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ART; Sometimes the Darkness Just Creeps In

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THE exhibition at the Brookfield Craft Center sounds benign and much of it is. But one of the pleasures of viewing "Women's World: A Work in Progress" is that it gets darker and darker as one goes through it. Part of the benign feeling comes from the art objects' roots in crafts, but many of the artists are eager to say something urgent.

The curator, Gail M. Brown, has chosen 24 artists who use a variety of traditional craft forms and materials -- and some startling departures. The show has a high caliber of wit, and although the gallery is packed, the amount of art seems about right to make a well-rounded statement about the progress in women's lives as well as those areas that need work. Some of the smart objects are the necklaces made by Tina Fung Holder from Wisconsin. The ornamentation reminiscent of ancient Egyptian necklaces in which the semi-precious materials are densely arrayed. But Ms. Fung Holder's materials include safety pins and paper clips that alternate with organic ones such as fish scales. Her talent is for making these everyday items into contributors to elegance.

Harriet Estel Berman, from California, knows how to bend colorful pieces of metal with colorful advertising on them into triangles and an aggregate of these shapes forms a cross that resembles a pattern on a patchwork quilt. Karyl Sisson, also from California, has a vitrine full of spotted creatures made mainly buttons, but their feelers are hairpins whose ridges impart a kind of energy.

If Ms. Sisson's items are bugs enlarged, Peggy Johnson, from Maine, makes good use of miniature pots and pans that might be found in an elaborate dollhouse. This cookware forms a kind of wreath around a small book containing adages pertaining to cooking -- including the ones about the watched pot and the essential step in making an omelet. "Frocks," by Rose Kelly, from California, is a line-up of simple dresses shaped like hourglasses joined like paper dolls.

The darkness enters by stealth. Barbara Stutman, from Quebec, for example, has made jewelry out of crocheted wire, but has given the pieces

names like, "Sugar and Spice: Must We Be Nice?" The figure of a cat-like creature, "Nursing," by Janis Wunderlich, from Ohio, looks sweet, if sentimentally so, until the viewer begins to count up the large number of kittens attached.

More on the theme of women's work never being done is conveyed in two sculptured objects by Cynthia Consentino, from Massachusetts. "She Irons III" is a flat iron standing upright; Ms. Consentino has given it an animated but angry clay face with the image a man's shirt between clenched teeth. She goes one better in "Dogma." A creature half human and half animal with many breasts holds a man in a business suit in its teeth. Several works that imitate articles of clothing are biting, mysterious or simply funny.

Lou Cabeen, from Washington State, has made two aprons that could be work except for the fact that they're replete with relief elements. Interestingly, Ms. Cabeen doesn't refer to the pieces as aprons but as shields. Snakes slithering through plastic leaves in "Domestic Shield III" recall the first homemaker, Eve.

Clementine Cummer, from Massachusetts, is represented by "Corset." The laconic quality of this work is what makes it sting. The stays are knives. The mysterious articles of clothing are kimono-like robes by Deborah Olin, from Massachusetts. Though they are too small to be worn by an adult, they contain some very grown-up anxieties. One, decorated with Hebrew letters, is called, "Is She Jewish?" while "Proceed with Caution" has an all-over design of secret handshakes.

Two pieces using ballet slippers by Jennifer Carroll, of Washington State, are funny. Though "Anorexia No. 2" and "Bio-Not-Logical" are difficult to interpret "My Two Left Feet" is a winner because it is but two left slippers attempting a ballet position.

Gail Smuda, from New Hampshire, is very deft at making jokes that require a little pause before they hit home. A spice rack with little bottles dedicated to women artists including Frida Kahlo and Alice Neel is a nice, proud tribute, but "Spin to Gold by Tuesday" is white yarn being turned into cloth displayed as if it were a web. There is a fairy tale element here, but a reminder of women's endless work as well.

No one is further removed from the kitchen or sewing room than Terry

Niedzialek, from Pennsylvania. She does hair sculptures, both wig-like works and temporary ones using the model's own hair. She aspires to be nothing less than an acolyte of Mother Earth. She is represented by three photographs of herself wearing her creations. Her most elaborate, earth-shaking one is "Rainbow Healing," which incorporates a world globe. Ms. Niedzialek is also represented by "Spirit Helper"; emerging from a casing of wood is a Barbie doll. The viewer is jarred by the notion of Barbie leading an incorporeal life.

"Woman's World: A Work in Progress" is at the Brookfield Craft Center through Oct. 22.