

CRAFTS

Fiber Art: Beyond the Mundane



By BETTY FREUDENHEIM

CLINTON

THERE is a surprising harmony among some plastic baskets, Op Art quilts and the 154-year-old converted gristmill where they are now on display at the Hunterdon Art Center. Both the center and the work in the "Fiber as Art" exhibition bear witness to their more mundane beginnings.

While the stream that rushes by outside no longer turns a millstone, it provides a soothing background murmur. And the heavy overhead beams and low ceilings of these well-lighted galleries help the visitors to focus on small objects in this show without being distracted by a plethora of competing colors and shapes.

Some of the fiber works also echo their traditional functions, but the delicate baskets in the show will never be used to tote strawberries, nor will a \$2,000 quilt ever warm chilled toes.

"Historically, fiber works can trace their origins to the manufacture of cloth or, ethnographically, to the production of housing, ritual objects, baskets, etc.," said Lewis Knauss, a Philadelphia fiber artist and juror of the exhibition. When fiber works become art, the "restrictions of function associated with the craft are removed, allowing the artist to concentrate on purely visual expressions."

He selected 61 works by 43 artists from across the country; eight live in New Jersey. Although this is the 37th annual Juried Exhibition at the Hunterdon, it is the first to diverge from



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an established pattern of rotating among painting, drawing, small sculpture and photography shows.

The switch is not so radical; many parallels exist between fiber arts and the so-called fine arts. For years, painters and sculptors like Rauschenberg and Christo have included textiles in their work. And some fiber artists use paper — but not for sketching or painting. They make their own and then mold, tear, stitch or glue it into new forms.

Jill A. Powers achieves the mysticism of the Orient with handmade paper that she casts into starkly simple forms. "Perilous Journey" is a dark, shallow boat afloat in a "sea" of white Angora foam. The cargo resembles a row of inverted mussel shells. Or are they tents? The title suggests the refugee ships that braved the rugged trip from Vietnam.

The serene oblong shape of Ms. Powers's "Reverence" has the essence of an Oriental reliquary. A single dried okra pod hangs down in front like a ceremonial tassel.

"Bnety," by Carole S. Weisman, might be the detritus left by nature after a storm has passed. Shreds of paper cling to a group of tall reeds. There are blobs of transparent rabbit skin glue that glisten like water drip-

"Fragmentation" wall hanging, far left, by Louise A. Ewing, "Bleeding Emblems" quilt by Dorcas Kraybill and "Bnety," above, by Carole S. Weisman, in exhibition, "Fiber as Art," at the Hunterdon Art Center in Clinton.

ping from the broken branches.

Louise A. Ewing's paper was shredded into amorphous shapes and then stitched and interlaced with a fine cobweb of threads. In the process this "Fragmentation" becomes a unified wall hanging.

And there are the unexpected, the unconventional materials. Nancy Koenigsberg interlaces telephone wires and tiny glass beads through layers of black industrial mesh to achieve her glittering "Galaxies." They scintillate like microcosms of a starry night.

Emily Marks crocheted a Cinderella-like slipper from gold metallic yarn and imitation pearls. A red, red rose is affixed to the toe. "If the Shoe Fits..." she calls it, but there is only one, so don't be tempted.

Although most of the quilts are cut from cotton fabrics, the designs are far from traditional block patterns used in granny's day. Helen Giddens's "Blue Study 1" features rows of black triangles in variegated sizes.

