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TRANSFORMATIONS  
ANTHROPOLOGY, ART AND THE QUILT

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## Abstract

Drawing on both anthropological and quilt literature, this thesis shows the many different ways that made objects are thought about by different groups of people. Awareness of these differences permits a new perspective of 'Western' art and object making. This awareness allows a space in which to consider the importance of the process of making.

Quiltmaking provides an interesting case study. This thesis therefore describes the field of quiltmaking activity that exists in New Zealand at the present time. This genre, as it is practised today, had its beginnings in the revival that began in this country during the 1970's. This study will show that the main impetus of this revival did not draw on known traditions in New Zealand, but rather on a largely imported tradition that had developed in the United States of America.

Ideas about the status of quilts as art objects, comes from a mixture of influences. The tradition of quiltmaking in the United States was already a strong one and had been through a number of revivals. Aspects of this traditional culture influenced quiltmakers in New Zealand. Simultaneously, there was an equally strong sense of the quilt as an art object in New Zealand. However, art entrepreneurs in the United States certainly were part of the transformation of the quilt into an art object in that country. Their strategies of discourse and display drew on contemporary artworld ideologies and ultimately this valuation affected which quilts could be seen as 'art' in New Zealand.

Through the use of participant observation, interviews and a questionnaire, the content of this study will show the many different ways that New Zealand quiltmakers work, their aims and goals for the quilts they make, and the ways these quilts are perceived by other quilters and the wider public. Some areas that have resulted in conflict and misunderstandings are discussed. As in any such group, conflicts and misunderstandings arise from the existence of different ways of valuing aspects of cultural activities.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, Art, Gell, New Zealand, Quiltmaking.

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## GLOSSARY

### “Baltimore”

Among some of the most admired appliqué quilts are those known as Baltimore style. These feature large numbers of often very complex appliquéd blocks, often framed by an equally complex appliquéd border. The whole top is then usually densely cross-hatched with quilting lines to throw the motifs into relief. These, along with other appliqué style quilts were often made as ‘best’ quilts. As such, they were not intended for everyday use but rather for display, for special occasions such as a wedding (Baltimore bride quilts) and the recording of family history and other events (Baltimore album quilts).

Historically, the style originated in the United States city of Baltimore, a busy entrepôt to North America. The availability of a wide range of cloth, ribbons and trims provided the makers with the means to produce these highly embellished quilts. Baltimore style quilts have been among the most highly valued by collectors with examples selling between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand US dollars (Peterson 2003: 486).

A Baltimore style quilt is illustrated between pages 140 and 141, Plate 24.

**Batting** – (or wadding) the middle layer of the quilt - usually cotton or wool. For the last forty years synthetic batting such as Pellon or Dacron has also been available.

**Pākehā** – the Maori term for foreigner

**Pataka** – within Maori usage this is an elevated storehouse, usually for food. The use of the word with a capital P in this thesis refers to Pataka – The Porirua Arts Museum in Wellington.

**Tapa** – Pacific Islands cloth made from beaten bark

**Top** – quilt top – this refers to the top layer or ‘front’ of the quilt. It may be a single piece of fabric, made up in a pieced pattern or have appliqué elements or patterns.

**Wagga** – a utilitarian quilt generally made from whatever cloth was available – often pieces of blanket and/or worn clothing pieced together then backed with similar items.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Our earliest memories and associations of comfort include the warmth, feel and smell of fabric. Cloth has the most sensual associations with the human body. We speak of 'hair like silk', of skin 'as soft as velvet', 'the fabric of society', 'common threads running through our lives', of the 'tapestry of life'. On the quilt the sensual nature of fabric is explored to its fullest in a radiant jumble of colour and texture.

Ainslie Yardley 1994

The April 2005 issue of *New Zealand Quilter*, a Wellington produced magazine for the country's quiltmakers, reported on the 11<sup>th</sup> Biennial Quilt Symposium that had been held in January of that year. Over one thousand delegates attended the symposium for lectures and workshops involving sixty-two tutors from New Zealand and from overseas. Possibly double, or more than that number of attendees, came to the city over the five days of the symposium to take advantage of, and see, the on-site merchants' mall and the two major symposium exhibitions. Another fifteen exhibitions of quilts featured in major galleries in Auckland and at the city museum. The same magazine also featured the installation of my own commissioned work for the Waikato Museum of Art and History, and the award winning quilts from the late 2004 National Quilters' Association exhibition, *Quilts Aotearoa*.

This level of participation indicates a dynamic area of textile production. Historically, in New Zealand, the making of such items as quilts, and other functional and decorative creations, drew on traditions and knowledge from the makers' countries of origin. Today, making quilts has become an important expression of creativity for many individuals, with some of the production being seen in art galleries and museums. However, the resurgence of this activity in New Zealand over the last forty years largely has its origins in the revival of quilting in North America.

The purpose of the research undertaken for this thesis was to write an ethnographic study which focused on the work of a number of New Zealand quiltmakers. Some of the individuals who shared their insights have been involved for the past few decades, while others have taken up the activity more recently. While only a small number, they were chosen partly because of accessibility and mainly because they can be seen to be representative of a large number of the many who make up the quiltmaking population of New Zealand. They represent some of the many different areas of interest within this field and also the way different practitioners work with different goals and a different emphasis in their practice.

In this thesis these informants are located not only within the environments of their private, local and national quiltmaking activities, but also within wider art making worlds. Events that occurred in North America, in both the quilting world and the art world, impacted directly on the way some quilts eventually came to be seen as 'art'. These transformations and the strategies involved in carrying them out will form an important part of the theoretical discussion in this thesis.

Relevant literature in both anthropology and art history has been consulted. The main body of the thesis is based on information gathered from in-depth interviews with a number of quiltmakers, by participant observation at quilt related events, and from a small study by questionnaire, of local guild members.

In analysing the information which has been gathered I have sought to understand what making a quilt means to the makers, how they value what they do, how it is perceived and valued by the recipients, and in turn, how these different values can often result in conflict that mirrors wider discussions about the world of art and object making.

### **Quiltmaking in New Zealand**

The activity of quilt making in New Zealand involves hundreds of women and a smaller number of men. Quiltmaking encompasses a broad range of practitioners and includes those whose main aim is to make quilts for their own pleasure or to make a quilt for a friend or relative. The works may be either simple or elaborate pieces in terms of design or the technical skills required to make them. Quiltmaking may also serve as the chosen medium of an artist who produces work purely as a means of creative expression. Others operate within and between these two groups.

Supporting these individuals is a whole industry dedicated to supplying materials, machines and tools. There are a number of organisations established to provide networks and to organise workshops, symposia and exhibitions. These organisations are often linked internationally, as are the many quiltmakers who use their computers for both designing and/or communicating with other quilters both in New Zealand and worldwide.

### **From The Beginning**

Historically, in the Western world, goods produced within the domestic sphere came to be categorised as craft production. Confusion about the understanding of particular words related to drama, as well as to object making, dates from ancient Athens and the writings of Plato (427-347BCE). Activities such as tragedy (drama), sculpture, painting, pottery and architecture were discussed as forms of *technē* or skilled craft (Freeland 2001:31) and as such were considered to involve a 'lower' form of knowledge. As historian and social scientist Pamela Smith notes in her study of the role of the artisan in the development of scientific knowledge:

A particularly persistent feature of Western culture has been a division between those who work with their minds – scholars – and those who work with their hands – artisans. Throughout most of Western history, these two groups have been separated by a social and intellectual chasm (Smith 2004:7).

Within a history that is deeply entangled in philosophical and social ideas of gender and class, the ideas of 'craft' and 'art' became separated to provide a means of maintaining particular power relations and ideas of

status (Summers 2003:63; Parker and Pollock 1981:Ch. 2; Parker 1984). This hierarchy which was reinforced during the Renaissance has seen quilting, together with a number of other areas of object production, classed as a “craft” activity. However, both the activity and the resulting productions are being in many instances, classified as ‘art’.

Much of this transformation involves work that has been produced in areas that were formerly categorised as being ‘other’ than the ‘fine arts’, that is, that which was constructed as outside Western ‘high’ art institutional history. The re-definition is both driven by, and subject to, many forces, resulting in confusion, contestation, claim and counterclaim. Likewise, the practitioners involved, in this case the quiltmakers themselves, occupy what often appear to be ambiguous and for some, perplexing categories of identity in regard to this activity. This ambiguity and perplexity are mirrored in the wider world of object production. They also provide some of the questions that I have sought to explore during my research.

### **The 1970’s Re-emergence of the Quilt in New Zealand and the Beginnings of a Thesis.**

Unlike our fellow quilters in the US, steeped in the traditions of their foremothers, New Zealand quiltmakers received a number of messages at the very beginning of their quilting careers. They learned about the traditional patterns, but were also very aware of ‘the quilt as art’. One of our best known artists, Malcolm Harrison<sup>1</sup> was using the quilt as his preferred medium and was producing large, impressive works that were exhibited in commercial and public galleries. This resulted in Malcolm receiving commissions for quite a number of works to be displayed in corporate and public buildings.

Around this time, that is by the late 1970’s/early 1980’s, one other major event had occurred that is seen to have moved this formerly domestic item

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Harrison was recently the recipient of a New Zealand Art Laureate Award. This award is a one off payment of \$60,000 in recognition of the artist’s contribution to New Zealand Art. It also allows for the artist to work full time at their art without the concern of earning a living as well.

into the world of fine art. In 1971 two New York art lovers, Jonathan Holstein and Gail Van der Hoof, exhibited a collection of Amish quilts in the Whitney Art Museum, a major New York public exhibition space. The emphasis in this exhibition was on how the quilts being shown resembled, to a remarkable degree, some of the best abstract and colour field painting of the time.

By 1971 abstractionism and minimalism were widely accepted art movements and art was well into the era of conceptualism and also the use of a wide variety of media. The exhibition of Amish quilts was a huge success. It resulted in a number of publications and travelled to other venues in the United States, Japan and Europe. I will return to the events surrounding what I will call the 'Whitney', but I will also discuss another development which sparked my interest in looking at this field from an anthropological point of view.

I am a quiltmaker and have been all through the recent decades. Throughout these years I was always aware that there is also a tradition of African-American quilt production. During the late 1990's this came to greater prominence in the wider international world of quiltmaking with the 'discovery' of a body of work made by the small and very poor African-American community of Gee's Bend in Alabama. The residents of Gee's Bend are the descendants of the African slaves who worked on a local cotton plantation. The quilts are mostly not perfectly constructed pieces, but rather, often old and stained bedcovers that were made as a necessity, and often from worn pieces of clothing. An exhibition of these quilts has been travelling throughout the United States since 2003. Two substantial publications have resulted from their acquisition by a collector and the subsequent exhibition of these works.

Apart from enjoying the first of these books (Arnett and Arnett 2002) for their content and inspiration, several other matters interested me. How is it that some quilts come to be seen as *art* while others no less beautiful or not so beautiful, clever or not so clever, interesting or not particularly

interesting aesthetically or technically, are *not* also seen as art? In addition, I was interested to know how those involved in these processes were benefiting from this transformation of what had been everyday utilitarian objects, to objects of fine art being displayed on the walls of art museums.

The Gee's Bend quilts were 'discovered' and 'saved' by a collector of African and African American art. William Arnett was encouraged by a colleague to explore the African American quilting tradition. A photograph of a particular quilt led him, in the search for its maker, to the community of Gee's Bend where he documented over 700 quilts. The story of the transformation of their status as bed covers for warmth in impoverished rural homes and considered of little monetary value, to artworks hung on white museum walls and of 'priceless' (monetary) value, has some similar elements to that of the story of Holstein's and van der Hoof's collection of Amish quilts.

Issues surrounding the commodification and transformation of material objects in new contexts have been the focus of a number of writers within the field of anthropology and related disciplines. From 1973 onwards, Fred Myers has written extensively on the history of the 'elevation' of Aboriginal paintings to fine art status in the galleries of Sydney and New York. This elevation saw an imposition of Western fine art values and practice and the creation of 'individual artists' upon an area of creative production that had previously been grounded in the community, in which all members could participate and where such production was integral to their social and spiritual lives. A more detailed discussion of these case histories and related anthropological writing will be undertaken in chapter four.

Sociologist Karin Peterson (2003) has written about the transformation and commodification of the Amish quilts in relation to the Whitney exhibition and its curators. Unlike the case noted above, the individual artists in this case remained unacknowledged. Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes also tells another side of the story of the quilts of Gee's



Bend and their makers. Arun Appadurai 1990; James Clifford 1988; Alfred Gell 1998; Igor Kopytoff 1990; George Marcus 1995 (along with Fred Myers); Brian Spooner 1990; among others, have all examined related issues regarding the making, movement, commodification, transformation and reception of objects within various social milieu.

The last few decades of the twentieth century saw an increase in interest by a number of anthropologists, in ideas about art in general. Initially this sprung from their involvement with writing about art-making practices in cross cultural contexts. This interest widened as the entangled nature of this area of anthropological study gradually became more apparent. A discussion of the writing that has resulted from these investigations will be undertaken in chapter three.

The writers cited above all explore various aspects of the questions that are at the heart of some of the issues I have identified in the area of my own research. Additionally, the questions about art can also be seen to have perplexed many viewers of art throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, movements such as 'pop' art, 'op' art, minimalism and conceptual art have led to philosophical questions about the whole idea of art, as well as ideas of 'philosophy as art' or 'art as philosophy'.

I do not intend to attempt to answer the question 'what is art?', but rather to examine the ways ideas of 'art', 'non-art', and 'craft' are implicated in the discourse surrounding the making and reception of quilts in New Zealand and the way this discourse affects and is added to by the makers of quilts. The use of examples and academic writing that focusses on events in the United States is essential to this study. Many of the issues are similar, and, as noted before, New Zealand quiltmakers have been heavily influenced by what has transpired in this field in the United States. In addition, a discussion of events in the art scenes of both New York during the 1960's, and in New Zealand, will be included. As noted above,

these can be seen to have impacted directly on the way various objects may or may not be considered art.

In the meantime, many New Zealand quiltmakers have welcomed this transformation of the quilt and its ability to be viewed as an object of fine art. However, this transformation for local quilters is not always unproblematic. There is often consternation and confusion and a conflict of values when traditional and more innovative work is exhibited and/or judged side by side. Quilts in New Zealand cannot be bought for a pittance as occurred in the two North American cases discussed above. Instead the prices reflect the high cost of materials and labour, and the skills and talents of the makers who value the various elements that go into making a quilt. These issues have featured in discussions with some of the participants involved in this study and will be discussed together with other ethnographic data in chapters five and six.

### **Terminology [also see glossary]**

For the purposes of this thesis and to avoid confusion of meaning, the word *material* is used in a general sense. Since it can also mean *cloth* and cloth is what is used in quilt making, this will be referred to as *fabric*, or more specifically by the particular type of fabric such as cotton, linen, wool, silk. The words *art* and *craft* may also be read as ambiguous and unfixed categories. It is this ambiguity that is at the heart of much discussion around goods being produced or already existing in the *art* and *craft* worlds. Both these words are contested and open to interpretation by both practitioners and commentators. Both terms are also unstable over different populations and over time. Similarly, ideas around the use of the word 'artefact' have also changed. It has been defined as "an object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest" (Oxford Dictionary of English 2003:88) and so the word is often used to describe those items produced either in ancient times and/or by groups other than European in more recent times. Many of these items have now been reclassified by those in the 'art' and museum worlds as *art* illustrating yet another example of the transformation of material objects.

The terms *art* and *craft* will be used as they are used in quotations or as they are most commonly used in various applications by others. These applications are based on constructed meanings which are also often arbitrary. 'Art' is as much a subjective notion in the quilt making and quilt viewing world as in other areas such as painting or photography. For some, the faithfully realistic landscape or portrait is the only genre that represents true 'art'. For others art is something that may be almost apparently nothing – an empty canvas, an intermittent sound or image on a video screen, or a work that dissolves or decays as you watch it, or it even may not exist as other than an idea.

As noted, a number of events have heightened the discussion of quilts as art. One of the themes that will run through my thesis will be that the two, *art* and *craft*, are not bounded entities, but that along with 'non art' and design, simply form parts of the whole that is the field of objects produced by humans for their use, their livelihood, and/or creative and viewing pleasure and fulfillment, or, to enhance their spiritual being.

### **Methodology**

When planning this research I intended conducting in-depth interviews with a number of quiltmakers throughout the country. In reality, ten in-depth interviews from a range of makers produced a wealth of data that will provide material for further study. This process worked particularly well. Some interviewees were interviewed in their homes or studios. A number, along with quiltmaker/owner Anne Scott, were interviewed at her office and gallery in Wellington. All the participants in these interviews have elected to use their own names. A sample of the types of questions that were explored during these taped interviews is provided in Appendix I.

I had also planned to conduct one or two focus groups among local quilt guild members. However, in the end because of timing, it seemed that a number of individual questionnaires would be a better option. A local guild committee member offered to distribute these and the members returned

them to me by post. Twenty questionnaires were distributed and returned, all providing useful further data. A number of these replies were anonymous and have been allocated a pseudonym. A copy of this questionnaire is provided in Appendix II.

### **Choosing the participants**

The focus of my research is the large group of mainly women who make quilts in New Zealand. This group comprises those who engage in their work on a full time basis, but a majority who spend varying amounts of time in quilting activities that are fitted between other commitments such as work and family. It will be seen that while many make quilts as an enjoyable pastime that also requires creative input, some use the medium more as a means of creative and artistic expression.

I have sought to research a range of practitioners that might represent the breadth and depth of quiltmaking activity in New Zealand. Rather than focussing on their work as such, which may be seen as more within the discipline of art history, I have sought to identify and understand some of the wider issues underlying debates within this area of material production. In addition I have sought to place these debates and issues within the wider world of material production, its recent history, its various players, audiences and other recipients.

There may appear to be many some gaps in this discussion in terms of the aim of providing a picture of quiltmaking activity in the whole of New Zealand. I have not sought to research the retailing outlets that provide for the quilters' needs. In relation to exhibitions I have focussed primarily on the way these are experienced by the quiltmakers. Discussions with gallery and museum staff and with viewers at exhibitions of quilts will provide a further avenue of research for the future. I have also not attempted to research the extent of quiltmaking by Pacific Island women in this country, although it can be seen that processes at work in that area of production are entangled with some of the issues and ideas that I will discuss.

Pacific Island quiltmakers do connect with other groups in New Zealand at various times. A well known tutor of tivaevae, Mary Ama, was one of the tutors included in the teaching faculty at the Auckland symposium in January 2005. One of the evening activities at this symposium was a visit to the cooperative that Ama is involved with. This included viewings of appliquéd tops, sales of tops and related items, and an evening of Pacific Island food and entertainment. Pacific Island quilts, both contemporary and historical, are often featured in *New Zealand Quilter* and were a feature of the earlier magazine *Pacific Quilts* and its predecessor *Quiltalk*.

I have also not researched quiltmakers who live in the South Island, or, those in Auckland and beyond, where over one third of the population resides, or in many other regions of the country. I would like to address this absence in the future. In a sense I have treated New Zealand quiltmakers as an entity, despite knowing that there is much diversity within this entity.

Anne Scott was the founder of *New Zealand Quilter*. Since 1992 she has edited and published this magazine which provides a voice for New Zealand's quiltmakers and a showcase for their work. She is also a quiltmaker herself. For these reasons I felt she would be a valuable participant. The other women living in Wellington provided an easily accessible group of quiltmakers whose work has featured in the top awards and exhibitions over the last few years. There are major award winners in other centres as well, but the Wellington group represented a significant number of such quilters living in close proximity. Other participants also include award winners. Some are also teachers of quilting. The reasons people have for making quilts will be seen to be many and varied and the quiltmakers themselves each add new dimensions to the overall picture.

### **Reflections on the Process - Quiltmaker as Researcher**

As noted in the acknowledgments, until now I have tried to keep my study at university and my quilting separate. I had previously researched and written on historical quilts (Wanigasekera 1991) and had taken note of current debates and issues in the contemporary field. I had resisted formally studying this area because I feared it might somehow spoil the pleasure I gained from making quilts, making this activity into a different type of 'work'.

I have been constantly aware that I am writing an ethnography of a group with whom I am familiar, and of which I am a part. For a researcher, this presents both difficulties and advantages. On the positive side this situation provided me with a great deal of insider knowledge, as well as fairly easy access to informants. It also provided me with a 'natural' place at a number of events where I might carry out participant observation. I already 'know the language' and understand the techniques involved. I know many of the quiltmakers personally and have come to know others more easily because of our shared interests and history. On the other hand, as an insider I have been aware that I might not always notice aspects that an outsider may do. Beliefs and happenings may be so familiar that I may not recognise their importance. On reflection, I realise that this thesis will become a part of the history of quilt making in New Zealand, and at the same time will also be active in the construction of that history.

Having made a list of those I would like to interview, I soon became aware that I had largely underestimated the depth and amount of data the interviews would generate and the time it would take to analyse this data in relation to the number and variety of theories I thought may prove useful. I also recognise that these women, in sharing what are often deeply personal parts of their lives, have placed a degree of trust in me that I must be continually aware of as I use their information in this work.

It is also important to note that I do not set out to make judgments and assessments of the aesthetic or artistic quality of any particular works. Rather, my intention is to write about what is being said about such assessments.

### **A Brief Summary of the Chapters**

Chapter one has provided an introduction to this thesis, as well as outlining aspects of my research methodology and a description of the process of choosing the participants.

Chapter two will provide a brief insight into the depth of anthropological interest in textiles, some history of patchwork and quilting in general, and of that activity in New Zealand in particular. A description of the processes, materials and technology involved in making quilts will be given. In addition, there is a discussion of a number of quilt-related topics and issues: quilts made by men; quilts as a medium of protest, and quilts made as a representation of grief and mourning; and of the way that cloth and quilts may embody the spirit and traces of the maker or of those who have used them. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of the absence of the recognition of domestic textile production, quilts in particular, in New Zealand history.

As noted above, chapters three and four form the theoretical background for this thesis. Chapter Three focusses on discussions that have resulted as members of the disciplines of art history, art and anthropology can be seen to have realised that they share a common boundary and overlapping discourses. The work of Alfred Gell and Diane Losche in particular, provide a focus for this chapter. Chapter four focuses on the processes, also noted above, that see the definitions and status of made objects transformed and altered in various circumstances. A number of case histories from both the quilting world and the wider world of object production provide the focus for this discussion. This chapter also provides a discussion of relevant art historical debates.

In Chapters Five and Six I will introduce the voices of the quiltmakers as they describe their activity and what it means for them and also a description of the circumstances in which they produce and exhibit their work. Their stories will be grounded in the earlier theoretical writing noted above, as well as in related recent academic writing that is emerging from research carried out into quiltmaking activities in other countries, especially those of the United States.

I will draw together the above elements in the conclusion to show the way they have impacted on and produced the environment within which New Zealand quiltmakers work. It will be seen that while these factors have had the ability to shape the way quiltmaking would develop, the development is not driven by these alone. Appadurai (1990) has shown that in a globalised world, as information, objects and people move from place to place, they are rarely received and integrated unchanged in their new environment.



## Chapter Two

### Stories of Cloth – Pieces of History

#### Anthropology and Cloth

In August 2005 I attended a conference on Bangkok on South East Asian Textiles<sup>2</sup>. The diversity of papers presented at this conference attested to the depth of interest in cloth and textiles by anthropologists as well as those in other fields of study. Academics from a number of disciplines presented papers which reflected the range and richness of textile production in this area. Many of the anthropologists present had worked in Thailand and other parts of South East Asia during the 1970's and 1980's and had developed an interest in textiles as a field of research. Textiles provide a rich source of information for enabling an understanding of the motivations and social processes at work in the societies that produce them and in Thailand are closely tied into complex systems of status and spiritual belief.

Those who attended the conference were enthusiasts, collectors and dealers. Only six of the fifteen presenters were indigenous to their area of study. I met few artists/practitioners of the various textile crafts represented. An exception was one presenter, an English woman Patricia Cheesman, a Professor in the art department at Chiang Mai University, who works as an artist in Thailand using natural indigo dye and locally grown silk in her work. Having founded a textiles gallery in Chiang Mai, Cheesman actively promotes the work of local traditional weavers. She has commented:

In the future more people will be educated. There will be a divide in mass production versus hand woven textiles. People will also be more socially conscious, and the profits from the textile creations will go back to the country... Textiles are becoming more commercial now, this then lowers the quality as well. At [Studio Naenna] we don't worry about time, because people want something special that is produced from the soul ... it becomes a piece of art (Russell 2005:O1).

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<sup>2</sup> Status, Myth and the Supernatural. Unravelling the Secrets of Southeast Asian Textiles. Bangkok, 4, 5 August 2005.

Several ideas are being expressed in these comments. One is a claim for authenticity and for the valuing of the hand made as against mass production. The other element that Patricia Cheesman emphasised is a value that, it is claimed, is inherent in textiles, as it may also be in other hand-created objects, that derives from the long time of their making and the touch and spiritual presence of the maker.

In his analysis of gift exchange Marcel Mauss (1950, 1990) wrote of the importance of *wairua* in Maori belief systems. Working from archival texts, he also provided an explanation of the associated idea of the *hau* or 'vital essence' that is said to be transmitted in gifts, along with the *wairua* (Mauss 1990:11). For Maori, the idea of spirit or *wairua* is an integral part of their whole belief system.

*Taonga* or treasures embody all those things that represent our culture... Our treasures are much more than *objets d'art* for they are living in every sense of the word and carry the love and pride of those who fashioned them, handled and caressed them, and passed them on for future generations (Hakiwai 1996:54).

In her discussion of Tongan graveyard quilts Phyllis Herda has noted the way the process of creation or transformation of cloth, in this case first *tapa* then patchwork quilts, imbues the work with "the 'essence' (mana)<sup>3</sup> of the maker [or makers]" (Herda 2000:67,68).

Like the traditional textile processes, quilting embodied the maker's status and, significantly, the maker's relationship to the deceased in a manner relevant to them – their *'ofa* (love) and *faka'apa'apa* (respect) was clear in the cloth they constructed, even if the cloth, itself, looked different (Herda 2000:68).

Similar claims are made for African-American, as well as many other historical and contemporary quilts. In the case of historical quilts, as in *Taonga*, this 'spirit' or 'essence' may also be added to, by knowledge of those who have used the items.

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<sup>3</sup> Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (1996:27) provides the following explanation of *mana*: "*Mana*, like *tapu*, is a pan-Pacific concept. It has layers and levels of meaning: primarily, it is about power and empowerment, about authority and the right to authorise. Charisma, personal force, social status, princely charm, leadership inherited or achieved are all forms of *mana*; it is a subjective human quality, measured by various means."

### **Cloth in a Cross-Cultural Context**

Adaptations and adoptions of material culture and of other social processes have been identified by Eric Hobsbawm (1983) in his discussion of “the invention of culture”. Appadurai (1990) has written on similar transformations, as both people and material goods move within a globalised world. Noting arguments (such as those of Hamelink 1983; Mattelart 1983; Schiller 1976; Gans 1985; Iyer 1988) that claim that with globalisation the world is becoming one homogenised society due to Americanisation and commodification, Appadurai points out:

What these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenised in one or another way (Appadurai 1990:5).

During the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the knowledge and techniques of quilt making travelled from Europe to North America, with the new settlers. This resulted in developments that would see these activities become an important part of America’s cultural heritage. These skills were also taken to Australia and to New Zealand from Britain by European immigrants, and to the Pacific Islands such as Hawaii, Tahiti and the Cook Islands by missionaries from Britain and North America (Hammond 1986:29).<sup>4</sup>

In her 1973 article claiming quilts as “the great American art” artist and historian Patricia Mainardi makes a valuable observation in answer to those who attributed changes in quilt designs there to “some sort of mystical ‘spirit of freedom’” (Mainardi 1973: 19). Instead, she argues:

I think a more down to earth explanation exists – the same explanation that has accounted for every change in all of art history, namely, that *when there is contact with new design traditions, art changes* (Mainardi 1973:19) (my italics).

A number of anthropologists have written on various aspects of textile production and its place in society. Of particular note is Annette Weiner’s

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<sup>4</sup> In her discussion of the introduction of patchwork and appliqué to the various Pacific Islands Joyce Hammond notes a number of documented instances. Among these are one in Hawaii April 3 1820 involving New England Protestant missionaries and another mention of quilts already in existence in Tahiti in 1860. Hammond provides a number of possibilities for their introduction to these islands, among them members of the London missionary Society who first arrived there in 1797 Hammond 1986:28-31).

1976 work focussing on textile production in the Trobriand Islands where she studied the processes surrounding the making, exchange and ritual uses of a form of cloth made from pieces of dried banana leaves. Her analysis has come to be seen as pivotal in bringing attention to the ways that aspects of women's participation in economic and political spheres in particular, are absent from the writings of the early anthropologists. As Schneider and Weiner note, this absence can be seen to have "subsequently influenced theories of "primitive" exchange (notably Firth 1967; Levi-Strauss 1969; Polanyi 1944; Sahlins 1972)" (Schneider and Weiner 1989:23). Weiner's research in the Trobriands and in Western Samoa resulted in a reappraisal of economics, gender and power relations in these islands (Weiner 1976, 1985, 1989).

Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner's 1989 *Cloth and Human Experience*, includes work from a wide range of writers who discuss the way cloth is used and valued in both small and large-scale societies:

Cloth ... lends itself to an extraordinary range of decorative variation, whether through the patterned weaving of coloured warps and wefts, or through embroidery, staining, painting, or dyeing of the whole. These broad possibilities of construction, colour, and patterning give cloth an almost limitless potential for communication. Worn or displayed in an emblematic way, cloth can denote variations in age, sex, rank, status, and group affiliation. As much as cloth discloses, it can conceal, however, homogenizing difference through uniforms or sackcloth ... Cloth can also communicate the wearer's or user's ideological values and claims. Complex moral and ethical issues of dominance and autonomy, opulence and poverty, continence and sexuality, find ready expression through cloth (Schneider and Weiner 1989:1, 2).

The various authors in that volume discuss aspects of the actual manufacture of cloth and the various rituals and beliefs that may surround this manufacture. The role of cloth in small-scale societies is discussed along with chapters that explore issues related to cloth and its production in capitalist and other large scale societies. It is interesting to note however, that given the recent events at the time of writing, and specifically the recognition of the quilt as an integral part of life in the United States culture, that this area of textile production is omitted from Schneider's and Weiner's book.

**Patchwork and Quilting – a Brief History.**

There is a growing body of academic writing about quilting. The American Quilt Study Group was founded in 1980 to provide a forum for the academic study of quilts and their place in society. The papers from their annual conference appear each year in their publication *Uncoverings*. In addition, a number of countries now have written histories of quilts that are in both private and museum collections. The greatest numbers of these have been produced in North America, even documenting quilts state by state. Britain, Canada, and Australia all have high numbers of historical quilts that have been documented.

Patchworking, which is the process of assembling many pieces of fabric to make a larger whole, and quilting, the process of stitching layers of fabric together, both have ancient histories. Early examples have been found in Egypt - a ceremonial canopy made of dyed gazelle hide, dating from the Egyptian First Dynasty (Colby 1987a: 20) and Siberia – a funerary floor quilt dating from 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. to 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. (Colby 1987b: 5). Of the latter it is noted that “the high order of artistry and skill ... show that a long cultural tradition lay behind the work at the time when it was done” (Colby 1987b: 6). India, Japan and China can also claim histories of similar textile production. Temple hangings from the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and clothing from A.D. 750 -860 have been found in caves along the Silk Road (Liddell and Watanabe 1988: 4-10).

In England, the documented tradition of quilting goes back to the days when it was used to produce both outer protective armour as well as padded protective clothing. The latter, of linen, cotton and silk, was worn beneath metal armour to protect the body from the hard and heavy surfaces of the metal and chain mail suits. During the 13<sup>th</sup> century a Guild of Linen Armourers existed and there were strict regulations stipulating how, and with what materials these protective garments would be constructed. Examples of armour made from cotton and silk, circa seventeenth century, are in the collection of the Pitt-Rivers Museum in

Oxford (Ffoulkes: 1912: 94, 95). Other quilted clothing was also commonly worn at different times by all levels of society.

While wool and linen have a long history of production in Britain, cotton was imported. Janet Rae notes its first appearance “as a possible textile for quilts about 1600” (Rae 1987:32) citing a document in the London and Guildhall Library that talks of:

...a kind of Bombast or Downe, being the fruit of the earth growing upon little shrubs or bushes, brought into this Kingdome by the Turkey merchants, from Smyrna, Cyprus ... commonly called cotton wool (Rae 1987:32).

At the time this entry was written there was already a large amount of production using this raw fibre with “... thousands of poor people set on working of these Fustians” [a cloth of linen warp and cotton weft] (Rae 1987:32).<sup>5</sup>

The Victoria and Albert Museum has a 14<sup>th</sup> century linen quilt of Sicilian origin depicting scenes from the Legend of Tristram (viewed 1991, also illustrated in Colby 1987b:14). Another finely worked piece (2200mm x

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<sup>5</sup> The history of cotton manufacture in Britain is a long and complex one that is tied to Britain’s history of colonisation, particularly of India and of North America. Cotton manufacturing is also deeply implicated in the totality of the history of industrial development and of the exploitation of agricultural workers, such as the slaves in the USA, and of nineteenth century mill workers in both the USA and the United Kingdom. Peter Harnetty notes that:

During the period 1780-1913 the average rate of growth in the industry’s output as measured by its main input, exceeded by about two-thirds the mean coefficient of expansion of British industry as a whole (Harnetty 1972:7).

Harnetty’s 1972 book traces the history of the cotton industry in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, placing it within the prevailing Imperial and trade policies of the time. Acting to prevent domestic production and development in India itself, these policies worked to keep that country as a cheap supplier of raw cotton and also as a vast potential market for Britain’s manufactured goods (Harnetty 1972).

Within the history of textile production and manufacture worldwide there is a long history of exploitation of both raw materials and people. In the present globalised, capitalist economy this exploitation continues today (Weiner and Schneider 1989, Part II; Chapkis and Enloe 1983; Chun Soonok 2003; Collins 2003).

2500mm) in their collection dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is an example of work produced by artisans in the Portuguese settlement of Satgoan in Bengal. These quilts were highly prized in both England and Portugal (viewed 1991, and pers. comm., 1991, from the V & A Museum).

Many British examples from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards are available for study, some with provenance, and some without. Many designs and patterns for patchwork and quilting can be traced to the earlier historical work already mentioned. Regional styles are easily identifiable with materials which reflect the environment in which the quilts were made. In the North of England, near areas of cotton manufacture, this was the chosen fabric for making both the pieced tops as well as for the inner layer, the batting. In Wales where sheep were reared, many quilts were pieced with woollen cloth. Filling or 'batting' was also often of wool, with some of this fibre being collected directly from fences so that none was wasted. These quilts were sometimes then quilted by itinerant quilters who did the rounds of farm houses. These men would stay with the farming family for a couple of weeks, earning their keep quilting the bedcovers for the household. Welsh woollen quilts have many design similarities with those of the Amish.

Australia and New Zealand both have some recorded histories of quilt making activities, by women and some men, along with numbers of surviving historical examples including, in New Zealand, a number from the Pacific Islands. The necessity for bed coverings that saw the expansion and development of the genre in Britain and particularly the U.S.A. more than a century earlier was not present in this country. By the time New Zealand was being settled by Europeans, factory made blankets were more freely available and became sought after items of trade with Maori who had settled many centuries earlier. However, there *are* many examples of patchwork bedcovers that were made here or brought as part of an immigrant's belongings. The designs mostly follow English piecing traditions, are frequently of just two layers, and often not quilted.

Documentation of this work is less common here in New Zealand than is the case in Britain, the United States, and, to some extent, Australia.

While it may appear that relatively little patchwork and quilting was done in New Zealand during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recent research, along with anecdotal evidence indicates that patchwork at least, continued to be made. It is not until the 1970's that an upsurge in interest in patchwork and quilting began. When this occurred the making of quilts was regarded as a recreational activity rather than one done out of necessity. More women were entering the paid workforce so had less time at home to sew but had more disposable income. Readymade clothes also became less expensive.

Patchwork and quilting provided an alluring outlet for the use of existing sewing skills and, an opportunity to exercise creative talents in a new way. For the many women who had continued to make textile items by hand, various forms of embroidery, crochet, knitting and weaving had provided creative activity as well as items for their homes and families. In addition, until this time, many had made items for church and school fairs, while others received income from small dressmaking or knitting businesses run from home.

At the time of this resurgence of quiltmaking, the influence of North American traditions provided the inspiration for the majority of New Zealand quiltmakers. The early publications on designs and techniques which became available were mostly from the USA. Many of the first tutors had either learned from Americans while they were living overseas or came from North America to conduct workshops.

In contrast to New Zealand, the USA has a very strong tradition of quiltmaking to the point where at the time of their Bicentennial in 1976, the American Quilt was seen as a metaphor for all that was best about the history of the United States. As one writer noted of the Bicentennial: "As a



celebration of [their] history, this event grounded everyone in the values of roots and traditions, including quilting” (Levie 2004:14).

In the U.S.A., as in New Zealand, other forces also acted to contribute to a revival that would become an obsession for many and see the rapid growth of a whole industry to support and further promote the activity. This revival also coincided with the full force of a highly politicised feminist movement. The quilt was seen and reclaimed as a particularly female medium for both protest and artistic expression. At the same time the very domestic origins of the quilt did not sit well with some women who were rejecting traditional female domestic roles. In New Zealand there does not appear to have been as great an emphasis as in the United States, on the making and use of the quilt as a tool of feminist expression or political protest.

From around the later 1970's groups of quilters began to be formed – at first meeting informally in each other's homes; then more formally as numbers increased and regional guilds began to be established. For most members the groups served both a social function and a way of exchanging ideas and information at a time when there were few relevant publications available and few workshops conducted. Today the situation has changed dramatically. There is a wealth of quilting-related literature. From 1984 a national magazine was published on a regular basis. Instruction books and books on quilting history are now freely available and exhibitions are regularly organised. A wide variety of quilt-focused magazines and books from the USA, Australia and Britain are also available. After the first New Zealand published magazine *Quiltalk*, (which was subsequently renamed *Pacific Quilts*) folded in 1991, *New Zealand Quilter* was begun and now prints 13,000 copies, with half this number being sent off-shore (Anne Scott interview, 5 July 2005).

In 1984 the first national symposium was held in Auckland and has been held biennially at different centres throughout New Zealand ever since. In 1993 a national body was formed (NANZQ) to co-ordinate activities and

contacts for the whole country and provide a point of contact for overseas visitors.

### **Cloth for the Quilter**

The specialty quilting fabric and equipment that gradually became available for late twentieth century quiltmakers have always been expensive as most of these items are imported. Despite this, from the 1970's, quiltmakers invested in the ever-increasing availability of specially designed fabrics and tools, together with relevant publications. Some quilts were made using off-cuts from dressmaking or other sewing activities or using other recycled fabric. Using recycled fabric at that time however, generally appears to have been considered as a second-best choice by the new group of quilt makers.

