

Social Fabric

by Jonathan Rinck

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Quilts? As punchy, in-your-face, contemporary activist art? Absolutely! When it comes to that sort of thing, we typically think of, say, Ai Weiwei or whichever artists are basking in their fifteen minutes of blazing glory or infamy at the Brooklyn Museum. So I initially didn't expect to be particularly moved by *Earth Stories*, an exhibition of quilts on display at the Michigan State University Museum, where I wandered in mostly out of intrepid curiosity. But it turns out the world of art-quilting is much more textured, artistic, and activist than I ever realized. Furthermore, these quilters aren't just making a statement, they're making a difference.

Occasioned by the 25th anniversary of the Studio Art Quilt Associates, the exhibition runs until November 26, after which it travels to the University of Central Missouri Gallery of Art and Design. The two dozen quilts on view came from all over the world, and they promote environmental sustainability and conservation. Because quilts re-appropriate and repurpose discarded things, they're the perfect medium for the message. And the MSU Museum, home to many resources for quilt-related scholarly research, is the perfect venue for the show's debut. Prepare for some surprises; this is not your grandmother's quilt show.



“Cooking with the Sun,” detail, Jennifer Day (photo, courtesy of the artist)

Some entries look uncannily evocative of a Rauschenburg Combine one might encounter at the MoMA. *Palimpsest* by Brooke Atherton comprises found materials, cotton, silk, graphite, and wax pastels to create a quilt that bulges out into the viewer's space, its earth-toned surface suggesting in three dimensions the topography of a landscape seen from above. Mirjam Pet-Jacobs, inspired by Royal Philips Electronics' development of a new energy-efficient light bulb, creates an ethereal and translucent diptych combining screenprinting, fabric, silver foil, and electric lights. Some of these quilts become so artistic and conceptual that they lose their functionality as quilts.



"Palimpsest," Brooke Atherton. Courtesy of the Studio Art Quilt Associates, Inc.

The show makes the important point that environmental sustainability has very practical human benefits. *Cooking with the Sun* by Jennifer day draws attention to portable solar stoves, which, in addition to being an environmentally friendly way to boil and sanitize water, brings efficient and free energy to parts of Africa where women laboriously traverse many miles daily to gather firewood. And Tenderloin People's Garden, featured in Marion Coleman's *Tender Gardens*,

isn't really so much about reclaiming blighted urban areas with nature as it is about providing affordable and healthy food for the San Francisco neighborhood's poorest residents.

These quilts span an astonishingly broad array of environment-related subject matter, from wind-farming to consumerism. By offering such a superb fusion of craftsmanship and concept, *Earth Stories* obliterates any lingering division between craft and fine art, while emphatically making the point that the arts really can make a real-world difference.



"Light Towers," Mirjam Pet-Jacobs. Courtesy of the Studio Art Quilt Associates, Inc.

Visit the MSU Museum's Quilt Index here (<http://www.quiltindex.org/about.php>), which for over ten years has been a centralized online resource for quilt-related research.

The website of the Studio Art Quilt Associates is replete with additional images of this and other exhibitions which so wonderfully blur the lines between craft and fine-art. <http://www.saqa.com/>