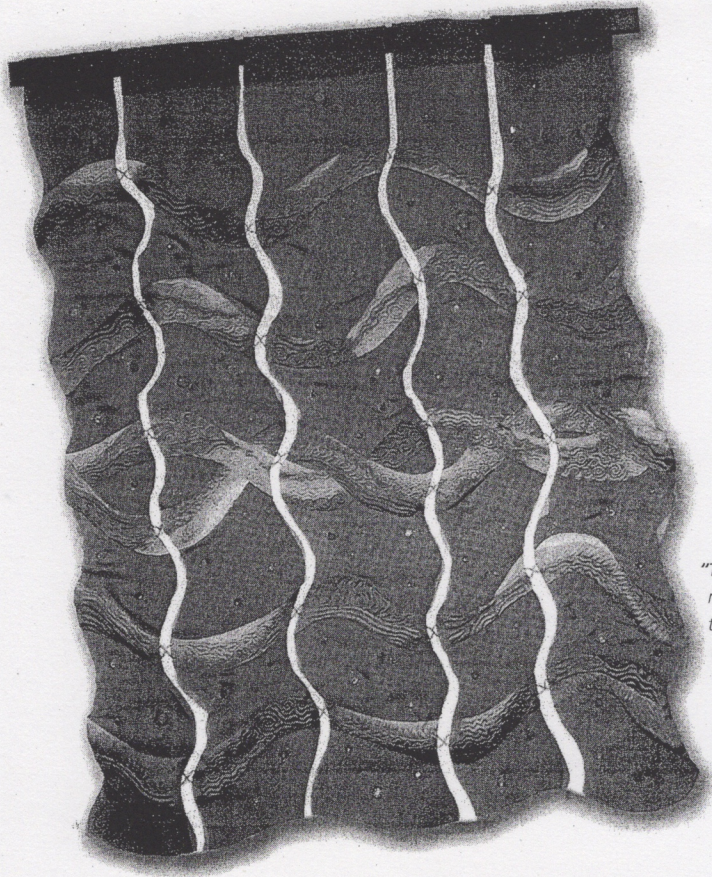


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"Twisted Fate I" represents the effects humans have on sensitive water ecosystems.

Going swimming

LOS ALTOS ARTIST COMMENTS ON WATER ISSUES

By Katie Vaughn

If the colorful fiber artwork on display in the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts doesn't catch the attention of passersby, perhaps its message will.

"No Swimming: Textile Work about Water Issues in California" represents the beauty of water but also warns about the state's water management problems.

"My work has a beauty to it," artist Linda Gass said. "I'm trying to use beauty to encourage people to look at hard issues."

The show is composed of a variety of textile art pieces, including wall hangings, maps, collages and quilts. Although all pieces relate to the water theme, they show the artist's diversity of techniques and aesthetics.

Gass, a Los Altos resident, grew up in Los Angeles with an interest in art, specifically in fabrics. But she took a different direction in her studies, earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics and a master's in computer science at Stanford. She worked as a software developer, but didn't forget

her interest in art.

"Working in graphics was like solving puzzles, but I felt like I wasn't able to express myself fully," she said.

After ten years at Adobe Systems, she transitioned into a career in art about a decade ago.

"I felt like I had done what I wanted to do," she said. "I knew I wouldn't have to be a starving artist anymore."

In addition to her practice, Gass began studying water use and conservation and observed nature throughout the western United States. She ranked Burning Man, the annual weeklong art and community celebration in the Nevada desert, as one of her artistic inspirations.

"Burning Man has been a huge influence on my work by expanding my notion of expression," she said.

Although Gass received no formal art training, she has studied the work of environmental artists including Christo and Robert Rauschenberg. She has created outdoor installations of her own, including a brook made from pieces of silk

winding through rocks.

For both outdoor and indoor works, Gass has been drawn to textiles as her artistic medium. And she has found they relate well to water.

"I've found silk and textiles to be a great way to represent water,"

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The textile map "Geography of Hope: San Francisco Bay" is part of a series focusing on areas damaged by water management.

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she said. "I work a lot with transparent fabrics, and silk has a natural reflective quality."

Gass typically works on several projects simultaneously, but has precise patterns for creating each type.

Her wall hangings, such as "Twisted Fate I" and others shown in the Center for the Performing Arts exhibition, are her most complex works.

She begins by painting — usually using fewer than five, and often complimentary, colors — on a stretched piece of silk. She next cuts iridescent chiffon fabric into wavy or representational forms and fuses them to the silk with heat. After attaching the fabric to a silk organza background, she cuts them into panels, leaving the edges unfinished to represent the destruction humans have caused the natural environment around them.

"I want it to look damaged," she said.

Gass then stuffs the panels and uses the free-motion embroidery feature of her sewing machine to create surface detail. She embellishes the panels by stitching in rhinestones and attaching the panels with crisscrossed iridescent thread. By loosely stitching the panels together, Gass said she represents the way humans can repair their damage to nature.

While she has a plan in mind when creating such works, she can never predict the outcome.

"They're much more subconscious pieces," she said. "Each stage evolves into something different. I don't know what until the end."

"Twisted Fate I," which Gass created last month, is based on the way plants and animals react to human interference with watersheds. Viewers of her work, however, often see other meanings, she said.

Gass' "Geography of Hope" series focuses on bodies of water that have been damaged by humans. She begins by finding topographic maps of the areas, then paints silk to look like the water she wants to highlight and fuses it to a white cotton backdrop.

Next, she heat-transfers photos she has taken of the area to the cotton and writes words along the edges of the water. The text tells both sides of the decision to alter the area. To finish the work, she stitches topographic lines into the fabric. These projects require the most preparation, she said.

"I do a ton of research before I begin a piece," she said. "I learn so much. That part is incredibly fun."

Although Gass wants viewers to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of her textile works, she places equal importance on the message behind them. She hopes

the show creates public awareness of California's water issues.

"I want to get people thinking and conscious about it so we can move to sustainable measures," she said. "I want them to become concerned and active within their own communities."

"No Swimming" runs through March 1 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts at 500 Castro St. Visiting hours are noon to 1 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and one hour prior to any performance at the center. ☐