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Kirsten Hassenfeld's obsession with paper



Kirsten Hassenfeld's elegant, dramatic paper installations surround Jo-Ann Conklin, gallery director of the Bell Gallery at the List Art Center at Brown University in Providence.

For many artists, paper is simply a means to an end — a blank slate on which they can draw, dab or doodle to their heart's content. Kirsten Hassenfeld, a paper-obsessed New York artist whose work is focus of a new exhibit at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, isn't one of them.

A 1994 graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, Hassenfeld is known for creating dizzyingly ornate sculptures and installations using many of the same materials you might find in a grade-school art class: heavy-duty construction paper, translucent vellum (also a kind of paper) and lightweight poster-board, along with a bit of tape and glue to hold it all together. Add up the cost of everything in the Bell show and you'd barely have enough to pay for a typical opening-night party at a New York gallery.

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At the same time, Hassenfeld has a knack for making paper assume almost any form or mimic any material she wants. The shiny glint of glazed ceramic? No problem. Hassenfeld can make paper look like the best china in your grandmother's pantry. The gleam of a glass chandelier? Hassenfeld can do that too, turning paper into shapes that suggest everything from cut glass to natural rock crystals.

Hassenfeld, who's distantly related to the family that owns Hasbro, also enjoys wading through some of the backwaters of art history. Look closely at her work and you'll see references to everything from Chippendale furniture to Faberge eggs to Asian export pottery. (A fan of what might be called decorative excess, Hassenfeld seems never to have met a swag, bow or tassel she didn't like.)

All of these far-flung influences come together in the two groups of work that make up the Bell Gallery show. The more recent of the two, Blueware, takes its name and much of its inspiration from traditional pottery — notably the popular "blueware" or Delftware patterns that European pottery-makers adapted from Chinese ceramics (and that still loom large in many china cabinets today).

In Hassenfeld's hands, though, these traditional shapes and patterns morph into something decidedly non-traditional. Familiar motifs like the ever-popular "Willow pattern," for example, have been replaced by more abstract patterns. Shapes, meanwhile, have become more sculptural (and less functional), although several pieces might easily be mistaken for traditional tableware designs.

Certainly that's true of Blueware (Cloud), one of the first things you see as you enter the exhibit. At first glance, this elegant little sculpture could easily pass for a traditional vase or candle-holder. On closer inspection, however, what initially appear to be openings for flowers or candles actually turn out to be tiny rolled-paper cylinders that suggest space-age domes, turrets and other architectural features. Rather than a vase, Blueware (Cloud) ends up looking like a miniature space station.

Another work, Blueware (Espalier), also appears to have a functional object (a candle-holder again) somewhere in its DNA. The difference: rather than ending in neat little candle-holding receptacles, the arms on this candle-holder have sprouted like the branches on a small tree.

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The show's second half is devoted to *Dans la Lune*, an installation Hassenfeld created in 2007 for the Rice University Art Gallery in Houston, Texas. At once playful and haunting, it consists of five large hanging sculptures, each brimming with a dizzying mix of decorative references — elegant curves and arabesques that would have warmed the heart of Louis XIV, faceted shapes that suggest gems and crystals, even architectural forms that recall the famous onion-shaped domes of Russian churches.

As a final touch, each sculpture sports a lighting element that creates a soft, lantern-like glow at the center of each piece. It's as if someone took a box of old-fashioned Christmas tree ornaments, tucked a light inside each one, then enlarged them to size of ballroom chandeliers.

The effect is beautiful — and a little disorienting.

Also disorienting is the color, or rather the lack of it. In fact, while there's clearly a playful side to *Dans la Lune* (the phrase roughly means "daydream" or "daydreaming" in French), the all-white color scheme gives the installation a sobering, even slightly spooky aspect.

If a group of style-conscious ghosts held a garden party, it might look something like this.

"Kirsten Hassenfeld: Recent Sculpture" runs through Nov. 1 at the David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, 64 College St., Providence. Hours: Mon.-Fri. 11-4 and Sat.-Sun. 1-4. Phone: (401) 863-2932. (Note: Kirsten Hassenfeld will discuss her work in the List Art Center auditorium on Friday, Sept. 25 at 5 p.m. The event coincides with the opening of a related exhibit of drawings and new sculpture created by Hassenfeld in collaboration with Providence-based Cade Tompkins Editions * Projects. Opens September 25th and runs through November 14, 2009)