

hand-face-body: Touch don't touch: review by joelewis

**hand-face-body** Gladstone Hotel, Toronto, Ontario. October 14-November 26  
Curated By: Helena Frei and Chris Mitchell

“In celebration of the intimate, layered and complex relationship between people and cloth, the Gladstone Hotel presents *hand-face-body*, an exhibit of textile-based art. ”



Janet Morton, "as of yet untitled" 2006, branches with lace [1]

Playing with the double meanings that "hand", "face" and "body" have in the context of textiles, curators Chris Mitchell and Helena Frei have assembled a diverse group of works whose makers range from established artists with impressive track records to students in the process of refining their focus. With the intimate, personal overtones of textile, the act of using it as a medium suggests human presence. The participating artists speak of things as disparate as biblical lyrics, cancer and the fate of dryer lint. Whatever the subject, whether addressing issues of body image, sexual preference, intimacy or pornography, the work speaks of the body either explicitly or by inference.” [i]  
There is no way around it, textiles are a major component of our daily lives whether we recognize it or not. We cover ourselves and surround ourselves with them, they absorb our sweat and odour, and they situate themselves in our memory. Cloth is part of the collective unconscious, usually unnoticed and un-remarked. It is a given in archaeology, noted anthropologically (Jesuits clothing naked aboriginals/ heathens usually), occasionally documented in history, depending especially on its significances to marking or documenting an event ([The Bayeux Tapestry](#)) . Cloth is a party we all attend and a story we all tell even if we don't want to.



Sonia Habersitch "wall works", collection of crochet embroidery etc., 2006 [2]

Walking up the stairs to the second floor lobby/ hallway Gallery on the opening night of **Hand –face - Body** was like entering the Wonderful World of Oz. Soaring yet still, suspended from the ceiling where two oversized objects by Vanessa Perunovich; a white gown and black pointed witches hat, nylon stretched over wire armatures, good and evil fighting it out, all the whimsy of a good fairy tale to set the mood of the evening. Onward and upward to the third and fourth floors crowded with people and art. The exhibition curators Helena Frei and Chris Mitchell have brought together the work of 25 fibre artist from across Canada to present to the international participants of, the Textile Society of America's 10<sup>th</sup> annual Symposium, which was being held in Toronto the weekend of the exhibition's opening.

The presentation of art in alternative spaces is a well established fact and when the space has been redeveloped with this in mind the Gladstone Hotel, with its graceful Victorian proportioned hallways with contemporary overhead gallery lighting, provides a near perfect setting for such an exhibition. The large scale installation pieces are equally mixed with the more intimately proportioned wall work, and regardless of size all of these works over extend concepts of traditional excepted fibre and textile work. The more obvious pieces: Louise Lemuixe Berbue's "Dream" jacquard tapestries, Allyson Mitchell's "Pretty Fat" latch hooked rug and Barbra Todd's "Heart" quilt work as counter foils to the more esoteric pieces such as "Undercover" by the Washboard Collective. "Undercover" is a mass of sheets and blankets knotted together in both fishing net and rope ladder. It is a ganglia of frustration, hope and fear. It is a spider's web. It is Rapunzel's hair. He can climb up, but how do they climb down. Is it about escape or entrapment? The washboard collective is Michele Costa, Mellody Startweather, and April Wash and this piece really does strike at some primal level which is something textiles seem to do easily. Further down the hall was another collaborative piece "Ever When" by John Krynicky and Mellisa Levin. It was a collage of brightly coloured acrylic yarn machine knit with images of faces combined with other images of childhood constructed out of jigsaw puzzles. This piece is, in some ways, the opposite of "Undercover", and because of its garish colour and design components has a "Retro" nostalgia, yet they both hark back to some childhood moment, wonder and the lively skill of free association. Both can provoke a very Jungian interpretation.



Hazel Meyer "Snot and Tears" vintage handkerchiefs and small engines, 2006 [3]

Another large piece “Snot and Tears”, or Crjetha Meyer’s collection of 1000 handkerchiefs by Hazel Meyer is an animated wall covering of vintage printed, embroidered or filigreed/lace handkerchiefs that are suspended on the diagonal on monofilament. Several are attached to a pivoting coil that raises or lowers them smoothly, hypnotically, and slow enough to startle when caught in the corner of the eye. These delightfully silly and beautiful squares of cloth that are involved with such human activities such as crying and sneezing are a mordant for altering meaning. It is the close intimate association of textiles to our physical life that is being explored in much of the work in this show. On the floor above are photographs of Andrea Van der Kooji’s knitted apparel.

Your typical full head covering/mask with eye, nose and mouth opening is doubled and altered with openings for the mouth alone. When worn, these double hoods inflict a forced intimacy appropriate for a kiss. Is it whimsical fetish gear or a comment the assumption of interpersonal relationships as a trap? There is a single glove for two hands, a hand cuff another piece of fetish. These objects: worn and photographed, forces another separation of viewer from object and they begin to operate in ways in which fetish “pornography” can. They give the observer/ viewer a chance to think about textiles beyond surface and assumed limited function within a fine/ traditional or contemporary/ conceptual art context.





people at play in one of Andréa Vander Kooji's knitted double hoods, in front of Louise Lemuixe Berbue's "Dream"[4]

The curators working in a short time frame have set a thesis and provide the work that supports it. All the pieces take you beyond where exhibitions of textile and fibre of work usually end: surface design, construction, materiality (hand) and quite readily move into philosophical and theoretical discourses usually stemming from both litterateur and more traditional fine art forms associated with "advanced thought". This exhibition was simply the best group show I have seen in Toronto and was as provocative and fun as the Chroma Living exhibitions in the early 1980s.

[i] Press release from Gladstone

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