

No crime here: Connet makes fabric art fresh

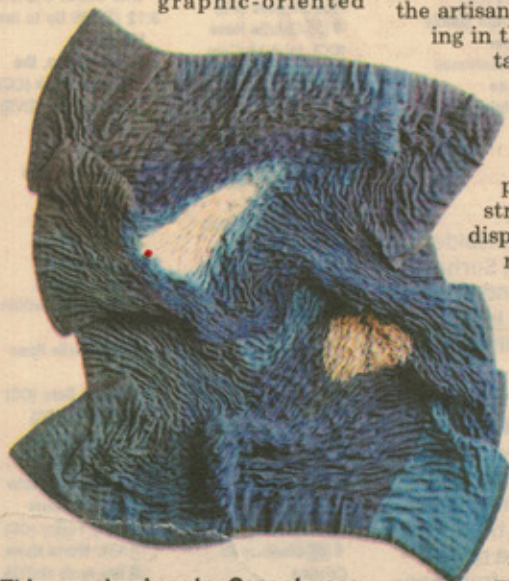
BY KEVIN NANCE
Art Critic

There's often a fine line between borrowing and theft. In the visual arts, that line can depend on whether you use what you've taken, as Picasso and his fellow modernists did, to make something new — and, when taking from cultures not your own, whether you do so thoughtfully and with respect. On one side of this line is an extension of artistic traditions that can lead to innovation; on the other are crassness, contempt and cultural piracy.

The pirates among us are bolder than ever. To stroll around some of the most commercial Chicago galleries is to be dispirited, if not enraged, by example after example of contemporary artists and artisans, many of them Caucasian, blithely ripping off techniques, motifs and subject matter from various strains of tribal and ethnographic art. At last weekend's otherwise admirable SOFA show at Navy Pier, several booths featured work by people whose facile appropriation of their multicultural sources bordered on larceny.

What a relief and a pleasure it is, then, to encounter the work of Chicago artist Frank Connet, who has exhibited at SOFA and whose exquisite new show of textiles at the Douglas Dawson Gallery is one of the highlights of the fall season.

Connet obviously has learned a good deal about the folk art traditions of Japan, southeast Asia and western Africa, creating fabric art that sometimes seems to evoke tribal themes — a fact that's emphasized by their placement next to Japanese ceramics and African statuary at the ethnographic-oriented



This moody piece by Connet uses bunched, layered fabric in a narrow color palette to create a striking sculptural statement.

ART REVIEW

FRANK CONNET TEXTILES

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through Nov. 26

Where: Douglas Dawson Gallery, 400 N. Morgan

Admission: Free

Call: (312) 226-7975

Dawson Gallery, which has never before exhibited work by a living artist. Connet also is lily white, a native of Texas who grew up in Alabama. If there were a profile of cultural pilferers, his mugshot would be on the cover.

But Frank Connet is not a thief. What he is, instead, is a skilled conservator of antique textiles who has found in his area of expertise a medium through which to express a dazzling flair with color and abstract composition. He has absorbed plenty of lessons from the folk art traditions of Africa and Japan — not to mention from his Southern grandmother, a gifted quilter — but he has also picked up a thing or two from the abstract expressionists, particularly Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, as well as more recent colorists like John McLaughlin and Sean Scully.

The result is a series of stretched cloth collages and elaborately dyed tapestries that are both earthy and sophisticated, ineffably old and startlingly new. You can see in their mottled, hand-stitched, temptingly tactile surfaces a cleaving to history, nature, folkways and the artisan spirit, yet there's nothing in them that's naive or nostalgic. Although their titles — "Olive Shoal," "Berget Swamp," "Estuary" — suggest

landscapes, Connet's pieces are primarily abstract, often juxtaposing disparate colors (especially red, orange and other earth tones bouncing off graduated shades of violet and blue) in complex patterns that challenge the eye in distinctly contemporary ways.

Still, you're struck first by the craftsmanship. Connet has mastered the art of Japanese *shibori*, in which fabric made of wool, linen, cotton or hemp is stitched, bunched, bound and squeezed in a bag, compressing the

cloth without breaking it. He dyes the cloth in as many as 30 contrasting colors, favoring natural pigment sources such as Mexican cochineal, which produces vibrant fuchsia and scarlet tones, and madder root, oak bark and black walnut husks, which combine with indigo to produce variegated shades of blue, black and gray.

But the stitching is as free and unconcealed as Picasso's intentionally sloppy brushwork or Pollock's famous drips. True to his modernist forbears, Connet insists on the importance of his materials and formal compositions as much as on any content.

It's the content of certain works — the vertical half-moon shapes that might be references to aboriginal shields, the patterned masses that can be read as the hides of animals native to the African continent — that brings Connet closest to political grief. But he is neither stealing nor abusing this non-Western imagery; he's weaving it, with deep knowledge and an almost tender care, into an aesthetic that's all his own.

He makes it new.



This fabric collage by Frank Connet seems to evoke tribal imagery as part of a contemporary composition.



Chicago artist Frank Connet combines a deep knowledge of antique textiles with a distinctly contemporary interest in abstract art.