

at the Main Ritual Hall. The mood changes when we see the "postponed" notice. Suddenly, the gray day feels foreboding. We are standing outside the hall in the snow, chatting with fellow artists about the state of contemporary art, and later having a snowball fight. The snow gets heavier, the light gets dimmer. There is definitely a sense of frustration, confusion, and anger at being left out in the cold.

cal facts. In the blended portrait, these facts are intermingled. Dong, in his statement, comments that the blended image of the two men was oddly not distorted and created a "third man." The two separate portraits are starkly different. We hear the tension between these men of different generations, with different life histories and beliefs. But we also see the similar facial features. In the combined central

New Orleans

Neil Harshfield

Contemporary Art Center

Each of the five interactive installations in the unpartitioned gallery embodies one of our senses. As we wander we are encouraged to stop and smell perfumes, eat candies, hear ourselves talk, touch Braille letters, and gaze at an apple orchard. But unless we validate the essential unity of the five stations in "Sins of

blossom from psychedelically illuminated perfume bottles. High technology notwithstanding, the eye-level arrangement across hexagonal black pedestals suggests an impromptu, unsecured archaeological museum display. *Taste* is a zigzagging fivesome of gleaming vintage gumball machines full of Atomic Fireballs and other sweets that can be nostalgically liberated for a nickel a piece and eaten on the spot.



A wall divides the two galleries, but they are linked by a narrow passageway. This is similar in floor plan to a Chinese ritual complex, separating the inside and outside, the haves and the have-nots. In the second gallery, smaller and dark, Dong's video installation of talking portraits is projected onto three columns. The portraits on the two side columns represent Song Dong and his father, while the middle portrait is a superimposing of the two men's faces. Each portrait recites simple biographi-

portrait, instead of sensing debate, surprisingly, we observe compromise.

Wu Hung, the organizer of this show, wisely writes in the catalogue, "A cancellation does not mean a failure...it confirms the experimental nature of the exhibition and enhances its impact on the public consciousness...and encourages the effort." These artists and curators must have been doing something right, to have generated such a strong response.

—Dana Mouton Cibulski

Ambivalence" by physically interacting with them, Neil Harshfield's exhibition stands as five thematically unyoked environments.

Abundant metal and glass impart a seductive material continuity, even without obedient viewers to consummate the five-senses theme, and the show's simple layout is enlivened by tapering faceted columns and a handful of symmetrically curved forms.

The installation *Smell* employs motion-activated heating elements to release the enticing aromas of honeysuckle, jasmine, and orange

Neil Harshfield, *Sins of Ambivalence: Room for Seeing*, 2000. Copper, black iron, solid glass, and resin, installation view.

Hearing, a nearly closed circle of copper tubing, opened just wide enough to insert one's head, is attached to a wall, comically recalling early telephonic devices. The two unconnected ends are capped by glass earpieces, out of which returns the voice of the participant who has spoken to himself through the connected third segment of tubing.

The waist-level velvet ledge forming *Touch* is perforated by imbedded children's marbles, which are lit white from beneath. The pearlescent orbs are configured as a 10-foot-long Braille message, whose widely spaced characters must be an inconvenience to a sightless person. Although this installation initially appears to be designed for a sightless audience, its badly lit red velvet surface is teasingly visible to a seeing audience. The logically satisfied customer for *Touch* would be a sighted but colorblind Braille reader who has large hands.

As the largest and most arresting arrangement, *Room for Seeing* is indisputably the exhibition's centerpiece. An elegantly patinated copper apple, three feet in diameter and presumably hollow, is impaled at torso height on its own tapered, hexagonal black pedestal. Centered inside a 16-foot square, it is surrounded by four corner clusters of two dozen or so ankle- to thigh-high black angle-iron stalagmites, each of which is topped by a giant, clear glass apple. The apple imprisons its own transparent apple in its center, visible from either side to a stooping viewer through a "wormhole." While the optical tunnel is a tempting nod to modern physics, the exhibition brochure reckons that Harshfield's apples refer to temptation, so that *Room for Seeing* becomes a glibly metaphorical Garden of Eden. However, the artist declines the biblical interpretation and insists that "the inherent conflicts between desire and trepidation" to which the brochure also refers simply offer us a secular definition of ambivalence.

But what is the nature of Harshfield's ambivalence? Does he mean that our fulfilled desires to smell, eat, touch, speak, and see in an art gallery are inevitably followed by guilt-induced trepidation after doing all those things? If this is so, we are being asked to reflect upon nothing more profound than our own fear of public embarrass-

ment. Instead, Harshfield protests that his ambivalence is of the existential variety, although only his vexing *Touch* installation articulates this, by asserting that "to touch is to know, to know is to feel, to feel is to live." Kant more broadly regarded all sensation as mediated, but Harshfield leaves us to infer our own wisdom through his artistic embodiments of smell, taste, sound, and sight.

