

On Symbols and Stitches

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If I were to sum up common strengths of the artists participating in **Fibreworks 2020**, my list would include:

1. Incredible attention to detail.
2. A deep well of patience.
3. A commitment of quality craftsmanship.
4. The courage to create unique forms of expression.

Fibreworks is a long-running biennial exhibition of contemporary Canadian fibre art, and is now on show until October 31 at the Queen's Square gallery of Cambridge Art Galleries | Idea Exchange.

I'll be frank: I can't even sew two neat stitches in a row. I can knit, in theory, but anything more complicated than a garter stitch gives me a headache. Does store-bought latch hook count as fibre art? I have a half-completed kit at home.

My creative outlet of choice is photography, so an exhibition like **Fibreworks** is a treat. Studying the work of unfamiliar mediums is a refreshing way to experience art.

The gallery experience can be intimidating to those of us who don't usually move in artistic circles. Sometimes, it caters to a certain crowd to which I can't even pretend to belong. I've felt out of place, judged, and bewildered in some galleries, which has - sadly - taken away from my experience. Thankfully, our local public galleries at Cambridge Art Galleries | Idea Exchange welcome everyone to their spaces (for free!) to respectfully explore the exhibitions. The works are carefully curated to demonstrate both artistic skill and a reflection of contemporary issues.

Among my immediate impressions of **Fibreworks** was the observation that the participating artists, by nature of the medium, are undoubtedly devoted to their crafts. I can't knowledgeably speak of the technical skill in working with textiles (as mentioned earlier, I'm more or less the opposite of a fibre artist), but I can certainly appreciate the amount of tedious work and time woven into these pieces (ha! See what I did there?).

Nanhee Kim's **Layered Fluidity #6** is a large, intricate net of fibers. The official description of the work indicates that it was hand manipulated with a manual knitting machine. Tiny loops and stitches combine to form a piece that, to me, holds a nautical feel; the sweep of the patterns remind me of the graceful curve of fish scales. Kathryn Hernden's **Sunset on the Digital Strip** is a dynamic play of colour and geometry, blending intensely coloured acrylics with coordinating patterns of interwoven thread, measured and executed with the precision of a mathematician.

These works are labours of love. They weren't whipped up over a lunch break.

In any form of creative expression, there are surface-level aesthetics, and there are uniquely personal meanings that lie deeper within. The results can be intensely symbolic. In my middle years, I think I'm learning (or re-learning) that exposing and interpreting some of these deeper themes takes time. Sometimes I look at a piece and think, "I don't get it." Maybe I'll never get it. But maybe, if I'm patient and quiet, if I pay attention, an emotion or message reveals itself.

Art, I'm discovering, is a relationship between the artist, the work, and the audience. The artist speaks, and we must make efforts to listen and to understand, but sometimes that message is elusive. We each bring our own wild concoction of life experiences, values, joys, and traumas to a piece of art - both as the maker and as the observer. In observing creative work, we have to be prepared, at all times, to be faced with more questions than answers. Even if the artist's intended message isn't exactly the same one we receive, it's just as powerful if the piece resonates with us for different personal reasons.

Yasmeen Nematt Alla's **Not Traumatic Enough for a Shock Blanket** is a collection of six fleece garments draped on wall hooks, as if in a closet or entryway, with text embroidered onto each one. "The pain felt deserved," reads one; "I was such a burden," reads another. The language is direct, unflinching. The garments are orange and the folds hang loosely, so that the full text needs to be 'found' by the viewer changing position. If we only keep one perspective, words may be missing or incomplete, and change the meaning of the phrase. The whole picture requires observation from all angles. Isn't that the truth?

Lies My Teacher Told Me, by Lois Schklar, occupies a large section of gallery wall. Standing at the entrance to the gallery, I was struck at first by its clean lines: 32 strands of black elastic cord hanging in perfect columns against the starkness of the white wall. A closer look reveals the chaos: each strand is twisted, tangled or knotted, some incorporating separate baubles, metal brackets, beads, a tiny bird figurine - evoking, to me, a 'jewelry-making-gone-wrong' sort of vibe. The lights of the gallery create multiple shadowed impressions of the strands against the wall. Beautiful, but troubled. Beautiful and troubled. What were those mysterious lies?

Each piece can stand on its own, but part of the beauty of a gallery setting is that there's new energy created when work is grouped. The mirrors of Bettina Matzkuhn's work bring additional perspective to the pieces around it as we observe their reflections. Lauren Brinson's various yarn works are presented on the floor, while Sofia Escobar's **Macro Weave**, a geometric pendant of yarn and plexiglass, hangs suspended from the ceiling. By its nature, fibre art conveys a sense of organic texture in contrast to some other 2-D mediums. It's interesting to seek out the common aesthetic elements and emotional

themes that unify the exhibition and help our eyes (and minds) move smoothly across the space.

Many thanks to Cambridge Art Galleries for providing the opportunity to share my thoughts about this exhibition. Congratulations to the artists for being selected to participate, and for devoting themselves to their creative work: may they keep doing what they do.

As for me, I'm inspired to keep making pictures (and I may even dig out my half-finished latch hook kit).