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Arts: Features

Editor's Pick

Common threads

Fiber-based art shows weave across the Bay area.

By Megan Voeller

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If you're an art lover in Tampa Bay, by now you've surely noticed a common thread linking many of the area's recently opened exhibitions. At nearly every visual arts venue in town, a particular genre of artwork has set in: at Florida Craftsmen Gallery, intricate baskets mingle with tapestries by Sarasota weavers; at the Dunedin Fine Art Center, colorful quilts, embroidery and dyed fabrics are all on view; at the Tampa Museum of Art, small-scale artworks made by weaving, felting, stitching and other means make for delightful discoveries.

The catchall term "fiber art" could be used to describe the work in these exhibits, though some people aren't thrilled with the label. (Laura Militzer Bryant, a St. Petersburg artist who creates vibrantly colorful weavings influenced by abstract painters Mark Rothko and Josef Albers, says the term "sounds like breakfast cereal.") Long relegated to the arena of craft -- or, worse yet, *women's work* -- fiber art may be unjustly underappreciated, especially because more contemporary artists than ever (both women and men) are choosing to embroider, knit, crochet, stitch, dye and weave their way into gallery shows and art history books, apparently without regard to the thought that fiber might be something traditionally associated with grandma.

In late June, a bevy of fiber-loving artists will descend on the Tampa Convention Center for Convergence, the biennial conference of the Handweavers Guild of America, Inc. While the conference's seminars and hands-on workshops serve as the main draw for practitioners and appreciators of the fiber arts (to register, visit weavespindye.org), a broad network of related exhibits geared to both dyed-in-the-wool fans and the uninitiated is already in place from Ybor City to Dunedin and St. Petersburg to West Tampa. Even if you aren't already a fan of fiber art in its many forms, you'll find much to enjoy at local institutions this summer.

Unlike any other gallery or museum in the area, Ybor's Brad Cooper Gallery takes a foray into the fiber arts of the ancient world with an exhibit of Coptic textiles curated by Egyptologist Dr. Robert Bianchi. The roughly 20 woven fragments on display, which date to 400-800 A.D., offer a deep historical context for the mostly contemporary weavings on view in other local exhibitions. To be sure, the ancient Egyptians were proficient weavers of plain flax long before the cotton and wool weavings of the Coptic period were produced, but these cryptic relics -- characterized by intricate patterns, color and human and animal figures -- mark an evolutionary jump in the complexity of the craft.

The Copts, early Christians native to Egypt, were a multicultural group, steeped in classical Greek culture -- not only its mythology but the Greek practice of dyeing, spinning and weaving with wool and cotton fiber -- as well as emerging Christian iconography. Imagery in the mysterious textiles suggests Dionysian processions of nudes, menageries of fantastical beasts and combinations of animals and objects with possible biblical undertones (the lion and the lamb, a cup that could be a communion chalice). The fabrics were likely used to adorn clothing, wrap corpses and decorate dwellings as table coverings, according to Bianchi, a Tarpon Springs resident who serves as an advisor to museums and collectors around the world. (When I spoke with him by phone last week, he had recently returned home from Egypt, where he filmed portions of an upcoming National Geographic Channel series on the ancient world.) Start your tour of Convergence-related exhibits here.

On the contemporary front, The Arts Center in downtown St. Pete offers *Practical to Poetic: Women's Handicraft Revisited*, an exhibit featuring three cutting-edge artists who use fiber-based techniques and materials to adventurous ends. Independent curator Sangoyemi Ogunsanya selected the artists (all of whom are women) to make a statement about present-day uses of materials and methods historically linked to the feminine, domestic arena. In her research, Ogunsanya says, she expected to find that the exhibit's artists had been influenced by feminists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who used embroidery and fabric in their work three decades ago to make statements about gender and power along with aesthetic impact.

"As it turns out, none of [the artists in the exhibition] feels very connected to the feminist art movement of the '70s," Ogunsanya says. "They're young artists and it's before their time. ... They just take it for granted that these other women forged the way for them, and they don't even have to think about it. They just pick their materials and do their work."

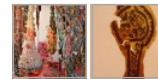
Olek, a Brooklyn-based sculptor, installation and performance artist, crochets unconventional materials -- think plastic, ribbons, balloons in addition to yarn -- together into room-filling installations. The result, says curator Ogunsanya, is a "fantasy of color and texture," piling up from the floor and hanging down from the ceiling like sparkly stalactites and stalagmites. As of my deadline last week, Olek was building her installation at The Arts Center for an opening reception on Friday. To complement the crocheted installation, the exhibit includes Jenny Hart's embroidered portraits of pop music icons (striking the perfect ambiguous balance between hipster irony and hipster earnestness) and Tamar Stone's decidedly more somber sculptural "books" constructed from



enlarge

Courtesy The Arts Center

HANGING BY A ... A look at Brooklyn-based artist Olek's installation for *Practical to Poetic* at The Arts Center.



INFO

Venetian Vessels & Coptic Textiles

Runs through July 11. Brad Cooper Gallery, 1712 E. Seventh Ave., Tampa, 813-248-6098, bradcoopergallery.com.

Practical to Poetic: Women's Handicraft Revisited

Runs through Aug. 16. The Arts Center, 719 Central Ave., St. Petersburg, 727-822-7872, theartscenter.org.

Convergence

Runs June 22-28. Tampa Convention Center, weavespindye.org.

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Ultimately, Ogunsanya hopes, the fiber aspect of the exhibit mitigates some of the trepidation people feel when encountering contemporary art.

"I think that these materials are very accessible to the public, in particular maybe to people who are not sophisticated art aficionados," she says. "Everybody knows something about sewing; they can see that there's a lot of work in it."

And what a lot of hard work -- in the form of weaving, stitching, dyeing and more -- is on display throughout Tampa Bay right now.

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