

*Palo  
Alto*

Vol. XXVII, Number 90 • Friday, August 11, 2006 ■ 50¢



# Weekly

## Weekend Edition

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# Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



Linda Gass's art quilt "South Bay" depicts southern San Francisco Bay, with some of the salt ponds standing out in sharp yellow-brown hues. Gass hopes to draw attention to the need for restoring those wetlands. The quilt is 29.75 inches wide and 29 inches high.

## A gentle statement

Artist looks at hard issues through a soft medium

by Rebecca Wallace

Nature dwells in Linda Gass' Los Altos house, from the rustic wooden beams to her framed trekking and mountaineering permits, and a certificate she got for climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

"These are all my diplomas," she says.

A world map on one wall is crowded with pins in all the places she's been: Kenya, Thailand, Israel, Japan,

Italy, Mexico and too many more to count.

It's interesting, then, that this voyaging artist chooses to work in a medium that conjures up the joys of tucking in at home: quilts.

Granted, her quilts aren't the typical cozy creations. There's no mosaic of fabric pieces; instead, Gass paints her designs on silk, using wax or another resist to keep the dyes from bleeding. She adds batting and backing, and then stitches intricate patterns with a

sewing machine.

"I consider my work to be fine art painting on silk," Gass says in her friendly, open way, seated on a couch in her home. "I'm really torn about calling my work 'quilts.' People always want to know if I make bed-sized quilts." She laughs softly.

True to form for this avid hiker, backpacker and former member of the Bay Area Mountain Rescue Unit, Gass's artwork reaches into the outdoors. Many of the



Norbert von der Groeben



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Top: Linda Gass paints the brightly colored background of her designs, then adds detail on top. Center: The painted silk is combined with batting and backing. Bottom: In Gass's home studio, she stitches together the pieces with a sewing machine.



*“Reclamation” depicts the annual wildfires that Linda Gass remembers from growing up in Southern California. “The smell of smoke in the air and the brilliant sunsets caused by airborne ash and gases are indelible memories,” she writes in an artist’s statement.*



*In the land art piece “Rivulet at Parker Creek,” Gass used nylon tulle to represent the water that once flowed through this dry creek bed.*



Norbert von der Groeben

*These days, Gass is experimenting in her home studio with new materials, planning to switch to all non-toxic substances. On this piece of silk, she’s used soy wax instead of the typical combination of beeswax and paraffin. (Wax keeps dyes from bleeding into the silk.)*

quilts depict landscapes, rivers and wildfires.

There are also local views of San Francisco Bay with surprising detail, and maps of Mono Lake and the Hetch Hetchy valley. Other creations include environment-themed paintings on silk, and lavender sachets with wildflower patterns.

Gass has been sewing and embroidering since she was young. She has always loved fabric, whether it’s the old friend cotton or the glowing silk she now

favors.

“It’s this very familiar material to us,” she says. “From the moment we’re born, we’re wrapped in it.”

Her logical, methodical side — she has a master’s in computer science from Stanford and worked in the software industry for 10 years before becom-

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## Linda Gass

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ing a full-time artist — also appreciates fabric.

“I like the engineering dimension of constructing something. I like being able to manipulate it in different ways,” she says.

But it's the familiarity of textiles that make them especially suited to her work, Gass believes. For she's not just depicting nature — she's making subtle environmental statements that may be easier to swallow when the medium feels accessible.

A quilt called “South Bay,” for instance, shows the southernmost part of San Francisco Bay. Next to the cool blue water, salt ponds stand out sharply with their yellow-brown hues. With the quilt, Gass hopes to quietly pique people's interest in restoring these wetlands.

“When I create a piece, I'm not thinking, ‘I'm illustrating my point.’ But maybe my choice of colors would cause a feeling in the viewer,” she says. “I'm trying to use beauty to encourage people to look at hard issues.”

“South Bay” is currently pictured on the cover of the Colorado-based *Fiberarts Magazine*.

Other quilts make statements about water rights, water conservation and river restoration. “Reclamation” also takes a look at summer wildfires, with bold flames leaping above purple mountains. But even these colors aren't garish, and the silk is soft to touch.

In her artist's statement about this piece, Gass talks about the devastation these regular fires wreak on the ecosystem. But she also adds a note of renewal: “I often wonder if fire is nature's way of reclaiming its wild lands and giving them a chance to regrow into their truly wild state.”

When you make a statement, it's hard to know if anyone is heeding your call — or even listening. But Gass feels especially successful lately because of the growing level of interest in her work.

Recently she's been on HGTV's “Simply Quilts” program, and had a piece appear in *American Style Magazine*. This summer, her artwork has been exhibited in a variety of locations, including North Carolina, Santa Monica, France and Washington.

Gass smiles at “Reclamation,” now lying on a table in her home studio. “That one just came home. It got to go to Lyon; I didn't.”

In one of the exhibits, at the Bellevue Arts Museum, the work of Gass and three other artists explores the theme of mapping through fiber art. Her San Francisco Bay quilts are currently keeping company with Matthew Gerring's “Moon,” a cratered moon map 7 feet in diameter, made with machine embroidery on black technical nylon.

The show also includes Barbara Lee Smith's mixed-media textile views of Puget Sound and Toot Reid's abstraction textiles.

Bellevue curator Stefano Catalani is taken both with Gass's painterly hand and her gentle way

of making a political point. He says she's a welcome contrast to the many contemporary artists who are influenced by the in-your-face style of advertising.

“I think the public is sort of tired of being slapped in the face by messages,” he said.

Catalani also likes the way the true nature of Gass's work reveals itself slowly.

“At first, the colors are so bright and the lines are so sensual that they overwhelm the eye. We think it's an abstract painting. Then we start to see rivers, creeks,” he said.

Finally, a viewer often performs sort of a dance with the quilts, swooping in to peer closely at the detail of the stitching, then stepping back to get the full picture, Catalani says. “Her work takes time to look at.”

When Gass has more of that elusive quantity, time, she'd like to do more land art, something she's only sampled. A few years ago, she took two land art classes through Stanford Continuing Studies that included trips to the areas of Mono Lake and Nevada's Lake Lahontan. She and her classmates made ephemeral installations blending fabric and other materials with the landscape.

Gass used fabric to represent bodies of water that were once alive but no longer exist. In “Rivulet at Parker Creek,” blue nylon tulle ripples through a creek bed that used to be a tributary of Mono Lake — before its water was diverted to the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Gass was also moved by a visit to the dry Owens Lake, which also had its tributaries diverted to the aqueduct decades ago.

There's now a backlash from that action. The naturally occurring toxins on the lake bottom that were once covered with water now blow into cities. Residents have reported respiratory problems, and the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District calls the dry lake “the largest single source” of particulate pollution in the country.

Gass shakes her head. “These crazy problems we create for ourselves.” ■

**Info:** For more about Linda Gass's work and exhibits, go to [www.lindagass.com](http://www.lindagass.com). Information about the Bellevue Arts Museum show is at [www.bellevuearts.org](http://www.bellevuearts.org).

### About the cover:

Linda Gass in her home studio in Los Altos. Photograph by Norbert von der Groeben.

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