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Review: Rosita Johanson at the Racine Art Museum

By Lonnie Turner, Art City contributor
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The late Canadian artist was originally a dressmaker, the daughter of a tailor. She was born in Germany in 1937. She expressed her craft on canvas as well, stitching and appliqueing plush layers of fabric and using various other needlework techniques that she experimented with through the years. Johanson often employed loop pile embroidery, sewing shimmering beads, shells and various found items into her works. Loop pile creates a plush surface from tightly packed raised loops of yarn. It's also used to create carpeting, velvet and corduroy.

Johanson immigrated to Canada in 1953. She worked in a garment factory before opening up her own business creating hand-embroidered clothing. Sometime later, a client requested that she make a handbag, not for the usual purposes but as an art object. That motivated Johanson to create work of a more personal, social and political nature. By the 1980s, she became more known as a contemporary textile artist.

Johanson spins happy tales through her work, which is surreal and full of symbolism. Lively festivals, blue skies and bodies floating to the heavens among bunches of helium balloons are repeating themes. Her colorful street scenes are abundant with folks riding bicycles, clowns and children frolicking about as in "Everybody Loves a Parade" and "The Magic of Sunshine." In "Garden of Eden" villagers walk giant beetles on leashes, children ride giant insects and mermaids splash in a pond.

The idealistic worlds that Johanson created also have an underlying dark side. Raised in Berlin during the war years, her life was certainly affected. Curiously, in many of her pieces, folklore and fairytales have been replaced with imagery pertaining to social and political upheaval and acts of war. These particular pieces challenge an outdated concept that needlework is simply used as a tool to reinforce femininity, complete

with butterflies, flowers and all things “nice.”

“Hail to the Victor!” addresses the invasion of Iraq. The piece is shaped like a large house with a cross in the middle. On the first floor, burning oil fields are overrun with tanks, on the second soldiers are massacred. On the third floor, we see uplifting scenes of peace. Innocent people are crucified inside the cross. The roof is covered in brightly embroidered cities aflame.

Johanson's father told her many stories while she was growing up, many of which influence the narratives in her work. In “Tales My Father Told Me (No. 6),” bodies float among the stars, framing scenes of well known fairytales. Images from these classic stories frame a white robed figure in the sky with arms open, standing inside gates flung wide. He is receiving a child who is climbing a ladder, who although reaching upwards, has not quite made it to the top.



Lonnie Turner was the creative director at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and is now the lead designer for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. She is a regular Art City contributor.

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