Textile production around the mid-twentieth century had seen a growth in the use of man-made fibres and blends for clothing and home furnishings. These were not particularly suitable for handmade quilts since they did not hold a crisp fold, having been designed to resist creasing. The received wisdom of the time said that if you were going to spend your time and creative effort to make the work, then it must be of the 'best' materials. The 'best' material was pure cotton, which, because of changing technology and the initial popularity of the artificial fibres, had become less available. However, manufacturers soon responded to the demands of the growing numbers of quiltmakers (Levie 2004:32-35). The emphasis for many new quilters at that time was on searching out the 'latest' designer quilting fabrics which were mainly imported from the United States. This buying was fuelled by the number of classes that were taught at community colleges and 'night school' as well as by quilting shops, creating an ever-increasing pool of potential fabric buyers.

At present the quilts which are made from recycled materials are made for reasons other than of frugality or necessity. The reasons include nostalgia, the aged appearance of the fabric, the utilisation of family memorabilia, such as pieces of cloth from wedding dresses, children's clothing or other

garments, as well as for making an 'artistic' statement about the very nature of patchworking. This latter often involves searches of second-hand clothing shops for suitable materials which may include old blankets, woollen clothing, neckties, and whatever else may be cut up to make something new. At the same time, this cutting up of the old is often done with respect for the history that is imbued in these textiles that have been a part of someone's life. In addition to using these various types of fabric, a large number of quiltmakers also create their own. This may involve dyeing by any of a number of techniques, printing, or embellishing in some other way.

### **The Structure of a Quilt**

A quilt is made up of a combination of layers of cloth, manipulated and/or embellished by the maker. A pattern may be created by the style of the piecing of the top layer, producing geometric or pictorial designs, as well as by the sculptural effects of the quilting line. Pattern and pictorial effects may also be achieved by the application of a further layer of cut out shapes being applied to the top or else layered and cut away (appliqué and reverse appliqué). Colour, texture (both physical and visual) and multiple fabrics may be used in myriad ways to produce something new that only emerges with that particular combination of pattern, scale and colour.

The completed top, a layer of batting, and a backing, are then sandwiched together and held in place by the lines of quilting which may be stitched in a simple geometric grid, repeating curvilinear patterns, follow the lines of the piecing, or else add a completely new dimension to the work by superimposing a new pattern. (Plate 1) Some quilting, such as stippling, produces a flattened background that throws other motifs or elements into higher relief. In addition, these motifs and elements may have more stuffing added from the back to provide even greater emphasis (this work is known as *trapunto* and originated in Italy). This creation of a sculpted surface plane allows for a degree of manipulation that is not available in

many other forms of textile production. As light plays across the surface of the quilt, the subtle patterns of the raised areas become visible.

There are hierarchies of ascribed values according to the techniques and materials used. However, these hierarchies are not stable. They vary between individuals, populations of quilters, and over time. The debate about this ascription of values is an old one. It has to do with 'fashion', changing technology and with perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not. This again often depends on one or more individuals, curators, teachers, authors and quiltmakers themselves. In the past such debate has focussed on such things as; 'hand versus machine' as means of piecing or quilting; and natural versus synthetic materials by way of the best choice of fabric.<sup>6</sup>

During times when manufactured fabric was in short supply, quilts such as the very elaborate "Baltimores" (see glossary) and other complex appliqué quilts, were seen as a luxury in that the makers used an extra layer of fabric to form the decorative design. Additionally, the making of these quilts required a great deal of leisure time or the services of domestic help. In the United States, a number of quilts that were originally thought to be the work of leisured Southern women have been shown to be that of their slave seamstresses. Different slaves were used for different purposes as they showed talents and skills in specialist and artisan areas such as carpentry, blacksmithing, weaving and sewing, among others (Fry 1990:1, 4). Patricia Mainardi (1973:19) was probably one of the first writers to note this omission in the history of North American quilting. Since this time extensive research has been carried out and there is now a growing body of work tracing the influences of African-American aesthetics in the quilting designs of that country (Leon 1987, 1992; Mazloomi 1998; Wahlman 2001). Judging by the upsurge of interest in the African-

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<sup>6</sup> In 1989 an entirely machine-made quilt won the American Quilter's Association Supreme Award in the Association's annual exhibition at Paducah (Simply Quilts, Sky Living Channel, 9.30am, February 27 2005). This was seen as a contentious decision at the time as a hierarchy that placed hand work above machine work was seen to have been overturned or at least seriously threatened.

American aesthetic in quilts, there is perhaps some danger that the more intricate, controlled, virtuoso examples of quilts made by African-Americans, are being ignored in favour of those which are becoming seen as this group's distinctive style – those that are 'improvisational' and less structured.

### **Technological Changes**

The technology involved in early examples of patchwork and quilting was that which was needed to produce cloth in the first place – techniques of weaving and dyeing, and then for the making, a pair of scissors and a needle. Once assembled, the work could be quilted 'in the lap'. Various types of quilting frames were developed, often simply comprising four stretcher battens placed over the backs of chairs. From then more elaborate free-standing frames began to be made, involving the skills of woodworking.

The sewing machine was invented by Isaac Merritt Singer in 1856 but did not become widely available in Britain until the 1860's (Rae 1987:34). The sewing machine revolutionised the production of clothing, allowing for more elaborate garments because sewing time was greatly reduced (Kiracofe 1993:125, 126). The machine also enabled the commercial production of clothing. This development resulted in a new form of exploitation of workers, mostly women. While for some the sewing machine was a woman's "most expensive and treasured possession," often passed on in her will" (Kiracofe 1993:126) for others it became the focus of low wage labour in often poor conditions in apparel factories; firstly in Britain and North America and then in 'developing' countries.

One of the side effects of the more complex design of clothing was the resulting increase in leftover scraps that provided "a greater range of choices when the time came to make a quilt" (Kiracofe 1993:126). The 'scrap' quilt has evolved into a style genre of its own, within the range of available patchworking designs.

While patchwork and quilting may still simply be done with cloth, scissors and needle and indeed is done this way by a number of quiltmakers, others embrace an ever increasing availability of sewing related technology. Large long-arm quilting machines (three to four metres long)<sup>7</sup> are now used to achieve in hours what can take many days on a home sewing machine. A number of businesses exist to provide this quilting service. Some operate from the shops that supply quilt fabric and other related materials while others have been set up as home businesses.

The emergence of the use of a rotary cutter for cutting fabric has had a major influence on design in quilts since the appearance of this piece of equipment for quilters in the 1980's.<sup>8</sup> Used in conjunction with a cutting mat and any one of the many marked Perspex rulers that are available, patchworkers can accurately slice up the fabric for a whole quilt in a much shorter time than they had been able to do with scissors. The cutter allows for up to eight layers of fabric to be cut at one time. The rulers are marked with a plethora of lines providing instant guides to the many geometric divisions of the square.

Computers have provided yet more tools for quiltmakers. Programs featuring fabric patterns, along with fabric collections, have been developed, enabling quiltmakers to design a whole quilt then print the necessary templates to make it. Quiltmakers are also using digital images which may then be printed from their computers onto specially treated fabric. This printed fabric may then be manipulated in a number of ways.

Associate Professor of Political Science, Susan Behuniak-Long, provides a careful analysis of the impact of technology on quilting and to some extent on our lives in general. She notes:

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<sup>7</sup> Eleanore Levie (2004:110) notes that at the time of writing, these machines had been in use for quilting commercial bedspreads for over 100 years.

<sup>8</sup> Eleanore Levie attributes the first use of the rotary cutter by quiltmakers in the USA to Barbara Sweetman, Marti Mitchell and Mary Ellen Hopkins in 1979. Sweetman's father, who dealt in textiles, had brought a cutter home from a business trip to Japan. The cutters had been developed there by the Japanese company Olfa, "to cut through multiple layers of silk fabrics for kimono production" (Levie 2004:51).

The ubiquitous nature of technology indicates a society driven by the pursuit of speed, efficiency, and production. Technological innovations are developed, sold, and embraced in the name of progress. The acclaim however, is not universal... [She notes] the growing body of literature that questions whether technology can truly buy us time, release us from boredom, and unleash our creativity... technology, in eliminating the traditional way of doing things, fails to fully replicate all the social functions of the previous method. A substitution of technique may result in a loss of social patterns and community values... [and, she asks] ...Are we aware of the point when this occurs? Do we know where to stop the advancement of technology (Behuniak-Long 1994: 151, 152)?

Her discussion provides a useful theoretical background when considering the ways various quilters interact with the available technology and as they reveal their different attitudes to and preferences for its use.

### **The NAMES Project – Quilts as Vessel of Mourning Ritual**

Mourning quilts, victory quilts, autograph and friendship quilts, celebratory quilts, and quilts created to cast social and political significance (such as antislavery, women's suffrage, the temperance quilts of the nineteenth century as well as the peace and environmental quilts in our era) may all be studied according to their effects upon social and political situations, and are all instances of rhetoric as they are constructed to do work in the world: to alter, to transform, or to solidify a position, not by physical force, but by symbolic action (Hillard 1994 112, 113).

Many men, and women, have died since the increase in the incidence of HIV/ AIDS during the 1980's. Whatever its origins, HIV/AIDS came to be seen as an illness which was associated with homosexual relationships, because it was in that community and in that of the intravenous drug users, that the first major spread of the conditions associated with the virus were experienced. At the time it was thought of as a new and "unknown" disease that affected only gay men and the remainder of the population remained relatively indifferent (Yardley 1994: 2). As HIV/AIDS came to be seen to be putting the heterosexual population at risk as well:

...the reports became more sensational and the use of emotive and enflaming language began. Fear bred anger and from anger sprang the desire to find a guilty party... individuals affected by the virus were marginalised in every aspect of life – employment, health care, education, worship, recreation – and those left to mourn their loss carried the burden of an unspeakable stigma (Yardley 1994: 2).

Ainslie Yardley identifies the AIDS Memorial Quilt as being:

... a reaction to this intolerable situation. It emerged from a powerful need for a recognition of personal identity within a climate of identity assassination and the systemic dehumanising of people affected by this virus. It was created because people could no longer look into the face of death within a framework of prejudice and bigotry (Yardley 1994: 2).

Yardley has written the text for the 1994 book *Unfoldings* that features the quilts made to commemorate the lives of 124 New Zealand and Australian men, women and children who have died from the disease. Thirty six were made in New Zealand. In his foreword to the book Australian High Court Judge Michael Kirby emphasised the anger that affects those involved. Stemming from lack of adequate health services, “the slow progress made by science, and the anger at the spread of the virus to millions in profoundly poor countries” he nevertheless described the individual panels which were incorporated in the quilts as “banners of the human spirit” (Kirby 1994:1).

Van Hillard argues that work such as the NAMES quilts, together with other rhetorical quilts:

... provide a public space for naming and renaming the world. Permitting a reality to be known, defined and communicated through a shared visual code, they mediate the position of private person and public world (Hillard 1994:119).

He notes, following Lipsett (1985), that in many cases friendship quilts from the nineteenth century provide the only record of women’s lives at a time when wives were not named in census taking. “... the quilt acts as a mediator between the individual and the social, as an embroidered or stamped name was brought to public consciousness” (Hillard 1994:119). He sees the NAMES project also as fulfilling a similar role and the totality of the ‘quilt’ as being something “not so much composed as it is accumulated” (Hillard 1994:120). Individual panels in the quilt measure six feet by three feet, representing the size of a grave. Eight panels are then joined together to form a square. “The New Zealand Project was officially launched on World Aids Day 1988 and held its first public unfolding ceremony in 1991” (Yardley 1994:7). The quilts have appeared



on a number of occasions at different venues around the country since then.

### **The Quilt as Medium of Protest in New Zealand**

New Zealand has a history of recent feminist political activity, in some ways mirroring that which occurred in the United States from the 1960's onwards. However, it does not appear to have resulted in the wide use of the quilt as a carrier of feminist messages to any great degree. It is possible that sewing was too implicated in the domestic sphere in this country at that time (during the '60's and '70's) and therefore to be avoided as a medium of protest. A 'crazy' patchwork coverlet in Rosemary McLeod's collection does contain what she describes as "mutinous words" and she notes: "It's interesting to see how a woman used needlework, so often thought of as a meek and submissive female pastime, to tease her family and rebel against domesticity – even as she practised it (McLeod 2005a:223).

In the USA the quilt and other textile arts were used by feminist artists. They recognised that textiles, so closely associated with women, provided a sympathetic as well as a political medium for their work. However, it is claimed that this use of the quilt as carrier of feminist messages has resulted in a division between the different groups of quiltmakers within the United States (Bernick 1994). While some individual quilters draw on feminist ideas from time to time in New Zealand, there does not appear to have been any similar identifiable grouping of makers.

Two of the few European-made quilts in the collection of The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, feature environmental messages (Te Papa Tongarewa Catalogue Report, and *pers. comm.* Kirsty Ross, October 2005). The environment, often in the form of representations of the landscape, seascape, flora and fauna, is one thing that does feature frequently in quilts by New Zealand quilters. Ideas about social 'inclusion' and 'peace' are also favoured themes for quilts. To date, quilts addressing matters of social justice appear only occasionally.

### **Quilts Made by Men**

With the wealth of documentation of quilts made by women, it could be assumed that few men have embraced this form of textile production. This is not so. While women do make up the majority of makers, many examples of often complex, and virtuoso productions can be found in the literature. Made by a wide variety of males, these quilts often attest to a high degree of skill and often a long period in the making. There are also many stories of simpler quilts made by men. The reasons for the production of these pieces, as with similar examples made by women, were utilitarian. Conservation and re-use of fabric that had originally required a considerable outlay of money, was a necessity.

In addition, the creation of quilts by men is not only a pastime but also a means of creative expression. *New Zealand Quilter* occasionally features the work of a male quilter. In addition, no history of New Zealand quilts will be complete without the recognition of the huge body of work produced by Malcolm Harrison who focussed his art practice almost entirely on making quilts for an extended period of time from the early 1970's to early 1990's.

### **The Absence of Textiles**

A discussion of the absence of textiles in art historical discourse will form part of Chapter Four. In New Zealand, historical writing about examples of textiles produced within the domestic sphere of European-New Zealand households, is notably absent. A collection of letters written by women during the nineteenth century contains only a few references to sewing and textiles, even though the authors themselves, in the introduction, use the metaphor of the quilt as a description of the contents of the book (Porter and McDonald 1996:11).

The 1982 historical survey of *The Pioneer Craftsmen of New Zealand* by G.L. Pearce only includes seamstresses along with tailors and others who provided clothing. There is no mention of women's domestic textile production. During the second half of the nineteenth century, domestic

sewing machines were becoming available so it would be interesting to know the extent of their use in this country during that time. To date there has been only one major publication focussing on our historical quilts and bedcovers (Fitz Gerald 2003). Pam Fitz Gerald acknowledges the difficulties in making her selection from those she found. However, even a minimal search of our museums indicates that many quilts remain undocumented.

In 2005, Rosemary McLeod's book *Thrift to Fantasy* provided one of the first revaluations of the many items that women have made within the domestic realm. McLeod traces the history of domestic adornment through the use of hand-worked materials, from the 1930's to the 1950's. This era saw many women survive the effects of the economic depression, World War II, and long periods of time without their menfolk, to arrive at a post-war era that would see them confined again to the domestic sphere where their lives were defined by the activities of being wives, mothers and homemakers.

McLeod shares the story of her own family and in particular of the women and their creative activities. This story is then grounded in a wider social history of the time, seen from the perspective of these women, and others like them. In particular she uses the examples that remain, of their creativity, to illustrate their search for identity in a young country, and their hopes for marriage partners, and for a home of their own.

In addition to pieces inherited from her family, McLeod has also collected a considerable number of handwork items made by women, wherever she has been able to find them. A number of these have been the subject of two exhibitions, one at the Dowse Museum in Lower Hutt, the other at the Taia Gallery in Kilbirnie, Wellington. Both exhibitions drew large audiences.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Winter 2005 Issue of *Artnews New Zealand* reports that when the collection was exhibited at The Dowse in Lower Hutt, Wellington, almost 40,000 people came to see it (Reviews p.78).

Although the research done by Pam Fitz Gerald and Rosemary McLeod have shown examples of historical patchwork made in New Zealand, there is evidence that much more was made than we have previously thought. As has happened in the United States and in Australia with the development of quilt documentation days, it has been seen that the publicity from such research results in even more work appearing.

A number of the women interviewed for this research have spoken of patchwork quilts made by their parents, often from used clothing. These were made simply to recycle fabric and provide extra bedclothes. It is difficult to ascertain the amount of aesthetic consideration that went into these textile productions. Few appear to have survived. Pam Fitz Gerald recounts stories of quilts poorly stored or displayed in museums at the time of her research, and another of a fine historic example that was rescued from the Te Aroha rubbish dump (Fitz Gerald 2003:8, 41).

Such stories are not peculiar to New Zealand, but rather reflect the lack of valuing of everyday domestic objects, and, particularly at that time, textiles made in the domestic sphere. Many of these quilts were made purely for utilitarian purposes and have simply been worn out. While being interviewed on Radio New Zealand about her book, Rosemary McLeod described such works that remain as being able to be read as “mute social documents” (McLeod 2005b). Rather like Van Hillard’s description of memorial and friendship quilts acting as a census of those otherwise lost to history, this work provides tangible evidence to allow a space for the ‘naming and renaming’ of a part of our history that largely has not included the things that women make.

In this chapter I have outlined some aspects of the processes involved in making quilts, as well as some aspects of relevant history, to provide a background for the theoretical discussion that will follow.

## Chapter Three

### Negotiating the Labyrinth

What is art? What is anthropology? As soon as one descends from the mountaintop of contemplation where distance imposes order, the entire arena is fraught with thorny philosophical problems. Art, as well as anthropology, becomes multiple ... I can only sketch in briefly some of the difficulties that occur when one plunges into the turbulent waters that form the channel between art and anthropology.

The journey from one specific site of art or anthropology is not along a wide path with a clear view ahead. Rather the structure of this movement from place to place is labyrinthine. This journey involves backtracking, false starts, false finishes and a continual sense of being unsure of one's direction.

Diane Losche 1999:211,213

In this chapter I will outline some of the discussions within anthropology, art history and studies of material culture that have formed the theoretical background from which I have been considering quilting activity in New Zealand. While many of the issues can be seen to be relevant to quilt production in particular, many are also implicated in discussions surrounding the production of objects by those who are considered 'other' to the dominant Euro-American art producing population.

In this and in Chapter Four I will also discuss events that occurred in both the United States and New Zealand, in both the art world and in the world of quilting, that have impacted on the way quiltmakers' works are viewed. This audience includes the quiltmakers themselves, as they accept prevailing art historical beliefs uncritically or else perplexedly; disagreeing, but not quite understanding why their disagreement is such a problem for others as well as for themselves. In combining these elements I set out to show that the 'world of art' and the 'world of quilting' should not be considered separate entities.

### **Western Ideas of Art**

The West's recent ideas of aesthetics derive from the time of Emmanuel Kant who can be seen to have been influenced by the writings of Plato and Graeco-Roman rhetoric (Summers 2003:98; Freeland 2001:15-18; Korsmeyer 1998). Kant developed his theory as a way of providing an "account of beauty and our responses to it" (Freeland 2001:15). As philosopher Cynthia Freeland notes, Kant did not "insist that all art must be beautiful. But his account of beauty became central to later theories that emphasised the notion of an aesthetic response" [that was] "disinterested" (Freeland 2001:15) distant and neutral.

Kant's view of beauty had ramifications well into the twentieth century, as critics emphasised the aesthetic in urging audiences to appreciate new and challenging artists like Cézanne, Picasso, and Pollock (Freeland 2001:15). Freeland notes how the influential British critic Clive Bell (1881-1964) emphasised the importance of 'Significant Form' "... insisting that art should have nothing to do with life or politics" (Freeland 2003:111). Edward Bullough (1880-1934) "a literature professor at Cambridge" argued that psychological distance was "a prerequisite for experiencing art" (Freeland 2001:16). Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) "who was [Jackson] Pollock's major champion":

...celebrated form as the quality through which a painting or sculpture refers to its medium and to its own conditions of creation. Seeing what is in the work or what it 'says' is not the point; the astute viewer (with 'taste') is meant to see the work's very flatness or its way of dealing with paint as paint (Freeland 2001:16).

In addition to these beliefs about the importance of 'form' or 'material' there was a gradual development of the idea that art was not made simply because the maker was skilled at whatever medium he or she worked in, but rather that art was produced by 'individuals' in possession of 'genius' and that this quality was something that was found mainly in men. Christine Battersby (1998) has traced the way this ascription came about during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the pre-industrial era ended and ideas of gender identity were re-formed. Using the writing of Immanuel Kant, she describes the changing meaning of the word 'genius'

and the impact his beliefs have had on ideas of gender in general and of art in particular (Battersby 1998:305-314).

These various art historical theories have also been used by many art critics as a lens with which to view the productions of other cultures, as well as of their own. Quilts, which at mid-twentieth century were not considered at all by art institutions, let alone as 'art' itself, could be thus categorised as 'other'. It will be seen below in the discussion of the transformation of quilts, that ideas of 'flatness', size and psychical distance will feature strongly in the way they came to be presented to the institutional art world and viewing public as 'art'.

### **Anthropology and Art**

In her 1999 paper considering the relationship between art and anthropology, anthropologist and museum curator Diane Losche concluded that the usual ethnographic practice of traversing cultures "is a less complex experience, and easier to encode, than traversing disciplines" (Losche 1999:211). She also observed that:

...recent issues of multiculturalism, primitivism and postmodernity are making apparent what may have been the case for a long time: the fact that in many ways, apparently neighbouring discourses within the same cultural context are as foreign and orientalist to one another as foreign and not very friendly countries (Losche 1999:211).

Losche makes her observations in her discussion of the importance of the "category of bird ... a ubiquitous and important form in the mythopoetics and philosophy of certain Melanesian societies" (Losche 1999:215). Losche discusses the involvement of the idea of "bird-ness" and the importance of birds as part of everyday life, rituals and the aesthetics of the people of Manje Kundi, the large area of New Guinea, where she conducted her study. Manje Kundi itself "can best be translated into English as Parrot Speech or the Language of the Parrots" (Losche 1999:213) and, as Losche notes that through an:

...elaborate deployment of verbal and visual metaphor ... the human-bird connection is built into an architectonic construction which houses, as nests house birds, the human condition (Losche 1999:216).

Losche follows anthropologists Alfred Gell (1975) and Steven Feld (1982) who also conducted fieldwork in parts of New Guinea and recorded similar processes at work. Both Gell and Feld wrote of the ‘importance of birds’ to those in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, describing the various ways in which “birdness” is deeply embedded in both everyday life, as well as in ritual and sacred activities. Bird metaphors pervade “art, language, the imagery of the body and Abelam constructions of space” (Thomas 1999:12). Losche emphasises that it is the “category of bird, rather than art [that] is a ubiquitous and important form in the mythopoeitics and philosophy of certain Melanesian societies” (Losche 1999:215). In his introduction to the same volume, Nicholas Thomas emphasises this point:

The response ... is not that aesthetics *is* important, but that ornithology may be art, as aesthetics and birds can be closely identified. It is easy to suggest that art in one place is not necessarily art in another, but the unexpected character of Losche’s proposition indicates how radical a cross-cultural analysis needs to be in discarding the assumption that art in one society models its locations and effects in another (Thomas 1999:12).

These insights have been gained through cross-disciplinary, as well as through cross-cultural research. Such insights about different ways of thinking about art and object production also provide a useful way of thinking about these areas of activity even within one society, as different groups may make similar things for different reasons. Thomas further notes that in intercultural comparison of ‘art’ objects there has been a tendency for art historians to concentrate on their formal qualities at the expense of considering their contextual relationships or reason for being (Thomas 1999:13).

The very complexity of cross cultural and cross disciplinary discussions, which Losche points out are the visible “cracks, rips and tears in the philosophical underpinnings of many discourses” (Losche 1999:21), may provide useful insights for the consideration of some of the questions that I am seeking to untangle when studying the particular area of material production that is the world of quilting.



In taking just this one field of material production it is possible to see that it can provide a basis for a study involving many discourses. Aspects of a discussion of this area of material culture have obvious links to social science and art historical discourse; to accounts of art history as a discipline, to feminist critique of male-focussed discourses, with colonialism and slavery (both historical and contemporary forms) and with forms of political protest, as well as issues of appropriation, commodification and transformation. In addition there is the underlying reality, also noted by Losche, of the academic cultural domains of anthropology and the academic cultural domains of art:

Anthropology drags in her train a scientific orientation as well as a scepticism about many of the most cherished ideas about art as an autonomous domain ... art has been defined as a separate and distinctive domain since Kant ... [and] anthropology's philosophical stability for much of the twentieth century has lain in its insistence on holism where [following Marcus and Myers] no dimension of cultural life is to be considered in isolation from others (Losche1999:212).

'Art' in the sense it is used in the above paragraphs should be understood as art which is a Western category or tradition. There is a great deal of recent writing that attests to the fact that over the years anthropology has been implicated in the way that the 'art' of the West's 'others' has occupied a different space to that of Western art (Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Foster 1996; Geertz 1973, 1983; Gell 1996, 1998; Marcus and Myers 1995; Myers 1994, 2001, 2002; Said 1978, 1985; Thomas 1991, 1998, 1999; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Parker and Pollock 1981; Summers 2003). Early anthropologists often collected the items that came to form the "ethnographic" displays that became the focus of many museums in the West. Their activity both stimulated and was driven by the fascination of those in the West for people and cultures that they saw as 'other' to their own. This issue can only be touched on at various points in this thesis as it forms a whole field of study in its own right. The writing that has resulted however has provided the theoretical background, albeit an overwhelmingly complex one, for this study. The 'different spaces' where objects are claimed to be art or not, are reflected in the discussions, claims, agreements and disagreements that exist between those who name the categories of 'artefact,' 'craft,' 'art,' and 'non-art'.

In addition to changing ideas of aesthetics, taste and fashion, at the more superficial level, I believe that the categorisation and hierarchy that exist within the areas of discussions of material production and, specifically, art and object making, is the result of the Western obsession with, and tendency to create such categories, hierarchies and classes. The need to locate objects, persons or groups within a hierarchical structure, has seen art and object making practices in all cultures submitted to the same treatment by commentators and critics in the West. With the advent of Western institutional art history (which can be seen to historically parallel the development of the discipline of anthropology) it can be seen that such production became divided into craft, art, fine art, artefacts made in ancient times or by 'other' cultures, and the things that women made. These latter were given little or no consideration at all (McLeod 2005a; Weiner 1976). Even where women produced substantial items or worked as professional artists, their works were often credited with male authorship (Parker and Pollock 1981; Parker, 1984; Freeland 2001; Guerilla Girls 1998).

The category 'art' is itself under the microscope of critical discourse with a number of authors, including Diane Losche as noted above, questioning its relevance as a category to those in non-Western cultures. Other writers such as art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1982) and Pollock (2002) question whether or not women should continue to work within continuing art historical practices or alternatively develop a parallel practice and ideology.

Western categorisation, along with the rise of capitalism, can also be seen to have produced the problematic phenomenological binary division that is male/female, or, of more relevance to this study, the "making of the feminine" (Parker and Pollock 1982, Parker 1984) along with "The Cult of Domesticity" or "True Womanhood" (Kiracoffe 1993, 97-101).

## Art and Anthropology

We seek wonder fitfully and with misgiving, frequently disappointed and even more frequently distracted by the nattering of critics and theorists, but somehow we still know it when we feel it: the staggered attention, the clearing of thought, and the shock of recognition that a work of art alone makes possible. Historical comprehensiveness, analytic precision, and conceptual shenanigans all fail to illuminate this fully. They can at best weave a discursive web around it, outlining the mysterious space of art's work. Only art itself can open up that space from within. Art, like consciousness, cannot be translated into any terms other than its own.

Mark Kingwell (2003:6)

What is art? When you see a piece... it is something that tugs at your guts.  
Susan Flight<sup>10</sup>

In what Mark Kingwell describes as “galloping aesthetic anthropology” (Kingwell 2003:4) David Summers argues that rather than looking at art as a purely visual medium it should be considered as a spatial medium. He argues that “all art is made to fit human uses, and can never be separated from the primary spatial conditions of those uses” (Summers 2003:Back Cover). Even when art is represented in virtual space, as is the case with two-dimensional paintings; such works are exhibited in what he describes as ‘real’ space – that which is personal and social – making that the “primary category” (Summers 2003:Back Cover).

Summers’ work could also be described as a type of Foucauldian archeological dig (McCarthy 2004:3-6). He: “wants to excavate the deeper significance that fashioned objects and structures offered to the people who first lived with and experienced them” (Kingwell 2003:4). He treats all found objects in terms of their spatial origins, and the way they were used and perceived in that place and in that time (Summers 2003:653), rather than for their aesthetic or any other system of value in particular. He creates a:

... conceptual framework that, by always relating art to use, enables us to treat all art on an equal footing. At the same time this framework can help to accommodate and understand opposition and conflict both within and

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Flight, a New Zealand artist, made this comment when asked this question during a workshop in 1986 on indigo and Shibori dyeing techniques. She had recently returned from a tour of the studios of some of Japan’s ‘Living Treasures’.

between cultures. In this wider framework, formalism and other theories of art can be seen and evaluated within the Western tradition whence they originated, without universal validity being claimed for them (Summers 2003: Back Cover).

Summers' argument has some affinities with that of Alfred Gell. In his 1998 work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Gell also argued for an assessment of art objects that ignored conventional aesthetic categories. Instead he suggested that commentators should focus on the way that various elements and players in the field of art and object production, including the works themselves, have agency within a social milieu.

Using a matrix that includes the elements of 'prototype' – the thing or being that may have inspired the work; 'index' - the artwork itself; 'artist'; and 'recipient' – the person(s) the artwork is intended for, or a viewer, Gell describes the interrelationships that are occurring around the particular object or piece of art. The elements are all viewed as being able to fill the roles of either (active) agent or (passive) patient, depending on the milieu in which any number of the elements are present or in relationship to each other.<sup>11</sup>

The aim of anthropological theory is to make sense of behaviour in the context of social relations. Correspondingly, the object of the anthropological theory of art is to account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of this relational context (Gell 1998:11).

Gell's book appears to have arisen out of the history of, and debates surrounding, objects and artwork within the cross-cultural milieu in the past. Much of the discussion of material production of those societies studied by anthropologists has focussed on such aspects as the way items were used in everyday life or for ritual or economic purposes. When

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<sup>11</sup> Gell uses 'agency' in the sense that it is "attributable to those persons (and things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of will of mind or will of invention..." (Gell 1998:16). His concept of agency is 'relational and context dependent' (Thomas 2001). "Social relations only exist in so far as they are made manifest in actions. Performers of social actions are 'agents' and they act on 'patients' (who are social agents in the 'patient' position..." (Gell 1998:26).

All four elements within the matrix that is the 'art nexus' may fill the role of 'agent' or 'patient' depending on the relational context. (Gell 1998:16-27).

these items were moved cross-culturally to the West they were then framed within the Western art historical ideology and were often initially classed as 'artefacts'. This type of labelling has come to be seen as a problem, as what may be considered aesthetically pleasing or valued for some reason by one person or group may be very different from the assessment and judgement of another person or group. Because formal aesthetics has played such an important role in art institutional discussion, Gell argued that by taking aesthetic judgement out of the discussion he could provide a theory that could be used when discussing art and object productions of all cultures, including those of Western institutional art.

His first chapter is a very clearly written comment on the relationships and conversations that abound within anthropological writing about what Westerners have termed 'indigenous' or 'ethnographic' art. In the same category we could easily insert 'art made by women' as historically this has been viewed as 'other' in relation to the items that have been produced by men. Following Baxendall (1972), and Berger (1972) Gell describes the way "the reception of art of particular periods in the history of Western art was dependent on how the art was 'seen' at the time, and that 'ways of seeing' change over time" (Gell 1998:2). Gell argues that the anthropologist has a parallel task to that of the art historian:

To appreciate the art of a particular period we should try to recapture the 'way of seeing' which artists of the period implicitly assumed their public would bring to their work. One of the art historian's tasks is to assist in this process by adducing the historical context. The anthropology of art, one might reasonably conclude, has an approximately similar objective, except that it is a 'way of seeing' of a cultural system, rather than a historical period, which has to be elucidated (Gell 1998:2).

*Art and Agency* follows on most closely from Gell's ideas presented in his *The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology* (1992), where he argues that, rather than looking at art from an aesthetic point of view, it should be considered from the point of view of technology and by the way that viewers of an object or piece of art can be overwhelmed by its technical brilliance. In this work Gell argued that "artworks are the outcome of a technical process in which artists are skilled" (Gell 1992:43). He believed that:

...a major deficiency of the aesthetic approach [was] that art objects are not the only aesthetically valued objects around... but art objects are the only objects that are *beautifully made, are made beautiful* (Gell 1992:43, his emphasis).

From this thesis he argued that the various arts were therefore parts of a system of technology which he termed “the technology of enchantment” (Gell 1992:43) and that the “*technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*” (Gell 1992:44, his emphasis).

As Nicolas Thomas points out in his introduction to his 2001 co-edited work with Christopher Pinney (a work which provides examples of the way various writers are using Gell’s theories) the idea of the ‘enchantment of technology’ is *central* to Gell’s theory of agency. Thomas argues that, the examples that Gell uses in his 1998 book are intended to show the way “art objects mediate a technology to achieve certain ends” (Thomas 2001:5). But, rather than the works simply being seen as:

... vehicles of strategies, it is important to emphasize that the formal complexity, and indeed the technical virtuosity, exhibited in works of art is not incidental to the argument but absolutely essential to it. It is crucial to the theory, in fact, that indexes display ‘a certain cognitive indecipherability’, that they tantalize, they frustrate the viewer unable to recognise at once ‘wholes and parts, continuity and discontinuity, synchrony and succession’ (Thomas 2001:5, citing Gell 1992:95).

For Gell this apprehension of the object under discussion is not viewed as an example of an aesthetic judgement on the part of the viewer. It is to be seen as the technical complexity of the object casting its spell on, and therefore ‘enchanted’ the viewer.

In his discussion of Gell’s work, Ross Bowden criticises Gell for failing to demonstrate “how people in different societies *conceptualise* what Gell and other analysts call “art” or the criteria they use to *judge the quality* in art” (Bowden 2004:3, his emphasis). I do not believe that this is what Gell set out to do or if it is something that is necessary for his argument. Instead, Gell wishes to sidestep ideas and theories of aesthetics in an effort to show what art *does* rather than what judgment we apply to its

visual appearance. Aesthetics is one of the ways in which art works in the West, regardless of their origins, are judged.

Among his many trenchant criticisms of Gell's 1998 work, Ross Bowden considered that what was missing was what he believes is an essential quality of Western art. That is, that Gell's theory did not address "conceptual originality and the way a work reveals in new and penetrating ways some aspect of the world" (Bowden 2004:12). Here I consider Bowden is reflecting and repeating the mantra (Dormer 1994) of twentieth century Western art ideology – *art must be about ideas*. For David Summers such an ideology can only be used as a focus for judgments of made objects by the people in the society which enabled the making of the objects. To try to evaluate or understand them from the point of view of another society or ideology would be, for him, a wasted exercise. Gell also emphasises that art objects must be understood within the milieu of their making or use.

One only discovers what anybody's 'culture' consists of by observing and recording their cultural behaviour in some specific setting, that is, how they relate to specific 'others' in social interactions. Culture has no existence independently of its manifestations in social 'interactions' (Gell 1998:4).

Likewise, art "has no existence independently of its manifestations in social interactions" (Gell 1998:4).

Bowden has produced what may be described as a Gellian analysis in his 1999 article where he discusses art forgery from an anthropological perspective. He contrasts two different systems of conceptual thought – that of the Kwoma (a group in the East Sepik Province of New Guinea) and that of Western art historical discourse. He demonstrates that what is valued in one society does not parallel that in the other society. In the West creativity and originality are of the highest importance in art object production and these values inhere in those individuals who conceive of such works. He argues that in Kwoma society no such value is attributed to the artist; in fact there is no comparable word for 'art' in the language (Bowden 1999:339). While the maker may be admired for and gain status because of his skill (and Bowden notes that only men sculpt and paint on

bark (1999:335)) what is of most importance is that a man is able to produce an *accurate* reproduction of the work that is being replaced (usually due to age and decay).

Kwoma attribute no culturally significant creativity to artists. No artist, however skilled, is considered to contribute anything *new* to a work he produces. ...a copy, provided it is well made, possesses all of the culturally and aesthetically significant features of an "original" or earlier work. An original, in other words, possesses nothing that a well made copy does not also possess (Bowden 1999:335).

Bowden also asserts that the:

... the second institutional feature that is relevant here is that in this society human beings are not thought of as the source of culturally significant knowledge about the world ... all knowledge of cultural value ... derives from the supernatural world (Bowden 1999:335).

Modern Europeans take the view that knowledge about the world derives exclusively from human beings ... For Kwoma all aesthetic and cultural creativity is the exclusive prerogative of spirits (Bowden 1999:336).

Bowden contrasts these two ways of thinking as he sets out to explain why in the West a forgery, that is a work that is technically and visually so like the original that its false authorship goes undetected, is then devalued as being a lesser item when the deception becomes apparent. He makes use of the writing of Alfred Lessing (1983) and Dennis Dutton (1983). Lessing has argued that forgeries are devalued in the West because they lack creativity. Dutton argues that forgeries are devalued because they misrepresent achievement (Bowden 1999:334). In his conclusion to this discussion Bowden cites Mark Jones who was a curator of an exhibition of forgeries and fakes held at the British Museum:

This finally...is our complaint against fakes. It is not that they cheat their purchasers of money, reprehensible though that is, but that they loosen our hold on reality, deform and falsify our understanding of the past (Jones cited in Bowden 1999:334).

Bowden also uses his findings on the 'anonymity' of the maker and what he sees as its misrepresentation in the West by a number of writers such as Sally Price, to critique current ideas about authenticity and the repatriation of indigenous artwork. He appears to argue, on the strength of his Kwoma research and other anecdotal evidence, that:

A refusal or failure to acknowledge creativity is found in many other Pacific societies as well. In Aboriginal Australia creativity was traditionally not only



denied but at times actively discouraged, and among the Maori in New Zealand innovation in art was considered inauspicious (Bowden 1999:340).

He concludes that much of the indigenous art that is held in metropolitan museums was anonymous because those societies did not attach any importance to the individual maker as 'creator' and that the items were no longer of value to those societies in which they were collected. Creativity belonged to the supernatural being that had 'caused' the work to be made. Instead he compares the makers to those Western artisans who carry out the actual technical manufacture of a work that has been conceived of and designed by another artist.

Despite Bowden's occasionally tenuous conclusions, what is of particular interest here is the idea that there are a number of ways of thinking about replicas and that in different circumstances they may be perceived as having differing amounts of value. Leaving aside situations where such items may be represented in a fraudulent manner, such as in the case of forgery, the idea of there being considerable value attached to either making or owning a replica is a useful one in the case of quilting. Many quilters gain considerable pleasure from making contemporary versions of historical quilts which, because of their rarity, may only ever be found in museums or private collections. In addition, it will be seen that for many, there appears to be value in the actual process of making and the way this allows contemporary makers to feel connected to the makers of the past. To say, as many critics do, that such an activity adds nothing to the totality of quilts, is to ignore the value that the makers themselves attach to their work, as well as the pleasure that other quilters or viewers may gain from being close to such a work.

