

## MUSEUMS



Cef/Lane, '5 Spoons' (2006).

FRANK SULLIVAN

## Not Your Grandma's Knitting

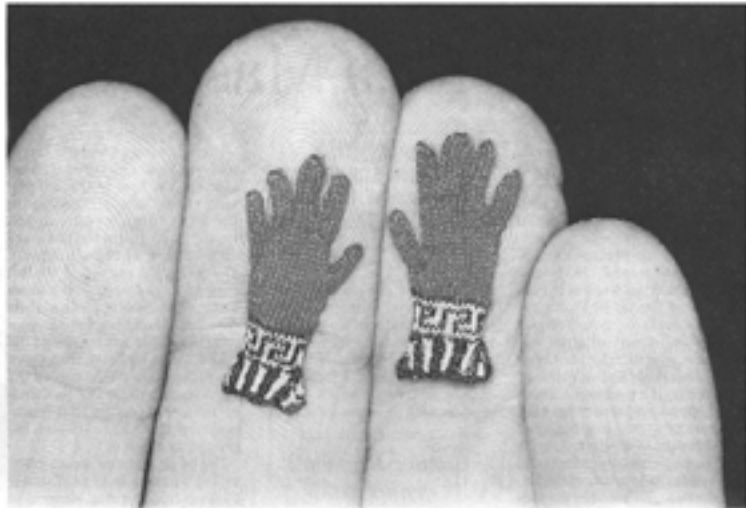
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Arts and Crafts movement and the Bauhaus, artists like Annie Albers (weaving), Hans Hofmann (mosaic), and Alexander Calder (jewelry) promoted an appreciation for this new craft-based work. Debates ensued about whether these works should be considered fine art—like painting and sculpture—or merely decorative objects.

As younger generations entered the art world—specifically those reared on the axis of high-low hybridization and anything-goes pluralism—they increasingly found the art-craft debate redundant. The semantics evolved, and works based in craft were given labels like art-glass or fiber art, distinguishing them from painting and sculpture while simultaneously offering equal billing as fine art.

As the name suggests, fiber art involves work dealing with issues related to the specific characteristics of textiles. Approaches are varied and can range from a narrow focus on technical specifics—as weaving, knitting, and crocheting do—to the manipulation of a certain material's properties, to more conceptually based works dealing tangentially with physical fibers. Early pioneers included Sonia Delaunay, Sophie Tauber-Arp, Sheila Hicks—whose work was exhibited at Bard Graduate Center last year—and Leonore Tawney, as well as Ed Rossbach, known for using nontraditional materials such as foil and plastic bags.

Comprising the work of 25 artists from seven countries, "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting," smartly curated by David Revere McFadden, represents the broad spectrum of contemporary fiber art. It showcases the possibilities available when working with concepts and materials related to fiber art. As with all large group exhibitions, some works are more engaging than others; however, there are no outright duds, and each piece deftly wrings plenty of interest from its respective material.



Althea Merbeck, 'Ancient Greek Gloves' (2006).

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

### RADICAL LACE AND SUBVERSIVE KNITTING

Museum of Arts and Design

#### THE EYE OF THE ARTIST:

The Work of Deborah Sperber

Brooklyn Museum

Piper Shepard's moody "Lace Meander" (2006), an 8-foot-wide piece of black muslin meticulously pierced with minute hand-cut sections, feels at once vulnerable and architectural. Using nontraditional technologies—such as laser cutting, rotary burnouts, and digital ink jet printing—Eugene van Veldhoven's contribution of seven untitled textile prototypes (all 2006) updates the often staid industry of mass-produced textile yardage. Broadly conceiving lace as a medium incorporating the play of light in an ephemeral structure is Edward Mayer's large-scale installation "Drawing Over" (2007), a collection of found objects laboriously wrapped in white tape and jumbled together like crumpled threads. To create "Fifty-free Car Bombing" (2007), Cal

Lane used an oxyacetylene torch to carve out delicate lace-like patterns on a rusted, disemboweled automobile, powerfully conflating John Chamberlain's bravado with a coy Victorian femininity.

At the Brooklyn Museum, opening tomorrow, "The Eye of the Artist" exhibits seven works by Deborah Sperber. Although each piece is an investigation into how much information is necessary for the brain to construct an image—thus firmly koositing Sperber's ideas in the camp of science—her technical approach to the work comes from fiber art's ideas about myriad uses of textile-based materials.

Typical of Ms. Sperber's work is "After van Eyck" (2006), a 122-by-100-inch wall-hanging comprising 5,024 spools of colored thread strung together and suspended from a metal apparatus. On the floor, approximately three feet in front of the piece, is a metal stand with an acrylic sphere on top. To generate the imagery created by the spools, Ms. Sperber used a computer to turn Jan van Eyck's 1433 painting, "Man in a Red Turban," into pixels. She then transcribed each pixel into a corresponding spool of colored thread, arranging these so the image appears to be hanging upside down.

Acting much like an eye, the acrylic sphere refracts this inverted image, simultaneously correcting the orientation of the jumbled spools and cohering them so that a miniature van Eyck painting appears to be floating in midair in this orb.

Ms. Sperber's complex works are impressive for their fastidious patience, and the long thick rows of colored thread-spools do have a pleasing tautness and abstract snap. But ultimately they are mired in their gee-whiz effect, making it hard to see these for more than well-constructed one-liners.

Craft, often a tricky word in the art-world lexicon, appears to have shed its loaded connotations. It is encouraging to see the once stigmatized decorative traditions—such as textiles—treated as one of the many tools contemporary artists now reach for in order to achieve a fully realized work of art.

"Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" until June 17 (40 W. 53rd St., between 57th and 58th avenues, 212-966-3535).

"The Eye of the Artist: The Work of Deborah Sperber" until May 6 (200 Eastern Parkway, 718-638-5000).