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Cutting-edge fiber art: Wide variety of materials make up annual exhibit

KURT SHAW | Saturday, May 28, 2016, 5:24 p.m.



Nate Smallwood | Trib Total Media

'THIS Revolution Will Not Be Televised #13 Protest Series" by Penny Mateer and Martha Wasik on display at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in Shady Side on May 20, 2016.

Far from simply being made from needle and thread, fiber art has become loosely defined to include much more. It can consist of natural or synthetic fiber and other components, such as fabric or yarn. But it also can consist of nearly any other material one can weave or join together.

Take, for example, the piece "Redirect" by Peter Clouse of Detroit, on display as part of "Fiberart International 2016." It is composed entirely of woven electrical cords.

Being made of something that has been transformed beyond its humble utilitarian beginnings, the piece fuses the concepts of consumption, waste and recycling with textile traditions and landscape.

Clouse's monstrous weaving is a balance between the two dimensions created on a loom and the third contingent on space. Here, the focus is on the materials and on the manual labor on the part of the artist, thus prioritizing aesthetic value over utility.

The piece is a perfect entry point into an exhibit — housed at the Society for Contemporary Craft in the Strip District and Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in Shadyside — that will require one to suspend all belief in what constitutes fiber art.

There are pieces made of everything from buttons to bottle caps, even makeup sponges and orange crowd-control fencing. This is fiber art for the 21st century. Now in its 22nd iteration, the exhibit has become an international benchmark of innovation.

Bringing these works to the fore was the work of three innovators in the field — Chunghie Lee of South Korea, Arturo Alonzo Sandoval from the University of Kentucky and Tali Weinberg from Berkeley, Calif. Each has been a cutting-edge contributor to the field of fiber art.

They chose works by 78 established and emerging artists from 14 countries, providing a singular opportunity to see current trends and innovations in this constantly evolving area of artmaking.

As visitors to both halves of the exhibition will see, the exhibiting artists have employed a dazzling variety of techniques, often in a single work.

Many of the artists have combined traditional techniques such as embroidery, quilting or weaving with more contemporary processes such as laminating, plant dyeing, digital printing and burning.

Alexandra Kirsch, an artist from Virginia who lives in Uniontown, used a technique called needle felting in which she built up and molded wool made from Alpaca hair with a single barbed needle to create "Expressions," which is made up of seven life-sized mouths in different forms of expression.

"When I made this particular piece, I was thinking about facial expressions and how the eyes and the mouth are the two most expressive parts of the face," Kirsch says. "I was also thinking about all of the different expressions that are made by a single person throughout even just one conversation. I, personally, am more drawn to the mouth

because of how intimate it is; it talks, laughs, kisses, tastes, etc. I wanted to see if I took the mouth and removed all other information (nose, lips, frown lines, chin, etc.), would the same expression still be communicated or would it be misconstrued? Because of this, it became somewhat of an interactive piece.”

Another three-dimensional form, “Bystander” by Korean artist June Lee, is a real standout piece. Comprising several small figures, each cast in resin and then wrapped in thread, it's part of an ongoing series Lee began in 2011. To date, she has created about 400 figures, each no taller than half a foot.

Each figure has distinctive patterns and colors of thread.

“I never repeat the same color or pattern again,” Lee says. “It is really important for me to keep making unique figures, which emphasizes the individuality of every human being. This patterned thread is like a fingerprint, each is unique.

“I love to read newspapers, and meet and talk with others,” Lee says. “(My work) is inspired from chatting with others, and newspapers. I make figures based on whom I met or whom I imagine from newspapers or books.”

Deb Hyde of West Bloomfield, Mich., says she has been pursuing her interest in fiber art for about 15 years. Her artwork on display, “Sam in Sunlight,” is a reference to the old Amish quilt pattern “Sunlight and Shadow,” which is the basis of this portrait.

“This is a portrait of my son when he was about 11 years old, adapted from my photo,” she says. “The main thing I want viewers to understand (aside from how cute my son is) is that I do not paint on or alter the commercially available fabric I work with. Instead, I cut them into one-inch squares and place them to fit my image. Sewing fabric squares together seems like the most basic kind of quilt, but I try to take it to a new level.”

Then there's the piece “(ragnarok),” a life-size sculpture of a wolf, by Emily Jan of Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

“It was the first life-sized hyper-realistic reed-and-wool sculpture I made and, as such, was a bit of a turning point for me in both technique and thought process,” Jan says.

The title is an allusion to the Norse Twilight of the Gods, for which Jan encapsulates the twin ideas of apocalypse and regeneration, “themes that have interested me for several years now,” she says. “I wanted the feathered wolf to be menacing yet beautiful, mysterious and also a bit humorous.”

The piece is entirely handmade — including the claws, teeth, eyes and tongue.

“Everything was sculpted and cast by me; nothing is ‘real’ except for the peacock feathers,” Jan says. “It's not taxidermy. The ‘pelt’ is made of wool felt, which I make in my studio.”

It's worth noting that in an exhibition of such international scope and scale, this year's best in show went to locals Penny Mateer of Squirrel Hill and Martha Wasik of Fox Chapel for their collaborative piece, “THIS Revolution Will Not Be Televised #13 Protest Series.”

Part of an ongoing series by Mateer, it is a response to the Black Lives Matter movement, which Mateer dug into deeper after reading a related article on Gawker.com (<http://Gawker.com>) that detailed all of the unarmed individuals who died in police

custody from 1999 until 2014.

“After seeing the images of all those people, I knew immediately that I had to make a traditional-style quilt, a quilt that would not comfort,” Mateer says.

“Because there were so many details about each death that I wanted to include, I turned to my dear friend Martha Wasik, who is a graphic designer, and asked if she would collaborate with me on the project.”

The result is an impactful work filled with faces and names, and above all, shame.

Kurt Shaw is the Tribune-Review art critic. Reach him at tribliving@tribweb.com (<mailto:tribliving@tribweb.com>).

'Fiberart International 2016'

What: The 22nd juried exhibition of the best in contemporary fiber art, produced by the Fiberarts Guild of Pittsburgh

When and where: Through Aug. 21 from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays at Society for Contemporary Craft, 2100 Smallman St., Strip District; and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays and noon-4 p.m. Sundays at Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, 6300 Fifth Ave., Shadyside

Admission: Free at Society for Contemporary Craft, \$5 suggested donation at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts

Details: fiberartinternational.org (<http://fiberartinternational.org>)