



Intimate Apparel (What's a Merkin?)

YOU COULDN'T TELL from the title of the exhibition or its promotional postcard—photo fragments of crochet, lichen, a guy in a gas mask—what the art *was*.

This enigmatic approach was strategic—as were the pink T-shirts worn by curator Linda Gass and participating artists attending the fourteenth International Surface Design Association Conference in Kansas City in June, which hosted the Intimate Apparel show. These shirts were printed with an invitation to ask the wearer about her merkin.

If you arrived at Pi Gallery uninitiated and clueless, you found yourself in a forest of pedestals topped with—pubic wigs. Made by artists.

The walls of the gallery offered up many more—but with only the briefest of explanations: “hair-piece for the pubic area” and “counterfeit hair for women’s privy parts.” If further backstory was available, it was clandestine, and lists of each merkin maker were hard to find—but skimpy information did not diminish the raw viewing pleasure.

Given only the definition and a size constraint, Gass invited artists to use the merkin as a format for artwork. The assembled results are certainly the most humorous, entertaining, and stimulating manifestation of an exhibition concept that this reviewer has seen at an SDA conference—and spot on for the conference theme of Mind + Body.

Irony, aggression, wit, and hilarity rule this show. Purple silicon fishing worms (*Bait* by Robin Cowley) play

ABOVE LEFT: Ingrid Goldbloom Bloch, *Untitled*, 2006; approximately 1,000 bobby pins pushed through shaped brass-screen grid, edges finished with wrapped upholstery thread: 7½" x 7" x 2½" (12" x 12" x 3½" framed). *Photo:* Dean Powell. *ABOVE RIGHT:* Robin Cowley, *Bait*, 2006; industrial black plastic screening cut to size, purple silicone fishing worms pulled through the openings, mounted on canvas; 10" x 6" x 3" (12" x 12" x 4¾" framed). *Photo:* Don Tuttle. *BELOW:* Wendy Huhn, *Safety 1st*, 2006; cotton thread, silk flowers, beads, cotton fabric, Timtex interfacing as batting; hand embroidery, stitching, xylene transfers, bead-ing; 6" x 7½" x 1/8" (12" x 12" x 1/8" framed). *Photo by the artist.*



on words and senses, as do shaped seaweed (*Something Fishy* by Elin Noble) and plastic cherries (*Cherry Pie* by Miriam Nathan Roberts). A thousand bobby pins become hairy; a mound of X-acto blades becomes scary. A shaped jacquard fig leaf displays weaving virtuosity, crocheted keys incite the imagination. Some merkins hint at and others shout the maker's public—and private—experience of being female.

The concept of a merkin show sprang from the fertile mind of the curator after a friend sent her a web link to a hot pink fake fur *Flashlight Merkin* created as satirical must-have gear for Burners (attendees of Burning Man—the alt art community that gathers—clothing optional—in the Nevada desert each Labor Day). Riffing on the idea with other artists led to the exhibition proposal and thus the thirty-seven works by twenty-three female artist on view at Pi.

It's not in Merriam-Webster's, but according to Wikipedia—where *Flashlight Merkin* illustrates the entry—"a merkin (first use, according to the OED, 1617) is a pubic wig, worn by prostitutes after shaving their genitalia to eliminate lice or to disguise the marks of syphilis." Further, currently known as "night flowers" to the Japanese, they are used to mask physical immaturity. The meaning of *merkin* was not unknown to a Kansas City woman who told Gass that she and her thirty-something friends have an annual merkin party (the merkins are worn over clothing) and sent her a photo of a mullet merkin in situ. Who knew?

Intimate Apparel should not stay a secret—or a regional delicacy. The art establishment has made a permanent place at the table for Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (now at the Brooklyn Museum), so galleries should be clamoring to offer a wider public *this* saucy banquet of conceptual muff. FA

Curator Linda Gass has posted images of the works on her website: www.lindagass.com/IntimateApparel. Gass's quilt South bay was the cover image for our Summer 2006 issue. Pi Gallery's website is www.pigallery.com.

TOP: *Bean Gilsdorf, Oh Darling, 2006; hand embroidery, sequins, lace on cotton; 6½" x 9" x 1/8" (12" x 12" x 1" framed). Photo by the artist. MIDDLE: Carolyn Kallenborn, Yes or No, 2006; X-acto blades, beads, sequins, bells, velvet, ribbon, found objects; stitching, construction, disperse dye; 2½" x 12" x 8". Photo: Jeff Bruce. BOTTOM: Bette Levy, Traveling Merkin Salesman's Display Case, 2006; waxed thread on vintage keys, douppioni; crochet; 11" x 16½" x 1½". Photo: Geoffrey Carr.*

