

DANCING DAZZLING BEADS

Spring promises to arrive along with “Dazzling Dancing Beads,” an exhibition dependent upon dazzling, dancing light. The North Dakota Museum of Art, known for its galleries defined by shifting, changing, glorious light, will greet the season with the work of thirteen artists addicted to beading.

Beads have been traded around the world for centuries. When White traders moved into the American West, they brought beads along, stashed away to be traded for pelts. And Indian people keen to unload fur pelts instantly coveted the shiny, glass beads. Beading resembled their quillwork, but promised to be far less labor intensive. No killing the porcupine, retrieving the quills, flattening and dyeing them before they could begin to sew them onto the hide backing. And beads caught the light; they sparkled. It wasn’t long before Indian people claimed beads as their own, seamlessly continuing their traditional patterns and objects but made from beads.

Victorian women and folk artists always beaded but it wasn’t until the last few decades contemporary Western artists turned to beads. They recognized that through accumulation, beads and more beads could be amassed into works of art, making whole galleries dance with reflected light.

Minneapolis guitar-playing, former art world heavyweight, meditating monk, and artist Glen Hanson uses 11,000 beads in each of the four, 7 x 6 inch artworks in the exhibition. With tanned hide as his foundation, he confines himself to one technique, the old Lakota style of beading called ‘lazy stitch.’ Elizabeth Simonson, on the other hand, strings thousands of beads into huge abstract installations, or intensely beaded globes suspended from the gallery beams.

Pearls and glass and plastic, wood and metal and stone, seeds and bone and precious gemstones: beads can found in nature, or carved and cast from almost anything. The only defining element is the hole drilled through the middle for stringing or sewing. Contemporary artists such as Judy Onofrio, Shawne Major—and most children—subvert the labor-intensive handwork with that contemporary contraption, the glue gun. Both artists have large, arresting works in the show, which typically combine beads with other non-precious materials.

Baltimore artist Joyce Scott is known as the “Queen of Beads.” She is of African-American, Native American and Scottish descent. Canadian CK Adams is of Inuit, Cree, and Scottish descent. Both use their art to confront stereotypes. Scott grew up in Selkirk, Manitoba, a mixed-race community where everyone seemed equal to her. Only when she moved to Montreal and later Winnipeg, did she learn what the word racist meant.

KC Adams responded in her “Cyborg Hybrid Series.” First she sought out living Cyborg Hybrids, defined as “Euro-Aboriginal artists who are forward thinkers and plugged into technology.” Using white beads on white tee shirts, she sewed the derisive barbs she often heard repeated around her: Scalping Is In My Blood. Half Breed. Savage. Ask Me About My Sweet Grass. Igloo Builder. Welfare Mom. Alcoholic. Dirty Red Skin. Next she fashioned white chokers for her Cyborgs to wear while she photographed them in stoic poses, mocking photographs of aboriginal people from the 19th and early 20th century. She then digitally altered the photos to look like their counterparts in glamorous magazine. Their defiant poses challenge the viewer to try and classify their identity. Adams is exhibiting Cyborg Accessories in Dancing Dazzling Beads. These include fur and hide mittens, a lighted pencil, bracelet, necklace, cell phone case and an iPad cover, all gorgeously beaded in white on white.



Joyce Scott says, “I believe in messing with stereotypes, prodding the viewer to reassess.” Her work in the show includes sculptures *Pretty Girl Veiled*, *Race Rattle*, and *Ancestry / Progeny*. In *Pretty Girl Veiled*, the girl is a Nigerian wooded sculpture; made pretty in a yellow, sparkling beaded dress; and veiled in a dark brown, diaphanous fabric. With her ambiguous and magnetic sculpture, Scott skewers colonial and racist attitudes, especially toward loaded subjects such as her black ancestry. Sometimes brash, other times subtle, Scott has led the field in transforming the lowly craft of beading into high art.

Sonya Clark follows in Scott’s footsteps with her strong sense of her own being within complex African-influenced traditions, the long history of textiles, and highly developed social understandings. Both create sculpture that is witty, seemingly offhanded, and spot on. Like Scott, Sonya Clark quickly established a national reputation and continues to pull down award after award. And like Scott, the honors are based upon her impeccable art grounded in history and life. Whimsical, seemingly simple and appearing hand made, her art grows out of a rigorous thought process, which she transforms into visual language.



Sherry Markovitz speaks abstractly about her goals. “My work is about animating the inanimate. It’s about blending observations and dreamlike sensations into forms using color, light, transparency, and opacity.” In reality, her drawing on paper in the exhibition “Beaded Doll” does just that. Light seems to shimmer across, through, and be blocked by the light defying, matt gouache on translucent rice paper.

Whereas Markovitz’s drawing is informal, Evelyn Svec Ward made formal, carefully considered collages. A member of the first generation of the Contemporary Fiber Movement, her work was included in the Museum’s “Frontiers in Fiber: The Americans” exhibition curated by Museum Director Laurel Reuter. It introduced the movement to Asian audiences for the first time as the exhibition toured to thirteen Pacific Rim cities and China.

