

CROCHET AS ART: A Conversation with 5 Free-Form Crochet Artists

BY GWEN BLAKLEY KINSLER

Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with five artists who use crochet as their primary medium of expression. Chosen because of their unique, diverse, and multi-dimensional approaches to crochet, they represent the journey fiber art has taken from the American craft movement of the 1960s and 1970s to a vibrant, inclusive art scene today. We discussed how crochet, past and present, is setting along the continuum with the other fiber arts; and they gave me their perspectives on the state of crochet art today.

THE ARTISTS



Kathleen Holmes: "My mixed media art puts crochet into the service of contemporary art. Using crochet is hugely appealing to me, especially working with found pieces and differing patterns."



Yvette Kaiser Smith: "I create fiberglass cloth by crocheting continuous strands of fiberglass into flat geometric shapes. These are formed and hardened with the application of polyester resin and the use of gravity. For twenty years my sculptures have dealt with abstracting narratives of identity. Within this context, an exploration

of fiberglass and resin led me to crocheting fiberglass roving. Years later, in pursuit of the same, I am mapping patterns from math sequences.... Math is the underlying principle in all of life, and all cultures seem to have their own lace tradition. If identity is a hybrid of our heritage, then lace is, as a tradition of time, labor, and creativity, one tiny point of intersection that connects us all."



Tracy Krumm: "I continue to challenge notions of balance and power, to explore the relationships between technology and the handmade—particularly the interface of digital and virtual communication with social and collaborative craft practices—and to investigate how textile construction processes can be incorporated with and influence our connections to space and place."



Andrea Uravitch: After forty years of crocheting, I still take delight in the creative and physical processes and their results."



Nathan Vincent: "Through the medium of crochet I have moved across ideas of gender—and how societal constructs often dictate the roles we play—to larger and more universal ideas of vulnerability, power and control, surveillance and technology."

SOCIAL AND COLLABORATIVE ART

Each artist agreed that the current practices of social and collaborative art, which includes yarn bombing and community-based exhibits, have been a positive influence on increasing the recognition of crochet.

Kathleen weighs in, "Public art harkens back to the quilting bee. This kind of interaction is always stimulating for artists and sparks new ideas and directions. When art is out of the private realm of the home, viewers react and get involved."

"Social public art and community projects have become an established contemporary art form. One cannot separate the simple act and tradition of crocheting from the art of yarn bombing," believes **Yvette**. "Art becomes the event, naturally transforming the public perception of crocheting."

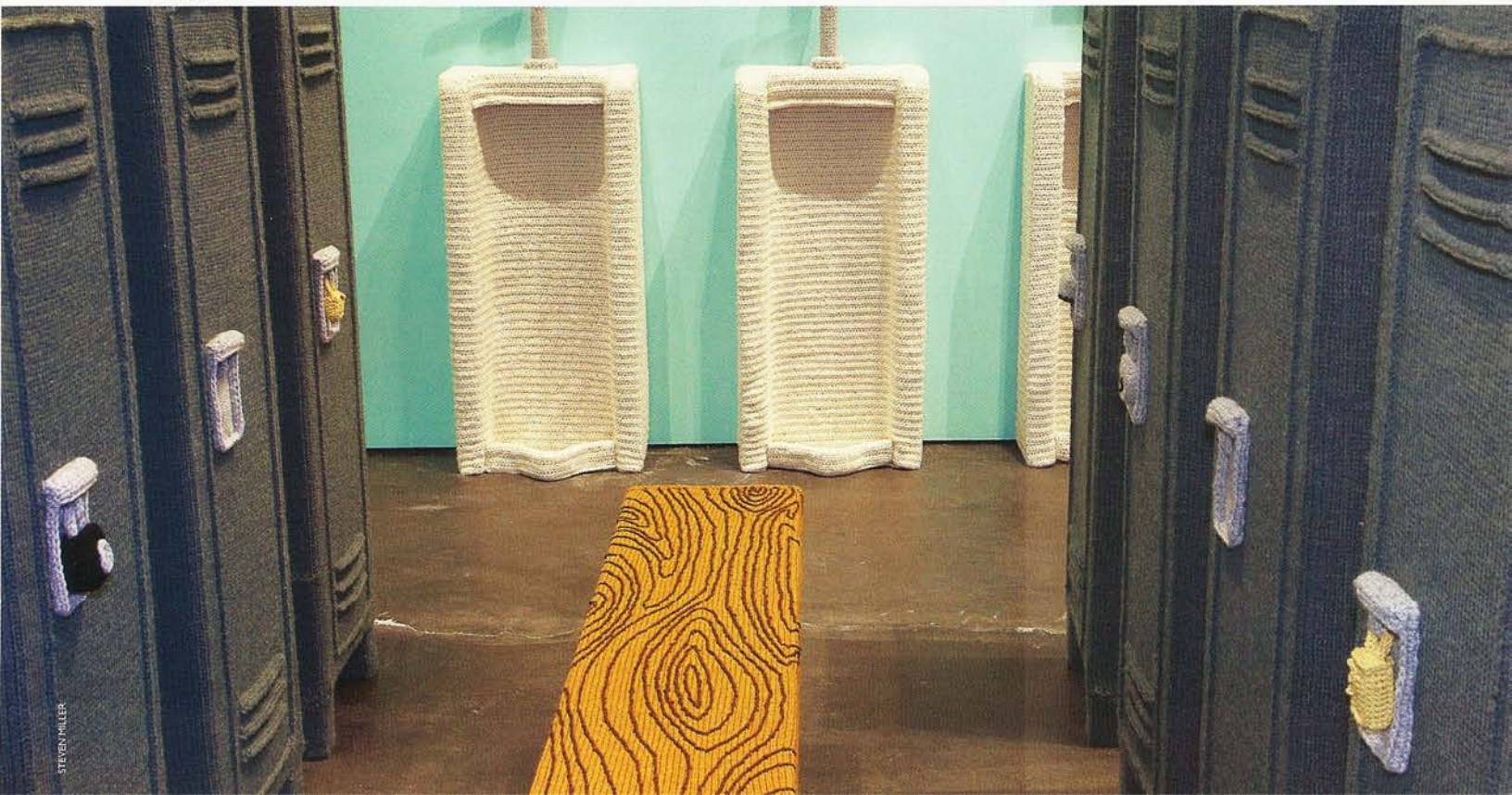
Tracy explains, "The 'Stitch and Bitch,' along with the abundance of Craftivist and DIY events, are the quilting bees for today's young artists. Fiber artists today often use craft-based practices as a means of social practice. These practices are re-invented because they resonate with and are valid for younger generations in fresh, new ways."

