

# Fluent in Thread: SDA Solo Exhibitions at Belger Arts Center

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With four solo exhibitions in-house, the Belger Arts Center continues its protagonist role as the textile arts' mecca during the Surface Design Association Conference. The work of Dorothy Caldwell, Kyoung Ae Cho, Annet Couwenberg and Kate Kretz display a wide range of processes and ideas that are sure to inspire and fascinate viewers who approach the exhibits on various levels of contemporary fiber arts fluency.

Internationally exhibiting artist and lecturer Dorothy Caldwell presents the latest developments of her textile work in the partitioned show *Marking the Everyday*. Begun in 2003, during a studio residency at the Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto, Canada, this exhibition was inspired by Caldwell's exploration into historical restorative stitching and mending techniques. Separated into two collections — the artist's recent fine art quilts and a supportive display of domestic traditions, antiquarian textiles and artistic influences — *Marking the Everyday* allows viewers to gain insight and visually reference the intensive processes and appearances of historical domestic textiles within Caldwell's representational quilts.

Strongly influenced by the surrounding landscape at her eastern Ontario home (where she has lived since the early 1970s), Caldwell has created large-scale quilts for this exhibition that extend over gallery walls suggestive of landscapes and everyday objects. In almost thematically colored blue, black-and-white swatches, the pieces in this collection use simplified shapes — such as ovals, rectangles, and cones — to signify the geological formations of hills, ponds, and islands. The organically trimmed pieces are plotted into grid-like patterns that stretch across her quilts' surface in ways that resemble patched cloths. Across these representational shapes, Caldwell creates a series of marks that are created using wax-resist and discharge techniques, adding layers of patterned texture and imagery to the quilts. Real and painted stitches are worked into these layers, often covering the surfaces in hypnotic rhythms that seem to reference field rows of cultivated land. Titles such as *A Lake/A Bowl* and *An Island/A Pond* provide these works with an ambiguous sense of representational *jouissance*.

Partitioned from these quilts is a smaller exhibit of objects taken from Caldwell's studio and private collection. This



Kate Kretz, *Threat of Heavy Weather*, human hair stitched on pillow.



Kyoung Ae Cho, *Aura II* (detail), 2002, corn leaves, silk organza, thread, 54" x 25".

display includes a historic darning sample and woman's sewing handbook, a child's sampler book and mended white muslin dress and sketchbooks, and drawings and patterns that were part of the artist's research at the Textile Museum of Canada. Such highlighting of the care and energy that was once expended to conserve simple cloths seems strongly disconnected from modern predispositions. This second display provides exciting insights into the artist's personal interests and the influences behind her quilts. Like the years of cultivation that identify contemporary field-scapes, Caldwell's collection of mending techniques and cloths introduce the possibility of the textile or garment to be a time capsule of personal details and memories.

Regarding collaborations with nature, Kyoung Ae Cho's mixed media artworks pronounce an intimate approach toward our environment. Cho's exploration, represented through material-based series, concentrates on single elements such as pine needles, sage bushes or small bits of wood. Her works succeed in reaching a difficult balance between respectfully portraying organic materials and restructuring these materials to develop visual enhancements.

Cho was born in 1963 in South Korea, where she studied textile arts at the Duksung Woman's University, Seoul, South Korea, before relocating to the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Her work has been exhibited internationally including exhibits in the United States at the Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth, Minnesota, the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Colorado, University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, Kentucky and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Alongside her active exhibition schedule, Cho also participates in academia as a lecturer, visiting artist and instructor — with students from the Kansas City Art Institute, Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School and

Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina. She is currently an associate professor at the Peck School of the Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

For her exhibition *Tranquil Moment* Cho has formed a series of work revealing of the formal and spiritual possibilities of corn leaves. Each piece on view contains long narrow leaves that are encased within two delicate sheets of white silk organza. Suspended within this enveloping, the leaves appear to float above the wall's surface as though in a thin cocoon.

Peacefully, the preserved corn leaves in the Cho's *Aura* series include four wall hangings. Encircled by thousands of red or white hand-stitched lines, these leaves appear to release lyrical fields of energy. In one piece, this spiritual force appears to radiate from a single leaf, but as a second leaf is added to the composition a relationship is suggested between each element and its surroundings.

In the 22-foot-long horizontal display *Continuation*, Cho presents a corn leaf that has been spliced into short segments and lengthened with repeated middle particles. With bars of vertical red stitches, Cho appears to be methodically compressing the leaf. (The choice of material used to present this dissection and artificial splicing seems to introduce a meditation of, specifically, the genetic alterations that have been performed to corn since its early days of cultivation and, generally, the interactions that man continues to have through his environment.) The scale and ambiguity presented in *Continuation* empowers this particular work to actively initiate a dialogue with Cho's viewers regarding our present environmental concerns and politics.

In a series of work that relates directly to the human form, Annet Couwenberg presents three groups of work for her exhibition *On Pins and Needles*. Heavily provoked by the



Dorothy Caldwell, *Between a Hill and a Lake*, wax, oversized stitching, cloth.



