

HAW/CONTEMPORARY

Debra Smith's *Shifting Territory* takes the textiles artist to unfamiliar places

Liz Cook, The Pitch, September 23, 2014

In her new solo exhibition at Haw Contemporary, *Shifting Territory*, textile artist Debra Smith steps into terra incognita. Employing bold, gestural lines and the large-scale sensibilities of a painter, she engages with the visual tropes of drawing and painting, and the fabrics she uses — vintage kimonos and men's suit lining (striped in a faint gray that suggests pencil graphite) — lend historical dimension to her airy iterations.



The Pitch visited Smith's Crossroads studio following the opening at Haw. It's a cavernous space made cozy with clutter: bolts of fabric, ironing tables three-deep, walls coated with half-pieced works in progress. Smith speaks without hesitation or pretension, halting her rapid-fire rapport only to fly across the room and yank pieces from the wall for illustration, heaping them onto the table like Gatsby's silk shirts.

The Pitch: *Where did the title *Shifting Territory* come from?*

Smith: The title has a lot of meanings for me: returning to KC after 10 years in New York; moving on from a residency in Roswell, New Mexico; moving away from weaving scarves to making artwork on a larger scale. And subletting this studio — I wouldn't have been able to make the work that I made in the show without it.

As soon as I got in this space and got to pin things up and get away from them, I realized I couldn't see half of what I was doing in my studio at home. Everything had always been right in my face, and when I got far away from it, I was like, "Oh, this is interesting." It was a gift to be able to have that distance, to work so not only could it read up close but far away.

Is that what led to some of the larger-scale pieces at Haw?

I came to a conclusion that I needed to make some bigger work to sort of shake the bush and get some people to pay more attention. Working in textiles, it can be so dismissed, and I recognized a lot of people weren't really looking. I knew that if I made the work larger, that it would stop them for two seconds, and they would maybe look. It wasn't a guarantee of any kind.

So it's a way of asserting yourself?

I think so. I started showing at the Julie Saul Gallery — it's primarily a photography gallery — and I got really incredible feedback from that show. I feel like textiles may be taken a little more seriously sometimes if they're taken out of their usual context. I've always felt like I'm dancing more in the world of painting and drawing. But it's something I'm still trying to figure out. I'm a weaver, a third-generation weaver — my mother and grandmother were both weavers — and I always joke that I'm a Gemini, so it's in me to be pulled in two different directions.

Do you work from drawings?

It's very rare. A lot of what I do is extremely intuitive. None of the work in this show has been premeditated. It's all sort of pieced, and the shapes twist and turn together. I have to leave the room a lot and come back and turn it and walk away again.

I did a commission once where I started out by drawing three gestural lines, and when I sat down to try and sew it, I realized I couldn't cut a gestural line and sew a gestural line the way I could draw it. I can't make an abstract drawing and work toward it. I can have gestural movements when I sew, but they can't be premeditated. They need to be more organic.

You've worked with color before, but the pieces on display at Haw are largely black and cream.

My original intention was that the first room was going to be black and white, and the second was going to be color. But when I started working, it didn't come out that way. There was enough going on already, and I realized I wasn't done exploring it. I wanted to play more with form and shapes.

What drew you to kimono fabrics?

I worked for [Asian-goods retailer] Asiatica for years, weaving scarves for them out of the scrap kimono fabric that they generated. That started my relationship with it. A lot of the creams and the acid reds I use in my work are from antique Japanese kimono linings. They're too sheer to use for garments, so they would throw them away, and I would collect them like crazy. It's become the main body in my work.

It was an incredible gift to be exposed to those fabrics. There's a quality to old kimono fabric that a lot of people can't see. There's just this vibration to the fabric itself because of its history. To me, it's not about the person who wore it, necessarily, but the humanity that went into making it. A lot of the stuff made now is slicker — you can sense a machine doing it.

Is there a place for contemporary fabrics in your work?

I've been trying to figure out a life for this really weird, green rayon with a sort of wood-grain pattern. It's either really hideous or kind of amazing. There's something really fascinating about it — the hand quality is just sleazy.

The fabric I usually work with is silk — vintage silk. It's not something I can find anywhere. It's a precious commodity. But this stuff, this weird, tacky, crazy stuff, I feel like I might be able to just be more free experimenting and to feel OK slaughtering it. There's a future for this fabric.

Do you see attitudes toward textile art shifting?

I'm not sure. On my recent trip to New York, there was a lot of textile work going on. A textile artist, a woman in her 80s, was in the Whitney Biennial, and her work was lovely. But a lot of the other works I saw were young people making the stuff my mother and grandmother made in the '60s and '70s. So on the one hand, it's kind of great that there's a lot of textile work out there, but you just think, "Why are we bringing this back? Why are we rehashing something that's already happened?"

More men are starting to do textile work now — and some of them I've met and I love — but some of them are doing really plain, boring work. And because it's a man doing textiles — "women's work" — it gets a lot of attention. There's still this gender battle going on. Some lights are getting shined brighter on the men working in textiles than the women who have been there working really hard all along.