

ART PAPERS

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PITTSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

By Ann Millett

Along a winding, mainly two lane highway, among patches of farm land, forest, scattered gas stations, pottery shops and barbecue shacks, lies Chatham Mills, the ghostly presence of a historic mill recently inhabited by contemporary art. Built in the 1920s, the mill reached its high point in the 1960s and 70s as the world's largest supplier of labels to companies such as Levi's, Oxford, L.L. Bean and Montgomery Ward, and closed in 1996. Renovations began in 1998, and in 2001 the mill began its second life as an art space. On the cusp between development and rural, early industrial past, the landmark sets the stage for the one hundred and ten art works it sustains more than hosts.

LOOM 3: LABELER (May 22–29, 2004), a grassroots project, showcased local talents, yet opened its doors to include fifty-one national artists and performers. Themes of labeling, labor and post-industrial environments/spaces, designed by curators elin o'hara slavick and Jeff Waites, prompted explorations of how mass production of the machine age has transformed natural, urban and social landscapes. Weaving together ties between individual works, the space and its history, these themes also enabled dynamic conversations between works like reverberations of the not-so-forgotten din of one hundred forty-some working looms and three hundred employees.

"Loom 3" animated the impressive space, whose 25 to 40 foot, vaulted ceilings, low-pitched roofs and steel beams were authentically "post-industrial" before it was fashionable. The tall windows that bathe the interior with natural light, the dusty, discolored, oily wood floors and the painted brick walls—yellowed and chipped—give the space a worn aesthetic that informs the exhibit. The show emphasizes on-site installation, each project articulated by floor-to-ceiling beams that line corridor-like viewer passageways and emphasize the industrial architecture. Emphatically man-made and human-touched materials are torn, folded, heaped, stitched, tied, tacked, strung up, tangled, molded and molding, draping, unrolling and unraveling, in dynamic displays of human and industrial production, preservation, pollution and disintegration. The works vary from exhibiting immediate to looser threads to the site, considering what such facilities give to and take from their communities.

Leah Bailis' generic housing models, *Untitled* (2003–2004), show the legacy of industries like Chatham Mills on neighborhoods and living spaces. *Random Neurosis* (2004), a work by slavick and her mother, **Ursula Lukas Slavick**, is a stitched, hanging web of Chatham Mills labels taken from family closets, which range from vintage London Fog to contemporary Old Navy, showing the diversity of individuals



elin o'hara slavick and Ursula Lukas Slavick, *Random Neuroses*, 2004, labels from the clothes in our houses stitched together, 14 by 8 feet (photo: Susan Mullally).

dressed by the mill and commenting on commercial labeling of social hierarchies. slavick's collaboration with **Brenna K. Murphy**, *Spool Trays* (2004), invigorates original wood and steel trays with shiny arrays of fresh, colorful

spools whose threads attach to a sliding door, awaiting visitation by a spirit seamstress.

The central room highlights human absence and apparitional presence as the viewer comes face-to-face with history. Many installations recycle desks, typewriters and other archaeological items from the mill. They are side-by-side with found carts of stacked, naturally dyed textiles, old brooms, worker's shelves, and, most strikingly, the one surviving, intricate loom machine together with a curatorial display of label patterns, handbooks, tools, tables and work uniforms. Using the space as an archive for art making, the installations appear like works still being completed, underscoring the abandoned labor in progress. Photographs of former mill workers further memorialize specific histories; they begin to tell stories about industry before automation and about the manual labor of bodies.

Carly Moorison's *Insulation* (2003) internalizes these themes, as cell-like, wood-framed, hanging glass structures showcase insulation strips, stitched with bleeding red thread, which allude to ripped muscles and wounded tissues. Other works similarly weave engineering and organic materials into fabrics of social and individual bodies that display the effects of industrialization. **Jeremiah Demme's** black and white photographs (2003) of flea market items such as a white dress, antique, price-tagged glassware and furniture and vintage toys are laminated, horizontal records of humans' relationships to once precious, now forgotten manufactured possessions. **Pam Pecchio's** photographs (2002–04) spotlight tacky business spaces. As part of a series of interiors, these images explore the nature of and in human work spaces, through visions of waiting room forest wallpaper and a gold eagle lamp. Installed in a run-down office in the mill, the photographs' saturated color ironically dramatizes 9-to-5 banality, yet also echoes fluorescent lighting, communing with the exhibition space.

The building is the showstopper, distracting somewhat from the individual works, but its visceral aura services the exhibit. Punching in with a time card, viewing art in the late day sun and humidity (merely appeased by the air conditioning of two central rooms) and

inhaling stale wood, dust and sweat—mine and that of others who labored long hours here—uniquely experienced the fatigue of seemingly endless days and repetitious labor once overwhelming inside these walls. "Loom 3" captures these essences as the history of the mill transmits to the labor of producing powerful art.