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"Unconventional 'Stitches' at the Armory Center for the Arts"

Scarlet Cheng

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Unconventional 'Stitches' at the Armory Center for the Arts

The Pasadena show knits together traditional techniques into sophisticated two- and three-dimensional works, elevating sewing, quilting and weaving to the realm of fine arts.

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Titus Kaphar /, Titus Kaphar /

In the 1970s, artists such as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago reclaimed crafts such as sewing, weaving and quilting and used them to create new and often politicized work. At the time, it was a radical gesture; today, these techniques have been absorbed into the artist's toolbox, as we see in "Stitches," a group show at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena through June 6.

"I've always had a fascination with process and material-based work," says curator Sinéad Finnerty-Pyne. "My object was to show work that was more sophisticated," she says, "that was elevating these techniques and showing how they could be applied with a fine art sensibility."

The work of the 12 artists she selected runs an eye-popping gamut of the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, some of which incorporates more traditional techniques such as painting and photography. They include such internationally noted artists as Elias Simé, an Ethiopian known for his intricate embroidery on canvas, and Dinh Q. Lê, a Vietnamese American known for his lattice-like interweaving of photographic images.

Some play on recognizable stitchery work such as Jane Brucker's installation of unraveled garments. During the opening, the artist did a performance piece in which she sat on one stool knitting together what another woman opposite her was unraveling.

Deconstruction is also a key idea for Titus Kaphar. He paints portraiture in a classical European style, sometimes adding African American figures. Then he cuts, tars and otherwise manipulates the surface.

Nicola Vruwink has a room for her installation, "pop rocks, moonlight skate, a & w teen burgers, keds..." made up of columns of black and brown audio tape, crocheted together and puddling here and there, creating a jungle effect. Small speakers are hidden in the columns, playing a sound mix Vruwink excerpted from the tapes. "I wanted to work with cassette tape because making a mixed tape is an act of love," she says. "I love when things took time, when the pace of life was a little slower."

Nuttaphol Ma's "Piano Loom, Tchaikovsky's Cocoon" also occupies a room. He has constructed a giant loom starting at the doorway and extending to the back, where sits a skeletal piano with colored felt keys. An LP player on a chair plays Tchaikovsky's last composition, the "Pathétique." When Ma heard it for the first time last year, the music moved him to tears, so the work is an homage to the composer and his untimely death.

"I like the fact that when someone comes in, they have to bow," says Ma, demonstrating as he dips his head to avoid a horizontal slat as he enters the room. "And they have to do the same when they come out."