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Snakeskin Yarns - Milton Fletcher



Ruth Marshall, Hand knitted Micrurus Hemprichii snakeskin. Photo: Milton Fletcher.

The last time I saw artist Ruth Marshall, she cast a weary eye on me and mentioned her prolonged workdays of recent months. Learn why here:

Milton Fletcher: Ruth, how would you describe your snakeskin art? How is it related to your life?

Ruth Marshall: I think the latest series of snakes I've completed would be described as fun and colorful, with each snake being dissimilar and yet similar at the same time. Just to give a more literal description, I have knitted the entire species of Micrurus snakes, which are more commonly known as coral snakes. I don't know how they relate to my life exactly except that this series took over my life for six months.

MF: When, why and how did you start creating these pieces?

RM: I started them in January. I was daydreaming about what kind of species of animal were colorful and engaging and immediately thought of coral snakes. I thought it would be interesting to knit every coral snake known to science so far. I was pretty nervous when I went about finding out how many coral snakes there are—hoping it wasn't in the hundreds. The 68 I had to do were quite enough.

MF: What is the process and sequence of creation?

RM: The first thing was to find out more about these snakes. Because I work at the Bronx Zoo, I'm fortunate to be able to talk to the herpetologists, and eventually ended up at the zoo library where I found "Venomous Reptiles of the Western Hemisphere Vol. 1." Everything I needed to know was in that book. I then spent a month drawing out the patterns for all the snakes and ordering the yarn and then finally sitting down to knit them. Finally, I tagged and ironed them for pinning on the wall.

I did find out some interesting things along the way. For example, while I was trying my best to present an accurate depiction of each snake, there was some guesswork on my part to determine the width of the snake. Scientists in the field don't normally record snake widths since they can vary so widely due to the snake's health, so length is regarded as more reliable.

MF: You mentioned the Bronx Zoo. In what other ways does it influence your art?

RM: Just being at the zoo is inspiring. Learning more about the animals in the collection and witnessing the visitors' interactions with them and how important this is—not only for conservation, but also as an intimate, personal experience. Animal forms have been represented in art since the dawn of time. The great ancient civilizations were masters at representing animal forms for spiritual, shamanistic purposes. I think that scientific knowledge such as recent discoveries that all living things are genetically related strengthens our deep ties to the animal kingdom, and I think it is a rich context to explore our relationship to the world we live in. The challenge to me as an artist is to try to use animals in art in a powerful, symbolic way without being cheesy, preachy or exploitive.

MF: Where do you see your art going in the future?

RM: Well, I'm very happy to keep knitting animal skins well into the foreseeable future. Because I do have access to the Bronx Zoo's animal collection, I'd like to continue making these skins based on actual, living animals. I think that has interesting repercussions relating to trophy skins, reverence, respect, celebration or even adoration—hopefully with some sophistication and artistry.

MF: How do you get your work seen and exhibited?

RM: Dam. Stuhltrager Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn has done an amazing job at bringing exposure to my work recently. Right after I finished these coral snakes, they debuted at Massart in Boston and will be featured in my solo show at Dam, Stuhltrager from November 17 to December 17. Then they go to the Museum of Art & Design here in New York from January to May 2007 and then they will continue to travel. I will also be involved in Scope Art Fair in Miami this December and probably another art fair in Istanbul; it's been a busy year for me.

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