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Fabric art and Cuban memories are on display



MELISSA BLACKALL PHOTOGRAPHY

Nathan Vincent made “Locker Room” five years ago, but it’s particularly relevant today as the transgender bathroom controversy flares.

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Fiber art: historically associated with women’s work. Viscerally intimate, linked to the clothing we wear and the bedding we sleep in. Art history cast a miserly eye on it, honoring fine art over craft. It’s labor-intensive, repetitive,

detail work. Often, its face to the world disguises all the knots, snarls, and loose ends on its more private verso side.

With its allusions to touch, to now-loosening binaries of gender and art, and to hiding, fiber art is an ideal medium to explore and express LGBTQ issues. “Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community,” a juicy, prickly exhibition now at the Boston Center for the Arts’s Mills Gallery, doesn’t flinch from condemning prejudices, even within queer society. Still, it’s cozy, erotic, thoughtful, and keenly engaged with contemporary art’s shifting paradigms.

The show originated at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, in New York. Curator John Chaich kicks it off with two older pieces that set up the craft/art dichotomy that “Queer Threads” artists exploit and explode.

Allen Porter’s untitled needlepoint (circa 1955) depicts two nude men lounging together on a red blanket. Harmony Hammond crocheted a grid for “Girdle” (1971) and weighed it down with paint-soaked rags. A man appropriates a traditionally female technique for romantic figuration, and a woman adds a feminist twist to the mostly macho territory of abstract expressionism.

Flash forward to this century. Sheila Pepe’s crocheted web “Your Granny’s Not Square” shouts out to “Girdle” like ab-ex’s impertinent granddaughter. Pepe’s piece, made largely of regal purple shoelaces, floats off the wall, suspended on metal brackets. There’s no paint in this painterly work, but within the web Pepe crochets concentric colors. Each little puddle of color brashly protrudes, or is pulled like taffy to another part of the web.

Speaking of impertinent, Jesse Harrod deploys macramé, a technique associated with an earthy, 1970s vibe, to make her big, Day-Glo yellow “Pensile Arrangement 2.” You read right: pensile, which means pendulous. The long, funnel-like work is exuberantly erotic, opening, curving, and jutting like an orchid. One wonders what Georgia O’Keeffe would think.

Much of the art confronts societal notions of propriety. Nathan Vincent made his installation “Locker Room” five years ago, but it’s particularly relevant today as the transgender bathroom controversy flares.

Vincent’s lockers, showers, urinals, and drains will put a blush on the face of anyone who ever felt awkward or embarrassed in a middle school locker room. He covers them in knitting and crochet, reclaiming them from the cold steeliness of standards about sexuality and gender that still ignite fear and discomfort.

Some pieces, such as Aaron McIntosh’s quilt “Road to Tennessee,” with a silhouette of a man’s body filled in by unfinished patchwork, decry the struggle of acceptance queer people face. Others question the openness and

sprawl of the LGBTQ umbrella. In Jai Andrew Carrillo's embroidered "Queer Martyred by a Gay Culture: A Self-Portrait," the young man is tied by the wrists to a San Francisco street sign — 18th and Castro — and pierced with embroidery needles, a Saint Sebastian in fishnet stockings.

In the end, even if there's some bickering and dismay, the sunny-toned "Queer Threads" feels like a hard-won celebration of the parts of ourselves and our families that have been repressed, derided, and even run out of town.

A hypnotic effect

Cuban artist Karlos Pérez, a 26-year-old up-and-comer, has poor eyesight. The condition informs his astonishing paintings at Galeria Cubana — lush, sepia-toned, distinctly out-of-focus works. In July, the show travels to the gallery's Provincetown venue.

Pérez labors over the surface of his paintings with thinners and an airbrush, creating wobbly blots and seepages that have a hypnotic effect.

The artist modeled most of the works here on old snapshots. He has an eye for arresting compositions and odd cracks and tatters. "20 de Agosto 1952 — Memorias Impersonales (20th of August 1952 — Impersonal Memories)" depicts a couple at the beach, knee-deep in water. Each holds an oar; they position them in an X in front of the man.

It's an odd scene. He looks like a warrior icon, she like a goofy girl, and Pérez's handling of it — the blur, the painted rips, the sensual surface treatment — accentuates the passage of time since then, and in turn heightens the image's dissonance.

Then there's "19 de Abril 1961 (Fidel Castro and compañeros)" in which the young prime minister poses with two unidentified men. Time has passed and history has been made. The hope Castro represented in the early days of his

rule has been tarnished by economic hardship, isolation, and repression. Pérez's paint handling represents all that fills the gulf between then and now; it has a charged emotional timbre.

The big "Untitled man" from the "Ametropia" series doesn't address time. Its subject, a man leaning and cropped by the picture frame, looms over us, his eyes darkened by shadow, his features blurred (ametropia is a condition of blurred vision). Yet in his posture, there's concern.

The subject is not the man, but what the artist senses about him, articulated in shadows, stance, and in the veil of bubbles and blots along the surface. Pérez's paintings are laden with charged intangibles because he paints what he cannot clearly see.

QUEER THREADS: Crafting Identity and Community

At Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, 551 Tremont St., through July 10.
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