

Textile Arts of Canada: exhibition review: by Joe Lewis

Unpacking the Space In Between; Textile Arts of Canada, by Joe Lewis Textile Arts of Canada April 15 – May 22, 2009, Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles 5800 St Denise, Montreal

New from Telos Art Publishing Art Textiles of the World: Canada ISBN: 9781902015156 180 pages, over 200 colour photos essays by Alan Elder, Sandra Alföldy, JR Carpenter, Lisa Vinebaum, foreword by the Editor

This exhibition, which was mounted to coincide with the launch of Telos Art Publishers latest number in their series # 19, Art Textiles of the World: Canada, presents the work of 22 artists from Canada and abroad working under the “general category” of textiles. It is this “General Category” that begins to become unpacked when seeing the show, and it is the space in between that is seen. As I was finishing this review, I realized that my conclusion was actually my starting point. Is there a criteria for looking at textiles that is different then one for looking at art? This question brings to mind “Why Bother? Handmade Textiles in the 21st Century”-- the exhibition curated by Sarah Quinton for the Textile Museum of Canada in 2002 and the essay she wrote to accompany it In this, she states “The work of the artists in this exhibition personalizes traditional time-tested hand skills and can be seen - without conflict - as both romantic (personalized and unique, while expressing practices associated with pre-industrial times) and rigorous (precise, restrained and disciplined).”[i] It also brought to mind a recent article written by Ingrid Bachmann in which she writes “But I would argue that fibres are a living practice and as such, dynamic, adaptable and constantly in flux, Fibre has many histories, and posed as a question, can allow for many responses. [ii] Dorothy Caldwell, two Lakes, 2007 resist and discharge cotton, appliqué and stitching. Photo by Joe Lewis

The work in this exhibition shows a variety of wall work being produced by some of the top artists in the field in Canada, and it is a group in which we can take national pride. Each artist has a strong individual and well established style/ approach within a range of end products that are not necessarily consistent in style or method, but that are succinctly theirs. The work presented is either a definitive example of the artist’s corpus of work or experimental. These include Dorothy Caldwell’s resist and discharge cotton, appliqué and stitching with embellishments, and Ruth Scheuing’s prints of sections of Google earth satellite images outlined by GPS tracking lines. Joanna Staniszkis’s “installation” is a slightly obtuse yet rather whimsical jumble of heddles with silk cocoons glued on to them which was, in turn, installed so well by Etienne Proulx after being told by Staniszkis to hang them anyway he wanted. This piece is easy to understand whether you know of her current weaving work, “The Silk Project,” or not. Ruth Scheuing, GPS Tracks October 07, Digital Print on cradle frame, 22 x 22 x 1.5" 2008 [iii] Joanna Staniszkis, It Rains Cocoons 2007, Size 54 inches by 54 inches by 6 inches, Materials silk cocoons, stainless steel loom heddles plastic ties

The work presented by Lesley Richmond, and Susan Warner Keene demonstrates the highly developed skill both bring to their material. With careers stretching over 4 decades and a concentrated focus, each has achieved a level of excellence that is represented with these pieces. Both have developed a way of creating a foreground free of background in which the “images” float in the air and are completely integral to their selves. Richmond’s is made on cotton/silk textile that has been painted with heat reactive base to build metal patinas through which the lace like piercing is done with a printed burnout technique. The image is a densely detailed, richly coloured, forest scene that has the light touch of delicate watercolours. The calligraphy of Warner –Keene’s paper piece is created by pouring, or extruding the pulp made of abaca fibre, thread and pigment, building thin layers of flowing text that is readable and beautifully formed. The mix of fibres creates ethereal almost lighter than air appearance that are transparent or opaque (depending on the amount of pigment in the mix) created a luminescent work. The craft manifest in these two distinct individual styles are exclusively their own. Lesley Richmond, Tree Scape- Spanish Banks, January 2009, Cotton / Silk fabric, heat reactive base, metal patinas, Technique: printing, devoré, painting and piecing, 60” X 32” Susan Warner Keene: Painted Book, 2007, handmade paper abaca fibre, thread and pigment. Dimensions: 73.7 x 81.3 x 2.5 cm / 29 x 32 x 1 in. Photo credit: Peter M. Newman Yvonne Wakabayashi, sea Anemone V, 2007, shibori sculpted silk. photo: Joe Lewis

Yvonne Wakabayashi works in silk from a small family mill in the Gunma prefecture, Japan, in the Arashi shibori technique. Wakabayashi has developed her own style from this traditional technique. After folding, wrapping and stitching the silk, it has been inflated into sculptural forms rather than just fluffed/fanned out to expand on its own. She created a peaceful looking ‘creature’ made of silk using a mixture of hand manipulated, organic form. detail of Sandra Brownlee" Improvisational Weaving", Summer 2008, mercerized cotton thread Photo: Joe Lewis

