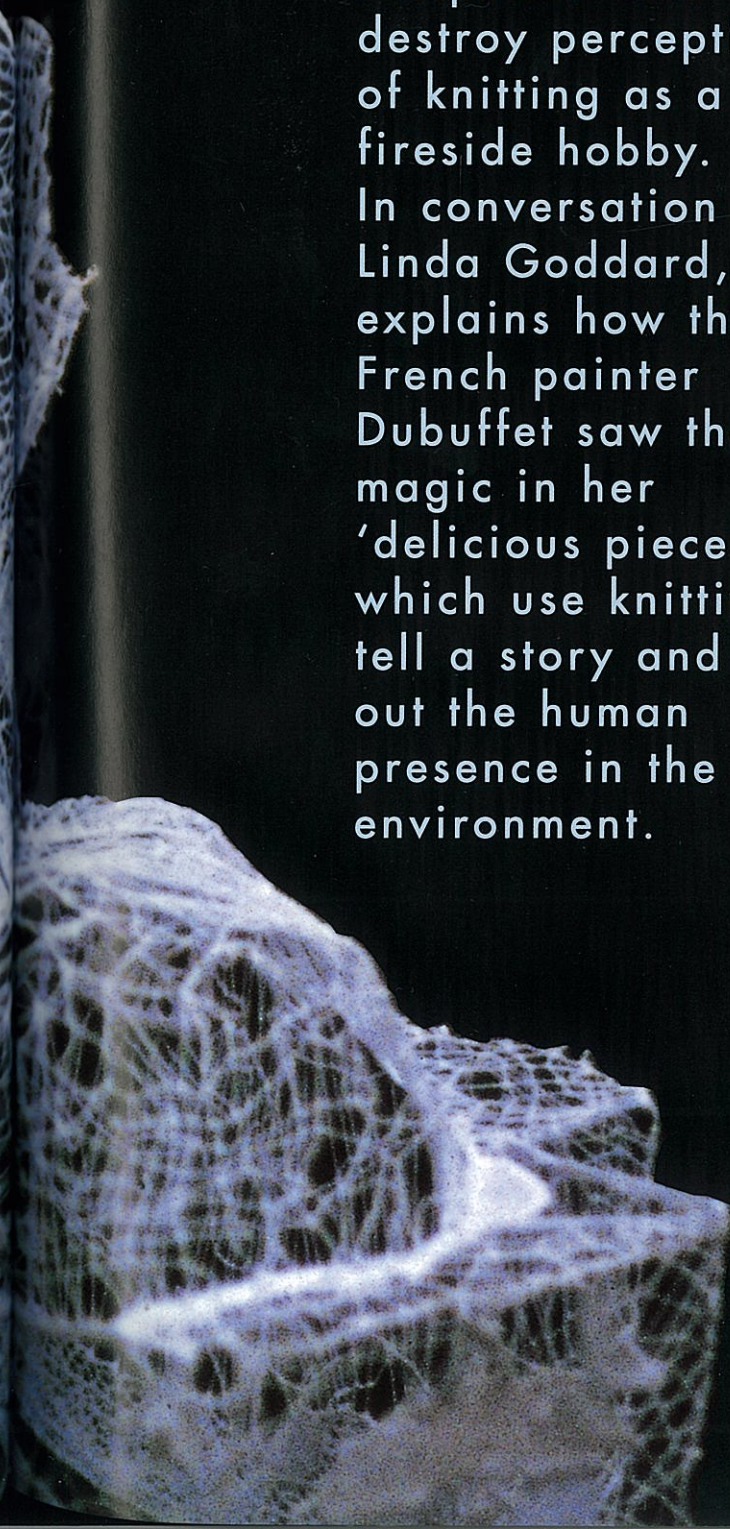
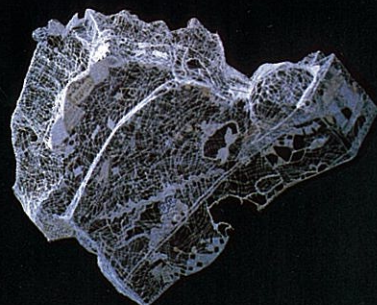
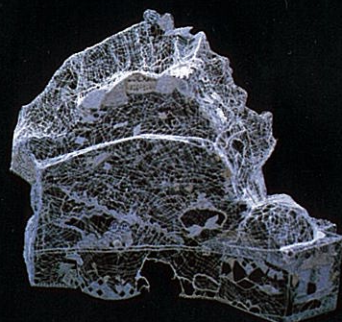
