

Art



A Good Yuck

To get her point across, a fiber artist attracts and repels.

BY THERESA BEMBNISTER

One fateful winter evening back in 1995, Erica Spitzer Rasmussen had an epiphany in her bathtub. Earlier that day, she and her college-level drawing students had taken a field trip to draw animals in a dairy barn, where they observed the birth of a calf. Shortly after the delivery, the mother cow gulped down the placenta, totally grossing out the students. Undisturbed, Rasmussen recognized the day's events as natural occurrences, but as she sat in the bathtub looking at her hairy legs, for some reason she was disgusted. "It seemed ironic that I was able to watch a cow eat her placenta and think it natural, but when I viewed the hair on my own legs, I felt repulsed."

"Placenta Incident," the resulting mixed-media sculpture, is part of *Second Skins*, Rasmussen's solo show at The Cube at Beco. It's one of more than thirty fiber-art exhibitions showing in Kansas City and Lawrence in conjunction with the Surface Design Association Conference, held earlier this month at the Kansas City Art Institute. The Minneapolis-based Rasmussen's nineteen sculptures depict female garments and deal almost exclusively with themes of cultural standards for beauty.

Even a casual glance at "Placenta Incident" reveals the artist's distaste for bristly leg stubble. Hanging from the ceiling at a height corresponding to the 5-foot-10-inch artist's own lower limbs, two leg forms, truncated at the ankles, are covered with thick, fuzzy, mashed-potato-colored, cottonlike material. The hollow forms are joined at the inner thigh by a wooden clothespin and filled with thick, off-white tufts of the cotton. Most striking, however, are dozens of sharp, gold-leaf-coated spikes jutting through the thin, stiff-looking structure. Rasmussen made the spikes beautiful, she

says, in an attempt "to reveal the possibility of value and worth." That doesn't mean she's gotten over her abhorrence of leg hair — she still hasn't tossed out her razors and shaving gel.

As demonstrated by her use of the gold-leaf spikes as symbols for hair, Rasmussen is mindful of the metaphoric and narrative connotations of her materials. "Many of my works stem from a childhood myth, an experience or a bodily fear," she says. "And because of this, I try to embellish the surfaces with materials that support the narrative component of the work."

"Tomatic Myth, No. 4," for example, was inspired by the fact that Rasmussen's father jokingly told her that eating tomatoes would make her big and strong and put hair on her chest. (For the next twenty years, Rasmussen refused to eat tomatoes.) The piece consists of a handmade paper bodice hanging chest-high

from the ceiling and encrusted with a layer of dehydrated cherry tomatoes, wax, and horsehair, camel hair and dog hair. The shriveled, crispy tomatoes range from bright, oxide yellows and rose pinks to deep tans and dark browns. Hairs sporadically stick out from the bodice's rough surface; tiny, snot-colored drops of wax congeal along them. On the wall behind the bodice, a row of fifteen canning jars with rusty lids sits on a white, wooden shelf. Inside each jar are what appear to be blobs of moldy, rotten tomatoes suspended in an oily liquid. Rasmussen created each jar's contents with a combination of gelatin, tomato paste, Styrofoam, horsehair, matte medium, jute and abaca. The result is both beautiful and disgusting.

Rasmussen recognizes, and even exploits, the simultaneously pretty and grotesque qualities in her work. "I try to lure an individual by first engaging them visually. Upon closer inspection, I hope a viewer will make a discovery about the work that he or she finds repellent."

"Dirty Little Secret," Rasmussen's response to the deadly early-twentieth-century practice of using x-rays to remove hair, looks like a slightly bloody uncooked ham. From an antique wire hanger, she has hung a pale-pink dress form covered in white rope netting. Large tumors protrude from the surface of the dress, and a ring of short clips of brown horsehair lines the floor beneath the sculpture.

Sometimes the repulsive element Rasmussen seeks is the way a piece smells — one viewer said her work reminded him of Italian food and a barnyard. "This pleased me," she says. In an open space like The Cube at Beco, scents tend to waft away unnoticed; however, a subtle, oddly warm odor permeates the immediate areas surrounding some sculptures.

