

More than just dyed in the wool

Spray foam. Stainless steel. A towing rope? That's just a few of today's knit pickings.

By David Ng
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New York — TO knit a simple sweater or scarf, you'll need the following: a ball of yarn, a pair of knitting needles and a pattern. To knit a work of art, you'll probably want to make room in your knitting bag for some new materials: industrial lead, say, or stainless steel, or cans of spray foam, or maybe enough nautical towing rope to pull a barge.

The world of knitting is looking a lot less warm and fuzzy these days as artists take the domestic pastime in unexpected directions. If Martha Stewart opened a poncho shop with Salvador Dalí, they might produce something like the knitted peculiarities popping up in galleries and museums across the country and beyond.

"Artists are taking knitting out of its traditional context and exploding people's conceptions of what they're going to be seeing," says David Revere McFadden, chief curator of the Museum of Arts & Design in New York, where a new exhibition, "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting," just opened. The show, which continues through June 17, features more than 40 works by 27 artists from around the world and spotlights innovations in fiber art, which has seen a significant resurgence in the last 10 years, according to McFadden.

Chief among the innovations, and a source of inspiration for many artists, are the materials: Traditional wool is out, anything offbeat is in, so long as it can be knitted, stitched, crocheted, knotted or otherwise twisted together. The weirder and more uncooperative, the better.

Artist Dave Cole of Providence, R.I., is showing a teddy bear he knitted out of industrial lead strips using custom-made steel knitting needles. (The lead kept breaking his regular aluminum needles.) "Big Lead Teddy Bear" is stuffed with lead wool, sits 8 inches high and weighs 25 pounds. Cole is also exhibiting an evening gown made of 1,000 \$1 bills that he cut into strips the width of dental floss and then knitted into a nine-piece dress.

"It's not that I work with obscure materials," says Cole. "These are common materials within their normal context. But I'm asking them to do something that they never, ever do."

Sharon Kagan, an L.A.-based artist, makes a point echoed by many who work in fiber: "Artists who knit don't want to be defined as just craftsmen. I think that's why more of us are seeking out the unconventional."

Kagan is using polyester tying ribbon, the type normally used to bundle newspapers, to knit an abstract 19th-century-style ball gown that she will exhibit in May at a group show at LAAA / Gallery 825 in West Hollywood. The gown will incorporate knitted and crocheted elements as well as steel armature to give the whole work a voluminous bell shape. Last summer, Kagan, along with five other L.A.-area artists working under the direction of sculptor Tim Hawkinson, created a giant project called "Sweater" at Gallery 825. The team used beige spray foam, the kind used for insulation, to construct a series of 4-by-8-foot grids arranged to suggest the inside of a sweater magnified 10 times.

Nicola Vruwink of L.A. crochets ribbon from audiocassette tapes. Her latest work, "The Nothingness of Nothingness," is on view through March 11 in a group show titled "Darkness & Light" at Armory Northwest in Pasadena. The piece stands nearly 12 feet tall and emulates the overgrown foliage typically seen on the sides of buildings and freeway structures. Vruwink plans a similar installation July 21 through Aug. 25 at a contemporary art in Culver City. In the past, she has crocheted wall-size lyrics of '80s pop songs by Wham! and Bonnie Tyler.

"Part of it is my nostalgia for my youth, when we listened to music on cassettes," Vruwink says. "But I'm also fascinated with the material. It has a sparkle to it. It's physically light, but it has a visual weight."

Breaking the mold

EXPERIMENTAL knitting has a multithreaded history. It garnered attention in the '50s, when such artists as Lenore Tawney, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Ed Rossbach abandoned two-dimensional fiber art and embraced free-standing shapes with sculptural elements.

About the same time, unconventional material began appearing in knitted art. Ruth Asawa drew notice for her knitted and crocheted wire sculptures. (A retrospective of her work opens March 10 at the Japanese American National Museum in L.A.) In the '60s, Eva Hesse changed the art of weaving by incorporating plastics, latex and other synthetics.

Marcel Duchamp, the early 20th-century Dada pioneer, wasn't a knitter, but his ideas influenced many contemporary textile artists.

"Knitting is Duchampian in that you treat your material like ready-mades," says artist Sheila Pepe. "You have to go out and find your material and then ask yourself, 'Now what do I do with it?'" From Feb. 28 through April 9, Pepe, of Brooklyn, will display a wall scrim knitted from industrial rubber bands and shoelaces at a group show called "Shared Women" at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. She's knitting a site-specific installation made from nautical tow line (a homage to her waterfront neighborhood) that is on display in the "Radical Lace" show.

"More artists are gravitating toward recycled material," says Carole Beadle, a professor of textile arts at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. "Anything with a sense of memory to it is popular now."

Dutch artist Erna van Sambeek has created a series of clothes called "Body Warmers for a Poor Family" knitted entirely out of newspapers, including old copies of the Financial Times.



(The work is on view at the Museum of Arts & Design.) The irony of using a business publication to clothe the poor is meant to be humorous, according to the artist. "It's more a social statement, not really a political statement," she says. "There's also the contradiction that this is being shown in a museum and poor people who live in the street don't go to museums. But there it hangs, clothing for them."

"I made little textile marks on the newspaper to make it look nice, like something you'd want to own. The good thing about newspaper is that if it breaks, you use a little glue to put it back together and off you go again."

Spider's silk and goat's milk?

AS the textile industry evolves, with high-tech fabrics and consumer synthetics as well as experimental products, such as bio-steel (an industrial fiber made from spider's silk and goat's milk being developed by Nexia Biotechnologies), artists find ways to incorporate the innovations.

Sheila Klein of Bow, Wa., created a series of outdoor crocheted pieces titled "Comfort Zone" (2004) made of a new stainless-steel yarn manufactured by Bekaert, a Belgian company specializing in industrial textiles. The material, which cost \$120,000 and weighed nearly a ton, was made by reducing stainless-steel fiber down to the width of a hair and then spinning it into a configuration that was more durable than conventional stainless-steel yarn. Klein, working in a team of six, crocheted a series of panels, each more than 20 feet wide, that were hung on the exteriors of public buildings in Seattle.

"I wanted a yarn that was permanent, not mutable, and yet was flexible enough to crochet," she explains. "Knitting represents a return to something primary. For me, it's interesting to infuse the primary with technology." Klein, who designed and created a 1996 installation at LAX titled "XX Marks the Spot," has also used so-called high-performance textiles, such as spandex and those found in football jerseys, in recent work.

With new materials come entirely new methods of knitting. Japanese artist and designer Yoshiaki Hishinuma has created machines that knit three-dimensional wearables from beginning to end without cutting the material, a process he likens to making a molded chair. "Casablanca," on view in "Radical Lace," is a woman's shawl created by one of his machines. The shawl sits about 3 feet wide and suggests the inside of a flower flattened out and magnified. To make it, Hishinuma loaded green, white and red yarn into the machine, then programmed the knitting pattern. From a slot at one end, the knitted garment gradually emerged row by row.

Hishinuma, who owns his own fashion label and has exhibited his work in museums around the world, comes from a tradition of textile innovation in Japan that includes artist Junichi Arai and fashion designer Issey Miyake, for whom Hishinuma once worked.

"Every hand technique that I know of, people are working now to translate them digitally," says Eugene van Veldhoven, an Amsterdam-based textile designer and instructor at the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague who created fabrics for "Radical Lace" using lasers.

Van Veldhoven noted that artists can construct fabrics entirely by computer now, without ever touching the material, but added: "I think there will always be handwork. I think we're past the age when everything should look like science fiction. People still want things to look friendly and personal."