

The Intimate Apparel Exhibit: Reviving an undercover cover-up

“Intimate Apparel” is an unusual, provocative exhibit of artists’ merkins.

- Curator Linda Gass created this exhibit because she thought it would be fun and fascinating to use the merkin, an obscure historical object, as a format for making art. She invited artists from around the world to participate and the resulting collection of works is wildly diverse.
- The exhibit debuted in June 2007 at the Pi Gallery in Kansas City, MO, and was part of the 2007 Surface Design Association conference
- The exhibit is traveling to the Textile Center in Minneapolis, MN (Sept. 18 – Oct. 24, 2009) and the University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (Jan. 30 - March 14, 2010)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a merkin is "an artificial covering of hair for the female pubic region; a pubic wig for women."

- The origin of the merkin goes back many centuries to a time when pubic lice were a common problem and women shaved their pubic area to eradicate the lice and relieve the itching. Someone invented merkins to replace the shaved hair. They are attached to the body with spirit gum, just like false mustaches are attached.
- Prostitutes were frequent wearers of merkins, using them to cover up the marks of syphilis and genital warts so they could appear to be disease-free and therefore still employable.
- As hygiene improved and drugs were developed, the need for merkins disappeared.

The exhibit artists are innovators in their respective fields – some are inventors of key surface design techniques and others have significantly expanded on traditional techniques.

- A common characteristic in all of the artists is their willingness to take risks.
- The artists have created a collection of visually exciting pieces utilizing weaving, embroidery, crochet, quilting, fusing, felting, silkscreening, monoprinting, marbling, beading, bookmaking, basketry, painting, casting, burning, and mixed media assemblage.

The artists explore a wide range of issues in the artwork for this exhibition.

- Although the original function of the merkin was to replace something “lost” in an area of the body we often consider very private and vulnerable, the artists have gone far beyond these beginnings.
- The artworks address sexuality, fertility, shame, self-esteem, danger, power struggles and domination, flirtation and seduction, voyeurism, pleasure, and the stages of our lives.
- Many of the artists use humor in their work - some directly through use of illustrative graphics, others more subtly through their choice of materials or title.

The artists’ merkins are made from diverse, sometimes surprising materials.

- In addition to fabrics such as velvet, silk, cotton and lace, the artists have used diverse materials including beads, sequins, human hair, X-acto blades, silicone fishing bait, bobby pins, pine cone scales, chrysanthemum stamens, lichen collected from the Black Forest in Germany.
- One of the merkins will literally come to life during the exhibit: it is made of moss and seeds and visitors can interact with the merkin by misting it with water to help it grow.