

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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Philbrook Exhibit Gives Whole New Meaning to Beadwork

By John Brandenburg

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TULSA - To borrow a phrase from comedian Rodney Dangerfield, a new exhibition at Philbrook Museum of Art should get more respect for beads as an expressive as well as a decorative medium.

The "Pure Vision: American Bead Artists" show containing 66 works by 29 artists is a good introduction to the varied possibilities of contemporary beadwork.

Singing is celebrated in bold, painterly terms with acrylic paint, embroidered sequins and beads on canvas in "It Sounds Good" and "She Sings," two large wall hangings by Ken Tisa, one of five male artists included in the exhibit.

Particularly striking is "She Sings," a composition in which a serpentine and rectangular border of heavily applied paint interacts nicely with the writhing and expressive movements of a scantily clad performer, her body covered by bands of multicolored beads.

Judy Onofrio needs only a few sequins and a whole lot of found objects (including bottle caps, mirrors, safety pins, keys, buttons, rubber balls, marbles, coral and shells) to create a powerful wall construction of "A Mermaid and Two Fish with Teeth."

Sherry Markovitz uses beaded surface design to convince us that an elegant gourdlike shape is a "Duckhead," while Mimi Holmes transforms beads, sequins, wire, horse hair, muslin and batting into a doll-like fetish in "Tumidity of Desire."

Jeanette Ahlgren decorates the top of a woven beaded basket with delicate loops of wire and opens up its sides, in order to emphasize form over functionality in "Hear the Colors, See the Music."

A bride-to-be seems to have let her wings and wedding dress slip down, exposing her naked, vulnerable back to us as she turns away from the mirror in Mary Ann Hickey's fringed "Fallen Angel" banner, one of the show's most thought provoking pieces.

A hand emerges from the body of a snake to hold a sprig up for inspection, two of its leaves turning into eyes of "Pure Vision," in an oil painting embroidered with beads by Jennie McDade, which suggests a contemporary feminist version of the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Lindsay Obermeyer collages a beaded diagram of a heart on top of a backlit X-ray in "Sacred Heart," and embroiders sequins on top of medical illustrations of a brain and skeletal foot in two other works exploring "the manner in which my body is viewed by society."

The exhibit is recommended viewing, especially for bead aficionados, during its run through March 14.