

By ROBIN LAURENCE

When I told a friend that I was reviewing an exhibition of subversive textile art, he groaned: "That's so old, that's so *soventies!*"

This friend is a brilliant, young, Renaissance kind of a guy — a writer, artist, critic, musician and architectural student. But his response made me bristle. It was so ... so Renaissance-guy-like.

Of course textile art is old — not just decades old, but centuries and millennia old. Within the context of western art history, however, textile artists have been overlooked and under-represented, their practice identified with the feminine, the domestic and, heaven forefend, "craft."

What a new group show at the Or Gallery tells us is that these rigid identifications, with their privileging of the masculine, the public and "fine art", still need redressing. Which is why this textile work continues to be relevant — or so I argued with my pal.

An unsmiling namelessness attends the exhibition at the Or (112 West Hastings, to May 20).

The show, curated by Or director Janis Bowley, has no title and the individual artists — Gillian Collyer, Catherine Heard, Germaine Koh, Roxane Permar, Wilma Johnson and Ruth Scheuing — aren't identified by labels within the gallery installation of their work.

This anonymity ironically underlines the anonymity of creators of textile art through the ages, while amplifying the sense of an underground or subversive project occurring here.

When I was discussing all this with my pal, I also argued for the "handmadness" of textile art, the need for an occasional respite from — and counter argument to — computer and photographic technologies in contemporary visual culture.

Not that computer and photo technologies are absent from this show. Roxane Permar and Wilma Johnson have used color photogra-

phy to document their *Craft Cosey Project* and Ruth Scheuing has employed a computer-assisted loom in the weaving of *Arachne's Tapestry*.

Permar, an American-born artist living in London, England, and Johnson, a traditional knitter living on the Isle of Burre in Shetland, Scotland, have undertaken a collaborative, public art project that is at once modest and ambitious.

Grappling with ideas surrounding nature and culture, topography and landscape, gender and identity, community and tradition, they intend to create an immense, hand-knitted cover for a Shetland cottage or croft. Through brochures, presentations and photos like the ones displayed in this show (the images are of knit-covered models situated in various seasons and landscapes), Permar and Johnson are encouraging Shetland knitters to contribute individual pieces to their project.

Formally and conceptually, *The Craft Cosey Project* evokes Christo, while its collaborative nature and innovative use of traditional women's work suggest Judy Chicago.

Vancouver-based Scheuing has created a 15-inch high, 32-foot long tapestry in colored cotton, installed it on a wall-mounted shelf and accompanied it with an audio tape.

As with the other artists in this show, Scheuing uses textiles to address gender issues: she looks at the way our attitudes toward women have been shaped down the ages of Western culture and more particularly, at the way women as weavers were character-

ized in classical mythology.

Quoting Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on the multi-voiced audio tape and employing text instead of images, Scheuing recreates the dazzling and defiant tapestry *Arachne* is

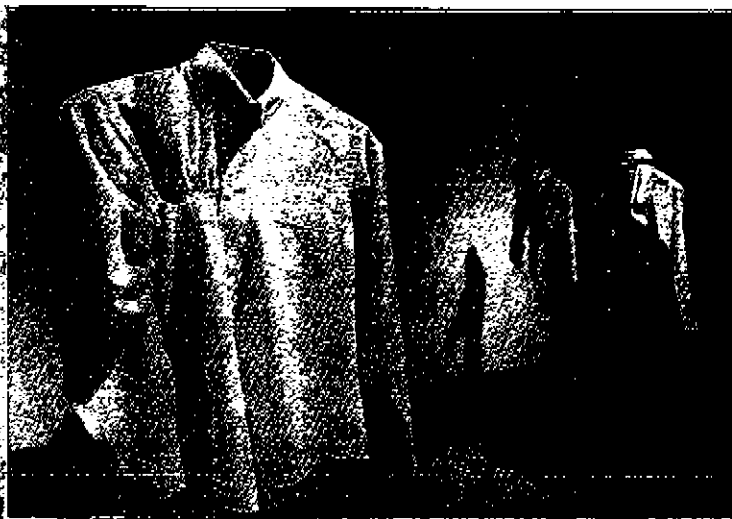
said to have made in her ill-fated weaving competition with

the goddess Athena.

Scheuing employs text rather than images, however, naming the women seduced, abused, deceived and transformed by the gods of Olympus, and we are made aware of the misogynist and patriarchal aspects of our Western cultural heritage. (Unlike *Arachne*, Scheuing can make her social comments without fear of being turned into a spider.)

In their subtle disruptions of the symbolically-charged clothing of "corporate culture," Gillian Collyer's *Smocked Shirts* are very reminiscent of projects that Scheuing undertook in the 1980s. (Scheuing altered men's suit jackets by pulling threads out of them and/or taking them apart at the seams.)

Collyer is a young Halifax artist



BAR LINDSAY/Vancouver Sun

Textiles redressed

SMOCKED SHIRTS,
an installation
by Gillian Collyer

yarns into a multi-colored, multi-textured afghan that, at last measure, was 36 metres long and contained over 200 garments.

Describing this project as a "life work" that will "be finished when I cease," Koh seems to revel in its processes of reclamation and repetition and its ironic massiveness (monumental size posed against anti-monumental materials and processes).

As viewers, we can respond to the almost "ecological" accretion of history here — to layers and layers of wearing and striving. We can also appreciate *Knitwork's* massive, slumbrous, anhal presence. It's like a great, rumpled, sleeping dragon of abstraction and figuration.

Toronto artist Catherine Heard uses embroidery mounted on black wooden frames to examine the construction of female sexuality in history.

In *After Bartisch* and *After Vesalius*, she has appropriated anatomical drawings made in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, drawings that strangely configure female sex organs as if they were male.

Heard amplifies our curiosity and discomfort by embroidering the images with human hair. The hair, which hangs in repellent strands from the back of the stretched pieces of white cotton, serves numerous symbolic functions and makes numerous social and sexual references (including Victorian mourning jewelry).

This isn't embroidery the way our Victorian great-grandmothers would have conceived it — although it certainly is reminiscent of their pretty, morbid and repressed ways. ♦

who has reacted to her periodic immersions in the computerized office world by smocking men's white shirts in odd places. Smocking is traditionally seen on the bodices of little girls' dresses. Through its delicate and labor-intensive application to the sleeves, backs and collars of men's shirts, Collyer creates a wonderful absurdity: uselessly decorative garments deprived of their gendered authority.

A surreal absurdity also informs Germaine Koh's *Knitwork*, an apparently endless afghan, begun in February, 1992, and made out of reclaimed fibres. Koh, an Ottawa-based artist, unravels discarded and thrift-shop garments like sweaters, scarves, hats, gloves and vests, then reknits the