New installation gets down to the nitty-gritty

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin, Seeing Things
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The 'Quantify Me' exhibit includes cutouts whose patterns are dictated by various sets of data.

Every day, Laurie Frick takes a count of how many steps she makes. And every night, she slips on a sensor-equipped headband that tracks her sleep patterns.

Frick also makes notes of the food she has eaten each day, her mood, the time she spends online, the number of visits her website (www.lauriefrick.com) receives and from where those Web visits originate.

If all the personal data-collecting sounds a little neurotic, Frick is decidedly not at all neurotic in person — calm, personable, a thoughtful conversationalist.

Discussing "Quantify Me," her current exhibit at Women & Their Work, the 56-year-old Austin-based artist couldn't be more at ease, untroubled by the biological and psychological minutiae that she tracks and uses as the basis for her intricate pattern-filled installation.

"There are things about ourselves we measure all the time without realizing it," she says with a shrug. "But what if you could live with that data all around you?"

And what if that data could be artfully displayed so that you could then adjust your behavior, tweek your daily habits? What if such self-surveillance were the norm? (To some people it is: Frick belongs to the Quantified Self community, a group of users and software developers interested in self-tracking. Discussions and meet-up groups around the world share info at www.quantifiedself.com.)

Frick transforms her personal data into an immersive installation at Women & Their Work. From the gallery ceiling, Frick has hung 48 laser cut drawings on thick watercolor paper. Each bears a different pattern of cutout lines and shapes. Each represents a different data set: sleep patterns, emails received, steps walked around Lady Bird Lake, the levels of stomach enzymes in the course of a day.

Together, the 48 cutouts form a room of sorts. Step in and you're encased by Frick's intimate details.
But what gorgeous minutiae it is. There's a simple hand-made gentleness to Frick's lines and shapes that contrasts with the technical precision of the laser cuts.

Along one long gallery wall, Frick installed thousands of colorful laminate countertop sample swatches, the colors graduating in intensity in some places while paler in others.
Frick employs a geek-worthy roster of gadgets, websites and smartphone apps in her self-tracking efforts. For her wall of laminate samples she used moodjam.com, a site that enables people to track their moods by visualizing each emotion as a different color. As she spent several days installing her exhibit, she charted her moods making the wall, titled "Moodjam," a document of its own creation.

Frick's installation is a self-portrait of sorts, one rendered in three dimensions and realized conceptually.

"Your behavior is more indicative of who you are than what you say you are," she says.

That Frick would tap into technology for creative inspiration is not surprising, given her background.

Raised in Los Angeles, Frick at first studied engineering and business, eventually getting a master's in business administration. For more than 20 years she held top positions in the high-tech field for such companies as Compaq, Hewlett-Packard and Vignette. It meant having a front-row seat to the development of technologies we now take for granted.

After leaving the high-tech business in 2004, Frick went to art school. She now divides her time between her South Austin home and an apartment/studio in Brooklyn.

"I'm considered by the art community an emerging artist just because I finished art school a few years ago," she says with just a touch of irony.

Later this month, Frick will have her second gallery show in Los Angeles.

Like she did when in the tech field, Frick is still looking ahead, parsing out ways personal metrics can be visually expressed in a new kind of artistic, pattern-based language.

"I think it's helpful, even if it is kind of compulsive," Frick says of all the personal data-collecting.

Whether it's ultimately compulsive or comforting, Frick's self-tracking makes for visually arresting art.