Nadia Myre’s “Meditation on Red” is a series of tondos or round photographs twenty-four inches in diameter. Myre creates the original, small beaded mandala by hand, carefully selecting shades of red beads, two or three at a time, to gradually stitch her painting into being. When these small meditations on a circle are complete, she photographs and enlarges them many times their original size. When mounted and placed in exhibition, they become monumental works, closer to paintings than the small craft objects of their beginnings.

Another painter with beads is Jessica Kincaid, and artist from Kansas City who spends days recreating snapshots from dreams. Retail Theater, a work in the exhibition, was dreamed on November 8, 2008. *I dreamed my mother took me to Kmart. We were going to shop for jeans but it was almost completely dark inside the store. There were racks of clothes but just a small amount of ambient light. A separate large sales floor extended across from the area where we were shopping. It was also dimly lit and it looked like a movie theater. There were several sunken areas for sitting and there were a few platforms with nice leather chairs on them. I sat on one of the chairs and it slowly hinged back. I was looking up and I saw a ge-ometric design/ a Persian rug was hovering a few feet from the ceiling. Thus was born her beaded picture.*



On November 11, 2009, she dreamed Perfume Counter: *I was in a department store with my mother and my grandmother (1920-2004). Mom and I were in the petites department when I saw across the store into the women’s department and there were three men. They were in separate spots as if they were uncomfortable., shopping with their wives. There was another man relaxing coolly because he had found the only chair. The chair in this piece is for the men. In the store there was an elevator that used to be in the back of an old department store, either Harzfeld’s or Woolf Brothers. The store had a checkered floor too. They still sold outrageously priced cosmetics in pastel colored bottles and compacts. I wanted to show the meeting of these strange realms: both dilapidated and glitzy-cool.*



Sculptor Christy Puetz studied at the University of North Dakota before landing in Arizona where her attraction to animal and human forms followed her. The small work in the show epitomizes her large oeuvre about which she says, “My figures feature exaggerated body parts and poses, and many of them have a comic-book feel. I view them as three-dimensional action figures from different experiences in my life.” Like many artists she stumbled into beading attracted by the beauty of beads: “I bought a few hanks of seed beads while on a road trip with my mother. I saw them and thought they were beautiful. I didn’t know what I would do with them—I didn’t know how to bead at the time—but I had to have them. When I got home, I hung them on the wall so that I could look at them. I eventually decided to sew them onto a cloth figure that I’d created. The rest is history.”

Fashion and beading have always been intertwined. The oldest works in the exhibition are from the Late Period in Egypt (666 through 332 BC). A fragment from a wooded coffin is decoratively painted with a broad bead collar. A mummy shroud from is made of netting constructed with Egyptian faience beads of their usual blue-green color. Contemporary fashion is boldest in Kent Monkman’s *Beaded Moccasins*, a 6-inch pair of vinyl high heels with their bands of plastic “Indian beading.”

New Yorker Evelyn Letfuss makes her jewels from the remnants of life around her. The necklace *Monarch Migration* Though Manhattan was inspired by a walk in her midtown neighborhood. At the air-polluted corner of 42nd street near Lexington Avenue she I found a dying Monarch butterfly. It served as a model for her beaded version in the necklace. “I attached a beaded Monarch butterfly and a pendant depicting the nearby Chrysler building.” The necklace comes with one Monarch ear ornament. Rochelle Peterson’s beaded contemporary shroud, necklaces, and bracelets, are intended to be beautiful, to evoke spring, to continue the tradition of jewelry that grew out of the Victorian passion for wearing beads.

Anne Kingsbury is a poet, a recorder of the history of ordinary life, and the Founder and Executive Director of one of America’s most important independent bookstores, Woodland Pattern Book Center. Wikipedia reports that this nonprofit center presents small press literature, readings, visual art, and experimental music “with a focus on contemporary practice.” The bookstore is known for poetry, multicultural literature, and books published by small and independent presses. One finds chapbooks, zines, regional literary journals, and one-of-a-kind artist’s books. Since 1979, Woodland Pattern has become know for its “community alliances, its efforts to bridge cultural and genre divides, and the diversity of its offerings, as well as its emphasis on new (experimental) writers and writing. An art gallery offers space for exhibitions as well as performances, film screenings, classes, installations, conferences, symposia, and workshops.”



How does such a place survive in the United States today? Through the wiles, nurturing, and determination of a woman who beads as well, Anne Kingsbury, says North Dakota Museum of Art Director Laurel Reuter. When asked to see her poetry, Anne replies, “I bead my poetry.” And she beads her passion for literature, starting with the letters of the alphabet—the “Ds” in Dazzling Dancing Beads are hers. She currently is attempting to bead an entire deer hide with journal entries starting in 1979, which couldn’t be in the show “because I have to keep working on it.” She decided to keep track of her own life by writing down what she does in fifteen-minute blocks. These blocks of time are beaded into *Beaded Journal Page, 2003-2007*, a work in the exhibition. Perhaps of all the works in this exhibition, Anne Kingsbury’s best demonstrates the full integration of beading into a spectacularly useful and nurturing life. For beads have sustained women—especially women—for endless and unknown time.



Joyce Scott will give the Elaine McKenzie Memorial Lecture on Thursday, May 2, at 7 pm.