

Face to Face Stitch Textile Artists Ginger Fig Gallery, Taunton Walcot Chapel, Bath, 16-29 August 2010

The Group

Stitch Textile Artists, founded in 1999, meet with mentor Siân Martin three times a year for a residential weekend at Urchfont College, near Devizes, Wiltshire. They aim to push forward and evolve as artists while retaining their individual styles.

The Challenge

Having been given the design brief *Face to Face*, the group then had to come up with individual themes exploring the many aspects that this title suggested. They use these words to describe the results. '*The human face may be revealed or partially disguised. The many facets of everyday items, reflections, memories and individual features juxtapose and invite the viewer to contemplate the ideas and feelings that lie beneath.*'

The Exhibits

It was fascinating to see how the title had been interpreted by the artists. There was always the danger that this topic would result in everyone producing work based on human faces but this was not the case.

In the instances where faces were used, they were depicted very much in terms of a result of a study, such as *Facebook* by Valerie Williams which looked at the way faces were expressed through art. The art depicted ranged from Maori face markings to famous artists.

The result was a delightful book where technical excellence matched thoughtful research. The beautifully stitched book rested on a mirror, giving a two-faced reflection and allowing a view of the 'spine' of the book, which you can see below right.



Jan Mortimer's interpretation of the theme was much more abstract. She realised that her jugs, collected over many years, brought her face to face with memories of the giver, the place or the situation. There is also the correlation of Toby Jugs and a long English tradition of 'face jugs'. Her small hand-stitched pieces suggested the crispness of blue and white china, softened by the stitches – redolent of comfort and loving memories. I coveted these.

The strings of jugs were also well thought through; scattered through the gallery, they enhanced the white wall space.



I have long been a fan of Jenny Bowen and the heartbreaking story of her *Security Blanket* certainly forced one to face difficult aspects of our social history. Telling the tale of children reluctantly left at Conram's Foundling Hospital in London, it shows us that scraps of clothing, mementos and keepsakes were left with the child for identification in the much-hoped-for event of retrieval. Although unbearably sad, Jenny points out that the alternative for many children was to be left to forage on the streets.

The scraps of fabric, writing and labels, shown below, are all depicted in her quilt. The use of sheer fabrics, combined with scraps of fabric, writings, buttons etc., all evoked the sense of nostalgia and loss.



Carol Griffin is another favourite artist – you can tell that this exhibition visit is a great indulgence for me – and she based all her work on lips, certainly bringing the face theme into sharp focus. Her work is always inspirational and very different; this body of work did not disappoint.

In *Lipstitch 1*, shown right, she stitched lip shapes in lipstick colours and rolled them into the cases. Mirrors were used to good effect by several artists in this exhibition. Her *Pillow Talk* exhibit – a fun piece – was, as the name suggests, a pillow of lips with witty commentaries. There was also a well stuffed lip book and handling was allowed – with gloves, of course.



New to me was the work of Gwen Earl, whose pale, multi-layered, ethereal paper pieces seemed to float in the glass display cabinet. Using the inner and outer casings of shellfish as a metaphor for the faces presented to the outside world, she produced exquisite pieces of apparent fragility, their underlying stitch hidden beneath the layers. Gwen's *Oyster Faces* series perfectly balanced the tough exterior with the vulnerable interior of the oyster's shell.



Tricia Hubbard works mainly in paper and her take on the *Face to Face* topic was to face up to the environmental problems and solutions that we are all facing.

This three-dimensional piece looks at bar-codes, labels from fair-trade organisations and other thought-provoking materials.

Veronica Broadley has a fascination for clothing which holds the imprint of the wearer, especially the piece below which considers the use of theatrical costume.

So many people wear these costumes – so many different faces appearing above this dress. You can also see in the detail that the faces are cleverly disguised in the fragmented form of the dress.

So many people merit a mention and a photo but this review is already too long and some of the pieces were glazed or difficult to photograph in situ. Tricia told me that this exhibition had been a long time in the making and my reply was that it certainly showed – in the best possible way.

Siân has pushed her group to produce excellent work – they are all good, so it's fitting to finish with a small detail from one of Siân's pieces – coming face to face with new life through the medium of a foetal scan. *With Child* shows the scan on a background of broken, painted eggshells – this certainly sums up *Face to Face*.

