

*Where Art and Ideas Meet*

# Norma Minkowitz at Snyderman-Works Gallery

## Magical mystery tour

April 27, 2013



**'The Present':** More than meets the eye.

A mesmerizing magic radiates from Norma Minkowitz's weird, profound, amazing fiber/mixed media constructions, now on display at the Snyderman-Works Gallery in Old City. The exhibit, titled "Storylines," is an important retrospective for Minkowitz, whose career spans more than 40 years of honors, grants and a long list of important museums and collections, including the Art Museum and the Met in New York.

It's the best kind of retrospective" not an ending point or an exercise in nostalgia, but more a pause to catch a breath and take stock. Minkowitz's early periods are well represented, providing a nice opportunity to observe and understand fundamental themes and techniques, but her later work provides ample evidence of a powerful creative force that's not merely undiminished but steady and growing.

One of the most intriguing things about Minkowitz's work is its simple foundation. No matter how elaborate or intricate the finished product, she roots her work in a simple crocheting technique and a simple material: thread. She proves again and again that simplicity, in concert with the hands and imagination, can offer a straight path to the magical.

When she adds other materials" like plaster casts, twigs and household objects" Minkowitz embroiders and expands on her vision without obstructing or weighing it down.

## **Between human and non-human**

In *The Present*, a figural sculpture from 2011, a young child stands firm in a golden dress that billows out around her like a circle of light. From a distance, the piece appears innocent; but as you come closer, an eerie hum begins, like warning music in a suspense movie, alerting you that there is more here than meets the eye.

The cast head and arms endow the piece with the fetching, sober charm of childhood, yet the eyes are blank, and one sees that the lacy skirt is fitted over and around a teepee of twigs; this child is planted somewhere between the human and non-human worlds. The final touch is the "present" □ that she holds. Clutched in one delicate little hand is a dead blackbird spilling a cheery twisted trail of bright red.

In a recent talk, Minkowitz remarked that she saw this as any child, bringing home a found thing to Mother. It's a simple scenario, but in the hands of this magician, simplicity is a deceptive idea. What it really means is up to you. Perhaps *The Present* signifies time "our own" and our human carelessness in regard to nature.

## **Metal or thread?**

A large round ball sitting at the center of the gallery is titled *Excavation*. The shape is simple and eternal, but it too beckons the viewer to come closer and look deeper.

The ball is black and silver in color and appears to be made of hard, heavy metal. But like the skirt in *The Present*, it's actually a fine web of thread shaped around a form and then stiffened. The surface, up close, is a clever, sophisticated mess "an orgy of tiny detritus, particularly grommets, skulls and streaming pieces of coated screen. There is no beginning or end, only an invitation to follow around and around the ball with your own thoughts and associations.

"Storyline" □ includes several well made yet somewhat banal pieces created recently in response to an invitation to a themed show about the Jewish Seder tradition. A few odd figures are placed to add some mystery, but here the narrative is too fixed and literal to evoke the magic of the work that Minkowitz creates without an outside agenda.

## **Crown of thorns**

Also on view is a series of impressive framed works on paper and some larger two-dimensional stitched compositions. The works on paper, several of which are stitched as well as drawn, show Minkowitz's facility and her love of filled space and detail. They amplify the scope of Minkowitz's overall work, but her greatest strengths come through best in three dimensions.

One work, titled *Pillow* (2007), added just a few days ago, shows off Minkowitz's crocheted technique beautifully. Twigs swirl up out of an opening, forming a crown (of thorns?) on a bulbous pillow shape, crisscrossed by endless highways of thread, color and texture. The work, once again simple yet infinitely varied and complex, majestically commands the space around it.

Norma Minkowitz's work is a compelling reminder that we live in a world where the ordinary holds miracles. We just have to be aware, perceptive and attuned to those miracles.

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