

in review

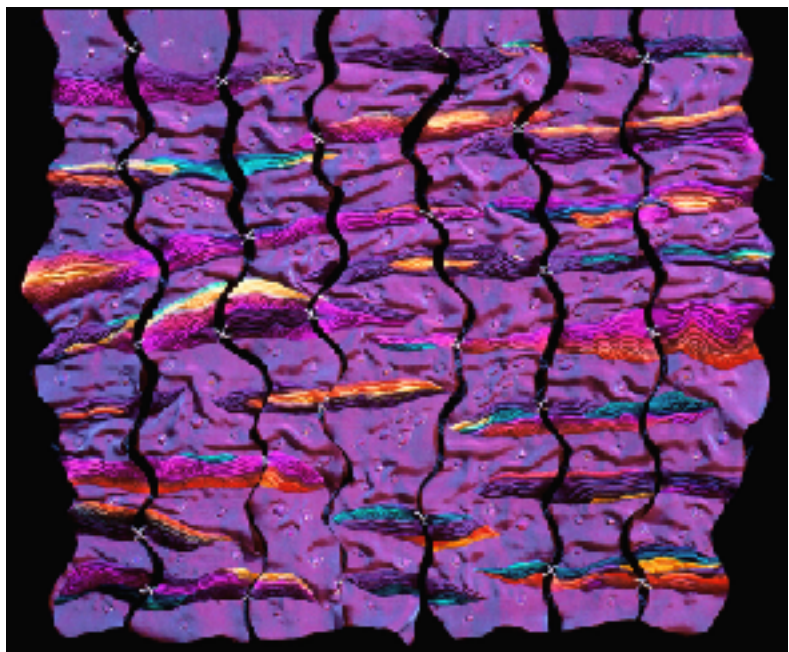
Redwood City, California

Transparent Trespasses: New Fiber Work by Linda Gass The Main Gallery

Reminiscent of Ansel Adams's love of natural beauty and his photographic works that were pivotal in bringing public awareness to its endangered status, the recent fiber work of Linda Gass is driven by her environmental awareness and her need to express concerns about the relationship between contemporary man and nature.

"I beautify unnatural landscapes in order to draw attention [to the ways] in which we are destroying the natural beauty of our world," Gass said. Her silk paintings, wall hangings, and quilts depict a variety of natural phenomena and forms using primarily gutta or wax resist and acid dyes on silk charmeuse, employing the Japanese *roketsu-zome* technique. In this recent exhibition (July 3 - September 1, 2002), Gass chronicles not only the natural beauty of water, waterways and watersheds, but also man's impact on them to "encourage us to begin thinking about new sustainable solutions."

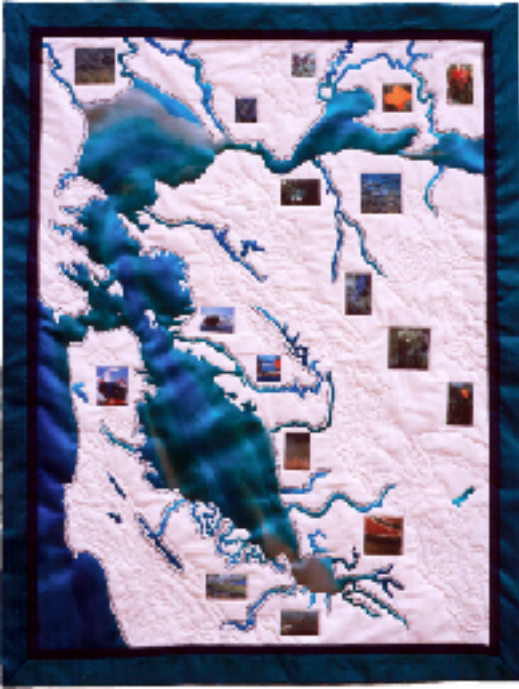
In one series of art quilts entitled *Geography of Hope*, a vivid palette of blues, aquas and indigos depicts some controversial water projects in California from the perspective of a topographical map that includes the San Francisco Bay, Mono Lake and Hetch Hetchy Dam. Dyed silk charmeuse cut into the shapes of these bodies of water and tributaries is fused onto a plain white cotton backing, then stitched and quilted to create a three-dimensional relief map of the area. Hand-written factual information about the project follows the patterns of the water shapes that meander through the work. These facts are both coldly scientific and descriptive of man's encroachment on



