
Livingstone's body of work

Life force informs every fiber of work

**By Ruth Lopez
Special to the Tribune**

December 30, 2001

Artist Joan Livingstone has been exploring the body in her work for more than 15 years. She has been preoccupied with felt for even longer.

Livingstone's first attempt to make felt was in the late 1960s, while studying textile arts in Oregon. Felt is made when wool fibers or fur are fused together. Livingstone's first experiment with sheep fleece included boiling it, beating it with a potato masher and running over it repeatedly with her car. She has improved her technique.

"I have an odd reputation as one of this country's most known feltmakers," Livingstone said during a studio visit.

Livingstone is also recognized for her fiber sculptures, abstract explorations of the human form made of felt, suture thread and epoxy resin. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, among others. In October, she was named a fellow of the American Craft Council at an awards ceremony held during SOFA -- the international exhibition of sculpture objects and functional art -- at Navy Pier. Livingstone chairs the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she has been on the faculty since 1983.

In January, the Evanston Art Center will present an exhibition, "In the Material World," which will feature Livingstone and three other artists.

Universal themes

"Joan Livingstone is important on a national and international level because she is a woman sculptor whose choice of material addresses not only feminine concerns dealing with issues of the female body but also addresses universal concerns of the body as [a] vessel or container," said Chicago art critic John Brunetti, curator of the upcoming exhibit. "She is able to evoke very intimate associations related to the body on a very grand scale."

For the last 12 years, Livingstone has worked out of a former auto-body garage west of the Loop. Throughout the studio are pieces from Livingstone's investigations on bodily activity from fluids to breathing. Saclike forms hang from the ceiling, attached to pulleys or hooks. Large forms of distorted or partially collapsed bellows lean against a wall.

The fabric of life

"I'm partly interested in felt because of its ability to describe a membrane," she said. The artist's technique accommodates this idea. After cutting felt from a pattern and hand sewing the pieces, she secures the object in a skeleton made out of scraps of wood. The piece is then saturated with an epoxy resin and left to cure for about a week. The process allows for tension to be applied to the felt, causing a lot of organic movement.

"I have built large paper models of the forms but they come out rigid and geometric," she said.

Livingstone found a chemist who works on boats to help her develop the resin. "He understood the need for resin to sink in for a boat to float," she said. "We figured out a formula for epoxy resin that is neither too thick or too thin."

After the pieces are cured, Livingstone sands the surface until the felt hairs begin to emerge, giving the work a peach-fuzz quality. From a distance, it's hard to discern the material. It could be stone or granite.

The confusion is welcome. "You go from this experience of a solid, mute kind of object to one that is actually very sensual," she said. "It's this moment of discovery that I think is really important."

Hamza Walker, the education director of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, said he has always found Livingstone's work both beautiful and interesting. In the history of sculpture there has been, for the most part, a divide between anti-formalist soft sculpture and the massive feats of engineering associated with the work of, for example, Richard Serra or Mark di Suvero. "Livingstone's work falls between," Walker said. It is neither hard or soft sculpture but it does have some formalist aspirations. "It rewrites a certain trajectory for soft sculpture," Walker said.

Livingstone has shifted away from using handmade felt exclusively to working with industrial felt. "I realized I was making material pretty close to what one could buy," she said.

Looking for materials in places other than art supply stores is a common activity among artists. Livingstone often visits hardware stores and marina supply houses. She found the suture thread -- surplus from the Korean War -- in a hospital supply store. "I bought it by the caseload."

Interior journeys

After several years of creating hollow pieces, Livingstone began exploring "the mysterious inner space" of the cavities.

Livingstone had always noticed the ventilation and exhaust systems on the roofs of the buildings that surround her studio in the light industrial area along Grand Avenue. "I began to get interested in how substances move between the interior and exterior." That exploration had its logical conclusion. "I began to fill the forms."

Felt sacs were suspended in an elevator shaft and filled with epoxy resin until it seeped out. They would be left to dry and then refilled. The pieces were filled or submerged. Some were heated until they charred. "It was like a laboratory," she said.

"I wanted this quality of total fullness, beyond full. Which is exactly how I feel my life is," she said.

In order to pour, she had to build funnels. And from that came another idea.

In 1998, Livingstone started to make funnels out of felt. Hundreds of them. The result was "At Capacity," a 40-foot long installation of 55 funnels, mounted on walls, that had been through the paces, much like the sacs, with resin and polyurethane rubber. A portion of the installation is now at the Cheongju International Biennale in Korea, another portion sold.

Supporting images

Accompanying the installation are nine enlarged color photographs taken from her work journals. The dated entries contain recipes and the experiments of the day, such as how many drops of color were added, along with the results.

Livingstone noticed an abundance of words such as weeping, staining, bleeding, sweating. "Words we would use to describe body functions," she said.

The journal wasn't created to be part of the installation. Livingstone has always been an obsessive note taker. "I wasn't thinking. I was just doing," she said. The images do add to the work. They reveal an artist who is paying attention to every moment of the process.

So does the stuff in Livingstone's office at the front of the studio. On a table near a window are old French doll parts. Lining a shelf is a collection of antique wooden hat forms: beautiful sculptural objects that relate to the historic role of felt in millinery. And then there are shelves and shelves of books. It's the library of a professor, a fine artist with a strong foundation in the liberal arts. In the spring a special book will join her library. Telos Art Publishing, based in England, will release a book on Livingstone, her first monograph, as part of a series on textile artists.

Livingstone is always reading, often in preparation for a class, lately just for pleasure. She had just finished Mario Vargas Llosa's "The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto," read as an "erotic respite" from the dark days following Sept. 11. "Anything to get back a sense of humor and life and body."

Copyright (c) 2001, Chicago Tribune