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ART

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Woman's Work

Natasha Duwin Challenges Everything You Thought You Knew About the Fairer Sex

By Angie Hargot

The real draw to Natasha Duwin's work is not necessarily what it says, but perhaps what it doesn't say — in the symbols that inspire the internal conversation or, that stirring in your gut when you realize you've just seen something important expressed in a way you've never before encountered it.

And it's all the more important because of the way you've just been taken to it.

Duwin's work centers on guiding the viewer to commentary on feminine identity, strength and fragility, and a woman's role in society — via the very materials and tasks that are so intrinsically ingrained in the multi-cultural psyche as 'woman's work.' She reverses the most feminine elements of anatomy while dubbing some of the works "Cuntal Objects."

The artist was born and raised in Buenos Aires and has since lived in New York, Tokyo and Miami. She has exhibited extensively over the last couple of years, including in several prominent collections, both public and private. She will also soon show later this month at Art Monaco, and at Pinta London in June.

In an endeavor as juxtapositional as her craft, Duwin recently teamed up with the often architecturally-styled painter and FAU design professor Henning Haupt for a two-person show in Miami's Design District, at Artformz Alternative. Duwin is also at the helm of a slightly less formal artistic endeavor — Hint: it includes barbecue.

Your work uses a fair amount of weaving and embroidery, to address themes of feminine identity. How did you learn these skills yourself?

I grew up in a family of immigrants that had survived WWII and the devastation of Europe. They brought the habits and skills of the "old way of living" to the New World — things like preserving fruits and vegetables, sewing clothes, mending socks, embellishing tablecloths. I grew up helping the household women to do all these chores, which were inherently feminine, and I use these skills as the vocabulary of the work I do. I call it the transparent work of women: the labor-intensive tasks that seem effortless, and that make the world more livable, enjoyable, and ultimately worth living.

EGGS | BY NATASHA DUWIN

Imagine my surprise when, in addition to women approaching me in fascination at some of my pieces, men started coming up to me to express the very same reactions...

Do you ever encounter confusion or misconceptions surrounding your work?

Surprisingly, I do not. Most people "get it" at a gut level, even when they don't have the vocabulary to explain it.

Your show "Rapture" is a two-person exhibition with Henning Haupt. What's it like exhibiting with him, and what brought your work together?

Henning and I were paired for this exhibition because we share an abstract-yet-poetic way of expressing fairly complex concepts that can be difficult or unpleasant in ways that are beautiful (sorry, there's no other word for it!) It has been a great experience to work with him, and in allowing our work to interact with each other in the space.

Tell us about some of the work that went into the show. You mentioned the pieces are labor intensive...

One of the works in this exhibition is titled "Offering: Sacred Space." It is about the small spaces of magic and beauty that surround us, many times unnoticed, that are created by the purposeful work and energy of women.

The installation in the main room of the gallery is called "Bestiole," meaning small critters, or organisms. It is made up of several dozen small structures that are suspended in mid-air. They are painstakingly constructed from metal, in a very specific vessel-like shape, and are woven over with cotton twine.

After that, I embroidered very old ostrich feathers onto these objects. These feathers are amazingly light and reactive to any movement in the room, and they will flutter ever so slightly when somebody walks by, or even breathes in their general vicinity. And each and every one of these objects has its own character and personality.

Finally, the installation in the Project Room is called "Shrine: Where I am Coming From." It consists of some of the vessel-like shapes, but covered in the very thorny twigs that I have used in years past, below a landscape-like collection of embroidered objects, that refers to the skills that I learned from the women in my family.

Tell us about the upcoming Small Wonders (Art) Salon of which you are a member of the host committee. How did the idea for an art event with barbecue and a \$499 price-point come about exactly?

My friend Allette and I have a bag lunch every week. During this time, we connect, we consult, we inquire, we listen, we dream. On this particular Tuesday, the conversation started with a problem: the exhibition that had been scheduled for May, an exchange with a group of artists from Valencia, Spain, had to be pushed to later in the year, so we had a hole in our gallery schedule. From there to making it a celebration of local artists and their fantastic art seemed like a very short leap at the time. We started a list of artists to invite, and pretty soon it was quite long, and that was just between two of the 11 artists in the coop! (We are now up to 62 participating artists.)

So it became a salon-style show of small works. Pushing the idea of the celebration, we decided it was a great occasion to kick out the gloom of the long, cold winter, and to kick-off the summer — hence the barbecue, the ice cream, the cold drinks. We are working on activities for kids, as well, to make it family-friendly. The below-\$500 price-point is about making it accessible to everybody, not just 'collectors,' as we envisioned small jewels of work, multiples and limited-editions.



What's the most flattering comment you've ever received about your work?

"Wow, that's exactly how I feel."

The most insulting?

Not exactly insulting, but definitely discombobulating: "How do I clean it?"

How does art change people?

Art has the power to remind us that we are more similar than we are different, across lines of race, gender, religion, nationality, and preferences.

See Duwin's and Haupt's current show "Rapture," (currently on exhibit), and catch the Small Wonders (Art) Salon on Saturday, May 8 from 4 to 7 p.m. Both are at Artformz Alternative, 171 N.W. 23rd St., in Miami. See more of Duwin's work at the ArtCenter South Florida, 800 Lincoln Road, Studio 107, and at Duwin.net.



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