

ART

Stitching the perfect stomach

Happiness for Ottawa, Ontario-based artist Karina Bergmans is creating the perfect stomach or liver or pancreas or kidney.

Bergmans has, she jokes, an “obsession” with body parts, specifically oversized, three-dimensional organs, lovingly made of vinyl, velvet or whatever scraps can be found among her sewing supplies.

Despite having a psychology degree, Bergmans has not yet discerned the origins of this obsession for organs and her desire to make them visible. But clearly Bergmans’s giant, sometimes diseased, organs help demystify the body, its ailments and the world of medicine. It is easy to picture Bergmans’s hammock-sized perfect stomach as a teaching tool for children or as whimsical art in a hospital. These organs are approachable, educational and lovable, even the damaged ones — including the ulcer in the perfectly rendered stomach.

Bergmans’s body parts obsession was well on its way to full realization by 2008. That’s when she started exhibiting an evolving body of work called *Organs, Organisms and Orifices*, a collection of cuddly creatures and outlandish body parts, some of them wearable. Once seen, it is impossible to forget Bergmans’s merry “colon bag,” a large purse shaped like coiled intestines. She still carries it on special occasions.

In 2011, Bergmans and her colon bag were off to the Banff Centre in Alberta, where she was awarded a one-month studio residency to find ways of combining her body parts obsession with her other passion, cloth-covered, three-dimensional letters of the alphabet. Some are “pillow letters” just for fun or for spelling words, many with anatomical connotations.

The explorations at Banff developed into a body of work named *Ligaments and Ligatures*: twenty gigantic organs



K.Bergmans

Stomachulcer, 2013, fabric, silk, foam, zipper, grommets, snaps.

and three-dimensional texts, initially exhibited at Ottawa’s City Hall Art Gallery during this past summer. Bergmans is hoping to enlarge her collection of organs and keep them traveling to galleries across the country.

One of the star attractions of *Ligaments and Ligatures* is “Heartattack,” a stuffed velvet heart, the size of a bar fridge, that is having an attack. We know this because the word “attack” is spelled out in text leaking like blood from the damaged heart.

“We’re all familiar with someone, a family member perhaps, having a heart attack,” Bergmans explains. “But what does it look like? How does it represent itself? What is the physical manifestation of it?”

The artist sees parallels between her process of creating organs and the work of medical professionals, who sew

damaged body parts. In fact, Bergmans sees *Ligaments and Ligatures* as a tribute to medical professionals: “We get broken and they put us together.”

Bergmans, who has spent most of her life in Ottawa, inherited a love of sewing from her mother. However, she didn’t combine art and sewing, using fabric as an art medium, until after graduating from Carleton University in Ottawa and taking some art courses at George Brown College in Toronto, Ont.

Bergmans traded Freud and Jung for such influences as Montréal, Quebec-based fabric artist Luanne Martineau, who creates organic-looking felt sculptures, Claes Oldenburg, an American artist famous for his giant hamburgers made of cloth, and Michele Provost, an artist from Gatineau, Que., best known for politically charged, embroidered texts.

Provost was enthralled by *Ligaments and Ligatures*: “I found her exhibition to be very people friendly, not in a dumbing down way, but rather in a

human mode, since it talks about the innards that we all share, and the threats that we all fear.”

Bergmans is unsure where her voyage

through the body will take her next. She recently turned 40 and is preparing for a two-week residency at the Moon Rain Centre for Textile Arts in the Outaouais, in Val-des-Monts, Que. There, she and 25 other textile artists from around the world will create outdoor, site-specific artworks as part of the second International Triennial of Textile Arts in the Outaouais, taking place in the fall of 2013.

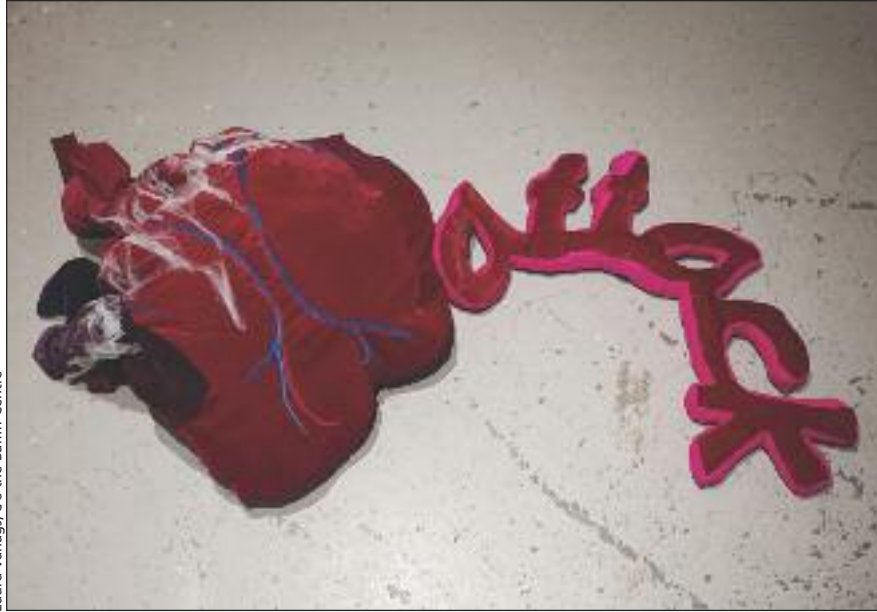
The experience is expected to be like that of an author allowing characters in an evolving novel to dictate the twists and turns of the plot. For Bergmans, the combination of the setting, her fabrics, the influence of other artists and the desire to create the perfect stomach may thrust her in a direction she never anticipated.

“I’m curious myself what the next tangent is,” says Bergmans.

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Laura Vanags, © the Bamff Centre

Heartattack, 2011, thrift store velvet, wool, polyester fibrefill, zipper.