August 7 – September 2, 2009 Prêt-à-Porter, Circle Craft Gallery

Pierre Trudeau would have given Katherine Soucie and Amber Churchill thumbs up for giving a French title to their Made in Canada show of notably distinctive textiles and jewelery. After all, our country is, potentially, if not yet in fact, bilingual. Come to think of it even the sound of words in another language can spark an insight beyond the literal meaning. How carefree is the pit-a-pat of Prêt-à-porter, while the English "ready to wear" tends to imply something sensible, possibly a bargain.

"Sans Soucie" rightly describes Katherine Soucie's textiles, so easy to wear and care for, no worry. Amber Churchill sticks to the simple name of Amber Jewelery, though on Salt Spring Island her Sweet Something's Gallery is a nice flight of fancy, though her jewelery is by no means just something. But names are the fun part of this creative partnership. What matters is the shared craftsmanship and its visceral language, learnt by doing and full of purpose.

Katherine Soucie has a very clear purpose, for she is a revolutionary. She started back at home in Ontario, making outfits from vintage clothes with the definite purpose of fitting the clothes to the personality of each person. Naturally she went off to study fashion design, but the range of available materials was boring. On the basis of 'If you can't get it, make it', she moved to Vancouver and at Capilano College began to learn how to create what is now her special line of textiles. Simply put she reclaims unworn nylon hosiery, and dyes and deconstructs it. Then the surface designs are silk-screened and heat-sealed onto cloth before being reconstructed into yardage. Unique? Sure. And note that Katherine abhors waste. Amber Churchill's purpose is to create inspiringly bold jewellery from semi-precious stones and paua shell. The colours of the stones are rich and important, the shells a delicate pink or grey, and each pendant is, in different ways, a presence by a delicate woven network of very tiny beads. I note Katherine's pure white dress, very simple, the surface broken only by widely spaced, stitched, black lines running vertically top to bottom. From the slightly ruffled neckline hangs a beautiful pendant of three large ammonite stones – and the dress is complete. By the way, Amber is an immigrant from Ontario and her jewellery reflects her joy in the beauty of BC's West Coast. In her Sweet Something's Gallery she proudly presents jewellery drawn from all over Canada.

For a change I have invited two guests for their comments this month, Diana Sanderson and Suzanne Nairne. Diana established her studio/shop on Granville Island in 1986 where she creates casually elegant classic garments from her hand-woven, hand-dyed silk ikat. Suzanne creates innovative silver jewellery which has honesty of creative work which comes from her heart. Diana and Suzanne are having a joint show together at our gallery next year. Here are their comments on this show. *Diana writes*: Viewing Prêt-à-porter with Katherine Soucie and Amber Churchill renewed my excitement about textiles and craft. Their works are a wonderful contrast. Katherine's textiles and forms are light and flowing. Amber's jewellery is big and bold. Brought together they are perfectly complimentary. Katherine's designs obtain a deep complexity from her mastery of a process of screening waste hosiery fabric and assembling pieces to create wearable collage. The result invites the viewer to study the detail without losing the drama of the overall impression created by the flowing fabric. Amber too relies on collages of carefully chosen large exotic stones and beads to create a powerful and integrated statement.

Suzanne writes: Looking at Amber Churchill's jewelry at the Prêt-à-porter show (shared with textile artist/designer, Katherine Soucie) at Circle Craft gallery, I was struck again by the incredible breadth of contemporary jewelry. Stones, beads, shells exclusively are the elements combined in these pieces – common enough materials in jewelry now and always – but what show stopping pieces she creates. Amber's work strikingly complements Katherine Soucie's innovative textiles in colour, texture, mood, but especially boldness, there is almost a performance ambience to the show, as if the clothing would fly off the forms and the jewelry off the wall to dance. Reading Diana's perceptive comments I think how fortunate Vancouver is in the wealth of what an American arts writer called "the expressive life." The phrase turned up in a brief review of a really interesting book, The Craftsman, published last year. Sennet has much to say on this subject, and he emphasizes the need to give importance to vocational training in the made-by-hand skills which are the art of craft. So I celebrate the opportunities which foster our "expressive life", not just the post secondary institutions but the studios of professionals. Definitely the profession of craftsmanship has grown up over the last thirty years and these skilled citizens are playing an important role in our society.

Thelma Ruck Keene, Circle Craft