

Galleries

Bedspring Sculpture Creates Tension

By FERDINAND PROTZMAN
Special to The Washington Post

Maureen Jordan Tierney's constructions using found objects seemed a bit whimsical two years ago, as if she were giving the materials free rein, then hanging on for a lively but unfocused ride. In her latest work, she has taken bedsprings, wire, fishing tackle, lace and other societal detritus firmly in hand and turned them into coherent, enchanting art.

The exhibition titled "Shadow Maps—Constructions and Paintings" at Touchstone Gallery effectively tracks the 34-year-old artist's rapid and impressive development since she began concentrating on making sculptural constructions that combine found objects and painting. There is an intellectual rigor, sensual power and emotional depth to the works on display that simply wasn't there in her October 1996 show at Touchstone.

The cohesion manifests itself partly in her choice of materials. Six of the works were made with bedsprings, which Tierney treats as a mass-produced version of that staple of abstract art: the grid.

She uses the bedsprings in a variety of ways: to support gauze, cheesecloth or lace that she has impregnated with resin or plaster and painted; shaped into a female figure; or used to form compartments containing small paintings. The springs provide a visual and structural logic, as well as a sense of internal tension, a feeling of flexible, resilient strength.

"In my previous show, I felt more controlled by the found objects," Tierney says, who works only with things she finds on the street or in flea markets. "I was willing to go where they took me. Now I feel like I know which objects are more a part of my vocabulary and I work with them."

That pared-down vocabulary contributes significantly to the show's thematic unity. Tierney's works explore several recurrent themes, such as the interconnectedness of all things physical and spiritual, the dichotomy between appearances and reality, and mankind's obsession with measuring time and calculating its exact

position in a universe in constant flux.

While the found objects provide a visual framework for her explorations, the emotional impact comes from the images she paints on the objects. Before she began working with found objects several years ago, Tierney was primarily a painter, and a very talented one.

"Switch Track," a construction made earlier this year, is a seamless example of the union of painting and sculpture. Tierney takes the key cover from a piano and makes a rectangular box with one side open to view. Painted on the back panel of the box is a gently undulating landscape, which resembles a recumbent female form. Against that landscape, she uses metal from the piano mechanism to form rails that run through a switch from an 027 gauge model railroad. The sidetrack runs into the top of the key cover, emerging on the other side as the neck, peg box and scroll of a cello.

Without the painting, the piece would be clever but cool. The painted image makes it a sensuous meditation on choosing a direction in life and the limits that we place upon ourselves.

But even the pieces in which there is little or no painting possess considerable physical and psychological presence. In "Charmed Carapace," another recent piece, Tierney has shaped a bedspring into a female figure and given it a skin of white fiberglass resin. The figure is hung from a brass scale she found at the Georgetown flea market. The front of the figure is split open, like a carcass in a slaughterhouse. The chest cavity is filled with rabbit's foot key chains. Fishing weights attached by monofilament line hang from the figure's back, like a lead bridal train.

The brittle fiberglass skin and the rabbits' feet evoke fragility, vulnerability and softness. But the bedsprings, in their deformed but still vigorous grid, evoke a woman strong enough to carry heavy emotional baggage. It is an accomplished piece by an artist hitting her stride.

Touchstone is also showing English landscape paintings by Margaret Alderson and abstract paintings by Danish artist Haas Tyrrestrup.

Group Sculpture Show

Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman is currently showing "Suspensions," a group exhibition featuring sculpture by three artists.

Geoff Smith's works hang from the ceiling or are attached to the walls in the gallery's front room. Smith, from Old Pratts, Va., works with strips of light-colored wood, fastened together with brass screws, lots and lots of brass screws. While his forms—a boat shape, vegetable shapes—are simple and clean, they are not particularly inventive and some are predictable. The shadows cast by the sculptures are better than the constructions because you can't see the fasteners.

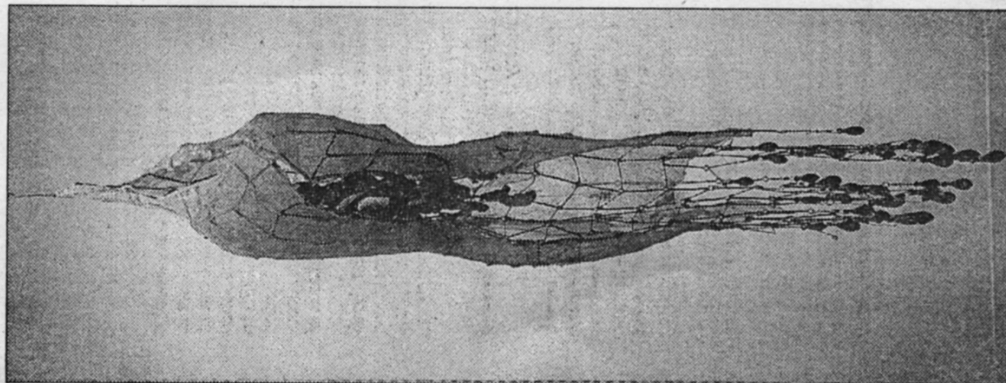
By contrast, Mark Cooper's works in the room next door are quite original. The Somerville, Mass.-based artist's bloated shapes made from painted fiberglass over wooden frames are somewhat reminiscent of French sculptor Niki de Saint-Phalle's giant female figures. But where Saint-Phalle's surfaces are smooth, Cooper's work is roughly textured. Looking at a piece like "Jack of Hearts," a squat, abstracted stump of a figure, is bizarrely engaging, like looking at a tattooed fat man in a sideshow.

Small found objects are combined with crocheted wire in Tracy Krumm's sculptures. In her statement, the artist, who is from Santa Fe, N.M., says that by "juxtaposing the historically gender-specific activity of crocheting with heavy industrial elements, I question and comment on power, identity, quality, relationships and beauty."

She does indeed. But Krumm's work also has immense visual appeal, an almost magnetic quality that makes it hard to keep one's hands off it.

Maureen Jordan Tierney, at Touchstone Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW, Wednesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday-Sunday, noon-5 p.m., 202-347-2737, through June 7.

Geoff Smith, Mark Cooper, and Tracy Krumm, at Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman, 1710 Connecticut Ave. NW, Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday, noon-5 p.m., 202-328-7189, through May 30.



BY JAMES M. THRECHER—THE WASHINGTON POST
Maureen Jordan Tierney's "Charmed Carapace" combines bedsprings and rabbits' feet.