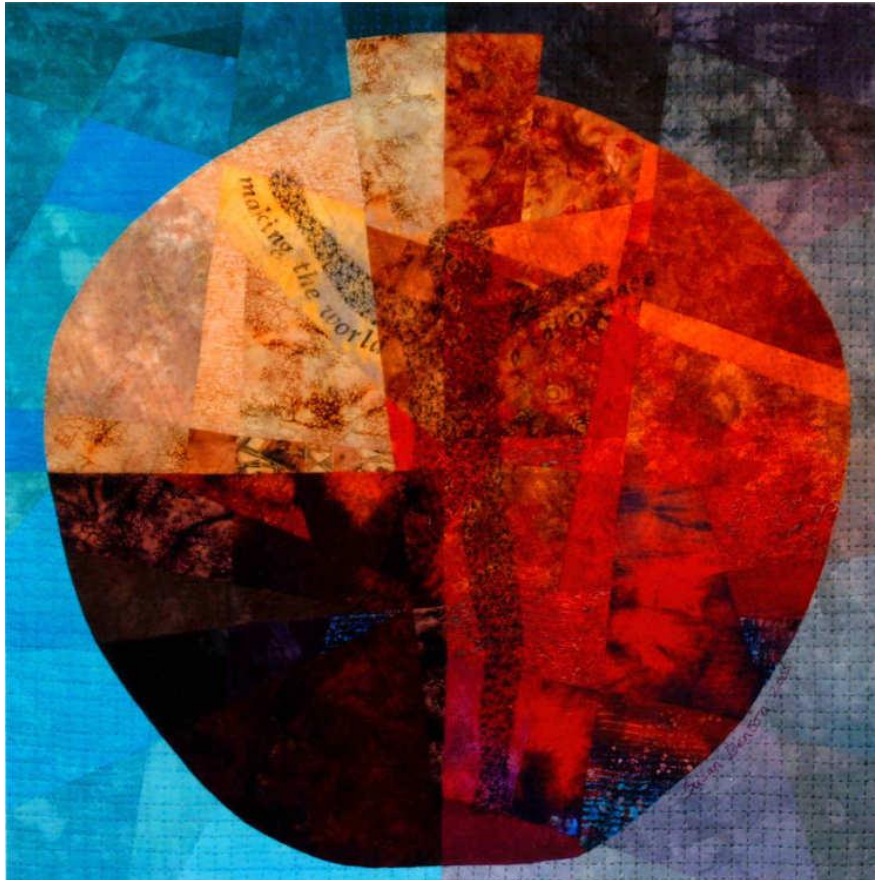


THE MORNING CALL

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Quilt or art? Exhibit blurs line with innovative works



Making the World a Safer Place, a quilt by Susan Denton, on display in Quilt Art: International Expressions Sept. 10-Dec. 31 at the Michener Museum in Doylestown. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

By Steve Siegel, Special to The Morning Call
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Who knew the art of quilting could be such delicious fun?

[Welsh](#) quilt artist Bethan Ash's "Cutting the Carbs — Shedding the Pounds," on display at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, serves up a colorful fabric feast. Sprinkled with the names of mouth-watering, calorie-laden foods from pizza to pasta, it's a generous helping of bold shapes, bright

colors and dizzying patterns.

Ash's creation is one of 40 nontraditional quilts on display in "Quilt Art: International Expressions." The quilts were created by members of Quilt Art, Europe's leading advocacy group for extending the boundaries of the quilt as an art form, which was founded in [Britain](#) in 1985. The exhibition brings together 24 contemporary quilt artists nine countries, including the U.K., Belgium, [Ireland](#), [Germany](#), [The Netherlands](#), Denmark, Norway, [Hungary](#) and the United States.

Cutting carbs might be an apt way to describe a collection of quilts that, created solely as works of art, free themselves from the starchy bulk and strict geometry of their more-functional relatives. Ash's quilt is a mere 1/8 -inch thick, German artist Inga Hueber's "Nine-Patch Variation" is an endless loop of paper-thin transparent cotton organza, and "Echoes from a Linen Manufactory" by Allie Kay of Ireland is not even cloth, but layered clear plastic stitched with metallic thread.

Where does quilting stop and fabric-art begin? "By definition a quilt has three layers: a top, batting in the middle, and a backing," says Barbara Harrison of Doylestown, a quilting authority and the main show sponsor.

