

Reviewed by Carl Hoover

**The Contact:
Quilts of the Sierra Nevada**
Martin Museum of Art
Baylor University

In her exhibition *The Contact: Quilts of the Sierra Nevada* at Baylor University's Martin Museum of Art (October 14 – November 14, 2013), Oregon quilt artist Ann Johnston combined a scientist's



eye for detail with an artist's heart for interpretation. The result was a remarkable geologic trip through western mountains told in fabric, color, stitching, and pattern.

The exhibit takes its name from a geology term that describes where rock formations or masses touch. Most of the 14 panels in the show illustrate these natural occurrences, whether in rock intrusions, mountain surfaces touching water and sky, or humans shaping the landscape. Contact could also refer to Johnston's own personal history with the Sierra Nevada. Her family has held a California mining claim for generations, and she and her husband camped in the Sierras for their honeymoon. The detailed explanatory labels for each quilt reveal Johnston's strong grounding in geology, although that is not a prerequisite to appreciate *The Contact*.

The subjects of her quilts range from subsurface geology and topography to human-manufactured ore mills built to extract gold and silver. Johnston's mastery of technique gives a tactile dimension to her work. Fields of tiny stitches suggest the rough texture of granite in *Vertical Joints* and *Tuolumne Intrusive Suite*. In contrast, less-distressed surfaces and straight lines show man-made machining of *Stamp Mill*. Appliqués of transparent silk and hand-dyed fabric add surface shimmer to rock faces and emphasize boundaries.

Long, curving seams over streaks of yellow and orange evoke the flow of molten gold in quartz veins in *Gold Fever 110 Ma*. Two quilts hung from the gallery ceiling allowed viewers to see that Johnston's attention to detail in top surfaces extends to neatly edged and stitched backings.

Johnston's fine eye for color, shown in dyeing and design, complements her command of stitching and cloth manipulation. Where fabric edges and seams define contacts, dyeing supplies fluidity and subtle transitions. Striking red-orange darkens the horizon of a mountain view in *Smoke at Sunset*, while the blue corner of *Vertical Joints* captures the startling cloudless clarity of a western sky. In *Vigil*, small stitches of metallic thread create glinting stars in the night. During *The Contact* exhibition, the adjoining

ANN JOHNSTON *Vertical Joints* Cotton and silk, hand printing and painting with dye, machine stitching, 84" x 36", 2013.

All photos by Bill Bachhuber.



ANN JOHNSTON *Gold Fever 110 Ma*
Cotton, whole cloth, hand painting with dye,
machine stitching, 84" x 46", 2012.

gallery showed *Ansel Adams: Distance and Detail*, a collection of iconic black-and-white photographic prints, several of which were views of Western mountain vistas. It proved a serendipitous pairing that provided insights into each collection. Adams's monochromatic images of the West offered a sharply detailed look of exteriors, visual slices of frozen time. Johnston's tactile explorations of the mountains, on the other hand, captured a sense of their geologic creation, of quartz and ore shooting through rock veins, of stone faces torn and twisted by uplift and folding over a violent, complicated past. Working with cloth and thread as a poet works with words, Johnston takes the viewer beyond the surface to a broader understanding of the mountains she so obviously loves.

www.baylor.edu/martinmuseum
www.annjohnston.net

—*Carl Hoover is the entertainment editor of the Waco Tribune-Herald in Waco, Texas.*

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