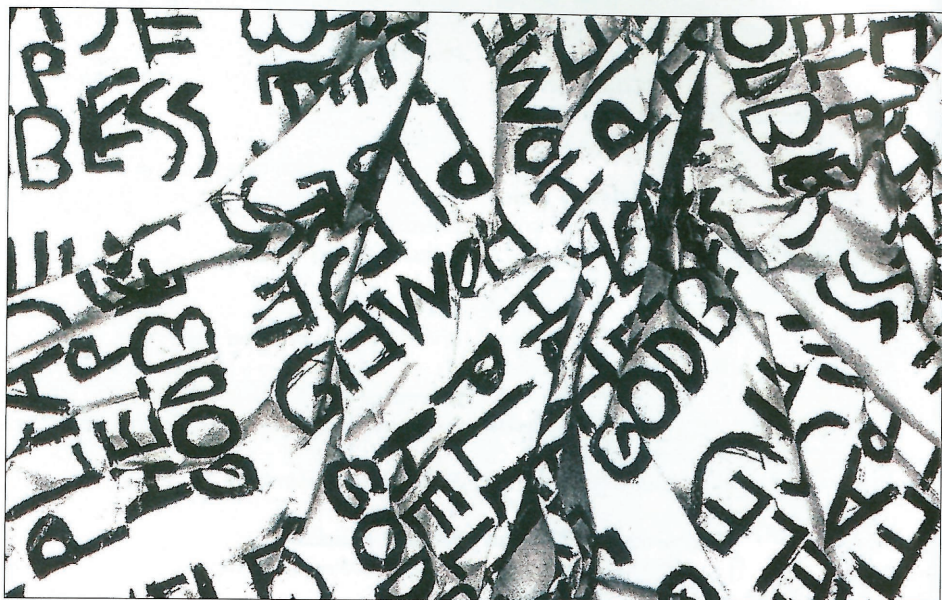


Stitching life into art



Detail of a fabric banner by Kirtley Jarvis from "Home Show for the Homeless."

To say the least, Kirtley Jarvis' approach to art is surprising. For the London artist considers herself an introvert, yet she stitches the events affecting her family, friends, and city into her work, often making the very personal, very public.

Take as an example her exhibit *Home Show for the Homeless* at the McIntosh Gallery. Profoundly disturbed after meeting a homeless woman her daughter knew well, she questioned the fine line that separates the dislocated from the more fortunate. She then created a show on homelessness and included those suffering from Alzheimer's, mental illness, and physical infirmities, as well as artists burdened with the downside of artistic life. "They all have a sense of disconnect or isolation," says Jarvis. "That's the common thread."

This thread is immediately apparent in the entrance to the exhibit. Hanging in the doorway are three gauzy banners with a can-you-imagine-it decorative motif copied from a sign: "Homeless Please Help God Bless." Like sick and homeless people are

rendered invisible by society's discomfort or indifference, the exhibit is hidden until you look behind the banners.

Among the often unsettling, sometimes ironic works is a table set with placemats from a panhandler sign saying "Won't refuse food." There is the emblematic shopping cart, only rather than piled high with belongings as in life, it is filled with panhandler signs Jarvis bought for \$5.00 apiece and reproduced. A sign fixed to the cart reads "Homeless Show Special," which ties in every artist's dilemma. "The question of what is authentic, what is a reproduction, what is art worth plays out in that shopping cart," she explains.

A partially cut-out hospital gown Jarvis picked up at Goodwill provides the base for a painfully personal piece. On the remnant she has stitched the inscription on her mother-in-law's medical bracelet and the nurse's evaluation when she was admitted to hospital suffering from Alzheimer's. Like her mother-in-law's awareness, the words are disintegrating. Another touching work is

the huge phrase "I Am Good Life," which duplicates in wire a note from Jarvis' twin brother who lives with mental illness. While the note simply stated he was at the gym, its implied exuberance belied her brother's struggle to deal with his disability. It made her wonder what the good life is and what it means to those who are ill.

"You can look at my work and go, this is pretty banal," says Jarvis. "But it has layers of meaning. Often it takes years before I truly understand what it's about."

The sense of disconnect that Jarvis depicts in the show is one she feels as well. She attributes it in part to growing up in Balmertown, a gold mining town that sits like a microdot in Northern Ontario. In contrast to the barren cultural landscape, her parents filled their home with books and music. But the real wrench for Jarvis came at age 14, when the family of six moved to London. "My clothes were wrong, I stood apart, I didn't fit in," she says.

Despite her alienation, it was in high school that Jarvis, at 15, met her future husband, writer Herman Goodden. After graduation the couple moved to Vancouver, where Jarvis took a night course in quilting. It became the seed of her 30-year artistic career. After returning to Ontario, she attended design school in Mississauga and then participated in BealArt's adult program, focussing on textiles.

At first Jarvis created large quilts with blocks of bright colour. After she discovered couching — an embroidery technique in

which you lay thread on fabric then tie it down with tiny stitches — she was able to form lines, which she used to add abstract figures to her quilts. In 1991, line turned into words, a passion for which she attributes in part to her husband's profession. From the start Jarvis always pushed the technique, exploring the boundaries of what she could do with material and thread.

While fabric is Jarvis' main medium, she has utilized others in her 40-plus exhibits, fashioning art out of wire, telephone poles, signs, and sandblasted marble to name a few.

Jarvis is an intuitive artist whose work evolves more than it is planned. It often takes years and much research for an idea to ripen, so she always has several projects on the go. While she does collaborate with other artists — her show at the McIntosh is part of *In Absentia* that also showcases J. Lynn Campbell's *Situating the Body* — Jarvis sees isolation as critical to creativity.

"I basically find life totally overwhelming. I'm so aware of detail and I'm like a sponge for emotion," she says. "I need to get into my studio and sit and stitch. Each little stitch grounds me in a way, allows me to come to grips with the things I can't control." And stitch by stitch, life turns into art.

Home Show for the Homeless runs until February 24 at the McIntosh Gallery.

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