



Get Ready For Horrible Cuteness!

Patricia Waller is showing at Loops 2010

Are you excited about Loops 2010 yet? You should be! It's only the most exciting thing to happen to Reykjavik all summer long. Let's break it down:

Loops 2010 takes place between June 17 and July 4, and is the first of what will hopefully be many annual Nordic yarncraft festivals in the Nordic House. The programme offers art exhibitions, workshops, symposiums and talks, not to mention all manner of off-venue events as well. The focus is firmly on the Nordic knitting traditions, of which there are many because, well, it's cold up north.

However, this is no fusty festival of conservative orthodoxy. While most of the designers and artists participating are inspired by and work within the traditions, they all present their own spin on things, resulting in various kinds of craziness and/or styles. The festival's programme is too detailed and marvellous to properly examine here, so head on over to www.nordichouse.is instead to check it out.

Cute and macabre

One of the most anticipated events in this line-up of greatness is surely a show by German artist Patricia Waller. Her work combines the cute and macabre in an elegant and humorous way, so that one cannot help but laugh, want to give the work a hug and feel repulsed—all at the same time. Why is she showing at a yarncraft festival, you ask? Because she crochets all her work!

"I used to knit pullovers as a teenager, but it had nothing to do with art at that point," says Patricia when asked of her love of crochet as artistic medium. "I began crocheting when I was in the final year of art school. All the materials we worked with in sculpture class were so heavy and difficult, usually metal or stone, so I started to work with crocheting, just to see if it could be done. All of my colleagues laughed at me for working with such an old-fashioned craft."

Wait, are you saying that these people thought crochet was in some way dorky? Surely not!

"In Germany at the time, crochet was mostly associated with toilet-paper cosies, so people found my experiments with it ridiculous," Patricia explains. Still, it must be said that as far as methods of toilet-paper heat preservation go, a crocheted cosy is one of the most awesome ones, and not ridiculous at all. But let's not digress.

Knit graffiti? Yarn bombing?

It wasn't just Patricia's school chums who were less-than-open towards her unusual choice of medium. Back in the heady days of the early 1990s, the art world in general was rather sceptical towards craft-based modern art. Patricia says that things have fortunately changed for the better in that respect, partially owing to a global backlash against consumerism and mass production:

"People today are more interested than they

were back then in expressing their individuality and are increasingly turning their backs on mass-market conformity. Making stuff with our own hands and having that feeling of accomplishment, of having created something, is part of that development and so people all over the world have become interested in handicrafts. This means that craft art is no longer associated only with housewives. Furthermore, things like knit graffiti and yarn-bombing have really worked wonders to change people's perceptions of what you can do with crafts."

Afraid of moths

Looking at pictures of Patricia's work is quite awe-inspiring for anyone who has ever held a crochet needle between their fingers and waded it around in an attempt to make something. Crocheting is hard, and Patricia has some serious skills. Why not go with something a bit easier, like knitting for example?

"I chose crochet rather than other forms of yarncraft for practical reasons mostly," she cheerfully admits. "Crochet is easier to unravel than knitting, because you don't have 500 live stitches off your needles that you need to worry about dropping. Fabric worked with crochet is also stronger and firmer than knit fabric, and that suits me well, because it prevents people from being able to see the stuffing inside my work."

Despite having chosen to work in a medium usually thought of as a craft, Patricia clearly approaches her work from an art perspective. For

example, while knitters and crocheters like to try out various types of fibre and can be quite snobbish about the organic and natural pedigree of their yarn, Patricia's thoughts on the subject of materials is refreshingly down to earth: "I prefer to work with acrylic yarn rather than wool or other natural fibres because I'm afraid that moths could eat my work. Furthermore, acrylic yarn doesn't get discoloured from light exposure, and is easy to clean; I've even made works that can be put in the washing machine!" How very convenient!

There will be blood. And gore

The themes in Waller's work are generally not for the faint of heart. There is a lot of blood (crocheted with bright red yarn) and gore, but the horror is camouflaged by the overpowering cuteness of the soft, handmade creatures that horrible things keep happening to. What's going on in the artist's mind when she dreams up these repulsive yet beguiling scenarios?

"I think violence is a really big issue for societies today. When you look the uninhibited slaughter that is served up for entertainment purposes in Hollywood films or video games, you realise that most of us encounter violence every day through those media. Where do you draw the line between socially accepted violence and extreme and unacceptable violence? My work contains many different levels that contrast with each other: the softness, the cuteness, the blood. The contrast and the lack of realism renders it so that, when faced with these works, people may begin to contemplate issues that they prefer not to consider in their day-to-day lives."

Waller's exhibition at the Nordic House in some ways presents a change from her usual *modus operandi*. There will still be blood, but this time, for the first time, her exhibition is the result of collaboration. Her show will resemble a natural history museum of sorts, with mysterious creatures nailed to the walls. To best describe these creatures and their lives, various people were brought in to contribute. The artist explains:

"Usually when I go somewhere to show my work, I just hang it on the wall, say hello to a few people and then go away. This time I decided that I wanted to involve the local people, the local landscape or to create some kind of link to local culture. To do this, I got some Icelanders to help me describe the lives and habits of the creatures, to give them names and to photograph them in their natural habitats. So far, this collaboration has been a really interesting experience for me."

Waller's work powerfully demonstrates how crafts can contribute to our lives in ways more profound than just keeping our toilet-paper rolls warm. They can be thought-provoking, can horrify and delight us in equal measure and bring us together through collaboration. All worthwhile things.

Waller's show opens in the Nordic House on June 17 and closes on July 4. Go experience it and the other wonders on offer at Loops 2010, and become consumed by a strange and sudden urge to take up knitting or crochet. ☺