

Mezza Mandolina vs. Lacis A comparison of Technique

This project started out of ignorance. I didn't know what I was looking at.

A friend knew that I was trying to fathom mezza mandolina. So she sent me this picture of Eleanor of Toledo¹ and a good close-up of the partlet Eleanor wears. According to my friend, Elisa Ricci² said the partlet was made of mezza mandolina. My own research led me to a quote of Santina Levey³, which said, “*Eleanor of Toledo is wearing a partlet of burato in [one of] her portrait[s] of the 1540s ... : it has been simply decorated in imitation of the *Mezza Mandolina* type of lacis.*” This may have been referring to this portrait.

So, which was it? The closeups of the picture were not terribly helpful. One made it look like darned Lacis, in agreement with Levey. <Appendix A> The other made it look like mezza, in agreement with Ricci.<Appendix B>

I pondered the question a bit, and finally tried to graph the pattern, a standard practice for me when I'm trying to fathom a lacis pattern. Since my experiments on paper rendered a classic lacis structure <Appendix C>, I decided that it was lacis, and not mezza. Because I was primarily looking for mezza patterns, in hopes of deciphering the technique, I immediately dismissed the picture.



¹ Bronzino, Agnolo, “Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo” Oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Washington

² Elisa Ricci: Old Italian Lace Vol 1

³ Santina Levey, “Lace: A History” 1984, Faber and Faber Publishers

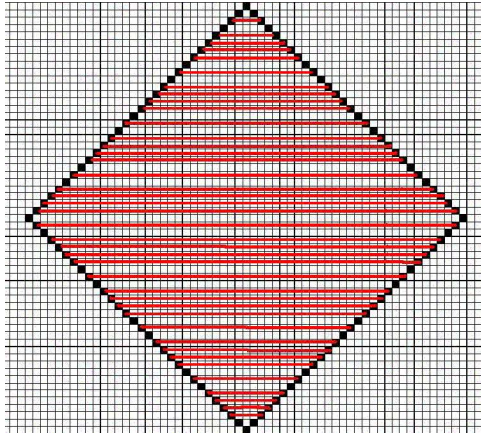


Figure 2 Step one in darning the lacis: cloth stitch in this sequence, indicated by red lines

It is made exactly as fishnet is made, with knotted loops; it is then stretched and darned with various decorative stitches.

Mezza mandolina is a variation of lacis. Instead of the decoratin being darned onto a plan mesh field, mezza mandolina manipulates the actual mesh; sequences of increases, decreases, long stitches, skipped stitches, are combined to create the pattern. In some instances, the modified mesh was further decorated with darning, embroidery, and cloth patches, though not always.⁵

For this particular project, it only made sense to make the pattern both ways, and see how it turned out. I made the lacis version first. In period, lace was done in linen or silk thread <footnote>, and to me, linen looked like a better choice for this experiment. So I used undyed, bleached 40/2 linen thread, purchased from a Belgian manufacturer. I used a standard lacis shuttle and a 4mm wooden dowel as a mesh gauge. I cast on thirty stitches, and did 60 rows of plain, diagonal mesh. This gave me a panel, 30 x 30 meshes in size.

I stretched this by pinning it to a foam board previously used to teach bobbin lace. There was no particular reason for using this stretching method, beyond my own convenience; it was close at hand, and easily portable.

The darning itself was simple: it's just a straightforward over-under weaving of thread –

After learning more about mezza, however, and after learning some of the more advanced techniques, I took another look at this picture. And I modified my earlier reaction. I still did not know if it was mezza or lacis. To my eye, it seemed possible to do the pattern in both techniques, with similar, if not identical, results. I could not solve the puzzle of the partlet in the painting – unless I tested my theory first. And that's what you have here.

Lacis is arguably the world's oldest lace making technique. Period examples have been found dating to the earliest years of the 14th century⁴. That precedes reticella – the next oldest lace – by a century. Lacis is, simply put, darned fishnet.