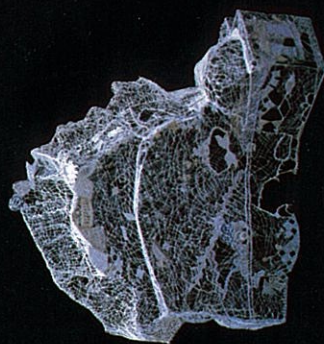
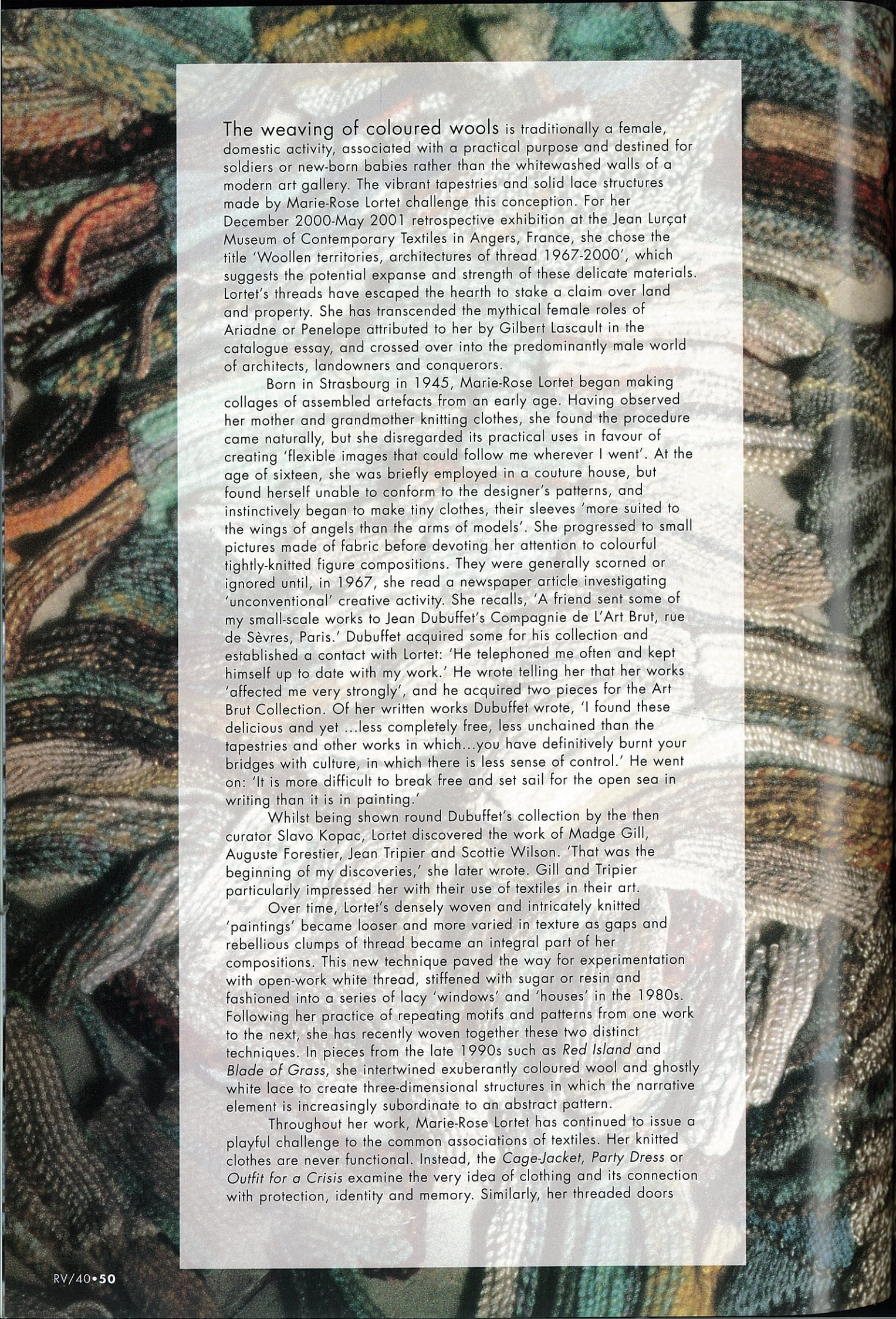




