

VISUAL ARTS

Artist's installation provides perspective on female rituals

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REVIEW

Nancy VanDevender: "Picking Cotton, Mississippi to Detroit"

Through July 31. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays; noon-4 p.m. Saturdays.
Prices: \$800-\$8,500. Emory Visual Arts Gallery, 700 Peavine Creek Drive, Atlanta.
404-727-6315; www.visualarts.emory.edu.

Bottom line: VanDevender's elegant installation creates an intimate and beguiling meeting place that transcends cultural and racial divides.



Nancy VanDevender's elegant installation, "Picking Cotton, Mississippi to Detroit," interweaves female rituals involving decoration — of the body, clothing and interiors — as a way of examining cultural and racial divides.

VanDevender re-creates "parlours" — rooms historically associated with an exchange of ideas, emotions or touch. She presents them like theatrical sets, populated with photographic prints, videos and chairs, staging quiet, intimate scenes.

Her models are posed alone and in small groups, displaying body art and particularly feminine attire. Added to the mix are stunning wallpapers (by the artist) as backdrops, with festooned ruffles and scrolled, ornamental lines filled with tiny vignettes taken from the photographic themes.

Skin and fabric are among VanDevender's decorative surfaces, as words consort with the artist's imagery. In "Bias Line" for example, she inks those very words on the nape of a woman's neck, along with an arrow pointed downward, cotton balls and bright ruffles completing her faux-tattoo that plays on the word "bias" (a synonym for prejudice and a term for cloth's diagonal pull).

"Pink" is another source of wordplay, appearing in the show's subtitle ("Pink: Beyond Black and White"), in its suggestion of femininity and its multiple meanings that include cutting skin (in tattooing) and fabric (in sewing).

VanDevender's work is part of a personal journey. She grew up in Jim Crow Mississippi and later lived in Detroit, where she became aware of commonalities that bridged the racial divide of her childhood. She interprets this awakening through fiber arts and digital media, and in narratives that incorporate various adornments that resonate historically and culturally, as status symbol and source of pleasure.

VanDevender's prints and videos are striking, but her inked, scanned and enlarged wallpapers are extraordinary. Each patterned surface is beautiful, identifying and camouflaging simultaneously. The palettes she uses reinforce the artistic intent: black dominates the background in one parlour, white in the second. A thicket of tones luxuriates in the third; more than just an exchange of color, it's a flourishing.