One thing that's attractive about her pieces, Rasmussen believes, is the sensuality of the female form. She creates shapely dresses, corsets and coats with smooth, feminine curves, all out of handmade paper. "Suspended Disbelief" was inspired by a story similar to the one behind "Tomatic Myth, No. 4." In this case, a woman confided to Rasmussen that her own father had told her it was sardines and herring that would give her a hairy chest. For this piece, Rasmussen fabricates a sexy piece of toffee-colored lingerie with straps and hooks for pantyhose. Tufts of black human hair, reminiscent of the ends of watercolor paintbrushes, protrude from the breast and stomach area, and the inside of the piece is coated with a thick, glistening substance, the texture of which resembles hay. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that it's really a layer of



Rasmussen's "Dirty Little Secret"

dehydrated sardines and anchovies covered in shellac.

"I think it's interesting to imagine what the piece would feel like on your own body," says Erika Navarrete, a recent painting and art history graduate of the Kansas City Art Institute who worked with Rasmussen on the installation and wrote the essay accompanying the show. In fact, Rasmussen believes that the sculpture helps demonstrate the difference between how men and women tend to respond to her work. "Women connect more with the stories. They are often the

ones who share their experiences with me," she says. "Men, on the other hand, seem to respond to the forms as sensual [suggestive] objects."

Although "Suspended Disbelief" cannot function as an article of clothing, some of Rasmussen's pieces, including

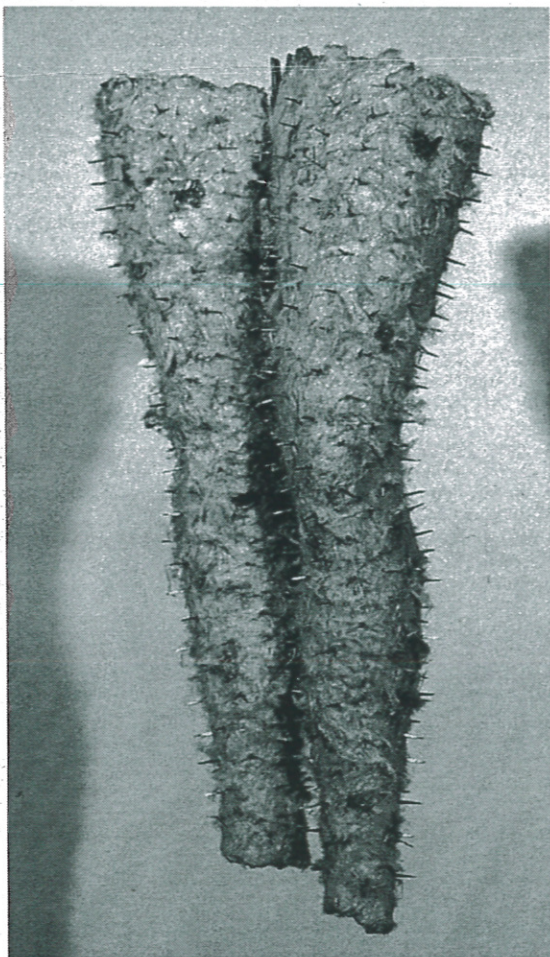
Erica Spitzer Rasmussen's *Second Skins*
Through July 26 at
The Cube at Beco,
1922 Baltimore,
816-582-8997

"Corsets of Talis" and "Set," are wearable and have been modeled in runway shows.

Navarrete finds meaning in the way that Rasmussen coats the inside of her garments with symbolically loaded materials. "The myth parts of Rasmussen's narratives are very internalized — something that is close and deep to the artist," she says.

Though Rasmussen spent much of her childhood avoiding tomatoes, now that she is older she realizes the ridiculousness of the myth. "It's amazing that anyone ever took such things seriously, myself included," she says. "I think this is funny as an adult, but it also scares me. Children's imaginations are a precious and delicate thing, but just think how vulnerable this makes them when they have so little frame of reference."

But pieces like "Placenta Incident" and "Dirty Little Secret" serve as reminders that adults can just as easily be swayed by beauty myths. ●



Erica Spitzer Rasmussen's "Placenta Incident"