Bowden's description of the Kwoma system of replacing a decaying work with a replica that ensures and provides the continuity of the prototype, also fits well with Gell's idea of both prototype as agent, of index as "vehicle of agency" (Thomas 1998:ix) i.e. in the role of 'patient', and also of Gell's idea (following Marilyn Strathern 1998) of 'distributed personhood'. It provides an example of Gell's assertion that the art object

may 'stand in for' a deity or person and therefore express the agency of that deity or person.

In showing what art may 'do', that is, the dynamics of agency within the milieu (i.e. the particular network of social relations) in which the object is a part, we are indeed able to gain a sense of how different societies conceptualise the things we in the West call art. By eliminating our socially constructed ideas of aesthetics, we are able to focus more clearly on some of the other reasons as to how and why any particular object in any particular society is important to people in that society. Diane Losche's discussion of the importance of 'bird-ness' to the world of Manje Kundi in New Guinea also provides an example of this.

Gell's idea of taking aesthetics out of the discussion resonates with the well known comment by abstract painter Barnett Newman: "Aesthetics is to art, as ornithology is to birds". In other words, art does not need aesthetics (either a theory of, or actual beauty (whatever the criteria)) to be good art, any more than birds need the science of ornithology to be birds. Diane Losche cites this statement and notes that, for her, it encapsulates the "problems that emerge significantly in the traversal of discourses ... [that is] ... finding the boundaries of the object of our study or contemplation" (Losche 1999:214). She uses the second half of the comment in particular as a basis for her examination of the primary assumption that each of these elements, aesthetics and art, and ornithology and birds, are separate categories in Western terms. Losche argues that for the people who shared their knowledge with her there is no such separation.

... no matter where I had started, this chapter would have demonstrated the necessity of dismantling positivist constructions of anthropology or art. The point is that there is no logical way of translating art as an isolated structure into the foreign place of Manje Kundi. Art is related to non-art, anthropology is also related to what is not ... The point for anthropologists is that before leaping in and categorising something as art or magic we need to explore the field of relations that these practices are embedded in (Losche 1999:225,226).

Losche argues that we cannot assume that “an object in one society is in any way a clue to the construction of an object in another” (Losche 1999:226). As noted above, for the people of Manje Kundi the categories of aesthetics, art, birds and ornithology are not separate entities but are all interchangeable within the space that is their world. It could be argued that she has also achieved a ‘Gellian’ analysis of Manje Kundi object production where no one element is privileged over others. All have agency in varying circumstances and all elements can be seen to be transferable and interconnected within their social milieu.

Losche’s chapter also provides a useful way of critiquing ideas about art and non-art. It highlights, by providing a very real contrast, the way positivist ways of thinking permeate so many aspects of Western culture. Losche’s analysis seeks to find a way through the same problems with which Gell and other anthropologists and writers have also engaged. Gell’s solution was to do away with aesthetic and semiotic interpretations and focus on agency. David Summers believed that looking at the way an object was used in its place or space of making or reception provided a way of understanding such objects. He also argued that each must be understood on its own terms and within the understandings of the society and time in which it originated.

Gell’s insights are valuable but a number of his academic readers have suggested that they still may provide only a partial explanation. Shirley Campbell, while making good use of Gell’s theoretical framework in her discussion of Vakutan (Trobriand) carving, argues that it is a little difficult to do away with aesthetics when one is considering the visual arts and object production. She instead argues that possibilities for analysis should not be limited, and that in his work even Gell himself does not “escape the lure of multiple lines of enquiry” (Campbell 2001:134).

While I have some sympathy with Alfred’s position, there are examples of anthropological analyses of art that successfully utilise aesthetic and semiotic investigations, massaging them along the way to more appropriately and accurately reflect what is happening in an anthropological context (Campbell 2001:120).

However, given the existing art institutional history of art, it is easy to understand why Gell chose to avoid aesthetic and semiotic analyses. He viewed previous examples of anthropological writing on art as too bound to ethnocentric interpretations of the material productions of 'other' societies. It will be seen from the discussion in Chapter Four, that throughout the twentieth century and in particular the second half, ideas about the value of aesthetics and also of 'beauty' were strongly debated within the art historical literature. As Annette Weiner (2002) notes, one of the important contributions that Gell's writing does make, is to totally dissolve all divisions between craft, artefact, art, fine art, 'ethnic' art, and other such socially constructed categories (2002:18). David Summers' encyclopaedic work *Real Spaces* (2003) does the same, ignoring existing categories of made objects, but, as noted, with a different process of analysis.

Gell did place an inordinate amount of emphasis on the agency inherent in the art/object. However, this agency is only activated within the social milieu in which it is under consideration. In such a case, any such agency remains in a liminal state and is only activated within a social milieu and, within this social milieu, the other actors and recipients must have the capacities to recognise and understand such agency.

Rather than just considering what it is that the artwork 'does' within the cultural milieu, it would seem at least equally important to understand what it is that the cultural milieu 'does to' the work of art or how those in a social milieu perceive, use, or conceptualise such an object. It would seem that although some of Bowden's criticisms are justified, Gell's book should be read as a work in progress – perhaps not fully realised or critiqued by the author himself, but written with an urgency to get down on paper, what he was thinking at the time.

The work is a considerable move forward conceptually from his two earlier studies: *Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology* (1992) already discussed; and *Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*

(1996) which highlighted issues surrounding the way objects are displayed and viewed within the museum context. However, it can be seen that his ideas were being developed throughout these writings. These two earlier works provide a number of useful ideas for considering issues surrounding material production. Despite their criticisms, it can be seen that a number of authors are making use of Gell's ideas. It seems that although he may not have fully resolved their use in his own work, others have since been able to do so.

All the authors in Thomas and Pinney (2001) were able to make use of Gell's theories in a number of productive ways. In a particularly adulatory chapter Daniel Miller provides a very entertaining analysis of internet websites using Gell's ideas of entrapment. Framing his discussion as a parallel to the "classic anthropological study of the Kula ring" (Miller 2001:152) Miller demonstrates the way that:

...websites may be considered artworks whose purpose is to entrap or captivate other wills so that they will come into relationship with them, exchanging either in economic or social intercourse (Miller 2001:153).

The creator of the site tempted to make one more link and one more page mirrors the surfer caught by some 'sticky' visual effect, and led on to some other channel. We become entrapped by our own creations, drawn into the intricacies of their aesthetics. ...for many others the sheer fascination of the web draws one into its labyrinthine networks. Once we set a trap we too become ensnared by its complexity and aesthetic brilliance (Miller 2001:152).

In her discussion of *singo*, a type of woven and dyed pandanus cloth made by the women of Ambae in Vanuatu, anthropologist and curator Lissant Bolton both uses and critiques Gell's ideas of 'enchantment' and 'captivation'. *Singo* cloth is made for and used as a part of status-altering rituals in the communities where it is produced. The cloth production and use are thus deeply embedded within the lives and belief systems of this community. Bolton describes the way that ideas of power relating to this particular form of textile derive not from any narrative meaning attached to the designs woven into the cloth, but rather from the period of manufacture. "A *singo* is most potent while it is being produced, until it is paid for and the restricted food is made for it" (Bolton 2001:112). From

this she concludes that “The idea of cognitive indecipherability is contextually dependent: a design may seem dazzling in one visual context and not in another” (Bolton 2001:113). For her the value of Gell’s ideas lies in providing:

... a way to reflect on other ideas about the power of objects. The concept of captivation makes it possible to attend to Ambaen ideas about the distinctiveness of *singo*, without becoming tangled in questions as to whether these objects are, or are not, art (Bolton 2001:114).

A number of other examples can be seen to fit with Gell’s theory, even though they were described either before that time or without reference to Gell. Anne Newdigate’s (1995:174) description of the use of tapestries in medieval France resonate with Gell’s use of the descriptions of Trobriand canoe prows, African masks, and of clothing and buildings that were designed to impress or intimidate. Newdigate describes the way that, as a portable art form, tapestries were “taken into battle and from chateau to chateau” [and] played the role that television does now “as a signifier of power” (Newdigate 1995:174).

Art historian Susan Conway, in her introduction to the catalogue for her exhibition of court dress in Thailand, described how elaborately made garments were worn to impress visitors to the Siamese court. “In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when European diplomats and explorers were granted audiences they were dazzled by the beauty of palace interiors and by the splendour of court dress” (Conway 2003:i).

In both the French and Thai instances a form of visual apprehension or ‘gut reaction’ appears to be involved. Nobles in French chateaux may have had an idea of the aesthetics of tapestries, just as European travellers in South East Asia may have had ideas about fashion. In neither case does it appear that either group paused to consider the aesthetic or stylistic qualities. Like Campbell’s Vakutans waiting on the shore for their Trobriand trading partners’ vessels to appear, they were simply awed by what they saw (Campbell 2001).

A number of Gell's theories have provided useful ways of looking at quiltmaking activity. Both historical and contemporary accounts of quilt production demonstrate the various ways that quilts function in the domestic and the familial context, as well as in their role as objects in public exhibitions or for consciousness raising ventures. It can be seen that Gell's idea of 'technology being enchanting' (Gell 1992) is a useful one, as both the maker and the viewer or user may gain pleasure from their experience with quilts. This is not only from a quilt's tactile qualities but also in the way it may 'hold' the viewer with its "cognitive indecipherability" (Gell 1992:95) of patterns, piecing and stitching. Gell's idea of 'the distributed person' (Gell 1998:96-153) fits well with the idea that in the legacy left for families by many quilters, their work does, in a way, represent and 'stand in for' the maker.

These theories focus attention on the work itself and also on its immediate environment. However, to gain a wider view of the way quilts are viewed by their makers and by the viewing public, it is necessary to consider several other discussions that have arisen in the world of art and object making. The first is to do with the changing relevance and devaluing of 'beauty' and of the decorative. The second is to do with the changing relevance and valuing of technical skill. The third is to do with the absence of women and their art productions in 'art history'. Although they are all interconnected, I will initially address each of them separately.

In addition, the movement of quilts from the private sphere of the makers' homes, to the public spaces of museums and galleries, will be seen to involve processes of assimilation, appropriation, transformation and commodification that have more in common with twentieth century marketing strategies than with either traditional 'art historical' practices or with their more usual communal, familial and domestic origins.

In this chapter I have outlined a number of discussions that have resulted from the engagement of anthropologists with the discipline of art history. In the next chapter I will discuss the many elements, noted above, that

have both formed and impacted upon the way quilts, among many other objects, have been viewed within Western arts discourse.



## Chapter Four

### Found in Transformation

#### **Strategies of Entrepreneurship: Assimilation, Appropriation, Transformation and Commodification in the Artworld**

...never have artists exacted a higher price for our understanding than during the twentieth century. In modernism, the perennial rewards of aesthetic experience – pleasure, insight, empathy – were largely withheld, and its generous aim, beauty, was abandoned. Modern artworks may often have been profoundly beautiful, but theirs was a tough beauty, hedged with deprivation, denial, revolt.

Wendy Steiner (2001:xiii).

The conceptual artists of the 1960's collapsed the distinction between art and advertising from both sides, making the art world a realm of anti-aesthetic intellectual play where cognition over-ruled experience, all the while constructing themselves as artful objects of marketing savvy, the artist as brand. They could not quite complete that collapse, since it would have spelled the end of their special status in chains of social-capital exchange. Nor could they entirely follow through on the anti-material logic of conceptualism, which would have eventually rendered the artwork dispensable.

Mark Kingwell (2003:5)

The above quotes encapsulate the way Western art came to be viewed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Not unlike the response to art of various types in other eras, the viewing public was at some times perplexed, at others outraged, as work, that they neither liked nor understood, won major awards, sold for thousands of pounds or dollars, and sometimes earned its makers cult status.

The products of a resurgence of the art of quiltmaking were also created during this troubled and contentious period of cultural upheaval. From this resurgence in interest came quilts that were no longer produced only to keep people warm in bed, or to decorate a home. The makers of many of these new quilts wanted their work to be exhibited on the walls of museums and art galleries and to be accepted in the same way as the

works of other artists. This new awareness resulted from a number of factors which came together from the mid-century onwards, particularly in the United States. These factors have continued to impact on the way quilts and their makers are viewed.

Among these factors are the post World War II era of art making which is seen by some as “more open to popular and technical cultural influences than was pre World War II art” (Bernick 1994:149 following McMorris and Kile 1984); a new interest in handmade items of many types; and, as previously noted, the resurgence of a feminist art movement that made use of traditionally female material productions; and the assimilation and transformation of the quilt from its largely domestic origins, to an ‘art’ object, that took place within the ‘fine’ artworld itself, rather than in the spaces where quilts had traditionally been used or exhibited. This recent ‘art’ status however, still represents a contested area of production and reception.

This chapter will explore this history by focussing on a number of case histories which highlight the processes by which objects may be moved from one context and presented in another in an entirely different way. To achieve this end, such objects may be appropriated, assimilated, transformed or commodified, or any combination of these processes of redefinition. In addition, these processes can be seen to be informed by prevailing ideas of fashion, style, taste and aesthetics.

### **Recognition and Discovery**

We picked an important spot on the end wall which we thought needed an extremely bold image. We decided to try the red and blue Log Cabin Straight Furrow from Pennsylvania.... Two installers, both artists, carried it with care to the wall. It was an extraordinary moment. Everyone who was watching gasped. I had seen the quilt hundreds of times, had folded and unfolded it, photographed it, examined it minutely; I knew it well. But as it came down the wall, it had a dignity which enlivened it in a way I had never seen. *It was very beautiful; but more, it was commanding, a confident and powerful aesthetic presence.* Everyone was held by it.

Jonathan Holstein (1991:39) (In: Peterson 2003:477, her emphasis)

Museums must constantly sift through the products of creative energy and search for works that are life enhancing. Museums weigh a diversity of opinions from innumerable sources and look for works that, in George Santayana's phrase, "objectify beauty." This process can degenerate into a popularity contest, but in the long run, a learned consensus of sensitive people helps to refine a vast body of work and focus on those refinements that have an inner force of life that goes beyond symbolism and storytelling into the world of being.

Peter Marzio, Director, Museum of Fine Arts Houston (2002)

As indicated in Chapter One, there are two events that I consider had a great impact on quiltmakers in the United States, and subsequently in New Zealand. First, there was the exhibition of Pennsylvania Amish quilts at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1971. This led to the perception of Jonathan Holstein as 'creator' of the 'Art Quilt'. Second, was the gradual recognition and appreciation of the African-American tradition in quiltmaking that has come down through the history of slavery, and that led to the 'discovery' of a number of bodies of the work of these makers and of their descendants. Among notable examples of these is the work of Anna Williams individually; and collectively, the quilts of Gee's Bend.

Jonathan Holstein later cemented his position as an important arbiter in the quilt world when in 1972 he curated another exhibition, this time of historical Euro-Americano patchwork quilts, at the Smithsonian Museum. A year later he published *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition*. Likewise, William Arnett, the 'discoverer' of the Gee's Bend quilts has, in association with his Foundation, published substantial background texts as supporting material for the travelling exhibitions of 'his' quilts.

### **The Whitney**

On the plain white walls of the museum, the quilts were given a new identity: "work of art." An aura of magic was attributed to them in the way they were "framed" in the museum setting and supported by details such as the priestly artists who held the staves [for lifting the quilts]. No longer did the quality of the needlework, or the people for whom the quilt was made, make any difference. In this moment, the quilts were severed from their personal ties and viewed in a museum frame with the discriminating eyes of the aesthete.

Karin Peterson (2003:472)

During the late 1960's, while searching in the United States north eastern countryside for antiques, Jonathan Holstein and his partner Gail van der Hoof began collecting Amish quilts after recognising their visual resemblance to the abstract painting of the time. Until this time, quilts had been "relegated to the "decorative arts" [or folk arts] by curators, collectors, dealers and art historians" (Holstein 1991:27).

Drawing on their experience in the art world and Holstein's work as a photographer for art galleries, the two started looking at [the] pieces of hand-worked cloth through the lens of modern art... Over a period of approximately three years the two 'discovered' Amish quilts, started collecting them and then persuaded a major New York city art museum to exhibit them as objects of art to be appreciated by the most discerning modern art connoisseurs (Peterson 2003: 461).

They then set out to "transform the common understanding of these bedcovers and to persuade the art world of New York and beyond to recognise them on wholly aesthetic grounds" (Peterson 2003: 461). The quilts were stripped from the context of their making and their makers' identities erased, despite the existence of identifying signatures on some of the works.

Karin Peterson, from the University of North Carolina, has traced the process of transformation and the work of cultural entrepreneurship in presenting their collection.

As cultural entrepreneurs, van der Hoof and Holstein had a particular vision for the potential of quilts and the astuteness to gauge the cultural landscape and the strategies that might work to transform it. They possessed both social capital, that is, a set of connections with key players in the art world, and cultural capital, that is a set of capacities (the ability to view, evaluate, and talk about art and life in culturally dominant ways) that allowed them to be seen as legitimate players in the game of defining culture (Peterson 2003:467, 468).<sup>12</sup>

Here, Peterson draws on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu whose analyses of educational success in relation to class (1984, 1993)

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<sup>12</sup> Peterson writes that "Gail van der Hoof worked in fashion and fashion advertising, majored in painting in college, and spent much of her childhood in museums because her father was a geologist and a palaeontologist... Holstein worked as an editor at McGraw-Hill. Through mutual friends he met several artists including Barnett Newman... In the 1960's he left his editing job to work for galleries and museums as a photographer and writer. Holstein, in other words, had a facility with writing, a good understanding of contemporary art world conventions [the 'eye' of a photographer] and a few critical connections (Peterson 2003:468).

led him to argue that rather than such success being dependent on individual talent or hard work alone it was, as well, very dependent on the socio-economic background of the person concerned. Following earlier research in France in collaboration with Passeron (1964), Bourdieu identified the way a society and an education system, such as that in France, may be structured so that because of inequalities of opportunity, access to some areas of knowledge is restricted and reproduced only by members of the middle and upper classes. While opportunities for educational advancement *appeared* to be equal for all, Bourdieu outlined the way members of the working classes did not have the same access to culturally important extra-curricular activities such as the concerts, exhibitions and literature that were available to those of better means and connections – their ‘social capital’ (Macey 2000:48).

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) Bourdieu collected data on inheritance, educational levels, literacy, spending patterns, gallery and concert attendance, along with many other activities. He then utilised this data to explore ideas about the way those engaging in these various cultural activities understood what they saw or heard, in terms of their existing knowledge, that is, their ‘cultural capital’. In his 1993 *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Bourdieu brought together many of his insights to provide an analysis of the activities of the various players involved, and of the power relations at work in the fields of literature and art-making and cultural (re)production.

Karin Peterson describes how it was necessary for Holstein and van der Hoof to erase all traces of the “cultural baggage” that quilts carried, of their connections to domestic, everyday, utilitarian, and folk origins, so that they could be viewed through the “pure” eye of the connoisseur (Peterson 2003:267). The focus of her article is to also:

...demonstrate how the ability to distance is facilitated by strategies of discourse and display that work to elevate quilts out of the stuff of everyday life by physically and socially distancing them from the viewer (Peterson 2003:463).

Peterson also notes the way the “practice of photography is aligned with the practice of museum display: both are aligned with clinical detachment” (Peterson 2003:469).

While noting the “scholarly disagreement over what exactly constitutes modernism” Peterson argues:

... that the dominant way of seeing cultural objects continues to be rooted in modern aesthetics, a particular, historically located set of ideas about how to appreciate works of art and evaluate their worth... This perspective claims that all works of art can be evaluated solely on the basis of the visual experience and rejects the notion that subject matter, or the viewer’s own life context, should interfere with appreciation of the visual qualities of the work... [She further notes] These modernist criteria developed from Kant’s philosophy of art and became standards that art critics – and eventually artists themselves – used to talk about the merits of artistic works (Peterson 2003:462, 463).

Peterson identifies three important elements of this discourse: formalism, artistic autonomy, and originality. However at the time of the Whitney exhibition, it was upon the first of these elements that the accompanying discourse was based. Peterson draws again on the work of Bourdieu (1984) and his concept that the “*modern eye*” relies on the “*pure gaze*”... “a concept that emphasises how this modern way of seeing is socially shaped and linked to class privilege through the mechanism of distinction” (Peterson 2003:463).

Conal McCarthy (2004) also draws on Bourdieu’s theories in his discussion of the history of display of objects made by Maori in New Zealand (*From Curio to Taonga: A Genealogy of Display at New Zealand’s National Museum, 1865 – 2001*). He traces this history of display at New Zealand’s national museum and the way the visitors’ perceptions of these items have changed from the early colonial period when they were considered from the colonist’s point of view as ‘curios’ or ‘artefacts’ up until the present time when they are framed and accepted by both Pākehā and Māori as *Taonga*. McCarthy (2004:6) comments:

Bourdieu dismissed idealist understandings of art as an ineffable essence ‘speaking directly’ to visitors in museums. For him there is no such thing as the innocent eye because the very notion of ‘the pure gaze’ is an historical invention.

He further cites Bourdieu:

The capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things...A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded (Bourdieu 1984:2; McCarthy 2004:6).

To achieve this psychic distance which was such an important consideration in that context, Holstein and van der Hoof set out to convince others of the qualities they could see in the quilts. The two used strategies of discourse and display that would create a “detached and distanced perspective” of the work while providing textual cues “that supported the viewing experience and called forth elements of the modern eye” (Peterson 2003:470). The first of these cues was to write about the quilts in the language of the New York art world at that time. The second was to “redefine the standards by which quilts would be evaluated. In doing so, he ignored quilters’ [own] distinctions between best quilts and utility quilts” (Peterson 2003:472).

The exhibition was titled *Abstract Design in American Quilts* as a way of identifying “the links to the stylistic tendencies of abstract expressionism” (Peterson 2003:471). The ensuing ‘discovery’ by the public, of the abstract qualities of Amish quilts, was not simply a happy accident. It was the result of a carefully staged event in which the curators very deliberately constructed how the quilts were to be perceived. The selection from their collection for the exhibition was rigorous, with quilts assessed after having been extensively photographed and studied by Holstein, and finally being spread “on a neighbour’s expansive lawn and [looked at] from the roof of the house” (Peterson 2003:471). Once passing this selection process they were then to be hung “evenly and smoothly ... like paintings against the museum’s white walls” (Peterson 2003:471).

Their placement was judged “solely in terms of visual effect and disregarding chronology or place or origin” (Peterson 2003:472). Peterson argues that Holstein’s later description of the hanging of the first quilt on the gallery wall, (cited at the beginning of this chapter) “may be interpreted

as a *ritualistic transformation* of the quilt's cultural value" (Peterson 2003:472, emphasis added).

Looking back at the events of this Whitney exhibition, it is easy to be critical of the strategies used by the exhibitors. However, it is important to remember the context of the art world and wider society as it was at that time. Although similar or parallel strategies continue to be used, at the time of this major exhibition, the two collectors and curators concerned faced a huge hurdle in wishing to have the work accepted, on their terms, in that world. At the time the US art world was experiencing a period of art historical rupture. Despite what we may now see as the less than desirable shortcomings, erasures, and strategies of promotion used, the two were successful. Because of their success others have been able to more easily enter into the space that they created which enabled quilts to be considered in such a context, as 'works of art'. However, as will be discussed below in the section on 'beauty', this modernist, 'artworld' framing of the patchwork quilt that valorised its geometric qualities, was wrought at the cost of the valuing of other styles of quilts.

### **The Quilts of Gee's Bend**

The full understanding of African American vernacular arts, represented not exclusively but extremely well by Gee's Bend's elegant quilts, requires far more than the appeal of poignant stories and distant ancestors. These cultural treasures stand on their own merits side by side with the world's great art. Recognising their aesthetic sophistication does not diminish any notion of heritage, but enriches ancestry by its ongoing relevance to history and culture.

William and Paul Arnett (2002:48)

The Gee's Bend quilts were 'discovered' and 'saved' by a collector of African and African American art. William Arnett was encouraged by a colleague to explore the African American quilting tradition. A photograph of a particular quilt led him in the search for the maker, to the community of Gee's Bend, where he documented over 700 quilts. Gee's Bend is a small community in Southern Alabama, USA. Geographically cut off from the larger part of Wilcox County by a bend in the river, it is seen as a unique community. Throughout the twentieth century Gee's Bend became



the focus of a number of government aid and farm development projects. Because of these interests, and its isolation, the area, which formerly comprised fertile cotton plantations worked by slaves, has been extensively researched by a number of agencies. It was also an area of focus during the civil rights movement of the 1960's and has even been framed in Edenic terms as an "Alabama Africa" (Arnett and Arnett 2002:34, 36).

A number of the quilts 'found' by Arnett have subsequently been exhibited in major exhibitions including The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2002) and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (as above) (2003). The exhibitions have resulted in the publication of two substantial hardback volumes which describe and illustrate many more of the quilts and the stories of their makers.

Keeping pieced quilts in closets, hampers and under beds was like keeping gold bullion in the home. These were quilt treasures that one could draw from, stored visual ideas that could transform at any time into completed works of art (Wardlaw 2002:16).

The residents of Gee's Bend have managed to harness an incredible freedom...in the very real struggle for a decent and rewarding life ... (or what [sociologist] William Du Bois referred to as 'spiritual striving') (Wardlaw 2002:18).

While these publications include a number of essays on both the works and the community, and its history, noting the levels of poverty at different times, these mostly gloss over the structural inequalities of the wider society of which this area was a part. Instead, there is an emphasis on the benefits of the isolation that the inhabitants enjoyed by being separated from that wider society. Arnett attributes the particular aesthetic of the Gee's Bend quilts to that isolation, and to the continuity of community that was enabled by the many government efforts to support the community's economic sustainability, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century. Making quilts to supply department stores was one later venture that was successful for a period of time. The designs and materials for these particular productions were supplied by the wholesale buyers. Few of these quilts appear to have survived, and, unlike the individual work that the women continued to make during this time, the commercial examples

are not highly valued by collectors and are said to be “tainted” by their commercial associations (Scheper-Hughes 2003:20).

However, there are other stories to be told about Gee’s Bend that are not emphasised in these glossy catalogues. One of them is told by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, an anthropologist who spent time there as a civil rights worker in the 1960’s. Scheper-Hughes was part of a team in 1967, researching residents’ access to food, healthcare and social services (Scheper-Hughes 2003: 15). What her team found was:

...a ravaged population living for parts of the year on the edge of starvation and largely dependent on capricious Federal farm programmes...

They identified signs and symptoms of malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies including childhood rickets, pellagra and ‘night blindness’...

The average farm household woman in South West Alabama reported seven pregnancies by the age of forty, had experienced at least one miscarriage or stillbirth and two infant or early childhood mortalities (Scheper-Hughes 2003:15).

As she notes “The hunger was particularly hard to bear in rural counties blessed with dark, rich soil and a long growing season. It was generated by landlords who restricted the subsistence crops, pigs and poultry permitted to the tenant farmers” (Scheper-Hughes 2003:16). The land owner did not want competition from his tenants as he wanted them to purchase everything from his store. The misery the civil rights team encountered was “the product of landowner corruption and a system of debt peonage that had replaced one form of slavery with another, the slavery of hunger” (Scheper-Hughes 2003:16). White landowners intercepted government subsidy cheques belonging to their tenants and extracted forced labour from the cheated farmers in exchange for food at the company store.

All this was done with the tacit support of the local US Department of Agriculture agents... Cotton allotment cheques earmarked for Black tenant farmers were ‘signed over’ to the landlords against outstanding debts [for such things as food, seed and farm tools that had been] sold to the tenants at highly inflated prices and recorded with fraudulent bookkeeping (Scheper-Hughes 2003:16).

An evaluation in the form of a benefits/cost analysis was carried out in the 1980's by a 'research analyst' and a 'management specialist'. Reporting in the *American Anthropologist* in 1986, they concluded that efforts such as the Federal programmes were "not economically worthwhile from government and societal points of view" (Trend and Lett 1986:602). They decided the programmes had not increased productivity and had basically done little to help the people of Gee's Bend. There is no mention of the quiltmakers, despite the fact that a number were involved (as noted previously) in a viable business supplying large department stores with quilts and related products.

On leaving the community in 1968, and having recognised the potential for quilts as art objects, Nancy Scheper-Hughes had attempted to promote the work in her home state. She was not successful, and explains:

The antique dealers of Vermont just could not (at that time) think out of the box. These Gee's Bend quilts represented a paradigm shift for which they were *not yet cognitively or sensually prepared* (Scheper-Hughes 2003:19, emphasis added).

In 1998 when William Arnett visited and documented the quilts of Gee's Bend he bought every last quilt. Today they are preserved in storage in Atlanta, Georgia by a private foundation set up by the Arnett family and with the help of a grant from actress Jane Fonda. Scheper-Hughes writes:

William Arnett laughed when I asked if I could possibly buy one of the quilts and he refused to tell me their market value, just that they were beyond the reach of ordinary mortals like you and me (not to mention the people of Gee's Bend). The art experts, he said, have judged the quilts to be authentic and priceless works of art (Scheper-Hughes 2003: 21).

Arnett, like many other discussants, frequently highlights both the abstract characteristics and the improvisational nature of African-American quilts in general, and of the Gee's Bend quilts in particular. However, in their valorisation of the 'abstract' and 'improvisational', these authors and commentators ignore the other quilt productions of African-American quiltmakers which mirror the range seen in the work of Euro-American quilters. In addition, they fail to acknowledge the existence of improvisation in the work of other groups of quilters. Susan Bernick argues that "the improvisational style said to be typical of African-American

quilters can be found in compositions of poor, white quilters as well” (Bernick 1994:139). ‘String’ quilts, made from odd shaped strips, represent an improvisational use of these leftover scraps of fabric. These were commonly made by many U.S. quiltmakers. Limited availability of fabric or other materials, in any situation, calls for ‘improvisation’ as the best way to use a precious resource.

In a footnote, Bernick also adds that, in many cases, the issue of attribution is also a complex one, given the intertwined lives of slave seamstresses and their owners. This observation is born out by the research of those such as Gladys-Marie Fry (1990) who has focussed her art historical study on African-American slave quilts from the Ante-Bellum South.

During my research of quilts in Britain (1991) I found a number of similarly improvisational quilts, with one particularly notable example in the collection of the Beamish Museum in the North of England. In this case the piecing had begun in the form of a Blazing Star (a design using carefully pieced sixty degree diamonds). This pattern formed only the central part of the work. The remainder comprised large irregularly shaped pieces that filled the rest of the completed top and bore no relation except that of colour, to the beginnings of the pieced work (Cat. 1969.188). Many historical quilts viewed, displayed collections of the fabric samples that were held by manufacturers, or carried by travelling salesmen, indicating that the makers valued whatever scraps and off-cuts they could get hold of. In some cases, the travelling salesmen themselves made the samples into patchwork tops. These tops all provide useful records for textile history and also of men’s involvement in the history of patchwork.

Valerie Wilson’s paper on Ulster quilts (1991) includes a photograph of a quilt circa 1910, made in Belfast, from linen and cotton tablecloth and napkin remnants (Wilson 1991:167). The aesthetics of this quilt match exactly those of many of the Gee’s Bend quilts. Early utilitarian patchwork made in both Australia and New Zealand exhibits similar aesthetic and

structural characteristics, including the recycling of used clothing for both tops and filling. More recently, an exhibition of Korean textiles at the Waikato Museum of Art and History (2005) provided more examples of the use of irregular geometric shapes in textiles work. In this case the shapes used in the patchwork items were said to owe their irregular trapezoidal character to the fact that they were off-cuts from the sleeves or other parts of garments (Waikato Museum exhibition notes 2005).

The improvisational aspect of African-American quilts has been written about for several decades. Jonathan Holstein's 1971 redefinition of what was important about quilts erased the necessity of fine and accurate needlework and piecing as the criteria for judging quilts. Until the time of his exhibition, these criteria had been best demonstrated in the USA, in the finely worked curvilinear designs of appliqué quilts, including those from the "Baltimore" era. The more elaborate and finely made, the more evidence of time spent in the making, the more valued by early collectors of antique quilts. The later collectors of African-American quilts embraced Holstein's erasure wholeheartedly. Instead they promoted the 'improvisational', 'abstract' and 'minimalist' aspects of the examples which they had collected.

Specific interest in African American quilts, appears to have arisen during the 1970's, probably mirroring the general resurgence of interest in quilts as a whole, and vernacular art in general, at this time. Patricia Mainardi (1973) makes the first mention of this type of work that I have found in academic writing about quilts. During the 1970's, art historian Maude Southwell Wahlman, was also researching this area of production, completing her Ph.D. dissertation *The Art of Afro-American Quilt Making: Origins, Development and Significance*, at Yale University, in 1980. She curated the exhibitions *Contemporary African Fabrics* (1975) and, together with co-curator John Scully, *Black Quilters* (1978). Since then she has curated and written extensively. In the 2001 reprint of her book *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*, she cites twenty five

examples of her academic and curatorial work during the intervening years.

Likewise, Gladys-Marie Fry has researched and written extensively on slave textile production, and, within this field, their quilts in particular. She lists the elements that are the major design characteristics of African-American quilts. These are:

- 1) vertical strips, 2) bright colours, 3) large designs, 4) asymmetry, 5) improvisation, 6) multiple patterning, and 7) symbolic forms” (Wahlman 2001: 7).

(Euro-American, Roberta Horton teaches classes in how to make an Afro-American style quilt, emphasising these elements but omitting the ‘symbolic forms’. These classes were included in her teaching visit to New Zealand in 1988.) Fry, however, cautions that many of the quilts made by women slaves “simply do not fit within any of these categories” (Fry 1990:10). She continues:

Perhaps it could be more accurately said that African-American quilt styles are eclectic – ranging from quilts with strong African influences to those that almost completely merge with the Euro – American design traditions (Fry 1990:10).

While Fry does recognise the African influences in many of the quilts, in particular noting the use of African symbolism, her research shows the breadth of styles in quilts made by slaves. These include many finely stitched works, both pieced and appliquéd. In the discourse that surrounds the recent emergence of the “Afro-American” style, the only examples of appliquéd quilts that appear to ever be mentioned are the two extant examples of the work of ex-slave Harriet Powers (1837-1911).<sup>13</sup> Instead, this discourse focuses on those quilts that display elements of ‘abstraction’ and ‘minimalism’, both ‘fine artworld’ sanctioned characteristics, and ‘improvisation’, that particularly ‘uniquely’ African-American element.

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<sup>13</sup> Among other events which “parallel scientific records” that Powers stitched into her quilts, was her depiction of the Leonid meteor storm that occurred in 1833 and which lasted for eight hours. The quilts exhibit stylised narrative scenes of events as well as African and Masonic symbols and biblical scenes (Fry 1990:90, 91, and Wahlman 2001:71-75).

Collector and dealer in vernacular art, Eli Leon (a native of the Bronx, New York), also began collecting and dealing in quilts during the 1970's. In particular he was searching for 1930's era quilts, as these were what he believed collectors were demanding at the time (Ruyak 2005:34). (By the late 1970's Amish quilts had become increasingly expensive). Jacqueline Ruyak describes how Leon's focus of collecting shifted about 1980, when he first encountered African-American examples of quilts and realised their particular appeal. Their improvisational aesthetic, for him, demonstrated a "friendly attitude toward fortuitous change" (Leon cited by Ruyak 2005:36).

Leon's collection, mostly sourced in Oakland, California during the 1980's<sup>14</sup> has grown to "more than 300 quilts and tops" (Weldon Smith 1990:11) and has been the feature of a number of exhibitions. While Leon sourced most of his quilts by "scanning flea markets and placing ads" Ruyak reports that he did make efforts to document the work by following up leads where he found them (Ruyak 2005:36). The requirement to document the provenance of such objects was not a part of Jonathan Holstein's strategy in 1971. However, like Holstein before him, Leon has also built a career around his 'discoveries'.<sup>15</sup>

I can see the similarities in the processes between the event of the recognition of Amish quilts as art, and the similar recognition of the aesthetic and historical value of African-American quilts and in particular the Gee's Bend collection. In both cases a body of work was in existence. Some credit may be given to the 'discoverers' of these bodies of work and

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<sup>14</sup> Ruyak (2005) notes that Oakland is a "predominantly African-American city... waves of African-Americans had migrated from Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, and other Southern states to work in Bay Area war industries" (Ruyak 2005:36).

<sup>15</sup> Karin Peterson also adds: Sociologically, cultural entrepreneurs are neither simply saints nor simply plunderers of culture. The entrepreneurs' actions help shape the cultural field in particular ways, depending on the strategies they undertake and on the institutional response they receive. Successful entrepreneurs often gain a measure of status themselves, as "discoverers" of ignored or forgotten cultural treasures and as the authorities on the artefacts they have promoted. It would be naïve to consider their acts as purely altruistic, but it is also the case that entrepreneurs may have a sincere passion for the works they promote, as I believe is the case with Holstein and van der Hoof (Peterson 2003:485).

their subsequent efforts to bring them to the attention of the 'art' public. But in the end, while they may be passionate collectors, they are also simply traders in material culture (and that is not intended as a pun). As noted, the Gee's Bend quilts are owned in a private collection. They were bought for approximately US\$15 each and are now said to be priceless. The Amish quilts were bought for not more than US\$35 each. The collection was recently valued at US\$2.2 million (Peterson 2003:475).<sup>16</sup>

Some of the quiltmakers from Gee's Bend have accompanied the exhibition as it has moved around the United States. While the quilts are described and 'framed' within the language of fine arts discourse, the quilts are attributed to their makers, and the texts related to the exhibitions tell many of their stories. This was not so with the 1971 Whitney exhibition of Amish quilts (or even the 1972 Smithsonian exhibition) where, as noted, one of the strategies for ensuring the quilts were seen as art objects was to strip them of all ideas of their origins in the domestic realm and even of information about their makers. Instead, they were art because they had been seen to be so by 'experts'. By excluding their makers as 'anonymous' workers who had few intentions as artists (Holstein 1972), it was instead the entrepreneur who was presented as the 'creator' of these works as 'art' objects. I see these events as an ongoing dialectic in the interaction of makers, artworks, mediators, dealers, and the recipients (Gell, 1998), or viewers and buyers of those works or images.

### **Anthropologists and Entrepreneurs**

A number of anthropologists have researched and written about the social processes that can be identified in the area of material production and in the traffic in such objects. In particular, aspects of assimilation,

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Bernick also provides figures for a later collection, that of David Pottinger who had moved from Detroit and a job in plastics manufacturing. From 1977 onwards he acquired approximately seven hundred Amish quilts from his base in Indiana. In 1987, knowing that Pottinger had donated a number to a New York museum, the Indiana State Museum raised US\$650,000 through a private endowment and voluntary fundraising to keep the collection in Indiana. Bernick notes: "The cost to Indiana was more than \$1000 per quilt; at the time Pottinger was collecting [c.1977] even the finest of examples of Amish quilts could be bought for only a few hundred dollars" (Bernick 1995:138).



transformation, appropriation and commodification are used in different ways to re-present these items as goods of particular value within local and global systems of capitalist exchange.

