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Petra Soesemann stands next to a series of fabric pieces titled "Lucid Dream." Her exhibition at the Roswell Museum and Art Center opens tonight. (Cid Standifer Photo)



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Updated: Monday, September 21, 2009

Soesemann invokes tactile senses, visceral feelings with textiles

Friday, September 18, 2009



Cid Standifer

The fabrics in Petra Soesemann's exhibition shimmer, they change with the light, they look soft or rich or smooth or breezy, and, even though they're off limits in a gallery, they beg to be touched.

Soesemann believes there's something about cloth that invokes primitive emotions. From infancy, cloth covers us, protects us and keeps us warm. It surrounds our

everyday lives.

"There's always an immediate response on the part of people to the tactile part of it," Soesemann said. "... Even if you're not touching it, it's like, visually, your eyes are touching it."

For Soesemann, working with fabric has been a part of her life almost since birth. The daughter of a professional seamstress, she said she learned to use a sewing machine before she could read or write, and made most of her own clothes growing up. In undergraduate and graduate art school, she focused on sculpture, fearing that fabric would seem too domestic or practical and lead her away from serious art, but even then, she collected cloth just because she loved to look at it. After completing school, she was finally comfortable enough with her formal art credentials, and with an art world that began to take "feminine" mediums and work more seriously, to return to sewing.

"I love working with fabric, and I keep coming back to it. ... It makes a real visceral kind of connection," she said.

And there are qualities particular to fabrics that help Soesemann express abstract concepts in an unusual way.

"Fugitive Green Series" is a set of fabric rectangles sewed out of smaller rectangles of green. Each piece is made out of a single sheet of fabric, cut up and rearranged.

"Green dye has always been notorious for fading," explained Soesemann.

The green cloths are from bolts she collected years ago that have begun to fade, some of them developing patches of deep red. She reconstituted them to highlight the way the fabric has changed over time.

"In some cases, the fading was incredibly beautiful to me," she said. But, in addition to their aesthetic appeal, they also made her think about the passage of time. Looking at the works, she says she wonders if they'll be recognizable if the fabric continues to fade.

"Maybe in another 20 years, you won't be able to see the color," she speculated.

Her work with the simple squares led her into one of her experiments with pattern, a common theme in her work. In "Disappearing Assets," sheared rectangles of gold-colored fabric seem to descend into a field of material covered with a tumultuous pattern, and emerge lower in the piece partially devoured. Each segment of the piece uses the same shapes, but with the repetition of the colors slightly altered.

"That's the fun thing about pattern, is that you can keep making endless permutations of it," she said.

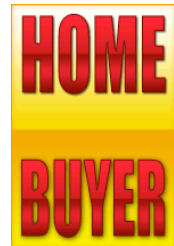
"Disappearing Assets" has a very material back-story. Soesemann said that when she moved to Roswell for the Artist in Residence program, the collapsing economy and Bernie Madoff scandal weighed heavily on her mind. The abstract work is symbolic of financial assets that enter a chaotic financial system and start to vanish.

"Reconstruction of the Memory Palace," a tapestry of sheer fabrics that overlap, layering their hues and changing with the angle of the light, combines concrete experiences with amorphous ideas. It was inspired by the Mayan and Incan ruins Soesemann encountered in Latin America. Massive stone blocks are scattered around the sites, leading to an infinite amount of speculation on how they once fit together.

Like an old memory, she said, "You try to reconstruct it. You may or may not be right."

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