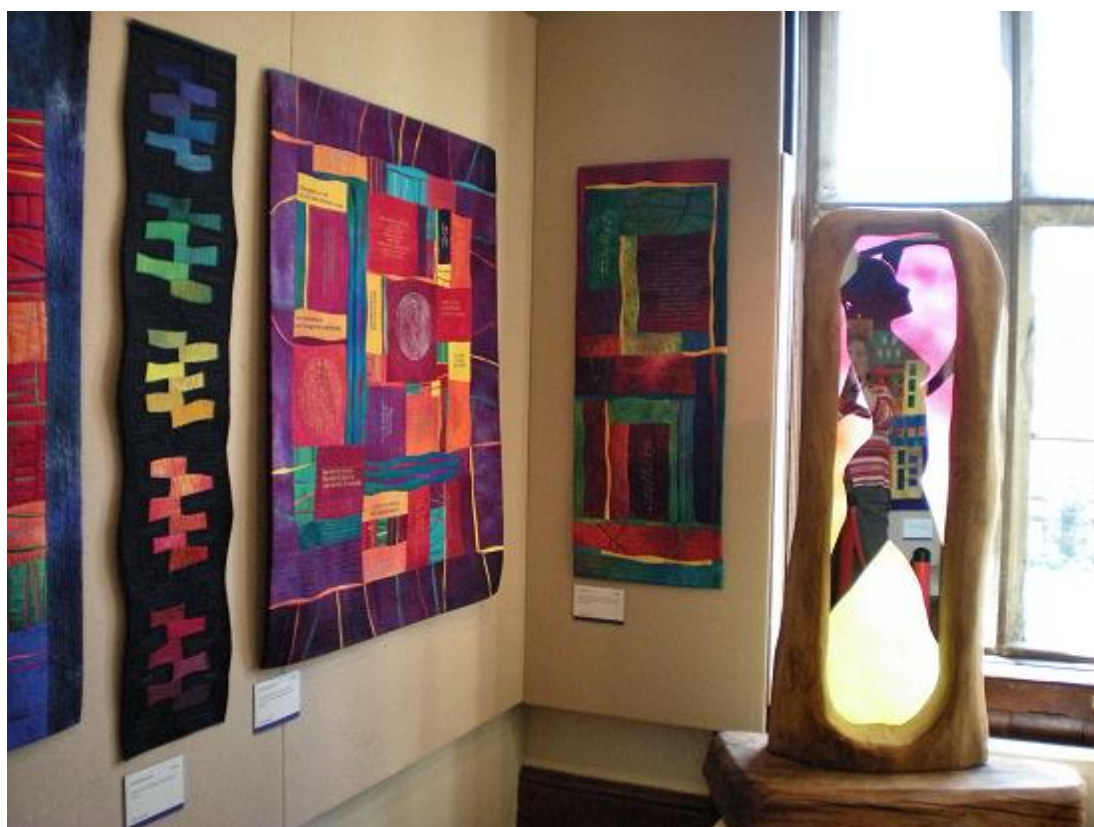
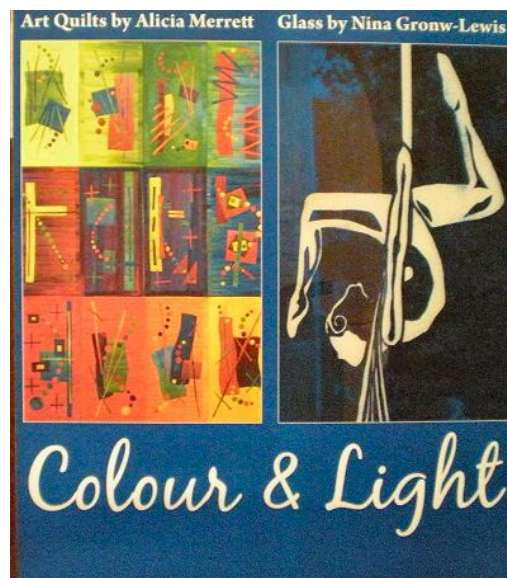
Catch this exhibition in Bath in August if you can.



Colour and Light

Alicia Merrett & Nina Gronw-Lewis
Somerset Rural Life Museum
20 March – 15 May

This exhibition was a brilliant collaboration between Alicia Merrett, quilter, and Nina Gronw-Lewis, glass artist. Although the gallery space at the museum is quite small, the explosion of colour introduced by the exhibits seemed to expand the space. The addition of the large glass pieces added to this feeling of size by giving an extra dimension, as you can see from the pic below.



Alicia and Nina met during Somerset Art Week last year – they were both part of an ‘art trail’ around Wells. Nina’s glass pieces feature the body and the way she uses shape and form in a series of calm unfussy designs, is exactly right for this collaboration, giving contrast and cohesion to the shared space.

Alicia's quilts are always a cheering sight. She really is a brilliant colourist and this combines with excellent technical skills to produce work that really sings.

The exhibition was arranged at quite short notice so, of necessity, it was a mix of existing and new work which gave Alicia the opportunity to treat it as a retrospective.

The inclusion of the glass pieces effectively provided a whole new way of looking at stitched work. You can see from these photos that quilts, viewed through glass, look fabulous.



