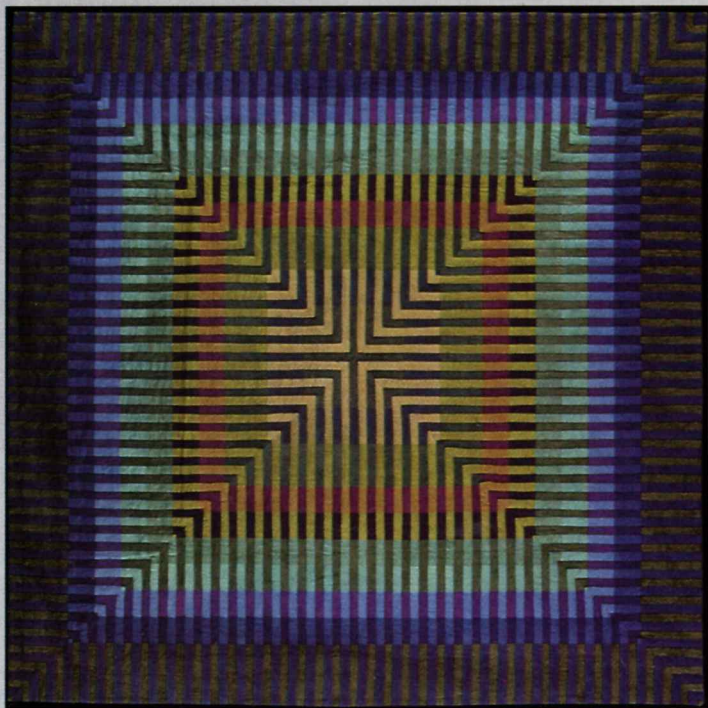




Modus Operandi

A Survey of Contemporary Fiber



By ROBIN RICE

Two things were notably absent from this large exhibition of recent fiber art at Snyderman/Works Galleries, Philadelphia, October 2 - 31: functional work and a catalogue. Curator Bruce Hoffman, director of both galleries, spent more than two years assembling the sumptuous group of some 160 works by 45 artists. The exclusion of functional pieces suggests that Hoffman believes function is not central to today's fiber art, but we'd like to know more. A few remarks outlining his views surely would have been warranted by the ambitious scale of the exhibition. Happily, the information gap was partly bridged by artist statements on wall labels. (A video of the installation will be available in April.)

The title "Modus Operandi" implies that method was Hoffman's chief interest. The axiom that methods and materials are inextricably, well, interwoven, is intriguingly embodied in Marilyn Pappas's *Nereid*, 1997-98, a large, wall-mounted depiction of antique statuary in embroidery and trapunto on natural linen. The "wet drapery" carving of the marble original is softened and humanized in Pappas's grisaille representation in cloth. Across the room, John Garrett's *Blue Swell*, 1998, is about the same size — 10 by 5 feet — but worlds apart in fabrication and feeling — a jazzy field of multicolored aluminum circlets interlinked into a coarse, scintillating chain mail blanket.

Ed Bing Lee's pictorial *Picnic: Hot Dog II*, 1997, is Pop pastiche — a ballpark special complete with mustard juxtaposed with a fragment lifted from Seurat's *Grande Jatte*. Lee's pointillist irony is reinforced by the suggestion of Benda dots in his knotted linen technique. In contrast to this machine-like effect, Mary Bero's tiny embroidered self-portrait, with parti-colored eyes and black-and-white stripes on one side of the face, is almost crudely expressive.

The many basket-related forms, none of which seemed intended for practical purposes, included Kate Anderson's cup and saucer of black waxed linen studded with black and red beads, C. A. Michel's downy camel-hair bowls with swirling feather interiors and Mary Merkel-Hess's dense hemispheres bristling with stalks of twisted paper. Lissa Hunter's lidded baskets in the form of water-smoothed pebbles were the most dazzling trompe l'oeil works in the show.

Norma Minkowitz's iconic *Bye Bye Baby Boo Boo #7*, 1996, is an unsettling three-dimensional winged baby doll in disembodied molded netting. A more archaic quality infuses the subject and construction of John McQueen's panel *Tug of War*, 1998, in which four nude figures are suggested by an organic network of twigs tied with waxed string.

Quilts by Nancy Herman (severely geometric) and Nancy Crow (playfully symmetrical) were in a traditional vein. In Kyoung Ae Cho's more daring *Quilt ?!-V*, 1997, the grain in a series of sewn-on wood tiles echoes the patterning of black moiré silk. She also showed the understated *Statuette I*, 1993, a tapered column bristling with fragile pine needles. Kate Hunt's powerful *Joe Torrington*, 1998, similarly emphasizes an ephemeral material while denying its fragility: massed strips of newspaper droop from thick columns of baling twine that link metal rods. More dynamic in form, but equally imposing, Barbara Cooper's woven-wood *Sonus*, 1995, seems to be based on the construction methods of animals or birds.

Taken as a whole, this survey was exciting, eclectic and, apart from the lack of functional work, reasonably comprehensive, demonstrating enthusiasm for the many materials and forms that the contemporary fiber field embraces. ■

Robin Rice, a writer and curator, teaches at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia.

