

Clothing as biography

A Portland artist's new exhibit examines stories that clothes tell about our lives

BY JANIE NAFSINGER

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Viewing Bonnie Meltzer's newest art exhibit is a bit like peeking into her clothes closet, which of course is the whole point. Meltzer, 64, a mixed-media artist from North Portland, is known for using all sorts of objects in her work — crocheted wire, computer disks, feathers, digital photographs, slabs of painted wood, even clothing.

In fact, clothes often appear as icons and motifs in Meltzer's work. Her current exhibit — "Clothing Chronicles," on view at Northwest Portland's Beet Gallery — delves into the stories that cherished garments tell about us. "Clothing as biography," Meltzer calls it.

"What do you have in the back of your closet that you can't get rid of?" she asks.

Is it the pair of ballet slippers from fourth-grade dance class? The 1962 prom dress? The pearls that Mom wore when she dressed up for a night on the town?

"Clothing marks the passage of time in our own lives but also connects us with history," Meltzer wrote in her artist's statement for the exhibit.

Some garments might provoke disgust rather than fondness. In Meltzer's case, that would be the Brownie uniform she wore when she joined the Girl Scouts.

"I hated wearing that ugly little brown dress that looked like everybody else," she says.

Meltzer got rid of the scratchy uniform long ago, but she worked its image into one of her mixed-media pieces. This time the despised outfit is made of painted wood; in its center, Meltzer has placed a little beaded dress that she crocheted out of wire, symbolizing the "dream" uniform she wished she'd worn instead.

Meltzer uses the same technique in another wood cutout titled "The Prom Dress." There's a full-figured "reality" gown and a "slenderized" crocheted version.

"How many times have you heard, 'I'm gonna lose 10 pounds before my prom, before my reunion, before my whatever?'" Meltzer says.

In another piece, she has arranged a pair of elbow-length gloves, a handbag and two necklaces, conjuring memories "of your mother going out," she says.

Meltzer, who loves costumes — she once taught costume history — used a garment from India in another piece that pays tribute to travel. "There is great social significance in costumes," she says.

This current mixed-media series isn't all about girls' clothes. Mounted on another canvas are several neckties belonging to her husband, Richard Ellmyer. "He hasn't worn them since 1984," Meltzer says. The words painted on the canvas say it all: "The best part of retirement is not wearing a tie."



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Another piece harks back to Meltzer's childhood in Irvington, N.J. Affixed to a canvas is a doll that Meltzer played with — “a fake Ginny doll,” she explains, referring to the 8-inch dolls popular with children in the 1950s. The piece also includes a pants-and-jacket set — voile over gingham — that she made for the doll when she was 9 or 10.

“I've always made things,” says Meltzer, who started crocheting when she was 5. “When I colored, I could never stay in the lines ... My mom would say, ‘Go outside and play, you're reading too much.’”

Meltzer majored in art at Montclair State College in New Jersey and later moved to Seattle to earn a master of fine arts degree from the University of Washington. She moved from Seattle to Portland in 1971. She and her husband, whom she met on Valentine's Day in 1969, have lived in the same house in North Portland's Portsmouth neighborhood since 1975.

During her 40 years as a working artist, Meltzer has also taught art, Photoshop and digital imaging. She has crocheted with wire since the 1970s — “it's very hot now,” she says — designs Web sites, produces commissioned art and collects “anything with lenses.”

And there are always the clothes. In a self-portrait that stands in her art studio, Meltzer has clad herself in a purple dress adorned with bits of wire, discarded CDs and other shiny embellishments. The figure is meant to call to mind the famous Jenny Joseph poem that begins, “When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple...”

Meltzer doesn't like the poem, by the way.

“Why wait,” she asks, “until you're old to wear purple?”

"Clothing Chronicles: Biography in Very Mixed Media"

Who: artist Bonnie Meltzer.

Where: Beet Gallery, 1720 N.W. Lovejoy St., No. 120, Portland.

When: June 4-27; opening reception 5 to 9 p.m. Thursday, June 4.

Beet Gallery info: 503-224-5000, www.beetgallery.com

Bonnie Meltzer info: www.bonniemeltzer.com