

Art Review By Regina Haggis

# Knitwit's exhibition is truly off the wall



**M**ost people think of knitting as the making of something functional — a sweater or baby booties — that gets worn, worn out and discarded. The first knitter, according to a Middle Eastern legend, was Eve. What did she knit in the Garden of Eden? The pattern on the Serpent's back. In fact, knitting is not nearly that old, but the story is interesting because it suggests that knitting's original impulse is more aesthetic than functional. In other words, it is more art than craft.

Germaine Koh knits up a work of art in *Open Hours*, a striking exhibition at the McMaster Museum of Art. There are two major installations in the main gallery area: *Knitwork* and *4w 2d a/c*. Several smaller pieces are distributed throughout the museum.

Koh, a Malaysian-born Canadian, has been exhibiting in Canada and abroad since 1991. She takes a minimalist approach to her work — the two major works in this show leave the walls bare — and likes to use mundane materials, including yarn, silver vinyl tinsel, postcards and mass-produced signs.

My favourite is *Knitwork*, a huge piece of knitting begun in 1992 and still a work in progress. Two metres wide and more than 60 metres long, the piece winds its way like a bulky snake along the floor of the gallery. It's obviously unfinished — a familiar practice among knitters — since one end of the work still hangs on the wooden knitting needles and feeds off five small balls of yarn.

In fact, Koh has stopped in the middle of a row and laid down her needles as though she will return any minute to finish it. Signalling the artist's absence like this makes us more aware of her participation. Knitters are advised by their mothers and mentors not to stop knitting in the middle of a row, so there's a small act of disobedience going on as well.

For some visitors, this unfinished row is an invitation to pick up the needles and help out. The work screams viewer participation. Only the thought of having to sit on a cold concrete floor keeps a knitting addict's hands off.

A huge piece of knitting filling the floor space of a gallery makes for an unexpected object. We're ready for ready-mades, but many still perceive knitting as a lowly craft, and yarn as unfit material for art.

Koh's piece is not a huge scarf or blanket; it's a work of art. It is displayed in a gallery and it is non-functional — its length alone renders it useless. Like an abstract painting, it reveals texture, colour and a geometrically based pattern.

Knitting, which has been around for at least 1,500 years, has traditionally been labelled a craft: an intellectual activity which produces something non-functional and beautiful.

Richard Rutt, the English bishop who has written extensively in praise of knitting, likes to keep it in the craft category. But Eric Gill, an early 20th-century English sculptor, defines art simply as making things. For him, knitting would be art. And many modern artists believe that a work is art simply because the creator says it is.

Koh toys with the traditional boundaries between craft and art by making a nonfunctional piece out of useful pieces, since she has unravelled and reknitted old sweaters. So far, she has used up about 300 old garments. Like many contemporary artists, she is recycling ordinary and discarded materials.

Koh's knitted object serves as a monument to women's hand-work, which is usually made for someone else and is worn and discarded. So this is a visible symbol of the historically invisible. Its length speaks to commitment and the passage of time, but it also suggests an obsessiveness, as though the artist does not



PHOTOS BY GUY RONALD, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

## Signpost

**What:** Germaine Koh  
**When:** Open Hours  
**Where:** McMaster Museum of Art, Sterling Street and University Avenue  
**When:** Until Oct. 20  
**Hours:** 11 to 6 Tuesday to Friday, 7 to 9 Thursday evening, 12 to 5 Sunday  
**Admission:** Suggested donation of \$2, students and seniors free.

know when to stop.

Obsessiveness in the creative process characterizes much art made by contemporary female artists. Koh's piece is similar. The time-consuming act of unraveling all the old garments and winding the crinkly used yarn into balls had to precede the actual knitting.

The knitting itself is not that easy as the piece grows it gets bigger and heavier. And Koh steers clear of the simplest stitches, thereby increasing her difficulty.

One viewer suggested all the yarn could have been put to good use by providing clothes for refugees or homeless people. This is a common opinion: a woman should knit something useful for someone else, rather than make a show of her labour.

Other viewers are still uncomfortable with the idea of yarn as artistic raw material. Yet Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century declared war on the traditional stuff of art. Many artists have followed in their footsteps and placed all manner of materials and objects in galleries.

And Koh is not the only contemporary Canadian artist who knits. Last year an Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition featured Barb Hunt, who had knitted and stuffed dozens of lambskin-like objects in fluffy pink yarn. In 1999, Toronto artist Janet Morton clothed a whole house in a sweater using 800 recycled garments.

Yarn is not the only ordinary material Koh turns into art. Her site-specific installation, *4w 2d a/c* (four walls, two doors, air-conditioning), consists of parallel rows of silver vinyl tinsel crossing the room near the ceiling. The lines flutter and rustle from the movement of the air in the main part of the gallery.

This work was partly inspired by the museum's clo-

**TOP:** Germaine Koh's *Knitwork*, more than 60 metres long and still growing, is knitted from unravelled sweaters.

**ABOVE:** Detail of *Knitwork* by Germaine Koh shows the knitting abandoned in the middle of a row.

sure for several months last year and the overhaul of its air filtration systems. The exhibition's title, *Open Hours*, also refers obligingly to the closing.

The tinsel is the kind used by car dealers. It attracts attention to outdoor lots and is believed to keep birds from messing up the cars on display. In Koh's hands, the attributes of a commercial space are brought into a gallery.

The rows and rows of vinyl tinsel replace the ceiling, giving the space an ornate and festive appearance, but also point to the artist's repetitive and obsessive working process.

The rest of the large gallery is empty. So the installation is a minimalist one, although this room is not quite as bare as the one that English artist Martin Creed created for the Art Gallery of Hamilton last year.

Half a dozen other works, some of which invite participation, complete the exhibition. Displayed in the museum shop is *Sightings*, a series of postcards Koh made from snapshots she found. By turning people's snaps into cards for sale, Koh has monumentalized — and commercialized — individual experiences.

In various places in the museum, Koh has hung mass-produced signs which she has altered. A *Sold* sign has been changed to read *SO*, while a *Help Wanted* sign now reads *HILL*, a more desperate request.

An opening reception for this exhibition will be held on Thursday, Oct. 3, from 7 to 9 p.m. The artist will be present and everyone is welcome.

In homage to *Knitwork*, the McMaster Museum of Art has organized four knitting classes for beginners. These two-hour sessions begin at 2 p.m. on Sundays, starting tomorrow. Call 905-525-9140, ext. 23081, to register.

Regina Haggis, a former professor of art history at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, teaches at the Dundas Valley School of Art. You can contact her at dhaggis@hamiltonspectator.com