

Exhibitions

**Through Our Hands – A Portrait
Festival of Quilts, National Exhibition Centre,
Birmingham, England
10-13 August 2017**

The theme of this exhibition was a continuation – indeed, it was the grande finale – of the Portrait Shuffle described in our News section. The completed portraits that had been sent in by the artists participating in this challenge were all hung around the outside walls of the stand, an intriguing taster of the delights contained within.

In this exhibition, there were some breathtaking examples of textile art. Faces present challenges to all artists and, perhaps, textile artists more than most, but there was some wonderful work here.

Winner of the most intriguing portrait was certainly Sandra Meech (right) as her excellent self-portrait only revealed itself from a certain angle. Viewed from the front, it appeared to be an attractive patchwork but, when you got the angle right, you suddenly saw Sandra.

Interestingly, it was much more easily seen through the screen of a camera and I was very popular for a little while as people looked through the rear of my camera. Once viewed like this, they had no trouble seeing it for themselves.

Linda Kemshall's 'Every Thought a Question' right, continued a personal theme where moths stand as a metaphor for ageing and loss. It was therefore a joy to see this theme translated into a study of a child, digitally printed from a pencil drawing but, here, the moths have become butterflies. Beautifully stitched and well considered, it was a haunting piece.

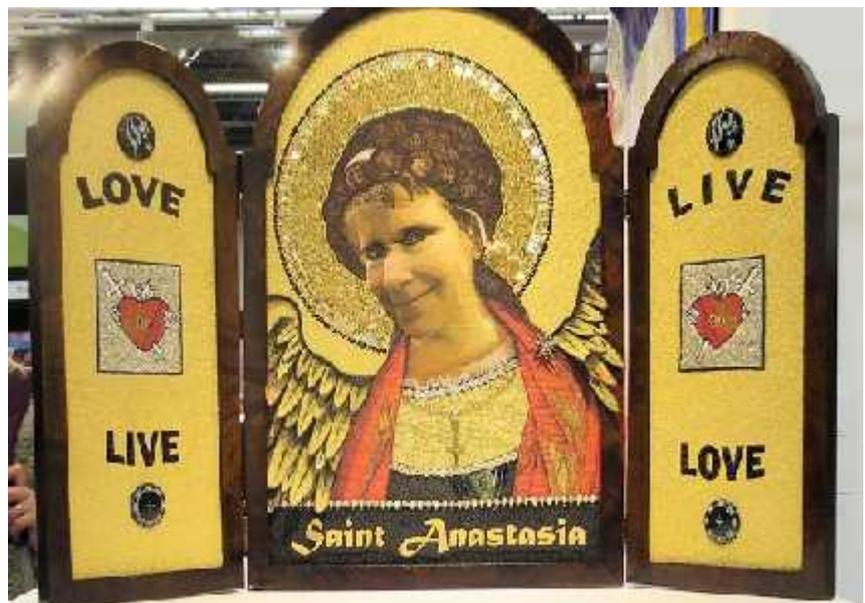


Jenni Dutton's portraits of her mother were, for me, the 'stand-out' works of the entire show. Based on photographs taken a few moments apart, they capture a fragile beauty and illustrate the difference those few moments make. Her smile lights up her face and to be able to capture that borders on genius. Jenni describes her method as 'darning' and I would love to see these two portraits in a top-flight gallery to emphasise the tactile nature of textile art and just how much meaning a 'bit of darning' can convey.



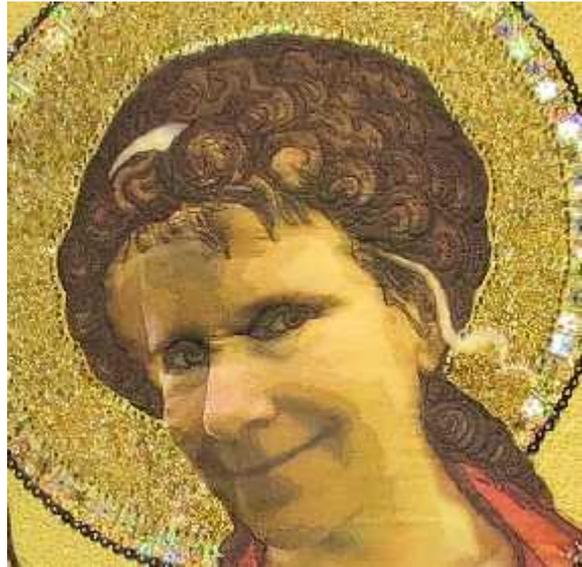
I'm a big fan of Susan Lenz and her portrait (in the form of an icon) of Anastasia Chernoff of South Carolina was touching and heart-warming.

