



Barb Hunt (shown page bottom with her dog Blackie) uses warm material to shine a cold light on society. — Submitted photos: (above) "Fodder", (below) "21.Italy.VS 1.6", (A1) "Heart's Ease", (B1) "The Root Dress".

Fabric of life

Fatigues, silk flowers, wool and steel: Barb Hunt brings warmth and compassion to her social action

By GAY DECKER
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

She started by knitting a full-scale pink rifle to give to the then-justice minister Kim Campbell as a thank-you for her role in initiating Canada's gun control legislation.

Then, some time later, Newfoundland artist Barb Hunt knit a pink landmine. In fact, she knit about a hundred of them, each one an exact rose-coloured woolen replica of a specific model available in Jane's Mines and Mine Clearance Catalogue.

Hunt's idea to knit landmines had originally been inspired by Canada's decision to join the international Mine Ban Treaty, but the artist wasn't sure of its value until she was in Paris about a year later. While there, she came across The Pyramid of Shoes, an annual event organized by Handicap International to raise awareness of the victims of landmines. As part of the exhibit, Hunt had the chance to look at actual landmines and to meet survivors, an experience that affected her deeply.

"These people were so committed and I thought, maybe it's not going to work, but I had to try. I didn't realize there were so many kinds," she says. "It was that social moment, I guess, when you realize, 'I have to do something; I have to do this. It might not work, but I am going to try.'"

Hunt says she chose to knit the landmines because it is a gentle way to get people to think about the horrors of war. She herself lived through the Vietnam War and remembers how some angry pacifists would use images of dead babies in their protests — a practice that she felt was violent in itself. Instead, she prefers to make her statements with compassion. By using yarn to make her landmines, she is referring to the material's long association with feelings of warmth and caring.

"We don't have guns," she says. "We just have our hands and our skill and our love. Wool and yarn and making clothes for people ... it's very strongly about love."

Once completed, Hunt's knitted landmines were, in fact, recognized as important — and not just in the art world. Much to her delight, her collection of hand-knit landmines entitled, "Antipersonnel," gained the full support of the Canadian military and was exhibited at the Royal Military College of Canada Museum in Kingston, Ont. in 2001. In subsequent work, Hunt continued to reflect on the devastation of war. For a long time, she hadn't known whether her first love who had wanted so badly to serve in Vietnam had ever gone, and more importantly, whether he had ever returned.

Her concern for his well-being and for that of all soldiers led her to a new body of work, "Camouflage," exhibited at The Rooms in 2010. Here again, Hunt used materials in unorthodox ways to create powerful and poignant work. In one work, her pink wool reappeared as pretty embroidery around the borders of each shape within the camouflage pattern of an army fatigue. She explains that her stitches are a metaphor for protection and "love for the body that's inside the uniform."

For another, she used the fabric from old uniforms to create small stone-like fabric balls, which she then arranged in the shape of a target used for shooting practice.

In the work entitled, "Fodder," she used the same fatigues, this time cutting out the material from between the uniform's seams so that only a fabric skeleton remains. These hollowed-out remnants were then hung from nails on gallery walls in various silhouettes, some reminiscent of trenches and others suggestive of a wave, referring to the "ocean of dead" that wars have left behind.

Yarn and fabric are not the only materials that Hunt redeploys to create provocative work. In the show "Fashionista," currently taking place at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Ontario, she is exhibiting a steel sculpture entitled "The Root Dress," in which she used a high-tech plasma art cutter to carve the intricate pattern of a tree trunk and its roots within the outline of a woman's dress. It is one of a series of stunning steel dresses that she has created. The sculpture's deft handiwork captivates, but so does its size. Standing at 7 1/2 feet tall, most viewers are forced to look up to see it in its entirety.

A self-described feminist and short in stature herself, Hunt has always been out-sized by most men. So for fun, she made the steel dress taller than the average male height. It's playful but with a point — a chance to reverse roles and provoke new sensations in the viewer. Hunt says making the dress out of steel was also important because it questions traditional ideas of femininity.

"It is a way of making women's power visible and using the male associations of strength with steel and applying it to women to show women's strength," she says. "I am playing with conforming to stereotypes and yet I am deconstructing the stereotypes at the same time."

In addition to her meditations on war and feminism, Hunt has also probed deeply personal territory to create a body of work on the subject of grief. Just after her father was killed in a bicycle accident, Hunt who is originally from Winnipeg, was hired to teach art at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College in Corner Brook. Still grieving herself, she was particularly touched by the Newfoundland ritual of adorning graves with fabric flowers. Unfortunately, many of them would be eventually blown out of their cemeteries and Hunt found herself spending hours collecting them.

"I just felt so strongly about these flowers that were placed on the graves out of love. They held that memory," she says. "So I washed them and took them apart and laid them out on white fabric. It was all very ritualized."

It was a practice that led Hunt to her body of work entitled "Mourning," which once again demonstrated her ability to use materials in unexpected ways in order to create meaningful experiences for viewers. In "Shroud," for example, Hunt's multi-coloured fabric flowers were methodically laid over large white, ceremonial-looking sheets, producing a thought-provoking tension between the solemnity of passage rituals and the riotous joyousness of life. In another work, she was so inspired by her discovery of a long-held Christian belief that Heaven is full of flowers, she decided to make her own version of the afterlife, calling it "Heart's Ease." To do so, she glued her harvest of man-made blooms onto hundreds of long threads that were suspended

from the ceiling so that when gallery-goers walked through them, the flowers gently swayed around their heads and shoulders.

Even though her intentions were to comfort, Hunt was at first worried about how people would react to this piece. Happily, though, her fears were unfounded.

"People loved them; little kids loved them," she says. "Even after they found out they were flowers from cemeteries, they didn't seem to mind. I thought they would think it was rather gruesome. But they didn't. They thought it was beautiful."

Over the course of her career, Hunt has participated in solo and group exhibitions across Canada and internationally. She has been awarded residencies in Canada, Paris and Ireland and has been the recipient of Canada Council grants, as well as the President's Award for Outstanding Research from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Currently, several of her works are on exhibit at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection until Sept. 3. She will also be participating in a show at Galerie Diagonale in Montreal, beginning in September.

Hunt continues to knit landmines, saying that her goal is to knit one for every kind in existence. Given that there are over 300 models and new ones are being developed every year, she figures it will take her the rest of her days to do so.

