

On the Edge: Fray by Joe Lewis**Fray: The Koffler Gallery and the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.****July 13 to January 7, 2007****Kathryn Ruppert- Dazai: Twin White 2005, the Conversation 2005**

Memory as we have learned is an unreliable thing. We now live with a growing understanding of ways in which the brain can change, dislodging function and changing perception. Memory, like history, is just as much a matter of approach and just as dependent on reference. Fray curators Carolyn Bell Farrell of [the Koffler Gallery] and Sarah Quinton of the Textile Museum of Canada [now referred to as the TMC] have brought the work of nineteen artists from across North America to explore the implications of memory embodied in the design, materials and processes associated with textile traditions. They have produced a thought provoking and challenging exhibition spread over two locations. It is not about nostalgia but rather the concept of it; it has aspects of cloth along with multifaceted and varied ways of looking at it -- bringing the past into the present, hiding it, celebrating it, using it as an excuse and explanation.

Upon entering the third floor gallery of the TMC from the main stairwell, you are greeted by the first piece in the exhibition. "Dirge" presents rusted metal stars and stripes glued on canvas, a 2004 piece by Toronto artist June Clark. A provocative if trite image, it nonetheless holds a key to viewing the entire exhibition. The decaying American flag, suggest corroding ideals falsely held attached to a concept that has in fact been damaged from its beginnings and offers a harsh comment on the contemporary state of the world. This is anchored to a moment of time and provides a chronology from which to move back and forth in time, something which is a prime element of memory. There is surface, pattern, structure and a process of combining the three and the effect of time on all of them. To extrapolate and explore the meaning in all the works, these recognized components are useful but not necessary--just as personal response and artist intent don't actually have to be the same.

There is fun and joy in this show, humour, sadness, fatalism, images on wood, paper, and made of cloth, video, and even dirt on the floor. This takes us up to the part of the exhibition at the Koffler Centre and printing as a way of adorning surface. Susan Schelle's limited edition glee prints are collaged images of whole to scale patterned rugs with slightly panoramic close up views of different cottage rooms. On the adjacent wall are three works by Jeannie Thib. "Sub Rosa", "Cluster" and "Influx" are screen printed wood panels with elaborate repeat patterns reminiscent of damask cloth (or 1960's flocked wall paper maybe). These printed works have insertions of florescent paint which according to Thib represent viruses and the names of the pieces are the ways in which a virus can insert itself into the human system and can be read as jewelled embellishment to the rich damask. (This information was put forward at a lecture/ panel presentation at the TMC but didn't change my initial reaction to the work).



Cal Lane Dirt Works at Koffler Gallery

On the floor of the second room is an unusual and untitled piece that strikes me as beautiful, American Cal Lane's screen sifted sand in a multiple floral rug pattern. Looking at the work by Jeannie Thib, Susan Schelle featured in the first room along with Cal Lane's take me to childhood memories of the cottage, or the rumpus (now family) room, cheap wood paneling with a piece of Indian fabric or lace pinned to it, worn rugs, and perhaps a black light -- depending on the era of your childhood memories. These are places associated with summer weekends or after school fun. The sand on the cement floor of the gallery gives off a smell that helps evoke these memories

Strolling around the Koffler Gallery unleashes a flood of memories. A piece by Montreal's Sarah Stevenson also fits into this domestic informality of relaxed summers. Her work "Smoke" (suspended nylon covered 3D slightly irregular pod shaped wire structures) floats on a wall in the same room as the dirt rug. Lit to cast a shadow, the evocation /effect of smoke is there, yet I think of trees covered with

insect nests. This is indicative of a reality that the effects of art on the viewer's thoughts are not confined to those determined by the artists or the curators. However there are more literal creatures / animals present in this relaxed domestic collection with Allyson Mitchell's Sassquirel and Sasskunk and Susan Detwiler's three 1998 animal skins of flat knitted wool [Raccoon, Squirrel and Rabbit looking like road kill]. David Merritt from London, Ontario, has suspended sisal fibre that goes from a bunched up mass to a string forming an almost legible text [untitled (ode to Sam Cook) 2006]. This takes on the role of spiders webs (Charlotte's web). 8 wool blankets 2003 by Liz Sargent rolls of 2 inch wide strips of wool blankets in muted shades of red, pink, yellow and orange stacked in a corner produce a garden effect.

