Exhibitions

Festival of Quilts 2013
National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham, England
8 – 11 August 2013

You will find a general review of this Show by Sam in the following pages but two exhibitions in particular caught my eye. These two were next to each other, which seemed fitting as there was a connection between them in the links forged by figures and themes of protection.

Through Our Hands
Curated by Annabel Rainbow and Laura Kemshall

Through Our Hands is not just one exhibition but a whole series designed to promote artistic quilt-making and to show, through exhibitions at both mainstream and textile galleries, what a thriving art form it is. The chosen exhibitors and participants in the Through our Hands exhibitions are specially selected and include many top-flight international artists. This version certainly proved a big draw at the Festival of Quilts in spite of their somewhat secluded location.

The quilts shown were selected by Annabel and Laura and provided a good flavour of the aims of the group but it was the work of the curators that was the main talking point here.

In her ‘Words for Life’ series Annabel’s amazing quilts tell the stories of women. ‘Hello Dear, What did you do Today?’, a question asked by many a spouse on returning home from work provokes a response which is shown in the quilt. The figure is used to hold text that gets the message across about the lot of women worldwide, covering everything from the loneliness of today’s elderly to the abuse of immigrants.

All put across with the lightest of touches but managing to ram home the message. And I loved the slippers.
'On The Shelf', tells a heartbreaking story of loss, with which many of us can identify. Ageing, the crisis and loss of confidence following a man’s departure with a younger woman are depicted here and the words on the body are from the song ‘Keep Young and Beautiful (if you want to be loved)’.

But all is not lost and that is the other strong message from these artworks. Desertion brings devastation but freedom can follow in its wake. The lot of those deprived in life can be changed if we all get off our backsides and do something. The message is everything in these quilts and to dwell too long on the construction seems to me to dilute that, so I will just say that the workmanship is exquisite. The proliferation of red dots proves that I am not the only one lost in admiration.

Anyone else but Laura Kemshall would struggle when sharing wall-space with these powerful pieces but Laura is no stranger to strength and message and the two artists complemented each other in the best way.

Laura’s work has often featured repeated symbols of birds, hedges, keys and hands and these come together in the works on show to provide a depiction of protection, love and responsibility. Possibly this link reflects, and is reinforced by, motherhood. The recent acquisition of a large scale digital printer has enabled her to make full use of her sketchbooks, drawing and paintings and I can’t think of anyone better placed to convince the doubters that this method of image transfer is both valid and liberating.

Strong imagery was used here; the dead bird, cupped lovingly in the hands that have lost their protective power.
The stitching was sensitive and contrived to give the piece a fine-art flavour that both embraced its textile roots and lifted it above the conception, sometimes exhibited by the art buying public, of the ‘cosy’ nature of quilting.

It was great to see Sandra Meech, another member of Through Our Hands, in this exhibition. This detail from her Arctic Expression’ series (below) bears out her statement that transferring images is not sufficient in itself but requires further work on the overall design in the form of stitch, mark making and colour balance to achieve a strong result. Good to see digital imagery portrayed so intelligently, as achieved by these last two makers.

This was a wonderful exhibit – centre stage next time, please.

Maggie Grey

Evidence of Bodies
Susan Chapman and Terrie Hitchcock

Susan Chapman and Terrie Hitchcock had an impressive exhibition in 2008 called ‘Bodies of Evidence’. This is the follow-up with words neatly turned around to reflect a new approach which looks at the evidence of a human presence all around us.

Working on this theme, both artists decided to depict this presence through mark-making and, to show this to its best effect, the use of bold colours was banned and a striking theme emerged from a limited palette.
Susan’s work is in the abstract. Print-making, drawing and stitch combine to form the marks and these are extended by the evolution of the marks into the written word. This conveys the deep human need for communication.

I love ‘The Guardian’, shown right, a looming yet protective presence. ‘The Male Line’ (below) is an interesting study in genetics.

Terrie draws on the deep human need for family; the presence of family and the bonds that remain so deep, even when the physical presence is elsewhere. Her marks on muslin and tissue combine with stitch to form figures. This row of red dots demonstrates the effectiveness of the technique.
This exhibition included a great chance for visitors to join in and have their input shown on the gallery wall.

