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Jean Kamins: Cabbages and Crushed Taffeta

Eileen Evans

Jean Kamins est une artiste qui dessine avec sa machine à écrire! Ayant d'abord fait des courtepointes, elle utilise maintenant des tissus appliqués pour créer des tapisseries.

While majoring in art at UCLA in the early sixties, Jean Kamins, a Vancouver artist, saved fabric pieces for quilt-making. In 1974, she appliquéd them to a tapestry instead. She had 'found' her medium.

For the past five years, Kamins has exhibited her work in Vancouver, an average of five times annually. In January 1981, nine of her works were selected for the

Herotica show at the Helen Pitt Gallery. The show later moved to the UBC SUB Gallery for a second run.

In March last year, she contributed *The Bathers* to the *Woman-size* exhibition at the Women in Focus Gallery. This work is a 6' by 10' lushly decorated tapestry dedicated to Avis Lang Rosenberg, who advised her, that for credibility 'go big.'

Last spring, a Kamins' cartoon was published in the *Pork Roasts* show at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery. In April, she had a one-couple show with Henri Robideau at the Sunshine Coast Arts Centre. The exhibit consisted of appliqués of

Robideau by Kamins and photos of Kamins by Robideau.

Kamins' work has also appeared in several feminist publications including *Makara*, *Atlantis* and *Room of One's Own*.

On Feminism and Fabric Art

'Fabric is my medium, and this is partly related to my feminism. Fabric has not been accepted by the art world because it has been a women's medium and classified as craft. When I returned to the Emily Carr College of Art in Vancouver, they didn't have a fabric department. So, I worked in the painting department and graduated with honors. By continuing to work in

fabric, I am making a statement on 'the problems of being a woman in society. It forces me to be conscious of the issue of being a woman.'

On Family and Work

'I am a family person. I have three children and they are important to me but my art is important too. Judy Chicago told me once that you couldn't have kids and be a professional artist too. I always felt that was an extremely unfeminist statement. I think it's essential that the women's movement include children. We must be allowed to be mothers without this biological role interfering with other goals. Daycare is the real alternative. As an artist who is also a woman with children, I often use images that are family-oriented. I call my art 'homespun' and I want everyone to be able to understand my work; I want my work to be about everyday living.'

On Imagery

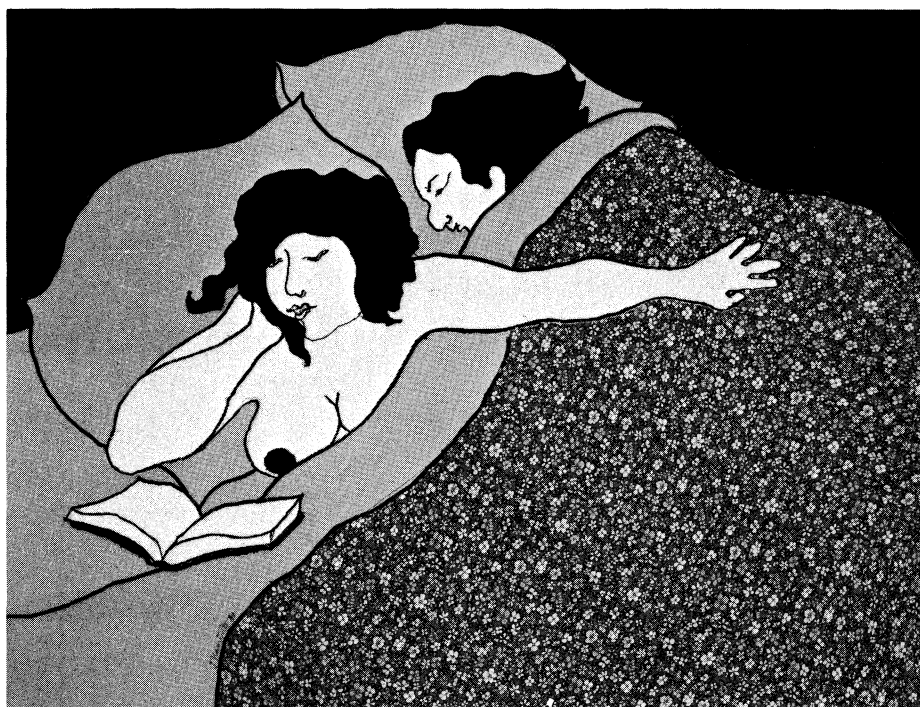
'In my art you can recognize the images. The reason is that I am a literal-minded person, very simplistic. I can't abstract. I don't feel it's important. For me, what's important is communication. At some point, artists make a decision about whom they want to reach. I'm not interested in appealing only to the artistic elite. People sometimes describe my work as distorted yet I think it is true to life. My tapestries are essentially line drawings filled in with fabric.'