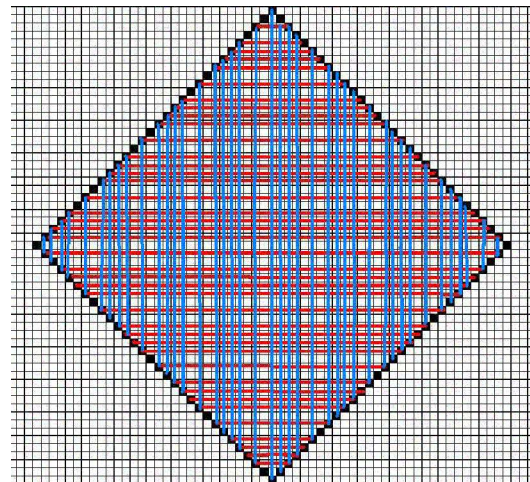


Figure 3 Step Two in darning the lacis. Cloth stitch, crossing the original sequence of darning, is darned in sequence indicated by blue

⁴ “Perth Parliament House Excavation” archaeological report, 1977, N. Q. Bodgan, Dr. H. Bennett & Dr. P. Z. Dransart, with Dr. M. L. Ryder.

⁵ Santina Levey, “Lace: A History” 1984, Faber and Faber Publishers

once up and once back – in each row indicated by the graph I had drawn. I did not leave gaps in the darning where I knew the bits of cloth were going to go. I thought that would not really serve any practical purpose, and would complicate the darning process unnecessarily. When I had

finished with the darning in both directions, I laid it aside, and moved on to the mezza mandolina mesh.

Yes, there's still the cloth bits to be done, and embroidery. But since that did not change essentially between the laces and the mezza versions, I saved it to the last.

For the mezza mandolina version, again I used the 40/2 linen thread. But this time, I switched to a 2mm piece of brass rodstock (acquired from a model railroad shop) and a modified shuttle.

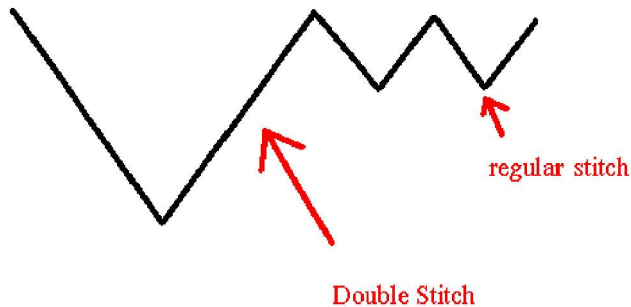


Figure 4 *The Double Stitch*

In this particular project, the mesh variation is created solely by a series of elongated stitches, creating a pattern I have dubbed a “floating square.”⁶ This is an exceedingly common mezza pattern, with variations occurring in fully half of the period examples I have seen.

But however common, that did not make it any easier to figure out. The system that finally worked was a combination of “Single Diamond” stitch and a lot of graph paper, to expand on the idea of the Single Diamond.

Single Diamond – and hence the Floating Square – depends on two different lengths of elongated stitch. The Double Length stitch is created by simply wrapping the thread an extra time around the mesh gauge before making the knot. The “finesse stitch” (my terminology) is, well, finessed; it ends up being a little longer than half the Double Stitch.

Thanks to working the Single Diamond, I already knew how to do these two stitches. The trick became the sequence. This is where the graph paper became critical. I graphed the image again. Then I began to draw in how the thread could run from stitch to stitch. The result was something like what appears in Figure 6.

Now that I had a pattern, I was able to start. I cast on fifty stitches, using the same 40/2

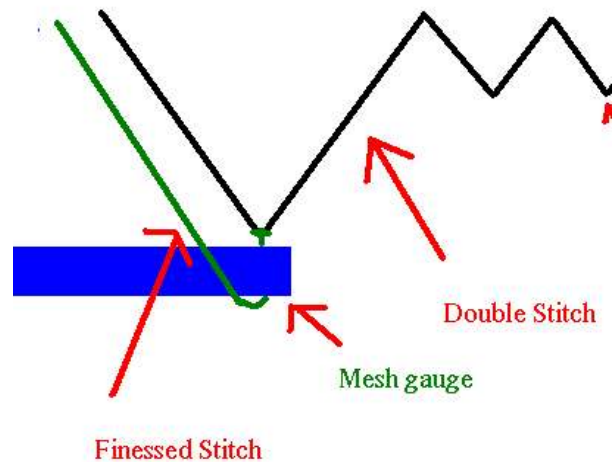


Figure 5 *Finesse Stitch. It is as long as one side of the Double Stitch, plus the mesh gauge*

⁶ To date, I have found no period documents that describe the mezza mandolina process, name the stitches, or otherwise designate anything such as stitch names. I have been in the habit of naming the stitches myself, to differentiate them in my mind and records. I hope to one day replace those temporary names with the accurate period ones.

