

LIFE WEEKEND WEEKEND LIFE

SECTION E
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ART

Cristin Searles' sculptures evoke blossoms and bodies

The calendar may say it's December, but the atmosphere inside Rhode Island College's Bannister Gallery has a distinctly balmy feel. The cause of this warming trend is Cristin Searles, a Providence

ART SCENE

Bill Van Sclen

sculptor and fiber artist who has transformed the gallery into something resembling a miniature

rain forest. Everywhere you look, soft, billowy shapes seem to sprout from the gallery's walls, evoking everything from delicate strands of Spanish moss to earthy clusters of mushrooms and toadstools.

Froth, for example, consists of a series of pillow-like clumps of green mohair that Searles has tucked into one of the gallery's corners. Flecked with shiny glass beads, they suggest a cache of glittering wood-ear mushrooms.

Another wall is covered with dozens of softly conical shapes that evoke both botanical forms (think thorns and briars) and body parts (think breasts and other erogenous zones). Made from shiny pieces of pink and tan organza, the work is

appropriately titled *Romance*.

The botanical references in another work, *Relish*, are even more apparent. It consists of dozens of delicate organza flowers attached to a sheer white background.

While plants and flowers are clearly sources of inspiration, they're not the only things that get Searles' creative juices flowing. The group of

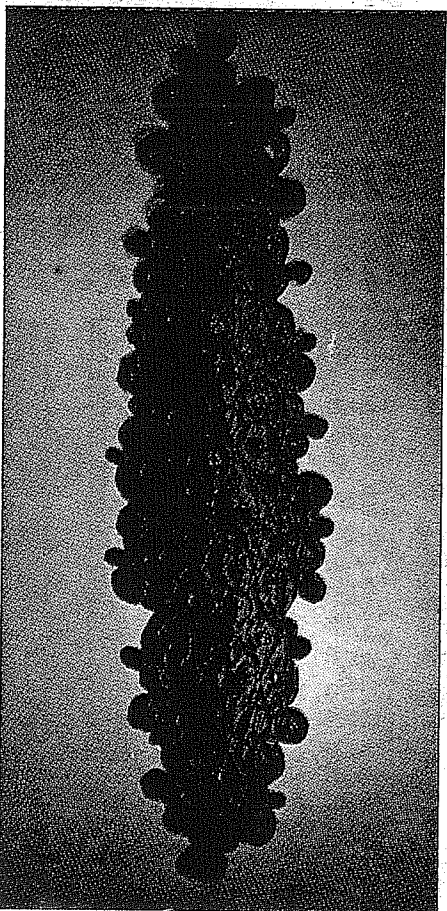
puck-size sculptures that make up *Urchin*, for example, is obviously meant to evoke the spiny sea

creatures of the same name. Fashion and dressmaking traditions, meanwhile, provide the style cues for several other works, including *Burlesque* (sheer blue organza edged with dark red ribbon) and *Dark Dark Day* (a work that suggests an

amoeba designed by Victoria's Secret).

These last two pieces also highlight a basic truth about fiber art: no matter how far artists like Searles push the genre's boundaries, as long as they continue working with fabric — to say nothing of using traditional techniques such as sewing and quilting — their work will always be tied to the human body. It's a truth that Searles, to her credit, seems to recognize. In fact, her sometimes playful, sometime sexy references to the body give her work an artistic heft that belies her lightweight materials.

Through Jan. 5 at Rhode Island College's Bannister Gallery (in Roberts Auditorium), Providence. Hours: Mon.-Wed. and Fri., 11-5 and Thurs. noon-9. Contact: (401) 456-9765 or www.rit.edu/bannister.



Cristin Searles' *Dark Dark Day*, made of silk, batting, glass beads and buckram, is part of a show of her work at Rhode Island College's Bannister Gallery.