Review

Meador, Janell Christopher. "Debra Smith: The Good, The Bad, But no More Ugly". *Review*. June 2007

The Good, The Bad, But no More Ugly

Janell Christopher Meador

Debra Smith in her studio. All images courtesy Elisia Friedman.

Artist Debra Smith has been in nine car accidents (most involving the neglect of red lights), suffered Bell's Palsey, spent nine months in a wheelchair and was given an obscene sign from the cosmos before deciding to move back to Kansas City, Missouri from New York City in 2005. Near the end of her eight-year sojourn in New York, Smith asked the cosmos for a sign to indicate whether she should return to Missouri or remain in New York. She had hoped the sign might be the handsome guy on his bicycle, she often saw on her neighborhood walks. Instead, her sign came in the form of a fat naked guy standing in his window masturbating, shades half pulled to hide his identity. Bad stuff. It was time for her to restart her life and career elsewhere.

Debra Smith now lives in a beautifully remodeled house overlooking downtown Kansas City, she has sold her work in galleries and boutiques in Germany, Switzerland and the United States, and she continues to make her living as a fiber artist — her passion is her profession. That is good.

Smith graduated from the Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, Missouri, in 1993, studied at the Italian Academy of Fashion and Design at Lorenzo de Medici, the Polimoda International Institute of Design and Marketing, Florence, Italy, and she has an associate degree in accessory design from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. She is the founder of Sakori, a business that produces hand-woven scarves, accessories and fine art made from contemporary and antique fabrics. A third generation weaver, she has shown her work at the Dolphin Gallery and The Pearl Gallery in Kansas City, the Pencil Factory in Brooklyn, New York, and the Olsen-Larsen Gallery in West Des Moines, Iowa.

After graduating from KCAI, Smith worked for Asiatica, a Kansas City company that sells custom designed clothing and accessories, owned by Elizabeth Wilson and Fifi White since 1980. Asiatica is renowned for creating fashions from antique kimonos collected in Japan. In the early 1990's, the partners donated some scraps of silk from kimono linings to the fiber department at KCAI, where Smith was studying. Smith seized the opportunity to work with such rare fabric and wove the first of her now well-known scarves, which Fifi White bought at an end-of-semester student art sale. White returned to show off her purchase to Wilson, saying that she had bought the best thing at the sale. Wilson then pointed out that of course it was the best — it was woven out of their own donated fabric.

It was no coincidence, therefore, that the Asiatica partners asked Debra Smith to work for them when she graduated

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Detail of one of Smith's works in progress.

Detail of felt and fabric flower pins in Smith's studio.

from KCAI. "They asked me if I was still making the scarves," says Smith. "I totally lied and said, 'Yeah, sure.' I had to run out and borrow a loom." Smith worked as a fabric inspector at Asiatica for the next five years.

The first time Debra Smith visited New York City she was a student and could afford only cheap accommodations; she quickly saw the ugly side of the city. Later, as an employee of Asiatica, she could afford more agreeable surroundings and saw the creative, exciting possibilities of living in New York. Walking in Soho, she saw fabulous work in shops and felt that, if surrounded by this teeming atmosphere, her work would be inspired — she could create anything.

In 1998, Smith moved to New York City, rented an apartment and a studio. She had just received the largest order of her life: 300 scarves from the globally distributed Peruvian Connection Catalog. "You get so busy just living in New York," she says. She was so busy, preoccupied and in such a hurry, while riding her bicycle home through the crowded streets, that she failed to avoid an oncoming car driven by a 74-year-old man who did not see her coming. She landed on her knee, shattering her tibia plateau, and spent the next six months in a wheelchair.

Plowing forward, she continued weaving from her wheelchair, filling the Peruvian Connection order and attending the Fashion Institute of Technology to study accessory design. In 2002, she was working for Wolfgang Thom, a German artist, at his company Decor Floral in New York. She began to realize that all her energy was being spent to simply pay the high cost of living in the city. Her art was being pushed into the background.

From November 2002 to March 2003, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York exhibited the *Quilts of Gee's Bend*, a collection of 70 quilts created by 42 women, most descendants of former slaves, from the community of Gee's Bend, Alabama. This exhibit had a stunning effect on Debra Smith. "The quilts were like undulating hides of flesh that billowed off of the wall," she says. "One woman made a quilt from the work clothes of her dead husband." Smith was awed by the naive beauty of the quilts. "They were pure passion and love," she says. "They weren't even trying to make art — they just did it. I wanted to do that."

