

Arts

Material gains

From mortuary toe tags to used soap, June Ahrens never wastes a chance. *By Sarah Urwin Jones*

EXHIBITION REVIEW

JUNE AHRENS: REVEALED/CONCEALED

Andrew Grant Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art, Lauriston Place, Edinburgh

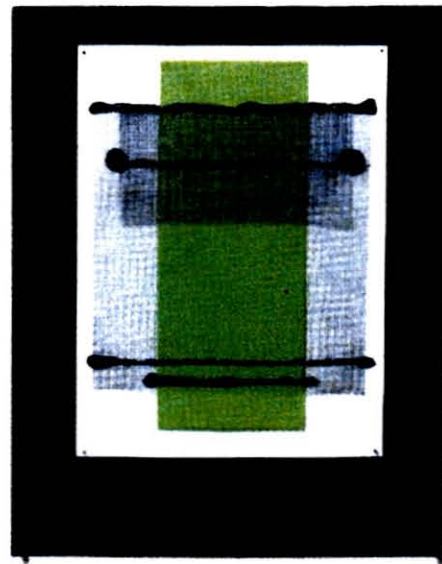
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Until May 11

This small but significant exhibition heralds the first in what ECA hopes will be a series of shows by international artists at their Andrew Grant Gallery.

The subject of this inaugural display is New York-based June Ahrens, a conceptual artist known for her sophisticated take on mixed media, incorporating everyday items in her work from safety pins to eggshells, used pillows and soap, creating sculptural wall-mounted works that are quietly, cleanly, often powerfully mesmerising. Past installations have included a display of anonymous soaps, meticulously arranged, apparently from shelters for the homeless, titled *Used and*



Collage, by US artist June Ahrens, who uses everyday materials in her conceptual work

Worn, to *Unclaimed Memories*, an installation made from 5000 State of Connecticut toe tags – the identifying marker that mortuaries put on corpses. Her work is attractive and comprehensible, while invoking longer-term reflection.

“What I like about everyday materials is that, isolated, they create a visual language from the residue of life’s experiences,” says Ahrens. “They can evoke fragility, loss, pain and healing. I want my meaning to be ‘at one’ with the material, and they achieve that. My hope is that the viewer can experience a connection, a recognition, and a reawakening through the integration of these works. It’s based on the knowledge that tactile materials, especially those with a previous life, focus the viewer’s attention toward examining their own thoughts and feelings.”

Ahrens is an artist with a deep social conscience – aside from *Used and Worn*, she has a great interest in collaborative projects and recycling the works of others into a collective whole. This has included everything from engaging homeless mothers in a photography and diary project to involving schoolchildren in a “healing hearts” installation after 9/11. While many of her works are large in scale, the 12 or so relatively small-scale works on display in Edinburgh, again of a meditative nature, examine “deep internal and external forces”.

“What I really want is to create work that provides the viewer with a visceral response by asking questions and unlocking stereotypes,” says Ahrens. Her tactile and engaging works blur the boundaries between sculpture, painting and collage in a sophisticated fashion, both from her use of a restricted colour palette – black and white is her statement scheme, through which she weaves, often literally, different colours – to her diverse use of texture, from the bubbling black tar-like surfaces of insulation foam and glue to the knitted mesh of wire and almost de-naturalised felt. It’s the upmarket antithesis of those macrame wallhangings everyone used to have in the 1970s.

Ahrens graduated from Purchase College, New York, receiving a BFA degree before becoming part of an advanced studies group at Yale University. She has exhibited all over the United States, with awards including the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Distinguished Advocate for the Arts Award from the Connecticut Commission. This is her first exhibition in Edinburgh. ■

For more information: www.juneahrens.com.