Nathan has observed that "public art works have taken crochet to the extreme which brings it into the limelight."

AESTHETICS OF CROCHET

Aesthetics is defined as a set of principles underlying and guiding the work of a particular artist or artistic movement. Confusion endures about

OPPOSITE PAGE — TOP LEFT: Tracy Krumm, **Cavity (Strainer)**; crocheted copper wire and silk covered wire, forged steel, found objects, patina, mix dye, resin; 52 x 9 x 13 in. TOP RIGHT: Yvette Kaiser Smith, **Charting e**; 2013; crocheted fiberglass with polyester resin; 65 x 65 x 4 in. BOTTOM: Nathan Vincent, **Locker Room**; 2011; yarn, foam and wood; 12 x 19 ft.





the aesthetics of crochet because of its heavy visibility in the hobby corner of the medium. What are the aesthetics of crochet?

Kathleen has always honored her family tradition of handwork with the use of crochet in her art. She explains, "Crochet is predominantly woman-made and in past years it was honored. The time and energy that went into making the found pieces I use is palpable. I think about all the hours spent and their need to make beautiful things. They did it for no other reward than just the doing. I honor that creative spirit that instilled the tradition of crochet in me; they were artists teaching me to be one!"

Yvette says that each material and process has its own language. As she began to understand that geometry, pattern, and traditional stitches were the language of crocheting, the work evolved exponentially. She recalls, "I asked myself, 'Was I fascinated with exploring the crochet because it is based on systems?' or 'Do I seem to be driven to find and create new systems?'"

Tracy observes, "It is amazing to see how crochet has such diverse traditions in so many different cultures. It is a vocabulary that connects me with artisans all over the world, which is why I love it so much."

Andrea uses highly refined crochet to express ideas. "I combine materials to make my art works rich and textural. I want the transition between the media, crochet, ceramics, and painting, to be seamless. I was classically trained as an artist in the '60s and '70s; nothing I've learned is lost when I transition from one media to another."

Nathan defines the aesthetic of crochet as work that is soft, draws the viewer in, and has an innate quality of intimacy. "It is difficult to create a work outside of that aesthetic," he says. "The key is in the intent. People have come to expect objects made from crochet; and many want to make something that exists, while creating it differently."

HISTORY

Understanding the history of art and artists is critical in any medium, and the history of fiber art is no exception.

Tracy says, "If one has access to technology today, it feels like they have access to everything. But this access does not necessarily develop an informed perspective." Having taught fiber art at the professional and college level for over twenty years, Tracy believes that the single injustice in arts education is the lack of insight into craft- and particularly fiber-history and theory.

She remembers, "Back in the '60s and '70s, the conversation about crafts began to shift as these disciplines became more absorbed into academia. Discussions started to focus on craft practices as valid artistic and intellectual pursuits. Students are still discovering the essence of what fiber art is today; each generation synthesizes information and history differently."

Artists of my generation have worked to bring awareness to fiber and crochet. Life experiences inform what we do and the possibility for transformative discovery is limitless at any age and is often very personal."

"We need to recognize art history," says **Andrea**; "but there is nothing wrong with putting a spin on it. I was thrilled to learn recently of a seminar for third graders which built the project around the aesthetics of Sheila Hicks. Galleries are trying to engage a younger audience, so educating children about sophisticated artists is vital."

