

Where Fiber Art Meets Hot Fudge Sundae

A Clinton Show Underlines Traditional Arts' Move Into the Studio

Until recently, the contemporary art world politely ignored the encroachment into artists' studios of techniques more commonly associated with traditional practical and domestic arts.

ART REVIEW

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"Knitted, Knotted, Netted" at the Hunterdon Art Museum confronts this trend head on, presenting work by a dozen artists made using the methods of the title. Each of these techniques is quite ancient, according to the exhibition catalog, probably dating to Paleolithic times, when humans first began to fashion clothing and hunting instruments from plant fibers and animal materials. Each is characterized by looping of a thread or cord, in contrast to, say, weaving or braiding, in which the elements may interlace but not necessarily loop.

Contemporary artists have pushed these old techniques in fascinating directions, as is evidenced by the beauty, variety and inventiveness of the works in this show, organized by Hildreth York, one of the museum's curators. In addition to using natural materials, artists now work with all sorts of industrial and synthetic substances, enabling the creation of far more dynamic looped structures.

Each artist is represented by multiple works, grouped together in clusters around the main gallery on the first floor. The arrangement gives viewers an overview of the individual artists, highlighting their preoccupations and interests as well as the sorts of materials, methods and techniques they employ. It also enables meaningful comparisons from one body of work to the next.

The show is so diverse that it is difficult to generalize about it. Everything is extremely well crafted, but that goes without saying in an exhibition of this kind. Most of the artists are also concerned with exploring the formal properties of their chosen materials rather than making social and political statements. This is artwork made to be looked at and enjoyed.

Ed Bing Lee provides one of the show's most irresistible offerings, intricately knotted life-size sculptures like a hot fudge sundae and a bucket of popcorn. Each sculpture, made of cotton, ribbon and linen thread, requires thousands of knots patiently tied over many hours. The artist also knots together surprisingly evocative little three-inch-square sculptural landscapes, including a beautiful one of Tasmania.

Numerous styles and methods of knitting are on display. Abigail Doan and Leslie Pontz use crochet, in which loops of yarn are pulled through other loops. Ms. Pontz is especially inventive, blending cotton thread with wire, fabric, iron and chain to make abstract botanical forms. "Cactus Arm Flowered # 1" (2006) is a surreal plant construction with a metallic blossom.

Ms. Doan's works are endearingly casual assemblages in which plant materials, chunks of wool, thread, found objects and various other things are crocheted, twined and hand spun into little balls. In addition to being power-

"Knitted, Knotted, Netted," Hunterdon Art Museum, 7 Lower Center Street, Clinton, through Jan. 24; (908) 735-8415 or hunterdonartmuseum.org.

fully original, they are filled with surprises; one of her works here, "Flotsam Fiber Forms" (2009), incorporates bits of fiber, debris and detritus including a deflated party balloon.

Much of the work can be classified as sculpture, whatever that catchall term means to us today. It ranges in scale from Karen Ciaramella's enormous, cloudlike objects made of dense accretions of thick, white scoured wool, some of them with knotted appendages that flow onto the floor, to Noriko Takamiya's "Untitled #3" (1997), a delicate, knotted object made of strips of ramie.

Ms. Takamiya, along with Hisako Sekijima and Kazue Honma, make up a small but notable contingent of Japanese artists in this show. The three artists have a great deal in common, from a preference for natural fibers to a love of simple geometric construction, usually using knotting. All three are pioneers in



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the contemporary sculptural basketry movement.

As with any group show, there are also works that defy categorization. Carol D. Westfall's dense bundles of compressed weaver's knots are so simple-looking yet oddly alluring that it is difficult to know what to make of them. Here the collapse of the boundary between art and craft is complete: these works are less pretty objects to be admired than they are the residue of an idea. Let's call it conceptual craft.

The show closes with a rare social statement, Ruth Marshall's "Ivy the Snow Leopard" (2006) — a leopard hide, accurate in detail and size, knitted out of colored yarn and stretched on a bamboo frame. Here we are invited to consider faux pelts as a desirable alternative to the harvesting of skins belonging to endangered species. The work is a plea for conservation.



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OLD WAYS

Works in "Knitted, Knotted, Netted" at the Hunterdon Art Museum include "Knitted Flotsam 01," by Abigail Doan, top; "Ivy the Snow Leopard," detail, above left, and right, by Ruth Marshall; "Cactus Arm Flowered # 1," by Leslie Pontz, left; and "fading away," by Ann Coddington Rast, right.



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