In their important book *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (1995) George Marcus and Fred Myers write of Molly Mullin's chapter about another set of strategies at work in an art market. These involved similar approaches to those used to elevate the status of the previously unrecognised Amish and Gee's Bend quilts.

The creation of the Indian Art market was not the simple, inexorable development of an American national imagery... but was... the product of a complexly located group of upper-class women whose interests, concerns and dreams neither match nor reflect those of profiteers or politicians (Marcus and Myers 1995:10).

As they note, Mullin focusses on the way "value is produced" [and] "how such practices and products are made to have meanings or are signified" (Marcus and Myers 1995:10). In this case, Mullin is arguing for the need to continue to question "the processes by which artefacts become art" (Mullin 1995:186). She describes how, during the early twentieth century, American Indian Art was commodified and promoted as a means of creating a uniquely North American cultural identity that could be differentiated from the settlers' European origins and heritage. The focus of this new national cultural identity, she notes, citing a writer of 1922, was the United States' south west, with its combination of American Indian, and Spanish Colonial influences. The area offered "antique furniture... inexpensive land and labour, and architecture, which, like pottery, weaving and silver jewellery, could be "praised as a true product of America" and a "purely indigenous art" (Mullin 1995:169). This combination of place and aesthetic elements has come to be known as 'Santa Fe Style'.

Two prominent women were among the early entrepreneurs of this fashion – a newspaper heiress from New York, Amelia White; and a prominent Republican suffragist from Philadelphia, Margretta Stewart Dietrich (Mullin 1995:172, 173).

Dietrich... bought up large tracts of land while joining the battle for Indian legal rights... Both White and Dietrich, along with an extensive network of

other wealthy arts patrons and less wealthy artists and anthropologists, began to amass substantial collections of Indian art and threw themselves into a decades-long campaign to promote “authentic” Indian art and to institutionalise standards of evaluating it (Mullin 1995:173).

Mullin notes that in many instances around this time Indians who were ‘on display’ at many events:

... were used as a foil for industrial progress and treated as objects of curiosity... [whereas] ...The sponsors of the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts sought instead to ally Indians with the romantic discourse of art rather than commerce, with the museum rather than the carnival, the elite rather than the crowd (Mullin 1995:173).

Their emphasis in promoting this genre of art was that the objects were to be seen as *art*, rather than as in their earlier framing, as ethnographic artefacts. These early entrepreneurs were then active in shaping the nature and form of the work that was being made, and to this end focussed on “older Indian artwork as their standard of authenticity and excellence” (Mullin 1995:174) and by way of educating potential buyers. Mullin suggests that this form of ‘cultural authority’ was a strategy designed to differentiate their product from the “many silly things” (177) and “trashy stuff” (174) that was sold in either department stores or at tourist venues (Mullin 1995:174-177).

While the patronage of these investors was mostly welcomed by individual artists, Indian Fairs, where awards and cash prizes were made, led at least one critic in 1935 to argue that “patronage, inevitably selective and arbitrary, encouraged rivalry, political and economic inequality, and divisiveness among the pueblos” (Mullin 1995:179). Here Mullin notes that at the same time, not all the groups of producers wished to compete with one another for prizes (Mullin 1995:179).

A number of other projects were designed by the collectors and entrepreneurs to influence the work of the artists. One was the practice of “distributing photographs of old Navajo blankets among their own collections and encouraging weavers to use them as examples” (Mullin 1995:181). Another example cited by Mullin, and that she notes also continues today was:

...to encourage Indian artists to study the collections in museums in Santa Fe, collections by which new works were judged, thereby strengthening a sense of tradition and aiding artists in the route to authenticity and institutionally sanctioned taste (Mullin 1995:181).

Mullin also argues that underlying this whole project were fears surrounding notions of identity that were related to the impact and expansion of consumer capitalism at that time, and the resulting standardisation of products.

The ugliness of commodity-dependent masses is the implicit threat looming on the horizon in the discourse of Indian arts patrons in the 1920's and 1930's, as well as much other discourse of the period concerning culture... There were also concerns that that Indians themselves might be drawn into the ranks of the masses, particularly as they increasingly produced handmade wares for sale and purchased mass-produced commodities for their own use (Mullin 1995:184).

Citing Ulf Hannerz (1990:250) she notes: 'There can be no cosmopolitans without locals' and, in addition, identifies what she sees as a stronger element in the discourse than the desire to preserve difference: "an apocalyptic sense that difference is getting out of control – particularly out of control of elites at that time (including the anthropologists)" (Mullin 1995:185).

In Mullin's discussion of the appropriation of 'primitive' art into the world of fine art, it can be seen that this was effected by a change in the strategies of re-presentation. Shelly Errington (1998) describes this process of discourse and display of Indian-made objects that has many aspects in common with those demonstrated in the transformation of quilts in the 1971 Whitney case history.

Between the two world wars and into the 1950's, one of the most important ways art historians and museum curators talked about, hence selected, certain kinds of objects over others to become authentic primitive art was according to their "formal qualities." In practice this could not help but mean, more or less (but usually more), how closely the objects approximated the formal qualities, the "look," of high modernist art. The formal qualities discourse claims these objects are valuable aesthetically, divorced from any of their uses or meanings in the societies that produced them (Errington 1998:92).

A dedicated strategy to assert and confirm these criteria can be seen in the quote that Errington supplies that comes from the 1941 catalogue for the MoMA exhibit "Indian Art of the United States":

In theory, it should be possible to arrive at a satisfactory aesthetic evaluation of the art of any group without being much concerned with its cultural background. *A satisfactory organisation of lines, spaces, forms, shades and colours* should be self evident wherever we find it (Douglas and d'Harnoncourt 1941:11, cited in Errington 1998: 93) (my italics).

The two authors cited, do acknowledge that “knowing something about the culture that produced the object” can, in practice, save many errors (Errington 1998:93). Such considerations are therefore more for the benefit of the museum (in this case) than for that of the makers.

Considering Mullin's analysis (following Hannerz), it can be argued that in the early years of the twentieth century Euro-Americans in North America were searching for a 'different' cultural identity than their inherited European one and thus chose to promote the work of an indigenous group. However, there came a point at which the products of this 'different' culture were reframed and re-presented, divorced from the context of their making, as objects of 'fine art' on the grounds of their 'formal' qualities. In this situation, Indian art can be seen to have been assimilated into the culture of a 'higher' (Euro-American) art world.

Another case demonstrating processes of transformation, commodification and assimilation, is described in the writing of an American museum curator, Christopher Steiner. Steiner has carried out fieldwork among African art traders in rural and urban areas of Côte d'Ivoire. He identifies the strategies used by these art dealers, who act as middlemen: “moving objects and artefacts across institutional obstacles which often they themselves have constructed in order to restrict direct contact or trade” (Steiner 1995:151).

He notes that in his area of research:

Art objects and cultural artefacts enter the market in two ways. Either they are bought from village inhabitants who are motivated by financial or personal reasons to sell family heirlooms and ritual paraphernalia, or they are purchased from artists who produce directly for the export trade. Both used and made-for-sale materials are collected by African traders who travel through rural communities in search of whatever they believe can be resold (Steiner 1995:152).

Such entrepreneurship requires some understanding on the part of these middlemen, of the world into which the items will be moved. With experience and knowledge they are able to manipulate objects through strategies of presentation, description and alteration (Steiner 1995:152). These strategies can be seen to have many elements in common with the cases already outlined. In particular Steiner discusses the framing of the act of “discovery” which he relates to the similar “longstanding tradition in travel writing that involves an author’s arduous exploration for genuine cultural objects – the more difficult the search – the more authentic the find” (Steiner 1995:152, 153). There are tales of relentless searches, of being taken to special, obscure, hidden or secret places, or, there is the tale of a serendipitous experience of ‘chance’ discovery or the “gifted connoisseur... who first “sees” the aesthetic quality of a piece and thereby “transforms” a neglected artefact into an object of art” (Steiner 1995:154). In a case of ‘double dealing,’ these “gifted connoisseurs” are also sometimes lured to their discovery through the entrepreneurial practices of the middlemen (Steiner 1995:155).

Verbal cues that affect the buyer’s judgment of authenticity or taste are also used. They may relate to the history of an object, its cultural meaning, or its traditional use. Borrowing from Gregory Bateson (1951:210) Steiner adds that in such strategies of metacommunication:

The sender’s messages... are “tailored to fit” according to his ideas about the receiver, and they include instructions on how the receiver should interpret their content (Steiner 1995:157).

Some of the African artefacts are sold with a documented pedigree which may include previous owners. Alternatively, the ‘biography’ (following Kopytoff 1986) or the history of the piece may be hidden so that potential buyers can believe they are the first to be offered such an object (Steiner 1995:157).

Steiner describes a number of strategies used by both producers and dealers to physically alter objects (Steiner 1995:160). Similar strategies are in evidence in other areas of art and antique collecting. Artificial aging

of furniture, artificial fading of textiles, repairs and reconstructions, or even such practices as the removal or exposure of genitalia or the garments that cover them, all work in different contexts and times to suit changing tastes and societal mores, or to deceive or reassure potential buyers and collectors about provenance or authenticity.

In addition, it is important to note that the Western interest in African-made objects as 'art' has also resulted from a history of appropriation and promotion by Western artists such as Picasso, Brancusi and Braque who were inspired by the 'form' and aesthetics of African sculpture.

Finally, and importantly in the field of anthropology, the writing of Fred Myers has recorded the way work by Australian Aborigines, seen by them as an intrinsic part of their culture, has been reconstructed as "art" in Australian and North American fine arts discourse (most recently see Myers 2002). Drawing on his continuing fieldwork, Myers has traced the history of this story of transformation and commodification first, of bark paintings, and then of acrylic "dot" paintings. The content of the latter, derived from patterns normally drawn in the earth with natural pigments, were 'repackaged' in acrylic paint on board and transported and promoted in fine art galleries in Sydney and New York. In the case of the "dot" paintings, their perceived value in Western art circles initially lay in their similarities to the large works of Western minimalist and abstract painters. This story began during the 1950's and provides a long and complex tale that demonstrates a number of the strategies described in the cases above.

In comparing these different studies of the traffic in made objects, it can be seen that elements of the objects' origins may be either, erased or downplayed, or else emphasised and supplemented, as the corresponding need is seen to exist when they are presented in new contexts. Transformed, either physically or through strategies of discourse and display, they are presented to new viewers and potential buyers who may

never know, or understand, the full circumstances of the context of their making.

### **The New York Artworld c. 1960**

Artists have finally been accepted as idea men and not merely as craftsmen with poetic thoughts.

Seth Siegelau 1969 (cited in Alberro 2003:152)

To mistake an artwork for a real object is no great feat when an artwork is the real object one mistakes it for.

Arthur Danto (2003:37)

In an example of art world writing that is both anthropological and historical, philosopher Alexander Alberro has written of the strategies of the New York entrepreneur, who, in the 1960's, Alberro argues, effectively built the careers of the leading conceptual artists of the time.

The figure of the artist transformed dramatically during the 1960's. The fit-for-Hollywood fiction of the tragic individual heroically converting raw matter into high art had already been challenged in its ascendancy during the 1950's, and manifestly revised on a variety of levels by the beginning of the following decade. But as the 1960's progressed, a new generation of artists went considerably beyond undermining concepts of personal expression in art, in favour of a persistent experimentation with novel methods and materials coupled with an unprecedented careerism. In the process, they increasingly resembled personnel in other professions in which success came to those who managed and publicised their work most strategically (Alberro 2003:1).

Alberro describes in detail, the prevailing conditions and the strategies by which art curator and dealer, Seth Siegelau, promoted a particular group of artists which included Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt and Laurence Weiner, among others. While a number of these artists were already employing the strategies of the world of commercial advertising as a way of promoting both their work and themselves, Siegelau, was one of the first gallery owners to fully embrace these strategies, including exploiting his social connections. He did so to an extent that caused the traditional arbiters of successful fine art – the highly specialised art critics – to be replaced by the “entrepreneurial, innovative, and often historically

naïve art dealer”... who was instead skilled in the arts of publicity and promotion (Alberro2003:9).

The challenge that conceptual art presented for the dealer was, that, in many cases, there was often no longer an easily recognisable object that could be purchased, carried home or to the corporate office, and hung on a wall. Alberro argues that while many accounts of this era:

... have tended to claim that conceptual art strove to negate the commodity status of art but failed ... there was never a moment when they [the artists] did not seek to market the art [and, as Alberro describes, also themselves] (Alberro 2003:4).

As examples of the marketing strategies, Alberro focusses in particular on the articulation of the world of corporate business and the world of art making and dealing. Among the many strategies used by Siegelau, the catalogue became a crucial element of communication, as he viewed the work as being able to be split into ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ information:

... the separation of art ideas that are abstract by their very nature from the raw matter on which primary information relies for presentation meant that linguistic and graphic information presented in the catalogue or other forms of printed media played an unprecedented role in artistic communication (Alberro 2003:56).

Because of the esoteric and incomprehensible nature of many works Siegelau developed a strategy of supplementing the information in the catalogues with secondary information such as: “... laudatory reviews, interviews, and public discussions by the artists articulating the epistemological basis for this work” (Alberro 2003:57). By these means he was able to reach a much larger public than that which would normally engage with such work, not only locally but also internationally.

... the potential audience for catalogues was both enormous and diverse, since the printed matter circulated in a myriad of different contexts and countries (Alberro 2003:57).

Alberro’s historically sited analysis of Siegelau’s tactics shows that the “conceptual art movement was founded not just by artists” ... but also by this new kind of entrepreneur: “the freelance curator” ... In addition, this particular curator’s development of a new legal agreement increasing the artist’s rights [Alberro 2003:163-170]... “...unwittingly codified the overlap between capitalism and the arts” (Alberro 2003:Cover).



As noted in the closing section of Chapter Three, these events have all taken place, along with the related writing, during a period of immense change in ideas about aesthetics, art and architecture, and about the nature of made goods, including those that are mass produced - household goods, and technology. Affecting the ideologies of 'art', 'design', 'taste' and 'style' that surround these productions, were a number of ideas about beauty, decoration, and technical skill, that also impacted on the way such items were viewed in the arena of twentieth century culture.

### **Beauty**

It is not easy to say how we categorise things like red roses as beautiful. The beauty of the roses is not out there in the world... And yet there is *some* sort of basis for claiming that the roses are beautiful. After all, there is quite a lot of human agreement that roses are beautiful and that cockroaches are ugly.

Cynthia Freeland (2001:10, 11)

Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it.

Arthur Danto (2003:160)

In his 2003 book *The Abuse of Beauty*, the philosopher Arthur Danto, traces the rise and fall of "beauty" as an essential element in the arts. He discusses the way that by the mid twentieth century, not only beauty, but a number of other previously essential elements were being dismissed by what he calls the "intractable avant-garde" of the art world.

Not only beauty and mimesis, but almost everything that had figured in the life of art had been erased. The definition of art would have to be built on the ruins of what had been thought to be the concept of art in previous discourses (Danto 2003:xvi).

Danto traces the way art movements such as minimalism, resulted from the modernist movement being presented by critics such as Clement Greenburg as a kind of "conceptual cleansing" (Danto 2003:20). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the creation or representation of beauty was one of the aims and prerequisites of art. Within fifty years this status, as it had been known, was erased. Shortly after this, the idea of the artist

basing his or her art on respecting a particular medium and exploring its qualities (the medium is the message) also “vanished from contemporary discourse” (Danto 2003:20).

Danto’s writing in this volume derives from his realisation that by “connecting the history of modern art together with [his] own philosophical interest in the definition of art” (Danto 2003:14) he could argue that beauty in art objects was internal rather than external (Danto 2003:14). In addition, he also argues that beauty is a value “like truth and goodness [and as such is] one of the values that defines what a fully human life means” (Danto 2003:15). On the basis of this realisation, he sets about exploring the ways that this value may be reintegrated into our thinking about art and about life in general. Having previously ignored beauty as an element of the visual arts in his earlier writings (1964 and 1981) Danto felt the need to address what he saw was a “crisis of sorts”... “the passing from artistic consciousness of the idea of beauty” (Danto 2003:14).

In her analysis of the history of representation of the female figure in the arts, Wendy Steiner also provides another discussion of the twentieth century’s ‘troublesome’ relationship with beauty. Steiner sees the rejection of beauty as part of the wider rejection of ‘femininity’ and the elements that were associated with that concept. Her subjects of analysis include not just the visual arts, but also literature, architecture, pornography, and ideas about male beauty. She argues that beauty appears to be under reconsideration:

Major museums are mounting exhibitions of work that only a few decades ago was considered far too pretty or sensuous or complacent to have been taken seriously... Invoking beauty has become a way of registering the end of modernism and the opening of a new period in culture (Steiner 2001:xv).

### **Decoration**

Alongside the erasure of beauty from the world of Western art in the twentieth century, ‘decoration’ also came under attack within the discourse of aesthetics, value and style in architecture, and also within art world

discourse. In his review essay of a number of circa 1990 books on the decorative arts in France, Tag Gronberg (1992) provides a useful snapshot of the way decoration in the early years of twentieth century France, was often framed in derogatory terms as 'feminine' and 'primitive'.

The figure behind this ideology was the 'modernist hero', Le Corbusier. Gronberg notes the way that following a 1925 Paris exhibition, which showcased the fine quality hand made luxury items being made in France at that time, Le Corbusier, demonstrating Darwinist thinking, criticised decoration as:

...emblematic of an earlier, 'primitive' state of civilisation: 'gilt decoration and precious stones are the work of the tamed savage who is still alive in us'... and represented an outdated 'past' against which 'objects of utility' were defined as 'modern' (Gronberg 1992:550).

The theme of Gronberg's review is that modernism was defined by being placed in opposition to decoration as *Other*. The books he reviewed, focus on interior decoration in terms of commodification and consumption. Gronberg notes the "heavily gendered imagery" of the era. In one instance an interior is described as the "ultimate sanctuary for work and meditation" ... for an aesthete or an art lover [both male] (Gronberg 1992:550). In another where he cites the reviewer of an early exhibition of *Art Nouveau* objects who claims: 'it all smacks of ... the Jewess addicted to morphine' ... Gronberg sees this interior "construed as the product of a deranged (and alien) femininity" (Gronberg 1992:551).

For le Corbusier, the idea of the interior – the home – as the creation of woman was anathema. Consumption, in the sense of shopping, is also disallowed, dismissed in terms of 'a shopgirl's aesthetic'. Ostentatious display and elaborate ornamentation are characterised as Eastern decadence: 'such stuff founders in a narcotic haze.' (Gronberg 1992:551).

Gronberg notes Clement Greenberg's characterisation of decoration as "the 'spectre that haunts modernist painting'" (Gronberg 1992,). This quote is cited in Peter Wollen's (1987) essay in which he also emphasises the way the discourse of the time focussed on "a dominant modernist aesthetic based on ideas of functional rationality" (Gronberg 1992:547) in which ornament and femininity played no part. In arguing his case Wollen

asserts that “Modernist art histories rewrite artistic careers, stressing (for example) Picasso’s Cubist paintings, but denigrating his work for theatre” (Gronberg 1992:547). Gronberg notes that Wollen’s essay “has engaged with ‘craft’ and the ‘decorative arts’ in an attempt to reveal the interests – and hence disrupt the power relationships – sustained by modernist practices” (Gronberg 1992:548). Wollen’s essay, along with the work of others such as Parker and Pollock (1981), can be seen as one of the early examples that questioned modernist discourse surrounding the area of ‘craft’ production. Gronberg concludes that all three of the books that he reviews “demonstrate that the *arts décoratifs* demarcate an important symbolic terrain for conflicts over identity and empowerment” (Gronberg 1992:552).

Bridget Elliot and Janice Helland (2002) have co-edited a volume that explores a number of the issues that are involved in the discussion of women and the ‘decorative’ arts. Elliot and Helland also comment on the dismissive and condemnatory attitudes of Le Corbusier, Alfred Loos, and Clement Greenburg [again] “the leading tastemakers of the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Elliot and Helland 2002:2). They also describe the way these three men justified their dismissal of decoration and ornament:

...on the grounds that they were sentimental, nostalgic and old fashioned... these male critics associated decorative practices with foreign, primitive, communal, decadent and feminine influences (Elliot and Helland 2002: 2).<sup>17</sup>

Elliot and Helland also comment on the way ‘detail’ “as a Western aesthetic category ... [is now] ... [u]ndergoing a startling reversal of fortune” (Elliot and Helland 2002:3). Citing Naomi Schor (1987) they note:

... the doubly gendered nature of feminine detail which she locates in a semiotic field that is ‘bounded on one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose “prosiness” is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women’ (Elliot and Helland 2002:3).

The authors also describe the time lags between ideas regarding aesthetics and art criticism over the last three centuries. At the time when

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<sup>17</sup> James Trilling (2001) identifies a number of the factors that helped bring about the “repudiation of ornament” ... One is the advent of mass production, another is ... “the pivotal role of the Austrian architect Alfred Loos, who in 1908 equated ornament with crime”... and lastly ... “that the future belonged not to ornament but to industrial design” (Trilling 2001:9, 10).

aestheticians were condemning ornament during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the artworld was embracing it. During the twentieth century they argue that this situation was reversed when theorists in other disciplines were re-evaluating the place of ornamental detail: “leading art critics were influenced by [the earlier] Kantian and Hegelian ideas and routinely denounced it” (Elliot and Helland 2002:4). On the basis of this observation the two authors suggest that that twentieth century female artists who are the subject of their book, rather than being ‘nostalgically old fashioned’, may instead have been ahead of their time (Elliot and Helland 2002:2).

### **Technical Skill**

Most art is crafted in some way, whether it is from the craft of painting, sculpting or some other form of manual application or construction. Confusion in the past has resulted from the arbitrary division of such work (as noted in Chapter Two) into the categories ‘craft’ and ‘art’. This categorisation developed along contested lines of hierarchy, gender and media (Parker and Pollock 1981:51, Elliot and Helland 2002:7). However, with the advent of conceptual art, the process of ‘making’ or ‘crafting’ in some form or other, no longer always applies. Instead, a work may rely simply on a particular thing or event being re-contextualised. With the prevailing thought that ‘anything can be art’ it followed that the ability to become ‘art’ inhered in all objects and phenomena. The possibility is there in rocks, in photographic images and video and sound recordings (i.e. technical reproductions of other things); in textiles, in paint, in snow, in fields and pieces of string. It may also be made or produced by someone other than ‘the artist’. Art appears to have become about ideas and perceptions and so it is harder to decide *whose* ideas and *which* perceptions hold the elements that can enable their productions to be hailed as ‘art’. In addition to this, ‘artists’ need no longer undertake the long process of learning any particular craft.

The devaluing and absence of decoration, and also of traditional ideas about beauty which I described above, were the result of an underlying

ideology that also saw a decline in the valuing of the processes of 'making by hand'. This state of affairs continued for much of the twentieth century and as noted was further compounded by the arrival on the scene of 'readymade' art that began with Duchamp circa 1910 and reached its full realisation during from the late 1950's onwards.

Earlier concern about standardisation as a result of industrialisation and mass production, led to a number of brief revivals in the valuing of the handmade, with the first of these being the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. A similar revival occurred later in the twentieth century with the increase in studio 'craftspeople' such as painters, ceramicists, glass workers and weavers, who were as much driven by the desire for a particular (and often semi-rural) lifestyle, as they were for their engagement with their particular *materia media* (Dormer 1988).

In his 1988 essay, and in his 1994 book *The Art of the Maker*, Peter Dormer provides a useful analysis of the history, ideologies and beliefs about of the value of the 'hand made'. He describes how, before the advent of mass production, many items were made in workshops where artisans of many types produced the items that people used in their households and buildings. As well, before the industrial revolution, this included the many other specialty areas of production, such as fittings for ships. Dormer describes the way studio craft production has changed from an activity that had utility as its goal, to one where the goal is aesthetic value. He argues that in the situation where people visit an artisan's workshop because they "need" to buy a particular item to use:

... everyone is clear on what is needed; but in a situation where people turn up to see what you are doing and might or might not buy something depending on the look of your work appealing to their fancy, then some of the rules are lost (Dormer 1988:138).

In addition, more 'rules' become lost when such work also came to be seen as having to be about 'ideas'. Studio craftspeople now also exhibit in gallery spaces with their work sometimes being presented as "art", further complicating perceptions of use, aesthetics and art status. Despite

another twelve years of 'progress' being made by those working in this area of production, Dormer's assessment in 1994 still holds true in many instances today.

Acceptance now depends on denying or subverting craft, or insisting that craft is the least important aspect of the work. Even then, a work in what is perceived to be a craft medium, such as clay or glass or textiles, is seldom accepted as art. Such orthodoxies and prejudices may be unfair or illogical, but they exist; they are as common as the prejudices of social distinction, manners and class which permeate North American and European society (Dormer 1994:27).

Dormer explores the way the hierarchy that has seen "craft" production as a lesser activity than art production, has been related to ideas about the value of skill and craft knowledge.

The orthodoxy of modernism, which is still strong, is that craft knowledge is separable from meaning in the visual arts – that technique is merely the means by which ideas are executed rather than conceived. An appeal to the intrinsic virtues of craft knowledge in art is currently regarded as either professionally quixotic or philistine (Dormer 1994:26).

Dormer lists the following common prejudices about craft knowledge:

- a) Craft knowledge is merely mechanical.
- b) Craft knowledge can be learned as and when you need it.
- c) Craft knowledge and 'having ideas' or 'being creative' are separate activities.
- d) Craft knowledge is separate from making aesthetic judgments.
- e) Craft knowledge is rule-based and rules conflict with personal creativity.
- f) Craft knowledge is about forming habits, and habits also conflict with or inhibit creativity (Dormer 1994:8).

Using examples that range from traditional art making practices through to media produced on computers, Dormer then proceeds to show the fallacy in these prejudices and argues instead that:

... process and content are interdependent...[and] ...that craft knowledge itself enriches individual experience and becomes a part of the self that is expressed in art or studio craft (Dormer 1994:8).

Similarly to Arthur Danto in his re-evaluation of beauty, Dormer provides an argument for the re-recognition and valuing of manual skill and knowledge. He focusses in particular on what he describes as "tacit" knowledge. Not easily described in empirical terms, tacit knowledge is the particular type of knowledge that results from an "interaction between practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge" (Dormer 1994:10). It is

acquired through 'doing' and 'making' and is not always easily translatable through language.

Such knowledge could perhaps be best described as the micro steps of action and thought that need to come together to carry out an action such as the experience when first engaging with a new form of technology. Dormer argues that such skill is not always a 'quick learning' process that one picks up when one chooses, but rather is built slowly in the processes of making and doing. He describes the way the deeper dimensions of knowledge and skill, or intuition, in such diverse activities as nursing and piano playing, are built up over many years of practice, and involve elements that are often difficult to quantify.

Tacit knowledge may be impossible to articulate precisely, but it may certainly be demonstrated: the virtuoso knows how in a way the amateur does not (Dormer 1994:17).

In considering that much of the denigration of 'hand' craft occurred at intervals over a time when ideas of "individual genius" (Battersby 1998:305-313; Guerilla Girls 1998) and the "conceptual" held the dominant position of value in the arts, it may be useful to compare this devaluing with the similar contemporary devaluing of manual labour. In a case that has some useful parallels, Kathryn Dudley (1994) researched and wrote of the various ideologies that came to inform opposing sides of a dispute that was common as many Western countries de-industrialised during the latter half of the twentieth century, and as they shipped industrial production to countries where labour was much cheaper.

Those who had worked in these industries were faced with competing in a market that not only no longer valued their strength and skill but also provided fewer opportunities where these could be used. Those who had forgone the immediate rewards of what had been relatively well paid production line jobs, and had paid to continue their formal education, often resulting initially in lower paid jobs, now felt the factory workers had no one to blame but themselves because they had frequently held their employers to ransom in pursuit of that higher pay.



The old order has been rejected and a new order is taking its place – one in which hard work is measured not by physical exertion, but by educational credentials and *individual* accomplishments. In this new order, people are rewarded for “thinking” not “sweating.” For brains not brawn, and for the time they have invested in developing their minds (Dudley 1994:60, emphasis added).

Within this ideology of what she terms the ‘culture of the mind’ Dudley analyses the ideas of evolution, morality, and ‘individual meritocracy’ that inform this discussion in its framing the physical, and work ‘done with the hands’ as a lesser form of activity. It is one that permeates much of twentieth century discourse, whether it is to do with the labour market, or with the valuing of the time that is spent in ‘making’.

This chapter so far, has provided a brief overview of the many overlapping discourses that have formed the cultural environment in which twentieth century women, and some men, created art. Many different ideologies can be seen to have influenced the changing movements in architectural design and in the visual arts. The dominant discourse of modernity, as well as post-modern movements in art have not only ignored or deplored many of the objects made by women, they have also effectively erased from art history the more decorative aspects of the work of many male artists.

In addition to these international influences which, in the past have been filtered through what were barriers of geographical distance and delayed communication, New Zealand has its own particular history that has also impacted on ideas of art and object making in this country. As noted in chapter one of this thesis Rosemary McLeod discusses many issues relating to this, in her historical account of domestic object production in her family during the first half of the century. Many of the gender issues that she describes are also evident in the wider New Zealand arts scene. Historical and sociological factors worked together to frame New Zealand as a masculine landscape, in which existed a particularly masculine mindscape.

## No Golden Mists – The Construction of a National Identity

There is no golden mist in the air, no Merlin in our woods, no soft warm, colour to breed a school of painters from the stock of Turner, Crome, Cotman and Wilson Steer. Hard, clear light reveals the bones, the sheer form, of hills, trees, stones and scrub. We must draw rather than paint, even if we are using a brush, or we shall not be perfectly truthful.

A.R.D. Fairburn 1934

It can be seen from the above discussions that the development of much of the art production in the United States, during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was driven by dealer interests. In contrast, Francis Pound (1986, 1996) describes the way that in New Zealand much of the art that was made from the 1930's to the 1970's, was closely aligned to the output of New Zealand writers of fiction and non-fiction in that period. He argues that writers, in particular, were active in creating a New Zealand identity – one that was separate and different from that of 'Mother England'. Artists became partners in the pursuit of this venture.

The kind of audience that Nationalist art had at first, the kind of audience which inaugurated it, and which published criticism about it, was very largely, or most noisily, a *literary* audience. Nationalist painting shared with the literati all their myths and predispositions. This painting was a vine which twined about their column – its fitting ornament (Pound 1996:187).

Pound highlights the close relationship between the literati, the authors and critics of the day, and those individuals who painted pictures of New Zealand landscapes and people. This resulted in what he calls a "Nationalist rhetoric of words and paint" (Pound 1996:189).

In the New Zealand Nationalist period, there was a whole vast and coherent verbal rhetoric about painting ... a rhetoric at once of words and paint, a discourse with its own set of rules, and its own codes of exclusion. This discourse provided at once an engendering ground, a rich humus from which a certain kind of painting was born, and a receptive and yielding ground into which that painting was welcomed, and too, the very intelligibility by which it might be understood (Pound 1996:189).

What was proposed by a number of commentators of the time was that the main subject of New Zealand painting should be the New Zealand landscape.

Furthermore, that landscape had to be painted in a high contrasted, hard-edged style, in accord with a much vaunted quality of New Zealand light – its hard edged clarity and high contrast (Pound 1996:189).

Pound further emphasises that, if an artist was to be taken seriously, *he* (and the 'phallicism of National rhetoric' is noted) was expected to paint in this idiom or, be "left out in the cold" (Pound 1996:189).

Landscape painting can be seen to have dominated the art of New Zealanders of European descent for much of their history until now. The early painters were mostly topographical draftsmen whose early work resembled the styles of Europe. Up until the beginning of the awareness of a sense of national identity, the changing styles of realist, romantic, sublime, impressionist, abstract expressionist and abstraction and formalism, followed the same pattern as that of the European 'masters'. As in Europe, those forms of art made by women, in particular their botanical studies, have always been viewed as of less artistic significance. Their textile productions, made in the domestic realm, were not considered at all by the art establishment.

Although landscape painting as such may have lost its prominence as the art that is to be 'taken seriously', the ghost of the rhetoric remains, popping up frequently in contemporary discussions about New Zealand art, as though its elements, such as the 'hard-edged clarity of light', are indisputable facts. Most books on New Zealand painting cite these elements. Likewise, a browse through a greeting card stand at any stationery or book-shop will provide any number of such scenes on those cards that represent New Zealand themes, showing that the genre still persists. In addition, it has been continued within many of the pictorial and figurative quilts made by New Zealand quilters.

Pound's chapter on arts writing is in the book *Headlands* which accompanied the 1996 landmark exhibition of New Zealand contemporary art which was shown in Sydney and a number of New Zealand cities. Also of particular interest here is the fact that apart from the use of a small amount of jute and hessian, and a great deal of canvas, upon which various types of paint have been applied; only one purely textile piece of work was included in this exhibition. That was a "Korowai (feathered

cloak) made from muka (flax fibres) and kaka feathers” (Barr (ed.) 1996:218). A number of mixed media pieces are described, including one of PVA glue on canvas, some photographs, some works in wood and aluminium, sand and collage, but no other textiles.

In 1993 New Zealand celebrated one hundred years of women’s suffrage. A number of exhibitions of women’s art were mounted at this time. While there were some examples of the use of textiles in these exhibitions, it could be seen that women artists at this time were still not comfortable in the very ‘feminine’ and ‘decorative’ side of their history (cf. Rosemary McLeod’s 2005 book). Even examples of the fine craftwork that had been made by women as part of the New Zealand Arts and Crafts movement in the earlier part of the twentieth century were not included. While many of the female artists made some headway towards creating art that was uniquely theirs, to a large extent it mirrored in form, what was already being done in the wider world of – predominantly male artists.

In the textiles section of a book of New Zealand craft (Blumhardt 1981) almost all of the examples shown are of weaving. The only examples of quilting that have been included are a couple of appliqué style ‘pictures’. Although by this time the revival of quilting was well and truly underway, it was still to be recognised in the world of craft-making – let alone that of art.

If we argue that there is a gap or an absence of women’s art production in the history of art, then the recent history of quilting in New Zealand represents a yawning chasm in the wider national arts discourse. One of the purposes of my research (to use a metaphor from the discipline of structural engineering) is to pour some solid material into that chasm to help provide a better foundation for future recorders of this history.

In this chapter I have discussed a number of case histories which demonstrate the many strategies that may be employed in the representation of made objects. I have then focussed on the ideological

environment in which these objects were made and 'received'. I believe that all these factors are valid considerations and have in different ways impacted on the way quilts are perceived as they are presented in private and public spaces. In addition, in my discussion of quilting it will be seen that it is not only the skill and mind of the maker, but also the circumstances of the making, that come together in many cases to make the quilt a potent symbol of life as it is lived.

The first part of the title of this chapter is a play on the words of James Merrill quoted by Clifford Geertz (1983:50):

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?  
But nothing is lost. Or else: all is translation  
And every bit of us is lost in it.

Clifford Geertz drew on this idea while writing of the way the understanding of aspects of one society may be lost when considered from the point of view of those in another society, that is, concepts may be misunderstood, misrepresented or are totally untranslatable. As the case histories in this chapter have demonstrated, in the world of the traffic in art and objects, such losses and omissions can also be part of a deliberate strategy to present such objects in a new way, and to redefine their identity in new terms so that they are – found anew - in transformation.

## Chapter Five

I look at that first quilt that I made... The workmanship is good but colourwise... I gave it to my great-granddaughter recently and she said "Nan, it's beautiful." So there you are. After sitting on it for about twenty years it has become beautiful – in her eyes.

Shirley Smith

I enjoy making quilts and find it very therapeutic. I find your mind turns off and you get lost in what you are doing. I achieve a sense of pride and pleasure when I have completed a quilt and enjoy just looking at it and displaying it.

Janice Bond

Personally, I am not concerned with posterity and am pleased to see my quilts being used and starting to look like it.

Dierdre Spence

As noted in the previous chapters, I have described the way that although quilting in New Zealand is now dominated by a North American influence, this is a relatively recent phenomenon. When I set out to do research in this field I wanted to record the early experiences of today's quilters as a way of gaining an insight into the recent development of the genre. My fieldwork included my own observations, but largely comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews. The following chapters include large parts of these interviews as the women tell their own stories and describe what the activity means for them, their different ways of working, their differing goals for the work they do and their different reasons for making quilts. I could describe these conversations but I believe that including the women's "voices" tells a much more intimate and powerful story and provides a good basis for analysis and for integrating the fieldwork with the theory I have covered.

In this chapter I will 'set the scene' in which many of today's quiltmakers began their careers, often first exploring elements of their English textile heritage, then later embracing the genre as it continued to develop in North America. One of the recurring themes throughout my quilt-related reading, together with my observations made over a number of years, and within the interviews, is the particular connection and affinity that

quiltmakers have with the cloth that is their *materia media*. This 'love of fabric' is, for many quiltmakers, something they have been aware of from when they were very young. The interrelationship of 'fabric' and 'colour' is a powerful force for both inspiring their work and in accounting for their choice of creative medium.

## **Beginnings**

Like many other quiltmakers in New Zealand, Clare Plug's first venture into patchwork as a teenager, reflects her English heritage:

That was in the early 70's I decided I would like to make patchwork. I must have said something about it. Dad said "I know what you do." I think it had been his granny who had lived in their house in Yorkshire and she seemed to spend her life sitting by the fire and doing hexagon patchwork. So he knew about making a 'master' shape. She had a metal one but we ended up drafting a piece of cardboard. But he knew about making the papers. There were books, but he just told me about it. Mum and I didn't believe he knew, but he did (CP).

Clare also commented, like others, that she was not aware of ways of quilting this work.

I didn't really know how to quilt then. I think with English work there seems to be a separation between the hexagons that didn't seem to get quilted so much [and other types of patchwork]. They were more a coverlet - perhaps attached to something else. Even when I have seen them in a museum here they have been attached to commercial quilting or something. ... even in England I'm not sure that they would have quilted a hexagon quilt or a log cabin for that matter. I think they were done more as a coverlet (CP).

Clare Smith was born in England but brought up in Kenya where, as she notes:

I was about fourteen or fifteen and I got a book out of the library which had Grandmother's Flower Garden (hexagons) in it. So someone showed me how to make the hexagons and I stated making it and joining them together... It ended up double bed size but it never got quilted. It was always just like a bedspread because I didn't know how to do the quilting part of it. That was the first one (CS).

Clare's grandmother and great aunts had all sewn for their households and she has inherited her grandmother's sewing box and all her sewing equipment.

Anne Scott's patchworking also began with hexagons:

I started my first quilt when I was about thirteen but I didn't really know what quilts were about. It was hexagons and I sewed a whole lot of Viyella [a finely woven woollen fabric] hexagons together. Then it got put in the cupboard and years later when I had my first child I brought it out and decided to make a quilt but again I didn't know what a quilt was. I knew it had three layers so I got the backing and the batting and I sewed the backing and batting together because I couldn't conceive of a way of stitching all three layers together without getting a terrible mess on the back... So that was my first quilt that I finished. I had made a lot of hexagon coverlets before that – from furnishing fabrics tacked over newspaper, butted together and zig-zagged together on the machine – vast ones. Then when my son was born (he's eighteen now) I was given a quilt by my mother's bridesmaid and looked at it and thought – I could make one of these. So that's how I started. That was in 1987 (AS).

