

**Introductory speech for opening of exhibition: 'VOICES' –  
*expressive approaches to quilting by the Quilt Art Group.***

Saturday 14 January – Sunday 26 February 2012

Devon Guild of Craftsmen, Riverside Mill, Bovey Tracey, Devon TQ13 9AF

*Guest speaker at launch event*, 13 January 2012 - Janet Haigh (Chair, Textile Forum South West):

When I was first approached by the Devon Guild to introduce this exhibition, I could not imagine why I had been asked! But when I checked my diary for today's date I felt a little more adequate for the task – I have spent today teaching a Crazy Patchwork Workshop at my new textile venue, Heart Space Studios in Bristol.

Patchwork Quilts, like Japanese Kimono, are for me the epitome of textile construction – they are essentially useful art objects.

When looking at the catalogue for VOICES and the Quilt Art Group's website, I realized that I had a lot in common with many of the makers, but what first impressed me about the group is that this international organization has managed to keep successfully connecting and exhibiting together for nearly 30 years – this is no small achievement.

At present the group members live and work separately across several European countries and America. What they all share is a common language of quilted textiles.

It is now common practice for artists to use whatever materials they feel appropriate to express their ideas. Indeed any art establishment abreast of the times and at ease with itself takes the use of mixing media and genre for granted.

Without naming any of the usual suspects, the fact is that quilts and large - scale fabric installations are now widely accepted as a vehicle to relay an artist's inner vision.

But this was not the case in 1985 when the Quilt Art group formed and stated that its intention was to '**deliberately make quilts as an expression of art...and to extend the boundaries of quilting as an artistic medium and achieve wider recognition of the quilt as an art form**'. this surely demonstrates that it was a pioneer in bringing about the changes we take for granted today.

By using an extended range of techniques, materials and tools associated with traditional quilt making the group aimed '**to create non-functional quilts to be displayed for their visual aesthetic; coupling integrity of expression and quality of craftsmanship.**'

The work here is as much a statement about craftsmanship as it is about personal expression. It visually and sensually demonstrates many successful examples of that wonderful moment of transition when putting different materials and techniques together, the disparate things become whole.

These fabrics have attained their integrity by fusing together a variety of several textile “languages”. Here we see evidence of the traditional craft skills juxtaposed with today’s technologies. The fluency with which different techniques are used to make one whole piece enables these works to be studied long enough to be “read”. The rich and varied surface sustains the viewers’ interest so that slowly more subtle meanings are revealed.

Reading the group members’ personal statements it becomes obvious that choosing textiles for a means of expression is not happenstance

Mirjam Pet-Jacobs writes 'Maybe because they are so commonplace, textiles have the enormous power to both evoke recognition and to tell stories' and several of the artists talk about “storytelling”

Elizabeth Brimilow states

'Fibre has been grown, spun, woven, dyed and stitched for thousands of years. I stitch and manipulate cloth, which is used for its tactile quality, its intimacy and its substance. Through my hands I have a story to tell and this connects me to other times, places and cultures.'

The meaning contained within the making is as important as the choice of the right tool for the right job, or put it another way; being in command of a range of technical ability gives the maker infinite choice to find the telling means of expression for a particular message. To develop a level of craft practice so that the actual means of production stops being the first, and sometimes the only thing to notice, takes much time; we now talk of 10,000 hours to attain fluency in any skill.

I stitch by hand and I am aware that time must be spent in a state of concentrated repetitive making to achieve fluency. It isn’t so much the precision of stitching, it is rather the rhythm that has to be established to enable a maker to sustain a large piece of work over a long period of time. Whether making by hand or machine an almost meditative state of mind needs to be attained to complete most large -scale work.

To quote Richard Sennett, in his book *The Craftsman* 'Built into the contractions of the human heart the skilled craftsman has extended rhythm to the hand and the eye.'

And as Inge Heuber says 'you understand best what is created by your own brain and heart. ' and she also writes of “waiting for a special rhythm “ to start to work

This exhibition of quilts is varied in its subject matter, and outcomes. Some works are abstract expressions of emotions, some are about the world surrounding the maker, some overtly political and some just plain personal , and sometimes they just appear to have been made for the pure joy of colour and tactility.

But by and large they have been produced with enough thought, innovation, knowledge and craftsmanship, to achieve a piece of work worthy of contemplation beyond the quality of its making - which is surely what differentiates art from craft ?

Janet Haigh 2012