

## Focus Fiber: Redefining Fiber Art by Erica Holthausen

Since 1970 the Textile Arts Alliance of the Cleveland Museum of Art has organized *Fiber: Focus*, a triennial, juried exhibition of fiber arts. The current exhibit, on display at the Canton Museum of Art through March 4, 2012, is both beautiful and thought-provoking. It raises questions about the nature of contemporary fiber art, how boundaries between different artistic media can be stretched and the motivations for artists to use specific techniques.

M.E. WARE *Power Suit for Modern Mothers*, Felted laundry lint, wool, steel, plaster, foam, cast paper from recycled materials, 5.5 x 2 x 2



Dorothy Caldwell, an internationally recognized fiber artist, juried the show. One hundred eleven artists from across an eight-state region submitted 278 pieces for her consideration. After an extensive review process, she selected 53 pieces from 39 artists to represent the ever-changing state of contemporary fiber art.

"The submissions varied from installation and performance works to innovative re-visioning of traditional textiles," says

Dorothy. "In the process of reviewing the submissions some pieces had an immediate impact while other works revealed their meaning more slowly through repeated viewings."

The artists whose work was selected for the exhibition have each developed a personal visual vocabulary through textiles. Quilting, appliqué, weaving, beadwork, and embroidery are a few of the techniques on display. However, not all of these techniques are used in ways that are familiar. Several artists incorporated photographs, maps, found objects, and other materials into their work. Though techniques and materials vary widely, the artists' personal stories and philosophies are woven throughout the exhibition. Both individually and collectively, these pieces tell a remarkable story.

Adam Kessler *Solar System Fan*, Black walnut, silver; embroidery, 12 x 17 x 1



ABOVE Adam Kessler *Human Fan*, Cherry wood, brass; embroidery, 12 x 17 x 1 BELOW Detail, *Human Fan*



One of the most provocative pieces is M. E. Ware's sculpture, *Power Suit for Modern Mothers*. Felted laundry lint, collected over a period of three years, covers a wool suit. The suit is displayed on a form of plaster and cast paper made of grocery shopping and to-do lists. The piece juxtaposes items often associated with traditional woman's work—laundry lint and to-do lists—with a fashionable wool suit, a symbol of feminine power in the workplace. The piece not only raises questions about fiber art, but starts a discourse about the role of women in today's world.

At first blush, Adam Kessler's *Human Fan* and *Solar System Fan* do not appear to fit in an exhibition of fiber arts. The beautiful fans are made of black walnut and cherry held together by a simple brass fastener, the fans are embroidered with intricate designs.

Another surprising piece is *Tea Cozy*, a quilted wall hanging by Martha Young. Mylar envelopes, used to store tea bags, are combined with cotton fabrics and beads. The printed and silver mylar pieces are cut and folded to reflect the light. It is also a commentary on our consumer ethos.

Emily Felderman uses found objects as a base for work that incorporates several colors of thread hand stitched into beautiful patterns and designs. Vintage scissors, a found piece of metal, and an old gear are the foundation pieces of *Bonsai*, *Joined* and *Sunrise*. The natural patinas of the metal frame and the colors of the thread are inspired by nature. The work takes shape over time, as sketches, thread colors, and found objects come together to create an entirely new object.

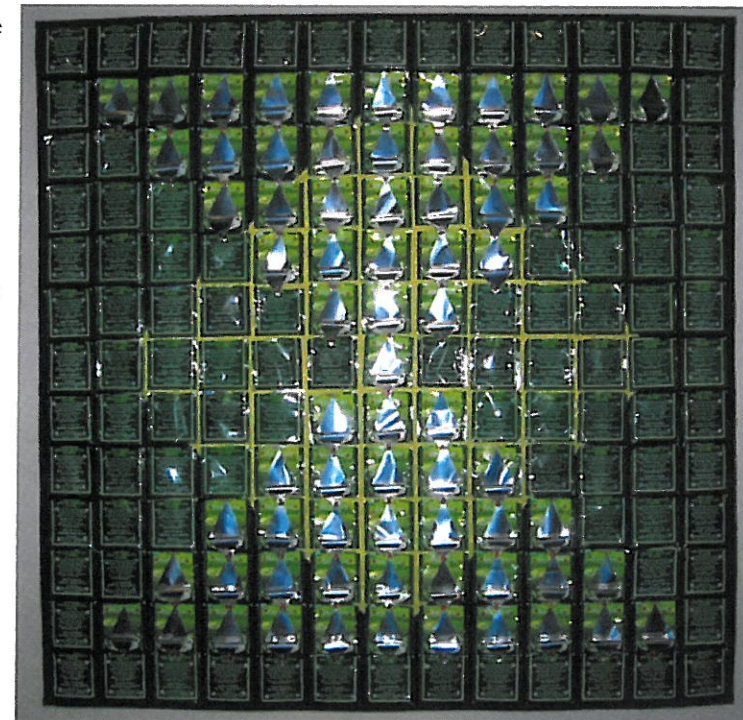
While each piece raises questions and provokes conversation, June Lee helps us explore the very essence of self. *Who Are We* is a series of hand-sewn uniforms made of noebing, a translucent Korean fabric. The twenty uniforms are suspended in four rows. Below each uniform, a set of colorful gloves are laid out in a variety of gestures. As a student in Korea, the artist and her classmates would sit at their desks for ten hours a day, an unvarying sea of students. But hidden below the desks, the students' hands could move freely and express their individuality. While each uniform varies slightly, the students' individuality is best expressed through their hands.

This year's *Focus: Fiber* exhibition showcases the diversity of the fiber arts and challenges us to not only appreciate the traditional methods, materials, and techniques, but to explore new ways of using this art form to express our ideas and opinions. "No theme or direction was given to the artists and likewise, I was not given a mandate," says Dorothy. "I was struck by works that offer a sense of calm through their well-crafted simplicity as well as those that stop you in your tracks by their audacious use of eccentric fabrics and casual construction—the unpredictable carrier of a message."



RIGHT Martha Young *Tea Cozy*, Cotton, Mylar envelopes, polyester batting, beads; quilted, 39 x 39.5

ABOVE Ann L. Rebele *Forgotten But Not Gone: Ruth*, Artist's pen and ink drawing on silk organza layered over original photograph digitally manipulated, sectioned and printed, machine pieced and free hand machine quilted, 46 x 36



~Erica Holthausen is a freelance writer who has contributed to various publications, including Coastal Home Magazine. She is the Principal at Joppa Communications.



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