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Embroidery, Tech, and Hurricanes: Artist Shelley Spector and Philadelphia's NextFab Studio (PHOTOS)

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Cataclysmic forces of nature, man-made disasters, unpredictable episodes of mass destruction: One might expect art inspired by these events to be of a grand and dramatic scale, brimming with emotive energy.

And what about art created using the latest technology and industrial tools? Super slick and hard edged, maybe even with lights and moving parts, right?

Not so fast.

In the spring of 2011, Shelley Spector came into her artist residency at Philadelphia's NextFab Studio with an open mind and no firmly set plan for what work she would produce. NextFab is a unique Philadelphia workshop housed at the University City Science Center that offers sophisticated, high-tech equipment to be used by everyone from industrial designers and architects to first-time inventors – in short, anyone who needs the technological means to fabricate their vision. Not only does NextFab offer fabrication services-for-hire and a membership program for supervised self-use of its facilities (imagine a health club membership, but instead of treadmills you have access to state-of-the-art laser cutters, 3D printers, and the like), it operates in a closely meshed partnership with Breadboard, a community-focused program of the Science Center. Breadboard also runs the artist residency program, with an aim to engender creative applications of technology. The works created during the residencies are presented in an exhibition series at the affiliated Esther Klein Gallery, also known as EKG.



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Although Spector is mostly known for her wood-based sculptures, she has also worked in textiles, and found herself drawn to one piece of equipment: a computer-guided embroidery machine, which she nicknamed "Gwen."

Interestingly, this was the single device that nobody at NextFab – neither staff nor members – had explored enough to develop a level of expertise. Thus instead of having guidance from a staff member, as with the other NextFab tools, Spector trained herself from scratch, wading through huge manuals and learning the possibilities of the equipment through trial and error. This was no small task. Although the machine has the appearance of a fairly basic, if slick, sewing machine, it's a complicated professional tool driven by its own proprietary software. She describes this training period as well-suited to her work style, which is "slow, and guided by process and thoughtful research." As an artist highly inspired by materials and tools, she found that the experience "completely opened up what I can do... I went from making wood sculptures creating a new vocabulary for myself."

So what does any of this have to do with disaster and destruction?



In what Spector calls a "weird coincidence," on the day she planned to commence her yet to be defined textile project employing Gwen, news of the Fukushima nuclear disaster broke, and the first work she created was inspired by a graphic diagram of the projected nuclear fallout. Suddenly, the stage was set for the conceptual direction of her residency project: the representation of large cataclysmic events rendered in an almost dainty scale, as if to capture and contain these forces of destruction – or even serve as a visual metaphor for the scale of mere humans against forces beyond our control.

Closely following the Fukushima work, she began a piece of embroidered female names – "Arlene, Cindy, Emily, Gert, Irene, Katia..." – rendered in preciously sentimental script over sweet, pink patterned fabric. The irony is clear when the viewer realizes these are the names of hurricanes.

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Repurposed from old garments and scraps salvaged in NextFab's woodshop, these intimately scaled works referencing disaster have a tactile, even homespun quality, defying the sophisticated technology that made them possible.

The technology is more apparent in the large work that rounded out her residency project, an intricate "wallpaper" of laser-cut cardboard taken from commercial packages, with logo remnants and graphics laid out in a vibrant, almost dizzying array. She titled the culminating exhibition Dreck Groove - "dreck" being a reference to the cast-off materials reclaimed for these works.

The fact that Spector came into the NextFab residency without a precise plan for a project is the type of scenario that Dan Schimmel, director of Breadboard, encourages. Schimmel explains that the program "opens interaction, experimentation, and serendipitous discoveries," thus a number of the selected artists come into the residency fresh: Instead of having a preconceived project that requires technology simply for fabrication, they enter ready to interact and be inspired by the possibilities. The exposure to the technological resources within the open workshop environment allows seasoned artists to discover "new ways of doing what they do," Schimmel says. Likewise, the creativity of the artist residents has an inspirational impact on the more technical users of the facility, whom they work beside on a daily basis.



Spector notes that the NextFab experience exposed her to a different kind of community than what is normally encountered in an artist residency, one that suited her well. "I feel comfortable in a place where experimentation is going on," she says. Especially intriguing was her discovery of how art and science come together, something she says she hadn't really thought about before. "They have a similar

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mindset... both involve making things that don't exist, combining things, discovering something en route to another place."

Even a place where random destructive forces can be harnessed and tamed by a machine named Gwen.

Pictured work courtesy of Bridgette Mayer Gallery

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