And although the artist's four other sense installations do not explicitly complement or fortify his Braille truism, we accomplices who interact with all his installations at the very least "blindly" endorse the timeworn five-senses construct. Fortunately there is no question that the construct is strong enough to support a visually satisfying art exhibition.

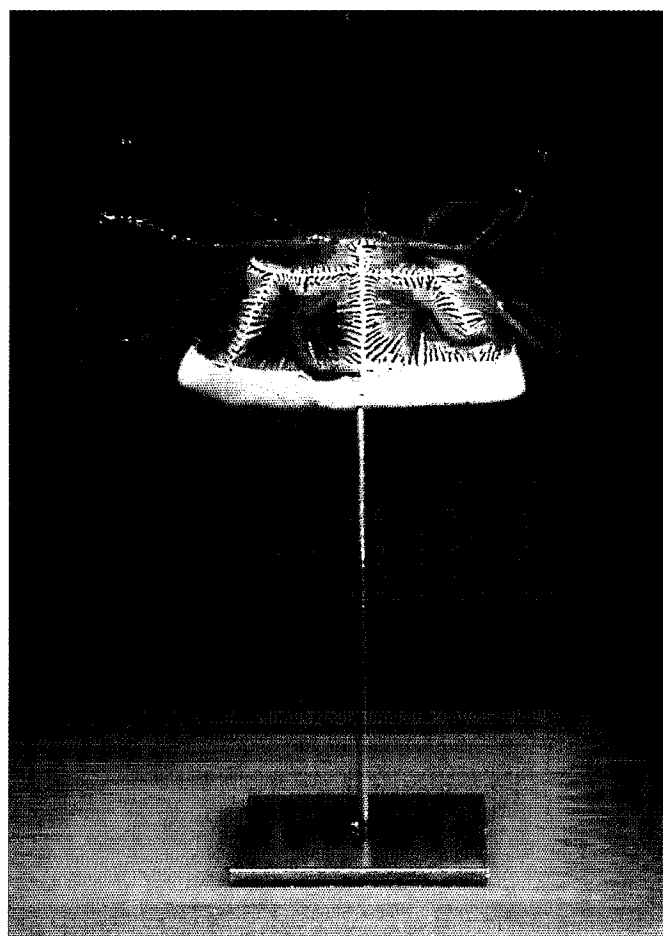
—Mark S. Price

College Park, MD

"Handle with Care: Loose Threads in Fiber"

The Art Gallery, The University of Maryland
The delicate frisson of danger intimated by curator Annet Couwenberg's title could refer to work that is hard to handle, that defies control and definition. But the title also implies dissolution, an unraveling of a once-unified and distinct fabric, an idea that perhaps captures the current situation of fiber art. Works by eight artists illustrated the multitude of options open to contemporary artists working in fiber and demonstrated that "fiber art" may have reached its end as a meaningful designation.

When fiber emerged as a serious art movement in the late '60s, its pioneering works displayed an essential integration of material, process, form, and content. Wall-hung or freestanding sculptures by Magdalena Abakanowicz, Sheila Hicks, and Olga de Amaral simply could not have been made in any other material. The artistic integrity and expression of their work depended on weaving, braiding, and sewing techniques, which in turn raised a political cry tied



Sonya Y.S. Clark, *Onigi 13*, 1997. Cloth and thread, 15 x 12 x 12 in. Work shown in "Handle with Care" at the University of Maryland.

to feminist goals and the reevaluation of women's work. The artists selected by Couwenberg no longer need to prove fiber's high-art worth. Beneficiaries of those early battles for legitimacy, they are free to mix and match fiber elements and processes. They play with the clichés of "Good Housekeeping" craft projects, revel in irony, and celebrate a wide array of materials, from pantyhose and cheap, mass-produced yarn to water-soluble plastic and Barbie-doll clothes, giving everything the conceptual twist common to much contemporary art—in some cases, losing the material in the process.

Sonya Y.S. Clark's exquisitely crafted headdresses and wigs, constructed of cloth, thread, hair, wire, and beads, are the closest successors to the fiber art movement. Plaiting, a social activity,

and beading, a sacred process within the African diaspora, give form and meaning to her works, which possess something of the ritual power of headdresses in traditional African cultures. It's doubtful that a painting or a bronze sculpture could so literally graft together the paradoxes and contradictions of race in America.

Like Clark's sculptures, Sandra Brownlee's diaristic textiles (laboriously created in the pick-up weaving technique) detailing figures, natural motifs, and abstract patterns are intensely personal and strongly felt creations that fuse process and meaning. Susie Brandt's updated quilts, such as *Barb* (1993–2000), with its bas-relief stuffed Barbie clothes, and

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments. A small red diamond is located at the top of this bar.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Neil Harshfield: Contemporary Art Center
SOURCE: Sculpture (Washington, D.C.) 20 no5 Je 2001
WN: 0115200727020

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Copyright 1982-2001 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.