"What you do with the top and what you do with the back is up to you." Nearly every piece in the exhibit, with perhaps one or two exceptions, qualify as true quilts — although few would wish to spend a cold winter's night under Kay's featherweight creation.

At least one distinction between traditional quilts and art quilts is that while the former are often said to tell a story, the latter often make a statement. Inevitably, Quilt Art members bring elements of their home culture, geography and design traditions into their work. Many of the pieces are more personal. In her artist's statement, Ash says her quilt, an elaborately pleated affair using machine quilting, hand-stitching and digital-transfer text, was inspired by her quest to lose weight as well as her concern for society's obsession with food.

"Making the World a Safer Place," a triptych by British artist Susan Denton, uses the colors of oil, terracotta and turquoise — a combination often seen on mosques — to represent the invasion of Iraq in the form of looted, ancient vases. "Aurora," a quilt shimmering with undulating waves of purple, rose and sea-green, reflects the windblown skies and bright landscapes of Dirjje van der Horst-Beetsma's Netherlands home.

These quilts abound with techniques both traditional and innovative, such as the painting, screen-printing, dyeing and rusting processes that went into Jette Clover's "Marks the Spot III," a set of three quilts that look like ancient parchment scrolls. Indeed, there is some archaeology in her work. She rusted her fabric with nails she found during the rebuilding of her hurricane-ravaged 18th-century wooden house in Florida. Britain's rich tradition of embroidery is highlighted in Val Jackson's "A Good Laundry Maid Requires Careful Training," a delightful set of quilts in the shapes of children's blouses, each lovingly covered with miniature lines of finely embroidered script.

While Eszter Bornemisza's "Vanished Town" relies on the texture of course hemp and heavy, earthen-colored cotton to create what looks like a three-dimensional aerial photograph of the ruins of an ancient town in her Hungary homeland, others, like Dominie Nash, use the subtle texture of stitching as a painter uses brushstrokes.

Nash, a full-time fabric artist with a studio in [Washington, D.C.](#), is currently the only member of Quilt Art from the United States. "I joined them in 2002, having been impressed by the quality and originality of art quilts coming out of Britain and continental Europe," she says.

Nash's quilts look more like abstract paintings than textured fabric. A painter might start with a blank canvas; Nash starts with uncolored white or black fabric, which she dyes herself. Her main technique for creating quilts such as her "Stills from a Life — #23 and #24" is collage, using overlapping pieces of fabric sewn on each other. "I also do a lot of what's called 'surface designs' in my work, which, in addition to dyeing, consists of printing, screen printing and discharge."

Discharge, Nash explains, is a technique where color is removed from a fabric by bleaching or by some special chemical. "I used that technique for #24, in which I applied a chemical paste over a brown and gold background. When I ironed the fabric, the color came out wherever the paste was. It gives you a mottled effect with uneven edges," she says.

For Nash, like many art quilters, the inner layer is often optional. "In a traditional quilt the lining is mainly a functional thing, used for insulation. Many art quilters skip the inner layer, but some choose to keep it for dimensionality and the texture it gives when you stitch on it. People now are feeling freer to break the rules," she says.

It has taken time for art quilts to become accepted as a medium suitable for exhibition, Nash says. In fact, at the time Quilt Art was founded, few people regarded quilts of any kind as works of art. For many in the United States, the architectural style of Amish quilting, with its large geometric medallions and heavily quilted elaborate designs such as feathered scrolls and hearts, still defines what a quilt should be.

"We all have been inspired by the beauty and colors of Amish quilts," says Nash. "But what I do is something else. When I tell people I make quilts, they have a very different picture of what I do. Nothing I do is that useful."

Britain, in fact, has a longer history of quilting than the Amish, who relied more on weaving techniques before coming to the United States from Germany and Switzerland. They learned much of their quilting skills from their non-Amish neighbors, many who were from the United Kingdom.

"Welsh quilting predates the Amish by over 100 years," Harrison says. "But it's still all about the fabric. It's a cradle-to-grave art, where all kinds of memories are connected by textiles. And the art basically entails what everyone learned in kindergarten: tearing, stamping, crayoning, layering, piercing. Traditional quilters like myself have been doing art quilts for years, the only difference is we didn't know it."

Steve Siegel is a freelance writer.