

Knitter's Review *Experience the World of Yarn*



Caption:

One of the knitted, printed panels flanking Sabrina Gschwandtner's Wartime Knitting Circle installation

Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting

By Lela Nargi

Museum of Arts & Design

40 West 53rd St.

New York, NY

212-956-3535

Open daily 10am-6pm;

Thurs until 8pm

Exhibit runs through June 17, 2007

Visitors to opening day of the Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting exhibit on January 25th were in for a bit of a hullabaloo. On the second floor landing, before a large, lace-like curtain stitched together of tulle and blue nautical towline by artist Sheila Pepe, exhibit curator David McFadden talked into the camera for Channel 11's morning news.

The art critic for the Daily News skulked between rooms, having missed the press opening the night before, which had been attended by art critics for The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Christian Science Monitor.

Setting the Scene

A smattering of art scene habitués leaned around on the circular staircase. A larger contingent of fiber arts aficionados in quirky hats milled about in small packs, nodding (rightfully) in somber appreciation of a silk organza dress by Liz Collins with intricate knitted web-work over its bodice; and a "Light Construction" by Dutch artist Niels van Eijk consisting of a bobbin lace chandelier constructed of glowing fiber optic strands, reminiscent of a large jellyfish.

A minority of women sporting handknit sweaters and scarves, perhaps expecting a homier scene, seemed to have been caught off-guard by the to-do. But the crowd-at-large gave rapt attention to the 10 of 27 exhibited artists who were on hand to discuss their work, each in their turn, on an informal tour of the galleries. Lending an air of authority to the proceedings were 15 or so museum docents busily scribbling notes for walk-throughs of the exhibit they'd be leading in coming months.

When Art Meets Craft

By now, it should come as no surprise to any lover of knitting that knitting, having re-entered the mainstream in the last decade, has filtered through to the more rarefied world of Art. What this actually means is up for very broad interpretation. As "Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting" makes abundantly clear, the commingling of craft and art can lead down some very interesting paths indeed, but also offers up a little something for everyone.

On Exhibit

For knitting purists, on view is Yoshiki Hishinuma's sweater-like garment, a lush machine-knitted tortoise-shell-shaped construction festooned with six red-capped appendages that resemble mushrooms. The only drawback: It is encased under plexi; no tactile gratification here.

Across the room, also, sadly, under glass, perk Althea Merback's infinitesimal gloves, in 1:144 scale, their fingers and geometric patterning so tiny they had to be knitted with wire.

For knitters who like something new under the sun, the exhibit showcases work by Dave Cole, who knits (teddy bears, for example) with lead. He showed off the needles he designed expressly for the purpose (made of aluminum, as wood or plastic needles would shatter in the undertaking). He also showed knitted swatches using lead of different widths—looking like inky linguine, fettuccine, and thick spaghetti—encased in see-through plastic packets. No tactile satisfaction here, either, for the knitters among us, although the neat art world appeal of the packets was unmistakable.

Lace Redefined

Various other works serve to reinterpret traditional meanings of "lace," from Elana Herzog's wallscales of decomposing textiles (is it lace if it's made by breaking down rather than building up?); to Hildur Bjarnadóttir's tableau of lace doilies surrounded by knitted skulls (is it lace if your grandmother would never deign to toss it over the back of her sofa?); to Piper Shepard's stark, dark panels in vaguely naturalist patterns (is it lace if it's made of muslin, graphite, and aluminum?).

Subversive Knitting



Caption: The installation at one point

The real star of the opening was Sabrina Gschwandtner's Wartime Knitting Circle. Flanking its space hung a dozen black-and-white knitted panels imprinted with archival wartime knitting photos.

In the center stood a small round table topped with a tablecloth, itself silkscreened with four knitting patterns. First, a pattern for knitting USS Cole Slippers (based on The Ships Project and sent to soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines deployed across the world); second, a pattern for blankets for recovery (sent to beleaguered Afghans and also U.S. troops returned from combat); third, Lisa Anne Auerbach's Body Count Mittens pattern (memorializing the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq at the time the mittens are made); and finally a pattern for balaclavas (sent to troops stationed in Iraq, and also to U.S. Senators in an attempt to persuade them to bring troops home). Four pairs of knitting needles sat atop the table, several rows already stitched up on each and awaiting elaboration.

An Installation Comes Alive

Toward the end of the morning, two women sporting short hair and comfortable pants took seats at the table and began to chat. A young woman stood at the periphery, studying the patterns on the tablecloth as if mustering the nerve to try one.

Another young woman stepped up, sat down and without hesitation began to knit from the silkscreened how-tos, at which point the older women pulled their own knitting projects out of bags and set to. The first young woman moved away.

"Aren't you going to sit and knit?" goaded an onlooker. The young woman turned the approximate shade of a pomegranate, then shuffled back to the table, shamed, where she picked up needles and yarn and began to knit. In no time, she and the other young woman had struck up a conversation—about Iraq, or boyfriends, or the benefits of a vegetarian diet. Twenty minutes later they set off together to view more of the exhibit.



Naomi Dagen Bloom and others sitting around the table
The two original women stayed put. One of them—Naomi Dagen Bloom (seated at left, facing camera)—offered up a small brown pamphlet to all who approached titled, "Knit it...A Condom Amulet for Friends and Family."

New divorcées and widows in their 60s were unwitting victims of HIV and AIDS, the pamphlet admonished. Save them by knitting them an amulet in which to carry a condom. She herself was sporting such an amulet around her neck, with a round, blue "Classic One" condom nestled snug inside.

Art Meets Life

The artist-led tour wended its way to Gschwandtner's installation. Would the ladies be swallowed up whole by the 70 docents and cognoscenti? The crowd stormed the table and Gschwandtner began to speak.

Lady Number One merely knit and knit without cease, hardly looking down at the work in her hands. Dagen Bloom fished a small camera from her bag and began snapping photos. In the midst of the maelstrom, the two were content and perfectly at home.

A bring-your-own brown paper bag lunch and much talk of all things related to knitting and art and politics and what-have-you was to follow—the by-product of any good old-fashioned knitting circle.

Visit the Show

Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting runs through June 17, 2007, at the Museum of Arts & Design located at 40 West 53rd St. in New

York. For more information, including pictures of works included in the show, visit the Museum of Arts & Design Website.

About the Author

Lela Nargi's most recent book is *Knitting Memories: Reflections on the Knitter's Life*, an anthology featuring contributions by Teva Durham, Elanor Lynn, and a dozen other famous and not-so-famous knitters. Visit her at lelanargi.com.