

## Dark and light sides of pleasure

### Kirsten Hassenfeld's place of "endless plenty" at Bell Gallery

By [GREG COOK](#) | September 2, 2009



ELEGANT A chandelier from *Dans La Lune*

"I want to create a place where people can take a little vacation from reality," Brooklyn artist Kirsten Hassenfeld has said. "I'm interested in going to a place where there is no want, only endless plenty." In "Recent Sculpture," her exhibit at Brown University's Bell Gallery (64 College Street, Providence, through November 1), she succeeds magnificently.

The main event is *Dans La Lune* (2007), a gallery-filling installation of paper, vellum, tissue, corrugated cardboard, and foamboard cut out and assembled into a dangling constellation resembling translucent white-on-white chandeliers, giant earrings, wedding cake decorations, paper lanterns, ice, Christmas ornaments, and an enchanted crystal palace. The five main elements, each four to eight feet wide, glow from within from fluorescent bulbs.

**VIEW:** [More photos of Kirsten Hassenfeld's work at the Bell Gallery](#)

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One of the main "chandeliers" features foamboard ribs curving around an accordion-fold paper lantern with the silhouette of woman's profile. Another seems to be encrusted by crystals and jewels, which sometimes look like Styrofoam lunch cartons. One of these "jewels" is hollow, framing a picture of a naked, chained woman inside.

The fragile-looking parts vary from tiny to giant. Wandering through you find that a chain dangling from a giant chandelier holds a little gazebo at its end with an accordion-fold lady and a lacy pony inside. At the end of another chain is a hollow star framing crystal towers and flapping pennants. Hassenfeld's smaller, earlier work could seem shallowly decorative. Here shifts in scale give it a deeper resonance, a sensation a bit like taking swigs from the "drink me" bottle in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The installation's apt title translates literally from the French as "In the Moon," but it's an idiom that can mean groggy, drugged, or "head in the clouds."

The mascot for this extravaganza, which was organized by Bell Gallery director Jo-Ann Conklin, is the Roman god Bacchus, who appears nude in a cameo dangling from a paper chain. Surrounded by a naked lady, a cupid, and a little satyr, he raises a glass in one hand and holds a phallic scepter in the other. "Bacchus represents a complete sinking into pleasure or decadence," Hassenfeld has said. "I like the dark and light sides of losing yourself in pleasure."



THE MAIN EVENT Hassenfeld's *Dans La Lune*

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Twentieth-century Modernism's main line wound up in a final march toward Minimalist and Conceptualist asceticism. But by the 1990s, the art world was buzzing with talk of a return to beauty. It was mainly a reserved Minimalist beauty — think Félix González-Torres's strings of bare light bulbs. But now we have lush, bubbly, decorative, romantic, rapturous beauty.

This transformation can be traced to 1970s feminist Pattern and Decoration art, which challenged macho aesthetics by embracing floral, decorative, domestic (i.e., "feminine") designs. But perhaps more directly influential was Kara Walker (RISD MFA 1994), who seized people's attention in 1994 by fashioning bracing tableaux of race and sex in a hothouse Antebellum America out of the "feminine" 19th-century craft of cut-paper silhouettes. And then in the early 2000s, Dutch designer Tord Boontje's die-cut, cascading flower lamp shades quickly became icons of contemporary design.

Common characteristics are (1) third-wave feminist art's proud embrace of "girly" and (2) artists adopting handcrafts traditionally not considered fine art, but "women's work." Simultaneously, our culture at large has seen a flourishing of craft (see *Stitch 'n' Bitch* and Etsy) that reflects a craving for handmade in our ever more digital, synthetic world.

Hassenfeld, who earned a BFA degree from RISD in 1994, works this specific cut-paper territory alongside a growing collection of artists. Imi Hwangbo's floral and geometric patterns cut into stacks of Mylar were shown at the Bell Gallery in 2007; RISD undergrad student Melissa Armstrong installed hand-cut dangling paper foliage at the RISD Museum in 2007. At the Wheeler School's Chazan Gallery in January, Kim Salerno showed cut-out paper and organza "chandeliers." Hassenfeld's version is the best I've seen because of the crispness of her decorative motifs and dynamic use of scale.

A vestibule gallery before *Dans La Lune* offers four glistening blue-and-white sculptures that Hassenfeld finished this year. (Hassenfeld will also have work at the new Cade Tompkins Editions/Projects gallery at 198 Hope Street from September 25 to November 14.) They're made of paper — rolled, cut, colored with ink and paint, and lacquered — but look like candlesticks or vases holding bare tree branches made from Dutch Delftware, Chinese export ware, or English Willow Ware. It's a new and promising direction for the artist.