

## Mansion at Strathmore galleries exhibit repurposed wonders

*Five artists transform media to invent new art forms*

Claudia Rousseau

On View “Inform/Re-Form,” the current exhibit in the Mansion at Strathmore, was created to open a door for five artists to show their inventive and, in most cases, transformative uses of their media. It is notable that all five artists in this show are women. Two are fiber artists; all have an unusual approach to the traditional uses of their chosen media or art form.

Set into the galleries of the Mansion, the exhibit easily divides into two parts. Wall-hung works by Virginia Spiegel, Catherine Kleeman and Laurie Brown are downstairs, while the upstairs bedrooms of this old house are occupied by the work of Jacqui Crocetta and Veronica Szalus. This latter includes works that demonstrate the artists’ parallel thinking and a large collaborative installation. As Lesser herself commented, it is remarkable how well contemporary and conceptual works fit into the neo-classical architecture of the Mansion; itself a transformative process.

Works on paper usually mean something drawn, painted or printed on flat sheets. Yet here paper takes an active role, becoming a sculptural element. The work of Laurie Brown is clearly based on the traditional art of quilling, a craft with origins in the 16th century, primarily practiced by women.

Quilling involves the rolling of spools of paper (or folding and crimping) for decorating boxes, purses, etc. Its name derives from the quill that was used to roll the paper strips. The practice is currently enjoying something of a revival, and craft stores sell the strips pre-cut and pre-colored. Brown makes her own strips, cutting them in different widths and lengths from large sheets of fine white paper, hand dyeing them and securing them with golden threads rather than glue. She then uses the resulting coils as elements for independent compositions, colored reliefs that have an extraordinary sense of depth and variety. From a distance a work like “Suspended Submersion” looks like buttons arranged in an ombre pattern. Up close, the variety of the widths of the colored coils creates an undulating surface that is visually fascinating. Brown combines tiny golden beads in a few of these pieces, adding a quality of luxury to them.

Paper also plays a big role in Crocetta and Szalus’ installation. “Out of Context, Close to Home” is an extended commentary on the false sense of security that we may feel from shredding paper to destroy data. A professional data destruction service shredded what looks like hundreds of pounds of newspaper, junk and personal mail to create a new medium. The shredded paper was used to stuff wire mesh “pillows” and a comforter stretched over a bed frame that mimics the real bedding that must have once existed in this space. Headlines announcing the imminent end of the world, or even worse, that “Apple Collects Address Books on Mobile Devices without Telling Users” are plastered over the bed. On a wall-framed “quilt” opposite is a curling banner reading “Am I Safe?” Somewhat heavy-handed in message, the installation is the centerpiece of this exhibit because of its unusual use of materials as much as its narrative.

The two artists actually are more interested, it appears, in natural forms and mythic shapes. In Gallery I on the second floor Szalus employs hex netting, wire, paint and dried grass to create a floor installation that recalls stumps and reeds in a pond, like somewhere in a fairy tale that the heroine should avoid. Although the name comes from the six-sided holes in the netting, the word “hex” conjures witches — women who practiced the craft. As if in response, Crocetta’s standing sculpture of dried grapevine and wire is a dress form with no figure, as if what remained after a transformation, Cinderella-like, of twigs into silk, or a woman magically changed into wood. The piece is actually part of a series of works, “Protect, Nurture, Release,” both in sculpture and painting, that explores the changing aspects of the mother/child relationship; a theme also expressed in the egg and pod forms Crocetta uses in other works.

The pod form is a favorite of the artist. An attractive example is the smallish black pod made of paper and wire that holds word and map-covered balls inside it. Titled “Gestation (Books)” the piece compares the idea of physical gestation in nature to a

writer's thoughts "gestating" before being born as a book. Similarly, Szalus' "CHeXOK: Vertical," is an installation of hanging balls made of stiffened white cheesecloth. With their opened sides, the balls evoke the remains of a hatching of huge birds or dinosaurs. The birth metaphor in both works is unmistakably feminine, and seems to have a kind of mythic dimension that is absent in the large collaborative installation.

The theme of unusual approaches to traditional forms also is evident in the work of Spiegel and Kleeman. Like Brown's adaptation of quilting, both fiber artists abjure the use of pre-existing colored cloth, and begin with simple white fabrics. Kleeman echoes the quilt tradition of three layers stitched together, but her works are not made with little squares of cloths, folded and stitched as in a real quilt. Instead, the artist hand-dyes and paints the fabric, adding screen printing, stenciling and overstitched calligraphic motifs that give the pieces an Islamic feel. Spiegel's works also have a (perhaps accidental) non-Western look. Her "Boundary Waters" series, made of innumerable strips of hand-colored cloth stitched vertically to give the impression of reeds reminded me strongly of African textiles. "Once," made of silk glowing softly with metallic paint evoked Indian or Middle Eastern origins. The title, which may only refer to a unique use of this technique, nevertheless evokes the phrase that introduces fairy-tales: "once upon a time..."

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*A reproduction of the online article can be found on the next two pages.*

COMMENTS (0)

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*Photo from Jacqui Crocetta's dress from "Protect, Nurture, Release." Crocetta's standing sculpture evokes the idea of birth and mythical transformations. The opened dress form is life sized, made of dried grapevine and wire.*

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