

# SURFACE DESIGN



## **SOFT BORDERS:** SDA INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION IN PRINT

CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIBER AND FABRIC

Fall 2019 / \$20.00



# IN REVIEW

Reviewed by Vicky Clark

## Fiberart International 2019

Contemporary Craft  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, US | [fiberartinternational.org](http://fiberartinternational.org)

*Fiberart International 2019* is of the moment—grounded in the political, social and environmental issues that impact today's world, yet it resonates with traces and echoes from the past. The work also speaks to and about fiber. Jurors **Sonya Clark**, Professor of Art at **Amherst College** in Massachusetts, and

**Jane Sauer**, Gallery Owner and Arts Consultant in St. Louis, chose 56 works (from 1441 submissions) that speak loudly and clearly about what matters today. Whether large or small, made with innovative or traditional techniques, each has a point of view and something to say. These artists are facing issues in an honest way. There are references to the #metoo movement, gender non-specific bathrooms, consumerism and recycling, the environment, labor, the body and identity. There is outrage and concern expressed with intelligence, humor and/or ambiguity through the quiet gesture and the outlandish statement. Kudos to the artists for making us think and look in new ways and for doing it with fiber.

Over the year this exhibition, organized by volunteers from the Fiberarts Guild of Pittsburgh, has been consistently excellent, serving as a model for other shows by presenting

**Carolina Oneto Tapia** *IGUALDAD*, cotton fabric, batting, thread, machine pieced, walking foot-quilted, 40" x 40". Photo by the artist.



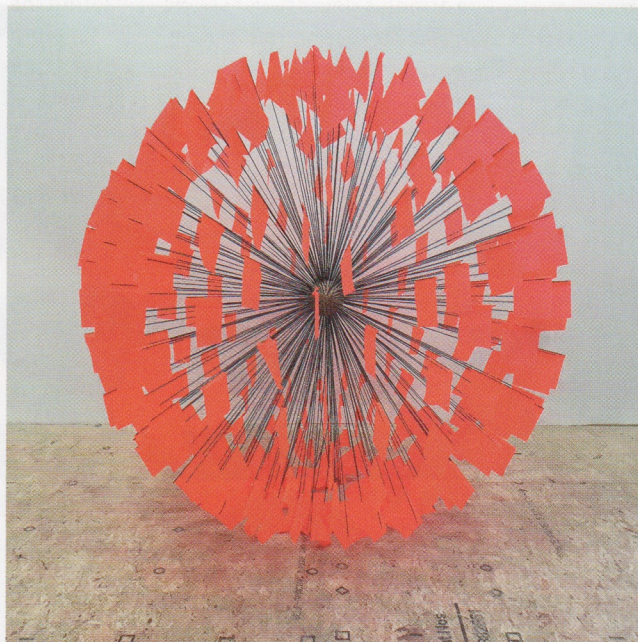


the multiplicity of fiber. Within this variety, this year's show has a surprising commonality, a shared sensibility that can be characterized as an engagement with language, the vocabulary of fiber and the shifting meanings of words. Many of the works also ask how art can address the confusion, complexity and contentiousness of our current political situation. **Michael Rohde**, in *Interrogative*, makes up his own language with abstracted pictographs or alphabets waiting to be decoded, hinting at ideas not yet understood. **Carolina Oneto Tapia** converts the word *IGUALDAD* into binary code with zeroes and ones residing in squares of colors taken from national flags. Expressed in a language

that not all can understand on an abstracted visual field referencing geography and politics, the word and idea of equality remain elusive.

A related concept in the show is labor, ranging from the labor of language and writing to blue-collar labor and the labor of making the pieces. In *American Portraits: Loss in the Heartland*,

**Patricia Kennedy-Zafred** *American Portraits: Loss in the Heartland*, original vintage feed sacks, textile inks, image transfer materials, batting, cotton threads, silkscreened, image transferred; machine pieced, quilted, 58" x 66". Photo: Larry Berman.



**Patty Kennedy-Zafred** presents a portrait of farm labor with statistics and facts (one form of language) as well as photo-transfers of farmers, another language altogether on a quilt pieced together with vintage feed bags. Her techniques tell a story that updates the power of **James Agee's** *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with photographs by **Walker Evans** (1941). **Jim Arendt's** hovering, two-dimensional, life-size male workers *Cat: Free Will Ain't Cheap*, also addresses the concept of labor. He uses reclaimed denim, originally worn because of its durability, to reference the "making do" culture among many blue-collar workers and as a counterpoint to our throw-away, consumer-driven society.

Both of these works exhibit a gravitas that fits their subjects, as does **Nicole Benner's** *Comfort/Confine II*, though she deals with identity and the body. An anonymous, life-size figure covered from head to toe in a mesh gown that flows onto the floor, it asserts both a presence and an absence. The faceless and generalized silhouette stands quietly like a sentinel charged with protection, wearing an armor made of

Top left: **Nicole Benner** *Comfort/Confine II*, metallic yarn, crocheted, 70" x 84" x 84". Photo by Drew Stauss, Departure Studio.

Bottom left: **Jim Arendt** *Cat: Free Will Ain't Cheap*, reclaimed denim, thread, appliquéed, embroidered, hand and machine-sewn, 84" x 56". Photo by the artist.

Top right: **Meg Arsenovic** *Tell Tales*, vinyl marking flags, wood, drilled, assembled, 36" x 36" x 36". Photo by the artist.

copper mesh. The armor is delicate yet strong, mirroring the act of simultaneously protecting and hiding one's identity. And while the figure is static, it seems posed a la **Martha Graham**, ready to move across a stage. Her enigmatic figure speaks about the body and is akin to **Do Ho Suh's** warrior's robe made from military dog tags, **Magdalena Abakanowicz's** hollow figure, and **Mrinalini Mukherjee's** ritual figures, all monumental pieces rooted in the language of politics and identity.

The large scale of this piece as well as **Meg Arsenovic's** circular flag sculpture and **Max Adrian's** inflatable snowman demonstrate how work made with fiber can exert a powerful presence. Moving beyond the specificity of materials to the knowledge that art is about ideas, these artists are taking the oft-marginalized fiber art into the mainstream. But just in case anyone forgets these works also are part of the fiber art world, there is the wonderful work by **Melinda K. P. Stees**, *The Start of It All*, an image of hands casting on stitches made

on a knitting machine. When all is said and done, *Fiberart International* continues to break through art historical boundaries and bring a vibrancy and excitement to viewers.

—Vicky Clark, PhD is an independent Curator, Critic, Lecturer, based in Pittsburgh.

Left: **Max Adrian** *Act II, Scene IV: Snowman*, pleather, satin, faux fur, nylon ripstop, chains, hardware, fan, timer, sewn, 95" x 26" x 26". Photo by the artist.

Right: **Melinda KP Stees** *THE START OF IT ALL*, perle cotton yarn, machine knitted, mounted, 33" x 24". Photo by the artist.

