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A Show of Hands: Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting

By Peggy Roalf

As DIY (Do It Yourself) has recently become a post-collegiate choice for legions of socially conscious 20-somethings, Stitch and Bitch evenings have popped up in cafés and knit shops nationwide. Now there's an emerging trend for Stretch and Kvetch (that's - *you've got it!* - yoga and knitting). Knitting and craft groups are forming to provide support as well as goods to needful people that range from the homeless, to cancer sufferers, to casualties of war. Crafting has gone intellectually upscale, and hip, in a social-network sort of way. And it's being done by men as well as women. So it's not surprising that an exhibition extolling the art of craft, and its more subversive practice, has arrived on the scene.

Last week, New York's Museum of Arts and Design opened Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting, with work by 30 artists who, to a greater or lesser degree, comment on post-industrial society. What used to be regarded as women's work, therefore inferior, is elevated to elite status here. "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" doesn't obtain, as ten of the artists are men. And "handiwork" is a word that vaporizes on viewing a multi-story net structure by Janet Echelman that suggests a nuclear mushroom cloud. Or a machine-knitted head-to-toe bodysuit by Freddie Robins. This sinister-looking item is pierced with metal knitting needles and emblazoned with the message, "Craft Kills," an allusion to the continuing airline ban on knitting needles.

Some of the "lace" pieces in the show are more decorative than

radical, but nevertheless thought-provoking. A trio of wall-sized muslin scrolls by Piper Shepard, which she created by cutting intricate patterns with an X-Acto knife, conjure up thoughts of forced labor and mental strife. In Anne Wilson's video, *Errant Behavior*, found lace has been unraveled and reconstructed through frame-by-frame animation. The accompanying soundscape adds to the overall effect of a wasteland taken over by aliens.

Another colossal piece, *Midtown*, by Sheila Pepe, contrasts delicate crocheted strips and ribbons of soft material, such as tulle and knitting yarn, with large-scale areas crocheted from hundreds of yards of chunky shoelaces, and twisted skeins made from nautical line large enough to haul up a ship's anchor. All are arranged over a transparent grid, also made from a combination of shoelaces and glittering yarn. Though the palette is a restrained range of blues, grays, and silver, thoughts of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* series, in primary colors, easily come to mind.

The knitting side of the show includes many modes of protest, from Ruth Marshall's biologically accurate series of 68 coral snakes to Dave Cole's *Money Dress*, knitted in a Vera Wang pattern from approximately one thousand dollars worth of shredded singles to Cat Mazza's collectively crocheted Nike Blanket, a petition against sweatshop practices, which will be sent to Nike's corporate headquarters. *Photo left: The Money Dress, by Dave Cole.*

Perhaps the most stirring piece in the exhibition is Sabrina Gshwandtner's *Wartime Knitting Circle*. The installation is enclosed with industrially knitted black-and-white photos of men and women making war relief items, from World War I, in Britain, to the present, in Iraq. The artist, who founded the limited edition magazine, *KnitKnit*, invites visitors to join her knitting circle and make a variety of garments for which patterns, yarn and needles are provided. There is also a comments book, in which visitors have added photographs and notes about their *Wartime Knitting Circle* experiences. On one of the pages, a tiny bag, knitted in lavender ribbon, and containing a single condom, was placed

without comment. *Photo below: The 2004 KnitKnit Sundown Salon, a celebration of extreme knitting, art & craft & the handmade. Hosted by [Fritz Haeg](#); curated by [Sabrina Gshwandtner](#) and Sara Grady. Photo courtesy of Fritz Haeg.*

[Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting](#) is on view at the Museum of Arts and Design through June 17, 2007. A series of public programs is scheduled (many free with museum admission), including speed trials for The World's Fastest Knitter, an international competition sponsored by the Craft Yarn Council of America

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