

At Suyama Space: Sophisticated 'Ruffle' a tribute to modest family love

A review of Gail Grinnell's enormous "Ruffle" at Suyama Space in Seattle, through Dec. 7, 2012.

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Gail Grinnell's "Ruffle" installation at Suyama Space.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Ruffle'

By Gail Grinnell. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays through Dec. 7, Suyama Space, 2324 Second Ave., Seattle (206-256-0809 or suyamaspace.org).

Sculptors have talked about "drawing in space" for at least a century now, but rarely has the phrase been so appropriate, or so beautifully embodied, as in "Ruffle," Gail Grinnell's splendid installation at Suyama Space.

Grinnell does her drawing on dressmakers' interfacing, a lightweight, translucent fabric used to stiffen fabric, and in "Ruffle," the biggest work she has ever made, she has used 500 yards of it. It comes in a neutral off-white, but Grinnell lends it more interest by dyeing some of it with tea or coffee in pale tints of gray, brown or pink.

The energetic black and white lines that she draws on this surface are remarkably responsive to the complex shapes and wide-ranging textures of her subjects. These include not only the ruffles that give the piece its title, but also dresses, dress patterns, fragments of skeletons, blood vessels, vine tendrils and all sorts of other things that are hinted at or perhaps only imagined, like vegetables, seaweed and spider webs. The installation as a whole manages to evoke both the dizzying spaces of a medieval cathedral and the mystique of an undersea grotto.

The drawing is all done by Grinnell herself, but cutting out the enormously detailed and complicated drawings becomes something of a cottage industry. Teams of family and friends wield X-ACTO knives to isolate sections which can still be up to 12 feet long, but which are at least manageable.

Once transported to a site like Suyama Space, these components become the stuff of an activity that is part planned, part extemporized and has as much in common with domestic craft as it does with sculpture.

It is altogether appropriate that Grinnell turns to her family for support in all of this, because although the sophistication and beauty of its final form might make it difficult to imagine, Grinnell's art is rooted in intimate memories of modest family life.

In particular her recollections of her mother's touch as she measured her and held pattern sections against her body as she made her clothes. Not only are these memories a direct source of Grinnell's imagery and

materials — the interfacing she uses now was preceded by her late mother's actual paper patterns — they also establish an ethos for her art.

She talks of her mother bringing "skill, imagination and beauty to the humble tasks of living" and, in its homely methods and materials, "Ruffle" reflects a belief that art conjures its qualities from the realities of day-to-day life, rather than imposing them in pursuit of some imaginary ideal.

As Seattle Art Museum's huge "Elles" show of women's art reminds us, in embracing the homemade, Grinnell has chosen a way of working that is problematic in our neo-feminist era. But more important she has arrived at them with an intelligent awareness and a fidelity to family traditions that endures at the very core of who she is. Like all the best art Grinnell's "Ruffle" provides a direct connection to the artist's life. The fact that it is also a breathtaking technical achievement is a wonderful bonus.

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