

Artists take fiber art in different directions

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03/20/2015 2:18 PM | Updated: 03/20/2015 2:18 PM

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Eve Jacobs-Carnahan's "Knotweed Not Safe" was inspired by the invasive plant knotweed. COURTESY PHOTO

It was 6 degrees outside when Eve Jacobs-Carnahan picked up the phone in her Vermont home last week, good weather to think about knitting things like sweaters and stocking hats. Those are the kinds of things Jacobs-Carnahan knitted before realizing all the possibilities of the materials in her hands.

"When I discovered there were knitters making artwork, I was just blown away," she said. "I was so inspired."

Today Jacobs-Carnahan uses the colors and textures of various fibers as inspiration for her yarn sculptures. She is one of 63 fiber arts artists from across the country whose work will be shown in an exhibit that opens Friday at the Wichita Center for the Arts.

The National Fiber Directions Exhibition features 81 works ranging from functional pieces such as pillows and tablecloths to two- and three-dimensional works that incorporate printing, stitching and all sorts of materials and techniques. The exhibit was juried by Barbara Shapiro, a San Francisco artist and teacher.

The piece by Jacobs-Carnahan that was chosen for the show, called "Knotweed Not Safe," illustrates one of her favorite themes.

"I do a lot of things that relate to plants and nature," said Jacobs-Carnahan during a recent phone interview. "The inspiration for the 'Knotweed' piece is knotweed, which is a real invasive plant. It grows like 8 feet tall and has these really big leaves. I believe it started being used as an ornamental, but it chokes out other plants and doesn't provide nutrients. It grows through asphalt and foundations. It's terrible."

She's quick to add that it's also a "beautiful plant, so I wanted to show both sides of that."

In the yarn sculpture, finished last year, she shows the weed piercing a hand trying to control it.

Jacobs-Carnahan has been making fiber art for about 20 years. In addition to knitting, she usually spins and dyes the yarn she works with. A part-time lawyer, she said her home in rural Vermont is near several sheep farms.

“I can get exactly the color and texture and shininess that I want,” she said. “Just like a painter might blend colors to get exactly the right shade of blue, I am blending fibers to get exactly the kind of yarn I want.” In “Knotweed,” for instance, she uses a couple of different shades of green to mimic the variation in nature.

Jacobs-Carnahan said knitting has experienced a resurgence in popularity recently, with celebrity knitters such as Kate Middleton and Scarlett Johansson driving an increase in knitting classes and shops.

She submits pieces to a handful of juried shows a year. Her work appeared in one exhibit in Wichita previously and was featured in the book “Astounding Knits! 101 Spectacular Knitted Creations and Daring Feats” by Lela Nargi (Voyageur Press). Her other pieces range from whimsical eyeglasses – with eyeballs attached – to yarn shadow boxes.

Jacobs-Carnahan said a piece like “Knotweed” goes through a four-stage process. First comes planning the piece, which she does with sketches and a computer program.

Then there’s preliminary knitting. “There’s a lot of trying out shapes, doing it in again in thicker and thinner yarn. I probably have made a half-dozen versions of those leaves before I got the shape I wanted.”

Finally, she knits the components and assembles them over a wire structure.

Surprisingly, Jacobs-Carnahan describes herself as only a “moderately fast” knitter.

“I know people who are faster,” she said.

A couple of Kansas art instructors also have pieces appearing in the exhibit.

Shin-Hee Chin, who teaches at Tabor College, is showing a piece called “Chinmoku-Silence,” inspired by a Japanese novel of the same name. It depicts a young woman near a window in various shades of gray achieved through dye and paint, fabric twisting, blanket stitching and hand painting. Chin said the novel is about one man’s pursuit of God, and “I wanted to duplicate this quality of questing.”

Chin, a native of South Korea, has also exhibited pieces at the Fiber Studio and Friends University.

“Mostly I use fabric medium to show the human condition, respecting humanity, by portraying human face,” she said.

David Brackett, an associate professor in the School of the Arts at the University of Kansas, has two works in the exhibit – “Look Out” and “Stonewall.”

Brackett said he took “sort of a round-about way” into art, starting as a zoology major before following the path of his parents, who are both artists. He worked in ceramics before finding his true medium in a weaving class.

“I loved the math of the loom,” he said, explaining that principles of the loom were used to design the first computers.

Both of his pieces in the show are technically quilts since they consist of several elements stitched together. Brackett said his work incorporates two related themes – chance and the patterns of nature. Part of the chance comes from dyeing fibers before weaving them together on his loom, producing blends that he couldn’t have exactly predicted.

“I always incorporate chance elements, so I’m always surprised by the results,” he said. “I also see it as a metaphor for the way people live their lives.”

In nature as in life, he added, “You don’t see a pattern until you step back and look. It requires time.”

“Stonewall” also includes a photograph Brackett took on a walk through the woods. “It was a day when (the wall) was covered in butterflies that had just hatched.”

Brackett said fiber art has been considered a fine art medium for about a century, although it’s been prized for its decorative qualities for probably as long as man has stitched together clothing. He said his own pieces get a lot of reactions.

“The reaction I get most is from scientists. Some people have said that it’s like you can see math in them,” he said.

IF YOU GO

NATIONAL FIBER DIRECTIONS EXHIBITION 2015

When: Friday-May 10, with an opening reception from 5-7 p.m. Friday; gallery’s normal hours are 1-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday.

Where: Wichita Center for the Arts, 9112 E. Central

How much: Free

Information: wcfta.com or 316-634-2787

More on the artists: evejacobs-carnahan.com, davidbrackett.net, shinheechin.com