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Crafting the revolution

The politics of queer fiber art

BY JAYMEE R. CUTI

A collective of women working yarn between their fingers, "stitching and bitching" about life and times, is the new image of subversive politics in Portland.

A knitting resurgence has taken shape in cities countrywide. Women, young and aging, are organizing at knitting cafes, bars and coffee shops, joining virtual crafty communities online and reclaiming the domestic arts as a pastime with purpose and value.

Knitting is attracting and connecting a variety of women, children and even some men who know that, historically, they were the stewards of practical fiber art.

Some cite its rhythm as relaxing. Others enjoy the creative and social outlet. All know they are creating what cannot be bought: handmade, functional items with no label, products from no corporation.

says. "This is a soft and fuzzy way to be creative, and you have the social aspect where you get to sit around and gossip about your girlfriends—and lack thereof."

Kay's group is not queer-specific but has a strong lesbian presence at any given meet. "The circle I have is very queer, but it's an extension of my own social circle, and my perspective is so skewed," she says.

Kay learned to knit from her grandmother when she was 7. She picked it back up while studying at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, to bring balance to her heavy workload. At that time, she says she spotted a handful of lesbians with needles in hand at lectures, dining halls and everywhere else they went.

"Knitting being reclaimed by our generation and being infused with a new sense of



Stitch 'n Bitch facilitator Natalia Kay knits hats at In Other Words bookstore in Southeast Portland

"For me, it's about reclaiming the craft and feeling like there's subversive power in creating something that's both functional and creative," says Natalia Kay, a lesbian in Northeast Portland who facilitates a Stitch 'n Bitch group in her home. "Having the Stitch 'n Bitch is having a group of ladies in a room for very political and intellectual conversation. Women's work is the site where the seeds of revolution are sewn. Get a group of ladies together and we'll start causin' some trouble."

The revolution is shaped by manifestos from Third Wave feminists. *Bust* magazine editor Debbie Stoller's *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* and follow-up book, *Stitch 'n Bitch Nation*; *Get Crafty: Hip Home Ec* by Jean Raila, editor of GetCrafty.com; and an abundance of Web sites and fanzines are instructing ladies in the DIY movement.

Many queer-specific knitting circles have formed in Portland, including a healthy group called QK (Queer Knitting), which has been meeting at Mabel's Cafe and Knittery, 3041 S.E. Division St., on alternating Sundays since the needle-friendly coffeehouse and yarn store opened last summer.

Sharon Rose says she formed the group as an alternative to meeting women in bars. "I was bored of going to straight knitting groups. I wanted to have more interesting conversation and thought I might actually meet a girlfriend. This creates an environment without the smokiness and loudness of bars and without all the drama."

Rose, an artist in multiple media, likes knitting three-dimensional objects like stuffed animals and monsters.

"Lesbians tend to be a creative bunch," she

style is typically what queer people do with different crafts and art forms," she says. "We don't care quite as much what other people think of us, so we'll knit and be dorky and then it becomes cool."

Knitting events themselves are in line with popular culture. Mabel's recently played host to a pirate-themed knitting group. The Yarn Garden, 1413 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd., hosts knitting clinics, workshops and afternoon tea with teachers. The Yarn Garden's hangout, The Sipperie, opened its doors earlier this month as a warm and welcoming place for patrons to stitch up a storm just a few doors down at 1429 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd. Northwest Portland has its own yarn-friendly locale, Lint, at 1700 N.W. Marshall St. Tagged "not your typical yarn store," it doubles as a gift gallery.

While some are looking for a break from the bar scene, Nocturnal, a watering hole at 1800 E. Burnside St., has cashed in on the knitting phenomenon by holding craft nights on Wednesdays. A devout bunch from Church of Craft, an international creative cult, meets regularly from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at Rimsy-Korsakoff, 707 S.E. 12th Ave.

The message from Church of Craft organizers and all knitting group leaders is that crocheters, beaders, wire-workers, stitchers, tiki-carvers, scrapbookers, builders of models—and men—are welcome.

Rose emphasizes that newbies are encouraged to attend her group; she gives free lessons to knitting novices. Free supplies are provided by Mabel's.

"New folks are always welcome, and we're not meant to be exclusive to knitters," says Kay. "We don't discriminate." **JM**