



LEFT: *Stone Flowers* (1975), crocheted and painted cotton, 16" H × 8" W × 8" D, Collection M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. BELOW: *I Can't Touch You* (1988), crocheted cotton, acrylic paint, colored pencil, shellac, 17" H × 13" W × 21" L

Fiber art—works created by weaving, knitting, knotting, crocheting, braiding, stitching, or otherwise manipulating yarn, thread, and their spoolable counterparts—enjoyed a heyday of sorts in the 1960s and '70s. But the enthusiastic response to several recent high-profile exhibitions, at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts, and the Drawing Center in New York, suggests that interest in fiber art hasn't waned. Younger artists are adopting traditional practices, while the movement's godmothers (the majority of fiber artists are female) are barreling ahead with new materials, ideas, and techniques.

Westport-based Norma Minkowitz is in the latter category. Since the 1970s, Minkowitz has been sculpting in crocheted cotton thread, creating shapes that are strong yet permeable and translucent. Painstakingly hand-hooked, their imperfect geometric repetitions recall natural patterns like spider webs or the veiny armature that remains when a leaf dries.

Minkowitz studied drawing at the prestigious Cooper Union in New York but returned to a childhood interest in fiber after starting a family. "When my kids were young, I thought fiber would be a good way to work," she says. "You can put it down and start working with

## Not Your Grandmother's Needlework

Norma Minkowitz turns the age-old craft of crochet into sculptures that have put her at the forefront of the modern fiber-art movement.

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BY KRIS WILTON



JOSEPH KUBIELSKY



BOTTOM THREE PHOTOS: TOM GROTTA

**“I always crocheted around something to get the form. What I was actually doing was casting the fiber like you would cast in bronze.”**

it whenever you want without having to take out a lot of materials.”

Like many girls of her generation, Minkowitz learned to crochet from her mother. “One day,” she remembers, “I started crocheting around a doll to make a hat, but then I just kept crocheting. Pretty soon the whole doll was covered with crochet. I think that was the beginning of my sculptural interest in using fiber.”

A pivotal moment came when she decided to crochet around a shoe for *The Great American Foot*, an exhibition at the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Sisters* (1998), crocheted cotton, 43”H × 21”W × 19”D; *Path* (2015), fiber and mixed media, 15”H × 58”L × 48”W; the artist with a self-sculpture; *The Golden Child* (2009), fiber and mixed media, 12½”H × 10”W × 7”D; *Inner Sanctum* (2012), fiber and mixed media, 9”H × 16”W × 14”D; *I Give Myself* (2010), fiber and mixed media, 21”H × 14”W × 14”D

Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York in 1978. Experimenting, she stiffened the material with shellac, then carefully removed the shoe to create a hollow shape. “When I finished it, I realized I had this wonderful vehicle for using the line almost like I would in the crosshatching of a pen-and-ink drawing, but in fiber—and it had enormous potential. It was transparent, so I could have things inside of it and on the surface as well, so the process becomes part of the content, and structure and surface are achieved at the same time.”

The shoe gave way to earth-toned vessels whose open surfaces allowed for both exterior and interior shapes: bowls and cylinders with tornado-like forms at their cores, cubes with suspended human figures or skulls. Textured yet sleek, strong yet delicate, intimate yet universal, the vessels found a wide appeal. Minkowitz began to win awards and be included in exhibitions alongside the





most important fiber artists of the day, and collectors and museums took note. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Art and Design in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston are among many institutions in whose collections she is represented.

Over time, her pieces got bigger, and more figurative. "I always crocheted around something to get the form," whether a dress form or mannequin, or handmade shape, she says. "What I was actually doing was casting the fiber like you would cast in bronze."

Recently, Minkowitz has been filling in her hollow structures with claylike modeling paste, an approach that shifts focus to line and texture. In *Inner Sanctum*, a bowl-like shape appears almost to have small spheres growing from within. These Minkowitz created by tying a piece of crocheted fabric around beads of different sizes, hardening it, then removing the ties and beads. Rendered in dark colors, the effect is elemental and organic, dark and dreamlike.

Minkowitz has also been working on a series of self-portraits in mixed media. In the striking sculpture *Path*, some 200 sticks, each encased in open-weave crochet, surround a life-size clay bust of the artist, painted in camouflage. The twigs, the artist says, symbolize the different paths one may follow; the camouflage suggests how we try to hide from our own mortality.

At the age of seventy-eight, Minkowitz is still experimenting. "Even though I'm not a young person, I feel like I'm growing all the time," she says. "I just have all these ideas that are fresh in my mind." •

**EDITOR'S NOTE** Norma Minkowitz is represented in Connecticut by browngrotta arts, browngrotta.com. To see more of her work, visit normaminkowitz.com.



*April Showers*, Acrylic & Polymers, 36 x 48"

Original works by  
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