

New Fleming Museum Exhibit Finds Thread Between Art and Craft

The University of Vermont's Fleming Museum recently had nine trees removed from its north lawn — that is, the side that slopes down to busy Colchester Avenue. But that's not why motorists have been rubbernecking lately, or why passersby on foot have been stopping for a closer look. Nope — that would be because four of the remaining trees are “dressed” in crocheted polypropylene rope in an alarming shade of yellow. Over three days last week, central Vermont artist Alisa Dworsky created these pieces and patiently explained them to curious viewers in the process. Though the collective work is actually an art installation — titled “A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew” — she reveals that the question she heard most frequently was, “Is this good for the trees?”



Photo: Matt Thorsen

The answer to that innocent query is not particularly, though the, er, outfits don't harm the trees, either; Dworsky cleared that with “UVM's tree people” first. Her arboreal crochet work, in oversized half-treble stitches, has resulted in clingy, vivid sheaths that hug the tree trunks without need for nails or adhesives. Think Spandex made of industrial-strength rope.

Dworsky's installation is an accessible, engaging introduction to the Fleming's fall exhibit, called “Material Pursuits.” While hers is the only outdoor component,

two other installations will appear inside the museum, explains Curator Evelyn Hankins, along with large-scale pieces by 11 contemporary artists working in humble craft mediums. If you want to know what highly trained fine artists are doing these days with such materials as Sculpey, tulle, thread, shoelaces and pipe cleaners, get yourself to the exhibit, which opens on September 4.

Meanwhile, Dworsky's work, which will remain in place through mid-December, is ours to contemplate and touch. Though her pieces are not intended to be particularly sartorial, clothing is a useful metaphor for the succession of crocheted creations on the quartet of trees, which form a gentle arc on the museum lawn. From a distance, the most westerly tree appears to be wearing a ballgown on its trunk, its bottom edge fanned out in a perfect circle on the ground. Dworsky likens this elegant, "idealized" shape to a parabolic curve. Moving east, the next sheath is roughly ankle-length, if the tree had ankles. The third tree is clad in a shrimpy mini-skirt.

The fourth tree, however, suggests a more ironic interpretation, given its proximity to the driveway of Fletcher Allen Health Care. Its crocheted tree-hugger appears appropriately bandage-like but is constructed with a "hole" that reveals and accentuates the tree's large scar — the result of a severe pruning. Serendipitously, the scar faces the hospital and alludes to the "rend" part of Dworsky's title. She chose the line from Ecclesiastes because "That section [of the Bible] is about human duality," she says, suggesting it makes her think about "what it is to be an artist — making, creating, as opposed to destruction.

Creating her work with 10 rolls of polypropylene rope, at 2400 feet per roll, also makes Dworsky think about more prosaic questions, such as, "How can 4-and-a-half miles of rope end up being so relatively small?" While her artist's mind ponders "this condensation of line into mass," she recognizes that the functional material makes the average viewer simply want to know what it's "for." And that thought is entirely apropos for an exhibit that marries simple crafting materials with the loftier aesthetics of fine art.

Info:

Though her website —<http://www.alisadworsky.com> — is currently under construction, Dworsky promises it will soon offer this and other examples of her artwork. "Material Pursuits" opens at the Fleming Museum on September 4 (the museum is closed until then for renovations); a public reception will be held on September 20, 5:30–7:30 p.m.