



SPEAKING IN CLOTH: 6 QUILTERS, 6 VOICES

BY ANN JOHNSTON AND
JEANNETTE DENICOLIS MEYER

Mounting an exhibition

Ann Johnston and Jeannette DeNicolis Meyer produced an exhibition and book with four other artists, Cynthia Corum, Quinn Zander Corum, Nancy Erickson and Trisha Hassler, naming both 'Speaking in Cloth; 6 Quilters, 6 Voices'. The focus from the beginning in early 2005 and throughout the following two years was to produce a museum quality exhibition of art quilts by a group of people who listen to each other and learn from each other. 'We,' Ann and Jeannette, write this article about 'us' in the hope of maintaining that focus and extending the conversation with you.

We had been imagining an art quilt exhibit for a couple of years, discussing possibilities over lunch at our neighborhood Thai restaurant. With growing confidence in our own artwork and interest in the work produced by other quilt artists in our Northwest region of the US, we only needed an opportunity. Our goal was to show everyone that there are accomplished artworks made with fabric and thread - that textiles and stitches are really just art supplies like canvas and paint.

The opportunity

When MJ Koreiva, executive director of the Coos Art Museum in Oregon, asked Ann to help put together an art quilt exhibit using the entire first floor of the museum, we realized this was our chance. Over more Thai lunches, we developed our ideas and reduced the number to six in order to give the viewers a good sense of each artist's voice and a glimpse into the larger conversation happening among us. We were excited to be able to fill the walls - over 320 linear feet - at CAM with a tremendous variety of work from six people of widely differing professional experiences and viewpoints.

We wrote down our hopes and dreams for the exhibit, and a theme emerged: a conversation among artists and viewers. We crafted the title, 'Speaking in Cloth, 6 Quilters, 6 Voices', to emphasize that this exhibit highlights individuals with very distinctive voices in their work, who share a passion for making art quilts and a desire to communicate with an audience. We developed a budget for the exhibit and book and invited Cynthia, Quinn, Nancy and Trisha. We met as a group, we asked other exhibit organizers for advice and we consulted a lawyer for documents about lending quilts and publishing images. We each, including the museum, committed money to the project and devised a plan to divide up the book among ourselves proportionately. We started a 'to-do' list and divided up the jobs.

Museum proposal

MJ helped us with the museum proposal by explaining the point of view of a director of a museum and immediately started the grant application process. Our proposal addressed every detail we could imagine a museum director might need to know. We supplied a description of the exhibit, including dates, intended audience, information about the artists with links to their web sites and linear feet required for the anticipated number of artworks. We outlined what support we expected from the museum and what they could expect from us in terms of publicity, transportation and insurance of the quilts, exhibit signage and installation.

After the board at CAM accepted our proposal, we made more lists: a six-page list for us was an itemized calendar and a three-page list for the other artists to give them advance notice about deadlines for their images and text and specifics



All that space!



Panoramic view of exhibition

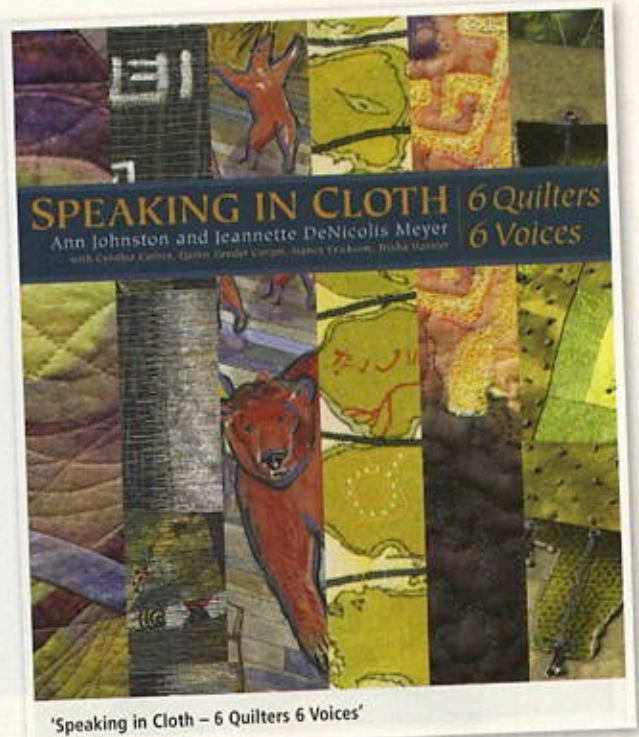
of shared tasks. Making it a traveling exhibit with a book multiplied the amount of work involved. Our lists were so thorough that they helped us keep on track as we squeezed these action items onto our lives, inked in beside other professional and personal activities.

