

The Contact: Quilts of the Sierra Nevada
An Exhibition by Ann Johnston

“The Contact: Quilts of the Sierra Nevada“, presented by Ann Johnston (USA), was without a doubt one of the most fascinating exhibitions within the Festival of Quilts in Birmingham (England) this summer. 16 superb quilts dealing with one theme and perfectly made in an outstanding vertical format caused a lot of excitement and interest. How impressive – not only the quilts but also a very pleasant presentation. Thanks to the event organizer’s generosity – who is known for paying great attention to the artists’ requests whenever possible and who does not stint on technical support or on good lighting – one can make the most of it and turn a simple gallery into a marvellous one. Thus some of the quilts hung freely in the middle of the relatively large gallery space. Depending on the viewpoint this provided various thrilling perspectives, not forgetting taking a look at the very interesting reverse sides. All in all, I think it was a quite exceptional show where not only I had a brilliant time!

The artist chose a tall and narrow format – each of the works is 84" (2,14 m) tall, but they are of various widths – that emphasizes the theme. She dedicates the entire exhibition to the Sierra Nevada. In the Californian part of this mountain range a mining claim has been in Ann’s family for generations. “The deed I have,” she writes me, “dates back to the 1880s and it is a small piece of land above 3,000 meters in elevation.” We have to bear in mind that only three decades earlier just this region was the scene where the so-called California Gold Rush took place when thousands tried to make their fortune with finding gold in an adventurous way. “My parents told us stories, showed us the maps and hiked with us up there as children, to eye level with the clouds,” Ann describes her memories. “It is an impressive place and with a little imagination you can ‘see’ men huddled in stone cabins, digging prospects and dreaming of riches.”

In sharp contrast to this stands the interpretation of her quilts. Besides all romanticism and imagination, first and foremost Ann is hooked on the spectacular landscape and the geology the exhibition title refers to. “The contact” has to do with a place where geologic units touch each other caused by several geological processes of squeezing and heating, by wind and ice erosions, a place where you can see bands of colours in the earth indicating this today. “The contact” has also to do with a certain human influence on the landscape where the forests, the rivers and even the mountains have been shaped by humans.

I asked Ann how the idea to make these impressive quilts emerged and she replied, “I have been taking photos of the Sierra my whole life, and thinking of making a quilt for many years, but I couldn't decide what aspect to focus on.” Then, in 2010, Ann was offered a solo exhibition at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, for 2013, and she realized “one quilt about the mine” would become many quilts. So she started dyeing fabric: big pieces for big quilts. She started reading: science and history and local literature of the Sierra. She started drawing: vertical compositions for a very vertical subject. By the end of 2011 she had three quilts started and now in 2014 there are 16, each one more admirable than the next one.

To work creatively on this project required further exploration of surface design techniques and more precision of colour mixing – by the way, the artist is very experienced in these subjects for many years and has written various books about in the past. Ann explains that in addition to hand-manipulated low-water immersion dyeing she used thickened dyes with brushes, sponges, rollers, scrapers and water-soluble resists making gradations of colours and layers of pattern.

Each quilt and each design required different construction techniques: some tops are whole cloth, e.g. “Gold Fever 110 Ma”, some are many parts, pieced and appliquéd. From the small drawing to the full size, from Ann’s imagination to the cloth and from the flat assembled fabric to the dimensional surface created by stitching through the fibre layers – each quilt represents multiple transitions in idea and design. “I use a broad array of literal, abstract and purely imaginative imagery and envision the quilts viewed all at once as one body of work,” Ann concludes her artist statement in the catalogue.

Ann has learnt a lot because she has really challenged herself with her decision to make the quilts all seven feet tall and narrow and with dyeing colours she never used before and with creating textures that mimic the natural world. Although she has taken breaks to work on other pieces for other exhibitions, weddings and babies, she still has new work in progress to continue the series. “I think I am about half done, but who knows, maybe I won't finish,” summarizes the artist. In 2015 Ann will be exhibiting the quilts at the University of California Merced campus, not far from the Sierra. “After that I hope to show the full collection as opportunities present themselves,” Ann points out, “in 2016 and later.” So I am looking forward with anticipation to the future!

by Gudrun Heinz

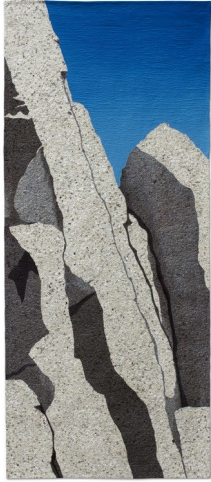
The exhibition catalogue comprises 44 pages and is available through the artist.
Further information can be found on the artist’s website: <http://www.annjohnston.net>
Take also a look at a video: <http://www.annjohnston.net/video-thecontact.html>
Images provided by Ann Johnston. Thank you so much, Ann!