CROCHET AS HIGH ART

While discussing when a work becomes “high art,” there were varying opinions.

Kathleen believes that the purpose of art is to move people to change their perception of the world around them. “I remember Miriam Shapiro adding doilies to paintings in the sixties. My work is a collaboration of forms. At one time I did many, many sculptures that honored famous women. For me, the imagery started to grow when I began to add crochet to my paintings. I am especially thrilled when the crochet resonates with the topic in my painting. Architects love this technique; they see it as bas-relief. Sometimes I will get the questions, ‘I love the painting but why did you put the crochet on it?’ People like what they already know. They know painting; they know oils.”

Yvette explains, “In the mid- to late 1990s, galleries and museums included works referencing traditional crafts. Kiki Smith, who is known for body referential, politically charged sculptures and prints, showed, *Untitled (Doily Drawing)*, a series of beautiful doily monotypes in 1994. Lesser known artists flirted with crochet-based artwork. Using a traditional craft process as a tool in creating artwork is not new, nor is it unusual. Curiously, after twenty years of using traditional craft to create my own fiberglass cloth, I still have to justify what I do as sculpture. Many focus solely on the crochet and discount the sculpting process and the math. In 2012, I had a solo show in the lobby of a corporation in Jena, Germany. It was interesting to me that viewers focused on the math and the hybridism of the work. They saw the three main components as one, as I had intended.”

“We are never going to shake the utilitarian history of crochet,” says **Tracy**. “My current approach...is to think more about the formal and conceptual aspects (What do the forms reference? How does the form activate space?) and less about the technical and material. Because I have control of the medium, I have more control of the form. I make abstract sculptures that reference the familiar. Half the world has a memory of someone crocheting and I know this reference helps viewers engage with my work on some subtle level.”

“The quality of the concept and the execution, not a simple choice of materials or technique, determines whether a work is considered high art, believes **Andrea**. “During the 1970s, Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg used fabric in their constructed sculptures and paintings and their work was recognized as high art.”

Because he is young and pushing boundaries with his art, **Nathan** has been described as the face of the future. He says a personality trait translates to his curious nature. “I am urged to give great thought to my art while dealing with contemporary issues in a surprising way. It is my intent to engage viewers on a level that is beyond the norm. If they go beyond the physical beauty of the art and look or think deeper about themselves or their world, I am satisfied. I enjoy being the person that causes that shift.” Nathan’s installation, *Be Good for Goodness’ Sake* will be on exhibit in December 2013 at the Muriel Guepin Gallery in Manhattan.

These five artists have shown that crochet art deserves a place of high honor in the world of art. With just a simple hook and thread made of anything that bends, something magical happens, enhanced when unstoppable creativity takes over the hands that create. Crochet has come into its own in the new millennium as a vibrant and exhilarating medium.



OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP LEFT: Kathleen Holmes, **Sonnets from the Portuguese**; 2012; cast glass (from crochet), mixed media; 17 x 12 x 10 in.

CENTER LEFT: Kathleen Holmes, **Giselle**; 2011; cast glass (from crochet) and mixed media; 16 x 9 x 6 in.

BOTTOM LEFT: Kathleen Holmes, **Dorothy’s Dream Dress**; 2011; cast glass (from crochet), mixed media; 18 x 12 x 10 in.

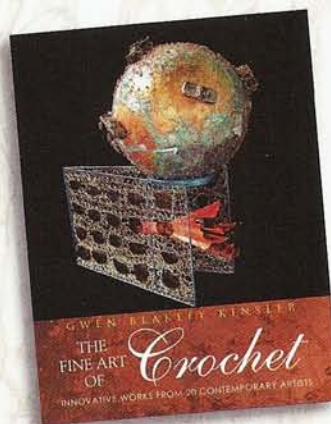
TOP RIGHT: Kathleen Holmes, **Day Care Dress**; 2009; ceramic, crocheted textile, mixed media; 17 x 11 x 10 in.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Kathleen Holmes, **Novel Tea (Franny Trollope)**; 2010; ceramic, crocheted textile, mixed media; 22 x 12 x 9 in.

THIS PAGE:

ABOVE: Andrea Uravitch, **Trouble in the Garden**; 2010; Leaf, Wonderflex, wire, hand-made paper; 45 x 13 x 8 in.; Cicada, welded steel armature, clay body, crochet fiber parts and sewn fabric wings; Orange Cicada, 10 in. high x 19 in. wing span, x 17 in. body length; Brown Cicada, 8 x 8 x 16 in.

FEATURE BACKGROUND IMAGE: Tracy Krumm, **Cavity (Strainer)** (Detail).



Gwen Blakley Kinsler is the author of *The Fine Art of Crochet* as well as two technical crochet books. She has written extensively about crochet as art and the artists who make it, since 1994. When not writing, she is busy covering her world in crochet and blogging: <http://crochetqueen-royalramblings.blogspot.com>