

RADICAL LACE & SUBVERSIVE KNITTING

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In the Summer 1967 issue of *Artforum*, the American painter Sol LeWitt stated: "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work... all planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art." Specialized skills and materials were considered beside the point by the nascent conceptualists, but when the craft world embraced the movement's basic tenet, it did so without relinquishing its primary commitment to materials and techniques. The result remains a hybrid art form in which concept, technical proficiency and materiality are inextricably linked. So it's not surprising to find all three of these elements at play in the 40 or so works by 27 artists (from seven countries) that make up this often intriguing show—a mix of site-specific installations together with pieces drawn from museums and galleries around the world. Video and performance art are also included.

All these pieces, as the show's title implies, make reference to fiber art by way of both traditional and unlikely materials—yarn and string, to be sure, but also ceramics, glass, rubber, steel, paper, lead and more. The techniques employed range from basic needlework, hand-knotting and scissor work to high-tech 3-D knitting (as in Yoshiaki Hishinuma's exquisite seamless knitwear), cutting with an X-Acto knife and acetylene torch, and assemblage. Many works are actually knitted, crocheted or tatted; others simply take inspiration from these traditional crafts, but all make a point, political or otherwise, about the complexities, contradictions and, yes, terrors of the world we live in.

Freddie Robins's machine-knitted Saint Sebastianesque self-portrait pierced with knitting needles, which serves effectively as a keynote to the exhibition, is a prime example. Shroud-like, the 2002 piece bears its title, *Craft Kills*, like a T-shirt slogan, referring to the banning of knitting needles on airplanes post-9/11. The piece falls into "Corporeal Constructions," one of six categories around which the show is organized. The others are "Matters of Scale" (Althea Merback's minuscule knitted sweaters at one end, Dave Cole's 45-foot flag knitted with excavators on the other); "Light Constructions" (ethereal works of great elegance in porcelain, lamp-worked glass and fiber optics); "Interconnections" (most shown in the catalog as installations in other museums); "Creative Deconstructions" (Cal Lane's transformation of shovels and crumpled auto-body steel into flame-cut "lace," or "beautiful filth," as she calls it, is wondrous); and "The Beauty of Complexity" (featuring the not-to-be missed video installation *Errant Behaviors*, 2004, by Anne Wilson, in which black threads from deconstructed lace perform an existential stop-motion ballet—at once menacing and humorous—with pins and knitting needles against a stark white background.)

A certain perverse sensibility informs several pieces, notably Barbara Zucker's *Lilian's Face Flowing*, 2005, a lugubrious wall-hung cascade of black rubber cut as a sort of macro-lace from patterns produced by enlarging to abstraction a picture of the artist's elderly friend's wrinkles—a strangely lyrical comment on aging and youth-obsessed culture. "I wanted to be able to throw [the wrinkles] around or cast them off at will," says Zucker in the catalog, "like pulling the skin away from the face and throwing age on the floor." In another example of dark humor, Dave Cole employs arduous knitting to create a teddy bear constructed of woven lead ribbons—the ultimate toxic toy.

At least two artists use straightforward knitting and crochet and traditional yarns to subvert our predictable expectations of these crafts. When we see long knitted ribbons, we automatically think "scarf"; but up close Ruth Marshall's dazzling wall-length installation reveals itself to be in fact 68 life-size knitted replicas of every known variety of the coral snake with its characteristic red and black striping. An exhibit sculptor for the Bronx Zoo in New York, Marshall was attracted to the diversity of designs that animal skins offered her as an artist, but her overriding message is one of appreciation for that very diversity and "the perpetual risk of extinction that threatens many species." Hildur Bjarnadóttir reinterprets the ubiquitous crocheted doily, expanding it into a table-sized memento mori with a pom-pom style edging of three-dimensional crocheted skulls—as suitable for Day of the Dead celebrations as for tea in Miss Marple's parlor.

One disappointment among the many provocative pieces in this show is *Midtown*, 2007, the stairwell installation by Sheila Pepe consisting of a netlike form designed to echo the surrounding rectilinear cityscape, visible through the museum's windows, while resembling a mushroom-shaped cloud. Despite its painstaking construction from shoelaces, towline, tulle and metal thread, the piece ultimately lacks impact, unlike Pepe's more typical weblike structures, illustrated in the catalog. Where *Midtown* bombs, these earlier pieces explode with creative energy and spectacular form.—ANDREA DINOTO

The 141-page, illustrated paperback catalog, essay by David Revere McFadden, is \$42.95 from MAD, 212-956-3535.

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