

ART

SPOTLIGHT: NAUGHTY OR NICE!

"Have you been Naughty or Nice," a holiday exhibit of jewelry, tableware and Judaic art by award-winning Kansas City metalsmith Robyn Nichols, opens with a reception from 5 to 9 tonight at The Pearl, 1818 McGee. The exhibit continues through Dec. 22; the gallery is open from noon to 4 p.m. Saturdays and by appointment, (816) 474-1731.
—Alice Thorson/The Star



SIMPLE POWER

Good-looking and compelling exhibit inspired by 1960s minimalism

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

The final show at the Joseph Nease Gallery, which recently announced it will begin a two-year hiatus in January, is one of the best-looking exhibits in its history.

It is also one of the most compelling.

The towers and stacks of used hospital towels displayed in "Marcie Miller Gross: Recent Work" exert a poignant and elegant presence in this spacious gallery, which, since it opened in fall 1998, has been the envy of every artist whose work needs lots of room.

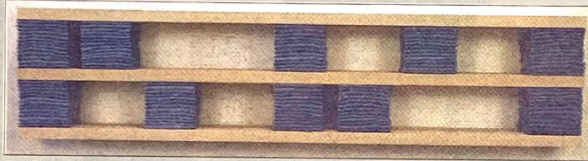
The power of Gross' exhibit is all the more gratifying for the artist's extraordinarily strong showing in the 2002 Charlotte Street Fund exhibition, where her massive cube composed from multiple stacks of blue surgical towels was a highlight of the show.

At that moment, Gross established herself as a master of reductionism, able to wrest emotional and formal resonance from the simplest of forms and materials.

Gross cites the minimalist sculptors of the 1960s — particularly Donald Judd, whose work she absorbed during a visit to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, several years ago — as a seminal inspiration. But her work takes minimalism to a whole new place.

With its hard-edged forms, rational modes of organization and rigid industrial materials, 1960s minimalism was an extremely "masculine" idiom, dominated by male practitioners. Gross appropriates and amends these minimalist signifiers to more humanistic and "feminine" ends.

The minimalists "were trying to eliminate expressive content," Gross said recently. "I'm trying to work with the expressive content of the material. How far can I pare that



Used surgical towels, basswood and steel are featured in Gross' "Compress #2" (2003).

THE SHOW

"Marcie Miller Gross: Recent Work" continues at the Joseph Nease Gallery, 1819 Central, through Dec. 13. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Friday and Saturday and by appointment. Call (816) 421-2166 for information.



Used terry cloth hospital towels and poplar wood make up "Density" (2003).

down and distill it and still retain a power and potency?" Her six new works at Nease present her answers to that question.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art recently purchased a Donald Judd sculpture, "Untitled (Progression)" (1970). It comprises an anodized aluminum bar, to which the artist attached five blocky rectangular forms at carefully calculated intervals. Now the museum should buy Gross' "Compress #2" (2003), which reads as an eloquent contemporary rejoinder to Judd's modernist masterwork (and at \$2,000 would use only 0.2 percent of that million a year the museum is spending on contemporary art).

"Compress #2" features three 6-foot-long basswood planks, displayed one above the other roughly six inches apart, that support short stacks of folded blue surgical towels positioned at irregular intervals. With its resemblance to closet shelving, it conjures a domain that is domestic, not industrial; it also differs from Judd's piece in its intuitional as opposed to mathematical system of organization. Gross said she relied on her eye, rather than any kind of formula, in deciding where to place the stacks on

the shelves. Each towel was painstakingly folded and placed by hand.

Gross has placed a vertical version, "Compress (Vertical)" just inside the gallery entrance. Both pieces, she said, were conceived last spring and arose from her interest in combining furniture and abstraction. At a time when the chaos of war is a constant presence in our living rooms, the idealized world of domestic order conjured by Gross' work is one of its great seductions. Yet it is not detached from human suffering — the white towels, particularly, are variegated with stains incurred from past use. Subtle, but evident, the stains insinuate an unmistakably human presence into "Release," an 11-foot-tall stack of folded white towels that rises from a low shelf.

The tall vertical form relates to columns and obelisks and other commemorative structures that typically celebrate the heroism and exploits of war or public figures. Yet Gross' column, in contrast, memorializes private suffering — each stained towel is like a step along the path to release.

In "Gravity," two stacks of

folded white towels sit on a shelf slightly shorter than their combined width, such that the outer edges of each stack curve downward like the wings of an angel or the pages of an open book. "Density," a shallow grid of stacks of folded white towels atop a narrow shelf, instigates a conversation with minimalist painting, notably the textural all-white canvases of Robert Ryman. Characteristically, Gross' towels profane the purity of high art with their bleached yet tell-tale stains.

"Axis," the exhibit's most ambitious piece harks to the artist's Charlotte Street Fund cube, in its use of hundreds of unfolded blue surgical towels. The format this time round is a narrow tower of stacked towels that rises from floor to ceiling. Here, too, repeated use and multiple washings have distorted the towels' flat rectangularity and ruffled their regular edges. Formally, these irregular edges contribute poetry and femininity to this simple geometrical structure; conceptually, they emblemize the disturbance and disorder that human use exacts on the surrounding world.



"Axis," (2003), by Marcie Miller Gross, incorporates used surgical towels in a floor-to-ceiling column.

Photos by E.G. SCHEMPF