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'Manufactured'

- **Where:** The Huntington Beach Art Center, 538 Main St., Huntington Beach
- **When:** Through Dec. 17. Gallery hours: noon to 6 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday, noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays
- **How much:** Free
- **Call:** 714-374-1650

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Exhibit: 'Manufactured'

Review: Four artists in the Huntington Beach show use unusual materials to make their statements.

By DANIELLA WALSH
Special to the Register

Fiber, fiber everywhere and not a canvas in sight. Anyone finding traditional art materials too pricey or unadventurous these days can take heart: Some of the best stuff seen lately suggests that artists are raiding craft stores, grandma's mending basket and the kitchen junk drawer. The old bit of beauty being in the eye of the beholder has given way to beauty being in everything imaginable.

Take, for example, "Manufactured," the latest exhibition curated by Darlene D. DeAngelo at the Huntington Beach Art Center: DeAngelo has found four artists who are crafting art from, for the most part, manufactured goods such as toy-store-bought inflatable punching bags, colorful zip ties, plastic mesh, beads and glitter, string and yarn and yes, even a bit of paint here and there.

Only Tomoko Suzuki, a sculptor and print maker, actually draws – but she eschews canvas or paper. Instead, she sews muslin quilts as backgrounds for her allegorical stair- and ladder-climbing figures representing the uncertain process of upward mobility ("Up and Down," 2006, and "The Way Up," 2006). "Frolic," 2006, with its palm trees, birds and waves, comes across as a stylized beachscape. A subtle arrangement of patterns suggests that order and a sense of ritual determine the way people live and play.

Cathy Breslaw layers plastic mesh to build subtly colored backgrounds for abstract compositions that are roughly woven, beaded or embellished with buttons, string, elastic and colorful ribbon. Breslaw's work is particularly intriguing, since it often first appears like a somewhat primitive but endearing grade-school art project. However, closer contemplation of pieces such as "Hot Pad" reveals sophisticated mastery of materials. Weaving and collage becomes painterly in her hands.

Wall hangings invite close contemplation, with works like "Spiritual Landscape," 2006, and "Shanghai Lights," 2006, having a somewhat meditative effect. Large floor pieces are intriguing as well. Resembling the fanned-out tulle skirts of 1950s prom queens, they contain personal messages concerning femininity (a combination of fragility and strength) and subtle allusions to globalization.

Breslaw notes in her artist statement that the signature plastic mesh was manufactured in China but is put to different uses in Europe, Latin America and in the U.S. Her uses of cast-off materials thus put a novel spin on reuse of mass-manufactured materials ("Labyrinth," 2005, and "Carousel," 2005).

Maureen Shields transforms the aforementioned toy store punching bags into candy-colored objects of seduction by covering them with nylon jersey and festooning them with multicolored zip ties. And yet, with titles like "It Feels Good to Have Your Heart Broken Sometimes," 2006, and "It All Felt Very Romantic at the Time," 2006, and "Making Love on Wounded Knee," 2004, the suggestive shapes warn of the joys and perils inherent in relationships.

"How cute!" might be an initial reaction to Amy Caterina's "Forest Fire Friends (Deer Installation and Moose Installation)," 2006. Then again, others may wonder what the critters are doing in an art gallery. Not to worry, they have earned their place: First of all, Caterina's medium of choice is knitting needles and yarn. She knitted pelts and antler covers from silky yarn and stretched them over the reindeer armatures that are festooned with lights at Christmas.

Disturbed by brush and forest fires displacing wildlife and destroying valuable land, she also placed knitted rectangles representing different-size burial plots before the deer. Viewers are prompted to speculate about the increasing price of land and how much a burial plot costs today. The patches range from an infant's gravesite to adult ones, allowing either for an urn or a full casket. The latter, also knit and covered by crocheted flowers, was inspired by the recent death of the artist's husband, according to DeAngelo ("Plot," 2006).

Given the unusual nature and use of media, viewers will find it helpful to read the four artists' statements, which DeAngelo inserted into printed gallery guides rather than burdening the exhibition with reams of wall text. Many viewers will undoubtedly wonder what constitutes art these days, but also, one hopes, ruminate about the many and wondrous origins of creativity.

Venturing into the gallery's project room, they will also get a chance to be part of the action. Caterina, who is the center's current artist in residence, has supplied knitting needles and yarn for the adventurous and nimble fingered.

There might also be grouching about the four female artists reverting to what used to be called "domestic arts." But such complaints are outdated to say the least: As several recent shows in the area have revealed, men are also wielding embroidery needles and crochet hooks to create richly textured works that break down demarcations between painting and tapestry, assemblage and collage.

Yet, it still remains to be seen whether this new freedom is just a hiccup after which such works might morph into expensive dust catchers. But, for now, art has become a melting pot of sorts, and that is what makes the whole scene fun.

CONTACT US: Freelancer Daniella Walsh has written about visual art for the Register since 1994.

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