By Lela Nargi

Hamburg, Germany-based Annette Streyl is a widely acclaimed visual artist whose architectural sculptures rely on two disparate and, some would argue, contradictory materials to give them form. One is stone; the other is yarn. The latter, Streyl has meticulously machine-knit into pliant, highly-recognizable buildings, accomplished on a spatially gratifying scale of 1:100.

More accurately, her knittings are skins of buildings—and Streyl makes much of this distinction. Sometimes they are exhibited stretched over armatures; others they are strung, billowy and strange, over lines as though they were so much bulky handwash left out to dry. Both versions manifest a certain weightless quality—the sagging hides because you can almost hear the hissing of air that would accompany their deflating; the structured ones because Streyl suspends them several inches off the ground when exhibited, so they hover like impossible dirigibles.

Deutsche Bank Frankfurt 157 x 140 x 140 cm
© 1999 Annette Streyl

Says Streyl, “Both versions of my sculptures have the same importance and are exhibited equally” – to whit, both versions in the same show. “With the armature, you can compare the size and the shape of the buildings. The version without armature is more abstract, critical, and ironic and fits better the soft material of wool, which doesn’t like to be at an angle. This version is my personal favorite.”

However they’re hung, these buildings are eye candy—big, soft and beautiful. But they’re also so much more: mathematically challenging, they’re contemporary riffs on “female manual work,” (Streyl’s words), as well as poignant political statements. As one reviewer notes, Streyl’s buildings lend “bodily warmth to institutions that chiefly represent tradition, constancy and power.” Streyl herself calls the buildings “conceptual work, without a personal touch.” She doesn’t knit them herself, but painstakingly prepares plans for the woman who constructs them on a simple, small knitting machine. She selects the “proper” materials, makes proofs; after this “I have to count every centimeter in Maschen [stitches] and rows.” Perhaps the results are impersonal, as Streyl maintains, but they certainly require an enormous personal investment of time and dedicated vision.

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Ikea Dortmund wool 10 x 144 x 96 cm
© 1999 Annette Streyl

One look and even the most staid homebody is sure to recognize some of Streyl's structures – they're just a tad…woollier than the originals. Says Streyl, "Every building has, or is, a logo." Which is why, with or without armature, no matter where in the consumerist world you hail from, you know that swatch of red knitting with the bright yellow arches could only mean McDonald's; and the bright blue blob marked with yellow writing, an outpost of the Swedish shopping über-franchise, Ikea. Streyl maintains that yarn color, "which must fit to the color of the buildings," is critical to achieving just the right look for her creations

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AT&T New York 195 x 60 x 28 cm

© 1999 Annette Streyl

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Some of Streyl's buildings have more localized impact. New York's Sony Tower (formerly the AT&T building, designed by Philip Johnson) starkly stretches to end in the ornamental "Chippendale" rooftop cutout so familiar to dwellers of the city's five boroughs. (In its armature-less form, it's reduced to a compelling pattern of black-and-white gridwork.) The Lurex-flecked "twin towers" of Frankfurt's Deutsche Bank, among the best-known buildings in Germany, are often referenced by newspaper editorialists as symbols of economic prosperity. Off the framework, Styreyl's knitted versions resemble nothing more than a pair of collapsed stockings. So much pomp and power, revealed with knitting to be so much puffery.

Palace de Republik Berlin 32 x 88 x 180 cm
© 1999 Annette Streyl

A 2008 article on Yatzer.com quoted Streyl as commenting on the nature of her work, "People assume wool is a simple material. But…as soon as you make wool angular, which most architecture is, it gets amazingly complicated." In none of Streyl's work is this more evident than in her version of the Berlin Reichstag, the original of which caught fire under mysterious circumstances during the Third Reich. On the framework, its four mini-towers and central dome happily perk, and the viewer has a sense of why the building's structural symmetry is so compelling to artists (the building was also famously wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in 1995). But strung on the line, its form reduced to an awkward series of puckers and punctures, you wonder how Streyl ever managed to make anything of it at all, let alone such a grand, precise something.

Great Hall Berlin 318 x 450 x 400 cm

© 2003-2006 Annette Streyl

Great Hall Berlin 318 x 450 x 400 cm
© 2003-2006 Annette Streyl

Meanwhile, for all the detail and care Streyl pours into these knitted architectural structures, her work is still prone to the same kinds of catastrophes that plague your average beginner sweater-knitter. Says Streyl, “I try not to use pure wool, because of the moths.”

Learn more about the work of Annette Streyl at streyl.net
This article has been adapted from an entry in Lela Nargi’s upcoming book for Voyageur Press, Astounding Knits! 101 Spectacular Knitted Creations and Daring Feats, Spring 2011. Visit her at lelanargi.com