In the piece shown below, *Syncopation*, the intention is to present a piece of work that provokes the same response as the syncopation in jazz music.

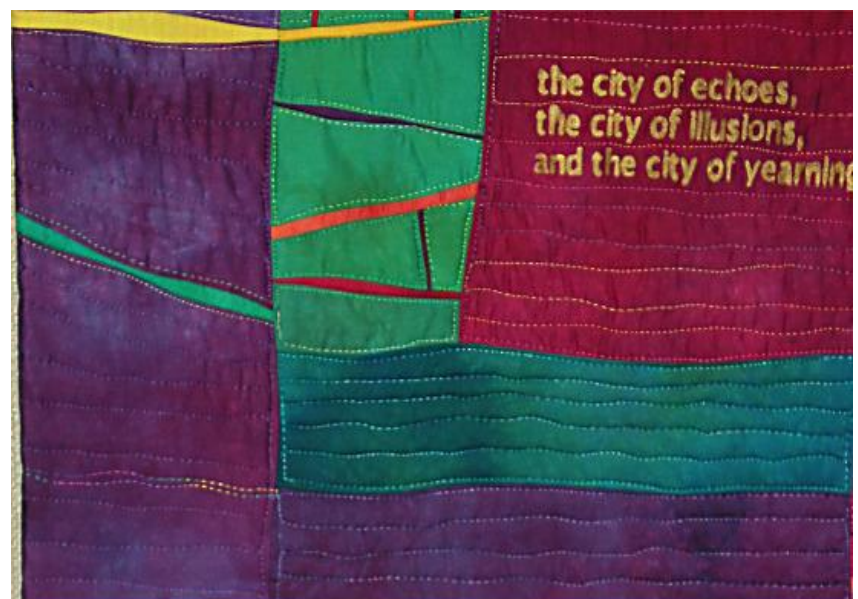


Another telling factor was the hanging - the grouping shown below, worked particularly well. These three pieces look great together, with the central 'joiner' playing an important role. This central panel, *Jewelled Spectrum*, makes a great link between the two quilts either side, both based on a study of cities. *Time and the City* (right) reflects the way a city evolves with time, and *Night Vision*, left, is based on studies of cities at night



Alicia often uses words in her quilts; this detail of *Time and the City* (right) shows how well they integrate with the quilted surface and how much they can add to the way the message is put across.

This use of words also told a story in her piece entitled *Library/Labyrinth*, where paradise is imagined by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges as a library.



The theme of place is strong in this exhibition and the city is once again evoked in the piece on the right, *Mojácar Evening*.

Here, the lights of a Moorish town are glowing against the setting of the darkening hills beyond.

Alicia is good at suggesting these haunting, transient moments and she also conveys atmosphere in a manner that transcends the fabric and threads of her building blocks.

There was an enjoyable cohesion to the exhibition – the cities led to the land mapping (see below right) and this in turn took us through to some of the more esoteric subjects at the other end of the gallery.



The 'set' of work (right) relating to the mapping and land patterns shows the pieces *Seaside Town* and *The River Flows On* (top of pic).

The two smaller pieces of work shown here are presented in the way that Alicia described in a workshop that she wrote for us in the September 2009 issue of *Quiltwow*. She said in the article that it was an appealing way to present work and these two carried the red dots to prove it.



Although you would be hard put to guess it, Alicia started out in her native Argentina as a toy maker and pursued this by studying a City & Guilds course when she moved to England. This move is in itself a great story and we reviewed her book, *Darling Alicia* in the December 2009 issue. This book tells the tale of her emigration through the love letters that she and her husband exchanged. One result of the City & Guilds course was that she studied colour theory and this ultimately led her to photography and then to the quilts she makes today. Alicia feels that the photographic work enabled her to 'see' and opened her eyes to colour and the possibilities of fabric and thread.



The journal quilt, shown right, is a great idea for those who enjoy making these small narrative textiles. Pieced together, they gain power from the individual elements and, as ever, the colour adds the zing.

Glass maker Nina has, in a way, come full circle with this exhibition as she originally studied textiles and fashion at UWE Bristol. Following a chance meeting, she became fascinated with glass, using screen-printing and sand blasting alongside more traditional techniques.

I love the way the frames, made by her partner AD, complement the work. In the pieces (right) the colour and pattern of the figure form a dynamic which is then constrained by the weight of the frame. Will she escape – certainly she will – she is just seen, flitting through the next piece.

The museum has only a small gallery area but this is the second time I've been excited by their choice of artists, having seen a super paper exhibition here a few years ago. It is certainly a space to watch.

Alicia and Nina put on a great show. Either of the artists could have carried off a solo exhibition here, but by combining their talents, they have both gained. They have played up to the contrasts – hard against soft, translucent against opaque – and it has worked so well. I wish we could see more cross-platform exhibitions like this.

