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Into View

Stitching together an artistic vision

Gallery director Beth Smith harnesses a passion for textile-related media: 'It's really rewarding to see artists change and surprise you'

By [Robert L. Pincus](#), UNION-TRIBUNE ART CRITIC / BOOKS EDITOR

Sunday, January 3, 2010 at 12:01 a.m.



Museum Director: Beth Smith

Institution: Quilt Visions

Previous institution: Oceanside Museum of Art (director of development)

Current show: "Interpretations," featuring 37 quilt artists

Upcoming show: "California Fibers: Liminal Spaces" (Feb. 5-April 25)

Web site: quiltvisions.org

Quote: "This is my dream job."

Beth Smith has been on the job for only about a month, as director of Quilt Visions, but it's as if she was practically destined for the position. She is a passionate quiltmaker herself — not in the traditional mold, but in the eclectic, contemporary vein that this nonprofit gallery and organization has championed for nearly 25 years. And in her several roles at the Oceanside Museum of Art — where Smith served since 1997 — volunteers were crucial to its success. And volunteers are also the lifeblood of Quilt Visions.

To underscore this point, she conveys the story of how the handsome space that Quilt

Visions now occupies, in Point Loma's Liberty Station complex (the former Naval Training Center), was a product of its devoted volunteers: from the architect Bob Leather's work on designing its interior to the actual construction of its rooms. And she is quick to credit the board and the volunteers with everything from the organizing of exhibitions to fundraising. (Quilt Visions has a \$20,000 matching grant, from an anonymous donor and is currently about halfway to its goal.)

In her years at the Oceanside Museum, Smith embraced many roles, from helping to organize its exhibitions to serving as press officer to managing the museum store to grant writing. Her array of skills will be useful at an institution where she is the only full-time staff person.

In Oceanside, where Smith served as the chief grant writer during the past year and a half in her role as director of development, they had great success in this arena. The museum received a \$300,000 grant from the James Irvine Foundation for sustaining its programming as well as several smaller grants, including a \$20,000 Leichtag Foundation grant for its recent exhibition "Fabric of Survival: The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz."

Strolling through the galleries of Quilt Visions, in a show ("Interpretations") that represents 37 quiltmakers from nearby and far-flung locales, her passion for the works on view is palpable.

"Here's an artist doing something completely different than work I've seen before," Smith says of Marianna Burr's "Ezekiel's Wheel," a quilt with a complex network of spherical forms in cool hues, many resembling eyes. "It's really rewarding to see artists change and surprise you."

Looking at a lushly colored, figurative quilt, Lori Lupe Pelish's "Lost," Smith says, "Her work has so much emotion in it, angst and tension."

The exhibition is indicative of another aspect of Quilt Visions that Smith cites: the wide geographic reach of many of its exhibitions.

"One of the things I really like about Quilt Visions is that we get outside of a regional focus. Work like this is global, even though different regions do have different identities."

The focus of the museum isn't limited to quilts, but broadens to include a spectrum of art in textile-related media. After the current show closes Jan. 17, the space will feature "California Fibers: Liminal Spaces" (Feb. 5-April 25), an exhibition devoted to a coalition of artists, established in 1970, who concentrate on media such as weaving, basketry, felting and wearable art as well as quilting and sculpting.

The rest of 2010 will include quilt shows; one will highlight three artists and another is a juried exhibition marking the 20th anniversary of a parallel organization to Quilt Visions, called Studio Art Quilt Associates. The year will then culminate with Quilt Visions' biennial juried show, which in recent years has appeared at the Oceanside Museum of Art.

Smith jokes that with her schedule as busy as it is, she has multiple projects of her own on the walls at home but none are finished. Since she was a young girl growing up in

Dearborn, Mich., she was always fascinated with making things. In fact, it was a gift she received at 4 or 5, "McCall's Giant Golden Make-It Book," that started a love affair that hasn't ended, but simply changed focus: from sewing and cutting to quilting and painting.

She came to California at 30, just to visit family. It was Thanksgiving and the weather was warm. She was smitten. She and her own family moved here, before her oldest child began kindergarten. Both her son and daughter, now grown, live in San Diego County.

For Smith, another formative experience was her years at San Diego State University, where she earned a B.A. in 1991 with an emphasis on textiles, and then a teaching credential in art a year later. She achieved a deeper understanding of the process of making art, courtesy of teachers like Joan Austin and Wendy Maruyama.


The love of education clearly informs Smith's vision for Quilt Visions. She is hoping that the organization can establish a docent program, so people who want a tour of one or another exhibition can have one. And some of the most gratifying projects at the museum, in her view, are those done by school-age children and teens in conjunction with Quilt Visions volunteers.

Work by third-graders from Dewey Elementary, recently on view, exceeded her expectations.

"The level of creativity was simply amazing," she declares.

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