There are four examples of weaving in this exhibition to which I wish to draw particular attention. Three of these artists work in traditional ways with a "modernist" aesthetic, Two of the traditionalists, Marcel Marois and Joanna Soroka, work in a modified Gobelin (high warp, discontinuous weft) tapestry; however, the two produce distinctly different results. Both working with abstract images of nature Marois's approach is like staining subtle washy colour with a very fluid spread, while Soroka's bold patches of colour with isolated attached fragments are somehow reminiscent of autumn leaves floating on a pond. Both of these artists reflect the influence of other Québec artists Paul Lacroix and Mariette Rousseau-Vermette who responded to Le Corbusier description of tapestries as "the murals of our time" and started working from their own "cartoons" rather than those of "painters" (i.e. real artists) and created their own pictorial space. The fourth artist highlighted here is Sandra Brownlee who "improvises" in near miniature form using mercerized cotton thread tightly woven with mechanical precision. Marcel Marois, *Scène N°2*, 2001-2002, high warp Tapestry, wool, 93.5 x 94.5 cm (36 ¾ x 37 ½ in.), private collection. Courtesy Galerie Roger Bellemare, photo credit: Yvan Binet Joanne Soroka *Golden Sections*, tapestry 2007, wool, cotton, linen yarns and synthetic and metallic threads, 155 x155 cm

Louise Lemieux Bérubé, working with a jacquard loom in a photorealist style, is in the forefront of the growing digital craft and art education and practice. The "re-discovery" of the jacquard looms capabilities to produce extremely detailed imagery by designer/ artist/ weavers has given rise to exploration and controversy. Tapestry work in the mid 20th century tried to transcend the burden of its own history as being a way of replicating or transferring painted imagery by way of a cartoon into textile rather than an original site of creation. This battleground for jacquard is still fresh. The question "Why weave a photograph?" The authenticity of jacquard woven "art" is an issue because the making of weave structures and card catalogues of weave structures is now a digital process, and the ability to produce multiples of the same pieces faster than working from a cartoon by hand. Looking at Bérubé piece, you see a warp and weft of mixed fibers and wire, a set of weave structures causing an image to appear. You see alchemy. You see what Bérubé intends you to see. I have mentioned about half of the 20 artists in this exhibition. All are known, some more than the others. All are well respected, and they are working at the top of their form. Others in the exhibition include: Jennifer Angus, Ingrid Bachmann, Lyn Carter, Kai Chan, Barb Hunt, Barbara Layne, Mindy Yan Miller, Barbara Todd, and Laura Vickerson. This group in its entirety have as artists and educators influenced the direction of fibre and textile nationally while gaining an international audience. This exhibition launches the newest of Telos Art Publishers' books "Art Textiles of the World: Canada" and it is an appropriate celebration of these artists.

Louise Lemieux Bérubé, *L'envoie*, 2009, Tencel, linen, wool, stainless steel and copper wire. Photo by Joe Lewis

[i] Why Bother? Handmade Textiles in the 21st Century" Quinton, Sarah, 2002, TMC website <http://www.textilemuseum.ca/apps/index.cfm?page=exhibition.detail&exId=190>

[ii] "Fibres in contemporary art", Bachmann, Ingrid. *DIAGONAL 01 le statut de la fibre en art actuel* ISBN 978-2-9810570-0-6 Depot legal- Bibliotheque et Archives nationaux du Quebec, 2008

[iii] Ruth Scheuing Artist statement

GPS tracks for October 07 + GPS tracks for May 08, each document one month of my activities and are made with a handheld GPS unit (Global Positioning System). When I started looking at satellite images and GPS technology, it furthered my interest in using technologies in ways that they were not really designed for. I also hope to follow Ada Lovelace's lead in blurring some lines between art and science. The tracks or drawings are my daily trips, made by walking, running, or traveling by bicycle, car or kayak and range from ordinary commutes and shopping trips to pleasurable visits and walks on the beach. All these activities, that may have distracted me from my work, are now a part of my art. The drawings appear to be just abstract shapes, but they hold real, factual information, codes and memories. I am now more aware of patterns I create, and my body, rather than being object or subject of my work, becomes its agent.

This work is related to "To walk the Line", which is my part in Digital Threads <www.digitalthreads.ca>, (an interactive web project curated by Sarah Quinton from the Canadian Museum of Textiles). The main ideas were part of my research presentation 'Walking a Line: GPS and Satellite Technologies as Narrative' at the TSA (Textile Society in America) symposium in Toronto in 2006 and published as part of the transcripts. photos have been provided by the MCCT are copyrighted and are used with permission. Unless otherwise noted.

Art Textiles of the World: Canada ISBN: 9781902015156 180 pages, over 200 colour photos essays by Alan Elder, Sandra Alföldy, JR Carpenter, Lisa Vinebaum, foreword by the Editor In less than 250 words I can tell you this book is a great addition to any one's [with an interest in Canadian Art, textile arts and arts in general] book collection. While being in no way comprehensive it is a great group of talented and influential artists. The essays provide a frame work in which to

see how these artist and these types of work fit into the world of museums, galleries and educational institutions. As a representative cross section of style and methods of production it opens the door to world so many can meet and see what is good in Canadian Textile art. Art Textiles of the World: Canada is available on line at Telos Art Publishers website: <http://www.telos.net/index.php> or in a book store or Museum shop near you. Actually it isn't but I like writing that. the TMC has some at the shop, but if you don't live in Toronto your best bet is to order one on-line.