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Artist starts a new 'Thread' Olah's art enjoying acclaim

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Spun from Amish fabric inspirations and architectural details are Karin Olah's inspiring multimedia works.

Olah grew up in Lancaster County, Pa., where her interest in Amish quilts led her to a broader study of American textile traditions. She majored in fiber art at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, with a focus on printmaking and color theory. After graduating in 1999, she managed a textile studio in New York City, developing colors and patterns for clients, including Donna Karan, Marc Jacobs, Ralph Lauren and Peter Marino Interior Architects. Eventually, Olah turned her talent for fabric into a more fine art approach. She sewed quilts for years, but then began branching out into a more painterly methodology.

"I was still making quilts about five years ago, but they are very time-consuming. My favorite part of making the quilts was actually the design process and experimenting with color, so I did a few initial quilt studies, which allowed me to separate myself from the actual sewing part. From there, I began branching out and creating larger works on canvas that have abstracted from the quilt idea further," says Olah.

"While collage work is somewhat new to Charleston, it is actually very suitable for the area because of the history of cotton and the strong textile traditions."

Olah's inspiration for her paintings stems from her long walks and bike rides around the city. "My paintings are based on the experience of walking around this town and discovering new little alleys all the time. The textures and histories that you can see in the aged buildings and the broken-down streets are what I am translating in my work with fine silks, cottons, canvases and burlaps. What I am capturing is an experience of the space," she says.

Olah's actual work is fairly abstract, focusing more on the experience rather than a realistic portrayal of structural design.

"Olah creates textural abstract paintings that elaborate on the heritage of American quilt-making," says Lese Corrigan of the Corrigan Gallery. "Her work incorporates materials, aesthetics and symbols borrowed from several regions of the United States. She uses fabric and often-antique textiles in a way that mimics the flow of paint from a brush."

Her buildings, architectural details and landscapes are generated through the texture of fabrics and textiles covered with drawings and paint.

Her quilting and fiber art background augments her natural talent for combining and laying out engaging designs, which are then further enhanced through fine art tactics.

"My paintings are made up of many layers. I start with one of my very literal drawings (buildings, cobblestones, etc.) on paper or canvas, and then I lay out a lot of fabrics. When I am satisfied with the layout, I glue it all down, draw on top of it, and then paint on top of that," Olah explains.

Olah's newest show, "The Meandering Thread," takes place this month at Corrigan Gallery, and includes many of her architecturally inspired pieces.

"It is so exciting to watch a new young talent going forward brilliantly. The show and the work are exciting because they are full of good energy, and they tie old concepts and materials to new contemporary visuals. She pays attention to the metaphorical implications of working with textiles and suggests connections between quilt-making and the blueprint of the city mostly in an abstract manner," Corrigan states. "While the larger collages on canvas expose a great depth of texture, the intimately scaled works on paper pull the viewer closer to notice the importance of a meandering thread or quiet pattern. Olah's modern approach offers a fresh interpretation of the local setting and captures the elegance and luminosity of the city's outlook while presenting universal imagery of color and texture."

Olah is the Charleston Farmers Market poster artist for 2006 and has been selected as one of the top 10 emerging artists in the city as part of the "Under the Radar" project by Halsey Institute at the College of Charleston and Charleston Magazine.

"The Meandering Thread" runs through June 30 at the Corrigan Gallery, 62 Queen St. Regular gallery hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and by appointment. For more information, call the gallery at 722-9868 or visit www.corrigan-gallery.com or www.karinolah.com.

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