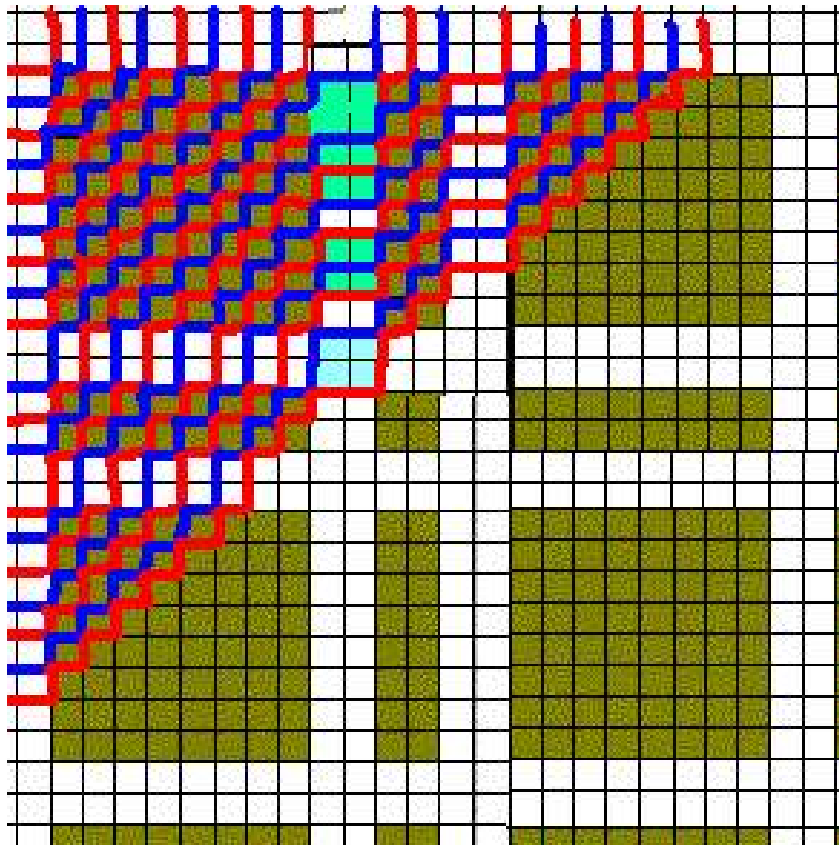


Figure 6 green squares indicate the desired pattern. Red and blue lines are alternate rows of stitching (all laces, mezza or otherwise, are worked on the diagonal). The pale blue square is a Double Stitch. The pale green is a Finesse Stitch

under the edges, but that didn't work very well. Either the edge frayed (if the hem was too shallow), or the hem added enough bulk to make the cloth hump up off the lace (if the hem was too deep). So I did not finish the edge of the cloth in any way. If I were doing this project for use in garb, I would certainly have tried binding the edge, perhaps with satin stitch embroidery. But for my purposes, this would serve. I used plain white cotton sewing thread, and an overhand stitch to sew the cloth down. In period, linen would probably have been used.

Now both pieces were finished, and I had a chance to look back at my original question. Which was used for the partlet Eleanor wears? Which would I have used?

I'll address the second one first. Which would I have used? I took a good look at both pieces of lace. And frankly, I thought the laces version is prettier; it looks more involved, and more delicate. But would I use it to make a partlet? Probably not. Those darned-in threads shift a LOT. It would be hard to keep them tidy in the course of a long day of wearing a partlet.

The mezza looks less attractive, in this instance; it looks precise, mechanical. But I have to give it credit: it's very stable. I invite you to take it up, wad it, twist it, pull it off square. It will bounce back with a few judicious pulls. I would not hesitate to use it on a piece of garb, regardless of how roughly it might be handled.

As for which one Eleanor wears.... Two different experts disagree as to the structure of the partlet's lace. One says laces, the other says mezza. My experiment has produced results that

linen thread I had used on the laces. I did fifty rows of mezza – following the graphed pattern – and produced a panel 50 x 25 meshes.