A phone call from a friend gave Smith the push she needed to make a change. Rachel Jacobs was working as a chef at the Rainbow Trout Ranch in Antonito, Colorado, and she encouraged Smith to join her there. "I kept telling Wolfgang I wanted to quit, but he ignored

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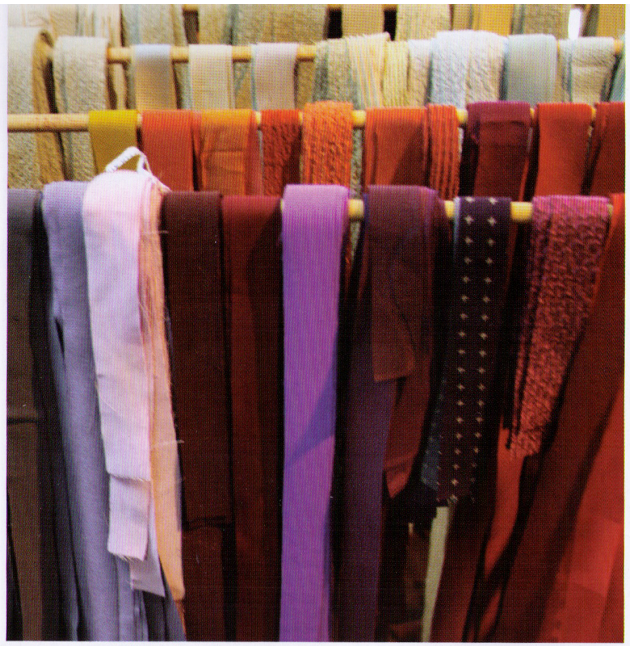

Fabric strips waiting to be woven.

Stack of Smith's popular woven scarves.

me," Smith says. "So I told him I was going to an art camp in Colorado, and to not contact me." She bought some vintage western clothing from David Brockman at Second Honeymoon, packed up her portable sewing machine and spent the next six months at the dude ranch. "My job at the dude ranch was to drop the laundry off in Alamosa and get the chainsaw blades sharpened," she says. "Then I would walk around Wal-Mart wearing these insane pink paisley pants looking for blue cheese and buying massive amounts of clay pigeons. They must have thought I was crazy."

After an expensive trip to Australia and the aforementioned *sign* from the cosmos, Debra Smith was convinced to leave New York City. "I was spending all of my time paying the bills in New York," she says. "I realized that I could do what I do anywhere."

In 2004, Smith exhibited in Kansas City in a KCAI alumni show organized by artist and alumni Davin Watne. While in town, she found a house at 1661 Madison and decided this was where she wanted to be. Built in the late 1800s, the house was dilapidated. "No one but squirrels had lived there since 1984," she says. "Before that, a blind couple lived in it for 60 years." Smith peeled off wallpaper, put in a parquet floor in the kitchen, and added a shed dormer and a deck on the second story where she now has her studio. In the studio, stacks and racks of colorful rolls of strips and folded fabrics fill every space not occupied by looms, cutting tables and sewing machines. "I'm constantly opening boxes," Smith says. "I never get to see all my fabrics together."

Smith says she created more art during her first year back in Kansas City than she had done in the entire eight years she spent in New York. "I had three shows here the first year I was back," she says. In 2005, Smith participated in the *H&R Block Artspace Flatfiles* exhibition, a group show at the Dolphin Gallery and a show with Kate Andrews at The Pearl Gallery.

Her home finally finished, Smith is considering a new contract with Peruvian Connection and looking forward to the 2007 International Surface Design Association Conference in Kansas City. She still weaves scarves and creates fine art with fabric, she recently hosted another show of her fine art in March, in Kansas City, and she returned from a trip to Hong Kong in April.

Is it difficult to make a distinction between art and craft? "There is a distinction," she says. "The scarves are my bread and butter. Doing them allows me to make art. I have noticed that when I stop weaving and sit down to try and sew art there is always this moment of anxiety, stress and pressure … the first things I do are so forced — overworked … then I hit a more calm, tranquil stride where things just flow. Working on multiple pieces, things just begin to fit rather than being forced together."

Smith easily balances her fine art versus her commercial work, just as she answers the question: artist or craftsman? "I have no problem with the word craft. I am not offended," she says. "I'm a Gemini. I'm both." •