Photos and captions:



The Contact: Quilts of the Sierra Nevada,
gallery view at Festival of Quilts 2014.

From left to right: Black and White, back side (hanging freely); Deep Blue Lead (partly); Cross Polarized Gabbro (hanging freely); Gold Fever 110 Ma; Vertical Joints (partly); Vigil (hanging freely); After the Ice. All quilts: ©2012 - 2014 Ann Johnston
Photo credits: Jim Johnston



Vertical Joints

©2013 Ann Johnston

84 x 36" (approx. 214 x 92 cm)

Cotton, silk, hand printed and painted with dye, machine stitched.

Ann Johnston's interpretation of one of the finest views in the Sierra Nevada: Bright sunshine and dark shadows falling on granite rocks form dramatic contrasts. With great sensitivity the artist dyed shades from bright to dark (dégradé) of pure blues for the sky. The rocks, excitingly arranged, have a fine texture and warm whiteness.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Black and White

©2012 Ann Johnston

84 x 32" (approx. 214 x 81 cm)

Cotton, hand printed and painted with dye, hand and machine stitched.

In red hues you can see magma that tapped the mantle below the crust and flowed off between granite and huge volcanic slopes.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber

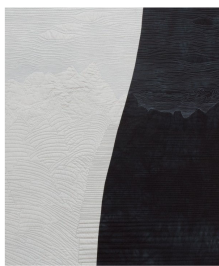


Black and White, detail

©2012 Ann Johnston

The close-up shows clearly – over the monoprinted granite textures in the background – the immersion dyed cut out shapes just ready to be hand appliquéd over raw edges with buttonhole stitch.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Black and White, back, detail

©2012 Ann Johnston

The upper part of the back shows clearly how the quilting – done by hand and machine – renders the mountains and the sky, of course mirror inverted. The fabric selection underlines the theme and title of this quilt – quite interesting to see.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Gold Fever 110 Ma

©2012 Ann Johnston

84 x 46" (approx. 214 x 120 cm)

Cotton, hand painted with dye, machine stitched.

This is a whole cloth quilt which deals with magmatic-geological super hot processes millions of years ago. As a result gold was mobilized into the quartz veins where we find it today.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Stamp Mill

©2013 Ann Johnston

84 x 39" (approx. 214 x 99 cm)

Cotton, silk, immersion dyed, hand printed and painted with dye, machine stitched.

A water wheel teamed with wide leather belts lifted and dropped tremendous iron stamps. In a day a stamp mill could pulverize 150 tons of rock. Under a green haze of arsenic dust floating over all high grade ore returned about 50 – 150 grams per ton.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Stamp Mill, detail

©2013 Ann Johnston

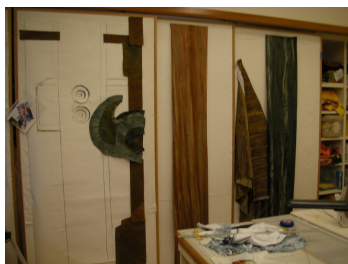
The close-up of the surface design and texture reveals that the artist created different layers to achieve this. At first she applied various colours for the fabric designs, next she appliquéd several fabrics and finally quilted heavily by machine. Together with the colour contrast the quilt gains spatial depth as you can see at the full view.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Remnants of a stamp mill

Photo credits: Jim Johnston



Stamp Mill

Work in progress – on the design wall at the studio: full size sketches and some fabric shapes pinned. Later they will be sewn and excess cut away one by one.

Photo credits: Jim Johnston



Cross Polarized Gabbro, detail

©2014 Ann Johnston

Cotton sateen, silk organza, hand printed and painted with dye, hand and machine stitched.

This quilt takes the viewer in a wonderland of colours, shapes and structures hidden deeply inside the rock. “Gabbro” is a dark rock that is sometimes associated with gold-bearing quartz veins and, to the naked eye, it appears only monotonous dark. But polarized light passing through a 30-micron thin section of gabbro reveals an infinite variety of sharply contrasting crystal twins of feldspar intergrown with colourful pyroxene.

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



Cross Polarized Gabbro, back, detail

The back side shows a real drawing of various structures caused by the quilting lines.

©2014 Ann Johnston

Photo credits: Bill Bachhuber



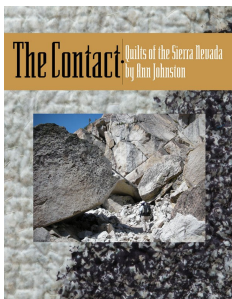
Ann Johnston at work at her studio when printing and creating granite texture with a sponge.
Photo credits: Jim Johnston



Ann Johnston assembling “Eureka Chimney“ at her studio.
Photo credits: Jim Johnston



Landscape in the Sierra Nevada.
Photo credits: Jim Johnston



Catalogue
©2014 Ann Johnston
Cover design by Ann Marra using photographs by Jim Johnston and Bill Bachhuber.