

METROGUIDE

Arts



Film
A filmmaker moves back home
in 'Momma's Boy' 43



Dixie Sheridan

Women's Work

'She Made It!' at History San Jose looks at the way local women have made fabric art over the centuries

By JACK VAN ZANDT

ZEWA SISTERS

Consuelo Jimenez
Underwood's wall
hanging visualizes two
parts of her cultural
heritage.

GROWING UP in the 1950s, I used to watch one of my Southern grandmothers (Arkansas) sit around with her sisters and friends and make quilts. My other grandmother (Texas) made clothes for herself, my mother and her nine brothers and sisters on an old Singer sewing machine powered by a foot pedal. It was a completely normal daily practice for women of their generation who lived through the ravages of the Depression.

These ordinary women created wonderful homemade products that were better than anything you could buy at Sears and for a lot less money. Many of these items are still beloved possessions of members of our family, including the old Singer machine that my sister still uses.

"She Made It," History San Jose's latest exhibit, celebrates these all-but-disappeared traditions as practiced in our valley since the mid-19th century, along with a couple of surprising contemporary fabric-art pieces based on these practices. The exhibition was put together by Sarah Puckitt, curator of art and photography, and most of

it comes from HSJ's own collection of pieces donated by local citizens.

The oldest pieces are a "sampler" from 1816, by Mary Tyrell, and a group of beautiful Tamian Ohlone Native American baskets. Many of the other older pieces are quilts made specifically to raise funds for local charities and handmade family keepsakes. Some of the most curious objects are pictures and medallions incorporating woven human hair from loved ones that were often made as memorial pieces. Moving on into the last century, there is a display of wedding dresses from three generations of one family dating from 1895, 1925 and 1980.

I loved seeing the tools for making the various creations. One item, a "sewing bird," a molded stylized object for holding needles and pins, was once given by a man to his lady friend to signal serious intentions of marriage. The exhibit also includes period sewing boxes and bags, as well as the mail-order catalogs and forms that were used to get fabric and tools.

I was especially intrigued by the textile pieces and a book, *How to Paint on Textiles*, written by one Marion Van

Zandt. She is not a recorded relative, and little is known about her except that she lived in San Francisco and Los Gatos and is thought to have been a teacher at San Jose State University, which brings me to one of the most interesting displays. Home economics used to be taught in most high schools and colleges in the United States, and SJSU had a Home Economics Department until 1987. The show presents a number of items from dress-design classes in the old department, topped off by intricate miniature models of dresses in the process of design.

The final room features recent works by two contemporary women artists who use old traditions in the creation of new forms of artistic expression. *Zewa Sisters* is a loom-woven, silk-screened and embroidered piece of silk, corn husk and metallic thread by Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, whose Mexican heritage combines old European Spanish and Hiochul tribe native cultures. Her graceful, subtle earth-toned wall hanging displays a vertical series of screened images drawn from both of her ancestral backgrounds.

After the Gold Rush, by Los Altos artist Linda Gass, is made from silk crepe de Chine, machine-quilted with monofilament and rayon threads, and hand-painted. Gass is active in water-resources issues, and that provides the background material for much of her work. Resembling a color aerial photograph of the Central Valley, *After the Gold Rush* is an arresting geometric representation of humankind's mark on the agricultural landscape of California. Also, interestingly, Linda is a mathematician and computer scientist, occupations that obviously inform her work. She proves that the traditions of women's arts and crafts celebrated by the exhibition are alive and well and even have a new technology angle that could only come from Silicon Valley.

SHE MADE IT! THE TRADITION OF WOMEN'S ARTS AND CRAFTS IN SANTA CLARA VALLEY runs Oct. 24–March 1 in the Leonard and David McKay Gallery at the Pasetta House, History Park, 1650 Senter Road, San Jose. Open Friday–Sunday, noon–5pm through Oct. 31, 11am–4pm after Nov. 1. Admission is free. (408.287.2290)