

METRO PULSE

The Art World's New Clothes: Beverly Semmes Challenges Us to See Textiles as Feminist Sculpture

By Heather Joyner Spica | Wednesday, August 1, 2012

Seeing the *Starcraft* exhibition (at the Knoxville Museum of Art through Sept. 9), a presentation of work by Brooklyn-based artist Beverly Semmes, I had to acknowledge an emperor's-new-clothes perspective rearing its head just a bit. Semmes' latest show should not in any way be dismissed. The impact of color alone in her current installation is pretty remarkable—the intense orange of the chiffon used for her "Prairie Dress" actually reflected in surrounding light, for instance. But despite its many positives, something about *Starcraft* feels overwrought; at times its combined themes come across as trying far too hard to be mysterious. And sometimes, they simply don't come across.

A form that's likely familiar to many viewers of the show, the installation approach to art took off in the early 1970s, and video loops and other means by which gallery-goers are incorporated into works are evidently here to stay. In other words, it's a form of expression that arts writer Michael Archer characterizes as "not merely something to be looked at, but a space to be entered and experienced in a fully physical manner." *Starcraft* indeed fits that description, presenting the usual combination of different media.

For *Starcraft*, the KMA, as always, has employed the scale of its upstairs Faires Stokely Gallery to stunning effect. Misshapen ceramic vessels on numerous blocks positioned throughout the space (referred to by critics as "questionable-looking" or "child-like and blobby") provide pops of color corresponding with ones found in Semmes' three enormous wall-mounted dresses with elongated sleeves, their fabric pooling like oversized Christmas tree skirts onto the floor.

The uninhabited dresses, generally Semmes' best-known work, possibly allude to women's sense of identity and lesser status in the art world as we know it. Simultaneously surreal and amusing, they come in different sizes, all larger than life and possessing a ceramic piece in the middle of each flat circle of cloth. I suppose one interpretation could be that the centered "pot"—more vessel-like in "Olga" and "Ophelia" than in "Prairie Dress"—symbolizes domesticity, around which women have historically revolved. Yet the metaphor is maybe a little too mixed.

Ingrid Schaffner, who wrote an introduction to one of Semmes' exhibition catalogs, sees the artist as being "part of a generation who made their mark during the early 1990s with a

Feminist take on Minimalist art of the 1960s." She adds, "Semmes uses her sculptures to communicate feminist ideas about 'women's work' and women's ideal 'place.'" Perhaps. But I see Semmes' whimsical dresses as instead evoking fantasy—the delight of little girls playing dress-up.

Included among 13 photographs by Semmes are a trio of cibachrome prints approximately 5-foot wide, with pumped-up hues and subject matter linking them to the rest of the exhibition. Like their smaller counterparts, they feature cloaked or mummified-looking figures and fabric used in a number of ways. A four-minute video titled "Four Views: Sitting, Flapping, Walking, Swimming" sets in motion a female figure also seen in photos. Images shift from the figure drifting in a boat to her perching on rocks, then streaming a narrow length of cloth through clustered trees in a forest primeval, and finally, beneath the water's surface, either swimming or drowning.

Rounding out the work in *Starcraft*—by virtue of contrast—are five particularly large crystal pieces, each on its own pedestal and lit by a pendant above, transparent forms like clustered icicles along the east wall. Their coiled "ropes" of glass reference the methods by which grouped ceramics are constructed. But the show includes too many of the aforementioned lumpy vessels, and as beautiful and colorful as some of Semmes' glazes are, some resemble slimy egg yolk, spackling paste, and other not-so-lovely substances. In such quantity, the sometimes spidery "vases" and other shapes end up crowded and lacking oomph.

Semmes' tendency to try too hard might simply be a matter of her dominant, ongoing themes wearing a bit thin. Even her attempts at not trying to create well-crafted ceramic pieces (supposedly to challenge accepted notions) seem somewhat forced. Nevertheless, Semmes' curriculum vitae conveys that she is quite accomplished and has arrived where she is with her work after much consideration and effort.

After graduating from the Yale School of Art, Semmes began exhibiting throughout the United States and Europe. In addition to solo efforts, she participated, in the early 1990s, in various group exhibitions such as *Plastic Fantastic Lover* at Manhattan's Blum Helman Warehouse. She received an NEA fellowship and moved on to design costumes and sets in 1995 (collaborating with the French choreographer Mathilde Monnier) for the "Nuit" production that continues to tour even now.

Semmes' major solo shows have been at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, and New York's Whitney Museum, among other venues.

Starcraft, originating at Chattanooga's Hunter Museum (and curated by Nandini Makrandi, formerly of the KMA), is certainly worth seeing.