Now that both pieces of mesh – the laces and the mezza – were finished, the next step was to sew in pieces of cloth. In the picture, the cloth patches were not perfectly square; they appeared to have one small corner cut away. I chose not to do this, as it wasn't really germane to my question of laces vs. mezza. This is also why I did not trouble to add in the embroidery that is on the square of cloth in the portrait; it just wasn't relevant.

I used a purchased piece of bleached linen cloth to make my squares. I cut the pieces to fit; I tried turning

could easily be interchangeable. By appearances, both would work. But, from my experience from working with them? It's got to be mezza mandolina. The lakis is actually easier to make, but the mezza also looks right, it's easier to live with, and it just makes sense.

Appendix A

Closeup of partlet in painting, “Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo,” by Agnolo Bronzino, 1540.

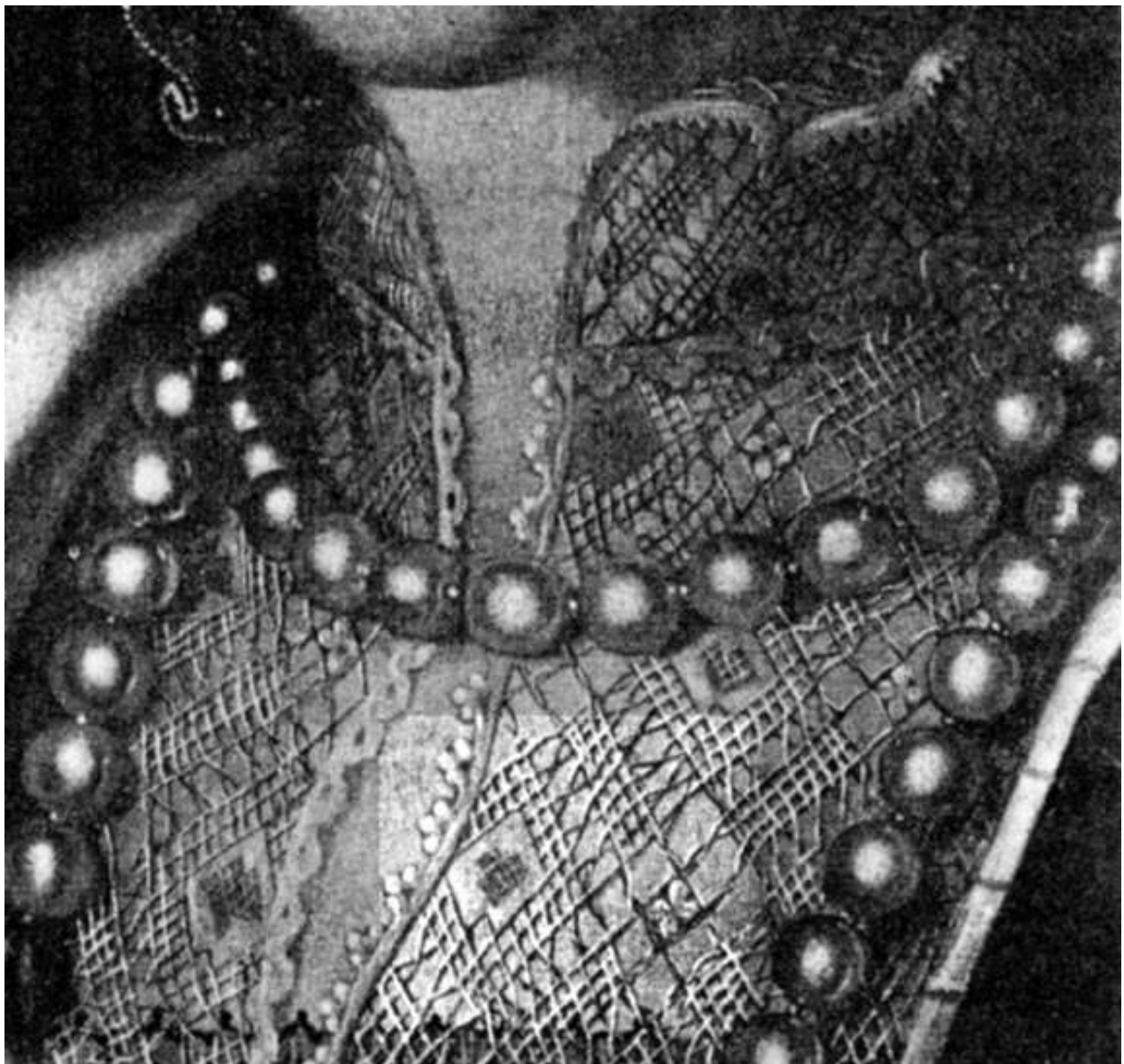
This is the picture that prompted the original graphing. From this magnification and acuity, it appeared to be a normal, if creative, usage of plain lacis.