The book

We contacted Ann Marra, the book designer who worked with Ann Johnston on 'Color by Design and Color by Accident', so she could start developing an overall design concept even before we had the images. We needed to decide on the content of the book, size, number of pages, weight of paper and estimated retail price.

The title suggested a conversation, so we generated a list of questions to answer about our work - the answers would become the text and turn a simple catalogue into a book. As we brainstormed questions for the book, we thought of the topics we most frequently discuss and fashioned questions that would provoke answers that would interest both artists and viewers. We all found that responding to the six questions forced us to clarify our thoughts about our work processes. We could allow only one hundred words maximum for each answer because we wanted a generous space for each quilt image.

When the images and written text arrived, our priority was to get the book in production, knowing we had a tight schedule to get it to Hong Kong to be printed before the exhibit's opening. The computer desk became our primary address. We poured over the images to choose the work for the book and exhibit and were delighted to find that the artists' written voices, evident in their answers to the six questions they were asked, were as distinct and varied as their visual voices. Ann Marra started giving us options for the cover, the first item we needed for promoting the exhibit and the book. Making sure the cover gave us the



'Speaking in Cloth - 6 Quilters 6 Voices'

visual impact we wanted while using each artist's work equally was a formidable task. Ann Marra found an elegant solution for the cover through the use of font, color, and image placement and came up with a sophisticated design for the book itself. We decided which quilts should go in each chapter and which ones should be chapter headers with a detail. The book design went back and forth via overnight delivery and e-mail. Ann M. said later that "...you all were so organized, all I had to do was develop a design to support the concept!"

Ann Marra orchestrated all the contacts in California, where the digital files were managed for the press in China. She arranged timely work on the proofing and kept us on track with costs and technical issues of paper types and coatings and, especially, the

Jeannette and Quinn rolling quilts



The packed van



MJ adjusting the lights

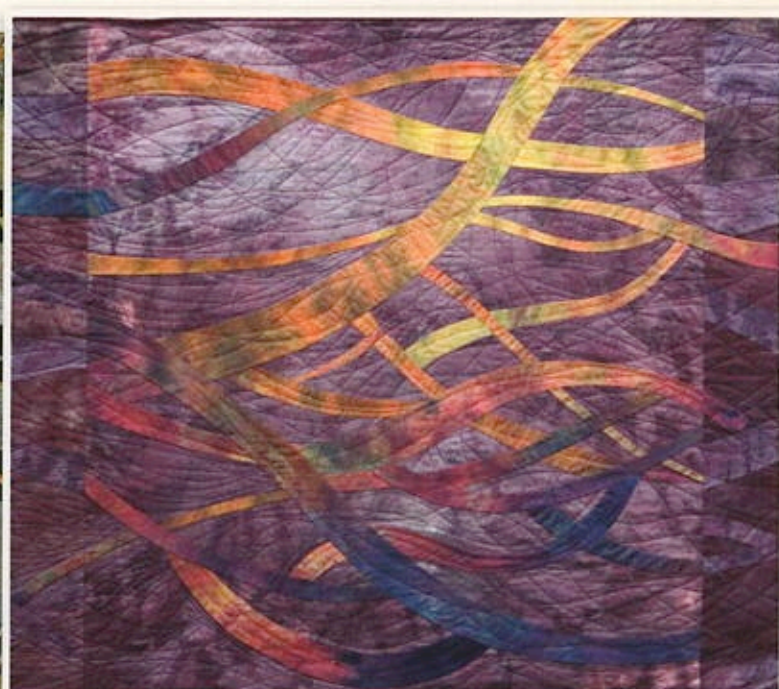


White gloves and ladders!





