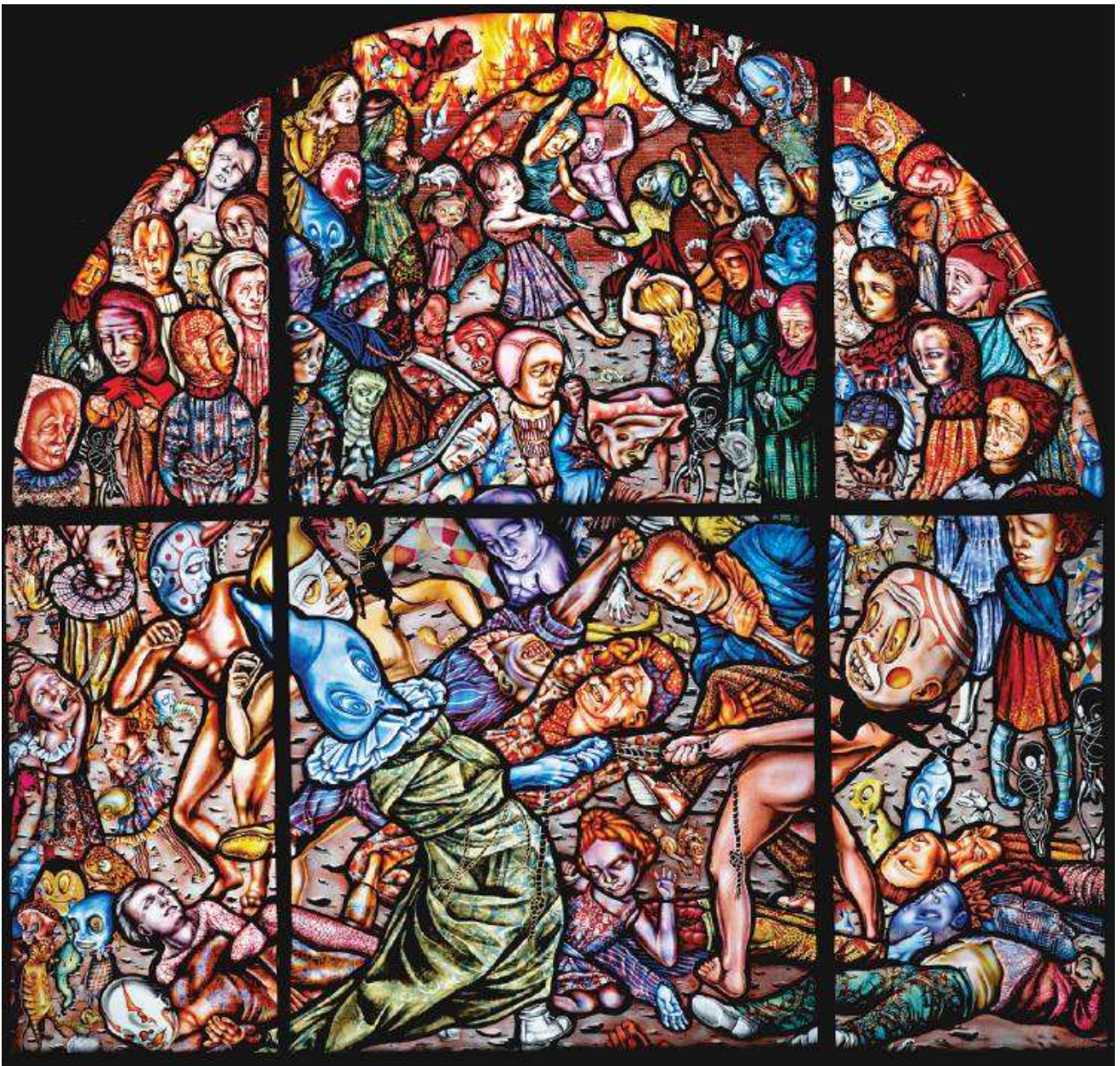


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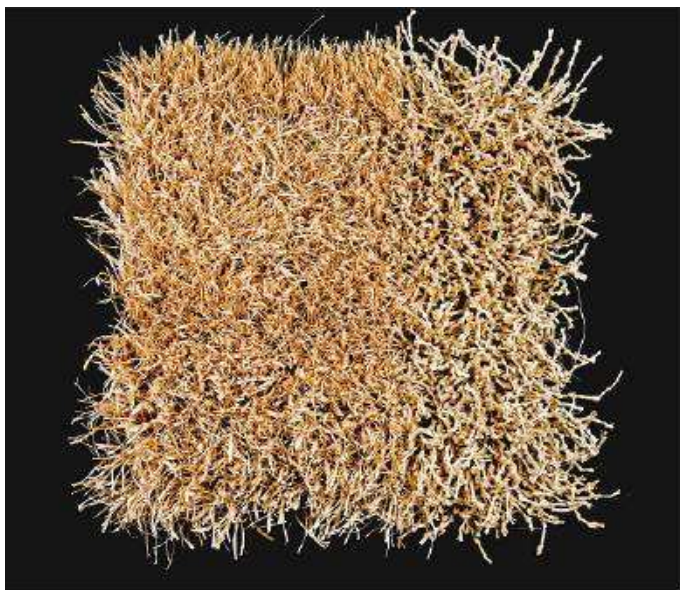
Stealth craft

“Art” by Thomas Hine and “Galleries” by Edith Newhall appear in alternating weeks. Multivenue show of 14 local artists devoted to fiber, ceramic, wood, glass is nothing less than a revelation.