Appendix B

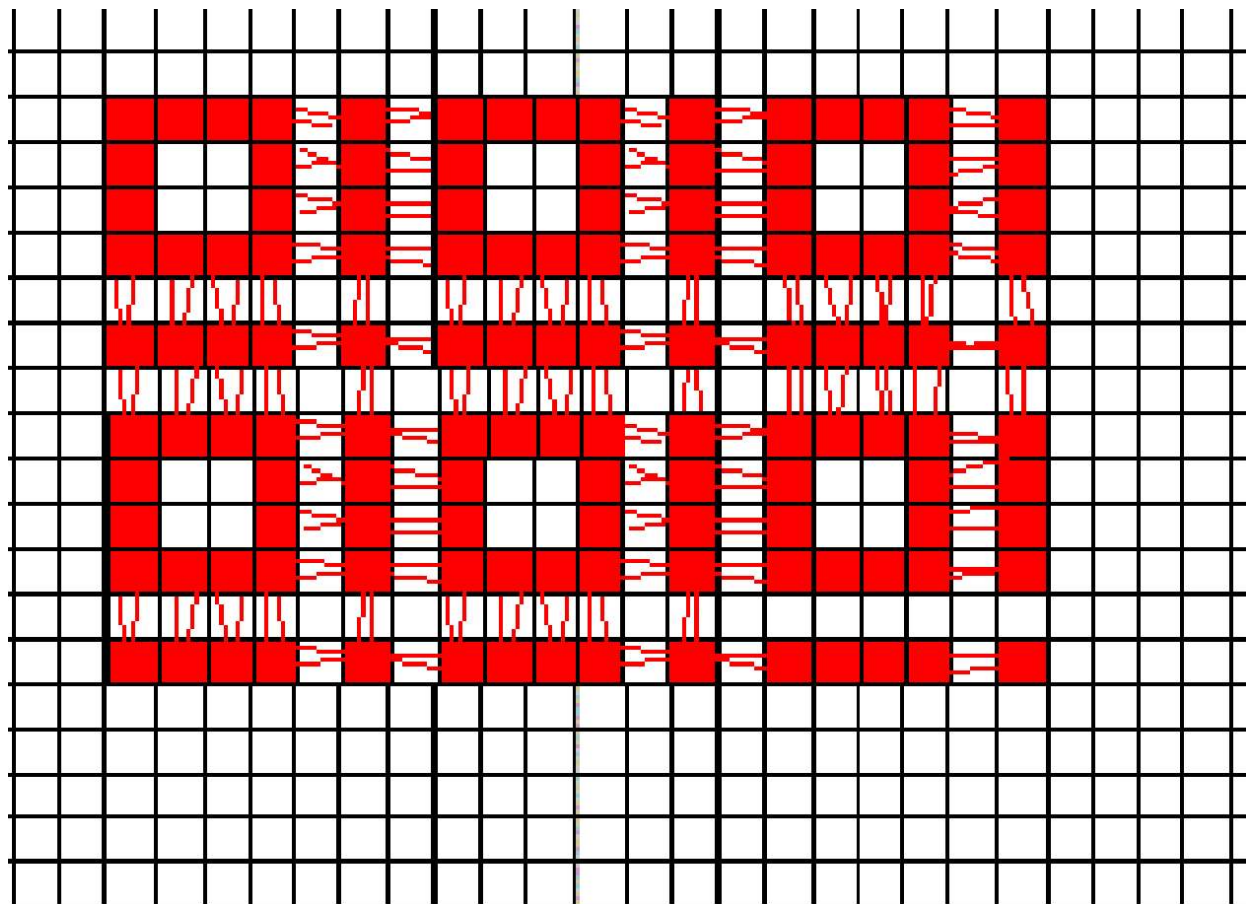
Another Closeup of partlet in painting, “Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo,” by Agnolo Bronzino, 1540.

