

College galleries take on a local flavor

School may be out for summer, but some local college galleries are still in session.

As a result, art fans can sample contemporary fiber art at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, savor some powerful self-portraits at Providence College's Hunt-Cavanagh Gallery and see works by Rhode Island College faculty members at RIC's Bannister Gallery.

Interestingly, all three shows highlight the work of local artists.

Bell's "The Fabric of Light" exhibit features the work of four Providence-area artists — Nina Cinelli, Cristin Searle, Esther Solondz and Cynthia Treen — who incorporate silk, denim and other fabrics into their sculptures and installations.

Hunt-Cavanagh, meanwhile, is showing a group of rough-edged self-portraits by Providence artist Ruth Dealy.

If you follow the local art scene, you know that both shows represent something of a departure for college galleries, which tend to focus on out-of-state artists while leaving it to their non-collegiate counterparts to look after the local talent pool.

At Bell and Bannister, the shows reflect a welcome commitment to Rhode Island artists on the part of gallery officials Jo-Ann Conklin and Vesela Sretenovic (Bell) and Dennis O'Malley (Bannister).

At Hunt-Cavanagh, the Dealy show is largely the work of Molly Narloch, a PC student who organized the exhibit (and produced the accompanying catalog) as part of a senior thesis project.

Fabrics at Bell

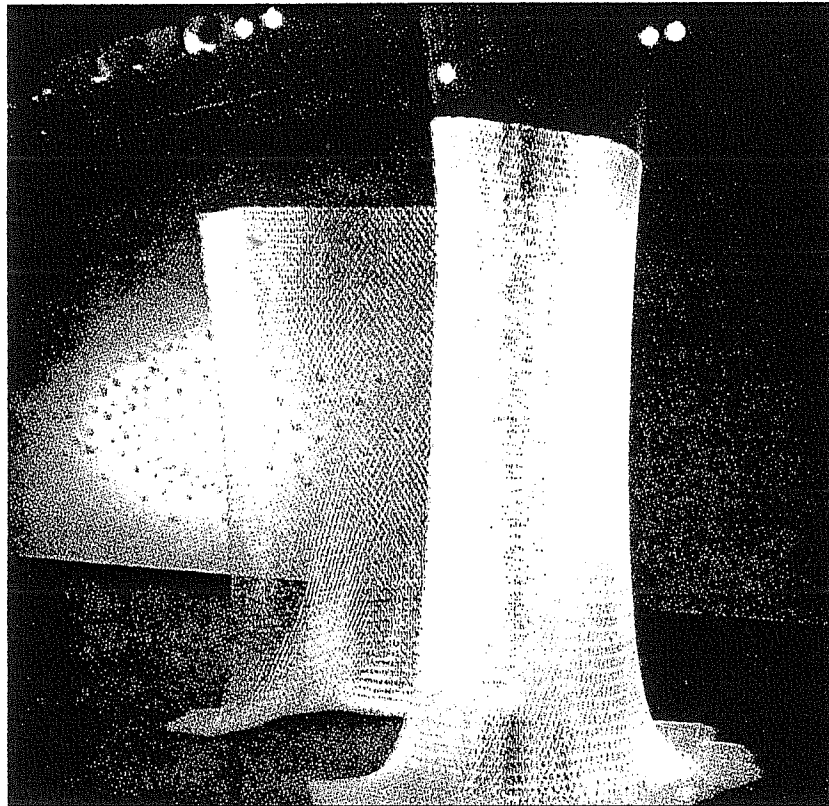
Of the three, the Bell exhibit is the most purely and pleasurably seductive.

The seductiveness starts with the show's spare, ultra-minimal installation, which allots plenty of breathing room for each piece. (If *Waiting for Godot* playwright Samuel Beckett had been a fashion designer, this is what his showrooms might have looked like.)

Then there are the fabrics, which include silk variants such as chiffon and organza, as well as felt, denim and cotton gauze. If you manage to get through the show without having to suppress at least one urge to reach out and touch one of the sculptures, you're probably not paying attention.

Finally, and most importantly, there are the artworks, all of which exploit the unique tactile and visual qualities of fabric while evoking its often intimate connection to the human body.

Searle, for example, creates ethereal wall sculptures out of silk organza, a fabric that can be fluffed and folded into almost any shape while still retaining its



An untitled work in silk by Cynthia Treen, right foreground, and souffle, a piece in organza and glass beads by Cristin Searles, are part of "The Fabric of Light" at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery.

lighter-than-air appearance.

In the appropriately titled *souffle*, sheets of white, silver and copper organza are gathered into plump, pillow-like forms, then pinned to the wall with plastic-tipped quilting pins. The result suggests a bough of shimmery summer blossoms.

In *romance*, the same ultra-sheer fabric is used to create a variety of cone-shaped forms, each topped with a swatch of different colored fabric and embellished with an aureole of tiny glass beads. This time the result suggests a trophy wall of male and female body parts.

TREEN'S UNTITLED INSTALLATION also takes advantage of fabric's ability to be light and luminous while still exerting a strong structural presence. It consists of a curving honeycomb of white silk that changes from sheer to solid, open to opaque, depending on where you stand. Perhaps the show's most mysterious entry is Solondz's *River Box*. Part of a larger work-in-progress, it consists of a rectangular basin filled with rippling water, river-smoothed stones and what appear to be the tattered remains of several dresses.

How did the dresses find their way into this makeshift riverbed? Did their owners

drown? Were they tossed out of a passing car? Are they the remains of some long-lost load of laundry? Solondz doesn't offer many clues. Instead, *River Box* creates its own quietly poetic mood, while leaving the explanations to us.

The show's remaining work, Nina Cinelli's *coming home*, is displayed in the lobby outside the Bell Gallery — a location that makes it feel a bit like an afterthought. Even so, it may be the show's most slyly subversive work, both in its motley assortment of found and/or recycled fabrics and in its comically elongated silhouette.

Try imagining a late-afternoon shadow dressed by the late Italian designer Emilio Pucci and you'll just about have it.

"The Fabric of Light" runs through July 11 at the David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, 64 College Street, Providence. Hours: Mon.-Fri., 11-4 and Sat.-Sun., 1-4. Phone: (401) 863-2932.