

The Hamptons and Handstitching

By Eric Ernst

When the police arrived in Springs on Saturday evening at the gallery openings at the Surface Library and the nearby Springs Fireplace Project in East Hampton, many who were on hand to witness their arrival surmised that the officers had come to look into the possible hazards of having so many cars parked densely and rather haphazardly along both sides of Springs-Fireplace Road.

Of course, they might just as easily have been dispatched to investigate an altogether different kind of hazard, which I'll have a comment on later.

Nonetheless, considering that the two galleries did draw quite a crowd, the apparent need for traffic control can be considered a testament to both the historical and continuing importance of the Springs as a geothermal center of the art scene on the East End.

In view of the fact that the extended neighborhood is still home to some of the most accomplished and entertaining artists of the region, both living and interred in Green River Cemetery, I always found it a bit strange that, outside of Ashavagh Hall, the Springs never (if memory serves), until now, boasted a commercial exhibition space of any kind.

One of the spaces that exemplifies this recent change is the Surface Library, currently presenting a small group show titled "Stitch," which, in its various modes and manners, luckily exemplifies this gallery's stated priority of emphasizing the impact of the arts and crafts movement of the 19th and 20th century on contemporary art today.

Offering art as object, the gallery puts a profound emphasis on craft as manifested in conceptually complex terms, gaining the greatest measure of interest by transcending the essentially utilitarian focus of other arts and crafts derived movements.

This is particularly true of the small, stylized cast resin swimming pools by Bonnie Rychlak, which are entertainingly evocative in the manner in which they challenge the viewer's notions of both sculpture and scale.

Serving as paradigmatic examples of pop culture and suburban iconography, the pieces gain in impact through the artist's use of famous historical styles of design as bases for the works themselves, alternately referencing iconographic designers such as Isamu Noguchi and Charles and Ray Eames.

Creating the works as architectural props whose ultimate functionality might be somewhat questionable, the artist further introduces elements of whimsy and mystery in the placement of objects associated with childhood, such as the piece of chewed gum affixed to the reflective surface of "Waterwork 10" (cast resin, drain,

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mirror, on Eames Base).

While Ms. Rychlak's works reflect and exalt an elegant measure of contemporary plasticity, Magali Wilensky's fabric installation pieces look toward a distinctly more organic pictorial orientation. Blending color, line and form to conjure cross-section images embodying imaginary organisms of the natural world, the works appear simple yet are deceptively complex in their structure and construction when viewed from up close.

Further, in their installation on the gallery walls, their independence from each other melts away and they begin to interrelate and become a microcosm of some sort of surrealist universe populated with amoeba-like creatures floating in indeterminate planes.

Mark Khaitsman, by contrast, similarly distills reality into a surreal and indefinably fractured materiality, although he accomplishes it through a visual disruption of this world, rather than an investigation of another.

He achieves this distillation through the use of realistic images that are viewed through layers of packing tape placed over the surface of a photo in a Plexiglas light box. This ends up fracturing the surface planes of the composition, granting a visual illusion that is energetically agitated but nevertheless strangely contemplative.

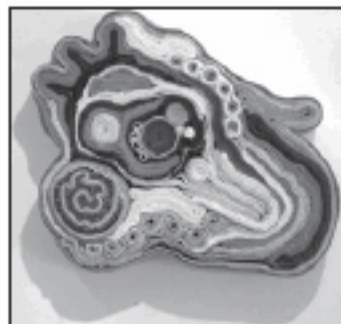
Also featured are Ben Schacter's series of playfully colorful vessels and vases made primarily of aluminum conduit ties and which, in much the same way as works by Ms. Wilensky, conjure images of organic creatures from some distant galaxy.

In these works, though, the artist has created an illusion of functionality that lasts only until one gazes into one of them and finds a twisted and abstract morass of colorful tendrils reminiscent of some sort of malevolent creature from a science fiction movie.

Also on display are works and ceramics by the gallery's proprietors, James Kennedy and Bob Bachler. The exhibition runs through July 8.

Meantime, to get back to the visit by the local police, the Springs-Fireplace Project just up the street is offering an exhibition under the title of "The Annual Hamptons Show," which could have easily aroused some measure of ire—and curiosity on the part of the authorities—in and of itself due to the inclusion of some rather crude though well-painted pomography that had no justifiable place in the exhibition except to offer tasteless shock value.

It should be noted that this personal observation does not arise out of any animosity toward either erotic art in



Magali Wilensky's work is on view in the "Stitched" show at the Surface Library.

general, nor pornography in particular (if you don't believe me, just ask my ex-wife). Instead, the offense taken is one more of a recognition that these works appear to have been hung for absolutely no thematic or narrative reason within the context of the exhibition.

Further, in situating the paintings in a place easily accessible to children, with no explanation or warning outside the gallery, the gallery directors showed a callous disregard for any measure of community decency. To describe it as a vulgar and bourgeois abuse of artistic and curatorial license is an observation tilted toward extreme understatement.

What makes the crass display that much more unfortunate is the fact that the inclusion of these works distracts both from the other painters in the exhibition and from their work on view, for the simple fact of their incongruity.

It is difficult, in effect, to appreciate the gentle elements of Patrick McDonough's "Blue Song" (oil on linen) or Lynn Kohlman's thoughtful narrative throughout "The Un-Hampton Series" (C-print) while one still has the title and graphic subject matter of "Gangbang" (oil on canvas) knocking around one's cerebral cortex.

"The Annual Hamptons Show" continues at the Springs-Fireplace Project through June 27.



Detail of a painting from Lynn Kohlman's "Un-Hampton" series on view at the Fireplace Project.