

COLLECTIONS



SHADOWS AND LIGHT
Artist Linda Brooks
Hirschman sits amid her
fabric creations.

The Fabric of Nature

Earthy elements of
artistic expression

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Photos by Michael Bocchieri



Landscapers offer to trim the bushes and trees in front of Linda Brooks Hirschman's rambling contemporary home in Woodcliff Lake, but she always refuses. She lets the overgrown greenery take the place of curtains, muting the sun's glare and providing privacy.

Just like Hirschman's penchant for driving around in her station wagon to scavenge fallen pods and bark, it's not about eccentricity, but aesthetics. Her profound appreciation for trees, rocks and other natural forms infuses her thoughtful and moving fiber artworks.

Hirschman even used "Into the Woods" as the title for her June solo exhibit at the Clark House, Montclair. Through July, she took part in a three-artist show at the Lautenberg Family Jewish Community Center, Whippany, and, earlier this year, she participated in the 2004 New Jersey Arts Annual at the Noyes Museum of Art, Oceanville.

"I think there's a prejudice against fiber in the art world, and that it's still considered 'women's work,'" she says, though she adds she was happy to see fiber pieces in this year's Whitney Museum Biennial.

"Linda Brooks Hirschman does one of my favorite things that art can do — take subject matter we see every day and transform it through magical and poetical vision," states Sidney Jenkins, curator for the Berrie Center galleries at Ramapo College, where the artist had a solo show in 2000. "I've been curating exhibitions for over 20 years, and Linda's work is among the strongest I've seen anywhere." ➤

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In the early 1980s, after moving to New Jersey when her son and daughter were in high school, Hirschman left the corporate world for full-time volunteerism, helping with promotion and marketing of the new YWHA/JCC of Bergen County. In her spare time, she took a quilting class.

"I learned to sew as a child, but, still, I found traditional quilt-making frustrating," she recalls. "I couldn't do all those straight lines, points and stars – they were too rigid for me – so I did curvy lines and made oddball quilts."

She had heard about art quilts in which the fabric swatches and sewing lines function as brushstrokes. A visit to a Delaware exhibit inspired her to pursue the idea further.

Still, Hirschman found it hard to follow the tradition. "My quilts kept getting more and more sculptural. I couldn't keep them flat, and they had strings and embellishments hanging off them." She points to one early "quilt," a three-dimensional, red-gold sunburst of beaded, metallic fabric, hanging over the fireplace in her living room.

Another early wall piece, "Undertow," features strips of navy-blue fabric coiled to form a vortex. Glittery threads and clear, bubble-like beads brighten the surface, with layers spiraling around a small, round piece of mirror. Hirschman explains that the work illustrates being drawn into a situation beyond your control and pulling back out of it. "Only when you see your true self can you emerge."

When not on exhibit in galleries or museums, Hirschman's artworks decorate the colorful, comfortable home

she has shared for 35 years with her husband, David. One living room wall displays "Her Wildness," a body cast of the artist embellished with green and brown fabric, beads, mossy yarns and leather.

In the mid-1990s, Hirschman began shredding fabric and stitching it back together into new shapes – "deconstructing and reconstructing." She protested the cross-cutting of trees in Bergen by sculpting several



shredded-fabric tree stumps with vertical slits that suggest wailing mouths; one also bleeds maroon yarn.

Two years ago, Hirschman fell in love with felting. The only non-woven fabric, felt is made by immersing combed wool in soap and water and agitating it until the fibers open up, grab onto each other and form a mat.

"The whole process is thrilling to me," Hirschman says. "I love mixing the colors and making my own fabric." Her home now accommodates two studios – a "dry" one upstairs,

where she sews, and a "wet" one in the basement, where she felts and teaches classes.

She has wrapped colorful felt around branches for her newer tree-themed works such as "Bearing Witness" and "Madrone at Midnight." Hirschman found madrone branches in California, and says, "I'm always shipping natural materials home from my vacations – sticks, pods, branches, even rocks."

Her felt hanging, "Persephone's Descent," features ethereal ivory at the top, shading through fiery scarlet, down to Hades black. Churning strata of brown, black and light-gray felt form "War Clouds," a recent work commenting on the threat of terrorism.

After 15 years of creating and exhibiting her art, Hirschman feels she has a better perspective than ever on where she has been and where she still wants to go. "My work reflects my own private process of remembering who I am." ■