Entitled 'Saint Anastasia', it is a memorial to a wonderful woman who, while suffering from cancer, taught her community 'how to die in the arms of love'. Susan's words, not mine, but wonderfully emotive and who could ask for more.



I was surprised to overhear some comments from visitors while I was absorbing this piece.

They were along the lines of, 'That's a really ugly piece, why make something like that?' By not reading the info cards and trying to understand the art, people do tend to make snap judgments. In this portrait, I feel that Susan has caught a look of patience, love and a life well lived. The purpose of a portrait is not only a vanity exercise. I don't suppose for a moment that the saints depicted in the more mainstream icons were glamorous, either.



A series of small treasures, *Foremothers* was presented as an installation by Miriam Pet Jacobs. Her 20 'foremothers' were a tiny delight. A mini forest of small frames, each presented in a book-type closing device, were her version of a locket. Such a simple idea, so well executed that it made me want to go home and raid the old photos box.

Miriam translated photos from old family albums into a series of framed portraits. Having drawn on cotton with Intense pencils, the result was stitched in a very simple way and the results very effective.

A final delightful touch was the use of joss paper on the front of the 'lockets'. Joss papers were used by the Chinese as a symbol of ancestor worship.



Annabel Rainbow's work, 'Self-portrait in the Third Person' examined identity reflected in the objects that surround you, the ones that are imbued with meaning and memory. In addition to the depiction of these in a wonderfully designed and constructed panel, there were words, stitched into the quilt that told the story of her life through events. Not as most of us would tell it (this is Annabel R) but as in 'when I had my first fish finger'.



This exhibition drew from its contributors far more than could have been expected from the simple brief 'A Portrait'. This brief included references to the portrait being able to reveal an inner spirit or identity and many of the artists were completely successful in getting this across. I think that, in addition to the thoughtful and thought-provoking response to the brief, it also demonstrates that the use of stitch, albeit as mixed media in many compositions, is a perfect vehicle for portraits that go much deeper than a painted surface. Perhaps Miriam's 'Foremothers' and Jenni's portraits of her mother demonstrate this most effectively – every stitch a work of love.

Maggie Grey.

Roots, Shoots and Leaves
'From the Earth' exhibition at the Upstairs Gallery, Berkhamsted, Herts., UK.
18th July – 5th August

There is something beautiful about a natural approach to textiles and 'Eco-dyeing', to name it in general terms, continues with its resurgence in the textile community. The celebration of natural dyes and printing processes as promoted by 'From the Earth' artists such as Caroline Bell and Jenny Leslie, the work of India Flint and Fabienne Dorsmann-Rey and Claire Wellesley-Smith's book 'Slow Stitch', all point towards a different approach to creating and executing good practices and thoughtful approaches to textile work.



Last year marked the first exhibition by 'From the Earth'. Set up to encourage ethical textile practices, it was successful in attracting new and established artists to take part.

In 2017, a second, smaller exhibition was mounted at the Upstairs Gallery and, although without some of the bigger names from 2016, it still produced a striking exhibition.

There was a combination of wall-hung pieces and three-dimensional work. The wall-hung work included printed, dyed, stitch and woven pieces such as work by Caroline Nixon (below left and middle) and Carole Nicholls (below right).



Jackie Hodgson's 'Rust Spray and Rust Tree' (detail shown below left and right) demonstrated simple shape and line but made good use of contrasting fabric and stitch. 'Earth Mother' was created from wonderfully rich colours and simply stitched pattern.



More complex patterns could be found in Joanne Bowes's 'Hidden' (below left). Angela Rossi's 'Den for the Gods' (below right) brought a splash of colour in her textured paper pulp piece.



The three-dimensional forms brought richness to the exhibition. From Ross Belton's 'Scrim Bowls' (right), which were well formed and stitched, and his constructed 'Nests' (below right) to Rita Johnson's pods (below), these were all pieces that were displayed beautifully and showed organic forms in an artistic setting.



Caroline Nixon had several pieces in the exhibition and her tailored jacket garnered much praise.

Beautifully printed and stitched, this was a definite highlight.

Sam Packer.