Susan and Terrie had cut shapes of figures as negative images and were encouraging everyone to have a go at mark making on a large sheet of paper or fabric which slipped behind the shapes to provide fascinating images (see right).

Lovely to have this idea; the backing fabrics were replaced every day with the previous day’s collections of ‘public marks’.

Maggie Grey

The Festival of Quilts, NEC Birmingham, August 8-11, General Review

There was plenty to see at the FOQ this year, from both Gallery Exhibitions and Competition quilts alike.

In the Competition, once again there was a huge selection of traditional, contemporary, group and miniature quilts. Some showed breathtaking attention to detail, some fantastic design, there were those constructed with painstaking piecing, while others showed a great sense of humour. So everyone would be able to find something that caught their eye.

Sarah O’Hara’s entry into the Quilters’ Guild’s ‘Transported’ Challenge (sponsored by Bernina) was ‘Suspension Cables’, inspired by suspension bridges, particularly the Seri Wawasan bridge in Malaysia. Not the subject matter you might gravitate towards but this inspiration produced a beautiful quilt.
Lesley Brankin’s ‘Horizons II’ was striking in its simplicity but, with a clever use of colour, some simple stitching enhanced the whole piece.

Stephanie Redfern’s pieces ‘Beach Thoughts’ and ‘Flowerpecker’ stood out in the Art and Contemporary Quilt categories.
Stephanie also had a stand at the show and many of her works were on display. These were a real show highlight, showing a variety of her works using collages of papers and fabrics. You can get a taste of Stephanie’s techniques in her recent articles for WOW in the September 2012 and March 2013 issues, which are well worth revisiting.

Jill Exell’s ‘Flight’ combined many techniques, printing, appliqué, computer manipulated pictures and the inclusion of text (always a favourite), and won the Art Quilts category. Using inspiration from King Lear ‘Winter’s not gone yet if wild geese fly that way’ (Act 2 Scene 4), it used the text, a limited colour palette and simple design for maximum effect.
Another prize winner was Stephanie Crawford with her Pictorial Quilt-winning ‘Chinese Journey in Three Parts’. Marion Robertson’s ‘River Nairns Pebbles’ were fabulous. Felted, stuffed with wadding and hand stitched, these looked just like the real thing, below, right.

A ‘hybrid-pixelated’ quilt by Kirsty Daum, (left) entitled ‘The Tenth’ and depicting David Tennant (The Tenth Doctor Who) brought a smile to many of the people who passed by. A huge piece, which took ‘51 methodical, yet blissful hours’ to complete was a feat of endurance and a labour of love.

There was enough in the Competition to keep the visitors going, but there were also some fantastic exhibitions on show this year. ‘Beneath the Southern Sky’, curated by Brenda Gael Smith explored 30 works using the title theme as inspiration. The majority of works coming from Australia reflect the view from the southern hemisphere. The works shown below, are (left to right) ‘Dry Valley’ by Dianne Firth, ‘Staircase to the Moon’ by Stephanie Knudsen, ‘White Cockatoo’ by Julie Haddrick, ‘Waiting at Kaiteriteri’ by Cat Larrea, ‘A Hundred Tales’ by Mel Forrest.
Dan and Annette Morgan: ‘Sticks and Stone’s' was based on Thetford Forest, where the artists live. There were some striking quilts using a variety of printing techniques and incorporating image transfers onto fabric. The accompanying book by Annette Morgan will be reviewed in the December issue.

‘Thetford Priory 2’ (left) included image transfers using t-shirt transfer paper, machine quilting and paint to highlight texture.

‘Thetford Forest 2’ (right) used similar techniques with screen printing on the middle section.

SAQA: ‘Metaphors on Ageing’ produced a range of styles and approaches. Those standing out included a heavily stitched piece by Lea McComas ‘Sweet Song from an Old Fiddle’ (right).

Cynthia St Charles’s ‘Evening Walk II’ incorporated printing, screenprints of the artist's grandmother's handwriting (a particularly poignant technique used to create the twinkling stars) (left). Elaine M Quehl's ‘End of Days’ contemplated the changing colours which mark the end of a season as a metaphor for life (above).

I thought it was a fantastic show this year, bustling with visitors and many interesting artists to see and admire. The shopping opportunities were as good as ever, and I stocked up my cupboard for the coming year (or until the Knitting and Stitching Show at least).

Sam Packer