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by Linda Gass

artist profile

By Kim Hall



Linda Gass Protecting the Planet, One Artwork at a Time

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the stitched paintings on silk by artist Linda Gass speak volumes about her passions for water conservation and preserving the environment. A former software engineer with degrees from Stanford University in Mathematical Sciences (B.S.) and Computer Science (M.S.), the 50-year-old became a full-time artist 12 years ago.

As a self-professed right- and left-brained person with an affinity for problem-solving, the Silicon Valley-based artist creates machine-stitched, soft sculpted paintings that effectively convey her message of environmental-consciousness. Using rich colors and eye-catching patterns based on maps and aerial photographs of the waterways of San Francisco and Silicon Valley, Gass hopes her work will attract aesthetic interest first, followed by a deeper desire to understand more about the ecological issues presented.

In addition to selling her originals, creating greeting cards and giclées, and licensing the images of her artwork to organizations and publications, Gass frequently speaks in public about her work and its related environmental issues. Here, she shares more about her passions, her process, and her plans for the future.

Art Calendar: *You're very vocal about your passions for water conservation, and that plays a significant part in most of your work. When did you start integrating your ecological messages into your artwork?*

Linda Gass: I started integrating it pretty early on. I think it was because I felt that I really needed something conceptual for my work to be about. I tried different things. I subconsciously arrived at it; in that, it's really a fundamental part of who I am. I grew up in Southern California during the drought years. My mother is from Luxembourg, a tiny European country where it rains a lot. She tried to raise her daughters with the superstitions of her childhood; every night we'd have salad for dinner, and she'd tell us if we didn't finish our salad it would rain tomorrow. But it never rained; everyone knows it never rains in Los Angeles. That planted this nagging question in my mind: 'It never rains here but yet I'm surrounded by lush lawns, palm trees and swimming pools, that need a lot of water. Where does that water come from?' I learned how we import water from other states, and drain lakes and rivers to feed our demand, and it really started disturbing me.

AC: *While some of your previous work was more abstracted or done from an eye-level view of the landscape, your recent works are bird's-eye-view landscapes — almost like brightly-colored, idealized maps. Why the decision to change your approach?*

LG: It's funny because I started with that bird's-eye-view with a work that I did in 1998 called *After the Gold Rush*. It was the third painted silk quilt I ever made, and it won the emerging artist award for (the) Quilt National (exhibit). It was such a runaway success that I became paralyzed with the fear of not being able to make anything else as good or better. I experimented with other techniques and finally seven years later went back to it. And I love maps and that view from an airplane window. It's really what I'm drawn to.

AC: *Early in your life as an artist, you were a watercolorist. Then you moved to painting on silk, and then turned to a combination of painting and quilting. Can you talk about this transition, and explain your process a bit?*

LG: It was a pretty natural transition. I was painting on the silk, and originally had this idea that I would do a one-of-a-kind art-to-wear clothing business. Although I loved painting the silk fabric, I learned that I did not like the repetitive production sewing. So I started making the wall hangings, and there was something about the linear quality of the silk painting that begged to be quilted.

Unlike traditional quilting, I paint on whole cloth; I don't piece fabric. I take a large piece of white silk and then paint on it. I really consider the quilting to be integral to my work — the stitching line is part of the design and the color of the thread becomes another layer of painting. In traditional quilting, the stitches serve a functional and decorative purpose, but I feel like I'm taking them beyond that to be part of the aesthetic. I also in a way sculpt my work because I use a really high-loft batting.



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Sanitary?, 2009, by Linda Gass. Stitched painting on silk, 30" x 30".

So where I'm stitching it, I'm smashing it down flat which then creates these mounds and channels in between the lines of stitching.

I use silk crepe de Chine; it's not as shiny as other silks that you might see on garments, but it still has a beautiful sheen to it – it's more subtly reflective of the light. I like painting on it because it's close in texture to watercolor paper .

AC: *How do you approach your current pieces?*

LG: My work is really about water and land use in California and the American West, so I usually pick a site that I can go

visit. It's very difficult for me to work when I haven't visited the site. I try to locate aerial photographs, images and maps. I do a lot of research, and use the Internet to find books and articles. Based on my research, I start forming an idea of how I want to convey the site, and then I refine my particular view of the landscape. Typically I'm focusing on the human mark on the landscape that affects something about our water— water scarcity, water supply, pollution, whatever it might be. From there, I do sketches and drawings. I also do thumbnail sketches with colored pencils to work out my color scheme; then I mix my dye colors. I'm very meticulous, mixing them drop by drop.

Then I do the painting itself, where I stretch the white silk on the frame, use a wash-out pencil to trace my drawing onto the silk, and then use a combination of a water soluble resist and liquid silk dyes. I use a resist that is non-toxic and I can just wash out. I build up layers of dye and resist. Like watercolor, I work from light to dark, so I have to plan ahead and I have to be very focused when I'm painting. There aren't good ways to deal with unintended results. When I'm done, I wash out the resist and residual (non-toxic) dye.