Note the clean demarcation of meshes around the sewn-in cloth. This seemed to indicate a mezza mandolina structure, as lacis could potentially be less regular.

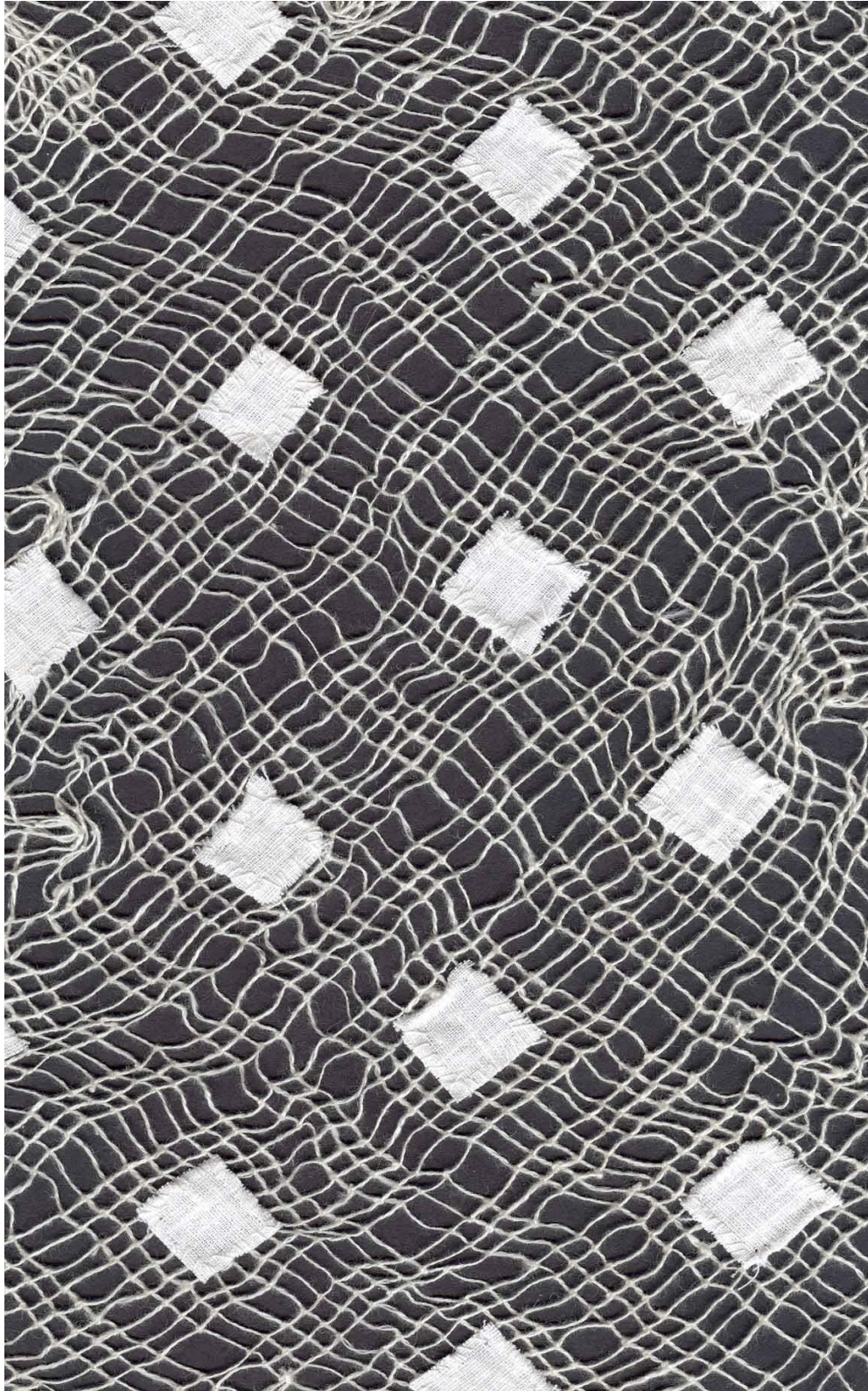


Appendix C

Here is a rendering of my original graphing of this pattern.



Mezza version



Lacis Version

