

Knitwork *giving form to the invisible*

by Bethany Lyttle

When Canadian visual artist Germaine Koh says she's been knitting on the same project since 1992, she isn't exaggerating. And when she says the project won't be completed until she dies, she's serious. Koh's knitted piece, which she describes as a "monument and tribute to the unnoticed aspects of everyday life," currently weighs in at a whopping 350 pounds and measures about 300 feet in length. "It's become too heavy to carry around," explains Koh. "So to work on it, I have to go where it's being exhibited or stored."

Knitwork, as the piece is entitled, is made up of hundreds of unraveled sweaters, hats, and mittens—all of them used and most of them "ratty." The majority of the knits that form her stash for unraveling have been donated. "Reknitting items that have been given to me imbues the piece with a sense of collectivity," she explains. "The more 'people' I can incorporate into the piece, the better."

Like much of her work, *Knitwork* is an attempt to give form to the invisible. "I wanted to illustrate the magnitude of the tasks we take for granted—commuting, office work, handwork. These things take up an enormous amount of time in our lives, but somehow remain unacknowledged." Koh has adopted the activity of knitting to express her concept. The sheer volume of her piece, the ongoing effort of knitting gathered in a single work, makes notable something that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Koh, who learned to knit when she was eight, works on *Knitwork* to the exclusion of all other knitted projects. No sweaters, scarves, hats, or mittens ever drop from her needles. *Knitwork* is a lifework, she explains, a comprehensive project intended to show what a lifetime worth of, say, knitting looks like. "If I were to knit other things, it would dilute the impact of the piece," she says.

Recently acquired by the Art Gallery of Ontario, the piece is sometimes exhibited along with a list of the items that have been used in *Knitwork*. Visitors have the opportunity to discover where each sweater, mir-



The British Museum

Above left: Knitwork, installation-performance at The British Museum, London. Ongoing since 1992. Unraveled used garments reknit into growing object. About 2 m x increasing length. Above right: View of installation-performance at Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge.



David Clearwater

ten, or hat came from, when the yarn from these items was incorporated, and who donated them.

Given the scale of the piece, Koh requires very large needles. She makes them herself from 3/8-inch dowels that she sharpens to create tips. "They do wear out, though," she says of the 3-foot-long needles. "When that happens, I have to make new ones."

To keep the project interesting ("At times, it can get a little dull," she confesses), Koh experiments with color, texture, and stitch patterns. "It's a fairly painterly object," she says. "I make certain choices about what to include and where. If you

look at the piece carefully, you can see the different phases in my work." Parts of the piece are defined by solid blocks of color, while other portions are varied and uneven. Recently, she's been mixing colors by knitting strands from two different sweaters at once.

It's hard not to wonder if Koh will be able to stay the course and continue working on *Knitwork* for the rest of her life. Asked if she has any doubts about remain-

ing interested in her ongoing knitting and its result, Koh responds in a tone that can only be described as matter-of-fact. "Sure. People make lifelong commitments like this all the time. Sometimes it's to a job, other times to a relationship or career or child. But in the end, that's what *Knitwork* is all about—how we make very heavy decisions very lightly all the time."

To learn more about Germaine Koh, visit www.germainekoh.com. Germaine is represented by the Catriona Jeffries Gallery (www.catrionajeffries.com); 3149 Granville St., Vancouver Canada V6H 3K1; cat_jeffries_gallery@telus.net; (604) 736-1554.

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