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ART review | 'Raised in Craftivity' is engaging group show

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"Raised in Craftivity" at Rockhurst University's Greenlease Gallery is an engaging group exhibition, with sewing, embroidery, knitting, beading, textiles and woodwork, but don't expect the kitschy relics of your grandmother's craft show.

These conceptual works are distant relatives of their utilitarian predecessors.

Guest curator Maria Elena Buszek brought together works by 13 artists, some showing in KC for the first time. Each taps the handmade aesthetic or skilled techniques of traditional handicraft to comment on its social or cultural associations.

Buszek, 36, is emerging as a heavyweight curator/scholar. With a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas, Buszek teaches art history at the Kansas City Art Institute and has curated well-received exhibitions throughout the city. She is author of the book *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality and Popular Culture* (2006) and is editing an anthology of essays on craft culture in contemporary art.

The exhibition is unified, well-installed and smart. What makes this show interesting is Buszek's desire to move away from honoring and validating craftsmanship, feminine materials or decorative beauty. Instead, the artists challenge the craft's unspoken connotations of being friendly, innocent and comforting, while utilizing the media and process of craft as a vehicle to address their individual concerns.

Many of the artists in this show embrace craft's "I get no respect" history.

"Jade" (2007), by Allyson Mitchell of New York, could be described as extreme-crafting — Mitchell warps the realm of suburban decorative into hilarious nonsensical theater. Suspended from the gallery's vaulted ceiling, a rotating installation of white yarn macramé encases a stuffed hot pink ferret-like critter with beady, black eyes.

Equally satirical is "Dominant Male of the Blue-Striped Variety" (2005), by Elaine Bradford of Texas. Bradford crocheted a preppy striped sweater, custom fit to cover two taxidermy deer heads mounted to the wall. Connecting the two is a long sleeve-like piece that adds to the bizarre and uncomfortable effect. As Buszek said in a recent interview, it seems to confirm that not even the power of loving, hand-made crochet work can alleviate the awkward reality that beheaded woodland creatures are accepted decorative elements.

Other works subvert our expectations of craft as being feminine, personal and delicate.

Cross-stitch may be one of the oldest forms of embroidery, but in the hands of artist Bren Ahearn of San Francisco, it subverts its time-honored reputation for sincerity. On a plastic lunch tray Ahearn cross-stitched the word "manmade," forcing new connections between sewing's conventional ties to soft textiles and the artificially mass-produced object.

Overall the stronger works employ references to contemporary culture while demonstrating crafty dexterity.

They include Claire Joyce's spiritual-styled glitter painting with secular, pop-culture references; Ben Schachter's rag-style rug made of looping industrial conduit wire, and Laura Splan's super-sized Zoloff, Prozac and Thorazine pills made from colorful latch-hooked yarn.

'raised in craftivity'

The show continues at the Greenlease Gallery at Rockhurst University, 1100 Rockhurst Road, through Sept 29. Hours are noon-5 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. Call 816-501-4407 for information.