

805

LIVING

Arts + Culture



By Joan Tapper

Christina Rocha created this art quilt in response to an Extreme Quilters challenge. It commemorates the masters swimming she has participated in for many years.



Sewing to Extremes

WITH ONE-OF-A-KIND ARTWORKS, BOLD COLORS, AND VARIED FABRICS, THE CONTEMPORARY QUILT WORLD IS AN EXCITING PLACE.

Traditional women's crafts have enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, so if the word "quilt" makes you think of days long gone by, it's time to refresh your perspective. One way to start is with Art from Cloth, an annual showcase of work by a group of women called the Extreme Quilters that takes place at the Thousand Oaks Community Gallery October 16 to 26 this year. You won't find traditional geometric-pieced bedcoverings here.

Members of this group—founded by Newbury Park resident Eileen Alber—create one-of-a-kind art quilts that are meant to be hung on the wall.

Extreme Quilters goes back to 1997, says Alber, when a quilt guild in the Conejo Valley challenged members to make quilts about breast cancer. An engineer by profession, Alber had been a lifelong sewer and longtime quilter who made art quilts as a hobby, but when she looked at the results of that challenge, she was particularly taken by the out-of-the-box creations. She invited those quilters to meet at her house, discuss their craft, and share their work. Two years later, she opened the Quilters Studio, a store stocked with fabric and other supplies, and the group shifted >



its meetings there. Though the shop closed in 2019, the meetings have continued—on Zoom during the pandemic—bringing members together to talk about concepts, materials, techniques, and quilt shows.

Loris Bogue has been an Extreme Quilter since the early 2000s, and she likens her work to painting, only using fabric. “I’m experimenting with different materials,” she says. Bogue incorporates cloth photos, pieced fabric, and hand-dyed textiles into her quilts, and once even used trash picked up at Pierce College, where she frequently attends art classes, to create a quilt of flowers in a vase. At this point, she adds, her quilts—like those of her fellow Extreme Quilters—are often meant to be given to others. “Many are commemorating life events like weddings, births, heritage, and ancestry.”

That’s certainly true of the work of Christina Rocha, a Newbury Park resident, who had quilted traditionally until she went to an Extreme Quilters meeting and “was blown away,” she says. “A lot of my pieces involve events in my life and my family. Most have a personal connection.” For example, Rocha points to an evocative quilt inspired by the master’s swim team she’s on and a realistic portrait of her grandmother.

Not all of Rocha’s quilts are representational, however. “I also like pieces that are abstract,” she says. Those may begin with a solid background to which she adds embroidery floss, decorative yarn, and beadwork.

Art quilts are, by nature, improvisational. They derive from the individual vision of the quilter, rather than a pattern. But art quilts make up just one part of this colorful and vibrant fiber craft, which also includes traditional and modern quilting.



Kay Porczak sewed this bold, modern quilt (above) for her son, who wanted a colorful wall hanging while he was working from home. The undersea world was the inspiration for *Kelp3* (left) by Lynn Jurss, another Extreme Quilter, who has made a series of pieces depicting the land and sea creatures of Channel Islands National Park.

Traditional quilt design relies on a grid of repeating often-complex, pieced blocks. *Quilting* actually refers to the stitching—by hand or machine—that holds together layers of cloth on both sides of the quilt filling. Modern-style quilts, which have grown in popularity in the last two decades, are more experimental, going off the grid.

“What makes the quilt modern is a focus on fabrics and color choices and the use of solids and negative space that shows off the quilting,” says Kay Porczak, co-owner of Picking Daisies, a San Luis Obispo sewing supplies store she opened with her sister, Dede Bruington, 13 years ago. Quilters quickly embraced the shop for its inventory of varied fabrics and contemporary patterns.

“We’re attracted to modern quilt-pattern makers,” says Porczak, “who are reaching younger generations. Young gals find bold, simple patterns they like. You need to be able to sew straight lines, but modern quilts are more accessible than traditional ones.”

Certainly, there’s plenty of room for all kinds of quilt creativity. “I don’t understand people who can have just one style,” says Eileen Alber, adding that quilts can be painted, dyed, or otherwise embellished. “I still piece rather than paint, and I tend to do improvisational abstracts. I don’t know what I’m doing until I do it.”

Christina Rocha has a more step-by-step creative process: “I think of an idea and how to transpose it into art,” she explains. “How to depict it. What colors [it is], or is it monochromatic? What about fabric? Layering technique? How do I quilt it? I use a lot of embroidery thread and machine quilting and add embellishment to give it a 3D effect. I tell people I’m a fiber artist. I use fabric and thread as my medium.” ♦