

Sculptor mulls twists of fate

GALLERIES

By Margaret Hawkins

I was at Cub Foods at 1 o'clock in the morning looking at tripe in the meat department," says sculptor Yvette Kaiser Smith, speaking of the moment of enlightenment that inspired her new work. "It had this fat, lacy, wonderful quality," she says, explaining that it expressed everything she'd been thinking about how man-made patterns are a reflection of what goes on inside our own bodies, which in turn is a result of our genetic patterns.

"There was this collision," she says. "It made sense all of a sudden when I saw that fat. I thought, that's how I feel on the inside."

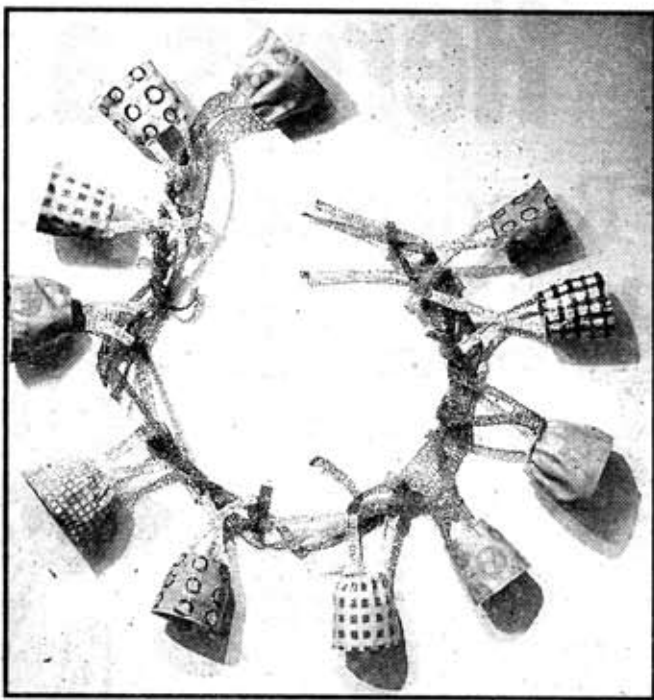
The result of this unlikely catharsis is a strong new show at the Chicago Cultural Center featuring Smith's latest floor and wall pieces fashioned out of crocheted and cast fiberglass. Smith sees these abstract works as metaphors for her own psychological and physical states, and certainly it is easy to see the organic—and in some cases female—origins of the forms she creates.

The objects are playful and light, yet oddly industrial, too, made out of materials we associate with manufacturing and tinted in chemical colors that are both sweet and tart. Many of them look like some mix of plastic waste and frothy, feminine garments. They could be lingerie for a sea creature, perhaps, or party dresses for fish.

All the work is rooted in biology or at least in the body, reflecting the patterns of cell structure yet also looking like costumes, skirts and skins. Fabric patterns turn into biological patterns, which in turn suggest social patterns in what Smith suggests is an inevitable cycle.

One piece is made up of a stack of flesh-colored cone shapes and looks like a pile of stiff taffeta skirts. Another piece using similar skirt forms lays on the floor. It is tinted in fleshy pinks and yellows with lacy, membranous attachments flowing out of it messily, like guts or ribbons that unfurl into organs.

A wall piece, "Lucy: Mitochondrial Evolution," is all crocheted fiberglass. The loosely woven shapes mimic the cell structures of microscopic creatures, yet at the same time they look like weirdly



Sculptor Yvette Kaiser Smith became acquainted with the lace tradition she used to create "Daisy Chain" through childhood projects with her aunt.

Yvette Kaiser Smith

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translucent starfish or crochet patches from an unraveled bed cover. It could be a constellation of muck skimmed from the surface of a pond or a handful of torn lace pulled from an old woman's sewing basket. Smith intends the subject to be ambiguous and for us to see the similarities between the various associations it inspires.

My favorite piece, though, is a tall, wide yellow crocheted hanging object that is suspended by thin nylon cord from the gallery ceiling. It undulates in rhythmic bulbousness, looking like a crocheted comforter, a mattress or a doily for a giant. It is crocheted in a loose, open pattern, strong yet light, as hand-sewn things often are. The milky sunshine yellow of the fiberglass seems to give off its own light, suggesting some kind of lu-

minescent invertebrate life form as it sways gently in the white gallery space. To stand behind it is to feel pleasingly encased in a lace shield.

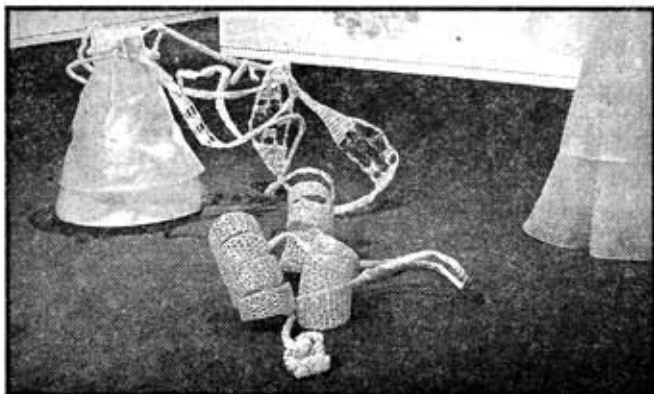
Smith grew up in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and moved to Chicago when she was 11. Her family was eager to assimilate. "We're in America now, don't look back," was her parents' attitude. But she began to feel the influence of her cultural history belatedly after her marriage to an American when she began thinking about traditions and gender roles.

This new phase of her work started after her second trip back to Prague a few years ago and what she describes as "a reacquaintance with my childhood." As she thought about patterns in her own life, she noticed the old Czech women dressed in mismatched yet harmoniously patterned garments. She became reacquainted with the lace tradition in the old country and remembered making daisy chains with her aunt. These memories and impressions have woven their way into her new work.

Smith has been crocheting fiberglass for two years now, and the inclusion of this traditional woman's craft in her eerily visceral yet hi-tech-looking sculptures is a nod to the traditions of the old country. "I've been thinking about genetic patterns and social patterns," she says.

Her earlier work used purely abstract forms but, she says, "That was empty for me." Then she went back to the figure and the female form, dealing with issues of fertility, birthing and feminine roles inspired by her newly married status. "I was stuck in the body," she says. "It was not enough."

This all led her to the work she is doing now, exploring both the messiness and order of biology and behavior that somehow weave together to determine our destinies. "I'm trying to articulate the psychology of identity," she says. "What is it that makes us what we are?"



"Undergarment 2," on view through Feb. 13 at the Chicago Cultural Center, is among Smith's floor and wall pieces fashioned out of crocheted and cast fiberglass.