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ART REVIEW: "Northeast Regional Contemporary Fiber Exhibition"

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on April 13, 2011

After checking with a few friends, I was both relieved and vexed that I'm not the only one whose understanding of the realm of fiber arts begins and ends with moldering tapestries and the hip revival of knitting at parties. If you're in this boat, we're all in luck, because this spring no fewer than three local exhibitions will center directly on the vast and varied craft of fiber art. First up is the Northeast Regional Contemporary Fiber Exhibition, presented by Rochester Contemporary and the Surface Design Association, and featuring 28 artworks by 20 regional talents that serve to expand our understanding of this versatile field of creativity.

There are far too many works of interest to discuss here, so make sure you check out the show for yourself.

The exhibition is a departure for Rochester Contemporary, says director Bleu Cease, as this is a show built around a medium rather than the work of one or a group of specific artists. Works range from expressions of peaceful meditations to studies in form and color, to political concerns; from adornments, like Carol Ann Rice Rafferty's ruffle-y cocoon of muslin, used coffee-filters, and beeswax ("Dressing Gown to Filter Out Bad Chi"), to Marilyn Beal's glowing, crisscrossing threadwork in "Snowless Winter," to "Apothecary," an arrangement of shimmering fabric bottles by Saberah Malik.

The fields of weaving, embroidering, quilting, and sewing are traditionally women's work, and though many male artists now work in fiber media as well, only 2 of 100 submissions to the juried show were men (and no men were accepted into the show, except as subjects). But the work is neither characterized merely by a decorative nature nor by its domestic usefulness; much of it is packed with philosophic wonderings and calls to social action. Meredith Grimsley's sentimental, woman-shaped wall-hanging, entitled "Imprinted (My Son's Ears)," blends the traditional method of quilting and dying fabric with inkjet-printing in order to create a portrait of a kneeling young mother looking down at her arms and hands, which bear red imprints of tiny ears trailing up to the mass of marks on her chest. A viewer can easily imagine the emotional imprints remaining from countless cradlings of the child in those outstretched arms.

Across the space on the facing wall is a jacquard damask, black, and deep blue diptych by Betty Vera. In

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"Hinoki" by Elaine Longtemps is part of Northeast Regional Contemporary Fiber Exhibit, now on view at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

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creating the abstract works entitled "Sparkles" and "Mystere," Vera uses the camera as a sketching tool, capturing "visual messages" and objects existing in the periphery, "traces of human activities, aspirations, and our tenuous connection with life itself," per the provided statement. Those digital images were then translated into textiles with the use of a jacquard loom, a mechanical tool originally invented in 1801.

Close by you'll find a sympathetic work by Vivien Zepf entitled "On the Streets," which transmits familiar messages of desperation to a socially conscious wall piece. Mixed media on cotton replicates black marker-on-cardboard messages from the streets. One reads, "Need, want, and will work." Stitched over the notes is a human silhouette with his back leaning against a building, one knee up.

Turn around again and you'll spy "Ina's Legs" by Rebecca Fricke. A springy yellow and green and delicately floral cotton sheet has been quilted to depict a pair of legs dangling from above the picture, suspended dreamily amid countless bubbles and shapes, above a series of horizontal striations like waves.

Further into the gallery the works return to family matters with "Saying Prayers for Daddy" by Linda Rae Coughlin, a hand-hooked, felted fabric wall-hanging that earned the show's second-place award, even though it caused a stir at the opening, says Cease. The disturbing image depicts a young girl sitting on the ground, hands in a praying steeple and clutching a crucifix. She looks up at a man standing next to her, visible from his chest to feet, holding a real leather strap that dangles from crossed arms.

Also in the disturbing vein of this show are two large wall pieces by Priscilla Smith, "The Weapons of War," which won the juror's choice award, and "The Death of War." The former work is the louder of the two; the dyed, printed, and fused rayon and silk blasting the viewer with deep red angles that frame an enormous handgun, all imposed over a background pattern of linear black tanks.

The latter piece follows the same pattern, with a giant foreground crucifix on which a soldier's helmet hangs, with flag-swathed coffins, crucifixes, and headstones repeating in muted colors. These works are born of a desire to put the effects of war in the viewer's face, "to provoke thought and emotion; to raise consciousness; and to galvanize change," says Smith in a provided artist statement. "For many years of my life, I marched for peace. But that is not enough," she says. "The artist must also create 'images' which reflect the horror and dark side of war."

Jane Ogren's "Jefo #627" resonated well with the jurors, as it won first place of all of the show's offerings. The stacked triptych of dyed polyester fiber mounted on curved metal forms features a smooth transition of hues and a softly bumpy texture, enabled by the malleable, fluid nature of polyester at certain temperatures.

Though all of the work is heavily textured and begs to be touched, most of the works are relatively two-dimensional wall hangings. The third dimension comes to play in Laura Tabakman's delicate and captivating "Vessels," an installation of three steel-and-wire-framed, rust-dyed silk, and hog-gut-covered boat forms suspended from the ceiling about waist-high. From the wooden platform below sprout wire reeds topped with realistic-looking polymer clay fronds, completing the effect of the vessels floating atop a calm and invisible body of water.

Northeast Regional Contemporary Fiber Exhibition

Through May 9

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461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

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