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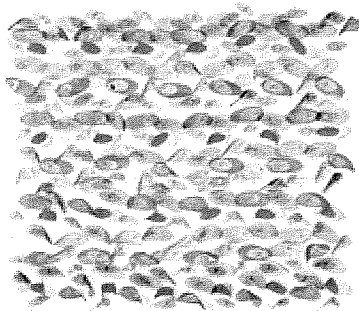
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Bell Gallery presents 'Fabric of Light'

by Mary Jo Curtis

As a child, long before she began formally studying art, Cristin Searles loved to sew. Although she tried her hand at painting and sculpting in college, it wasn't until she began working in a theater costume studio that she discovered the medium that would best serve her creativity.



"I realized I was having much more fun working in the costume studio than my art studio, and maybe fabric was the reason - so I stopped fighting with all the messy, goeey materials" and began turning fabric into art, she says. "I grew up sewing, and fabric is the material I know best. When I realized that, it was a 'duh' moment, and everything became easier."

Now Searles is one of four Providence-area artists exploring the dynamics of fabric and light in an intriguing exhibition at the David Winton Bell Gallery through July 11. Titled "The Fabric of Light," the exhibit features the recent work of Searles, Nina Cinelli, Esther Solondz and Cynthia Treen.

"The concept was very simple; that is, how do you create sculpture using fabric and light," said Vesela Sretenovic, curator for the exhibit. "What fascinates me is the transparency of these works, bringing in the use of light."

Searles has contributed three works to the exhibit - "lure" (shown above), "romance" and "souffle" - using hand-sewn layers of sheer organza in various colors with tiny glass beads in her painterly, three-dimensional works. Sretenovic describes them as "elusive and poetic [in] nature."

Searles, who has exhibited extensively in the greater Providence area, says her work is "about beauty care, delicacy and joy, sensuality and space."

"They are musings on how we clothe our bodies and our environments to reflect ourselves," she says. The mother of a toddler, Searles is expecting her second child; she concedes motherhood may also be influencing her recent work. The installation "romance" consists of a series of repetitive, mammary-like objects made of pink and beige organza.

"I started that piece with no idea that's what people would see. My husband was actually the first one to tell me they looked like breasts," she says. "It must've been subconscious, the pregnancy seeping in; that shape seems to keep coming back in my work."

Solondz presents "River Box," a shallow 12-by-6-foot wooden basin filled with water that flows over rocks and tattered pieces of fabric. Part of a larger yet-to-be completed installation titled "Until Everything Not Essential Was Washed Away," the work is mesmerizing and, at the same time, peaceful.

"This was a great opportunity to make this one thing stand on its own," says Solondz, who earned an M.F.A. at Rhode Island School of Design. "In large part, it's about a paring down of things to what's very essential. With 'River Box' I think of a sort of purification."

Treen's contribution to the exhibit is an untitled, dramatically-lit eight-foot-high sculpture made of translucent off-white silk and suspended from the ceiling. The shape of the piece allows visitors to enter its interior and experience the sensation of seeing the gallery from inside a honeycomb. Treen, who also studied at RISD, uses her background in design, fashion and architecture as inspiration for creating artwork. She says she is interested in "how the play of light filtering through the fabric affects the spaces we inhabit."

Cinelli, recipient of the 2003 RISCA New Gene Fellowship, says she is "interested in blurring the lines between costume, sculpture and everyday clothing." In her installation "coming home," she has created a nine-foot shadow-figure in a patchwork of silk, cotton and denim in shades of blue, gray and purple. As displayed on the lobby floor outside the gallery, the figure - accented with a pair of three-dimensional felt shoes - strikes a playful note. Taken together, the four women offer visitors to the Bell a light-hearted break from the doldrums of summer.

The Bell Gallery is open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday and 1 to 4 p.m.