Architectures in Thread

Marie-Rose Lortet's complex knitted sculptures forever destroy perceptions of knitting as a fireside hobby. In conversation with Linda Goddard, she explains how the French painter Dubuffet saw the magic in her 'delicious pieces' which use knitting to tell a story and map out the human presence in the environment.





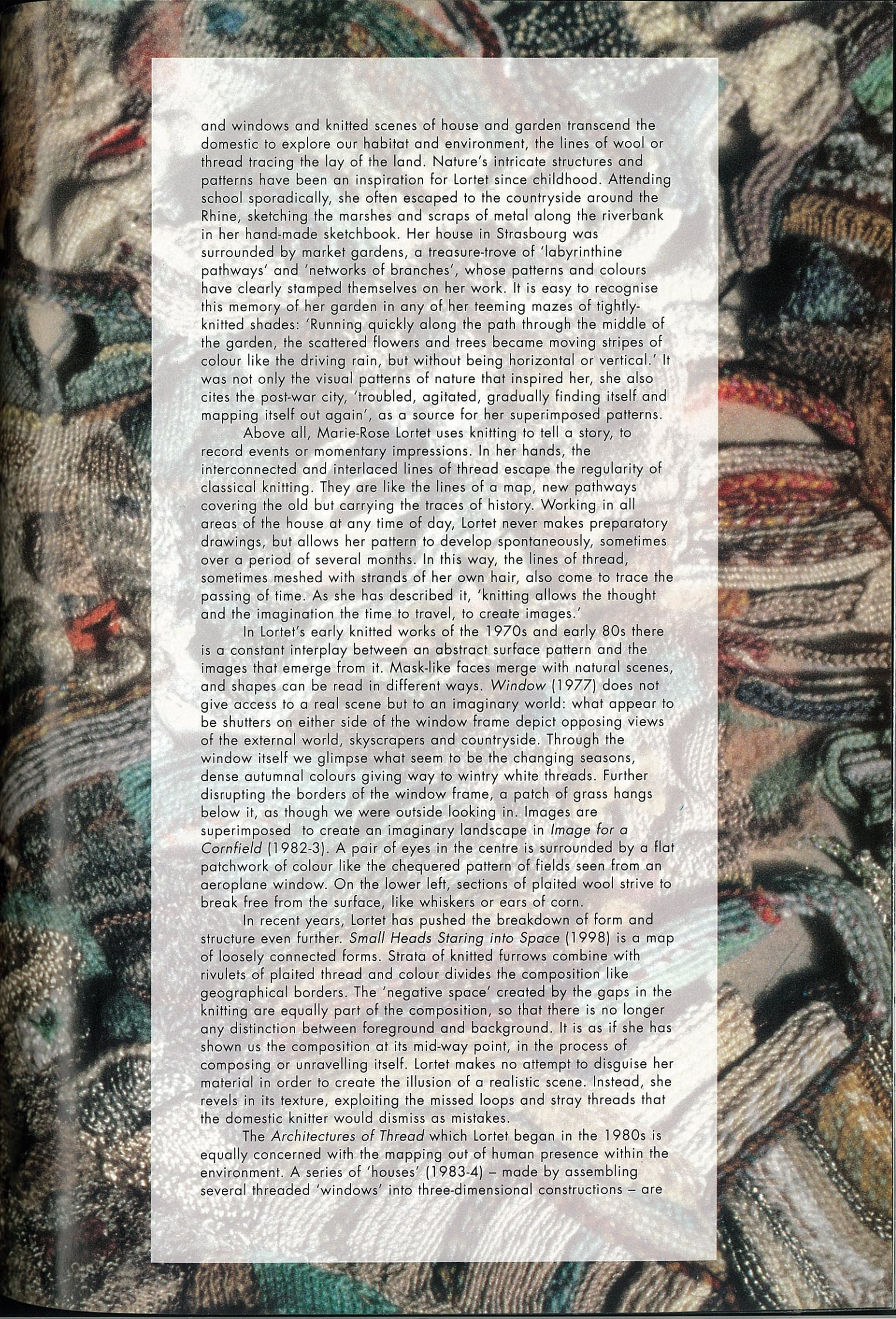
The weaving of coloured wools is traditionally a female, domestic activity, associated with a practical purpose and destined for soldiers or new-born babies rather than the whitewashed walls of a modern art gallery. The vibrant tapestries and solid lace structures made by Marie-Rose Lortet challenge this conception. For her December 2000-May 2001 retrospective exhibition at the Jean Lurçat Museum of Contemporary Textiles in Angers, France, she chose the title 'Woollen territories, architectures of thread 1967-2000', which suggests the potential expanse and strength of these delicate materials. Lortet's threads have escaped the hearth to stake a claim over land and property. She has transcended the mythical female roles of Ariadne or Penelope attributed to her by Gilbert Lascault in the catalogue essay, and crossed over into the predominantly male world of architects, landowners and conquerors.

