

Entertainment

'Undeniable Thread' binds crafts, activism at Blockfort

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The exhibit, opening Thursday, shines a deserved spotlight on sometimes-overlooked forms

Walking into "Undeniable Thread," a new Blockfort exhibit created in collaboration with Midwest Craft Con (MCC), visitors are immediately confronted with a trio of firearms hanging on the north wall of the Downtown gallery. Moving closer, though, the edges begin to soften and the stitching steadily comes into focus, until it becomes evident the three guns have actually been knit from yarn, artist Jen Edwards inviting questions about the weapons' potential for violence and the ongoing push for more restrictive gun legislation in the wake of a seemingly endless string of mass shootings.

Other artists in the exhibition employ quilting, embroidery and sewing to grapple with similarly outsized societal questions, ranging from the war crimes committed under multiple past U.S. administrations to the issues swirling around the current presidential primary season, the inherent softness of the deployed materials (fabric, yarn, thread, etc.) bringing these oft-harsh realities into sharper reserve.

"Undeniable Thread," which opens Thursday, Feb. 6, is the brainchild of Megan Green of Craftin' Outlaws and MCC (Blockfort will host **a Feb. 27 closing reception of the exhibit prior to the craft conference**, which runs Feb. 28-March 1), inspired by an exhibit she viewed at Museum of Design Atlanta (MODA) that featured craft makers confronting activist issues.

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“I’ve been involved in the creative craft movement for over a decade, so I believe that craft is a really great form of personal expression,” Green said. “So this was really just an extension of me appreciating craft as an art form. It’s not always recognized for the value that it’s carried over generations.”

Green noted that this lack of recognition and critical respect could be attributed to the reality that craft tends to be a women-driven practice. “Therefore I think the general value is demeaned,” she said. “Like this idea that a quilt is meant for more home purposes. But a quilt, it’s about putting blocks together. It’s about every thread making up the bigger piece. Quilting goes back to when slaves were using it to represent and tell their stories, and it was something you could pass on from generation to generation. The more we can celebrate that, and recognize craft, in general, for what it is, I think it speaks to where we want conversations to shift and change.”

Craft has long been associated with social justice movements, from the AIDS Memorial Quilt to the pink knit “pussy hats” that surfaced during the 2017 Women’s March on Washington D.C., and the conversation continues in the pieces from the eight represented artists, including Edwards, whose intricate firearms incorporate moving pieces (a yarn box inside one display case is even packed with knit ammunition), and Bonnie Peterson, whose “War Crimes” quilt documents atrocities predating the current administration.

“So Bonnie’s been thinking of this since long before Donald Trump was a thing,” said Blockfort’s Adam Brouillette. “Obviously there’s an amplification when there’s an entity like that in office, but I thought it was interesting the types of categories people are talking about [in the exhibit]: race issues, gun issues, political and social issues.

“I’m not a crafter, but as an artist I can say that working on a piece that has some political and social connotation, it’s almost like time spent thinking about that thing, and then when you get done and present it, it’s almost like you’ve found a way to excise it, to push it out of yourself. I know for a lot of artists, [creation] ... is just a way to process what’s going on, and I imagine the craft world is probably the same.”

Galleries like Blockfort finally displaying these craft creations on their walls, presenting them on equal footing with more traditionally lauded forms, extends these similarities to the way in which these pieces are treated within the larger art

world, a long-overdue development.

“I want to see what happens when there’s a bunch of crafters here for a conference (MCC), and what they do is showcased on white walls in a gallery,” Brouillette said. “I think that kind of stuff is a feather in the cap of crafters, where they can come in and say ... ‘What we do is important, too.’”

“Through Craftin’ Outlaws having moved from essentially a back room at Skully’s to now showcasing our work at the Columbus Museum of Art, creators are really looking for that elevation,” Green said. “So I think extending into a gallery setting is really important. But including these pieces at higher levels, in terms of museums, and continuing to raise the bar of where these voices get displayed is a trend we need to see continue.”

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