

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



A Philly Favorite, Front and Center: Shelley Spector at Bridgette Mayer Gallery

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In her work, Shelley Spector translates or illustrates the world that she is living in, the now of her time. This is what I love most about her work. She claims the present, she claims the world as her own, and more importantly, as an artist and an individual, she claims herself as part of this world. She refers both to the universal and the personal, in order to connect viewers through a common thread underlying all of her work: the every day world, the every day experience. That is not to say that her work is banal in any way. Quite the contrary, it is fresh and exciting every time. These every day experiences of our shared world vary from translations of the fallout map of the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster to installations of reclaimed paper, recycled cleaning product containers, boxes of cereal, or upholstery fabric.

Another aspect of Spector's work that I am drawn to, one which resonates with the way I approach my own work, is its anthropological quality. Spector researches and discovers objects that are part of our world, that describe our time and our civilization, in one way or another. She transforms and re-arranges them to tell a story about ourselves, a mute, corporate autobiography. Her process-oriented, labor-intensive work has the quality of the archival fascination of a historian who carefully chooses and displays different objects or evidences of existences and experiences in order to best display an account of the past.

The exhibition at Bridgette Mayer Gallery is in three parts. In the front of the gallery, there are several three-dimensional pieces composed of transformed recycled and reclaimed materials and two wall installations made out of recycled upholstery. In the vault, there are twenty-eight prints from her well known series *Five and a Half by Forty*, and in the North Gallery, an installation, *Mariposa*, comprised of a red blanket that had been in Spector's family attic for decades, un-threaded/re-threaded onto hand-made spools.

Spector's work is playful, a little bit quirky, yet increasingly grave the more you look at it. All of these objects seem to have a function, yet they don't, or the function has been altered.

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Boxing Time, 2012

Boxing Time, for example, is a three dimensional piece that looks like an old sewing box, a working clock set in a box made of a metal frame and upholstery. This piece, whimsical and playful at first glance, evokes nostalgia. As the clock ticked into the silence, I felt the acute sadness of the physical passing of time while musing on the already (personal) passed time, triggered perhaps by the old look and feeling of the fabric and the awkward loneliness of the box itself.



Incubator, 2012

Another great piece that stood out was *Incubator*, a small sculpture made of tiny yellow pencils enclosed or trapped in a bell-jar-glass-bottle with a swollen red wood cork stuck in the top of the bottle. It left me uneasy, like I was the one trapped in the bottle, gasping for air, and wondering whether those tiny pencils are to be preserved, suffocated, or harmlessly displayed.

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Mariposa, 2010-2012

The masterpiece of the show is of course *Mariposa*, the installation of the un-re-threaded blanket. Set a little below (my) eye level, hundreds of unique wooden homemade spools surround the room. One could spend hours looking at each one. Ranging from one inch to over one foot in size, each spool is a gem, a perfect sculpture unto itself; and yet they remain powerful as a whole. Although they are mostly the natural color of wood or of a natural looking stain, there are a few color pieces that add a surprising quality to the installation. Seeing a pop of yellow-orange or teal from time to time jolts and grounds the installation at the same time. I was drawn, again and again, to re-visit each object and step back and get closer over and over again. For me, *Mariposa* had all the qualities that I look for in a work of art. It is conceptual in its approach and in its transformation of the subject and material, it is impeccably crafted, surprising and a bit humorous, and in spite of its many, unique components, it remains aesthetically minimal and unified.



Pin Cushion, 2012

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Not to refer in any way to the Ken Johnson scandal, Spector's choice of objects and fabrics in this exhibition (more so in the front and North Gallery) have a feminine quality. The thread and needle in *The Mend*, *Pin Cushion*, the old patterned fabrics, and the un-weaving of the blanket, all point to an old world of domesticity marked by a woman's touch. I applaud this "feminine" quality, as it evokes a new level of intimacy and adds a different (historical) dimension to the work.

Everything seems contained, captured and preserved in Spector's work. The objects look inward and to refer back to themselves. They are part of the word, have been part of the word, have seen the world and have a past, and now they are forever transformed and full of history, yet silent, like a shard of clay or a piece of metal displayed in a glass case in the 'ancient world' wing of a museum.

I believe it is important for artists and galleries to support our city's artistic community. It is up to all of us to be part of this community and to cultivate it. And it is up to us to claim ourselves as part of the world we live in. It was encouraging and refreshing to see one of Philadelphia's artistic 'icons' front and center.

<http://artgrind.wordpress.com/2013/02/08/a-philly-favorite-front-and-center-shelley-spector-at-bridgette-mayer-gallery/>