LINDA GASS *River Fragment* Silk charmeuse fused to iridescent silk chiffon, rhinestones, rayon and metallic thread, hand stitching, 42" x 45." Photo: The Artist.

nature. Small photographic images of the sites, incorporated into the compositions by heat transfer, reinforce the destruction as contrasted with the original natural beauty. While this series takes effective advantage of the watery application of the dye in conjuring up the bodies of water, overall they still read as technical maps and emphasize an inert, controlled approach.

In a more metaphorical mode, Gass's *River Fragment* art quilt is created from hand-painted silk charmeuse formed into padded shapes and fused to long wavy panels of iridescent silk chiffon. These ele-



LINDA GASS **Geography of Hope: Hetch Hetchy** Hand-painted silk charmeuse fused to cotton, heat-transferred images from artist's photographs, machine quilted, 32" x 25"

ments capture the shimmering, fluid essence of water. More visceral and sensual than the other work, this uses her media to elicit an emotional response to the inherent beauty of water. Sparkling jeweled beads and pebbles "entrapped" between the layers of chiffon further evoke the visual qualities of moving water; their subtly faceted surfaces alternately reflect and disappear as the light changes. Demonstrating Gass's "right brain" in action, this less literal approach successfully generates a primal response about water and the need to keep it pure, natural and flowing.

Gass's blend of pictorial imagery with scientific underpinnings reflects her personal background. Having taken degrees in mathematics as well as an MS in computer science from Stanford University, she worked in the software industry for ten years. She studied painting and fiber art techniques informally and considers herself "an outsider" to traditional formal academic art training. She now makes fiber art pieces full-time. Self-described as "equally left- and right-brained," she enjoys "solving both technical and artistic problems using the same common ingredient: creativity." This is a tricky balance: how does one create visual messages that have serious, scientific content yet also evoke an emotional, artistic response in the

viewer? Ansel Adams's method was to go for the dramatic; he heightened the wonderment inspired by natural beauty. He ramped up the contrasts - light and dark, cloud and sunlight, solid granite and elusive shadow - through the use of photographic filters and developing chemicals to enchant and seduce views of his photographs. Gass's "watery" pieces attain a similar quality when she allows her materials to work their magic and speak for themselves; they take on a life of their own through the languid fluttering of silk charmeuse drenched with watery dyes. This seduction elicits the desire to join her campaign for clean protected water, waterways and watersheds moreso than the descriptive, austere map-based pieces.

My only disappointment with this exhibition was that there were none of the wearables depicted on the show's announcement card. The paneled chiffon dress pictured in a wild meadow setting was intriguing and inviting. Instead, there were only individual scarves on which simplified wavy patterns were delineated with hard-edged wax resist. On an intellectual level, this series of scarves entitled *River Flow* referred to the colors and patterns created as water gradually carves through the landscape. This pattern is reminiscent of Japanese s-curve depictions of flowing rivers, but lacks the rich nuances of Gass's *River Fragment* quilts.

This exhibition raises a fundamental question about the viability of trying to communicate intellectual content through an artistic medium. Can an artist successfully transcend factual presentations and generate an aesthetic, emotional response in the viewer? Not always. Perhaps these two approaches activate two separate sides of our brain and complement one another with rational information supporting an emotional impression. But if an artist wants to inspire and engage passion, the irresistible aesthetic experience provided by the more poetic approach is more effective, as *River Fragment* proves.

More of Linda Gass's work can be viewed on her website: www.lindagass.com

—Reviewed by Jo Ann Stabb, a designer of textiles and wearable art who recently retired from teaching for 34 years at the University of California, Davis