

Buttons as contemporary art, reimagined in NYC exhibition

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Ula Ilnytzky January 22, 2016

NEW YORK (AP) — There’s no denying buttons are an important clothing item, but can they rise to the level of art? A new exhibition at a Manhattan gallery proves they can.

In the hands of 11 artists, the everyday, mundane objects are used to create sculptures, portraits and amazing wearable art — some political, personal or whimsical.

Each artist is “pushing buttons” beyond their normal use and reimagines and repurposes them as an artistic medium in contemporary art, said Peter “Souleo” Wright, curator of “The Button Show” at Rush Arts Gallery in Chelsea.

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“What I tried to do with this show was look at artists who were elevating that level of craft and making polished, well-executed works that can stand next to a painting ... because of the amount of detail and precision in the work,” added the curator.

In “A Harlem Hangover,” Beau McCall simulates a spilled wine bottle. It lies on its side on a high pedestal and a long ribbon of buttons cascades into a pool of ruby red buttons on the floor.

The Harlem artist’s technique involves lining his object with an identical button and then adding a second layer of buttons of varying shapes, sizes and texture for a three-dimensional effect. The stitching that holds them together becomes an integral part of his design.

In another piece, a school desk becomes a statement on his childhood Catholic school experience, where punishment was physical and doled out with a ruler.

He’s covered the surface entirely in wood-tone buttons, with wads of gum (piles of pink buttons) stuck to the underside. Several darker-colored buttons start to spell out the alphabet, but abruptly end in a sassy — unprintable — phrase.

“The school chair is my site of pain, reflection, healing and holy revenge,” he said.

A bullseye made up of yardsticks and rulers appears above the desk, decorated with letter buttons that spell out phrases like “what goes on in class, stays in class.”

For San Francisco-based artist Lisa Kokin, buttons are highly personal. When her father, an upholsterer, died in 2001, she created his portrait completely of buttons. Until then, they had made only cameos in her largely textile-based works.

The memorial to her father led to other button portraits, including those of activists Rosa Parks and Cesar Chavez. For her sculptures, like a bust of her pet dog Chico that's in the show, she builds a chicken wire structure that she covers in an assortment of old and new buttons. A lacy-like stitch ties them together, adding texture and transparency.

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“Every button is stitched to its neighbor to form a low-tech, pixilated composition,” she says. “The further back one stands, the more decipherable the image becomes . It is as though I am painting with buttons.”

Others use buttons as embellishments, as artist Amalia Amaki, of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, does in her work using old photographs. And Los Angeles artist Camilla Taylor applied them to a trio of large otherworldly headless creatures with spindly legs.

The exhibition runs through March 12. It's presented by the Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, founded in 1995 by hip-hop producer Russell Simmons and his brothers Danny and Joseph “Rev. Run” Simmons.