“Making hexagons” represents the first experiences of piecing for many quiltmakers in this country. Almost all the quiltmakers interviewed, as well as many of the guild quilters, talked of having made hexagons as their first form of patchwork. This seems to indicate that there was a continuing tradition that enabled the practice to be continued. Because the majority of our early European settlers came from Britain, it was the existence of known patchwork techniques from that geographical area that mostly influenced the first efforts of the new generation of quiltmakers. What does not appear to have been continued by the early European immigrants is the practice of hand quilting. This represents a rupture in a tradition that had been alive and flourishing in Britain for several centuries and continued there into the twentieth century. A closer examination of the temporal and regional aspects of emigration, as well as the concurrent invention and availability of the domestic sewing machine, may provide some explanations for this rupture in tradition. However, despite this absence the situation was to change dramatically as the influence from North America, as discussed in chapter two, began at first to filter through and then to dominate the field.

Katherine Morrison had sewn some patchwork items but became more involved while at home caring for her young family during the 1980's. She joined a quilting group for the social contact.



I find the whole history of it fascinating. It just grips me so I've been doing it for twenty years now and the more I do the more excited I am. I'm really passionate about it. Making bedcovers – it's odd really – all that comfort, security and caring thing (KM).

Jo Cornwall began making quilts while attending art classes to complete a fine arts preliminary course during the early 1970's. At the time she needed a new quilt for her bed and had been given a large bag of fabric scraps. Her mother and grandmother made patchwork covers for their households.

It was only going to be one quilt but I really liked working with fabric. As a child I used to play with fabric. Mum would give us scraps. We didn't actually do much with them. We just seemed to like playing with fabric. We would drape it and wrap it around. But once I had made the one quilt I thought I would really like to make another (JC).

Patchwork and appliqué quilts quickly became Jo's chosen medium and she exhibited her work in commercial galleries frequently throughout the 1980's.

Shirley Smith learned her quilting skills from community classes and notes that it was her attendance at her first quilting symposium classes in Hamilton (1996) that enabled her to learn that "you can be adventurous with colours – which I feel I am" (SS).

Shirley was brought up in an orphanage from the age of nine, after her mother had died. Shirley commented that she had had to teach herself all her basic sewing skills until she began high school. She worked for many years as the wardrobe mistress for the local operatic society where she made all the costumes for their productions. She wishes she had found patchwork and quilting earlier but has nevertheless created a large body of work, particularly enjoying the designing and piecing but often having someone else quilt the work.

Esther Woollaston has stitched various items from when she was five years old. At this time, living in difficult family circumstances as part of

what she terms a “bizarre fundamentalist religion”, ‘making things’ was, in a way, a retreat from a world and a family with whom she felt unable to connect. Her first experience with quilting was as an adult when she joined a local patchwork group to ‘have an evening out’. Apart from that early contact she is largely self-taught, feeling, like Katherine Morrison, that it is more important that she “finds her own knowledge”. However, her early quilts were also created using the grid and block format (Packer 1996:4, 5).

Marion Manson was another who attended classes initially for the social contact, having moved with her husband and small child to a new town where she knew no-one. Unlike many in the early groups of quiltmakers, Marion had not sewn before.

I saw an ad in the local fabric shop for patchwork classes and I remember thinking ‘I don’t even like sewing’... so I joined this patchwork group... I was hooked. Hooked, line and sinker, I was history (MM).

*So when you say you didn’t like sewing, did you sew anything at all?*

No. I didn’t even have a sewing machine. My first quilt was all hand stitched, hand pieced and hand quilted... I remember having Roberta Horton [USA] in my early days. She made a very big impression on me... doing Amish, then later a scrap quilt (MM). (Plate 2)

Another early influence on Marion was North American tutor Nancy Martin.

The first symposium I went to was Hastings [1989]. I remember Nancy Martin because she was into quick piecing and that suited me fine. She had brought suitcases and suitcases of quilts that were in her books and I just thought I was in seventh heaven seeing the real thing – being able to touch them (MM).

Donna Ward, who has taught classes since the 1980’s, perhaps more frequently and consistently than any other quiltmaker in New Zealand, also started the activity with little knowledge of actual quilts. Now well known as a teacher in both New Zealand and Australia, Donna has also been the recipient of a number of major awards at exhibitions here. She was also

recently awarded an international teaching scholarship – The Jewel Pierce Patterson Award which is presented annually from Houston, Texas.<sup>1</sup>

Donna remembers her first efforts at patchworking:

I started in my teenage years because I have always sewn and had scraps of fabric around (her mother is a dressmaker, now also a quilter and tutor) and thought I'd make a little hexagon quilt ... paper pieced over... it got quite big actually (DW).

Later, as patchwork shops began to open and Donna met others who were involved in quiltmaking she began her first actual quilt – a traditional *Dresden Plate* design, completely hand pieced and quilted. Donna's first quilting teacher was New Zealand quiltmaker Rowie Naish, who had returned from overseas and tutored some classes at the local embroiderers' guild. Donna also recalled attending a workshop, circa 1989, with North American tutor Roberta Horton, who was visiting the country at the time to teach workshops in Amish and in African American quiltmaking techniques and aesthetics.

*So basically you were picking up your skills from workshops and other people?*

Yes, initially that first workshop but a lot of it was from my sewing skills that I had got since I was little. I had always sewn, always had a sewing machine and just pottered away by myself a lot of the time... To me it is instinctive – it is very instinctive... I've just learned through my instincts as I have gone along – no formal art training or anything like that. And I do it for the enjoyment so it just flows (DW)

Anna Prussing, together with her sisters, was brought up by her grandmother after her mother became ill. She learned not only her sewing skills but also the 'art of living' from her. Having always sewn for her family, Anna discovered patchwork through her sister and began attending classes and building up her skills. One of her early teachers was Marge Hurst, a North American who settled in Wellington.

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<sup>1</sup> In alternate years this scholarship is awarded to a non-American quiltmaking tutor. It involved an opportunity to attend the Houston Quilt Festival and workshops in the first year and then in the second year to return to the festival with an exhibition of her own and her students' work.

We were lucky we had our grandmother. She was brilliant, we adored her. So in a funny sort of way, a bit like Rosemary McLeod who was brought up in her grandmother's house, and she had that huge influence. So I think some of us who were lucky enough to be almost behind a generation are the ones who are now stitching and carrying on because we were given all of that... Much harder to learn it later if it doesn't come naturally (AP).

From the comments of these quiltmakers, several themes emerge. The first is the importance of skills being passed from one generation to the next and of the influence of the British heritage. Although from Marion Manson's and Shirley Smith's stories it can be seen that this passing on of knowledge is not essential, as the skills may still be learned, the influence of family members has been strong in many cases.

The second influence that came to bear on the quiltmakers, superseding the first, was the prevalence of information and techniques brought by either North American tutors who came to New Zealand or by New Zealand women who had learned their skills from such women, either overseas or in New Zealand.

A number of the quiltmakers also appear to see their sewing skills as the result of a 'natural' process. This view fits with received ideas about the innateness of needle skills in women. As noted in chapter three, such beliefs date back to the eighteenth century and the construction of 'the feminine'. Given that men are also stitchers of cloth, may become as adept at fine surgical work as may women, and likewise, be *patient* and *dexterous* when manipulating intricate technology, it can be seen that such beliefs are part of an inherited ideology that shaped the way generations of women 'should' live and behave. Rather than being innate to women in particular, the knowledge they have built up over the years of growing up in families where sewing skills were taught, despite its gendered connotations, could be better described as *tacit* knowledge (Dorner 1994).

Having chosen to interview a number of quiltmakers whom I knew to have been working and exhibiting in a dedicated manner and whose work had frequently featured in awards, I also arranged for a short questionnaire to

be distributed to local guild members. Thinking that perhaps many of these women might use the activity more as a pastime, I wondered if the reasons they gave for making quilts would be any different from those in the first group. I did not set out to compare the two groups as such, but simply to see what they thought about their quilting activity.

The local guild quilters who answered the questionnaire mostly gave a variety of similar reasons to the members of the first group for wanting to make quilts. Although a number of the local guild members stated that they would never sell any of their work, with much of it being presented to friends and family, their reasons for making it as well as for gifting, were not all that different from those in the first group. There was a general feeling by most that they wanted to make use of their *creative* abilities, to do or to have an activity that was 'something for themselves' and that they participated in whenever they had the opportunity. Many had sewn in the past or had mothers or grandmothers who sewed. One in particular, recalled her family's history of making patchwork bedcovers. Many had been attracted to the work after seeing an exhibition of quilts. For many, exhibiting their work was also an important part of their practice.

A number of authors such as Katherine Langellier (1990) and Catherine Cerny (1991) have pointed out that making quilts for family members allows many women to participate in an activity that fulfils their urge to be creative, while at the same time refashioning their feminine identity.

Participation in quilting affirms family relationships and the home where quilts are given and used. But quilting does not contain women in the private sphere and within the traditional definitions of femininity as submissiveness, selfless, service, and dependence: a femininity-for-others. Nor does quilting confine women to their homes; on the contrary it opens vistas to travel and to form relationships and networks with other women. In their identity and activities as quilters, women may relax the constraints of their roles as mothers to children, daughters to ailing parents, and wives to husbands while re-affirming their feminine identity. Quilters may actively participate in quilting with little guilt for their self-indulgence because this appropriately feminine identity is for the most part sanctioned and supported by husbands and families. Quilters exercise control over this highly valued dimension of their lives (Langellier 1990;50).

Langellier also notes that the creative process is one that is in the control of the maker (Langellier 1990:35, 39). What was surprising among the local guild members was the extent to which many of them are working at making quilts in a very focussed and dedicated manner. While for some this activity was an enjoyable pastime that also provided them with social connections, for a number it had become something they were working at in a more serious and focussed way.

When asked what sort of things they did to make time for their quilting activity some answered that their life circumstances had changed and they now had more time available. Reasons that were given for this were changes such as children going to school or growing up and requiring less of their time, or retirement from work or career outside the home. For some however, it was as the result of a change in their priorities. These are some of their answers:

I only do quilting as a hobby. It is fitted into limited time. I need some creative time, no matter how little (GQ1).

[I] plan housework in the evenings throughout the week to give me time at the weekends. If we are away at motor racing I always have a hand piecing or hand quilting project to take with me (MC).

I resigned from my full time job and I have a husband who takes a full share in doing the household chores (MJ).

I look at juggling things at home that are priorities – and usually get them over and done with first. I make lists of current quilt projects for that month and work through it in order of importance. .. [I] sometimes need to do chores late at night to give me a free day in order to quilt (SJ).

Organisation. [I] start as soon as chores are done, early in the morning (JR).

[I] keep household chores up to date so I can go to my sewing space whenever possible (MS).

!! If I really want to I sit down and do it (DM).

- forget to do the housework
- forget the garden
- hire someone to do the above (LMcD).

As soon as I get time to myself I'm off to the sewing room. I lock the door and don't answer the phone (PP).

My quilting is my priority. Now that I live alone I find I have much more time to indulge my passion (NS).

### **Fitting in With Family and Making a Living**

Like many other artists, none of the women included in this study made their full-time living by making and selling their quilts alone, whether through exhibitions or other means. All either gained income from other quilt-related activities, or from a completely different form of paid work, or depended on the support of a partner.

I take care of myself so I have income from other sources as well. I do have a lot of solitude... so having something like a part time job keeps me in touch with humanity in a way, so it doesn't get too eccentric (EW).

Anne Scott has juggled making her own quilts with the demands of publishing a magazine, as well as being a mother of three children.

Well, by its nature patchwork is slices of things, so it's slices of time, so we've got a big island in the kitchen and when they were very little I would be feeding them and cutting out on the island at the same time. So I would do a block a day and it got done, bit by bit...

I used to find with the children when they were younger, I would always get my quilting when they came home from school and I would sit down. So they could talk to you without being one on one. Because I was doing something, they would just come and chat away. So I was just listening (AS).

Although she trained as a radiographer, Clare Smith also continued her interest in learning about textiles, attending Goldbourne College in Canberra where she majored in printmaking. She later studied at Teachers' College and then at Whiterea Polytechnic in Porirua where she gained a diploma in visual design. Clare now frequently teaches workshops in design, fabric dyeing, machine quilting, collage quilting, as well as producing her own quilts. Her workshop teaching time is juggled along with time caring for her family, being involved with her children's

school activities, as a scout leader, and as a member of a Samba band, which requires a great deal of her time in rehearsals.

Clare Plug talked of the difficulty of trying to achieve a balance between the need to make a living and the need to have time for her creative life.

I found I had to have something that was not too challenging mentally because the sewing involves so much thinking... I think of how many hours you have to do the other – whatever it is you have to do to support yourself – that can be quite a critical amount. Two days was fine but with three days it was harder to make the shift – the shift back to the other gear. For me...everyone would be different. I don't know how people can walk in and out of it and go home and do half an hour of their quilting just here and there (CP).

She also discussed her experience of teaching workshops and the various pitfalls that had meant it was eventually not a viable option economically. She had been left “out of pocket” on several occasions when she had had to pay for accommodation herself, in order to get to a particular teaching venue on time. She also talked of the frustration of having classes cancelled after she had kept aside time from other activities, as well as spending many hours in preparation that was then wasted.

In a way the separation of a job that has nothing to do with quilting is an easier way to earn the money. [...cancellation, or airfare changes]... suddenly moves it from being an economic option to not being able to get any return for your time. It's quite tough. I was already having to work at a part-time job and then you have to take time off work to do these things (CP).

Clare, like a number of other respondents also mentioned other difficulties such as when a group had invited her to speak at an evening meeting. There was not even to be a token payment for this talk which would have required her to spend a number of hours in preparation, as well as the expense of travelling to and from the venue.

I did find that an interesting problem to have to deal with, to have to decline. I hadn't expected it. There seem to be a lot of assumptions. They [some of those who organise events] probably don't need to think about those things (CP).



Some other women who tutored reported similar difficulties, with one noting an assumption that because making quilts was something that many people do for recreational reasons, that spending a weekend teaching this activity was considered simply “money for jam” (AP). These situations and tensions seem to arise from the history associated with making quilts. Having been often an activity done by women who worked mainly ‘in the home’, the skills of quilting were often either handed down from generation to generation within families or else were learned in a shared environment, such as when women met together socially for the purpose of making quilts. These ways of passing on knowledge within the quilting world do continue. However, many makers now also choose to make a career by using their various skills of designing, making and teaching. It is a situation where ‘tradition’ (however that is viewed) meets ‘market forces’ and the world of business and all that that requires of those who enter into it.

It requires talent, knowledge, organisational skills, accountability, dealing with issues of copyright and fair trading, along with all the other requirements of running a business. In addition, for those having other family or work commitments, arranging time away for teaching purposes requires the support of the family or employer.

Donna Ward discussed the way that she manages her quilting activities with her role in the family. She said she has put off opportunities to teach further away than Australia until her children are both well through high school. If she is teaching just a day away from home her husband will sometimes accompany her and spend the day fishing, if that is an option. He has also travelled with her to Australia. She felt it was good when they could work together like that but as his job requires shift work it made that possibility more difficult. Friends and extended family have also supported her with childcare when her children were younger.

A number of quilters talked also of the direct support that they gained from their partners.

My husband is incredibly supportive. He'll help me make systems for hanging them and he'll help hang shows. He is really kind – a really nice man. He says, "Well Kath you're worth investing in. When I retire you're going to support us" and I say "yeah right". No, it's good (KM).

Jo Cornwall regularly exhibited her quilts in commercial galleries consistently throughout the 1980's. During this time many corporate organisations sponsored substantial art awards in a variety of media. Jo was the recipient of a number of these awards. (Plate 3 & 4)

Her husband had also been her photographer during this time and she explained that it was difficult to enter those awards without good photography. Jo talked of how the loss of her husband had affected her work.

He was very interested and he learnt a lot. He was a good judge and we would often go to Auckland. We would pop up on a Monday and do the art gallery circuit, do the openings. When he died I didn't have any of that. It just saps your... you just go down where there is nothing left for your work. But I think he was with me for as long as I needed him. I made myself keep on... [Now] I just do it for myself. I do it for my own pleasure and it gives you a great lot of freedom (JC).

A number of the other quiltmakers also talked of the time and energy needed to promote their work, obtain good photographic images, apply for funds and scholarships, and arrange to exhibit their work. While they felt it was important to keep promoting quilts in the 'artworld', many also found this to be a tiresome and often expensive exercise.

I don't know if I've got the energy to keep going like that, playing the game, getting references – that's embarrassing. You've got to play all those little games... .. it's all very tiring and time consuming. I would rather make quilts than do all that stuff – all that marketing and running around (KM).

While a number of the quiltmakers do exhibit in venues where their quilts are for sale, not all have this as an aim in the work. The selling of quilts does not appear to be a straight-forward market exchange as it is for many other types of art. Many quiltmakers appear to develop a personal attachment to their work during the long process of making. A number of

the women stated that they would *not* sell their work. However, these same women make quilts as gifts for family and friends. While they avoid placing a monetary value on their work, such items are still nevertheless the object in a form of more a subtle and complex exchange that is tied into ideas of family and community recognition, and sometimes, reciprocity.

Donna Ward remarked that while she doesn't sell a lot of her work when she does it is sometimes difficult to see it go. Nevertheless she has a pragmatic attitude to the sale of her quilts.

I never make them to sell... I make a quilt because I *want* to make it, for the pleasure of making it, and seeing it finished and exhibiting it or whatever, and if it sells well that's a bonus... I sold one a while ago and I put a good price on it and when it went I thought ooohh ... I know a lot of people get attached to them. It's like you feel a rubber band break inside you, you know that kind of feeling. I remember the first time I sold a quilt... it was just that funny kind of feeling, it just goes ping inside you... then I think of the money. And I think if someone pays that much then they're probably going to look after it. Probably love it more than me (DW).

### **Arts Funding in New Zealand**

I asked the quiltmakers in the interviews what they thought about government schemes for supporting emerging artists. Their replies varied:

Yes, there's lots of debate about that and the 'arts dole'. But I suppose I have always felt that this was my choice and I couldn't expect other people or the state to subsidise my self indulgence. So I haven't felt that I should be funded (CP).

I think it's great. I think the reality is that there are eight fine arts schools now and you're only going to get one or two art practitioners out of each intake. So maybe people need to find out they're not going to make it, by being on this thing and trying, or they might make it. So they have an opportunity to give it a go... If we can support all the sporting things I don't see why the poor old arts can't get some money... I think it's really good. There are so many people doing art now I think it is really hard (KM).

But how would you prove you had actually got out and done the work. There would have to be some way of monitoring it so that you had to have an exhibition and that would be awful too. That

would be pressure. If you're getting paid you would have to produce which means you'd have to have an exhibition or sell a certain amount, or your grant or payment wouldn't work if you didn't prove that you hadn't done a certain amount per day. I think with what's there you have to have been on the dole, looking for work and then if any work came up that was suitable like working for a gallery you would have to do it. It might not be what you want (CS).

Judith Tizard, Associate Minister for the Arts, provided an idea of current government thinking around arts funding. I was interested to know what schemes are in place and who is making use of them.

Work and Income [WINZ] have a programme for the unemployed: Pathway Arts and Cultures Employment [PACE].

The Arts Foundation has Arts Icons – they receive a medal only, and Arts Laureates. These are awarded erratically – I think we have about twenty six and I think they get about \$30,000 - \$40,000 as a one off award.

In 1999 I looked at our arts policy to investigate a scheme for established artists. I was looking at a scheme they have in Scandinavia – at least in Sweden and Norway. Basically it's an 'artist right', a lifetime entitlement after evaluation by other artists at the level of their superannuation, which is higher than ours, as being a cold climate they have high heating costs – about \$35,000 per year. And it can be abated. For example, a ceramicist who was lecturing at a university got nothing, but if he stopped teaching he would be entitled.

I was keen to see something like this here but we didn't want anything that would be thrown out [i.e. opposed in the House] so we started with young people so they could learn business skills. They have to have had some background of formal arts training.

The singer and songwriter from *Goldenhorse* [a popular music group] were supported by this. They have to be seen to be meeting their jobseeker agreement.

The scheme works erratically – depending on the local commissioner [of IRD]. Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin work well – Christchurch is pretty good (*pers. comm.* Judith Tizard, 18.5.05).

I asked about which practitioners in different media were using the scheme.

I think if you're a prolific painter or printmaker it's okay. In the fashion industry we've supported people to get into the overseas markets. The writers we have dealt with, with a number of literary

grants. There are now three big prizes for literature – we're looking to extend that out (*pers. comm.* Judith Tizard, 18.5.05).

It would seem that those developing policy are caught between what they may want to see in place and what they may realistically expect to be sustainable, that is, not at risk of having the funding cut by a subsequent government. This situation appears to result in a policy that favours schemes that are based and judged largely on their economic merit.

Unfortunately, within a political scene that focusses on market ideology, any focus on art production that is valued for reasons other than economic ones, becomes a difficult idea to sell to a large part of the population. However, the alternative, a focus on the artist having to 'have a job', may do little to improve a person's art practice. As Judith Tizard noted: "We had people sent to do data processing - that was hardly developing their talents" (*pers. comm.* Judith Tizard 18.5.05).

Along with the necessity to earn a living, the quiltmakers who spent a lot of studio time alone, also felt the need to engage with the wider world. Most saw their outside employment as fulfilling their need for social contact. Spending hours stitching at home alone, while it may seem a luxury, can in fact be a fairly isolating experience.

I know it's not healthy to do it all the time. That's why I do the riding for the disabled two days a week. It makes me get out there and it's good to get your hands dirty. Cloth is very clean isn't it? And I love the kids and parents too. And the horses – I really like the horses. I couldn't be in the studio seven days a week. You close in on yourself a bit. I found I wasn't very tolerant of people – so it wasn't a good move. I think you would become a hermit (KM).

While discussing what was important to her about teaching Donna talked about the importance of the classes she has taught for about seventeen years at a local college under the umbrella of Community education programmes. Many of the women who attend these classes are returners – that is, they have done all the basic classes as well as more advanced work but keep returning for various other reasons. Some return for guidance and advice on new projects while others are responding to the

challenge to develop their skills and talents further. Others still, come as well for the companionship and support of the group. Often having to deal with difficult circumstances at home through family illness or other problems, for some members such a class functions as a community of caring others with whom to share those difficulties.

... at the moment there is all that stuff about high school classes getting chopped – community classes – and more classes like mine where they are not learning a skill that can ‘help them in the workforce’. It would be a shame – they’re really valuable things. The good thing about my classes is that they are always full – they pay for themselves (DW).

### **Inspiration and Influences**

On the day I visited, Jo Cornwall’s small granddaughter was spending the day with her. She sat drawing and painting while we talked. I remarked that many of the quilters I had talked with had grandmothers or others in their families who stitched things or were creative in other ways. I asked if she had any relatives like that.

I have always said to people right from the word go “I come from a long line of domestic artists” and I do. I used to stay at my grandma’s when I was little. There wasn’t one machine made blanket on the beds. All the beds had either crocheted Afghans or patchwork made out of old bits of tweeds...just pieces joined together... Everything we had was hand made and home made (JC).

Living in a small rural town Jo Cornwall has felt relatively isolated since the death of her husband. They had worked together, promoting her work and getting it to galleries and exhibitions. She was excited about a recent overseas trip with her daughters and was feeling re-invigorated by spending time visiting New York’s art galleries.

*Do you think some of that will come out in your work?*

I’m sure it will. It stimulates your brain... (JC).

Jo explained her method of working.

I usually do a drawing and then I gather up the fabrics that go together. I just put things together. I never have a preconceived

colour scheme. I don't like them. I always say I would be limited by my imagination. My eyes work better than my brain. So I will come in with a pile of things that look good together (JC).

Others also drew on inspiration from a variety of sources.

Inspiration is from everything I see basically. I love colour and I think I love the simplicity of a lot of designs... I've been quite influenced by the designs coming out of the Pacific Islands, like on tapa cloth... But it's often some simple idea that I'll start with and play with and extend and play with... see where it takes me (DW). (Plate 5)

These comments indicate a serendipitous approach to the process of conceiving a quilt design. A number of other makers also described a similar way of working where the idea for the quilt may have come from a piece of fabric, another quilt, an event, or, some entirely non-related source. Shirley Smith said she is often inspired by fabric and also often picks up ideas from seeing other quilts in books and exhibitions. These sources were frequently mentioned by a number of the quilters.

Anne Scott talked of gaining inspiration from antique quilts.

I adore old quilts. I have made a "Baltimore". I like the relaxing part of stitching. I'm a traditional based quilter really... So a lot of mine are designed around traditional blocks or like the medallion quilt I did, I took a bit from here and a bit from there, amalgamated it all - made it work (AS).

Anna Prussing uses and adapts patterns that fit the personality of the family members who receive her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday quilts. She has also made other pieces that reflect parts of her family history.

... my grandfather... had been gassed in the war – he was deeply special to me so I made *Gallipoli* because he had been at Gallipoli and it absolutely devastated him – he never really recovered. His best friend got blown up on the beach. We were brought up behind the RSA in Brooklyn in town so there were always the old fellows there with their medals and poppies. That was the grimmest winter that I ever spent making that Gallipoli quilt because it was grey and it was raining and I was really sad, really missing my Grandfather who died a long time ago. So I can only make those sort of quilts intermittently because I think about all of the difficulties while I am doing it (AP). (Plate 6)

Anna talked of the emotional cost of making quilts that involved the more difficult stories of her family.

I can't possibly allow enough time to make the reflective things like... the Gallipoli quilt. I simply couldn't work on that emotional level all the time. I would hate that. They both drew a vast amount out and I've got to make a quilt for my mother about being locked up in Porirua [psychiatric institution] – the despair of being an immigrant and it didn't work. And it's sitting there quietly winding its way out but I know that it's going to be not a year that I enjoy. It's not going to be something that I love making because it is sad... So I have got this quilt which you can imagine. It's about bars and windows but it's just sitting there. It's another grid and it's the grimmest colours. There is not much hope in it but it has to come out. So I can only commit myself to doing stuff like that once in a while (AP).

Although these quilts are not made with a recipient in mind, they too serve to create a legacy within the family at the same time as they are creating a narrative of the history of the family.

Many of the guild members expressed their pleasure at working with fabric and with colour and of being inspired by these. Almost all expressed their pleasure at being able to 'create'. The level of personal input to the design of their quilts usually depended on their confidence in their ability to do this well. While many seemed to have had "improving their technical and/or design skills" as a goal in their work, this varied, with some mentioning they preferred to use the time they had available for sewing rather than for designing. Spending time designing on paper takes away from time to design with the actual fabric and to stitch. It seems that the actual process of working with the fabric and the 'making' are among the most important aspects of many quilters' practice.

### **The Importance of Cloth as a Medium**

I make quilts because I have a long-standing and sincere interest in the form itself and because I LOVE fabric – I love to FEEL it and to HANDLE it and I ENJOY the sewing processes with which fabrics are secured TOGETHER.

Michael James USA (1998:12)

I've always done print making on paper, I majored in that, but I have realised that it was always when I went back to using fabric that *I felt like I was coming home. It was something I understood better.*

Clare Smith



These quotes articulate a sentiment frequently heard among quilters – the affinity they feel with the medium of cloth. In her discussion of medium and the creative process, Lisa Gabbert noted that for many in the group she studied “colour and fabric were inexorably interconnected in the same sentence” (Gabbert 2000:142). She writes:

... colours seem intricately associated with the fabric’s more tactile aspects. Touch [is] an important tool of aesthetic evaluation (Gabbert 2000:142).

In what historian Lois Martin (1995:2) describes as a “visceral response” there appears to be a particularly strong engagement by quilters with the fabrics that they use – a love for the cloth itself – the promise or possibilities of what it represents or may be transformed into. This is evidenced by the amount of fabric many women collect and the stories they tell about these collections and the pursuit of new pieces. Many quilters have more fabric than they will ever use in their lifetimes. Such collections demonstrate not only the importance of the sensual qualities of cloth but also the importance of associated spatio-temporal qualities – of the times and places such pieces were collected or used and the people with whom they may be associated.

Many quiltmakers appear both slightly embarrassed by, as well as proud of, their fabric collections. They appear to gain immense pleasure from the search and discovery of fabrics both new and used. As well as collecting fabric to make quilts, the women appear to get pleasure and inspiration from ‘playing around with fabric’ (or, as Lisa Gabbert described it in her article noted above: *Petting the Fabric*), seeing which pieces work well together or searching for that one piece that may bring the quilt to life or else bring to it a sense of calm.

Clare Plug noted her concern at the changed perceptions of the patchwork quilt:

I think there’s a bit of an irony that the whole beginnings of patchwork for me were, that it was a very frugal craft and I have felt it had made a shift to being a rather more, in the main, a well-to-do ladies’ activity. And I mean that nicely, but its just there is an irony

there, that for a lot of people it was 'make something beautiful out of nowt' and now it has become so much business associated with it and people buying so much of the fabric instead of hand-me-ons and supplementing from the scrap bag and maybe buying a few pieces. That's what people would have always done... Embroidery has historically been the 'high' needle art. It's almost like there has been a flip over somewhere (CP).

While many do choose to work with the fabrics that are designed especially for quilters, they use them in a variety of creative ways - adapting existing patterns or designing their own patterns and layouts. Others still, have turned to using recycled fabric, returning to the origins of the craft of patchworking.

Marion Manson decided she had "done all the 'pretty' American cottons" so began dyeing her own. She has since moved on to working with dyed woollen fabric. (Plate 7) Katherine Morrison has used a variety of fabrics in her quilts but more recently has also become well known for her quilts made from woollen blankets. There is a long tradition of the use of both woollen fabric and of blankets in quilts. In Wales in particular, blankets (along with worn quilts) were often recycled as batting in either cotton or wool quilts, making these very warm, but also very heavy. Blankets and woollen garments are also found as a component of *waggas* in both Australia and New Zealand.

... the blankets have only been around since about 2000... I was adopted when I was three and my very first memory was of a grey blanket on a camp stretcher. My parents lived up in Titirangi they were Bohemians. They were up there when Colin McCahon and Maurice Shadbolt were up there and I have these images of this bach and this blanket... I had been working with woollen fabric and I thought why don't I use blankets and I just thought - this is so right. Because they're indicative of New Zealand, the past and my childhood and they just do something for me. I'm not sure why but I think they give me a sense of security. I think that is what it is. As simple as that. The softness of them - they evoke, they remind me of landscapes, of New Zealand landscapes. You know when you drop a blanket on the folds - like a Toss Woollaston painting or a McCahon. It comes from inside. I think it is the patheticness of them in a way. They are kind of pathetic aren't they? In their original state. They're quite forlorn and they need a sense of preservation and permanency. I think making them into quilts does that (KM).

Used textiles also hold a particular appeal for Esther Woollaston:

I buy old stitched things, old clothes that have been lived in and breathed in, washed and touched. It speaks in a way that new fabric doesn't. And you get that particular patina that I look for in my deep pieces (EW). (Plate 9)

The use of a medium itself as the focus of artwork was strong from the 1960's onward. It was important to the colourfield painters as they explored the nature of paint and of the painted surface itself. However as 'fashion' changed within the art world, a focus on medium and materials alone was superseded by the idea that art had to be 'about ideas' and that concentrating on any particular media may constrain the artist or shape perceptions of their work.

In discussions with the quiltmakers I interviewed I did not gain any sense of feelings of constraint in terms of their attitude to their chosen medium. The use of cloth and stitching is *central* to their creativity. All embrace the use of the quilt as a means of creative expression. Some actively engage with the idea of textiles, of the quilt in itself or in the ways that it has been used, as a part of the concept of their work. Katherine Morrison's blanket quilts function in such a manner, as her conceptual starting point is 'the blanket'; as a part of her personal history, as part of our history as New Zealanders, as an object that provides warmth and comfort, and, as an object that is used as a bedcover. Just a few examples of this exploration are her works *Rural Composition 2002*; *Life is not a Bed of Roses* and *She Made Her Bed, Now She Must Lie In It*. (Plates 10 & 11)

Quiltmakers celebrate and exploit the qualities of their chosen medium. They often explore the ideas that surround the textiles they choose to incorporate in their works. Whatever their reasons for making a quilt, a great deal of the pleasure gained from that process is, in fact, derived primarily from the complex haptic interrelationships involved in the process of making and in working with their chosen medium. For quiltmakers, whether this is specialty patchworking fabric, recycled clothing, fine silk, or

woollen blankets, nearly all these quiltmaking women speak of the cloth used with admiration, affection and respect.

### **Skills and Technology**

While it may be seen that changing technology forces change on the humans who use it, within quiltmaking at least, it can be seen that the extent of the use of technology is very much a personal choice and within the control of the maker. As described in chapter two, there has been a constant development of new tools and technology for quiltmakers. However, not every quiltmaker makes use of every piece of new technology that arrives on the scene. Instead, each chooses a way of working that best suits the work they set out to create. As an example, while some will use both hand and machine quilting depending on their project, many have a distinct preference for one type of stitching over another.

I like the relaxing part of stitching - although I machine piece, I hand appliqué and I hand quilt. I'm not a machine quilter, by temperament or by skill. I love hand quilting – just sitting quietly and quilting. I quilt in bed – that's where I quilt and you can't machine quilt in bed. I sit up in bed and quilt (AS).

Esther Woollaston chooses this method for the finish she can achieve with it. She sees the hand stitching as an integral part of her work.

... the technical effect ... I really like because it marries beautifully what I have done... [for quilting] I use a frame like the old clothes horse system that you pull up to the ceiling. Just a couple of pieces of dowling and stretchers and it works perfectly (EW).

Marion Manson hand-quilts her woollen quilts with large stitches. I asked her if she would machine quilt them.

No, it didn't seem right. You wouldn't see the stitches on it. It just didn't seem to go. Like an oxymoron – when things don't fit together. Because they are quite primitive really – just squares and rectangles (MM). (Plate 11a)

Donna Ward now prefers to machine quilt her work. Although she is still proficient at hand quilting and teaches it to her classes along with machine techniques, the process does not appeal to her any longer.

I don't even enjoy holding a needle. I hate hand sewing anything now. It's really interesting. I loved to hand quilt when I hand quilted and I was good at it but I haven't hand quilted things for about ten years – a long time, a long time. I love the look that you can get with machine quilting that you can't get with hand quilting – the designs that you can do and the threads that you can use and basically the quickness of it (DW). (Plates 12 & 13)

For Clare Plug the element of quilting in her work is largely subordinate to her overall aim for the piece she may be working on. I asked her if she quilted by hand.

No, not lately. I would if the work needed it. I think that certainly the quality of the stitch interests me... I'm using it [machine quilting] more as a texture rather than a feature... It gives life to the work and as I work my way across the quilting I think it looks so much better. But it's not a decorative part of the quilt... I'm not using it in that way (CP).

To say that the quilts that are made by the women are made either by machine or by hand (often used a way of categorising them), is to ignore the fact that both are actually made by hand; that is, they are made by hand using different technologies. Both processes require the skills of hand and eye coordination along with knowledge of design, structure and the sculptural effects that may be achieved. Machine quilting requires that the quilter has control over what the machine can do. In both cases, the skills are not learned quickly but are built gradually through the processes of making.

### **Designing and making**

Quiltmakers all work in different ways. The process of designing and making is for some a very structured process, while for others it is one that is more improvisational and intuitive.

Anne Scott recalled her experience of classes she attended in Singapore where she was taught to piece quilt blocks with almost obsessive accuracy: "Absolutely everything had to match... [that was the] *only* way of doing it" (AS). This seemingly very rigid way of working has not constrained the development of Anne's design skills.

[I work with] colour really. I just love plain squares. *Millennium Lights* [1999] was just squares and rectangles. It just started off – sewing all the stuff that was on the floor – cutting it into regular shapes and sewing it together and only using the dark colours... So it's colour that sets me off (AS). (Plate 14)

*What do you enjoy most about making them?*

I really love tipping everything out on the floor. I tip it all out - it's the way I used to knit. I used to knit all these coloured jerseys for kids and sell them. I used to tip all the wool out on the floor and get the needles and start knitting. It's the colour, you see, and the patterns and it's the same with quilting. So I tip it all, and I've got an awful lot of fabric, so I'm usually restricting myself to colours or values and it all goes out on the floor. Then I sit at the sewing machine with all the fabric (AS).

Anne showed me her workroom. She had a work in progress 'on the wall' and fabric piled in every corner, as well some in more organised storage. "I just tip everything out on the floor then start picking up the pieces – I go from there" she said of her method of working. I could see that that is exactly what she does.

Another quiltmaker also described a process of designing that is intertwined with the process of making.

You can't draw or paint quilts because it is not until you actually stitch the fabrics together that you see what is going to happen (AP).

Jo Cornwall described how she does often design on paper but also works in a fairly improvisational manner.

I was making this but it wasn't working. I had too much orange so in the end I had to cut a piece out of the end of it and still I wasn't happy, so I left it again then put this other piece in it. I was happy then... (JC).

Katherine Morrison describes a longer process in the conception and design of her work.

I've got a series in my head at the moment so I'll probably wait about another month and then I'll do some designing. You have an idea and it sparks off – that's in my series work. Once you have an

idea it doesn't really take long to get it done with proportions and things... Sometimes you do some work and it doesn't seem connected then you think up this reason why it is connected. Sometimes it will be two or three months down the track (KM).

Clare Smith discussed her process of working:

It's the ones with the more conceptual side that are actually quite hard to come up with, whereas the more light-hearted ones are easier... But the genetic stuff that's a bit harder to work out so it puts me off a bit (CS). (Plate 15)

Clare has a science degree and trained as a radiographer. She has produced a series of quilts relating to issues around the science of DNA profiling, in particular on the idea of knowledge of the human genome and the possibility of this knowledge being used as a way of categorising humans on a hierarchical basis. She has made fourteen quilts that have explored this theme. (Plate 16)

Esther Woollaston describes her process of working as a spiritual one.

I can probably say this now without being shot by anyone – it is 2005 – I channel beautiful information from other dimensions. That's what I am able to express in my work. That's the beautiful thing about it. That's what I was looking for... I never know how it's actually going to be with each piece. One piece I had in the Auckland exhibition – *The Underground Pear Tree Avenue* I knew it had to be three levels of colour because it was quite a deep beautiful place that I go to in meditation sometimes and it needed to express the colours that I was aware of, like silvery grey, goldy colours and what I had thought about was that in the middle piece there would be a particular type of embroidery. But I started to do it and *it's like you have to listen way up above your head for what it is you are doing*, so I just did these bold lines all through it and that's what made it... So you just have this lovely abstract thing that can be still what it is you are saying but it is more than that as well (EW). (Plate 17)

*So do you achieve that level of distance by going away somewhere quietly or does it happen when you are doing other things?*

I find when I am hand quilting ... I can easily access an altered state. It's like a rhythmical thing. Your hands are occupied. It anchors you in some way but I find I am off in another state when I am working like that... So doing that long period of time allows quite a beautiful meditative state to occur. That's when I'll be thinking about other work. I keep a record of it all. I write spiritual diaries (EW).

