

Reviewed by
Marilyn Millstone

Green:
The Color and the Cause
The Textile Museum

Exploded truck tires, plastic newspaper sleeves, x-rays: these are not the usual materials of art. Yet, fiber works made from these and other recycled materials were among those selected for *Green: The Color and The Cause*, a recent show at The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.

The third in a series of color-themed shows mounted by the museum in the past four years—following *Red* in 2007 and *Blue* in 2008—*Green* was the first to consider not just color but connotation, exploring green's contemporary association with environmental consciousness. The show's April 2011 opening was timed to coincide with Earth Day.

Intent on creating an exhibition that reflected global perspectives on green, co-curators Rebecca Stevens and Lee

Talbot issued an international call for entries—unprecedented in the museum's 85-year history—posing the question: what does "green" mean to you? Submissions were judged blindly, although artists' statements were factored into the selection process. From a field of over 1,000 entries, 30 works were selected, representing artists from five continents. Additionally, five works in the show were by invited artists: Japanese weaver Shigeo Kubota, Hungarian-born sculptor Gyongy Laky, sustainable fashion designer Natalie Chanin, weaver Ruth Marshall, and quilter Linda Gass.

The resulting exhibition reflected an appealing diversity of subject matter, materials, and scale. At its best, the show inspired contemplation, beginning with the opening work,



LINDA GASS *Treatment?* Silk, dyes, polyester; hand-painted, quilted, 2009.
Photo: Don Tuttle.

Treatment?, Gass's exquisitely quilted, hand-painted reproduction of an aerial photograph depicting a water treatment plant on San Francisco Bay.

Steps away, art and concept converged intriguingly in Kristina Estell's quiet installation *Enmesh*—a display of 38 oddly shaped beakers made of transparent nylon mesh, each containing a single, small, decaying leaf. Interestingly devoid of the color green—all the leaves Estell selected had turned brown—the display was so subtle that most people walked by it with just a passing glance. This viewer, however, lingered, captivated by the



way each leaf decayed so differently. One had collapsed into a curl, another had disintegrated so much that only its delicate spine remained. The hypnotic repetition of beakers and leaves—each unique, yet structurally the same—reinforced the idea that every leaf is an amazing feat, a true work of art.

Clamoring for attention in the next gallery was a spill of sculpted paper titled *Estuary: Moods and Modes*. Adapted by artist Nancy Cohen from a larger work she'd created for the Noyes Museum of Art, the piece was made of handmade abaca paper and marsh grass plucked from around the Great Bay Estuary of the New Jersey Pine Barrens—the ecosystem that inspired her. Saturated with brilliant, hand-colored blues and greens, the work seemed slightly cramped in the smaller space available at The Textile Museum. Still, it energized a gallery whose works appeared loosely connected by the theme of water.

On a nearby wall, Peruvian Maximo Laura's fantastical tapestry *Ode to Fertility* pulsed with life. Inspired by Andean spirituality and pre-Columbian imagery, Laura playfully depicted the dense flora and fauna of a tropical rainforest. Woven of alpaca, cotton, and mixed fibers, the work was so vibrant one could nearly hear the owls in it screeching.

Decidedly more somber was the next gallery, which seemed focused largely on man's impact on the environment. William Knight's swirling black *Wall Tapestry*—made of

exploded car and truck tires found on New Jersey highways—resembled a cloud of fumes.

Suspended from the ceiling was *Osmose*, a trio of larger-than-life men made from new and recycled x-rays. Artist Brigitte Amarger was "very clear that the men's feet were not to touch the ground," curator Stevens explained. Is this, one wonders, a commentary on the heavy impact man has had upon the planet?

One of the challenges involved with curating a show trumpeting a cause—in this case, the cause of the "green" environmental



MÁXIMO LAURA *Canto a la Fertilidad (Ode to Fertility)* Woven tapestry, alpaca, cotton, mixed fibers, 2008.

movement—is that compelling artist statements do not necessarily yield compelling art. The most sublime works in the show needed no explanation at all. Among these were the late James Koehler's misty-blue tapestry *Rhythms of Nature II* and Joh Ricci's intricately designed and knotted basket, *Earth Day*. Sprinkled throughout the show were several elegant textiles from the museum's permanent collection, among them: *Sash*, a late 18th century-India weaving of green silk embellished with spun gold—a work so valuable that it was stamped with the still-visible inventory seal of its owner; and *Fragment of a Hanging or Cover*, a mid-19th-century Chinese cloth lavishly embroidered with iridescent-green peacock feathers.

Kudos to the museum for the exhibition's clear, colorful, and well-designed website, which invites the viewer to consider Green from historical, ecological, political, and artistic perspectives. One can study each exhibited work in whole or in detail, read each artist's statement, and link to each artist's website. Importantly, one can do this sitting down. In the four galleries of the actual exhibit, there was only one small bench—understandable, given the museum's diminutive size, but frustrating for anyone wanting to sit and ponder the provocative ideas posed by many of the pieces. Fortunately, the *Green* website (www.textilemuseum.org/green/) is slated to remain online indefinitely—at no risk to the environment whatsoever.

—Marilyn Millstone is the former managing editor of the *Journal of Environmental Education*. An aspiring quilter and recently produced playwright, she writes frequently about the arts for various national magazines.



NANCY COHEN *Estuary: Moods and Modes* Handmade paper, marsh grasses, salt, wire, handmade abaca paper; assembled, 2007. Photo: Ed Fausty.