



## Traditions/Transitions: The Changing World of Fiber Art

**FOR SEVERAL MONTHS**, *Fiberarts* readers and contributors have been carrying on a dialogue about the complex, and sometimes contentious, relationship between fiber arts and the larger art world. Faced with the difficulty of determining what counts as art and what does not, some people invoke the “institutional” theory. According to this view, proposed by philosopher George Dickie [*American Philosophical Quarterly*, July 1969], an artifact becomes an artwork when an institution presents it to the public as a “candidate for appreciation.” Therefore, simply by its purchase of contemporary works in fiber, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, has essentially declared them to be works of art.

By refusing to define an artwork by its medium, the institutional theory opens the art world to include materials and techniques, fiber among them, that otherwise might be ignored or disparaged. The question is, Does presenting works as art make them art? Critics feel that

*ABOVE: Norma Minkowitz, Goodbye Goddess, 2003; fiber, wire, acrylic paint, resin; 51" x 96" x 9". Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Photo: Richard Bergen.*

the theory is simplistically circular. *Traditions/Transitions: The Changing World of Fiber Art* (November 20, 2004–March 6, 2005), a Wadsworth exhibit of seventeen works, provided outstanding examples of fiber art and offered food for philosophic thought. Wall sculptures, baskets, vessels, and hangings of various traditional and high-tech materials exhibited great variety in style of execution.

According to Olga De Amaral, art is an attempt to convey meaning, while craft is decorative or functional. This definition is exemplified by her *Paisaje Heredado I* (Inherited Landscape I). The subtly blending colors suggest the essence of landscape—color, line, unity—without depicting any recognizable object. “Landscape” is, after all, not a natural object but a concept.





ABOVE: Joan Morris and Michèle Ratté, *Animation 2* (left) and *Animation 3* (right), 2003; 23-karat gold, silk dyes; monoprint, shaped resist; each panel, 6' x 2½'. Courtesy of the artists.

Norma Minkowitz's evocative three-dimensional sculpture, *Goodbye Goddess*, suggests a shawl-like protective garment of delicate openwork crochet, against which are arrayed four classical female shapes. Above, a moonlike sphere surmounted by a small female face gives the piece a wistful character.

Also in the exhibition was a set of three works that explore the interconnections between art and textile printing. Created by collaborators Joan Morris and Michèle Ratté, the series of 6' x 2½' hangings conveys the impression of traditional Japanese silk scrolls. Organic shapes are the theme of these monoprints executed in paint and 23-karat gold on silk. *Animation 2* and *Animation 3* are, very effectively, the positive and negative of each other. Their foundation fabric is a translucent silk; mottled rust

and brown areas are echoed by gold regions. *Animation 1* is the same design rendered in various colors with just a little gold.

The Traditions/Transitions exhibit (which also included works by Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman, Letty Fonteyne, Sheila Hicks, Ferne Jacobs, Gerhardt Knodel, John McQueen, and Lenore Tawney) challenged both the eye and the mind. For viewers who accept the institutional definition of artwork, it offered a highly satisfying experience to see contemporary pieces that use traditional fiber techniques receive the status and recognition they deserve. For those who reject this definition, the pieces nonetheless exhibited formal and expressive qualities that clearly give them aesthetic value as works of art. ●

Maureen Egan is a professor of philosophy and aesthetics who lives in Westfield, Massachusetts.