

Installation Art: Turning a Thing on its Self

By: Briana Lyon

Mmmm...warm, woolly fence. Who made you? What are you doing here on this busy street corner? You're all wrong here. You're all soft 'n periwinkle, supple magenta and fuzzy indigo and you're strapped to a cross section of wood! You're floating over concrete and asphalt- miniscule yarn in comparison to the glass and steel soaring above you... how you draw my eye - you outcast!

Art is great for starrng at. If you sit and look at a piece of art for an hour more and more ideas will blossom, connotations will fruit and your focus on other things will wobble like jell-o. Every time you look at the work, it looks back anew, from another place or another dimension and it shows you a nuance you thought you had covered. Art has transformative power. Installation art above all changes the power of a space and gives off distinct sensations.

Two excellent examples of contemporary installation art were submitted to OCW this summer issue. The first, Neil Chung's *Husks* is composed of clothing patterns cut into the shapes of game animal pelts, dampened and hung in four columns of ten along the ceiling of a gusty warehouse. The second, Jessica Glesby's 'graffiti knitting' installation at the Burrard & Davie St. community garden, is made of colourful yarn sleeved around some sections of plain, brown fence. Both pieces emanate themes of displacement, animation and awareness, and both works are made out of common, natural materials with little to no environmental impact.



Neil Chung's "Husks"

Bodybags. My mind recoiled when I first looked at *Husks*. Instantly the haunting imagery overwhelmed me. Air, space and death mix to form a potent and masculine blend. *Meatfactory*. The yellow paper, like pale skins of industrially sacrificed animals, flaps in the breeze. In the shapes of game and domestic animals they represent the trophy from the hunt and the skin of the beloved. Lust has led to the mass slaughter of living creatures. This is the exhibitionist display of the carcasses. We are invited to walk among the carnage, take in its musty scent and recall the travesty of our inheritance: environmental destruction.

Chung's chosen materials connote industrialization and garment factories. For these pelts are not *really* yellowed skin, they are not products of nature. They are discarded paper clothing patterns. The setting is a poorly-lit empty warehouse, also reminiscent of under-paid human sweat and over-kept machinery. Chung's material is society's garbage hung up elegantly for display. Our waste is 'hidden' indoors, away from the greater public's eye, in a setting where only the workers would go.

Thematically this artist is working with nature. He confronts the life we impose on ourselves with constant consumption and the ignorance of holistic nature. The artist states: "My work seeks to question and address the anthropocentric mentality generally displayed towards the treatment of all non-human life that co-inhabit the Earth." Anthropocentric: centering one's view of everything on human kind. Thus Chung struggles to heighten humanity's awareness of its environment and more importantly its environmental impact. Alluding to the dire consequences we will have to pay if attention is not paid to global industrialization, Chung's *Husks* is a haunting reminder of unsustainable living.



Jessica Glesby's "Knit Graffiti" Installation at Burrard & Davie Community Garden

Looking at Glesby's installation piece I am reminded of things I have mixed feelings about: toques, leg warmers, mittens, itchy socks and homemade scarves, but in this case, knitted a few feet too long. Why on earth are they wrapped around a community garden fence? Well if you haven't heard of *knitting graffiti* get informed, because it's on the rise. According to Magda Sayeg, the founder of *Knitta* -the first North American 'yarn bombing' company- knit graffiti "animates dead objects making them not only alive" but "comforting and loving." Organizations like *Glesby's Identity School* are using knit graffiti as a tool for marginalized youth to transform 'cold' spaces into 'warm' ones. Taking agency to alter an intimidating environment into a welcoming one is very arousing.

Glesby's chosen location is a poignant one. A former gas station, the community garden lot sits on a major crossroad and the graffiti-ed fence clearly faces the intersection. The bright majesty of her colours puts the aggressive emptiness to stark contrast. The desolation and non-decor of the world around it is apparent. A world largely enslaved to profit. Most people move by, many at 40 km an hour but some slow down to glance at the oddity. A rare few, mostly 40-50 year old men, stop and touch but people and vehicles get back to moving, building the future. The colourful yarn highlights a boundary, demarcating between a realm of growth and a steadfast concrete jungle. The installation glows with intensity and sacred, creative spirit welcoming unconventional ideas of design and public beautification.

I asked the donair vendor down the street what he thought of the colourful display, he found it very celebratory and wondered if it had anything to do with the upcoming fireworks. Though festively coloured, I think at first glance many people may find this installation laughable and inane. Perhaps it strikes a chord of curiosity but seems overtly feminine and thus unconstructive to a largely patriarchal society. They can't see the subversion and anarchism inherent to such work, all they feel is grandma's afghan in an unusual place (although *hers* were never in such garish colours). Dismissing this work is admitting a disability to understand and denial of the opportunity to be transformed by art and colour.

Conclusion

The feminine graffiti knitting piece gives life to a dead space while the masculine *Husks* installation brings death to live industrial space. Both works bring heightened awareness to areas of society in dire need of progress and all of our attention. These downtrodden aspects of society are much easier to 'walk by' than to acknowledge and understand (similar to bums on the street). Give an art piece a chance to define your image of reality instead of branding or advertising. Believe that sustainable living, emancipation and inclusive thinking will transform mass reality. And it will.