

Ornamental Invasion: Liz Miller

BY CHRISTOPHER ATKINS

Even though they are often used interchangeably, the terms “decoration” and “ornament” are distinct. Decoration implies a formal, coherent design. Ornament would include organic designs, suggesting a less controlled but no less expressive form. Historically, these might include religious, cultural, and ideological symbols that weren’t necessarily functional.

Throughout her career Liz Miller has maintained composed embellishments in her gallery and public-space installations. Whether the elaborately colored bits of felt and paper were adhered directly to the wall or hung from the ceiling as if they were floating, they created organic lines and patterns. They also incorporated the DayGlo colors and graphic qualities of two-dimensional system diagrams and digital screen maps. Miller’s MAEP exhibition, “Ornamental Invasion,” elaborates on these previous works and takes her site-specific strategies in new directions. She works directly from and incorporates the formal language of weapons and armor in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

By unpacking the words of her exhibition title, “ornamental” and “invasion,” Miller finds interesting opportunities to discuss the formal qualities of her installation as well as the holistic effect of the finished work. As Heinrich Wöfflin wrote in his *Principles of Art History*, “A Renaissance panel may be designed with as much life as you like; its appearance stays as it is, while ornamentation as in rococo art strews over surfaces and produces the impression that it is in constant change.”

Miller is interested in the forms and functions of ornamentation and, in this case, how they converge with the potential violence inherent in weapons. Months ago, she began looking at MIA registration photographs of the weapons, extracting bits and pieces from images of specific objects, then folding them into the striking patterns of her



Installing “Ornamental Invasion” at the MIA, April 2011.



installation. Look closely at the blue, brown, and yellow forms and you’ll see the silhouettes of swords and knives as they undulate along the wall. It begins on one side of the gallery, growing along the wall, then caroms off in three-dimensional sculptural patterns that visitors can walk around. Her objects are tacked delicately to the painted walls, but are unconstrained by boundaries.

Armed with weapons and ideology, a military invasion disrupts defense systems in order to take control of a sovereign territory. Throughout history, invasions often resulted in major cultural shifts. Whether violent or not, invasions produce change. It’s quite a jump from military maneuvers to installation art, and many artists wouldn’t think of their work in these terms. Yet there is an ideology about gallery spaces. The whitewashed walls and clean floors would appear to be a neutral container designed to display all works without distraction. But through years of institutional critique, the “white cube” format has come

to be understood as anything but neutral. In fact, when the walls, floor, and ceiling are essential components of an installation, the gallery space can be thought of as a participant with the art, not merely a passive support.