On Colour

'I like colour. People say I am a colourist. I think that is someone who isn't an objectist. But I am. However, I do love mixing colours and using subtle, different shades. I enjoy the complexity of using various patterns together: with flowers, or stripes, or polka-dots — all with the same hue. When I grew up, you weren't supposed to wear stripes with polka dots together. Rebellion is often a part of my work. Take the "black line" for example.'



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On the Black Line

'When I studied painting, they said I couldn't use a black line. But I've solved that problem. I can't put fabric together without a line of stitching. When I first did the appliques, I used different colours of lines with zig-zag stitching, but ultimately, I settled down to the

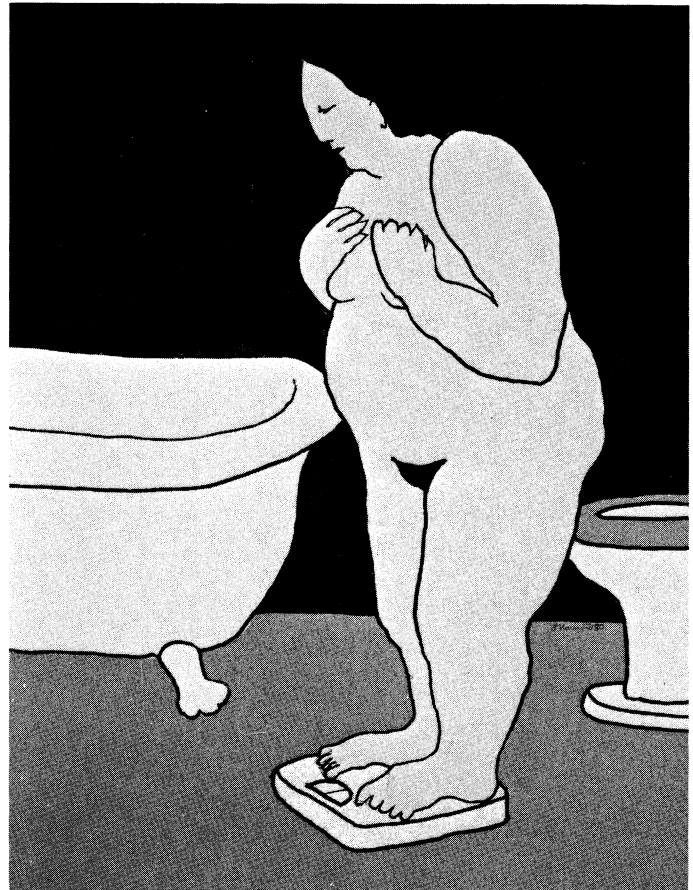
black line because it gave such perfect definition. I love my black line.'

On Exploring Fabric

'Recently, I got bored so I am trying to expand my use of fabric. I took a course at Langara College



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from Barbara Shelley, a fabric artist and a wonderful teacher, who taught me how to draw with a sewing machine. It was really exciting mastering the techniques — slitting the backs of fabrics in appliques, to avoid buckling. More and more I am going beyond "found items" to create the fabric I need. For instance, I transferred Xerox images onto fabric with acetone and I did a painting with ink on fabric and then put it into the background of a tapestry.'

'For years, I have collected fabric pieces from all over the world. When I look at fabric, I see things others don't. One day I was out driving with another fabric artist. As we passed a cabbage field she grabbed my arm and said, "Jeannie, look! Doesn't that look like crushed taffeta?" It was an exciting moment for me because seldom do others see with my imagery.'

'When I look at a fabric — I see water, sky and things I suspect the designer might have seen so I use the material in those places. I was in Scotland once and suddenly understood Harris Tweed. All the

colours of that geography are woven into the material: the moors, the skies, the rocks'.

On Erotic Art

'I do erotic art. I have never had a sense of shame. The first time my work was confiscated was in the third grade. I was drawing nudes so they took my work away. In the sixth grade, two teachers were laughing at my work in the hall. I was furious. I still am. Although they took away my drawing — as if I should be embarrassed — they were laughing about the whole thing. Because erotic art is considered dirty it's segregated. When I have shows my erotic art is not placed with the other pieces. I believe the erotic is just a part of life.'

Kamins is currently with a group of women who are putting together a women-in-art show to be held in Vancouver this year. The show will be called *Festival '82* and will include performing and visual arts. As a contact person, Kamins can be reached at 3281 West Third Avenue, Vancouver, B.C. V6K 1N5 or call (604) 738-8991.



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Photos and Art by Jean Kamins

- 1 *Henri Tapdancing*
- 2 *Birds Flying South*
- 3 *I Like to Read in Bed, Henri Doesn't, But He does Like Me Patting Him*
- 4 *The Cauliflowers*
- 5 *Weighing In*
- 6 *Henri Stalking The Wild Chicken*

All pieces shown recently at Sechelt Arts Centre, B.C.