Born in Strasbourg in 1945, Marie-Rose Lortet began making collages of assembled artefacts from an early age. Having observed her mother and grandmother knitting clothes, she found the procedure came naturally, but she disregarded its practical uses in favour of creating 'flexible images that could follow me wherever I went'. At the age of sixteen, she was briefly employed in a couture house, but found herself unable to conform to the designer's patterns, and instinctively began to make tiny clothes, their sleeves 'more suited to the wings of angels than the arms of models'. She progressed to small pictures made of fabric before devoting her attention to colourful tightly-knitted figure compositions. They were generally scorned or ignored until, in 1967, she read a newspaper article investigating 'unconventional' creative activity. She recalls, 'A friend sent some of my small-scale works to Jean Dubuffet's Compagnie de L'Art Brut, rue de Sèvres, Paris.' Dubuffet acquired some for his collection and established a contact with Lortet: 'He telephoned me often and kept himself up to date with my work.' He wrote telling her that her works 'affected me very strongly', and he acquired two pieces for the Art Brut Collection. Of her written works Dubuffet wrote, 'I found these delicious and yet ...less completely free, less unchained than the tapestries and other works in which...you have definitively burnt your bridges with culture, in which there is less sense of control.' He went on: 'It is more difficult to break free and set sail for the open sea in writing than it is in painting.'

Whilst being shown round Dubuffet's collection by the then curator Slavo Kopac, Lortet discovered the work of Madge Gill, Auguste Forestier, Jean Tripier and Scottie Wilson. 'That was the beginning of my discoveries,' she later wrote. Gill and Tripier particularly impressed her with their use of textiles in their art.

Over time, Lortet's densely woven and intricately knitted 'paintings' became looser and more varied in texture as gaps and rebellious clumps of thread became an integral part of her compositions. This new technique paved the way for experimentation with open-work white thread, stiffened with sugar or resin and fashioned into a series of lacy 'windows' and 'houses' in the 1980s. Following her practice of repeating motifs and patterns from one work to the next, she has recently woven together these two distinct techniques. In pieces from the late 1990s such as *Red Island* and *Blade of Grass*, she intertwined exuberantly coloured wool and ghostly white lace to create three-dimensional structures in which the narrative element is increasingly subordinate to an abstract pattern.

Throughout her work, Marie-Rose Lortet has continued to issue a playful challenge to the common associations of textiles. Her knitted clothes are never functional. Instead, the *Cage-Jacket*, *Party Dress* or *Outfit for a Crisis* examine the very idea of clothing and its connection with protection, identity and memory. Similarly, her threaded doors



and windows and knitted scenes of house and garden transcend the domestic to explore our habitat and environment, the lines of wool or thread tracing the lay of the land. Nature's intricate structures and patterns have been an inspiration for Lortet since childhood. Attending school sporadically, she often escaped to the countryside around the Rhine, sketching the marshes and scraps of metal along the riverbank in her hand-made sketchbook. Her house in Strasbourg was surrounded by market gardens, a treasure-trove of 'labyrinthine pathways' and 'networks of branches', whose patterns and colours have clearly stamped themselves on her work. It is easy to recognise this memory of her garden in any of her teeming mazes of tightly-knitted shades: 'Running quickly along the path through the middle of the garden, the scattered flowers and trees became moving stripes of colour like the driving rain, but without being horizontal or vertical.' It was not only the visual patterns of nature that inspired her, she also cites the post-war city, 'troubled, agitated, gradually finding itself and mapping itself out again', as a source for her superimposed patterns.