Annet Couwenberg, *Act Normal and That's Already Crazy Enough* (detail), starched fabric, reed, computer embroidery, copper wire, 31" diameter. Photo courtesy Dan Meyers.

culture surrounding her Dutch background, her work is rooted in the civic responsibility and Calvinistic work ethic that permeates her heritage. Balancing this strict work ethic with exhaustive introspection, Couwenberg uses clothing as an entrance into the emotional realities within the wearer. She approaches her constructed garments architecturally, as both a form of protection and concealment, and metaphorically, as an opportunity to describe the conflict between social rhetoric and private desires.

Couwenberg's frequent use of the ruff collar (a popular high ruffled collar worn in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in Western Europe) in her work, alongside needle-lace, introduces contemporary viewers to antiquated symbols of nobility and wealth that today seems foreign and archaic. *Discarded Ruffle*, her latest installation, takes advantage of the unique architecture of the Belger Arts Center. Through the wielding of thousands of large paper lace dollies, this artist creates an engulfing oversized version of the ruff collar that is a feasible extension of the piece Couwenberg recently created for New York's Museum of Arts & Design exhibition *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*. With references to the history of the lace commodity, *Discarded Ruffle Collar* confronts the appropriation of this once priceless object into a disposable commodity. In her artist statement, Couwenberg describes the lace paper dolly as an "imitation of culture, cheaply bought and easily discarded. As a commoditized token of class," she continues, "it glorifies elegance, however false."

This idea of falseness is further explored in the new series of work *Are We Perfect Yet?*, which includes dozens of digitized computer embroideries/portraits. In reaction to a personal fear of eugenics, Couwenberg references the cruel Nazi experiments that were attempts toward perfection and beauty through genetic and surgical intervention. The digital white-on-white images portray

a dehumanized image that strives towards superiority. A continuation of this installation is represented through three large-format digital prints depicting the circled embroidery of the question *Are We Perfect Yet?* Through her reference to the historical use of embroidery to identify significant bloodlines, Couwenberg establishes embroidery as a metaphor for genetics.

Annet Couwenberg's textile works have been exhibited internationally and throughout the United States at the Villa Julie Gallery, Stevenson, Maryland, Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, Delaware, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri. She is currently the chair of fiber arts at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland.

Hand-embroidered images created from human hair invite viewers to a surreal state in Kate Kretz's exhibition *Threadbare*. Trained initially as a painter, Kretz turned to textiles about seven years ago in order to communicate three-dimensionally. After teaching herself to sew by instruction manuals and experimentation, Kretz created a series of *psychological clothing* as a way to use garments to illustrate, rather than conceal, inner states of mind. Qualities of this subconsciously inspired clothing are perceptible in the series of embroidered pillowcases that Kretz presents in *Threadbare*. Illustrated with the psychologically intimacy and the emotional vulnerability explored by artists such as Frida Kahlo and Nan Goldin, this series of work seems to dwell on characteristics of the female condition.

In *Threat of Heavy Weather*, an open mouth is craftily stitched into the pillow's surface with the artist's own hair. Pressed from within the pillow's surface the mouth's lips are parted, revealing a frightful tornado spinning inside. Whether this image portrays a scene from the artist's memory or a nightmare, the inner tornado image

presents a scene that the artist often revisits within her artistic career. Cate McQuaid of the *Boston Globe* wrote that "the mouth, to this artist, is a metaphor for taking in life, and then digesting and integrating it or spitting it back out." If the scene that is presented here represents the inhaled life, viewers are invited to wonder what secrets they might witness if they were to rest their own ear atop the Kretz's exhaling mouths.

Perhaps inspired by a stray hair left behind on Kretz's pillow, the piece *Young Lover* depicts the long wavy trusses and ear of the artist's ex-boyfriend. Created by crosshatching and threading strands of the boyfriend's hair, Kretz presents her viewers with a chilling representation of this partner. As though made in an attempt to arrest the lover's presence on her bedside, this invocation seems to regenerate the lover's ear with the purpose to engage in intimate unspoken discussions.

Kretz is a graduate from the fine arts departments of the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, and the Binghamton University in New York. Her work has been exhibited at The Fiber Art Foundation in Amherst, Massachusetts, The Frost Art Museum, Miami, Florida, and the Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

Gallery goers during the 2005 SDA Conference are sure to remember the large-scale installations of Chunghie Lee, the reconstructed ancient Japanese garments by Wendy Lugg, the cerebral works of mixed media by Anne Lindberg, and Jason Pollen's *Chysalis*, a magnificent series of collages on industrial rubber. In this new exhibition, the Belger Art Center presents artists who express a rich understanding of the traditions and practices of textile arts and who infuse each work with originality, thoughtfulness and aesthetic maturity. This stands as proof of the liveliness of textile arts in the contemporary fine arts community. •