'Adds Up', Cynthia Corbin, 77" x 54"



'Dancing in the Dark', Jeannette DeNicolis Meyer, 47" x 64"



'EARTH FORMS-Dry Arroyo', Quinn Zander Corum, 30" x 41"



'Storyteller', Nancy Erickson, 60" x 50"



'Symmetry is Highly Overrated', Trisha Hassler, 37" x 33"



'Writing Uphill', Ann Johnston, 34" x 54"

transformation of digital images to reflect the actual work as accurately as possible - the most difficult part of a book like this. As soon as we had the text and images planned - six quilts each - we sent them to selected reviewers for advanced comments.

As we were sending the book out to print, MJ found out we had received a grant from the Oregon Art Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts to support our project - timing which just allowed us to credit them in the book. Then we compiled more lists: museum directors and periodicals who would receive review copies. It was time to start planning the full-sized exhibit, which would include more quilts from each artist than we had space for in the book. We continued to aim for equal exposure for each of us, measured in this case in linear feet, not number of pages.

The Exhibition

We continued to publicize the exhibit to other venues with our partial early shipment of books. We were thrilled to get a response from New Zealand and arranged that the exhibition would travel to Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch. In the US, another response came from the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum in Colorado. With two items on our wish list achieved - the publication of the book and the traveling schedule of the exhibit taking shape - we made final plans for the opening at the Coos Art Museum.

Ann's studio filled with deliveries of all the participating artists' quilts and the shipping supplies for transporting the quilts from one museum to the next. Trisha Hassler built sturdy boxes to hold her artwork and the rest were rolled with archival tissue and packaged in telescoping boxes with enough bubble wrap to cushion the town. We loaded a van with 46 quilts in overseas shipping boxes and just had space for an emergency supply of chocolate.

The four hour drive to deliver the quilts in December 2006, through Oregon forest and farmland, flew by as we puzzled how we were going to mount the quilts. We marveled at the luxury of having control of how the exhibit would hang. After we arrived at the museum and unpacked the quilts, we looked around the space, mentally sorting the artwork and placing the movable walls. We had asked the museum to produce signs to accompany the exhibit taken from parts of the text of the book. Each sign addressed a question about theme, processes, and meaning using a quote from each artist. As we laid out the quilts, it became obvious that we could continue the conversation by grouping the quilts with the quotes, so the viewer could join in, hearing the distinct voices of each artist, and making connections.

The museum provided staff and volunteers who cheerfully drilled holes and hung quilts. We all wore white cotton gloves, which did double duty that day - to protect the quilts and to keep us warm while the furnace was waiting for a replacement part. It took two days to unpack, place, and hang the quilts, but by the time the ballet of pushing walls into place, ascending and descending ladders and mounting and aiming lights was over, the exhibit looked even better than we'd envisioned. Cold but happy, we walked through the large galleries now ready for the

opening that night. The quilts, each hung in a respectful space and lit so they glowed as fine art, could now speak for themselves.

The book, 'Speaking in Cloth - 6 Quilters 6 Voices', reviewed in the July 2007 issue of Patchwork & Quilting costs \$21.95 plus p&p and can be obtained directly from: Ann Johnston, P.O. Box 388, Ashland, OHIO 44805. ph: 800-247-6553, fax: 419-281-6883 order@bookmasters.com

Questions discussed by each artist in the book:

- Why do you choose the language of fibre and thread to make your art?
- Do you find yourself working with recurring themes over time?
- Is there a visual voice that identifies your work?
- What is your working process?
- What are the challenges and joy of making your art?
- Does it matter if the quilt communicates a specific message to your viewers?

Comments received about the book and exhibit:

"...a body of work that will set the tone for the early 21st century art quilt medium in our region. These are fully realized works of art that draw you near, beckoning you to look closely and then asking you to step back and think - and join the conversation."

MJ Koreiva, Director, Coos Art Museum, Oregon

"The internal conversations exploring the concerns of language, ideas, process, and challenge are kin to those of their peers in painting and sculpture, and further cement the footing of fiber artists in the universe of fine art."

Rick Gottas, Fine Art Gallery Owner and Collector, Tacoma, Washington

Artists' web sites:

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