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The Work of the Hand exhibit is just as much 'art' as 'craft'

By DANIEL KANY

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Above: Gregg Lipton, Zen Coffee Table, quarter-sawn white oak, patina aluminum.

I think the distinction of craft as opposed to art has long since stopped making sense.

For one thing, defining an artist's status by his or her medium has become silly. Many top contemporary artists work with wood, clay, fiber, glass, paper and other media traditionally associated with craft. Also, there is no denying that most painting in America is the stuff of weekend watercolorists and velvet Elvises: kitsch.

That doesn't mean we have to erase history. We just don't live there any more.



Morris Dorenfeld, Domino Series XII, tapestry.

That the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA) has been mounting an annual craft exhibition -- "Work of the Hand" -- for 20 years might not seem such a surprise. After all, the artists are all contemporary and work in Maine. However, what is remarkable is that a leading venue for contemporary art has made such a commitment to presenting "craft" as contemporary art.

"Work of the Hand" is a huge show with works by 50 Maine artists, including five selected as featured, honorary artists: book artist Laurie Adams, weaver Morris Dorenfeld, furniture maker Wayne Hall, weaver Sara Hotchkiss and jeweler Jan Muddle. The show is an absolute delight.

Dorenfeld's three wall pieces are world-class. All three -- from his "domino" series -- place rectangular forms on a monochrome field. One is elegantly calm; the next has a playfully open and jumpy feel; the third is almost gnashingly obsessive and powerful. Handwoven on a loom, each 68-by-46-inch work takes months to create. That Dorenfeld is a master is readily apparent in his work.

My favorite single piece in the show is also a fiber wall piece: Gabriele d'Italia's huge and layered white quilt. It would stand up to any piece of contemporary art anywhere. It is gorgeous, subtle and brilliant.

I am always interested in the balance of media at shows featuring fine craft. I was particularly surprised by the strong presence of book art and fiber as well as the paucity of glass and clay.

That said, Simon van der Ven's thrown porcelain vessels -- especially his "illuminated" works, which are as porous as a natural sponge -- stand out as particularly strong.

While "Work of the Hand" focuses primarily on craftsmanship and strong design, there are some bright flashes of fun as well. I particularly like Suzanne Anderson's polymer clay jewelry. It is witty and uplifting, and it looks even better when worn than on display.

Several artists and works deserve mention. Gregg Lipton's "zen coffee table" is a gem. I was particularly enamored with one of Gail Savitz's large porcelain egg forms as well, and impressed by Susan Atwater's hand-painted/dyed silk scarves.

Barbara Michelena has been organizing "Work of the Hand" for about 10 years. She is an interior designer, a fact that is evident in spades. Michelena somehow manages to show literally hundreds of works of art and have the space breathe. Less obvious is the role her terrific eye played in jurying the show -- for which she deserves equal praise.

I would imagine that some people might be inclined to write this show off as an upscale early holiday craft show. Sure, the show is only 10 days long, the work is for sale and many of these artists are very familiar with setting up booths, but the CMCA has served up a very handsome and grown-up show of contemporary art.

Freelance writer Daniel Kany is an art historian who lives in Cumberland. He can be contacted at dankany@gmail.com

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