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Intro to Art Criticism

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Exhibition Review: *Soft/Cover* at The Fabric Workshop and Museum

*Soft/Cover* at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) is an exhibition open from October 9, 2024 to August 17, 2025 that was created with the goal of celebrating almost 50 years of the museum, and the numerous artists who have been through residency programs there.

The Fabric Workshop and Museum is located in Center City Philadelphia, across the street from the iconic Reading Terminal Market and Pennsylvania Convention Center. FWM is free to all, and as one enters the building they must pass the front desk and museum gift shop before being greeted by the artwork of *Soft/Cover*.

Introductory text claims that *Soft/Cover* is analyzing the “surprising ways” FWM artists have used fiber and screenprinting to create relational work between the body and the medium. The exhibition is also said to be inspired by early residencies of the 1970s and 1980s. The two introductory large scale works, *Going Under, Shhhh*, (Julia Chiang, 2024) and *Alice* (Tristin Lowe, 1998-2011), that accompany the text in the opening room of the exhibit are used as evidence by the curators to reinforce their curatorial intent.

*Going Under, Shhhh* is a 7 x 24 foot screenprinted repeat pattern that represents the current state of residency at FWM and is used by curators to advertise this residency program. The work is very mild, an abstract pattern with no apparent relation to the human body or historical work by past residents. *Going Under, Shhhh* acts as an advertisement for audiences, if they were to only walk into this room of the museum and then leave, at least they are left with

the impression that FWM is a place for screen printing. Curators seem to hope that after seeing this work audiences may come back for the FWM's workshop tours held on weekends.



Installation Views of *Going Under, Shhh*, (Julia Chiang, 2024) and *Alice* (Tristin Lowe, 1998-2011) in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

*Alice* by Tristin Lowe is a gigantic sitting blue inflatable cyclops that wears a red dress with a white apron, reminiscent of the iconic blue dress from *Alice in Wonderland*. This piece has some shock-value with its size, as *Alice* towers over audiences entering the room, but she is easily palatable once audiences realize she is representative of the scene in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice eats the cookies that cause her to rapidly grow.

*Alice* solidifies the curatorial statement more convincingly than *Going Under, Shhhh*, but together they are two of the most quickly digestible pieces in the show, and serve to convince audiences who may leave to come back and see the rest of the exhibition.

After the introductory section of *Soft/Cover* audiences are able to quickly move through the rest of the first floor and up the elevator to the second floor of the museum and second part of the exhibition. Unlike the first floor, the second floor is one long gallery space with a concrete floor and white walls.



*Soft/Cover*, Installation View, second floor gallery of The Fabric Workshop and Museum.

The second floor features a number of hand constructed garments, umbrellas, a bed, and a painted folding partition. There are a number of exaggerated triangular gray clothing racks through the gallery space that hang the clothing objects in an almost salon-style manor. These racks erase the individuality of the artist and instead force unrelated garments into a shared narrative. This gallery space is united by a number of black and white pieces by iconic residents of FWM from the 70s, 80s, and 90s including Pat Steir, Robert Morris, and Robert Whitman.

One lonesome commissioned contemporary piece, *Untitled (jacket)* (Borna Sammik, 2024) exists within the space of the second gallery but is completely overshadowed by the

surplus amount of 70s-90s work shown alongside it. This gallery space aims to connect works from the 70s to 90s to one another with an emphasis on constructed semi-conceptual garments. The pieces are too similar to one another to be able to hold their own and the gallery blends together as one vaguely political message.

The eighth floor has a similar curatorial concept, floorplan, and execution to the second floor and once again the pieces blend together into one vaguely political message, though more feminist in nature. Once again, objects are forced together by supposed content rather than artist.

*Soft/Cover* both fails and accomplishes the goals it set out to achieve. The show seems to be a very thorough analysis of resident's work, particularly in the 70s through the 90s and advertises the work of newer residents of the 2020s. The lack of work from the 2000s and 2010s left me questioning how the exhibition could accurately portray the evolution of its artist residency program without 40% of its history. Nonetheless, the show is able to juxtapose old work and new work, particularly on the first floor of the museum.

The curators of this exhibition have pulled out a surplus of works from the 70s through the 90s and have unfortunately lost the meanings of the individual works through their open galleries and exaggerated displays on the second and eighth floors. The lack of linear curation forces pieces from 2024 to blend into pieces from 1977. Any notion of evolution is lost on those who do not wish to spend time looking at each label and decoding which piece is which.