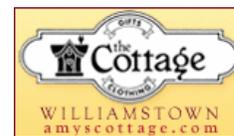


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### Culkin creates a curiosity shop with art

By John E. Mitchell

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North Adams Transcript

ADAMS -- New York City artist Jody Culkin stresses function -- and often the lack of it -- by taking functional design and turning it into something entirely decorative.

For the new show at Greylock Arts at 93 Summer St., "Relics of Future Past," opening Friday, Sept. 25, Culkin will contribute a body of work that includes hats and hoodies, a lamp, dresses and books from a variety of unusual materials including broken glass and copper mesh.

"I feel like different materials have some kind of different context and I think you want to be both true to the context and take it away from the context," Culkin said.

Culkin's books aren't like the traditional objects we've grown used to -- they're whimsical slices of color that don't offer a narrative in the usual sense. Some are constructed of vinyl and all of them come complete with holes that imply the content has been ripped out and replaced with little voids that tell a whole other story.

"It's like taking out the pictures and taking out the narrative," said Culkin, "but each one tells a little story in a way -- not really a specific story. It's more like some kind of experience of color and texture. But I really did want them to be funny."

Culkin has also created what she calls "ruffle books" that are exactly what they claim -- books of ruffles that can barely be contained by the chipboard covers

Culkin also recognizes

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pumps -- some of her handbags featured TV monitors and cameras embedded in them.

Culkin has also designed dresses that used motors as decorative portions that didn't do anything in particular -- she just used them instead of, say, a button or a certain stitching.

For the Greylock Arts show, though, Culkin wanted to make things less complicated, let the work be about the basic components and enjoy the physicality of the creation. In her daily life, she teaches digital creation -- building Web sites, programming -- but in her art work she likes to step outside of the virtual creative universe.

"I really like coming back to the world of objects and materials and thinking about what these different materials are like and what's going to happen when you put them together -- and what are the implications of these materials and how



that books are objects and appeal to people on that level as well. The stories that books have to tell are not just in their words or pictures, but in their binding, paper, typeface, scent and condition. Culkin's creations take all this into account and introduce her own variations of the physical allures of books.

"I think of these books as being about color, but they're just as much about texture, about the touch of all those different fabrics," she said. "Some of them are things I bought and some of them are things I had lying around, like old towels. What are they and how do they feel? And how does the weight of the thing feel in your hand. A lot of it really is tactile."

Most of Culkin's work is approached with humor. When she makes books filled with ruffles, they make her laugh and her goal is to get other people to laugh with her.

"I think that's kind of a big part of my work -- making fun of stuff or little jokes about stuff," she said.

In the past, Culkin's work has incorporated motors and electronics. She created a series of handbags that featured little water fountains in them, propelled by tiny

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can you fool around with it," said Culkin.

Culkin began her artistic career with abstract sculpture, and later worked in public art with a lot of time spent welding. She liked painting, but enjoyed working with objects more, and gradually began to move into the realm of creating humorous critiques of the various objects she was crafting.

"As I got older I got more interested in the idea of function and making fun of function, in a way -- making things that don't really work but have some relation to something literal that would work," Culkin said.

Public art proved exhausting and Culkin pared down her efforts to a smaller scale that offered her the chance to work with a wider variety of materials while still giving her an occasional outlet for her welding skills.

"I did a bunch of pieces in the 1990s where I did a lot of knitted steel wool pieces," said Culkin. "I was just trying to use materials in different ways."

Throughout these periods, Culkin always crafted lamps -- this was her first and most consistent foray into electronics.

"I'd go in and out using different materials," she said. "Sometimes I used sheet metal -- I started out making these cardboard lamps. I used a lot of those cardboard tubes that you used to be able to find everywhere in the streets of New York with other cardboard in the 1980s."

Culkin would incorporate one of her favorite materials -- broken glass -- into her lamp work, as well as chains, which are a part of a continuing fascination to Culkin in their dual use of bondage and beauty in everyday life.

"They're used to chain things up but I think it's interesting that they're this decorative device and we wear chains to look beautiful, so I just find it interesting," said Culkin.

Culkin attended New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program, the final part in her journey to combine technology with her sculpture. Even though her current crop of work has turned its back on that component, it may only be fleeting -- even as she prepares to show her low-tech books and hats, she also begins plans for augmenting them sometime in the future with LEDs, motors and other electronics.

"I'm totally all for technology being completely arbitrary," Culkin said. "I have no problem with that. I think it's actually funny."

In context of the world around her, Culkin is definitely part of the modern culture that darts between the technological and the tactile, a world defined by participants of events like Maker's Faire, where the skilled set of the high-tech go to put their knowledge to use with DIY home projects and such.

"I think I'm a person who's going, 'Okay, I'd really like to make stuff and not just be on the computer,' but I think I'm not that unusual," said Culkin. "I think there are lots of people who are sometimes playing around at both ends."

Culkin is happy to be one of those people with hand on each end of the spectrum. Her desire is to be able to abandon neither, but continue to integrate and separate as the desire moves her.

"I feel like I'm bouncing from one to the other, and sometimes they're really integrating too," she said. "Sometimes they're just bouncing and I'm happy with either."

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