

# Fresh forms

## Cristin Searles's playful "Installation"

BY GREG COOK

### "CRISTIN SEARLES: INSTALLATION"

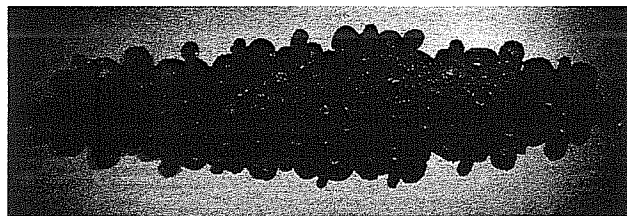
RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE, 600 MOUNT PLEASANT  
AVE., PROVIDENCE | THROUGH DECEMBER 29

Providence artist Cristin Searles's cloth sculptures sprout from the walls of Rhode Island College's Bannister Gallery like an infestation — but in a good way. *Dark Dark Day* is a small quilt hanging on a wall, but instead of a rectangle it's a narrow horizontal cloud of blue-black silk backed by orange. It's decorated with circles of beads atop the fabric or that ring holes that run right through. The design suggests bubbles or cells, so when the middle bows out from the wall it's like it's boiling over from some chemical or biological reaction.

Much of Searles's work transforms fabric and beads into stylized organic forms. *Urchin* is five little pods with bead spines that cling to the wall just above the floor. They could be fabulous flirty creatures harvested from some disco ocean. *Froth* features three dozen shelf-mushroom-shaped things of mossy green mohair tousled and matted like marsh grass after the tide's gone out. *Romance* is five dozen floppy, hollow silk organza breasts with pink nipples ringed with beads. They present a morphology of lady lumps: pointy, round, stumpy. The material is floppy and delicate; some are dented in. They seem ready to shrivel up at one's touch.

The 36-year-old's work sits at the confluence of two art trends — first, the craving for idiosyncratic handmade things in

our ever more technologically modified Sims world and, second, a kinder, gentler reinvention of '60s minimalist sculpture, with its emphasis on raw materials and the sculpture's relationship to the space it's in. The conceptual charge of Searles's art stems from how she cycles through analogies — urchin to breast to body to clothes as second skin to flowers and spores to pollination to sex to high couture fashion as mating plumage. Running underneath are whispers about women's work and the sexualized objectification of women via the dictates of fashion. The pleasure here is how Searles suggests these connections with a stutterstep — the links are apparent but you have to negotiate a small mental curve to get there.

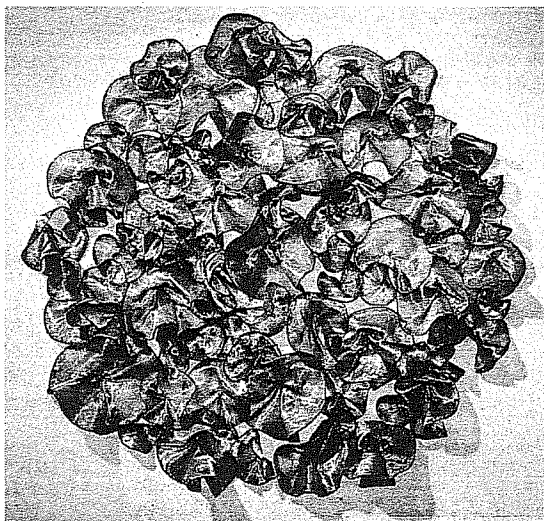


A CHEMICAL REACTION? *Dark Dark Day*.

You can trace how Searles works up her ideas in *Three Dimensional Sketchbook*, a collection in cases outside the gallery of pictures clipped from fashion magazines, an article on Louise Bourgeois's recent soft sculptures (some are at the Worcester Art Museum through February 25), and Searles's drawings and sketches in fabric.

Searles falters when her analogies are too literal or not developed enough. *Burlesque*, a circular cluster of shimmering blue silk organza circles ringed with red, suggests the ruffles of a burlesque dancer's peekaboo wardrobe, but formally it's a bit blah and the one-to-one correspondence of title to design seems a one-liner. *Relish*, a hanging veil of sheer white organza decorated with a floral pattern, feels too familiar, like it could be any flowery fabric.

Searles's best works charm because their forms are fresh and mysterious — they feel pleasingly, teasingly familiar, but you can't quite put your finger on what they remind you of. *Cheeky* is a cluster of little vinyl punching bags that seem to shoot out from the wall like a candy-corn-colored star burst. Searles's references elsewhere get you thinking here of flower buds, pistils, stamens, or maybe penises and sperm. While your mind puzzles over these associations, you get caught up in the bright, rugged forms. And, damn, they're fun to see. @



TOO LITERAL? *Burlesque* seems a one-liner.