Donna Ward prefers to work with her fabrics. I asked Donna whether she still used traditional patterns as well as her own designs.

Yes. I do it simply for the pleasure of sewing and the colours because you don't have to put any thought into the design and you pretty much know it's just a straight sew thing. ... it's just simple and refreshing. Because with all the other quilts I make I tend to not have an idea of what I'm going to end up with so it can be a slow process with a lot of thought and a lot of playing... but traditional you just know... yes it's very different. It's just total pleasure. Not that the other isn't pleasure but it's just that the process is a lot longer and a lot harder (DW).

She also noted that even when she used a traditional pattern that somewhere along the way some part of the pattern might be slightly altered.

So on the last one I think I've got an extra round. So it was just for the pleasure of sewing. I just sat there and sewed it. It doesn't take any brain power at all really (DW).

A number of quiltmakers commented that sometimes just the process of stitching something, no matter how simple, allowed their creative side to re-engage.

... if I don't want to think too much I'll just put some squares together. Sometimes it gets me going on something else – just doing something fairly mindless – if I'm a bit blocked or something I start doing something like that and it starts me thinking about other ideas (CS).

Rather than not “taking any brain power” or being “mindless” I believe this situation demonstrates that when a level of skill and mastery over the process has been acquired, the maker is then able to allow the work to “flow”. Tacit knowledge is at work. Creativity is stimulated by the work of the hands, clearly supporting Peter Dormer's argument that “process and content are interdependent” (Dormer 1994:8).

The process of working “instinctually” also allows for a meditative state. This meditative state appears to be achieved whether one is using technology as simple as a needle and thread as is the case in hand sewing, or, whether one is using a sewing machine.



I asked a number of the quiltmakers what they felt about the importance of technical skills. Clare Plug told of how it took her a long time to develop her design skills and her technical skills. Her most recent works explore aspects of the environment, using a method of discharge dyeing to achieve complex dimensional effects through the manipulation of light and shadow. (Plates 18, 19)

It has only been the last five years that I have felt that I have the two aspects – design and technique, sort of at equal, at a fairly even level. To be able pull the ideas off with the skills I have (CP).

Katherine Morrison felt that good craftsmanship was something she aimed for and as well gained satisfaction from achieving.

I think it's important for it to stay together. I enjoy crafting something well. I get a lot of pleasure from it... It's probably my repressive upbringing or something [laughs] I don't know. Just joking, but mum always said if you can't do a job properly then don't do it at all. It's that protestant work ethic I think. It is important to me though because I want my quilts to be around for a hundred years. If they're not made properly they're not going to last, are they KM)?

Anne Scott had similar sentiments:

It's interesting, I have an Anna Williams [the Afro-American quiltmaker whose quilts have inspired much of Nancy Crow's recent work] quilt at home and nothing matches, its just way off but its perfectly wonderful. So no, obsessive detail doesn't worry me but having said that, if you're looking at a "Baltimore" that's badly stitched then it's not okay. So you don't have to have your points matching for it to be a totally successful quilt, particularly if it's more contemporary. If it is a very traditional sort of quilt, then workmanship and craftsmanship matters more. (Plate 20) It is important to its looking old that it is properly made. But I love the wonky old quilts as well. I have a 1930's top that I'm quilting at the moment and the poor love was no stitcher. She was just abysmal, but I love it to death... I bought it in the States. I love that vintage of quilts. I have been collecting a few of those 1920's and '30's tops and I enjoy quilting them (AS).

I asked a number of the women who used traditional patterns and designs whether they also felt a connection to the early makers of those quilts.

Yes, I do actually. I do think about the people that started off and where they begun and so forth. In our show we had some old quilts and I really loved them. I looked at them, at the materials and things and how they would have got them. They would have worn

those materials and made things out of those materials... They are beautiful. I do love them because they are *traditional*... (SS).

Shirley is representative of many quiltmakers who base their work in the traditional but also adapt and play around with fabric and pattern as they become more skilled and confident of their abilities. In this way, they inject their own creativity into their work and into the body of quilting as a whole. This occurs to different degrees with different quiltmakers. It also continues a long tradition of continual innovation. Quiltmakers have always been innovative, so that quilting (as noted by Patricia Mainardi (1973:19) of art in general) has a long history of development and change as new influences and new makers all used, changed and added to the many patterns, styles and genres within this area of textile production.

For many, there is a fascination about the history and circumstances of the making of historic quilts. This can be seen in the large numbers of books that have been published about quilts and their makers. Historic quilts are often the focus of a number of the papers presented annually to the American Quilt Study Group (AQSG). As noted in chapter two, historic quilts, like Rosemary McLeod's description of the domestic textiles made by New Zealand women, provide 'mute social documents' of women and their lives, often when little other record exists. Among many of today's quiltmakers, there is a sense of continuing the tradition of documenting one's work and of leaving a legacy for the future.

### **Quilts for Others: Creating a Legacy**

All the quiltmakers spoke of having made at least one quilt as a gift for a family member or a friend. This was a more important part of their work for some than for others.

I have actually given away nearly seventy. Every time someone has a baby, just little tops made from scraps. Often when people die I will give them a quilt. It sounds a bit morbid but it's actually very appreciated. Close friends, a partner or a child they really like it. It's a comfort. When my Aunt who was in a nursing home died they said "well what do you want to do with the quilt"? I said "well can you put it in with her"? It harks back to those ancient rituals – is it Viking? – when they have warm clothes and a piece of bread to

send them on their journey. I think of it like that. You don't like to think of people being cold do you? I guess its silly really, but if it makes you feel better, which it does... it makes me feel better (KM).

When I attended the 2005 exhibition of quilts at Matamata I was struck by the large number of quilts that Shirley Smith had entered in this exhibition. Of particular interest was the fact that so many of these had been made specifically for members of her family.

I always think that quilts are tomorrow's treasures and that's why I spend money on them. I have never bought cheap materials; I have always bought good material, good material (SS).

*So you're creating a real legacy?*

Yes, that's basically it... When I am dead and gone they'll pass it down and they know that. I've always let them [the family] come out and pick their own. The boys have been out and picked what they want out of my cupboard, out of my stash. The great grandchildren have done the same (SS). (Plates 21, 22)

As noted above, Anna Prussing has become well known for the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday quilts she has made for her nieces and nephews as well as for her own son. These have become a popular feature of family birthday celebrations where the presentation of the quilts has become a family ritual. (Plate 23)

While the quilters themselves gain enjoyment and pleasure in the process of making, they also gain pleasure from the contribution they are making to family life as well as in creating a legacy for the future. In addition, the talents of the maker are shown to the wider audience of the extended family, and, depending on the circumstances of the presentation, members of the public. They also continue a long standing tradition among quiltmakers whose works are signed and dated and may include autobiographical details – ensuring that they themselves will not be forgotten.

## Chapter Six

### The Great Debate

The progress of women in the arts has been like the slow, sideways progress of a crab towards the sea: a crab that keeps being picked up by a malicious prankster and placed back somewhere high on the beach.

Christine Battersby (1998:305)

The magazine *New Zealand Quilter* represents just one of the many avenues by which images of quilts and their makers may be moved into the public arena. It is most likely that the magazine is mainly read by quiltmakers in New Zealand but more than half the print run of 13,000 is sent offshore (Scott 2005). Likewise, a large number of the overseas readers could also be assumed to be quiltmakers. Despite this seemingly homogenous readership, it can be seen that within New Zealand there are many instances where the work featured in the magazine is the focus of heated discussion. Through *Letters to the Editor* and frequent longer columns about related topics, the magazine provides a forum for such debate

In the last few years one of these debates has been about quilt exhibitions, the categories into which these are divided, and the selection and appropriateness of certain quilts as winners of awards. Exhibitions, in particular the larger national ones, have become a site, not only of competition for excellence within the quilting world, but also one where the different aims and values held by quiltmakers result in some conflict and a great deal of discussion. Quiltmakers who exhibit their work in commercial and public galleries also exhibit their work together with other quiltmakers at the national quilt exhibitions. It is in that environment that the different qualities that are valued by quilters become visible and are contested.

In addition to this internal area of contestation, there is the challenge that is continually faced by quiltmakers as they seek to exhibit their work in the wider art world. Because their genre of work has for a long time been associated with the domestic origins of its making, the world of the

'feminine' and of the 'decorative', the makers have had a continual struggle for artworld recognition. While there is less emphasis today on only specific media such as painting or sculpture being recognised as belonging in the world of fine arts, those who work in textiles still often find resistance to their work in that milieu. During the last few decades such work has been variously described as 'fibre art' or 'textile art', that is, always being ascribed a qualifying descriptor, rather than simply being seen as 'art'. Of the work that does gain a level of recognition in the world of art it is because such work fits with the already existing and accepted genres and movements in art – in particular, those of abstractionism and minimalism.

In Chapter Four I discussed the environment of the arts scene during the second half of the twentieth century. It could be seen that 'art' became an elusive concept as ideas about the nature of art changed dramatically. Not only art, but also the artist, became commodified, with success in the art world often depending on the strength of the publicity that accompanied new work and new artists. I also explored the recent history and devaluing of beauty, the feminine and the decorative. Among those who query the aesthetics and value of many of the quilts that have recently won awards, it can be seen that the aesthetic qualities that they themselves value in quilts, are the very ones that were virtually eliminated from twentieth century art, architecture and design.

One other perceived difference between the quiltmakers and the 'artworld' artist who is regarded as a "citizen" of the art world, is the circumstances surrounding the production of their work. While the art world artist has often been viewed as an individual 'genius' (Battersby 1998) at work in (usually) 'his' studio, distant from the world of the everyday and the familial, the quiltmaker/artist still frequently creates (usually) 'her' work within the domestic realm. Even if her place of work is a dedicated studio space, that space is most likely to be a part of the family home.

In this chapter I will explore ideas about identity as this has been formulated and experienced by the quiltmakers and the issues that arise

from their practice which appears to be more embedded within their lives and those of their families than are those of other artists. I will also discuss the issues that arise when quilts move from their place as covers for beds or as decorative items for the home, to join others in the wider world of quilt shows and exhibitions.

### **Identity: Quiltmaker or Artist?**

ART is a LANGUAGE: it takes part of a LIFETIME to become fluent. Don't however, expect everyone to UNDERSTAND your dialect.

Michael James (1998:49)

All the women interviewed talked of difficulties in describing to others what it is that they spend their time making and in the way they identify themselves in their work practice.

I try to say I'm a quiltmaker. It's a hard one. Like when you have to fill something out like a passport... I just put part time tutor and just leave it at that. To be perfectly honest, I never tell anyone what I do. If I don't know them I don't even say it because I've had to do it for so long and they've got no clue. No matter what I do they just don't get it. I just don't tell them (DW).

It depends where I am. (*and laughs*) I say I publish a magazine. I am a quiltmaker and I make lots of quilts for the magazine... I'm usually staring down the barrel of a deadline and need a pattern, so that's where a lot of them have come from. My more successful quilts are the ones that I have really wanted to make and have made (AS).

It's a bit of a hard one because if you say you're a quilter everyone thinks you do squares and triangles. Usually I say I work from home as a textile artist. I make wall hangings and quilts but they're not the kind of quilts that you put on beds, with squares and triangles – they're actually more collage. So it's no longer a one word answer (CS).

Clare commented that it was a help that she has a website because she can direct those who are interested to that.

... sometimes they'll come back to me and say 'I googled your name and found your website and it's totally different to what I thought' (CS).

... as a quiltmaker. I changed it on the electoral roll. I was a practice manager for a long time but I thought if I'm really going to be clear about what is most important, I'm a quiltmaker, so I changed it. I feel really comfortable saying that. It is such a huge part of my life (AP).

Anna agreed that some people did have a problem with the word quilt, asking her about her "tapestries," "needlework" or "cross-stitch" rather than saying quilting. Like Donna, she felt that as soon as they could see a quilt the reaction was a different one.

I've just made a quilt for my niece to raffle because she's going to Hungary on a student exchange... so the quilt has been everywhere. My brother-in-law took it to work and he said he walked around with it over his shoulder with the raffle book and he said "People who have never noticed me in twenty years stroked the quilt." He said all these people knew what it was and loved it and wanted it and wanted tickets. It broke down barriers that he didn't know existed. It wasn't just the women. There were men whose wives or mothers sewed, who would come up and look at it and look at all the little pieces. It was wonderful. He had never taken a passionate interest in it. He knows it was there and he was okay about it but not something he cared that much about and suddenly he realised, this is amazingly universal (AP).

However, Anna also recalled an instance where her activity was not so warmly welcomed.

We went to the party and this man came up to me and said "I'm not letting my wife talk to you because you do that stupid cutting up fabric thing". So I said what passionate interest do you have in life that makes you so ready to judge me? He said well I play golf. So I said "So you walk around the same stretch of turf bashing a small white ball and this somehow adds to the universe does it?" He said "I'm not letting my wife talk to you. I won't let her do it." He wasn't joking... So his wife makes quilts at a friend's house. He thinks they play golf and they don't. They are secret quiltmakers. He thinks it is such an abomination. What a waste of time. I have come across that reaction a few times – from more men than women, but occasionally women – "Why would you waste your time on that?" So there are a lot of people who don't actually do anything creative... It doesn't mean anything – they don't get the point of it. It's a tremendous redneck thing. You go to some small New Zealand towns and they're lovely but you go to others and they have got quite an air of aggression and the men are 'real men' and they don't like all those feminists down in Wellington (AP).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> At this time, the roles of Prime Minister, Chief Justice and Governor General in New Zealand are all held by women.

Among the quiltmakers themselves, some described those who are doing 'contemporary' work as artists, or that they themselves would have needed to have an art school background to make such a claim. Only a few gave themselves the ascription "artist".

No, I don't know that I ever could. I have no art background, I've got no training and often think I should do something but I'm not sure I really want to at this stage... Because I started out with the traditional thing I've just gone on from there and I'm nowhere near up to that contemporary level. I'm confident when I teach because I know my stuff but I don't feel so confident around those others who see it at a whole different level (DW).

I don't like to do that but other people step in and say it. I tell them I'm a quiltmaker and they'll say 'oh that's nice' but if they're interested I'll elaborate. I feel secure enough in myself – I'm happy to say I'm a quiltmaker (KM).

I put artist now. It took me a long time to do that... But now I put artist, and that feels fine for me. I used to put mother when I had my child (EW).

Clare Plug felt that she had struggled for a long time to gain recognition for her work. She had thought a lot about the issues under discussion.

I don't have to [identify myself] really. I think of myself as an artist who works in the textile medium. Just like any artist really – they're described by their medium. I think the word 'art quilt' isn't particularly helpful because a lot of people who are not quiltmakers have trouble finding the art in art quilts. Maybe because they don't understand the history or the language of quilting, that they can't see the art in them – or – maybe there isn't art in them? That there [aren't] the qualities that they expect in art to be found in all art quilts. I just see it as a challenge to get people to see quilts in a different light (CP).

*There seems to be so much difficulty around the word quilt. I have been making quilts for years and had exhibitions but even people who know me will say "How are your tapestries going?" They can't quite seem to use the word quilt.*

Yes, 'tapestries' is quite a common one for me too and it's not being dismissive. Maybe they are trying to find another word because they know they are not regular bed quilts? It's just that the two words don't match. That's why I think that it doesn't matter what you call yourself anyway so you may as well pick the word that conveys things the best way, and I think depending on what your



goals are you might use the word quiltmaker or you might not. Certainly in the beginning that was where I started but I don't necessarily think about it per se now. And yet everything I do has come from that history of quilt making, construction, and the compositional devices that quilts use are all in my work. I don't necessarily use blocks as such but there is the presence or the hidden presence of a grid, changes of scale, repetition – all of those things that are the trade-in-art compositional devices of quilts. I think lots of artists use those – especially lately. A lot of abstract art uses all of those same things. It was an ideal solution to things – compositionally ..... But I see it that I learnt those compositional things from quilting. Others will have learnt it from some other source like an art history class or some other means.

I think the grid is such a good solution. The other thing I think quilting is a good grounding in is abstraction – or perhaps a pathway to abstraction. I personally can't quite understand why people in their quilts would want to try to make things so pictorial and try to make a picture or painting out of their quilt because it just works so well to go the other way, i.e. abstraction. To me it was the pathway for me to understand a process of abstraction. When you make quilts you can quite comfortably look at Mondrian and Malovich and some of those abstract painters and colour field painters. You can understand all that easily – you don't actually have to go through all the steps perhaps if you've started from a quilt making background (CP).

*Yes, some writers are now saying 'where did some of those colour field painters get their influences from'?*

I mean the reason for making the work isn't necessarily the same – perhaps the intellectual pursuit or whatever you would call it – the colourfield painter – maybe, maybe not... But to come to the same visual solution from two different starting points I think is really interesting. One of the books... that really got me to see that you could think of quilts as an art form right in the very beginning was *The Pieced Quilt* by Jonathan Holstein... I used to get that book out of the library continuously. There's a big chapter in there talking about Albers and colour theory and that was when I first felt well, what was the difference between modern art and these quilts other than perhaps the concepts and the intellectual starting point. But visually, the result, to all intents and purposes, is the same. It's very well written in that book and they're not trying to say that the quilt maker pre-empted the art but they put the two into context (CP).

I think there's a thing about quilting – there seems like two sorts, two reasons why people might be drawn to patchwork and quilting activity and one is that is because they like the neatness and the almost obsessive attention to detail and the finish and the 'pretty'. And then there's the other group, and I'm not saying that its divided

and there are only two sorts of quilt makers, but there's another side of it where people see an opportunity for self expression or the fact that the fabric itself can convey some quite subtle and emotional messages by their choice of fabric or the choice of design. Or they can hide their own kind of stories – they don't have to be a public thing (CP).

*I see it as one of the disadvantages in the reception and perceptions of quilts - that is because of those different areas.*

Yes, indeed. I used to feel that the best thing we can do is be all one and strong together and steamroll them down but I don't now... There are wonderful advantages of a club or a group or committee but sometimes the consensus that is required is a slowing... So it can be a supportive thing but it can also be a dampening thing. I can see that if you're a creative spirit you find that harder – the consensus of the group – that you ought to fit. It's not just quilting – that's the same with any group (CP).

The idea of group ideology placing constraints on those who may seek to produce work that does not fit with the values that the group holds, was one of the findings of Amanda Doyle in her 1996 thesis. In her discussion of "Show and Tell", a popular segment of quilt group meetings, she felt that the group whom she studied identified strongly "with a vision of quilting as a medium for reinforcing family and community relationships" (Doyle 1996:85). Doyle argued that the expectation that quilts which were made and 'shown' would conform to these values, had the potential to ensure that those who participated "may be more inclined not to deviate from the norm... [effectively] sustaining the relatively conservative nature of the group" (Doyle 1996:85).

Although there are currently some similar tensions where work that is not understood or appreciated may be denigrated by some, in most instances, quiltmakers currently celebrate the diversity of production. Despite having begun from a traditional base, many use this base to explore a more creative or innovative pathway in their work.

In her discussion of 'traditional quilters' and 'art quilters' North American, Clover Williams noted:

... the quilter's self designation as traditional or as artist may have less to do with the types of quilting she herself engages in than with the values she identifies with (Williams 1991:126).

Among the New Zealand quiltmakers, it appears that how they make this assessment rests as much on the way they approach their work and on how they themselves categorise their work. In the United States the division between traditional quilting and art quilting appears to be more acute. In 1994 Susan Bernick identified “at least three distinct quilt cultures” (Bernick 1994:135); *artist*, *feminist* and *traditional*. From observation of recent literature and popular television programmes about quilting in the United States, I have gained the impression that the ascription there of ‘art quilt’ by quiltmakers themselves, appears to cover *all* ‘innovative’ work. In New Zealand, this ascription appears to be more associated with those (quilts and) quilters who are seen to demonstrate ‘art institutional’ qualities, or demonstrate or use art institutional ‘language’ in their discussion of their practice and their quilts.

As far as I have been aware, even although the description appears frequently in North American quilting discourse and is sometimes used by New Zealand quilters, there has never been a category for “Art Quilts” in any New Zealand quilting exhibition. The more usual terms for work at this end of the continuum in New Zealand are “contemporary” or “innovative” or some similar description for the category such as “pushing the boundaries”. These descriptions of such works do not seem to conceptually separate such quilts from the greater body of quilting to the same extent that the descriptor “art” appears to. ‘Art quilt’ appears to have become a contentious notion asserted by some, avoided by others. In contrast no-one seems to feel the need to talk of ‘art paintings’ or ‘art sculptures’. These are simply paintings and sculptures.

**Exhibitions: Sites of Excellence or Sites of Contestation – or “just a different way of seeing things”**

Both traditional and art quilts must be displayed and exhibited to ensure our work is given the homage we deserve. Let’s not put up fences, our community of quilters is too small, but instead celebrate and more importantly enjoy our diversity through quilts.

Sheryl Sefton (2005:7)

I love traditional quilts. I love both ... actually. I appreciate all forms of quilting.

Donna Ward

The contemporary quilters seem to be much more accommodating and not wanting there to be a divide. I think it is a strength of our quilting that everyone does more or less mix and at some point exhibit together.

Anne Scott

While many of the quilts made by the women move no further than the home where they are made or to that of the recipient if gifted, many quilters also gain both pleasure and status from showing their work to the wider world. This 'showing' may take place at a guild meeting during "Show and Tell". It may be displayed at an exhibition organised by the guild where often all quilts submitted are hung for viewing. It may be displayed at a national exhibition such as those held at biennial symposia where quilts are selected. In addition, the quilts of one or more makers may be shown in a public or commercial gallery or museum.

A number of issues appear to arise within these different contexts. A number of women mentioned that the costs involved in entering competitions or exhibitions may exclude some potential exhibitors. Having paid entry fees and courier costs, there is still no guarantee of selection. Another is the issue of content – that is – which quilts will be hung – and whose criteria are used for making a selection. The other, is the presentation of the work. The quality of the display, that is the manner of hanging and presentation, is largely dependent upon the particular venue and on the skills of those who have organised and hung the exhibition.

Donna Ward mentioned a panel discussion that took place as a part of the Auckland Symposium. The discussion was to focus on the way quiltmakers critique their own work. The three panellists (including Donna) each talked about the way they assessed their work. However, as soon as the discussion opened, those in the audience immediately changed the subject to have their say about the state of exhibitions. The dominant argument was that they felt that the situation had become one where it was the "traditional" versus the "contemporary", with the traditionalists

more or less arguing that exhibitions had been hijacked by the makers of the contemporary style of quilts.

While categories that separate by technique are easily understood, those that separate the 'traditional' from 'others' i.e. contemporary/innovative, seem to engender often heated discussion. I asked both the quiltmakers who participated in interviews as well as those who answered the questionnaire what they thought about these categories. The local guild women described the idea of "innovative" in a number of ways. While some saw "new styles", "own or original design, concept or technique", "clever use of techniques or fabrics", "pushing the boundaries" as being innovative, some also counted variations of traditional patterns in this category. Some saw the use of embellishments such as beading and embroidery as innovative.

When asked what sort of quilts they like to make the local guild quilters supplied a wide range of answers. While a few said they were happiest using traditional patterns, most gave some indication that they liked to use these in creative ways – "traditional with a twist". Many also noted that they also did more innovative work, as well as some that was original. Most of these respondents appeared to feel less threatened by the idea of "innovation" as opposed to the idea of "art". While "innovation" is in the reach of most, "art" appears to be viewed as a separate and less accessible field.

Donna Ward talked of her recent experience at an arts symposium in Wanaka, in the South Island where she had come into close contact with the working processes of artists working in a variety of different media. She taught a five day workshop there along with painters, printmakers, video-makers and bookbinders. Each of the tutors had given a presentation about their work.

It was interesting for me to see how they get to their work and it has actually made me think more about how I do things. A lot of it is similarly based but because of their art background they tend to have to think more about what they are doing and how they get it to evolve... So you can understand now when the contemporary

quiltmakers ... how they see their work – to me it has anyway – just in the way they develop it... [she noted of one person in particular – a painter] ... listening to him talk about how he got to where he is now, it wasn't a quick five second thing (DW).

Donna acknowledged that she could see where some quilters put a lot of thought into what they do, allowing their work to evolve and working in series.

I tend to get bored really quickly – I tend to flit from one thing to another. But it is a shame that it is becoming such a hot topic ... the traditional versus the contemporary because there is certainly room for everything and my quilts have always been in that in-between (DW).

Having seen Donna's work evolve over the last twenty years, I could argue that she has in fact also often worked in 'series' in the same way that she described the work of the painter, even if that is not how she views her output. She has engaged her design skills and processes of thinking and reflection while solving technical and design difficulties. At the time of the interview she had sent ten quilts as an invited exhibitor to an exhibition in France.

Clare Smith talked of her experience of the 'art' institutional world.

There was a feeling... that you had to have major angst to be an artist. I didn't really fit in because I'm blessed with a functional family. According to these people if you don't smoke dope or you haven't been an alcoholic .... or had some other trauma you can't be an artist – you have to have major angst. Yes, that's art schools. So quilting is too happy for them (CS).

*Mmmm maybe that is why there is that resistance there. Quilting is seen as being only concerned with all the happy events?*

Yes, maybe too much technique and not enough 'message' for the art world... With conceptual art you've got to have toilets that bray at you.<sup>3</sup> Any realistic work is not considered to be very good in the art world. So I suppose realistic [pictorial] quilts would be well down the chain (CS).

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<sup>3</sup> The selection of New Zealand artist et.al. to represent New Zealand at the Venice Biennale 2005 became controversial when the public realised that one of her recent works was a portable lavatory that emitted braying sounds. Her selection caused an inordinate amount of discussion about the nature of art.

The feeling that quilts *should* be about ‘beauty’, ‘a good standard of workmanship’ and ‘happy’ events, is reflected in this (abridged) letter to the editor of *New Zealand Quilter*.

Have we been hijacked by the so called Modern Art World? ... Once upon a time quilts were perhaps a woman’s only expression of beauty in her otherwise difficult life... Am I totally wrong in thinking that quilts should express joy, hope and celebration rather than doom and gloom? That merit should be attached to good workmanship, colour and design? (Wendy Johnson, 2005:5)

In addition to my own article addressing this issue (Wanigasekera 2005:49) the following issue of the magazine also included a letter by quiltmaker Sheryl Sefton who suggested that “art quilters” and “traditional quilters” have many similarities. Sheryl pointed out that through quilts “we are able to *tell stories*. These stories may be a personal expression of hardship endured, expressions of love and beauty and of celebration” (Sefton 2005:7). She noted that quilts are also made for functional and decorative purposes but that both groups enjoyed the same processes of making and that *excellence* or *technical* merit is what “all serious stitchers are striving for” (Sefton 2005:7, her emphasis). She continued:

Both [groups of] quilters like their work to be *viewed* and admired. This may be in exhibitions and shows or more privately on walls and beds. Some quilts will provoke more emotion and discussion than others, such as subversive quilts. Yes, quilts can express joy, hope and celebration and yes, doom and gloom also. These feelings can take the viewer out of their comfort zone, but the stitcher of the work would then consider the purpose of the quilt to have been a success! (Sefton 2005:7).

Those interviewed were asked what they thought about this discussion.

I just ignore it [the debate] as much as possible and do my own thing. I really like traditional quilts - I’ve got half a “Baltimore” at home. I just haven’t finished it. I like hand sewing. People are always shocked that I would be interested in it – that kind of hand work – but I think there is a place for both and I am quite happy to do both (CS).

I believe there is a place for everyone and even though a lot of it may not appeal to me personally that’s just my ... I don’t make a big deal out of it because I know that some work other people do like, and we do this for pleasure and enjoyment. It’s sad in a way that people get really hung up about it and I think it’s really important to appreciate each other – there’s such a wide variety and I can see how it’s happening because there are a lot of traditionalist in patchwork – I’d say the vast majority are, mmmm (DW).

Donna is frequently asked in class why a particular quilt has won an award. She usually tells her students:

... just because you don't like a quilt, that's your choice... I don't set out to make a quilt to be a grand award winner. I make it for me, so basically I'm the judge. I don't have to please anyone but me and that's why I make quilts. Judges are all different ... and it has never really bothered me if a quilt I don't like wins a prize. I just don't think like that but a lot of people do... They just don't want to see it. It's a very personal thing... It's just a different way of seeing things... (DW).

Donna also believes that because a lot of traditional quilters make quilts mainly for beds or else 'wall hangings' for their homes, they tend to look at quilts in general, from the point of view of whether they would like the quilt 'in their house'.

I asked Anne Scott if she thought that the traditional people are feeling left out.

[They are feeling] sidelined, and they're feeling that they have got to the stage – a lot of them – that it's not worth putting it in because they just don't get chosen – to a degree – and that's why we're getting the letters. I feel I have to tread a really narrow line between contemporary and traditional. I love the contemporary work, I do traditional myself. So I can see both sides of it (AS).

That which is seen as a boundary by some is in fact a very permeable and often shifting space. Quilts seen as contemporary in one context may be categorised as traditional in another. The quilting community is like any other multicultural community where the members hold often widely divergent values. These values need not, but often do, result in conflict. Of the quiltmakers interviewed, a number are seen as working at the more innovative end of the quilting continuum. All of these noted their debt to traditional designs and patterns and some also make work that would fit ideas of 'traditional'.

When asked what they considered "traditional", most of the local guild women described traditional in terms of "known patterns" or "patterns handed down... well documented and published for all to use", "made by passing down knowledge from one generation to another", "anything with a basis from history". Many mentioned appliqué quilts such as



“Baltimores” or block style quilts as being traditional, while others added that it also included variations of these.

Traditions relate to families – culture. Whose traditions? English – Japanese, Amish?? – Is it a quilt made with repeated blocks – a “Baltimore”? I really don’t know how I would define it (DS).

... in New Zealand we are now starting to see more inspiration from Maori patterns, so these too, although modern, are new traditions but based on old traditions (MJ).

Some indicated that while they also made some innovative work, they were not keen on what they described as “art quilts”.

[The ones] that I have so far seen in exhibitions or magazines do not in general appeal to me. I find most of them too sombre – as I love colour. I also have difficulty in seeing the design concept in some of these works (BJ).

One respondent felt very strongly about some recent winning quilts.

[There] should be a section for ART quilts. I really HATE a few which have won a few recent winning “PATCHWORK” quilts (DW).

Most however, while stating a preference for a particular type of quilt, also emphasised that they appreciated *all* types of quilts and all quilters.

Embrace all forms of Quiltmaking and all Quiltmakers. We are all different yet we all love fabric and making quilts to look at and touch (LY).

We have some great artists in our quilt world (DM).

While the debate over values was the focus of a lot of discussion, other issues regarding exhibitions also presented challenges to the quilters. A number reported being dismayed to find their work poorly hung or displayed. I discussed the nature of the large quilt exhibitions with the participants, noting that there seem to be ongoing difficulties in this area. I commented that it is a problem in quilt exhibitions when quilts of so many differing styles are all hung together.

Yes, because the only thing that is holding them together is that they are three layers and that they are made of textile. When the work is very disparate it is very hard (AS).

I think it [space] is really important. When you’ve got only so much space it really becomes an issue. When we are trying to see quilts

recognised as art I don't like to see shows where it looks like a little bedroom and there are quilts draped around things. It might look very nice and quaint but I think they deserve to be hung up as best they can. It takes ages to get it right (DW).

At least when you have a show on your own you have some control over space... I think they [New Zealand symposia and other organisers] are more careful now. But even then you still don't have any control over who it's hung next to whereas if you pay your money at a gallery at least you have some say and you can control the environment... Then you can say well, who would want a quilt next to mine. Then they think well, we'll cheer hers up a bit by having a bright one beside it, or they will add other paraphernalia like once in a group exhibition - a whole lot of aquatic stuff [was added] as accessories to go with it and my work didn't need that. Accessories!!! (CP).

Other quiltmakers also commented on the negative aspects of some of the larger exhibitions. Quilts hung too closely or with insufficient space for people to stand back far enough to appreciate them; venues where other elements such as carpet that "screamed at them" intruded visually; and even quilts simply being carelessly hung so that they appeared to be poorly constructed, were among the many complaints about the large mixed exhibitions.

I guess that's the choice we have, to have our work in solo exhibitions or buy into the big mixed exhibitions or the guild show where all that goes with the territory and I don't think people can criticise you for that i.e. the choice you make not to join in. I think you have to be careful what you put where – you have to be if that is your career. Each piece is valuable and if you don't have control over the handling – you have to rely on people to be careful (CP).

Anne Scott noted the difference in her local guild's show and the difference that good gallery space can make.

Wellington Quilters' Guild show is always very nicely hung. They have it at The Academy of Fine Arts and they have good lighting, good wall space, good hanging systems. It bumps up the quilts that are average in that setting – makes them look very special (AS).

It's really hard getting good wall space and I have hung some. Some of those quilts out at *Pataka* we changed their position five times. You'll always get one or two quilts that are disadvantaged by their position – because of the nature of what they're beside or the lights or anything like that. You can't have everything. Sometimes they're so big they've only got one space they can go in (AS).

*Do you think the larger mixed exhibitions are working against the status of quilts?*

Pataka has been important in fostering quilts [as art] – bringing them up in the public perception because they light them beautifully, they show them well, they're all hung nicely, there's a good catalogue... (AS).

*There was a quite critical review of the exhibition last time...?*

Yes, I got quite a bit of feedback about that review but I could see both sides of it. I could see that if any artist puts their work into a public gallery and its reviewed in the paper they would be pulling no punches and as I was presented with a review that made some fairly sharp comments, it wasn't for me to say "I wanted you to review that but I don't want you to say that" that's not the point. But I could also see that people weren't used to this kind of comment and felt aggrieved about it (AS).

I commented that it is probably the same as criticising someone's children.

Yes, and we certainly definitely don't go out of our way to criticise and there have been some occasions when they have been so negative that we have just left it out. But I looked at it with *Pataka* and thought well, that's a professional venue and a professional show and it's a slightly different benchmark than a guild show. It's a whole different ballgame (AS).

Having work accepted at a commercial gallery appears to be quite difficult presently for those who work in the textile medium.

I haven't plucked up enough courage to go and ask galleries myself. They usually just turn textile things down flat. They don't make many sales from textile things. It's not seen as an 'investment' and quilts are usually bought by quilters. So not too many go into galleries... There's no secondary market which means the galleries are not interested. In the States there is a secondary market but they've had a longer history of those textiles by hundreds of years (CS).

However, as has been noted in chapter four, it took some time to achieve this recognition outside the area of folklore or antique collecting. The demand by feminist writers and artists for greater recognition of their work was also taking place alongside the dedicated strategy of some in the existing 'artworld' to effect that wider recognition.

While the comments of critics may present one type of challenge to quiltmakers, those of some newspaper reporters cause other difficulties.

Anna Prussing recounted the very negative feedback she received from other quilters after being interviewed about her winning quilt *Gallipoli* at symposium in Auckland, for a major newspaper.

Yes, that had been a very difficult interview. She picked me up from town and took me back out to the exhibition. The first thing she said was "You know it's a really grandmotherly thing this quilting stuff isn't it?" "It's sort of Nana-ish". I had been feeling so excited about that award, just thrilled and it was like having a bucket of cold water thrown over me. I got really cross, which is never wise. I said to her well you might look at us all and we look like so much elderly wallpaper but there are young women doing this and men doing this. It's just not a grandmother thing at all. It's your stereotyping. So she said well none of my friends do this, it's something that older women do. So I said to her "well that may simply be a reflection of your group of friends rather than all young people or all old people. For a journalist you have rather a closed mind". She wasn't that bothered and she said well it's just not something that most people are interested in. So I said "well how do you get 1500 people going to a symposium and 27 galleries in Auckland, dealer galleries, showing art quilt work? How can you call that a fringe activity"? She was a junior reporter with no knowledge... ...she was going off to cover the tennis after that. She knew nothing about that either (AP).

Clare Smith's oeuvre includes many quilts with humorous subject matter. Clare commented that this work was not 'acceptable' everywhere.

... the galleries like Pataka or Te Tuhi they don't want the humourous whimsical stuff (CS).

*That's a shame because it has a value of its own.*

Yes, but it doesn't seem to be what the galleries want. They're more suitable for quilt exhibitions and symposia exhibitions and things like that. It's not what the galleries are looking for. It has to have deep meaning or some sort of meaning (CS).

*You would think if you did a whole lot of those it would be quite powerful.*

Yes, perhaps if it was some sort of commentary on women's place in the home or something like that but if it's just the vacuum cleaner or the dryer that eats the socks, or the filing cabinet that falls off the chair and attacks you, they don't seem to go for that. But I can use those for quilt exhibitions and World Quilt and Textile [USA]. So I often have two different things that I'm doing at the same time. I'll have ones that are more suitable for quilt shows. I mean if I hang up one of those genetics ones I'll have about five people who will understand what it's about. They'll just say "Oh, you're using old clothes. Why are you using old clothes?" Last time ... I had seven quilts that I could have taken along but I knew there would have

been either a collective groan or complete silence in the hall if I had shown those... (CS).

Clare's comments illustrate the way the reactions of the 'group', show where the members' ideas of comparative value lie (Langellier 1992). I observed an instance of this sort of reception while attending the bi-annual, northern regional day for quilters. Members of the committee of NANZQ were asked to show their quilts to the audience.

There is applause as each person shows their quilts. There is strong applause for the traditional or highly coloured quilts. Cheryl Comfort's dark, achromatic quilts are received in relative silence, despite her explanation of her reasons for making them – her reference to black being strongly associated to New Zealanders' sense of national identity, and also to the work of painter Ralph Hotere (Field notes 13.8.05).

To be fair to this audience, these particular quilts do require good lighting to show the subtlety of the varying shades of charcoal and black and also the sculptural effects of the quilting. These qualities were not easily visible in this setting. It did however support Clare Smith's argument for being selective about where she chooses to show or exhibit her quilts. Esther Woollaston had experienced some similar difficulties when sharing her quilts in some circumstances:

That's the thing about doing this sort of work – sometimes those meeting points with people who aren't aware of what you are doing and don't like it – can be difficult... It's that punishing thing groups of people do to anyone who is slightly different (EW).

While many of the above comments revolve around the major national exhibitions and gallery exhibitions, in the case of local guild exhibitions many of the members felt that these served another purpose besides showing the work to the public. The guild quilters had mixed views about whether all quilts that are submitted should be hung. Some believed that space and a good standard of work were important considerations. Many however, believed that the guild exhibitions served to encourage beginners.

If you want to attract new quilters they need to see something that they could achieve. All professional quilters would have started from somewhere (JB).

Everyone who wishes to exhibit should have the opportunity to do so (MS).

Yes [all submitted quilts should be included] It gives the beginners an opportunity to show where all quilters began (MC).

[There should be] a special group for obvious beginners to encourage them to try again next year (DW).

One felt that exhibitions may be selected if that is the tenet on which they are held but commented:

We need to make sure that there is ample opportunity to show quilts which are not from the tight-knit group of “experts” (MJ).

I feel that some are scared to display any work in an exhibition because of the pulling apart [criticism] of their work in some cases (MJ)

These comments demonstrate that the guild quilters mostly see their exhibition as an opportunity that is grounded in egalitarian values where all members have the same right to exhibit, regardless of the quality of their work. They mostly see the opportunity to exhibit as a part of the growth of all their members even though some are uncomfortable about the idea of having their work critiqued.