THOMAS HINE



“The Battle of Carnival and Lent” (2011) by Judith Schaechter, among 16 of her works in the exhibition. DOMINIC EPISCOPO



"Mow" (2011) by Lewis Knauss, a work in woven, knotted hemp, linen, and acrylic paint. KYUNG Y CHO

If you want to really lose yourself in a work of art, you should get to the Art Alliance during the next two weeks and spend some time with Judith Schaechter's monumental *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*. It is as chaotic, overpopulated, disturbing, and mysterious as a Brueghel or a Bosch and filled with faces and demons based on the vision of the Middle Ages and the nightmares of the Third Millennium.

It's not a painting, but backlit stained glass that has been, as the label says, "cut, sandblasted, engraved, painted, stained, and fired, cold-painted, and assembled with copper foil." As you look at it, you see how the artist achieves effects impossible in another medium, as when the glass is layered to create new colors, and the artist has painted on the back of the glass so that ghostly figures seem to lurk behind those on the surface.



"Totemic Figure" (1966) by William Daley. JOHN CARLANO

The work's technical achievement encourages the viewer to pause long enough to think more deeply about the subject. It seems as though most of the figures in the scene represent Carnival, the last nights for lust and indulgence before Lent's 40 days of denial. But it is hard to tell who is on which side. After all, ostentatious penitence has its kinky side. The battle might happen between people, but also within each person.

And once you are through with that one, there are 15 more Schaechter works, all virtuosic, all fraught. They are part of the show "Material Legacy," which devotes a gallery each to artists who work in fiber, clay, or glass. This show, in turn, is part of a multivenue exhibition, "Masters of Craft," which spotlights 14 Philadelphia-area artists who have been elected fellows of the American Craft Council. The Clay Studio has substantial selections of four ceramic artists, the Center for Art in Wood features five artists, and two are being shown in the American galleries at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Two, the ceramicists Paula and Robert Winokur, are being shown in two places each.)

Together, these shows, which sound as though they might be a bit parochial, add up to a stealth blockbuster. Though all the artists have been shown here before — some frequently — and many have been distinguished teachers, it is still a revelation. Media such as fiber,

ceramic, wood, and glass impose a discipline on artists, but also free them to achieve things that could not be done any other way. The exhibitions offer nothing more than 14 artists, our neighbors, all of whom are



"Tea Cup Desk" (1994) by Michael Hurwitz. TOM BRUMMETT

really excellent.

There is no theme to the shows, which are essentially a series of substantial solo exhibitions. But many of the works in all the shows have the immersive quality that drew me into the Schaechters. There is, I suspect, a strong relationship between the quality of mental and physical attention the artist devoted to the work and the attention we give it as viewers.

Often, though, the material quality of the piece pulls us in. Adele Akers (in the Art Alliance show) does weavings that seem in photographs to be straightforward patterns. But by incorporating horsehair, which protrudes from the fabric and seems to place them in a sensuous haze, along with metal foil and other materials in the weave,

they engage us in the world of their own making.

Lewis Knauss' works use woven and knotted hemp, paper, twine, and paint, most often to evoke something mundane — dried grasses and bales. Blame it on my rural youth, I suppose, but I felt myself being drawn to these subtly varied works with a childlike awe. You need to be looking slowly to understand his series "Sitting With Deborah," which looks at first like a group of bamboo window shades, as a set of seascapes and landscapes in which all that is shown is the quality of the light.

At the Center for Art in Wood, David Ellsworth's work begins with the exploration, and burnishing, of the nature of the trees he uses. But his more recent works, executed like most of the others in wood burl, chronicle the transition from the natural into the cultural, as the wood is twisted into tall spirals that evoke the tower of Babel.

Meanwhile, Michael Hurwitz's furniture looks, and is, luxurious, but it invites deeper interpretations. His *Tea Cup Desk*, for example, does have the profile of a teacup. But as you stand at it, looking down at its marble mosaic surface and the structure beneath, it is more obviously an inverted dome. It seems made for some public purpose, perhaps as a ceremonial desk for a speaker of the House.

In contrast to the clarity of the presentations of individual artists at the Art Alliance and the Center for Art in Wood, the Clay Studio mixes all its artists together, though you will have little trouble telling them apart. William Daley, an unmistakable figure in the ceramic world, is here with a series of iconic ceramic figures, mostly of unglazed stoneware. They are totems of an unknown civilization, a reminder of the primordial power of working in clay.

Meanwhile, many of Robert Winokur's works are about Pennsylvania brick clay, with which people in the region have at least a subconscious connection, and about glazes, which can transform earth into something colorful and luminous. The artist controls and manipulates this seeming alchemy, but there is an irregularity about it that speaks of chance and circumstance.

A review like this can barely scratch the surface of such a rich and diverse set of shows, filled, to think of it, with surfaces that are sensuous, ambiguous, and seductive. (In addition to the artists already mentioned, textile artist Warren Seelig is in the Art Alliance show, Sharon Church and Bruce Metcalf and the late George Nakashima are at the Center for Art in Wood, Rudolph Staffel is at the Clay Studio, and Ted Hallman is at the Art Museum.)

The shows share a well-illustrated catalog, and draw attention to institutions where similar work is on display regularly. They don't take the place of a really big show that would chronicle and celebrate Philadelphia's craft-arts tradition, but they are filled with ideas, sensations, and beauty.