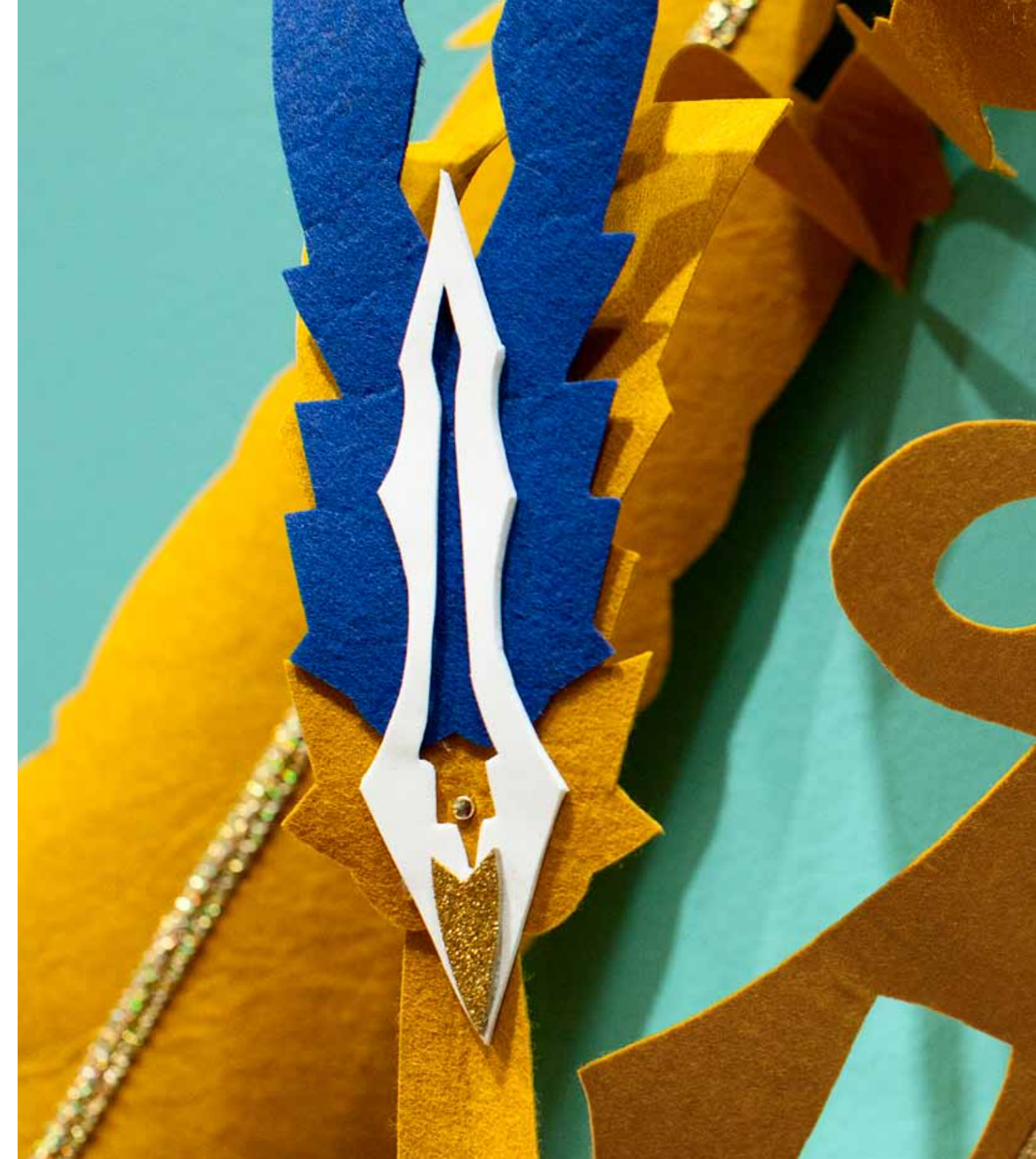
As Brian O’Doherty stated in his famous treatise on gallery spaces, “context is content.” Miller knows such arguments, and with them in mind, uses an elastic definition of “invasion.” In addition to her weapon imagery, her organically draped shapes echo invasive plant species that kill as they grow. Furthermore, the small lozenge and sinew shapes make it possible for a viewer to think about threats, or invasions, to their immune systems in the forms of bacterial and viral infections at the cellular level.

As her work has evolved, Miller has become expert at using folds to create elaborate wall textures. This installation reveals a new level of dimension in her work, and shows how she is continuing to push the limits of her materials.

This has come about by her responding to the specifics of each space she works in. But her folds have a conceptual as well as a formal dimension. For example, baroque sculptors created in marble the expressive volumes of textiles and drapery. And in formal terms, folds and pleats make it possible to see the inside as well as the outside of materials. Miller inherits and expands on this tradition, by folding images of weaponry, science, and botany into her felt cutouts. The result is a fascinating, deeply textured work.

Christopher Atkins is the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) coordinator

This exhibition is presented by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, a curatorial department of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which features work selected by Minnesota artists. MAEP is made possible in part by generous support from the Jerome Foundation.





Ornamental Invasion
Installation by Liz Miller

AND

A Field Guide to Snow and Ice
Photographs by Paula McCartney

April 22 to July 3, 2011
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Galleries

Opening Reception
Thursday, April 21, at 7 p.m.

Artists' Talks
Thursday, May 19, at 7 p.m.

MAEP Special Guests
Thursday, June 16, at 7 p.m.

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

For more information about the artists,
this exhibition, and MAEP, visit:

lizmiller.com
paulamccartney.com
artsmia.org/maep
twitter.com/arts_maep
facebook.com/arts.maep



MINNESOTA ARTISTS EXHIBITION PROGRAM

2400 Third Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404
www.artsmia.org



Ornamental Invasion