



For "Bait," Robin Cowley used a plethora of purple silicone fishing worms.

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When it comes to private body parts, human imagination has come up with countless erotic adornments designed both to titillate and protect modesty. One such cover-up came into fashion in the 1400s, when people shaved hair from their heads and pubic areas to combat lice. Rather than going bald, wigs became popular both on top and below.

A female pubic wig is called a merkin, and they were used by women of high and low class alike. Certainly very "Intimate Apparel," the name of a new exhibit featuring 34 works from 22 artists across the United States. Some are whimsical, some seem to make political statements, and many are shown in pairs with juxtaposed messages of "come hither" and "stay away." An opening reception is set for 6 to 9 tonight during AHA! in downtown New Bedford.

"I immediately loved the concept of the exhibition, and found the work inventive, irreverent, and humorous, as well as very beautiful. The exhibition is a testament to the freedom of expression we all enjoy," said Lasse Antonsen, director of the University Art Gallery in the UMass Dartmouth College of Visual and Performing Arts campus in New Bedford. "Intimate Apparel" is showing there until March 14, the last stop on a national tour. The show was curated by Linda Gass for the Pi Gallery at the 14th International Surface Design Conference at the Kansas Art Institute in 2007.

Antonsen learned about the unusual exhibit because New Bedford textile artist Elin Noble was invited to participate. He said he was interested in hosting the show because of its relevance to textile design, which is taught at the university. "As gallery director, I'm interested in having exhibits related to what we teach.

The students love it. This exhibit shows that art in many ways can be fun, can be whimsical, can be entertaining, can be serious and not serious at the same time," Antonsen said. He also commented that merkins may be making a comeback as a flirtatious decoration for young women, so many of whom have taken up the renewed trend of shaving their private areas. In fact, he said, actress Kate Winslet, who won an Oscar for her 2008 leading role in "The Reader" wore a merkin during filming to look more natural despite her preference for going bare down there.

Noble's two contributions to "Intimate Apparel" reflect a

certain duality in attitudes about women's genitalia. One merkin, called "Tickled Pink," is made of intricately hand-dyed material, which is Noble's artistic specialty. Pieces are sewn together and stuffed to look like a living organ; most closely resembling a heart. Asked to interpret the piece, Noble said, "Relationships happen between two connections. There is sexual energy and then there is where the heart lives. They have to get together for a relationship to work and it gets stitched together. It's not flawless," she suggested. The second work by Noble is very different. It is a dried collection of colorful seaweeds collected at West Island beach in Fairhaven. She said the composition was "purely about fun. I was thinking about flower arranging, about artfully arranging the seaweed that, before it dried, was more intensely colorful: oranges and fuchsias, corals, deep purples, ochres, browns, and greens." As part of AHA!, Noble will give a talk about her work at 7:30 tonight in the Lecture Hall of the Star Store building.

Amongst the variety of merkins on display are a boxed set by Carolyn Kallenborn titled "Yes and No." One merkin is a shiny shingled surface of Xacto blades, while the other is covered with sequins and bells. Erica Spitzer Rasmussen's contribu-



Carolyn Kallenborn's paired merkins,, titled "Yes and No" one is a shiny shingled surface of Xacto blades, while the other is covered with sequins and bells.

tion called "Matchstick Merkin" is a forest of red-tipped fire-starters adorned with gold leaf and black upholstery fringe. Anna Peach's merkin is the most interactive. It is a bed of grass seeds on a plate with a misting water bottle and a pair of scissors nearby for trimming the sprouts as they shoot up.

Gass said her idea for the exhibit was inspired by an alternative culture arts event that takes place annually in the desolate Black Rock Desert of Nevada for one week. Nudity is commonplace, and as a joke one year, someone started selling pink fur merkins with flashlights attached ostensibly to help participants find the portable toilets. Soon after, Gass noticed that the upcoming Surface Design Conference was going to focus on a mind and body theme. Her idea for "Intimate Apparel" was born. "Once I started inviting the artists to make merkins," Gass said, "the art became quite profound. It was funny. It touched on vulnerabilities. It conjured up power. I'm really pleased with how the range came out. So many topics were covered, and a lot of artists had so much fun creating more than one. They found more than one thing to explore with it."

For more information about "Intimate Apparel," go to www.lindagass.com/intimateapparel. The University Gallery of Art is at 715 Purchase St. Hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week.