From these discussions it can be seen that in general, quiltmaking activity in this country comprises women whose work is more directed towards being recognised within the art world, and women who see their practice as more based within their familial and community lives. Many of the first category of women also interact on many levels with the second category. Many still belong to community groups such as guilds. Many also often exhibit their work in competition with the second category, making use of the organisations and events that are mainly provided by that group. Among the second group are many who work in a dedicated way towards the same goals as the first, gaining inspiration from many of the same sources.

Among the second group are those who value *most* highly, quilts that have not to date entered art world discourse. These are the complex and elaborate and often very ‘feminine’ floral appliqué quilts that ever since the Whitney exhibition and the advent of art world writing about quilts have

been sidelined, if discussed at all, to the world of the 'pretty', the 'domestic' the 'decorative' and the 'feminine'. (Plate 24) Many quiltmakers themselves appear to identify 'abstraction' and 'minimalism' as *the* elements necessary for quilts to be categorised as 'art', unaware of the extent of the construction of the ideology that underlies this ascription of value.

It can therefore be argued that what Jonathan Holstein and the Whitney exhibition did (along with the later recognition of the genre of 'improvisational' African-American quilts), was set the scene for the way a large section of the quilting world in New Zealand would develop for the remainder of the century. Only some styles of quilts were promoted as art; those that demonstrated the formalist and minimalist qualities recognised by the art institutions of the time. This selective valuing has seen intricately made floral appliqué quilts such as "Baltimores" regarded, like Tag Gronberg's description of the 'decorative', as Other, thereby constructing a hierarchy that had not existed before. This new hierarchy replaced one that had been constructed by quiltmakers themselves and that was grounded in their own way of valuing quilts – those that were made for everyday 'use' and those that were made for 'best' i.e. to celebrate or commemorate an event, to record family history, or to demonstrate their skill and fulfill their need to be creative.

If the work still remains, as Dr Wendy Cowling recently noted – "largely below the radar" of the New Zealand world of fine art (discussion 28.9.05), some of the reasons for this may, by this point, have become a little clearer. They can be seen to involve ideas of the gendered world, of conventional art history, and of the way objects and commodities are transformed and valued in different ways in different contexts and different times.

## Conclusion

### The Quilt: A Multivalent Object The Maker and the Will to Create

Our position in the history of what art has been thought to be makes it difficult to appreciate the importance of technology for art, since we are predisposed to believe that to the degree that artifacts are technology they are not art at all. In broader terms, however, technology is always the more or less immediate background for everything we call art, and from a historical point of view the link between *technē* and art cannot be broken.

David Summers (2003:67)

... the gendered conflation of textiles...with the feminine suggests that somewhere within the softness of fabric and the intricacy of stitching lies an inherent relationship that cannot be signified or secured: it is always 'excess' and therefore external to more easily and rigorously defined concepts. Excess is elusive, defies categorisation and thus... occupies the margins, but... it is precisely in this marginal space that disruption ferments, always ready to dislodge the symbolic order and its dominant discourses.

Bridget Elliot and Janice Helland (2002:5)

Quilting activity in New Zealand presents a complex field of study for an ethnographer. Having set out to see what quiltmakers were saying about their practice, I became immersed in what Diane Losche described as the labyrinth that is the field of inter-disciplinary research (Losche 1999). As a result, I have focussed on just some of the issues that are most relevant to my original aim and have sought to understand how these issues impact on those who make quilts.

In this thesis I have outlined aspects of the quilting activities of a very diverse group of women set against a background of some of the discourse relating to historical views of "art" and of various art "worlds" (Danto 1964). I have sought to understand why the women create the work they do. I also sought to understand the different areas into which



the work is sent, received and how it may be viewed. I have identified the areas where conflict has arisen from the time during the 1970's, when quilts first began to be recognised by those outside quiltmaking, as 'art'. This conflict revolved around the various conceptual understandings of the quilt as art object, that is, around the categorisation and valuing of quilts in the public arena, as well as in quilt making groups, both in New Zealand and overseas.

While there has been a significant expansion of quiltmaking activity since the 1970's, the comments of the women in this study show that, at that time, the 'quilt' as we have come to regard it, was not a well known object. Many people had made items using patchwork or knew of patchwork that had been made by members of their families. However, the style of patchwork quilt which was so well known to North Americans was a less familiar object for women in New Zealand. This is shown by the many comments made by the women whom I interviewed as they talked of their introduction to the genre.

In Chapter Three, I discussed the various ways different groups of people around the world experience what is generally thought of in the West as 'art'. In the West art is often framed as the activity of a few elite individuals, often separated from 'everyday' life by their 'artistic genius' (Battersby 1998; Freeland 2001). Art may become a part of other people's lives (the dealers and collectors of art) but it is often seen as an accessory, an acquisition, a status symbol or an 'investment'. Obviously, much Western art is treasured, either by individuals or shown or stored in purpose built places such as public galleries and museums. (As noted earlier, the recent consideration of the circumstances and politics of museum display has resulted in a whole new field of research and discourse).

In the last few decades art and art production is again being seen as being more integrated and interconnected with other disciplines and areas of life. However, despite recent explorations by artists and others such as the

relationship between art and anthropology, between art and film/history/medicine/science, it nevertheless remains in many instances, a category or classification of only a particular range of objects and experience, framed within particular circumstances.

There are groups who do not themselves have such a category. They create their material culture, the objects they make, the performances of their song and dance, both sacred and profane, for a number of reasons. These productions are often part of an apparently seamless system of beliefs that form the foundation for the way they live. For the community in Papua New Guinea (the Manje Kundi) who shared their knowledge with Diana Losche “bird names and bird imagery [were] woven through the structure of everyday life... entwined with emotions” (Losche 1999:216). For the Manje Kundi, the totemic symbol of the bird and the idea of ‘birdness’ were deployed in hundreds of ways in both “visual metaphor and verbal metaphor” (Losche 1999:215).

I found the thinking of the anthropologist, the late Alfred Gell, most illuminating and helpful. Gell has made a very useful contribution to the discussion of how judgements about art have been made in the context of anthropological investigations. While early engagements with “Primitive” art by both artists and anthropologists resulted in “essentialisation and concomitant ghettoisation” (Gell 1998:1) later commentators such as Price (1989), Coote (1992, 1996) and (Morphy 1994, 1996) have asserted that “the task of the anthropology of art is to define the characteristics of each culture’s inherent aesthetic” (Gell 1998:1).

Gell, however, argued for a new way of understanding art. Focussing on the way in which art in the West has generally been considered, Gell briefly outlined existing theories such as those of *aesthetics*, i.e. ways of evaluating “any object that is aesthetically superior [with these qualities having been *intentionally*] put there by the artist”; *interpretative theory*, i.e. art is “interpreted in the light of a system that is founded within an art-historical tradition”; and *institutional theory* i.e. where “the art world co-opts

the work, and circulates it as art, then it *is* art because it is the living representatives of this art world, i.e. artists, critics, dealers and collectors, who have the power to decide these matters, not ‘history’” (Gell 1996:15,16). Gell argued that “[e]valuative schemes, of whatever kind, are only of anthropological interest in so far as they play a part within social processes of interaction, through which they are generated and sustained” (Gell 1998:3).

A number of twentieth century Western philosophers and artists tried to do away with ‘aesthetics’. Gell also believed that by eliminating ideas of aesthetics (and semiotics as well) and instead concentrating on the *agency*, that is, what an ‘index’ (the object or artwork) may ‘do’ within a social milieu, we may gain a better understanding of the ways such indexes ‘act’ or are acted upon. Gell differentiated between primary agency - that of intentional beings, and secondary agency – that of objects or artworks (indexes) which may be “objective embodiments of the *power or capacity to will their use*” (Gell 1998:20, 21, his italics). He commented that the “ways in which social agency can be invested in things, or can emanate from things, are exceedingly diverse” (Gell 1998:18). These may be variously described by such notions as aura (Benjamin 1969), *wairua*, *hau*, essence, or, ‘distributed personhood’.

By focussing on agency, Gell’s theory addresses the *made object* (or index) and its place in a relational context. His theory still requires that we consider the made object as an entity. His discussion of specific examples focusses on the visual elements of these objects.<sup>1</sup> From here we must consider the various ways that the object may either have agency or else be in the position of ‘patient’ [that is, passive, non-acting] within any social milieu (Gell 1998:21-23). His discussion focusses on the phenomenological aspects of made objects, which is, in a way, a parallel

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. his extensive discussion of *Style and Culture* in chapter eight where he asserts that style is created *within* the inter-artefactual domain and is “founded on connections between artefacts”... “artworks are holographic fragments of the ‘larger unities’ to which they are united by stylistic linkages” (Gell 1998:217, 220).

to the ideology prevailing in contemporary art – that is, art is about *ideas* – in this case, ideas of agency.

Gell's theory provides a valuable example of the way we can consider the various ways objects may be apprehended or understood. However, his theory does not include the complex physical and psychological experience of the *maker* and the way that the actual process of making can, in itself, provide a rich field of ethnographic analysis. Gell confronted the 'artworld' on artworld terms, engaging with objects or 'indexes' but using an anthropological paradigm of analysis. I believe that an anthropological examination of the process of 'making', the importance to the maker of the will to create, and of the way that makers physically and psychologically engage with their media, can further enrich the understanding of the way we experience made objects.

Lissant Bolton achieved this with her research into the making of textiles by women in Vanuatu. I believe that her research provides a valuable model of understanding the way humans may consider made objects. For the women whom Bolton worked alongside, the actual process of making was of greater importance than was the end product. Her research provides a counter to Western ideas of art and object making where the emphasis is frequently on the end product. When the process of *making* becomes the focus of study, the dynamics of the situation that focuses only on the 'made object' in its relational context, may be upended. We may gain a deeper understanding of the value to human beings of the actual process of making, irregardless of what that process may be. Such an analysis stands against several thousand years of Western history which have placed the culture of the mind as separate and above the culture of the hands.

A number of other writers mentioned in this thesis are reconsidering the process of *facture* and how it is experienced by the maker. Richard Anderson did this in his study of cross-cultural philosophies of art. One of his examples was a discussion of the importance to Inuit artists of "the

enjoyment that is derived from artistic creation itself” (Anderson 1990:23). David Summers (2003) argued for consideration of the made object or art work to be based in the context, time and place of its manufacture, use or reception. Pamela Smith investigated the complex interrelationship of artisanal knowledge with the development of scientific knowledge in her 2004 work *The Body of the Artisan*.

A recent issue of the Australian arts magazine *Artlink*, was devoted entirely to discussions by various authors of the importance or otherwise of the ‘maker’. This discussion was stimulated in part, because of the selection of a work by woodcarver Ricky Swallow as Australia’s entry to the Venice Biennale. Many of the writers emphasised the value of the ‘hand-made’ in art-making practices. This was contrasted with discussions by others, “that it is the nature of the hand *to take meaning away* [resulting in] a critical breathing space of random disorder in which life can emerge” (Murray 2005:11). There is also discussion of ‘artists’ who conceive of a work, but have someone else do the making.

Peter Dormer (1994) has put forward a strong case for the revaluing of tacit knowledge and the work of the maker. In his discussion he outlines the way that the process of making can inform the process of conceptual creation, that is, the work of the mind and the work of the hands are *not* separate processes but are interrelated. This fact was demonstrated by the many instances noted by the quiltmakers where they used the process of *making* as a tool for *thinking*.

I continued my discussion on the production and reception of art and other made objects in Western society in Chapter Four. I was interested in the way processes that occurred within and surrounding art production reflected similar processes and strategies evident in the wider society, in this case; assimilation, appropriation, transformation and commodification. I have outlined situations where these processes had directly impacted on the way quilts have been moved and re-presented within different milieux to effect particular outcomes. During the latter half of the twentieth

century, the circumstances surrounding the presentation of art in the West focussed around ideas of identity construction and of commodity consumption and used similar strategies of promotion to those used by the advertising industry. When quilts were moved from their traditional places of making and use, they were subjected to the values of the 'artworld' rather than those of their traditional makers and users. Within this different relational context, previous aspects of their 'agency' were overturned, upended, or ignored altogether.

In his discussion of the 'elevation' of Aboriginal art to 'fine artworld' status, Fred Myers described processes that have much in common with those already discussed in relation to the Whitney exhibition. Following Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991) Myers commented on the tendency of European art curators to create a particular way of displaying works:

[There has been a tendency] to split up the senses and parcel them out, one at a time, to the appropriate art form. Conventional museum exhibitions follow a pattern of partiality, of fragmentation in sensory apprehension by prioritising the visual, which inevitably draws what is exhibited toward the classification as "art" (Myers 2002:248).

Citing Peter Sutton (1990), Myers describes the subversive nature of the 1988 New York *Dreamings* exhibition of Aboriginal paintings in the way that it showed that:

... people could make marvellous meanings and marvellous objects within a tradition that had little room for personal creativity or "originality," where people preferred to look after meanings and relationships rather than artefacts, where the social rather than the individual was the basis of value, and where production and consumption could proceed without an accompanying religion of consumption (Myers 2002:248).

Conal McCarthy (2004) convincingly demonstrated the way in which display mediates the experience of the viewer in an institution such as a gallery or museum. In any display of objects, the way they are presented spatially, visually and textually, actively constructs the way the viewer will conceive of such objects. Some of the quiltmakers reported the way display affected the apprehension of quilts within different milieux. While they understood that the effect of some quilts could be advantaged while the effect of others was diminished, they did not seem aware of the extent to which such processes *actively construct* the ways quilts are viewed.

Not surprisingly, what seems to have been a deliberate strategy by some exhibition designers to separate *some* quilts from the greater body of quilt production, has resulted in divisions and misunderstandings among quiltmakers themselves.

One of the greatest insights I have gained from this research has been the realisation of the extent to which those elements of culture which are seen as being particularly 'feminine' – beauty and decoration – were devalued within twentieth century art and architecture. Set against a history that saw a greater recognition of women's rights, this can be seen to parallel a similar devaluing of women's familial and nurturing roles as women sought equality with men in order to be able to share more fairly in public decision making and in the economic rewards of what was seen as a "man's world". While the two cases have different dynamics, they nevertheless resulted in a similar outcome – the continuation or strengthening of a 'male' aesthetic and of 'male' values in the world, to the detriment of a valuing of the 'female' and of the 'feminine'.

### **The Patchwork Quilt**

The patchwork quilt bridges the extremes of object production. The spaces where quilts are made and the circumstances surrounding the making of quilts are usually more embedded in the familial space of the home than is most other Western art. The quilt is held close to the body of the maker during the time of its making. It is often used as a 'visual metaphor and a verbal metaphor' (Losche 1999), a carrier or symbol of emotions, a narrative of a family's history, or to honour an ancestor. It may be used as a medium to express ideas. It may also become an object of exchange as a form of reciprocity or as the subject of a market transaction.

Whether quilts are made for utilitarian purposes, as gifts, or as a medium of artistic expression an important reason for their coming into existence is often to provide an opportunity for the maker to express his or her

creativity. Essential to this act of creativity is the importance to the makers of the medium itself. The complex interaction of the senses with cloth and colour and with the physical acts of cutting, stitching and rejoining, is one not of destruction but of creation. These provide a potent mix that appears to fuel the creative souls of those who engage with the medium.

While a number of practitioners separate their quiltmaking practice from their daily lives and use the quilt as a medium to explore aspects of the environment or other areas of life that inspire them, many actively engage with the idea of the quilt itself and its many associated cultural and historical meanings. Catherine Cerny in her discussion of the aesthetic appreciation of quilts has examined the way this discourse may link “individual experiences to unifying cultural values” (Cerny 1994:161).

... the play of tropes [relate] the warmth of a quilt and the act of quiltmaking to values of social connectedness and female empowerment. The mythic tradition of quiltmaking... evokes images of female struggle and accomplishment, which in turn may be personalised through the varied expressions of contemporary quiltmakers. ... the internal processes occurring during an aesthetic response involve a dynamic interplay of psychological and cultural factors (Cerny 1994:161).

For the women who shared their experiences with me, quiltmaking does provide them with a sense of ‘connectedness’ and ‘empowerment’. Equally important though is the sense of identity that is enhanced by the use of their creative energy. They are grounded in their discipline and confident in this creativity.

Some were concerned that the notion of ‘art’ had become so broadened that the concept could become devalued. However, as has been shown, ‘who and what’ gains recognition as ‘artist and art’ and at which points in history is the result of many complex and overlapping processes. Quiltmakers themselves are confident of their valuation of their work. Some respondents also felt that ‘time’ would validate the work they had done as ‘art’. Antiquity gives prestige and recognition.

While some quilts in New Zealand have gained ‘artworld’ status, ‘discourse and display’ have worked against this status in some circumstances. As



Clare Smith noted in her interview, a secondary market in contemporary New Zealand quilts, is yet to develop. Instead, they await the cultural entrepreneurs and dealers of the future.

In his 2004 article about *Objectspace*, a new Auckland gallery “devoted to innovative design and craft” Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, an art critic and design tutor discussed the ongoing challenge for these areas of production. He commented:

You’d be forgiven for thinking that the exhibition of the tougher end of craft and design might have been comfortably accommodated within the structure of the country’s existing galleries and museums. However, ask yourself this: ‘When did you last see a pot in the Auckland Art gallery or an exhibition of weaving on the walls of the city gallery in Wellington’ (Lloyd Jenkins 2004:59).

Lloyd Jenkins considered that the leading galleries “lump design and craft together in a category of its own called – “the things we don’t show” [and claims that] “this is because craft exhibitions are popular rather than prestigious” (Lloyd Jenkins 2004:59). He suggested that corporate sponsorship has seen the “lightly populated contemporary art exhibition” winning out over the more popular but “less prestigious” areas of craft and design (Lloyd Jenkins 2004:59). His use of the word ‘craft’ as a noun also continues a division which writers such as Gell and Summers effectively erased in their discussions of made objects.

While he acknowledged the decades in which there has been a breaking down of boundaries, he feels that this has been a one way process. ‘Artists’ have appropriated elements of craft practice for the purposes of their art, and have also moved into areas of design and craft production as a means of obtaining a livelihood that is difficult to obtain by their art alone. Lloyd Jenkins saw this as a problem in that:

... future generations of designers are being taught by those with minimal design training and little sympathy or awareness of the unique requirements of design and craft culture (Lloyd Jenkins 2004:59).

Lloyd Jenkins comments reflect those made by tapestry weaver Anne Newdigate (2003, noted earlier) in her discussion of the power relations she experienced during the development of her career.

Also, it is interesting to note that when Lloyd Jenkins reviewed some of the many exhibitions of quilts that appeared in Auckland several months later as part of the symposium, he was careful to distance himself from those quilts that he viewed as “just another piece of sewing” (Lloyd Jenkins 2005:59). Instead, he emphasised the importance of those works that, in his view, demonstrated “conceptual quality” (Lloyd Jenkins 2005:59), reflecting the view that process and content are separate entities.

Despite the ambivalence of some quiltmakers towards the ‘artworld’ it has been shown that they have been proactive in arranging their own competitions, symposia and exhibitions, on both individual and collective bases. A wonderful amount of creative energy is going into this field. I don’t believe quiltmakers need to develop a “parallel practice and ideology” (Pollock 1999) that is separate from other artmaking activities. They can simply continue to work in the focussed way they already do, to create an ever-enlarging wedge that will open a space in wider arts discourse where some of the aspects that the makers themselves value about their work, can be recognised.

Some quiltmakers do view their work as belonging within a fine arts tradition, seeking to have it recognised by those institutions where the valuation of conceptual expression is paramount. As a strategy to achieve this, some have separated themselves from the wider quilting activity in New Zealand. Quilts may be accepted into the body of work that is known as the ‘fine arts’, since, as has been demonstrated, they comprise all the qualities necessary to be considered as such. Whether or not a quilt may have the qualities that enable it to enter the world of *avant-garde* art depends upon the circumstances of its reception and in whom the power to make such an assessment resides. As Bridget Elliot and Janice Helland point out; from a marginalised space, disruption may ferment and the “symbolic order and its dominant discourse” (Elliot and Helland 2002:5) *may* indeed be dislodged.

Very recently Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (2006) have advocated for a greater dialogue between contemporary art and anthropology. They argue that:

...anthropology's iconophobia and self-imposed restriction of visual expression to text-based models needs to be overcome by a critical engagement with a range of material and sensual practices in the contemporary arts (Schneider and Wright 2006:4).

In his discussion of aesthetics, the anthropologist John Forrest also advocates a "multisensory and multidimensional" analysis of aesthetic objects (Forrest 1991:53). In his application of this approach to such an analysis, he uses the patchwork quilt as an example, noting that cloth may be experienced not only through sight but also through other sensory experiences - touch, hearing, smelling and tasting (Forrest 1991:50-52). Forrest argues that the senses may also be "enmeshed ... with the spatio-temporal dimensions" (Forrest 1991:52). Cloth, unlike some other media, holds a value that is more than the sum of its material being. Cloth may hold in itself the memory of a person, the touch or scent of another human being, the trace of the hand of the maker.

In many genres of art the emphasis is on the end product – the object. There is little or no emphasis on the processes or circumstances of its making. It is as though the "thought" i.e. the conceptual basis of the work, is paramount. The skill of the 'maker' is given little consideration. For quilters, the process of making is the essence of the quilt. It is *primarily* a "made object". In her essay on the quilt as art, Susan Bernick pointed out that:

Quilters also consider the reason a quilt was made to be a fact about its history of production that can direct the viewer's attention to intrinsic properties of the quilt that are worthy of contemplation (Bernick 1994:139).

The makers of quilts mostly do not see themselves as separate from wider society but see themselves as an integral part of society. To paraphrase Fred Myers (2002:248) in his discussion of Aboriginal painting, they prefer to 'look after meanings and relationships rather than artefacts alone, and for many the social rather than the individual, is the basis of value'. Their concern may be for their families, for the environment, for social justice or

consciousness-raising. They also gain pleasure and sometimes status when their work is appreciated and received well by their families and/or peers or displayed for the wider public.

The quilt as object resists categorisation. It may be seen as 'women's work' but quilts are also made by men. It may be seen as 'domestic' but it may also hang in a gallery or be a focus of a ritual. It may be gift, commodity, display object or heirloom. It may be made to carry a political message, but it may also simply be made to keep a person warm. Cloth can carry a message or the spirit of an ancestor – a part of their *distributed person*. The quilt is a multivalent object in which all the processes that bring it to being are integral to the whole. Within and between the fibres of the quilt, and in the lines of stitching which hold it together and form the sculpted surface, are held the marks of the hand in making, the memory of the maker.

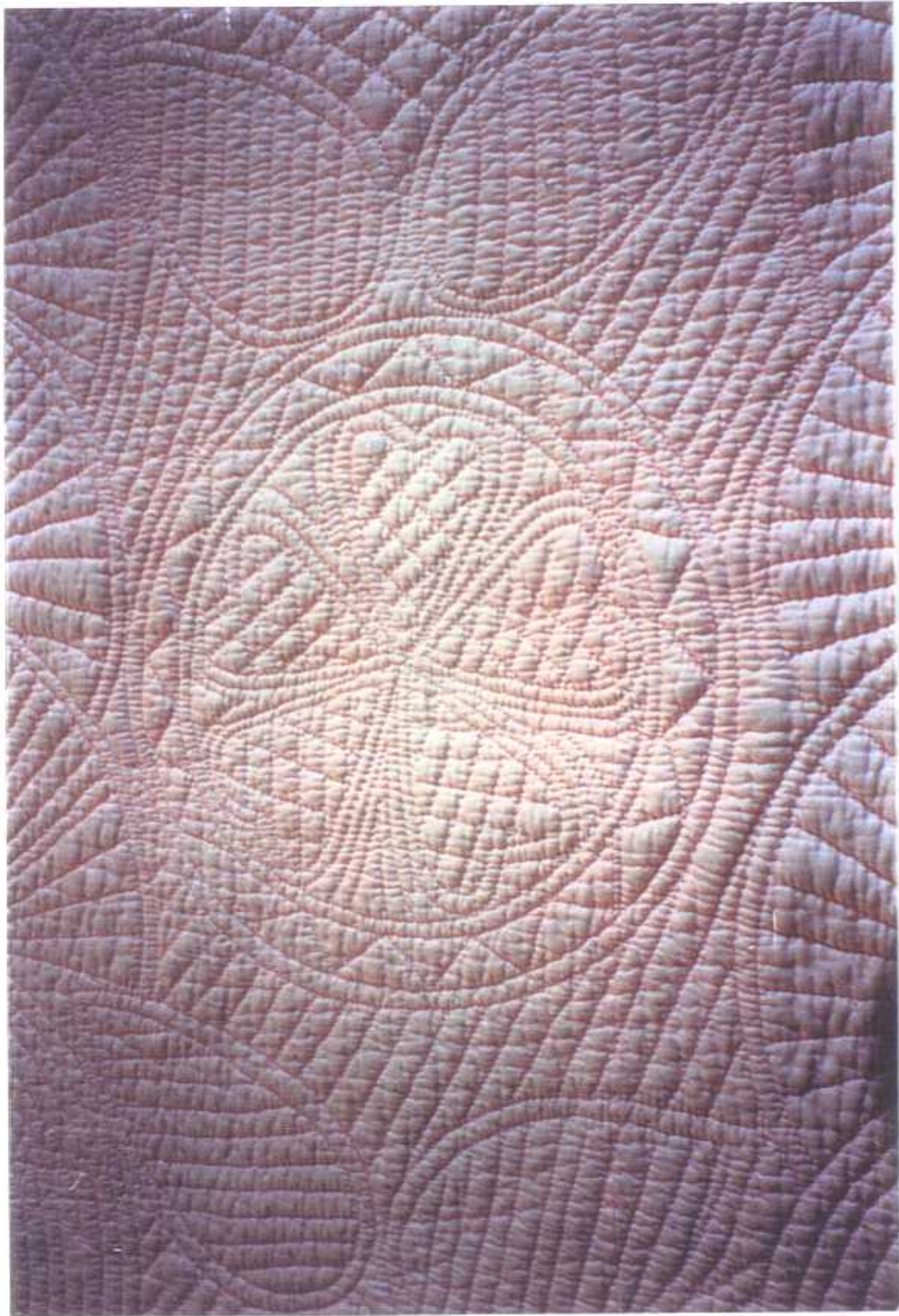


Plate 1 Welsh Quilt detail. Hand quilted, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Maker unknown

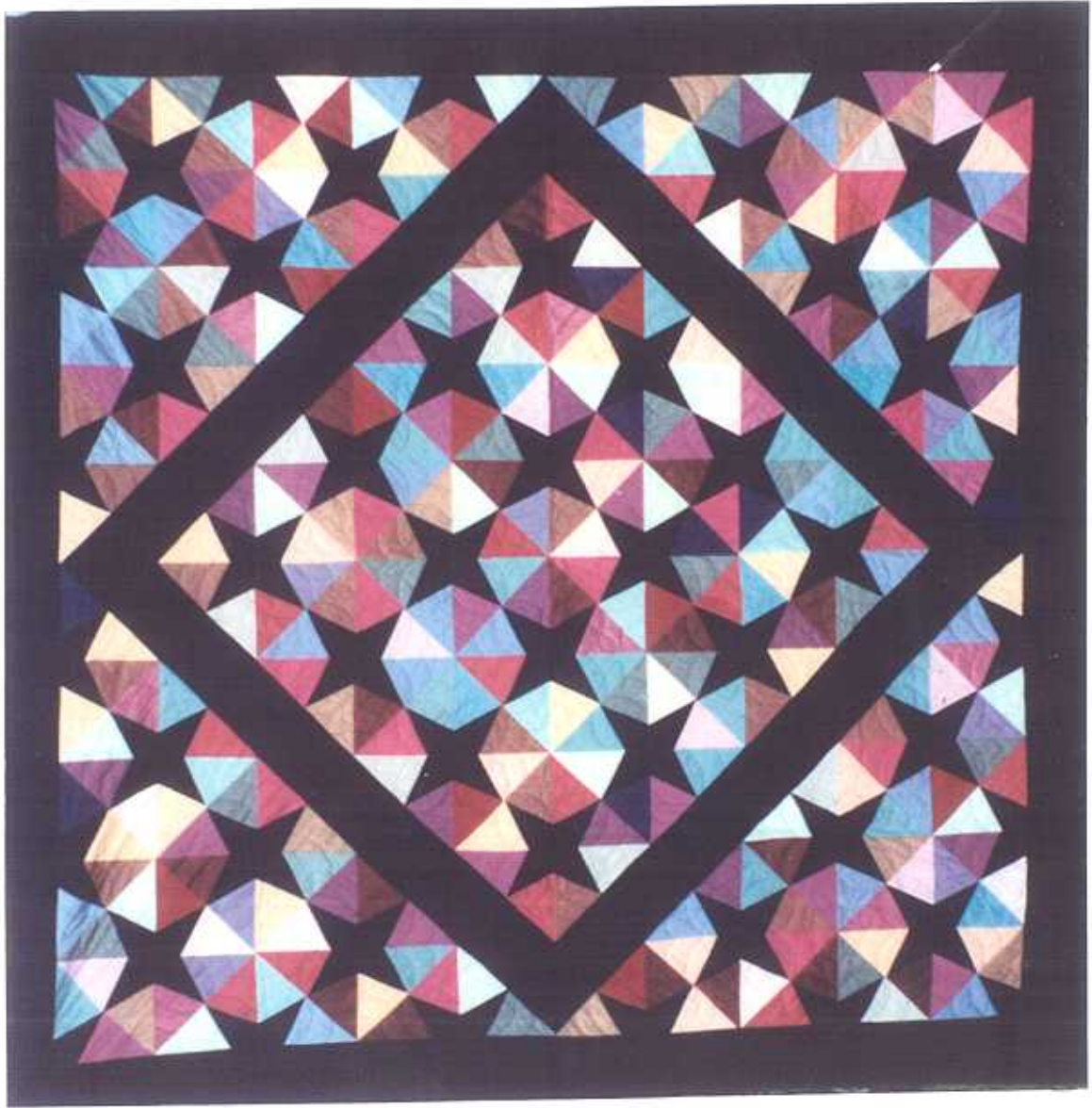


Plate 2 *Almost Amish*, 1700mm x 1700mm,  
Machine pieced, hand quilted  
Marion Manson, 1993.



Plate 3     *Desert Flower*, 2400mm x 2400mm,  
Machine pieced, hand quilted  
Jo Cornwall, circa 1986.



Plate 4 *Bluebird*, 1500mm x 1050mm,  
Machine pieced, hand appliquéd and quilted  
Jo Cornwall, circa 1986.





Plate 5. *Jewel of the Pacific*, 1830mm x 1830mm  
Machine pieced and quilted  
Donna Ward 2005

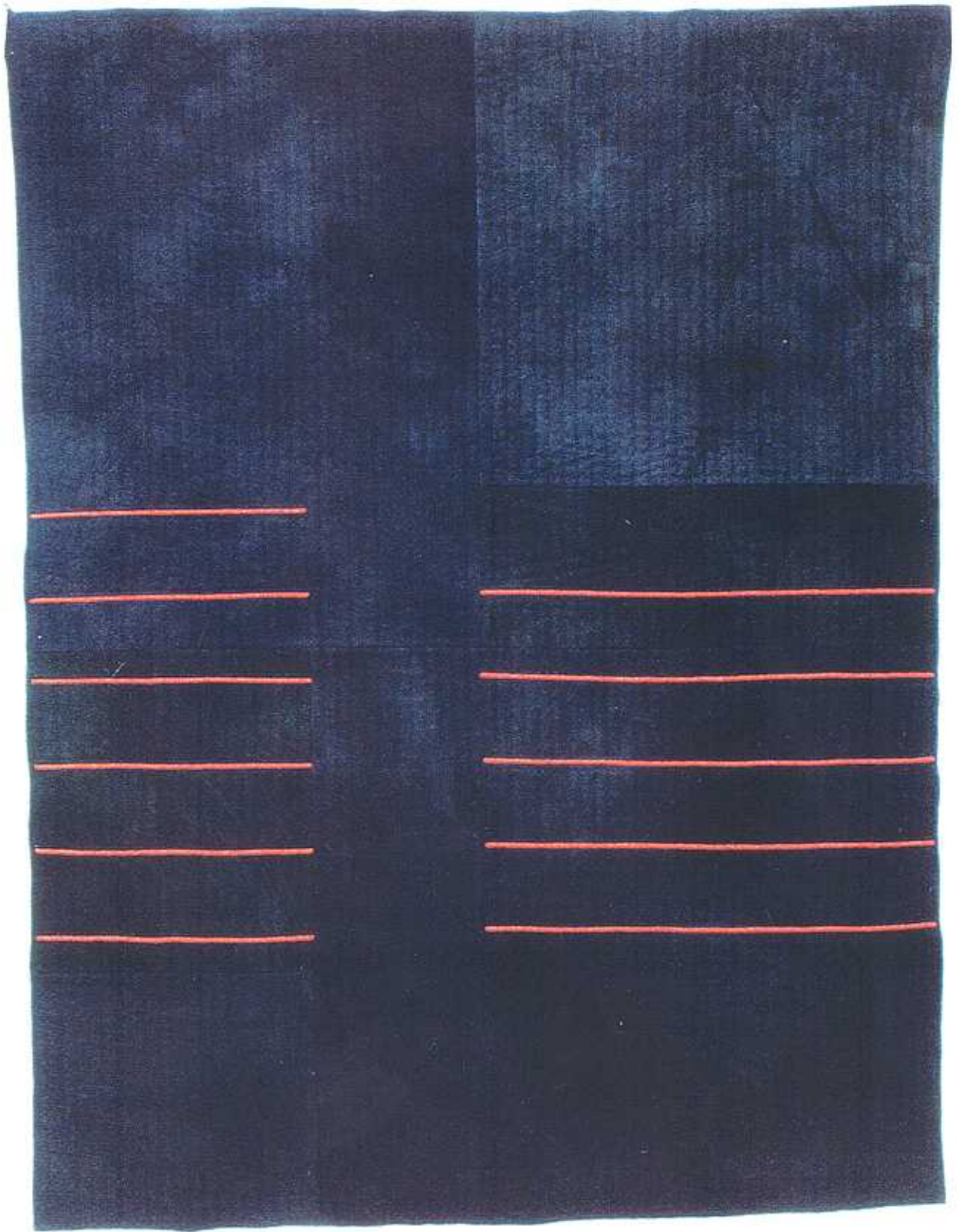


Plate 10 *Rural Composition*, 2120mm x 1960mm,  
Machine pieced, hand quilted, woolen blanket  
Katherine Morrison, 2002.



Plate 11 *Life is Not a Bed of Roses*. 1780mm x 1720mm  
Hand quilted and embroidered, woolen blanket  
Katherine Morrison. 2005.



Plate 11a *Happy Birthday Bro.* 2180 x 2380mm  
Machine pieced, hand quilted, wool  
Marion Marison, 1993.

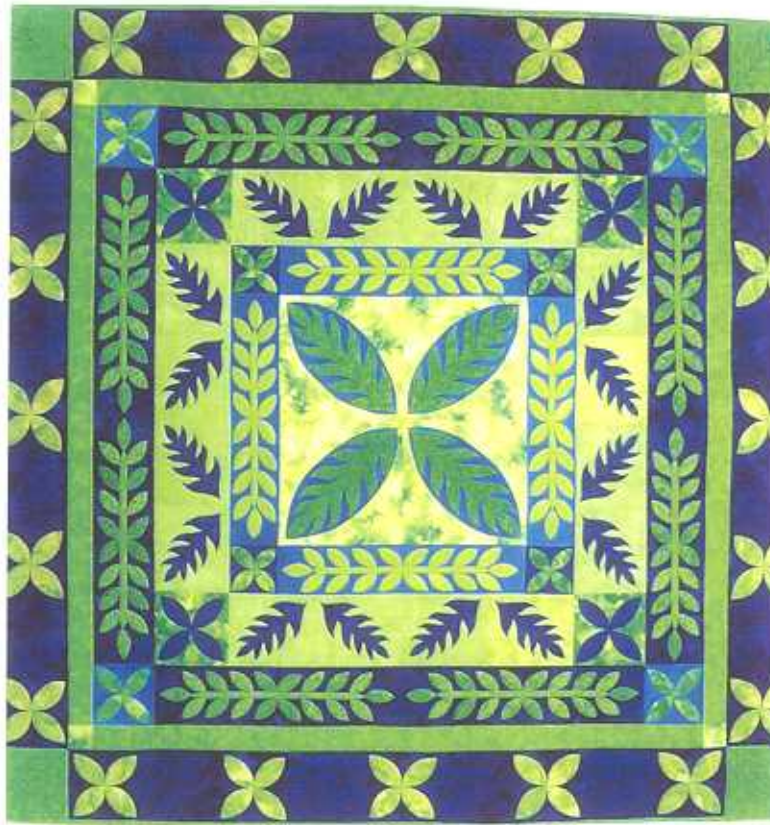


Plate 12 *Pacific Garden*, 1830mm x 1830mm  
Machine pieced and quilted  
Donna Ward, 2004.



Plate 13 *Pacific Garden*: detail showing machine quilting  
Donna Ward, 2004

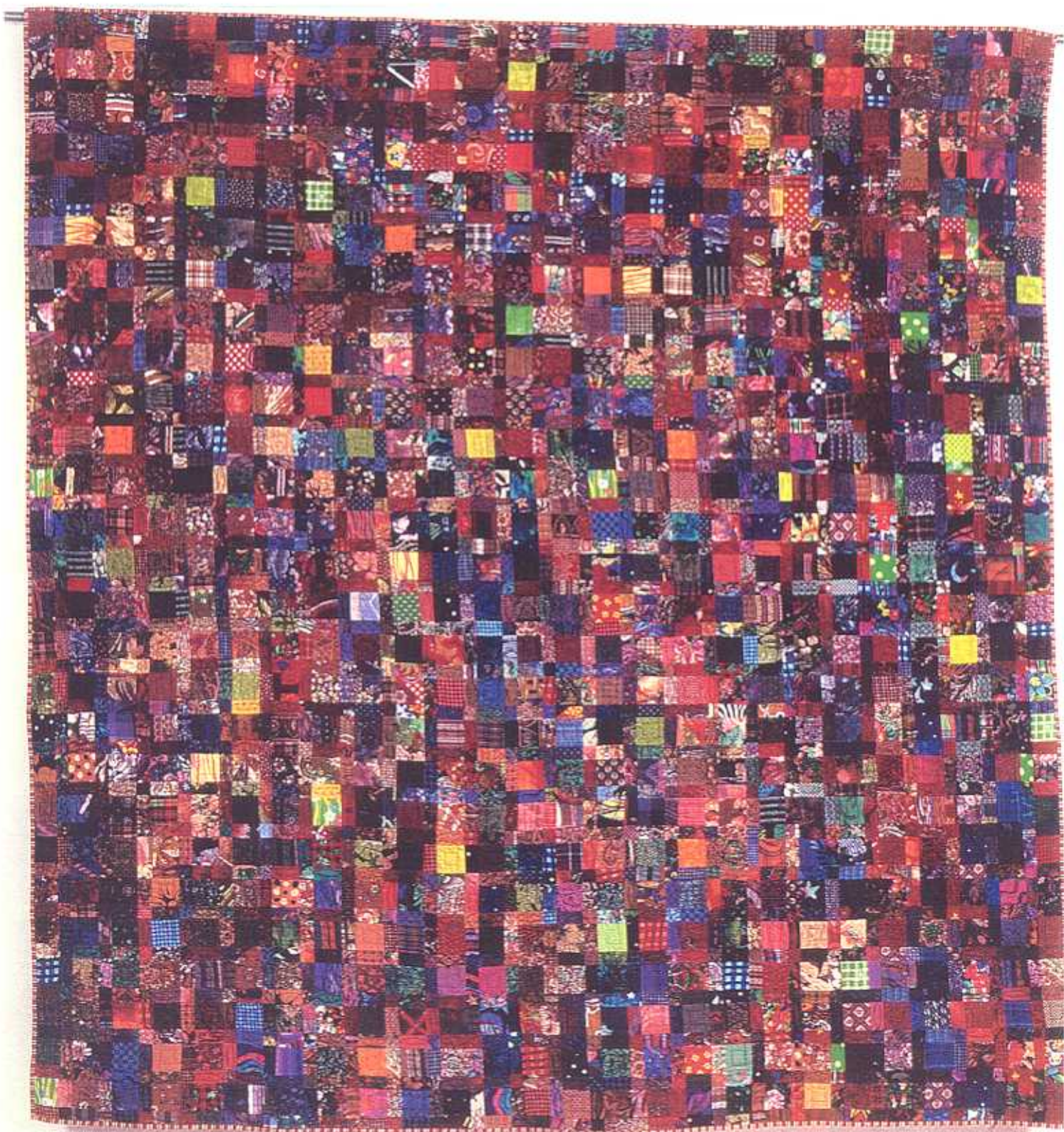


Plate 14 *Millennium Lights*, 2040mm x 1800mm,  
Machine pieced, hand quilted  
Anne Scott, 1999



Plate 15 *Babble*, 590 x 480mm  
Collage, Machine quilted  
Clare Smith, 2005.



