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\$1 beyond the greater New York metropolitan area.

By HOLLAND COTTER

Three strong summer group shows of art by women are bound together by some loose connective threads. All three highlight artists of an older generation, and all three include work in which cloth — woven, embroidered, cut and stitched — plays a central role.

"Fiber and Form: The Woman's Legacy" at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery takes the medium as its theme. This exhibition doesn't pretend to be even a casual survey of its subject. But by bringing together seven idiosyncratic figures who rarely bump shoulders in the same gallery, it suggests the versatility of fiber-based work.

The show also makes a broad historical point or two. It proposes that, at least in the context of this gathering, fiber art is a matrilineal tradition, rooted in crafts and domestic skills passed on from mother to daughter. And it gently confutes the notion that the medium came into its own in the United States only with the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970's. Many of the pieces on view predate that era by decades.

The fabric and paper collages of the New York artist Anne Ryan (1889-1954), for example, were pieced together from sewing basket scraps during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. The large collage here, with its finely wrinkled textures and off-center patch of celestial blue, has the painterly touch and intellectual urbanity associated with that movement.

Lenore Tawney, still prolific today at 89, had already produced several of her major woven pieces by the end of the 1950's. Her small free-hanging work titled "Mask" (1967), inspired by African and Pre-Columbian forms, demonstrates that the spirit of non-Western craft traditions was being infused into New York vanguard art even when arch-Western Pop and Minimalism held the field.

Of an earlier date than the Tawney piece is a striking sculptural assemblage by Lee Bontecou, from 1961. Made of canvas stretched over a metal armature and caked with paint-blackened bits of cloth, it suggests a gaping mouth or a Cyclopean eye and projects a heart-of-darkness menace of considerable power.

Menace of a different kind — a brutalized sensuality — radiates from the dense assemblages of torn leather jackets and belts by Nancy Grossman, who at 56 is the youngest artist in the show. Fiber pieces only on a technicality (they are stitched together with thread), these works from the 1960's prefigure the sexual politics that mark much of the body-fixed work of the 90's.

Politics has a gentle voice in Betye Saar's "Brother of the Shadow," with its photographic image of African sculptures half-hidden behind a layer of cloth netting. And in the fanciful modernist embroideries and appliqués of Eve Peri (1887-1966), a little-known artist who is awarded a mini-retrospective here, it vanishes altogether.

Not so in the in the work of Hannelore Baron (1926-1987), a German-born artist who survived the Holocaust and, crippled by agoraphobia,

led a reclusive life in her Bronx apartment. In her small, distressed collages — paint-stained, marked with half-articulated words — fiber work has an expressive gravity equal to any painting.

A comparison of these mediums is beautifully realized in a little dream of a show at Washburn Gallery, in which Ryan's collages from the early 50's are matched with paintings by Agnes Martin and Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-1971) from the same decade.

In contrast to the conflicting moods at Rosenfeld, this show has a tranquil, meditative tone. The Ryan collages are beige and gray, with accents of mustard and moss-green. Their chromatic austerity finds a counterpart in the whited-down terra cottas and omelette yellows of Mason's geometric painting, and in Ms. Martin's ethereal "Harbor No. 1" (1959). Painted when Ms. Martin was living near the seaport in lower Manhattan, it is an example of a whole range of work edited out of her retrospective two years ago at the Whitney Museum of American Art, but its gray and white forms are as pellucid and atmospheric as the sound of bells in a fog.

Painting is also the dominant medium in the group show at Lennon, Weinberg, though here, too, fiber has a part to play. Sometimes its role is literal, as in Mia Westerlund Roosen's sculptural stack of cotton disks or Robin Hill's length of waxed string looping haphazardly down the gallery wall. Sometimes it is only implied.

A handsome painting by Valerie Jaudon, for example, with patterns

of crisp enamel-black curlicues arranged against a curtainlike gray ground, simulates the cut-and-paste of collage, as does a joyous Matissean abstraction by Shirley Jaffe.

One can't say the same of the work of Carmengloria Morales and Harriet Korman (whose single piece here shows her striking out in interesting new directions). But the enormous painting titled "Recollect," by the 31-year-old, Trinidad-born Denyse Thomasos, making her New York gallery debut, resembles a vast patchwork quilt built up from countless squares of hatched strokes. There may not be an actual stitch in sight in Ms. Thomasos' painting, but its clear reference to a craft form and its labor-intensive style carry the proud spirit of "women's work" into yet another generation.

"Fiber and Form: The Woman's Legacy" remains at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, Manhattan, through Sept. 3. "Agnes Martin, Anne Ryan and Alice Trumbull Mason: Paintings and Collages From the 1950's" remains at Joan T. Washburn Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, Manhattan, through July 12. "Summer Group Exhibition" remains at Lennon, Weinberg, 560 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo, through Aug. 1.