

In every snippet there lies a tale

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Each meditative, repetitive gesture, each cut, stitch and placement is part of the experience of merging the natural and the man-made, the physical and the spiritual. (Kyong Ae Cho 2010)

This visually stunning and vibrant exhibition presents sixteen works by Carmella Karijo Rother, a Canadian artist who works with fiber and has long been engaged in visually documenting the formal relationships between colour, line, and space through the careful study and placement of meticulously cut fragments of silk.

The use of a horizontal format, common to many of these works, suggests that these are landscapes; however, if this is to be believed, it is one that only Alice would recognize – earth seen from a great height or alternatively through the lens of a microscope. Rother uses pattern to narrate her nuanced visions and in an interview about her work she explained that she has been “using repetitive elements in this and previous series, building complex images with them. And, while the design may “appear random from a distance, each one is placed with precise consideration of its relationship to the others set down before, and those to come.” She went on to state that while “many of the works in this series use horizontal layers, illustrating balance, separation, continuity, infinity” this is not always the case. For instance, in *No.7*, *No. 8* and *No.9* she created strong vertical elements (within a horizontal format) and in *No. 27*, *No. 28* and *No. 33* she introduced arcs of colour that she describes as “swooshes.”

Rother is an exceptional colourist and craftsperson – each work features a minimalist palette made up of precisely cut geometric pieces of solid coloured silk anchored by fine rows of evenly spaced machine stitches. Given this precision, the raw edges of the cut silk are unexpected and cause a slight *frisson* as one moves in to examine the layers – of fabric and meaning. As a textile historian I appreciate Rother’s control and manipulation of the medium – making full use of its intrinsic qualities. The artist recognizes that “Colour is a major feature in my art, and has a strong impact on the direction of a piece. With Dupioni silk I can manipulate the fabric's surface by controlling the angle at which the individual

elements are placed. I have used this understated feature through the years that I have been working with this material, in fact, it was a major reason I initially chose it.” While these works are made of fabric and do indeed reference the history of textiles, the artist’s inner dialogue and inspiration are to be found in the cerebral world of modern art and her methodology, a by-product of a science background. Rother considers that her art is a homage to “the interconnectedness of all life [an approach that] was instilled in my formal education in biology and environmental studies.”

When I first encountered Rother’s work in her exhibition *Out Numbered* at Wall Space Gallery in Ottawa (2010) I found myself awash with textile memories. My own history is shaped by a love of fine craftsmanship, a familial connection to traditional textile techniques, and respect for tacit knowledge. This means that certain works of art have a strong visceral appeal – a reaction I always try to decode. The first memory was obviously triggered by the depth and richness of the dyes and the small pieces of silk – for they brought to mind silk crazy quilts – those precious pieced and embroidered throws that were designed as much to reveal the makers’ social position as her skill with a needle. The next was personal – a long forgotten bag of silk scraps in my mother’s cedar chest. The final textile memory was academic – in some way these silk mosaics evoked the practice of Kyong Ae Cho, a Korean born contemporary American artist whose work has been described as a respectful response to the environment.

Unlike Rother, who uses only silk, Cho incorporates natural materials including grass, pine needles and leaves. In *Seeded* (2008), Cho suspended a single leaf between two layers of silk organza, holding it in place by concentric rows of tiny hand-stitched running stitches – mirroring the tight rows of stitches Rother uses in her work. In both cases the materials and processes are deceptively simple; yet, the work is complex and the time investment is valued and celebrated. Both are articulate and have a keen eye for detail and respond to their environment intuitively using textiles. Finally, in an age that is defined by technology, these artists appear to be intrigued by the deceptive order that disguises nature’s

complexities – and as Cho has written “Each meditative, repetitive gesture, each cut, stitch and placement is part of the experience of merging the natural and the man-made.”

In fact, Rother identifies the rural and urban landscapes as the raw material for her work. “I live [and have a studio] in Gatineau Park, a stone's throw from Ottawa, where I am surrounded by the forest and its inhabitants, and from which I draw serenity and inspiration. I also enjoy the hot and exciting energy of urban landscapes. I am attracted to beautiful architecture with its geometric angles, graceful curves, tactile surfaces, imposing size; for the role that buildings play in sheltering our bodies and fueling our private and public worlds.”

When I approached Rother about writing the catalogue essay to accompany *Out Numbered 2* she responded that “With my art I extend an invitation to the viewer: Here, this is what I have, experience it in your own way.” This self-conscious disconnect between the artist’s intentions and the sovereignty of the work speaks volumes about the history of art in the twentieth century and provides fascinating insights into both the artist and her work. The autonomous object was a major tenet of mid-century modernists and was given voice in 1946 by literary critics Wimsatt and Beardsley in “The Intentional Fallacy.” The theory was taken on-board by many visual artists including the Abstract Expressionists Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923-2002) and Mark Rothko (1903-70). To this end, Rothko abandoned conventional titles (1947) stating that “Silence is so accurate.” He feared that “words would only paralyze the viewer's mind and imagination” and started to use only colours or numbers as titles in order to distinguish one work from another.

While this strategy is seldom invoked by painters today, for artists working in what are often perceived to be a marginalized media, such as fiber, this approach is still considered to be a means of engaging the audience. By not providing a point of entry into the work, it is presumed that the viewer will be forced to take a closer look, and in doing so will explore the formal relationships and consider their own responses, thereby recognizing the work’s significance. In short, they

are meant to understand that these are well-considered serious works.

The works in this exhibition have been identified only by numbers. Nonetheless, I would argue that Rother has self-consciously manipulated this trope – for these are carefully conceived visual responses to the ongoing critical discourse about the role of art and craft within western culture. The artist’s appropriation of a modern idiom is given a post-modern twist as she self-consciously describes how *No.13* and *No.14* “feature segmented trapezoidal shapes, inspired by Riopelle and time spent at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa experiencing *Pavane* (1954).” Rother’s works successfully engage the viewer on a variety of levels – emotional and intellectual. One critic enthused, “The patterns and shapes radiate from the walls of the gallery in an explosion of colour that is a delight to behold.” And, as a displaced easterner (I now live in Alberta), I was mesmerized by what I saw in these metaphorical landscapes: the shimmering depths of the northern lakes; the richness that defines Autumn foliage; the geometric mystery of the sky at night. In other words, I did look at the art and “experienced it in *my* own way.”

Rother has skillfully drawn on the past – utilizing the visual language of textiles, art history, the history of display, and even her own history – all the while being open to new adventures. In particular this exhibition – for she has chosen to represent these meticulously hand-crafted tactile objects in a uniquely twenty-first century environment – the virtual exhibition.

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Web Sites

Kyong Ae Cho <http://www.kyoungaecho.com>

Carmella Karijo Rother <http://www.ckrother.com/>