

# The New York Blade

## Faaab-ric!

Two gay male artists approach fabric-based works

By RAFAEL RISEMBERG

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Gay male artists working with fabric? With glitter? What a shocker! Sarcasm aside, fabric artists are not all that common, probably because they are—unjustifiably—accorded less respect than those working in more traditional media. Still, for a few fabric art is their calling, and this week you can see the products of two artists' handiwork at galleries in Chelsea.

James Gobel, a San Francisco artist exhibiting at Kravets/Wehby Gallery, specializes in figurative "paintings" made of felt and yarn. His subjects are bears—the large, hairy gay male type—and here he portrays fashion designers Jeffrey Costello and Robert Tagliapietra, two bears who are life partners (for 13 years) and career partners, hard at work in their studio. Gobel's felt paintings show Costello and Tagliapietra wearing their customary plaid flannel shirts as they cut and sew, and as they fit their dresses on female models. The designers' bulldog is also seen in one work, wearing a comically feminine ruff. Gobel starts his pieces by gluing twisted yarn onto a wood panel, thereby creating the skeletal structure, akin to the black metal outlines in stained glass. He then cuts the felt into pieces and glues them into the spaces within the yarn outline. Glued felt is an unforgiving medium—if the artist makes even the tiniest mistake in laying the fabric, the entire work must be discarded and begun anew; the process is especially challenging with larger expanses of felt. Finally, in spots, Gobel adds touches of acrylic paint.

The effect is a velvety richness of color and texture, very pleasing to the eye. The subject matter is somewhat mundane, but comforting: two men doing their job in a typical workday. There's a sensuality in the figures' huskiness and in the flowing fashions that the designers create. Gobel's occasional cropped heads and torsos add to the sense of real-world spontaneity.

Two blocks away at Pavel Zoubok Gallery is artist Christopher Tanner's mixed media, fabric-and-glitter-based work. According to the gallery, the artist's intent is to depict colored, ornamented surfaces that, upon reflection, reveal dark, brooding evils, mirroring the anxieties of our times. Tanner has succeeded: To walk into the gallery is to be overwhelmed by garish colors and busy, bejeweled surfaces that both invite and repel. For instance, his large round work titled "How High the Moon," with its dime-store-bought moths and butterflies that are encrusted and surrounded by mirrors, sequins, faux jewels, and other adornments, does convey the simultaneous attractions and dangers of showy excess.



*How High the Moon*, 2007 by Christopher Tanner. Mixed-media on wood, 8-foot diameter. Courtesy of Pavel Zoubok Gallery.

Tanner's other large wall constructions, however, are a bit unwieldy and enigmatic. One example, "Hand in the Pool of Maria Montez"—its surface covered in embroidered squares, sequins and the like—does communicate a gritty sense of glamour. But the references to screen sirens (Jeanne Moreau, Doris Day et al.), along with the hand in the middle of the work, seem to perplex more than anything else. Some, though, will appreciate its ambiguity.

Far better are the artist's glitter-on-paper renderings of various owls, each named after a person in the news (one is called "Hillary") or in the artist's life, not that I detected any resemblance to their human counterparts. My favorites were "Sally" and "Pat," named after Tanner's lesbian mother and her longtime partner. These beautifully executed nocturnal creatures best capture humanity's fascination with the dark side. And they give off an aura of drag queen decadence, besides.

In the end, both artists use fabric and related materials to comment on glamour—in one, the workaday makings of it; in the other, its potential for nightmarish excess.

James Gobel, until March 31, at Kravets/Wehby Gallery [kravetswehbygallery.com](http://kravetswehbygallery.com), 212-352-2238. Christopher Tanner, until April 14, at Pavel Zoubok Gallery [pavelzoubok.com](http://pavelzoubok.com), 212-675-7490. Rafael Riseberg, Ph.D., leads gay & lesbian art gallery tours through New York Gallery Tours, [nygallerytours.com](http://nygallerytours.com), 212-946-1548. Next tours are Saturday, March 24 & April 21.