Plate 16a *X Marks the Spot*, approx. 1600 x 1500mm  
Machine appliqué and embroidery, hand quilted  
Clare Smith, 2002



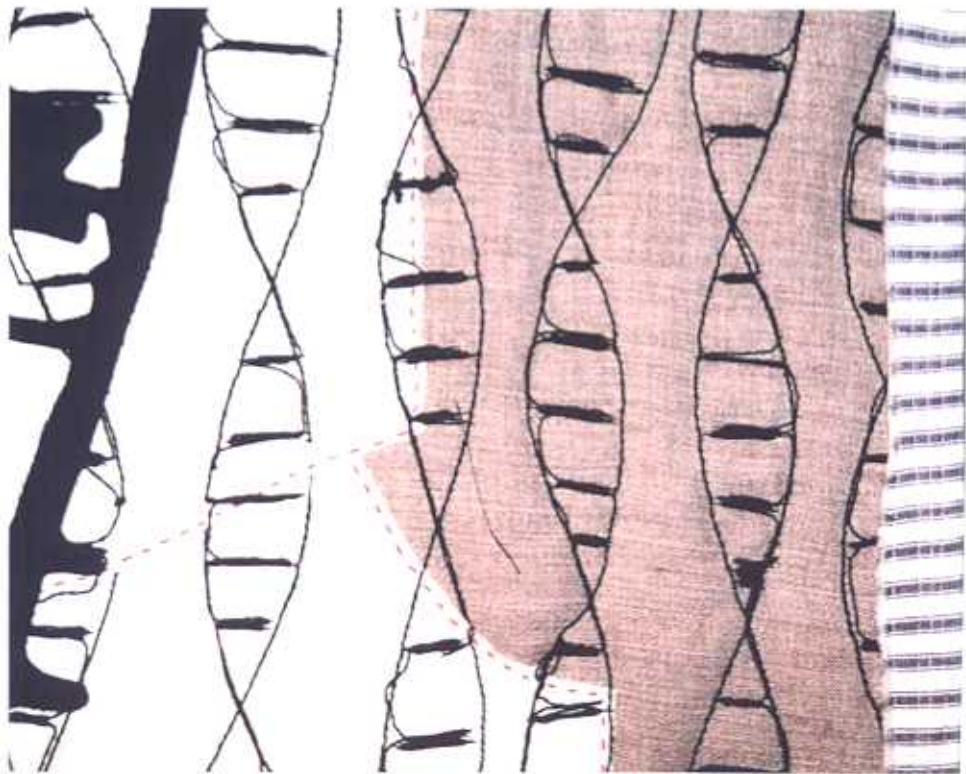


Plate 16b *X Marks the Spot*, detail  
Machine appliqué and embroidery, hand quilted  
Clare Smith, 2002

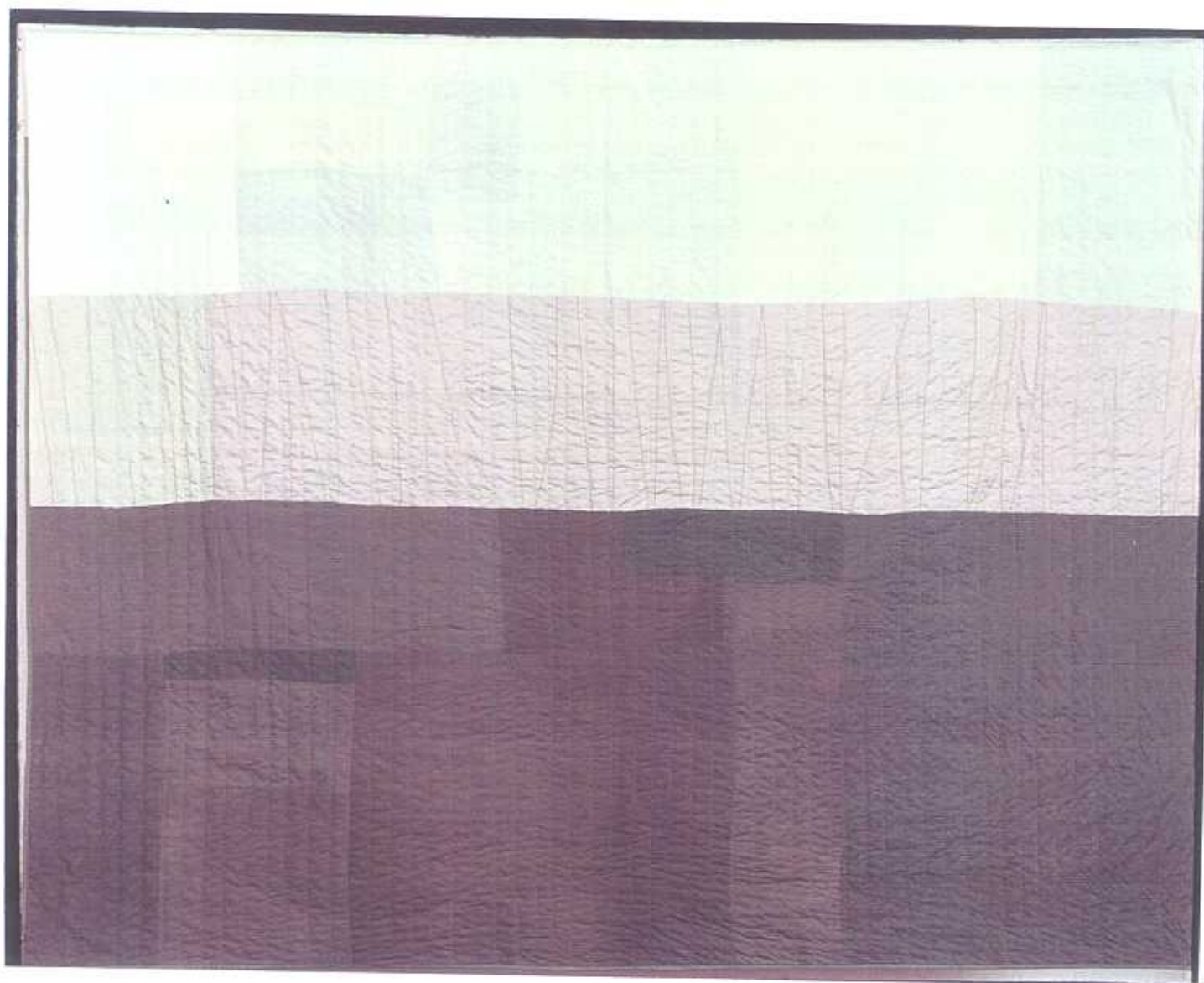


Plate 17 *The Deep Underground Pear Tree Avenue*,  
1600mm x 2040mm  
Machine pieced, hand quilted and embroidered  
Esther Woollaston, 2004.

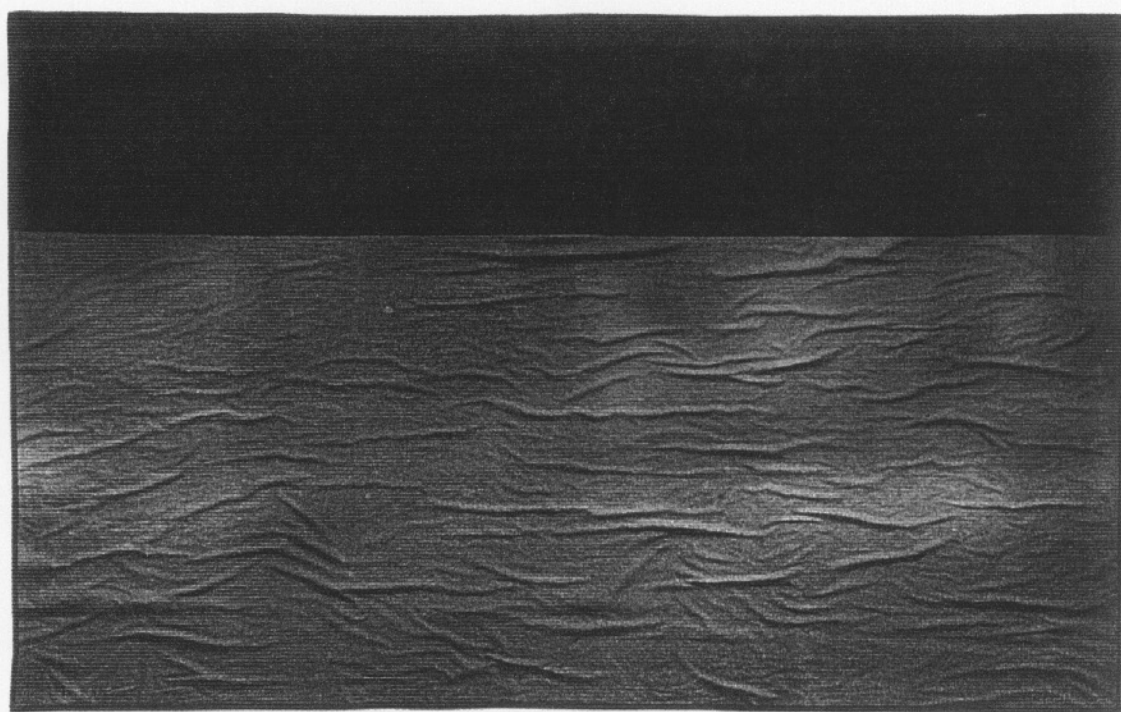


Plate 18 *Moon Shadows*. 1790 x 1140mm  
Discharge dyed, machine quilted.  
Clare Plug. 2004



Plate 19 *Slip*. 1100 x 1450mm  
Discharge dyed, machine quilted.  
Clare Plug. 2004.



©Anne Scott 2001

Plate 20 Mystery Quilt Pattern, 2400mm x 2400mm  
Machine pieced, hand appliquéd.  
Anne Scott, 2001

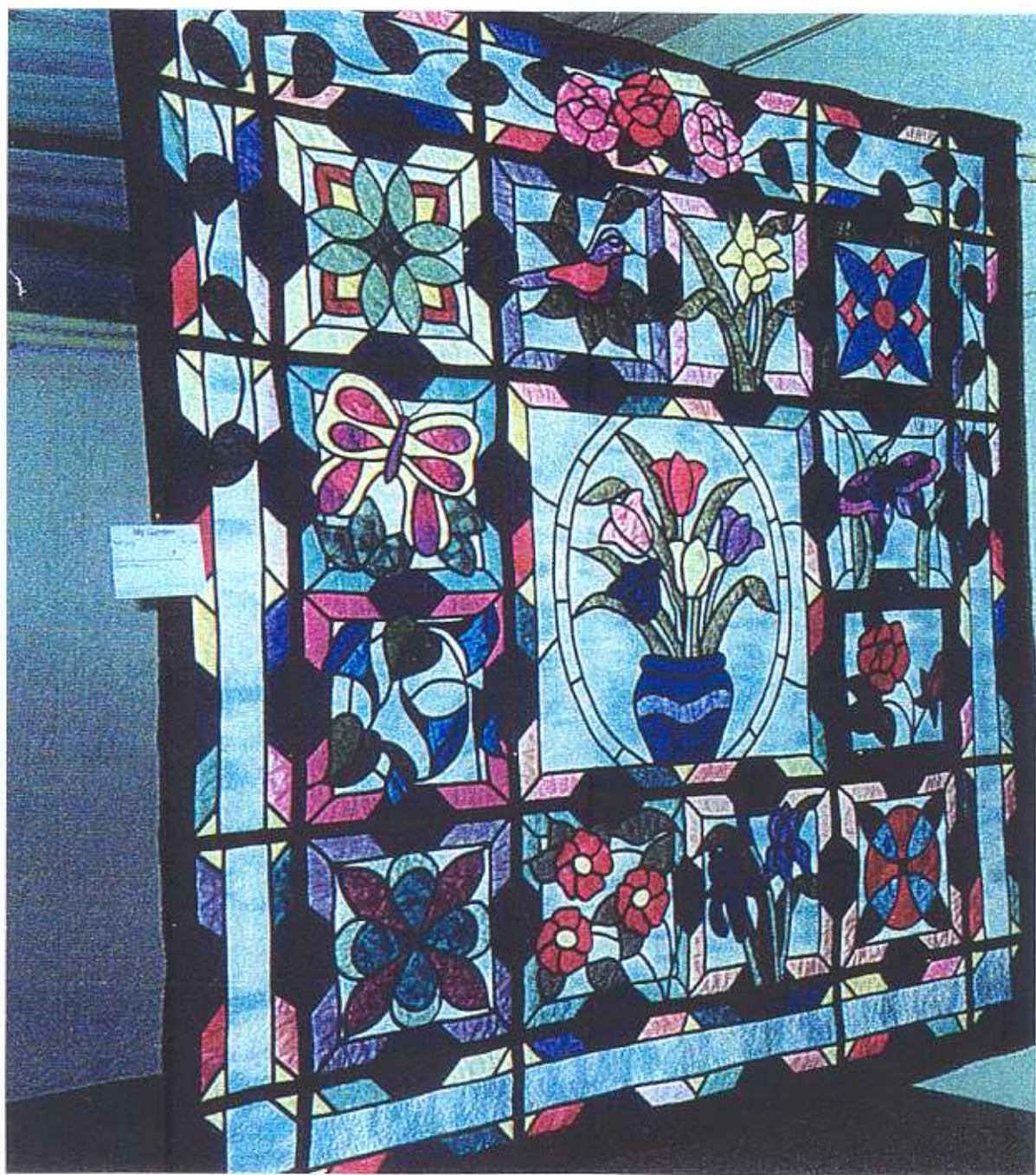
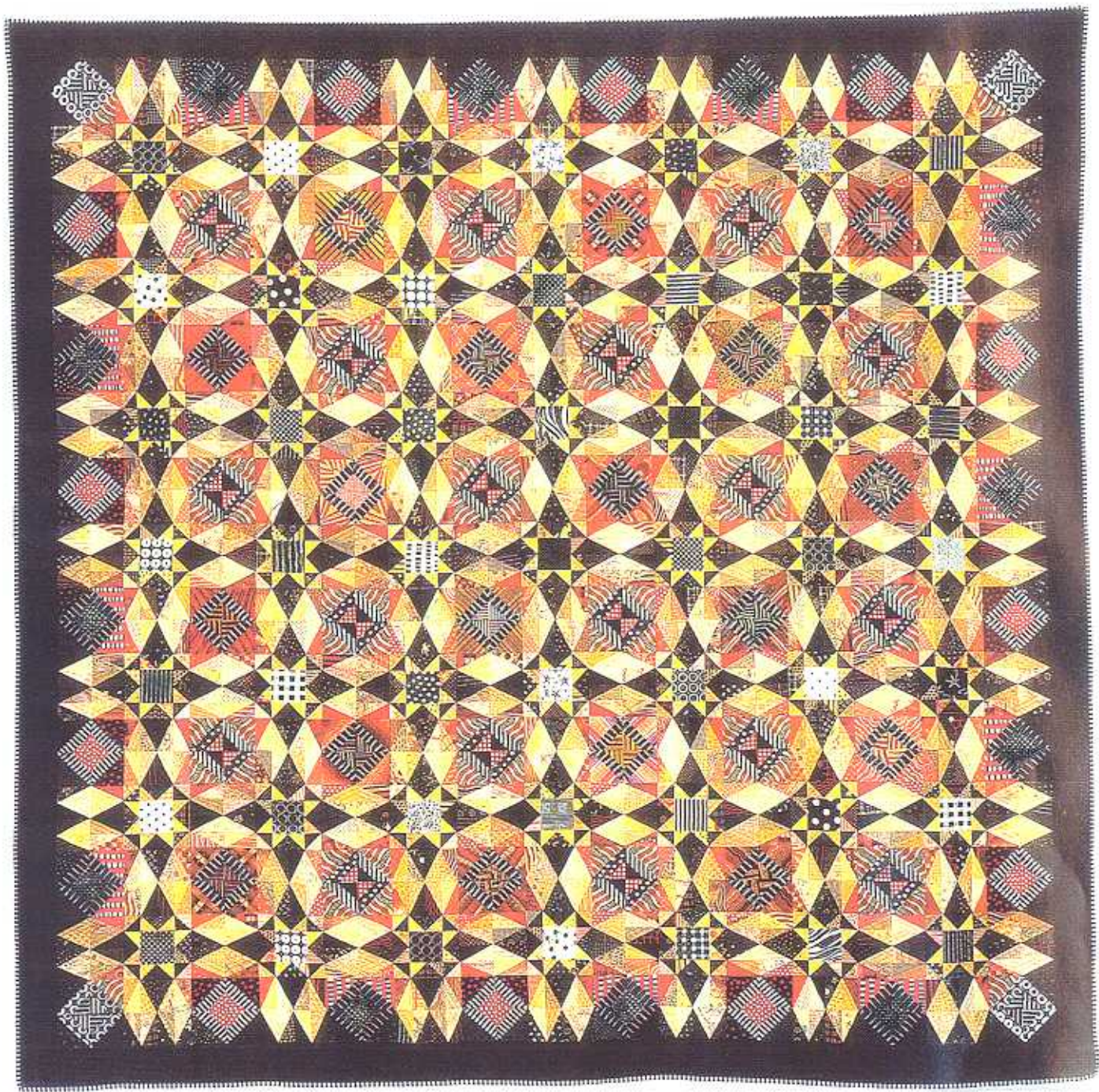




Plate 22 Left: *Colourwash Blocks*, approx. 1700 x 1700mm  
Right: *Amish Stars*, approx. 1900 x 1500mm  
Shirley Smith



PHOTOGRAPH: HELEN MITCHELL

Plate 23 *Tui or Speights – Whatever*, 2440mm x 2440mm.  
Machine pieced and quilted  
Anna Prussing, 2002.



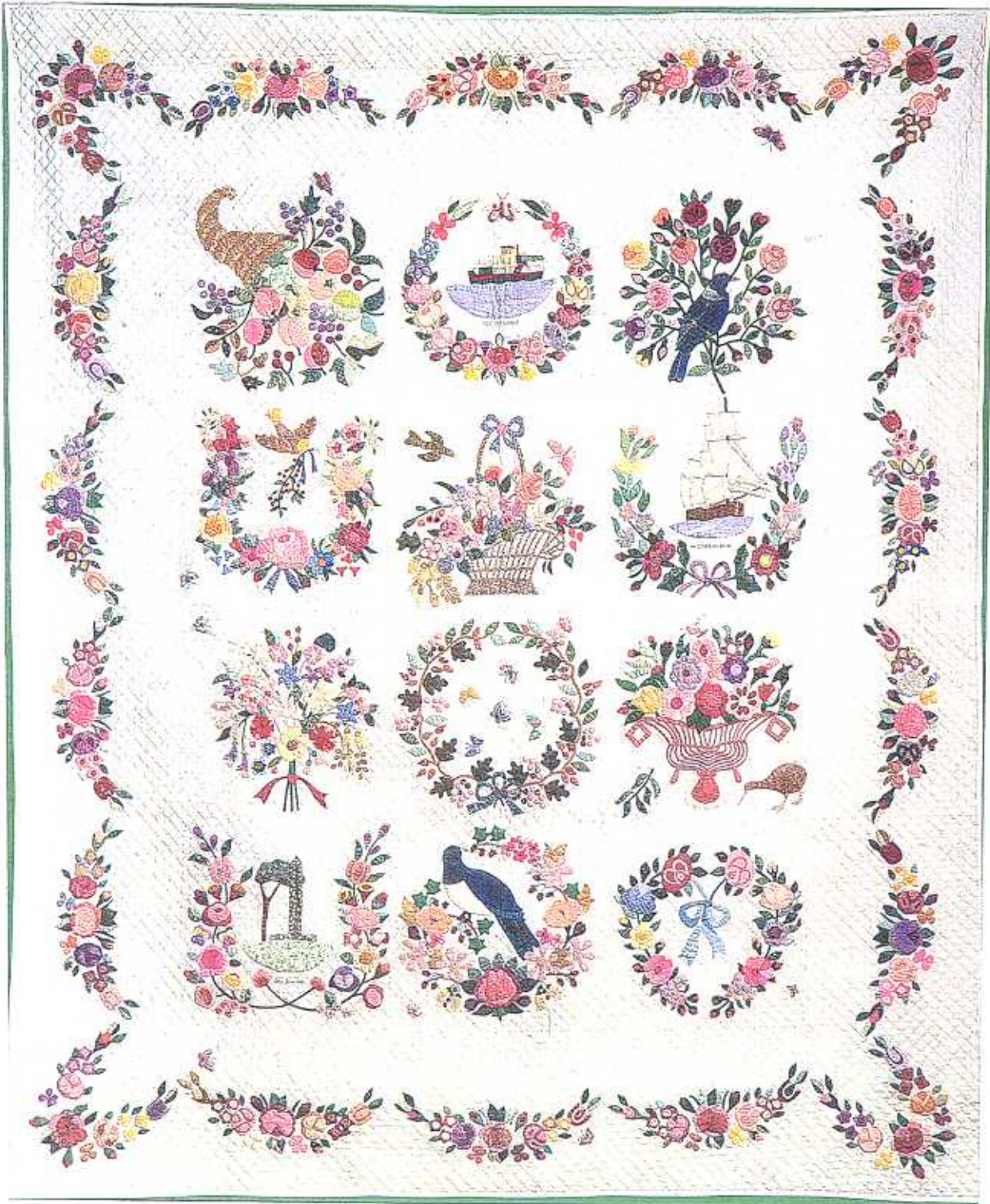


Plate 24 *New Zealand Heritage*. 2300mm x 2000mm.  
"Baltimore" Style quilt, Hand appliquéd and quilted.  
Jean Nutter 1994.

Jean Nutter made a number of these quilts throughout the 1990's. One was purchased by the Auckland War Memorial Museum, being their first acquisition of a 'contemporary' quilt (Scott 1994:13). Subsequently Jean's Baltimore style quilts have won major awards in North America.

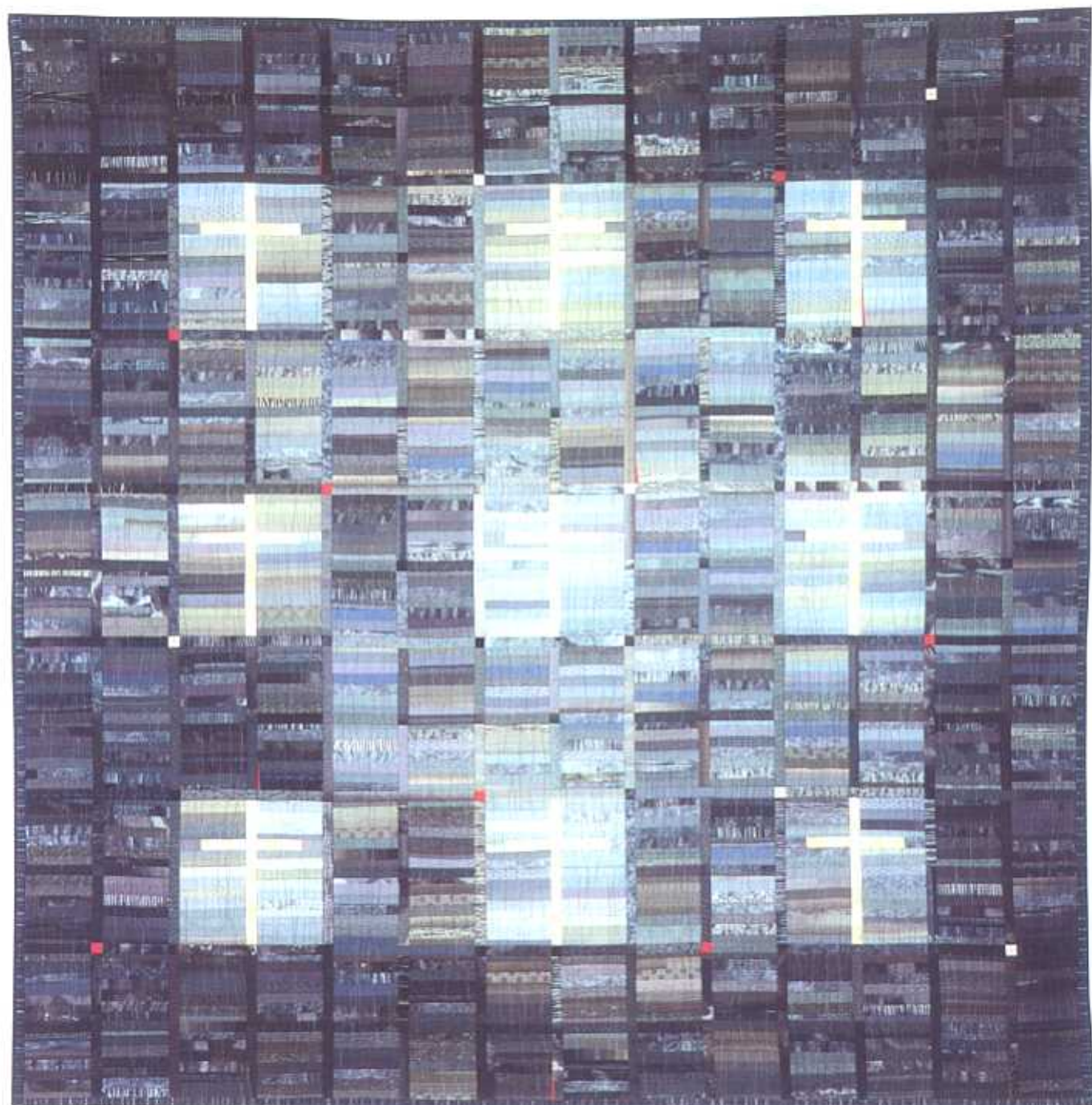


Plate 6 *Gallipoli*, 2490mm x2490mm,  
Machine pieced and quilted  
Anna Prussina, 2005



Plate 7 *Opposé*, 1900mm x 1900mm,  
Machine pieced, hand quilted, wool  
Marion Manson, 2006.

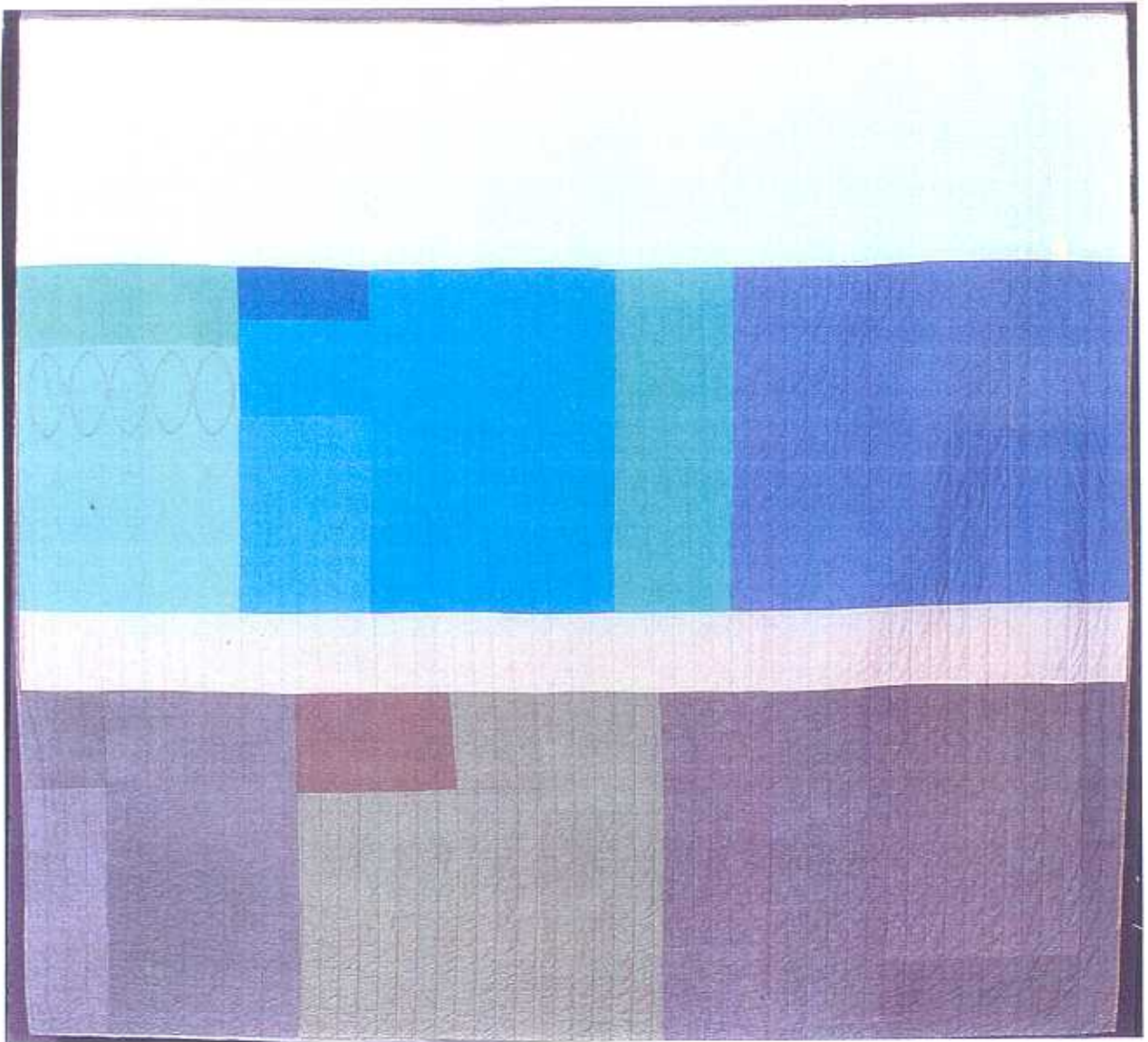


Plate 9 *Sirius B: Digitaria*, 1950mm x 2110mm.  
Machine pieced, hand quilted  
Esther Woollaston, 2000.

## Appendix 1

### Questions for the extended interviews.

*Not every one of these questions was asked of every quiltmaker. Often I began taping while we were having a related discussion. Not every question was applicable to every quiltmaker.*

How and when did you start making quilts and what prompted you to begin?

How have you learned the skills?

What is the inspiration for what you do?

Which materials and techniques do you prefer to use?

How long does the process of designing take?

How much of your work is instinctive?

How does the final work relate to what you set out to do?

Do you work as an individual or within a group?

How does quilting fit with other activities and commitments in your life?

Do you get as much time as you would like to do your work?

Does your quilting support you financially?

What do you enjoy most about what you do?

How have you gone about having your work exhibited?

How have you felt about the exhibitions?

What do you think about the controversy and discussion about contemporary quilts and traditional quilts?

How important is technical expertise and crafting skill?

What sort of response do you get from others about what you do?

How do you identify yourself?

**Appendix 2**

**University of Waikato  
Department of Societies and Cultures  
Private Bag 3105, Hamilton**

Thank you for taking time to fill out this questionnaire. I am currently undertaking research into quilting activity in New Zealand for my Master's Thesis in Anthropology.

I am interested in knowing why people make quilts, what they enjoy about their quilting, what they gain from this activity, how they value their work, how quilting fits within their lives and other commitments, and how they feel about the wider quilting/arts scene in New Zealand/Aotearoa.

Your participation in this project will be very useful in providing ideas about what members enjoy about being a part of the guild and what they enjoy about their quilting activities, so I really appreciate your time.

Participation is entirely voluntary and you may leave any questions you do not wish to answer. You may also choose to remain anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns I can be contacted at 07 856 9620.

Or my supervisor:

Dr Wendy Cowling  
University Of Waikato, Ph. 07 856 2889

Or the convenor Human Research Ethics Committee:

Dr Jo Barnes  
University of Waikato, Ph 07 856 2889

Thank you  
Yours sincerely

Gwen Wanigasekera

20. 12. 05

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ (optional – you may choose to remain anonymous).

**You may also leave out any question you do not wish to answer.**

- 1 How long have you been making quilts?
- 2 What inspired you to start making quilts?
- 3 How long have you been a guild member?
- 4 What do you particularly enjoy about the Guild?
- 5 Which, if any, other quilting groups do you belong to?
- 6 What sort of things do you do to make time to make quilts?
- 7 What sort of quilts do you like to make? E.g. traditional, innovative, original, children's, for family and friends, to sell, other?
- 8 Which of these do you enjoy seeing in exhibitions?
- 9 Should all quilts submitted, be hung in exhibitions?  
Or:  
Should all exhibitions be selected/juried?
- 10 What do you consider is a traditional quilt?
- 11 What do you consider is an innovative quilt?
- 12 Any other comments you would like to make about your quilts or about quiltmaking in New Zealand. *(please write on the back if there isn't enough space here)*

**Appendix 3**

<b>Quiltmakers interviewed: Place</b>			<b>Date</b>
DW	Donna Ward	Hamilton	16. 5. 05
SS	Shirley Smith	Matamata	11. 6. 05
CP	Clare Plug	Napier	25. 6. 05
AS	Anne Scott	Wellington	5. 7. 05
KM	Katherine Morrison	Wellington	5. 7. 05
CS	Clare Smith	Wellington	6. 7. 05
AP	Anna Prussing	Wellington	6. 7. 05
EW	Esther Woollaston	Wellington	6. 7. 05
JC	Jo Cornwall	Te Puke	12. 7. 05
MM	Marion Manson	Hamilton	30.10.05



## Appendix 4

### The Waikato Guild Quiltmakers

A number of the guild makers wished to remain anonymous. They have been allocated pseudonyms. Some have been quoted directly, but many of the answers were collated to form one representative comment within the text.

Rosie Hutcheson	RH
Ngaire Smith	NS
Jeanette R	JR
Linda Young	LY
Melva Sole	MS
Pam Price	PP
Ngaire Slater	NS
Dorothy Wilson	DW
Dell Mills	DM
Janice Bond	JB
Lorna McDowall	LMcD
Marylon Jones	MJ
Melanie Coleman	MC
Bev Johnson	BJ
Julie Strong	JS
Dierdre Spence	DS
Sally Jenkins	SJ
Con Redgate	CR
Guild Quilter 1	GQ1
Guild Quilter 2	GQ2

## **Appendix 5**

### **A Typical 2 Day Workshop Experience**

Many workshops are held over two days of a weekend. This timing has become more necessary as many women work during the week or may also have children and need to have a partner or someone at home to care for the children while they are away. Typically the workshop will begin at 9am or 9.30, running for about six hours. There are short stops for morning tea and lunch but these are usually only long enough for participants to have their refreshments before getting back to work.

While not all workshops are project based, many do require a substantial financial outlay for the participants. Some provide an opportunity for learning new techniques which may or may not require fabric but are based more in design and drawing skills or in the use of dyeing techniques. Even so, it is usually necessary to provide materials of some sort and even when these may simply be in the form of a 'scrap' collection of fabric, such a collection is usually the result of having already purchased larger pieces of expensive fabric. Off-cuts resulting from dress-making activities by workshop members are not seen all that often. Occasionally someone will bring a collection of factory off-cuts they have been given. In the past, such a collection may have been taken home and used by a person who actually worked in the factory or other textile industry. Historical quilts made by such workers appear in a number of museum collections.

Venues vary, depending on who has organised the workshop. Some are run by fabric retailers who may have a workshop space within their premises. This often provides only a minimal working area for each participant. This restricted working space, along with occasional interruptions from being within retail premises that are often still open to the public as well, can make for more difficult working conditions for both participants and tutors.

A big advantage for both participants and the shop owner is the immediate availability of fabric that may be added to what the participants have brought along with them. Many participants make use of this facility either for the project they are making or simply as an opportunity to spend some time choosing and adding fabrics to their collections.

Apart from these and the large national or regional symposia, workshops are also often organised by individual groups or regional guilds. In these cases venues will be a local hall or school classroom – a technology classroom where possible. Depending on available space and the nature of the workshop, there will usually be between ten and twenty persons in each class. Even with an optimal amount of space, working in an unfamiliar environment is not always easy. In general the women are very focused on what they have come to learn. They have set aside this time,

paid their fees, and want to achieve as much as possible from the experience. Many often comment about the luxury of having uninterrupted time to work on their projects. The environment of the workshop is generally very cooperative with participants frequently sharing equipment and fabric. They are often prepared to persevere with techniques which may be new and difficult. Even if they decide it is not something that will become a part of their repertoire, they are generally prepared to at least 'give it a go'. Mostly though they will have chosen the workshop because it is something they feel they will continue to use.

The workshop also serves as a social outing. There is often discussion of local and national events and quilt related discussion, as well as other more general topics. Friendships are also often continued or formed in this environment. Occasionally pairs or groups of friends will have travelled some distance from another area to make this also a social 'weekend away'.

In the same way that the organisers of these workshops must spend a good deal of time sorting out venues, the tutors themselves must invest a great deal of time in preparing for their classes. Most must prepare samples for advertising their class, along with variations and further examples to provide inspiration for the class. Preparation may include making patterns and class notes or assembling packs to be used in the class. In addition, like their students, many also have to make arrangements for time off from other employment or for family left at home.

The women have made a conscious decision to give themselves a break away from household and other work commitments. It is their time out, their opportunity to feed their creativity and usually also, to indulge their passion for fabric.

Although shop owners may gain from this seemingly readymade customer base, it is only achieved by a great deal of time and energy being spent on organising and promoting such workshops.

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