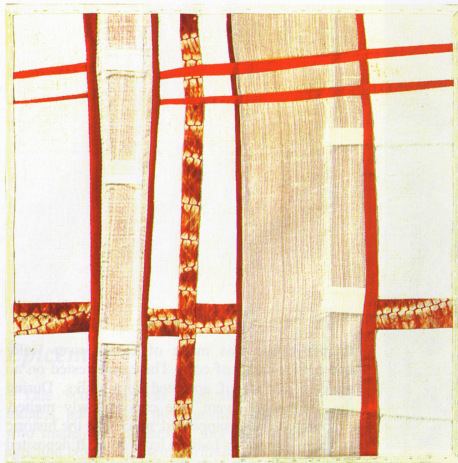


KATHRYN  
MARKEL

FINE ARTS  
EST. 1976

Review

Lulaki, Susi. "Debra Smith at The Pearl," *Review*. September 2005.



Debra Smith  
*New Work*  
The Pearl  
June 3 – July 1, 2005

Art made from pleasing silks filled The Pearl in June during Debra Smith and Kate Andrews' *New Work* show, exhibited during the Surface Design Conference. The most eye-catching part of the two person show, gently swaying yards of silk organza resist dyed by Kate Andrews and hung from the lofty ceiling, mesmerized viewers and acted as a dramatic counterpoint to the more stationary silk pieces comprising the bulk of the show. Kate's many small wall pieces, also resist-dyed silks with the same earthy palette, were nicely developed tidbits that seemed to be snipped from her flowing yardage.

In the quietest section of *New Work* on the opposite side of the gallery, six small, muted works by Debra Smith titled *Transformation of Thought* and *Transformation of Space* hung in a row that underlined their formal similarities of white silk pieces layered over more white pieces with subtle curves thrown in — circle shapes and bits of khaki color. The intricately pieced and sewn silks in these six works were salvaged from linings of Japanese kimonos, which accounts for their special sheen. This patina shows evidence of having lived through many people and lifetimes and hints of wabi sabi, the underpinning of Japanese aesthetics that venerates simple things that have beauty stemming from age and use. Over the last 12 years, Smith has developed a style of elegant restraint that discovers unexpected beauty in found objects.

Smith works in series and her silk pieces were organized in groups according to color variations and pattern. Her other series in *New Work* brought in more colors that livened up the plays of white on white; reds were also from kimono linings, orange and brown patterns were from kimono fronts, and greenish blue silks were from the garment district in New York City, her home for the last seven years until recently.

Since returning to Kansas City last February, she created a large textile piece commissioned through Dolphin, sewed a few of the new silk wall pieces that were at The Pearl, showed five white and red silk artworks at Dolphin, also during the Surface Design Conference, and wove a few scarves. Smith also makes hand woven, one-of-a-kind scarves also using antique kimono silk. The

Surface Design Conference and all the concurrent shows bring up definitions of art; what is included and what is not. Smith's work argues that who makes an object along with their intentions may be more important to inclusion in the art category than the material used (Historically fabric and clay are often designated craft materials versus oil paint and bronze.) Duchamp made his points about intention and what makes art *Art with Readymades* almost 100 years ago, and yet we still draw lines in the sand. There are languages, English not being one of them, that have no word for art and neither differentiate art from craft nor separate art from everyday usefulness. In a liberated, post-Duchampian world, Smith creates art with a wider net that includes useful scarves and non-utilitarian wall pieces with such a refined sensibility that questions of a scarf being art are out-of-date.

That said, her work resonates beyond pleasing surface design. Smith's work shines first as art and secondly as surface craft. This is due to more than aesthetic discernment, more than the mysterious wabi sabi affects of scavenging previously owned Japanese kimonos, and more than the tactile qualities of silks; it is due to the development of context, which takes you deep beneath the surface.

She began a relationship with the antique silks she uses in her work while at Kansas City Art Institute. Asiatica donated remnants of Japanese fabrics to the fiber department, and she started weaving thin strips of the curious silk into her work. After graduation, she worked for five years as a production assistant at Asiatica, which specializes in the reconstruction of antique kimono fabrics into contemporary clothing. Linings of the kimonos, usually in shades of white, were too delicate for the clothing line. Smith took them home and continued to develop a distinctive style of working with vintage silks.


She has built her context over her lifetime, from growing up with a mother and grandmother that were both weavers, through art school and work at Asiatica, to establishing her own textile company, Sakiiori, that produces scarves with a loose, hand woven look that belies their strength. Simultaneously simple and complex, each scarf appears to be in a constant state of shifting — falling apart yet holding together. How could those scarves not be called art? Hans Hoffman would envy their surface, so alive and active with the opposing forces of his famed push and pull theory.

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