Above all, Marie-Rose Lortet uses knitting to tell a story, to record events or momentary impressions. In her hands, the interconnected and interlaced lines of thread escape the regularity of classical knitting. They are like the lines of a map, new pathways covering the old but carrying the traces of history. Working in all areas of the house at any time of day, Lortet never makes preparatory drawings, but allows her pattern to develop spontaneously, sometimes over a period of several months. In this way, the lines of thread, sometimes meshed with strands of her own hair, also come to trace the passing of time. As she has described it, 'knitting allows the thought and the imagination the time to travel, to create images.'

In Lortet's early knitted works of the 1970s and early 80s there is a constant interplay between an abstract surface pattern and the images that emerge from it. Mask-like faces merge with natural scenes, and shapes can be read in different ways. *Window* (1977) does not give access to a real scene but to an imaginary world: what appear to be shutters on either side of the window frame depict opposing views of the external world, skyscrapers and countryside. Through the window itself we glimpse what seem to be the changing seasons, dense autumnal colours giving way to wintry white threads. Further disrupting the borders of the window frame, a patch of grass hangs below it, as though we were outside looking in. Images are superimposed to create an imaginary landscape in *Image for a Cornfield* (1982-3). A pair of eyes in the centre is surrounded by a flat patchwork of colour like the chequered pattern of fields seen from an aeroplane window. On the lower left, sections of plaited wool strive to break free from the surface, like whiskers or ears of corn.

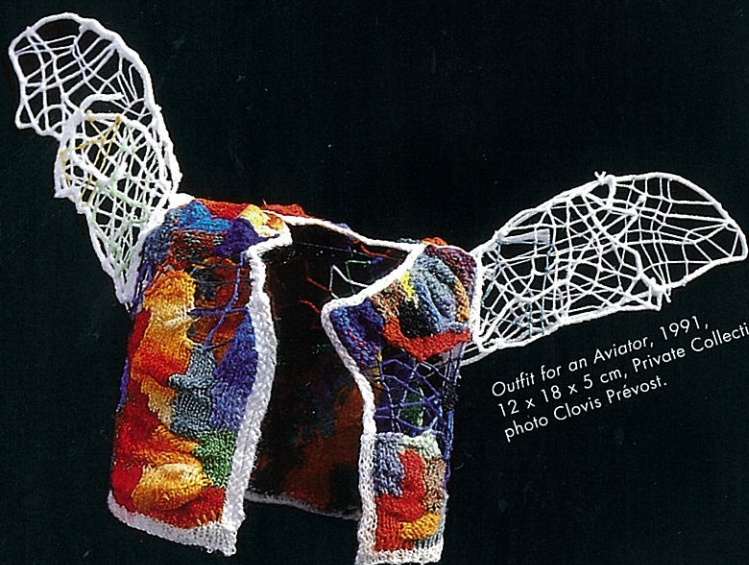
In recent years, Lortet has pushed the breakdown of form and structure even further. *Small Heads Staring into Space* (1998) is a map of loosely connected forms. Strata of knitted furrows combine with rivulets of plaited thread and colour divides the composition like geographical borders. The 'negative space' created by the gaps in the knitting are equally part of the composition, so that there is no longer any distinction between foreground and background. It is as if she has shown us the composition at its mid-way point, in the process of composing or unravelling itself. Lortet makes no attempt to disguise her material in order to create the illusion of a realistic scene. Instead, she revels in its texture, exploiting the missed loops and stray threads that the domestic knitter would dismiss as mistakes.

The *Architectures of Thread* which Lortet began in the 1980s is equally concerned with the mapping out of human presence within the environment. A series of 'houses' (1983-4) – made by assembling several threaded 'windows' into three-dimensional constructions – are

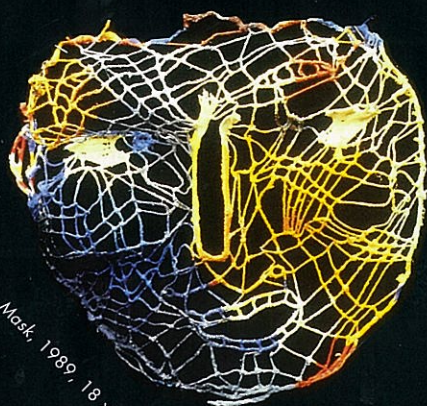
The Other Rooms of the House, 1976, 95 x 107 cm.
courtesy Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.



Outfit for an Aviator, 1991,
12 x 18 x 5 cm, Private Collection,
photo Clovis Prévost.