My placing the work presented at the Koffler Gallery into this domestic set of memories is in sharp contrast to my reaction to viewing the pieces in the more formalized setting of the Textile Museum. My response to the work at the Koffler is embedded with a false set of memories constructed from established set of country life decors manufactured so well in Hollywood. It's the "Summer of 42" meets "National Lampoons Summer Vacation" rather than an art historical or even personal reading of this material. Working with "memory" as a theme and choosing to let the work stand alone with out didactic information allows the viewers the freedom to identify their own reference point, and find their own meaning. It is an interesting move on the part of the curators who have brought together works where the reference to textiles is not necessarily obvious. The individual pieces often work outside of this basic frame. An example of this at the TMC is Rachel Ehenberg piece entitled "Blanket (Snow)". It is a video of a somewhat gentle passing of time as we observe an individual walk across a pristine snow covered park and lie down on a bench and eventually become covered in snow. As the camera moves in close we see a rather serene expression on the person's face as it is slowly disappears into whiteness. If it is necessary to defend the inclusion of video or film into a textile exhibition I would make the parallel of photography to textiles by linking: preparing the shot = carting the wool, shooting the scene = spinning the yarn, editing = weaving, still photography = felting perhaps.

Make these leaps with me the title itself takes you in different directions. Appropriately "Blanket" denotes comfort, home protection, while "Snow" conveys beautiful, peaceful, isolation, cold, death. Very quickly this piece can take you from a gentle childhood joy of making a snow angel to the harsh reality of the homeless that are found frozen each winter in urban centre's where concepts of care, comfort, and protection emanate daily from both bureaucratic and politically concerned facilities. It is at this point that one recognises that dismissive assumption about levels of discourse provoked by textile and fibre work prove to be naive and should be abandon.

This brings us back downtown to the TMC and its museum context which differs from the more flexible Koffler Gallery practice. As shifts in museum practice have change methods of presentation varying from anthropological/ archaeological situational setting such as a Victorian ladies parlour, with all it trappings, from furniture (fainting couch) to pastimes (needle work) in which textiles are over looked rather than the subject to be examined, in contrast to wall hung academy formats that shift focus and imbue authority. The exhibition under review pushes these boundaries even further. Ironically by showing common ways textiles function in the banal, everyday and domestic spheres that have now been contextualized this show challenges the removal of that context, by isolating surface, structure and function. By doing this the curators have expanded the basic definition of textiles to include myriad properties with equal shares of value/importance. All the works in this exhibition use one or more of these properties as a starting point.

The wall works of Allyson Mitchell and Kathryn Ruppert- Dazai alone are worth the visit the TMC components of the show. While operating from deeply theoretical concepts with a cannily naive approach, both artists present standard rectilinear surfaces with images. The "painting surfaces" being a chenille bedspread and shag carpet in Mitchell's case, and, in Ruppert-Dazai's work, a combination of

areas that are knitted or crocheted and/ or pieced, then mounted on stretchers. Then the works of both artists are assembled by collage and appliqué. Here the similarities between the two artists work ends.



Allyson Mitchell: Sasshunk 06, Sassquog 05, Sassfag 06 at the Koffler Gallery

In the past few years, Allyson Mitchell has developed a female version of the mythical missing link “Big Foot”, or Sasquatch, using this figure in her in sculpture and images. If Sasquatch exist, there has to be one of each sex in order to procreate, and if it has continued for centuries, the supposition is that it has its own culture which conveniently is a model of ours Lady Sassquatch, a mass of recycled and fake fur and vintage “borg” is a lusty, wild, larger then life creature These images, including “Orangio” a 2005 and “It ain’t gonna lick itself” are in the centuries old artistic tradition of painting the female nude. However in this work the female gaze in these post feminist modern interpretation is sly, aggressive, defiant and self satisfied. There is the possibility Lady Sasquatch has been using human males for their own pleasure. These images are amusing yet highly contentious.

In contrast Kathryn Ruppert- Dazai works are child-like images worked in colourful and oddly shaped over- sized crochet figures stitched to the ground. “Twin white, I don’t” love you □ and “the Conversation”, both from 2005, are like fridge paintings from kindergarten. They are full of delight, joy and whimsy. It is the same whimsy that is evident in Mitchell’s work. Ruppert-Dazai’ third piece “the blanket” is darker and ambiguous-- hinting at something. This haunting quality appears in many of the pieces on display in both venues.

This show put together by Sarah Quinton and Carolyn Bell-Ruppert has surpassed their plan to “explore the implications of memory embodied in the design, materials and processes associated with textile traditions.” They have chosen pieces that work beyond this supposition and have engaged the audience in a dialogue about how a multitude of concepts function. This exhibition is not easy or simple, you may in fact dislike some of the work on display and question its connection with textile practices, but the one thing you won’t do is pass it by without question.

Is that not the basic function of art after all?

The Koffler Gallery: 4588 Bathurst Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, July 13 to October 13, 2006, and the **Textile Museum of Canada**: 51 Centre Street, Toronto Ontario, Canada. July 13 to January 7, 2007

There are several pieces which I have not mentioned and some of these works are ongoing, one of which can be accessed on line. Nadia Myre’s Scar project can be reached on-line at <http://www.nadiamyre.com/>

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