

Jeannie Thib: Swarm and Fret

By Patrick Mahon

"A girl hears a dream
Rushing towards her
At first she thinks
It may be a train

Then she changes her guess
to a twisted gust of wind

when the thing comes closer
it's a swarm of bees
murmuring in their rapture..."

by
Anne Szumigalski, The Swarm
Instar, © rdc press



Jeannie Thib's "Fret" is many things that it does not, on first encountering it, appear to be. As the viewer enters the gallery, their initial thinking that a visually overwhelming experience is to occur is instead rewarded by a powerful olfactory sensation. The stench of industrial rubber pervades the environment. And the work, despite its lacework character that conjures the ephemeral pleasure one might expect when a lace or silk curtain brushes across their body, also readily reminds one of a prison-like screen, or a cloister made for detainment rather than contemplation. And finally, the pull of gravity upon the piece makes the negative spaces of it become slightly distorted so that pattern -- densely rich and decorative though it may be - verges upon visual turmoil.

Jeannie Thib herself describes "Fret" as "a black neoprene curtain that hangs from the ceiling and can be viewed from either side. A 19th century Italian velvet pattern representing olives, grapes, fronds, grain, a lily and a crown is the source for the stylized motif which is represented vertically and horizontally over the entire expanse of the work." The artist notes that the ground around the motif has been cut away to leave a fretwork of 1/32" rubber. She also reminds us that the word 'fret' suggests several meanings: it may refer to an ornamental pattern that has been specifically cut - often in wood - to yield to fretwork. And of course it can also denote the act of worrying, or wearing away a hole through something by biting or corroding.

As viewers, we are likely to be intrigued by the artist's preoccupations, but these do not necessarily explain our own experience of the work's overwhelming stench, its contradictory character that reminds us of a pleasurable surrounding and a space of imprisonment, and the tension it advances between symmetrical patterning and the agitation produced by a maze within which one might possibly become lost.

So, let us consider first the olfactory character of the piece. As we are aware, it is made of cut neoprene rubber, which has a strong chemical/industrial odour. While this is strongly evident, we may alternately be reminded of some of the other circumstances where neoprene is more readily employed -- and wherein the stench of the material would readily dissipate. Here we may think of its employment as a material for producing wetsuits for underwater diving. In the instance of such a rubber object - and its usage - one becomes aware of how the garment causes friction against the tiny hairs and the skin surface of the body as it is put on. But then, when the diver descends into the depths, in an almost "vacuumed-down" fashion, the neoprene becomes slick, frictionless and without odour. The artwork "Fret", on the other hand, appears to work against - perhaps almost celebrate, what might be thought to be the more "ideal" state of its material: producing a subtly choking effect that eschews an evocation of fluidity. To what effect is this advanced? Perhaps to remind viewers of the tension that exists between decorative pattern as potentially ebullient and lush - and decoration as cloying and sometimes even distressing to encounter in a vast quantity.



Although "Fret" announces itself as visually gorgeous, (if only for a moment), the up-close effect of being imprisoned against rubber flora and imperial motifs may quickly become uncomfortable for the viewer - especially if one moves innocently forward to examine the carefully-managed hand-cut production of the work. A particular narrative may readily come to mind at this point: "The Yellow Wallpaper" by 19th century feminist Charlotte Perkins Gillman, wherein the female protagonist gradually descends into a state where she identifies a woman trapped amidst the floral meanderings of the teeming "yellow wallpaper." Yet the notion that Thib is setting us within a space to identify with the anxiety-producing content of a historical short-story is likely more of a distraction than a clue to what being "caught" may be about here. For, clearly, the piece has a beginning and an ending - and a front and a back. Therefore the realization of a sense of confinement that accords with a close examination of the work eventually yields to the further realization that escape is possible. And, what is more, there can never be the absolute sense of certainty that one is caught behind the screen, because both sides of the work advance an equal opportunity to experience both "contained looking" - and emancipation. Thus, with "Fret", the notion of being imprisoned behind the flowers is simultaneously accompanied by one concerned with the knowledge that one may also escape the floral net.

Can gravity be a sufficient force to undo the continuities and reciprocities that an expansive patterned work such as "Fret" presents us with? In fact, the gestalt of the work, (the overall effect that maintains the continuity of the piece), necessitates a resounding "no" to this question. For despite the slight pulling and delicate twisting that is produced when the rubber curtain extends itself toward the floor of the gallery, the giant black lacey skin prevails. But in doing so, we are reminded of the possibility that even those surfaces and screens that appear continuous are often themselves provisional, and vulnerable. Indeed, a spider's web may tear in an instant, and a beautifully and symmetrically designed gown may easily be torn as it catches upon a heel. And the sometimes apparently seamless and delicately patterned surface of the body's skin breaks open quickly, and, even more importantly, sags gradually over time to reshape itself as it moves toward the earth.

Jeannie Thib's "Fret" is a meditation. It is a swarm of decoration that worries its own surface, reminding us that the glories of floral patterning turn as readily toward thoughts of death, as to they do toward promises of growth, abundance and renewal.

Bio:
Patrick Mahon is an Artist, Writer and Teacher who lives in London, Ontario. His latest exhibition, "Palindrome", was shown at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in June 2000, and toured to Open Studio, Toronto, and to the Art Gallery of Peterborough.

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Fret
cut neoprene rubber
274cm x 6m x 8cm
2000
photo credits: Ivan Binet
Fret
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detail
274cm x 6m x 8cm
2000
photo credits: Ivan Binet

Fret
cut neoprene rubber
large detail
274cm x 6m x 8cm
2000
photo credits: Ivan Binet
Fret
cut neoprene rubber
detail
274cm x 6m x 8cm
2000
photo credits: Ivan Binet

Fret
cut neoprene rubber
detail
274cm x 6m x 8cm
2000
photo credits: Ivan Binet
Baudelaire's Mistress
no informatiom given