Mosk, 1989, 18 x 18 cm.





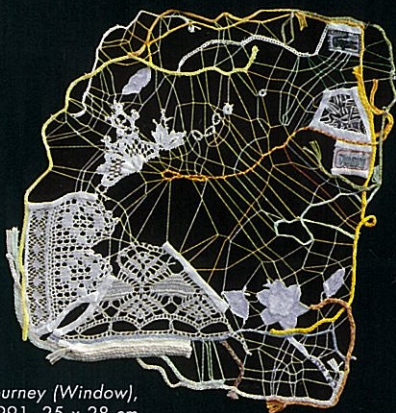
The Small Heads on the Wall, 1998/99,
approx. 60 x 50 cm.



Window, 1977, 38 x 42 cm,
courtesy Collection de l'Art
Brut, Lausanne.



Image for a Cornfield,
1982/83, 58 x 99 cm, Private Collection.



Journey (Window),
1991, 25 x 28 cm,
photo Clovis Prévost.

not structurally-sound homes in which to take refuge from the world. Their lacy facades are vulnerable to decay and peering eyes, the memories of past inhabitants written in the patterns that make up their walls. These are houses whose occupants have long ago departed, leaving behind only the ghostly tracks of their footprints, and cobwebs in the corridor. *Journey*, a small work from 1991, resembles a threadbare lace handkerchief, a humble, functional piece of cloth that Lortet has laden with emotional significance. It has been stripped to its bare bones, revealing the tracks of farewell tears dripped as its owner waved off a friend at the station, tiny labels trapped in the web of threads like tickets kept as souvenirs. With its ill-fitted scraps of lace shuffling to fit together, *Journey* is an image of fragmentation, yet the tautness of its intersecting lines forms a rigid architecture.

Like her precarious houses, Lortet's clothes offer little protection. They mimic 'real' clothes but at the same time examine their associations and functions. Thus the *Outfit for a Grounded Aviator* (1991) and the *Outfit for a Crisis* (1997-8) sport sleeves shaped like wings or parachutes. The threadbare network of *Cage-Jacket* (1985) threatens to expose the flesh, but also to trap it in a cage of lines. Like a favourite old jacket that has retained the shape of its absent wearer, its material and form have taken on the qualities of a cage. Similarly, *Raincoat* (1987) would be useless in a storm. Its openwork pattern, like a skein of drops, has adopted the essence of rain.

The artist herself likes to dress simply, often in jeans and t-shirts, so as to avoid confusion between her work and her clothing. She insists that her work is not practical or a form of decoration. Instead, she adapts her knitted 'clothes' to the natural environment. Resembling discarded chrysalids or resilient gossamer cocoons, these lacy sheaths are both garments and habitats, as Lortet indicates with titles such as *Pullovers for Flies* or *Bedjacket for a Dragonfly*. *Party Dress* (1998-9) is at once celebratory and sinister. A glowing mass of white thread and red wool, it suggests blood coursing through the veins in excitement and elation, but also hints at a painful exposure: not only is there no additional protective layer, but even the skin has been stripped away. Clothes, Lortet implies, cannot disguise what lies beneath the surface.

Suspended Cloud (1998) is perhaps the work in which Lortet comes closest to pure abstraction. Its delicate blend of red, gold, and white suggests the sun setting behind a cloud or autumn leaves falling through the mist, but it lacks a central motif or background detail, and has no real subject other than the pattern itself. It is the medium of knitting that allows such freedom, more than painting ever could. For Lortet, there is no canvas, no framework or underlying structure: 'My wools and my threads are like a palette; combining these colours is my way of painting.' 🧶

Linda Goddard is a PhD student at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She has written for *The Art Newspaper* and *Art Review*.

pages 48-49

An Architecture of Threads, 1985, 85 x 70 x 60 cm.

pages 50-51

The 627 Heads on the Wall (detail), 1986/89, 150 x 200 cm.

right, top to bottom

Vest Jacket No.2: Justaucorps, 1984/85, 83 x 67 x 35 cm.

Blade of Grass, 1989, 33 x 17 x 15 cm, photo Clovis Prévost.

Party Dress, 1989/99, 125 x 90 x 50 cm, photo Clovis Prévost.

Suspended Cloud, 1988, 90 x 110 x 30 cm photo Clovis Prévost.