(For the quilting,) I make a sandwich with high-loft polyester batting and another piece of silk, and really small safety pins, because once you poke a hold in silk it's there forever. I use free motion embroidery so I'm controlling the direction of the fabric and how long the stitch length is. It takes me probably about two months to do one. I work on more than one piece at a time because I can't sit at a sewing machine for more than a few hours, and I have to wait for the dye to dry, so it works to bounce back and forth between them.

AC: You often speak about conservation issues when you exhibit your work. Was taking on the public speaking aspect difficult for you?

LG: I've done a lot of public speaking. When I was in college, I taught courses. When I worked in the software industry, I did a lot of presentations. I've been speaking about my art pretty consistently for the past seven years or so. When I do presentations, I make them very educational in nature. I provide the background of what inspires my work, through photographs and charts; I do it very graphically with few text slides. I do try to educate my audience in what we're doing with our water supply. We're lucky to live in the U.S. where all we have to do is turn

on the tap to get water and drinking our water doesn't make us sick, so it's easy to take it for granted. However, if you take a look at what's behind the tap, it's very surprising.

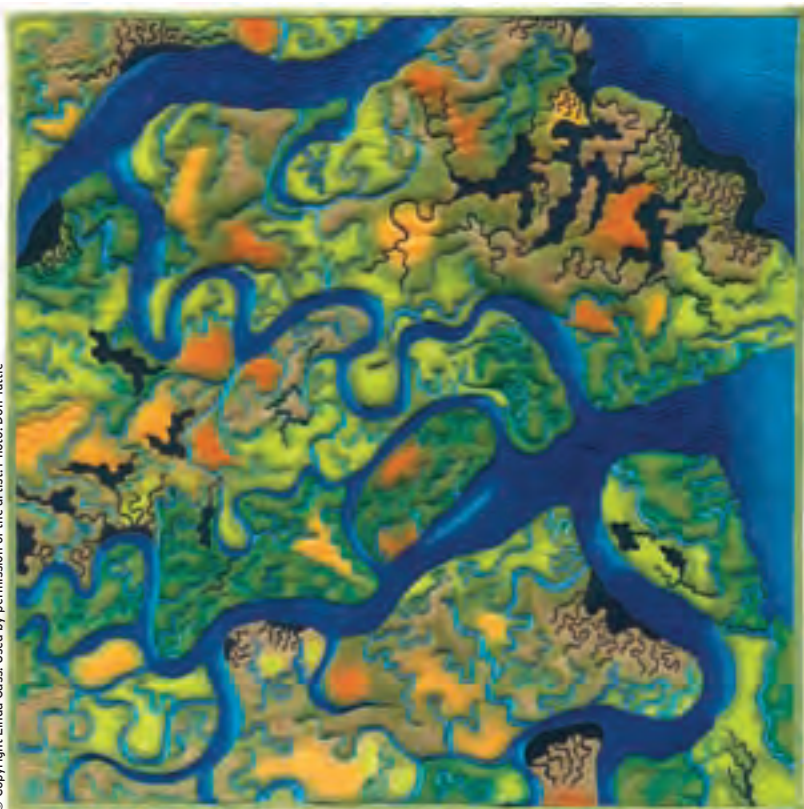
One of the things that I try to inspire through my work and my presentations is that there are small actions that everyone can take to make a difference. I want to give hope — not just point out the problems, but explain that there are things we can do. I get a questions a lot at the end, saying, 'You've really opened my eyes; what can I do?' So I prepare a handout about different nonprofit organizations and Web sites where they can actually do something about it.

AC: Where do you plan to take your work from here?

LG: One of the things I'm looking at is public art; I haven't actually done any yet; I just completed the Bay Area Public Art Academy. Because of the environmental concepts in my work, the general public is the ultimate audience. I'm also looking into working larger and translating my work into durable materials, like metal, ceramic or glass or terrazzo floors; I was approached by an art consultant to submit designs for a floor in an airport. It didn't work out ... (but) I just love that idea so it's something I'd like to explore.

AC: What's the most rewarding thing for you about becoming a professional artist?

LG: It's interesting because I've done a lot of different things in my life, but being an artist is the most rewarding and challenging thing I've done so far. I'm fortunate to be in a position when I can express my ideas visually and to the public. I guess the most rewarding thing is when people come up to me to thank me for bringing focus and attention to these topics. I'm trying to use the lure of beauty for these issues to encourage people to look at the hard issues we face and to give them hope for a better future. **AC**



Wetlands Dream by Linda Gass. Stitched painting on silk, 29" x 29 1/4"

Linda Gass is an award-winning artist, as well as a curator, public speaker and environmental activist. Her work has appeared in dozens of publications, including *The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography* by Katharine Harmon (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), *500 Art Quilts* (Lark Books 2010), *AmericanStyle Magazine* ("Innovative Quilts: Painting with Thread," February 2009) and the 2009 Sustainability Report from CH2M HILL, a global engineering, consulting and construction firm. Gass also served on the artist selection panel for public art for the new Environmental Innovation Center in San Jose, and is moderating a panel of three artists who address environmental issues for an upcoming conference sponsored by the Studio Art Quilts Associates and the Surface Design Association. For more information about her art, public speaking engagements and environmental passions, or to see her studio and work during Silicon Valley Open Studios, May 15 and 16, visit www.lindagass.com.