

Digital Masterpieces

Brooklyn artist straddles digital, domestic arts at Light Work

**KATHERINE
RUSHWORTH**
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's difficult to name Brooklyn-based artist Zoe Sheehan Saldana's medium. Saldana starts her creative process with a digital or digitized photograph, but along the way she'll involve a computer, a sewing machine, a needle and thread or possibly colored pencils and a bottle of ink.

The result is compelling work that straddles the digital and domestic arts and plays with our sense of perception.

Through March 10, Light Work presents a cross-section of Saldana's recent work in a thoroughly enjoyable exhibition, titled "Meanwhile."

The show, on view in the Robert B. Menschel Media Center, is composed of fiber art, pen and pencil drawings and a curious set of photographs referring to articles of clothing. The works range in scale from diminutive to enormous, with the finished work of art a camouflage for Saldana's source material and her creative process.

Saldana downloads much of her source material from the Internet: photos of missing children, images of dangerous places and people engaged in hazardous jobs.

For the fiber pieces, she then alters the digital photograph into a stitching pattern or grid, with each stitch representing a pixel. From there she completes the sewing by hand or with a computerized sewing machine. The result is an image that holds together from a distance but dissolves into tiny blocks of color as the viewer approaches.

This dissolution of the image is most apparent in a showstopper of a piece titled "America's Most Dangerous Intersection, 2004."

The ultimate work, which is



BROOKLYN-BASED artist Zoe Sheehan Saldana titled this wool and cotton tapestry "America's Most Dangerous Intersection, 2001." The piece measures 72 by 100 inches and is the centerpiece in her exhibition at Light Work. Saldana begins with a photograph, which with the help of a computer, she transforms into a stitching pattern, with each stitch representing a pixel. She then stitches the image by hand or with a computerized sewing machine. The imagery in the piece appears crisp from a distance but dissolves into one-inch pixels of woven color when viewed up close.

72 by 100 inches, is a wool and cotton tapestry that reads like an urban landscape from a distance - there's a set of traffic lights, cars traveling in different directions and a smokestack. But as you approach the piece, the image begins to deteriorate into indistinguishable blurs of color.

By the time you're 4 feet from it, all you see are inch-square pixels of woven color, an abstraction of an urban landscape. You may have experienced the same effect when viewing some of the Impressionists' paintings or a piece by the American artist Chuck Close.

Saldana has reinterpreted the medium of photography through the ancient art of sew-

ing. The result, in some ways, is a visual pun on the photographic process. She challenges our sense of what we expect photography to do, which is to represent literally or metaphorically; that's what makes it a work of art.

Instead, Saldana begins with a photograph and turns it into something else entirely. The photograph is like a found object, which she appropriates and manipulates into a new work of art. The new piece retains elements of the photograph - the pixels, vague imagery - but Saldana has entirely transformed it.

This technique is evident in much of the work comprising the show. You'll see it in an

ensemble piece titled "Group Photo, 2002," "Twelve Portrait Heads, 2001," "Untitled (people), 1999" and in two portraits titled "Julian, 2001" and "Melanie, 2001."

Saldana deliberately leaves out facial details in these cross-stitched portraits, prodding us to draw conclusions about the lives of her subjects. They're like old yearbook photos - the faces fade over time, but they're still vaguely identifiable.

A set of five photographs with accompanying articles of clothing were the most intangible pieces in the show. For about a year, Saldana frequented a Wal-Mart in Vermont, purchasing clothing, faithfully reproducing it and then covertly

The details

What: "Meanwhile," the work of Zoe Sheehan Saldana.

Where: Light Work, 316 Waverly Ave., Syracuse.

When: Through March 10. What to expect: Work that combines photography and fiber arts to explore the changeable nature of photography.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays through Fridays.

Admission: Free.

Contact: 443-1300.

Related event: A reception is 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday at Light Work. It's free and open to the public.

returning it to the sales rack with the original tags attached.

She doesn't know if anyone purchased her forged pieces, which is a shame. I think that would have been the most interesting part of the project, although Wal-Mart's management probably wouldn't agree.

Saldana's work is pleasing to look at and well-crafted, but its strength lies beneath the surface, below the carefully stitched pixels and meticulously applied dots of ink. She challenges us to consider how we look at things and how they are portrayed. In this process, Saldana reinterprets the conventional role of photography.

Katherine Rushworth, of Cazenovia, is a former director of the Michael C. Rockefeller Arts Center (State University College at Fredonia) and the Central New York Institute for the Arts in Education.