



*Gwen
Wanigasekera*



Quilts

FISHER GALLERY

sponsored by



Coats Enzed Crafts

Despite the relatively short history of New Zealand quilting, visiting artists are constantly expressing delight and surprise at the overall high level of standards achieved by our growing band of patchwork exponents.

Statistics continue to confirm that per head of population, New Zealand is still the largest home sewing market in the world and it is therefore not surprising that with changing lifestyles this skilled band of sewers are turning to creative expression in the various branches of fabric art.

Quilting in New Zealand is continuing to grow and so is its following. As a result of this activity, it is obvious that emerging from the ranks of these craft enthusiasts is an elite band of artists whose work is reaching the highest of international standards.

It is my opinion that one of these artists is Gwen Wanigasekera. My wife and I are fortunate to own several of Gwen's major works and they constantly brighten up our lives. Amongst these is Putanga O Te Ra which was recently selected by the Japanese Quiltmaker Setsuo Segawa to tour the United States and Japan with the exhibition *New Wave International Quilts*. As well as being the winner of the *Enzed Sewing 1990 National Quilting Competition*, Gwen has exhibited as a solo artist on five specific occasions and in 1991 received a QEII Arts Council Study Grant for travel to the UK. A quiltmaker since 1970, a student of Batih and Shihori, Coats Enzed Crafts have great pleasure in being the major sponsors of this exhibition of her work.

I thank the staff of the Fisher Gallery for the professional way they have handled the exhibition and also for their enthusiasm in organising the month-long *Fibre Workshop* which is to run in conjunction with this exhibition. I extend a warm welcome to our visiting tutors and students and wish them and the viewing public an enjoyable experience.

Peter Gordon
Managing Director



Coats Enzed Crafts

Gwen Wanigasekera * Quilts

Over the past twenty or so years, the patchwork quilt has undergone a phenomenal transformation in terms of status. It is as likely, now, to be seen on walls as on beds. One might say, in agreement with American art writer Lucy Lippard, that the quilt has been gentrified.

The perceived elevation, from women's work, to women's leisure pastime, to 'Art', has its problems as well as its benefits. To quote Lippard, 'Artist/quiltmakers seeking aesthetic dignity now... are caught in a uneasy balance between tradition and modernism.'¹ They are also caught, inescapably, in the art/craft debate.

As with other crafts, these recent developments have made it possible to remove the quilt from the entirely functional. Although what we admire about old quilts are, often, their graphic and visual, as well as tactile, qualities, these aspects were, in the first instance, subservient to their function, which was both practical and sociological. (Many parallels can be drawn between present-day Eastern Polynesian customs regarding *tiwaeae*, and those of early American quilts.)

The same was true of other art and craft – painting as narrative, pottery as vessel, and so on. Since this 'expanded'

attitude to quilting is so recent, and coincides with the currently popular notion that art is supposed to be a vehicle for self-expression, it's not really surprising to find large numbers of self-styled 'artists' in all craft media, including this one.

Gwen Wanigasekera's work resists such categorisation; in this regard, it is refreshing and unusual. These quilts are generically, structurally, and philosophically, quilts – despite their non-utilitarian aspect. Not 'soft paintings' (to quote American quiltmaker and author Michael James)², or 'art quilts' which mimic the means and imagery of painting or sculpture. Respect for the mores and conventions of the genre, and mastery of the skills involved, provides a solid base for exploration of ideas about its nature. As in other disciplines, attention to the inherent processes and materials, and understanding of the historical and sociological context, is vital to providing a structure upon which to build something new.

Restricting her range of techniques, she works almost entirely with the simple, ancient, and universal method of strip piecing. Such self-imposed confinement focuses the mind; constant exploration of and experimentation with the method, together with a broad-ranging attitude to materials, continues to provide her with a satisfactory means of playing the games of colour and texture for which she is best known.

The work is characterised by a sophisticated and evocative use of colour. There is a remarkable ability to exploit the possibilities of colour contrast, complementarity and variety; there is little reliance on obvious harmonies or contrasts of the spectrum. Black, a favourite of quiltmakers for its tendency to sharpen images and provide contrast, is used with discretion, and usually in several textures – shiny, matte, patterned – in one work, adding subtlety. There is, as well, a marvellous 'fuzzing' or 'bleeding' of colours in some works, due to careful juxtaposition of prints. She can make colours sing, dance, and glow, and handle awkward fabrics so that the tiniest pieces are used with precision; a great diversity of fabrics adds dimension. Just as the actual texture and substance of paint is an important aspect of experiencing a painting, so does actual and visual texture – the



Fine Madness - Gentle Obsession 1992

light reflective or absorptive qualities of cloth – markedly affect our experience of any textile. So the wondrous array of silks, brocades, velvets, satins, and cottons makes a big contribution to our experience of Gwen's quilts. The cloth is handled with a rare degree of finesse, and diversity of scale gives an impression of complexity. In some quilts – for instance *Fine Madness, Gentle Obsession* – there is constant visual excitement, with what seems like a struggle for dominance between blue and red. The 'glow' comes from fine, slim strips and pieces of different textures and patterns, advancing and receding.

With regard to technique, it should be noted that, while excellent craftsmanship is paramount, there is no prejudice as to whether the process is by hand or machine. In some cases machine-quilting is most appropriate, while in others, hand-quilting of exquisite refinement (as in the *Chain walk* work) is an essential component of the work's intention. Similarly with piecing – the minutely-detailed, complex piecing of a work like *Te Mouno* exemplifies the value of the sewing machine as a tool for more than mundane purposes. Yet *Tawhāngi Blocks*, by its very nature, structurally, can be made only by hand; each piece of cloth is first shaped over a piece of paper before being stitched together. Usually, these papers are removed upon completion, but as a reminder of the fragility of the silks here employed – and obliquely, of the preciousness of the entire work, by virtue of the hundreds of hours which were spent in its making – here the papers remain. Thus the quilt, while bed-stored, is a decorative, not a utilitarian, object; like the silk 'throws' of late Victorian times.

Our initial response, in either case, is not to 'all that work', but to the delightful product of it. Which, emphatically, is not to say that to appreciate the amount of time



and skill involved in making a quilt is to trivialise it. On the contrary, these factors are integral to the process of, and must be a part of the response to, the craft.

In this show, Gwen refers to the continuum of which textile arts have been a part since time out of mind. Patterns, both visual and sociological, are referred to here; the continuing flow of life and death, of life-passages, of war and peace, of destruction and prosperity. Textiles, in

bed-ding, and incorporating quilted symbols which, to the ancient Sumerians, signified fertility.

Visual patterns – ancient designs from mediaeval embroidery, old stone-work, old patchwork of many cultures – whose original meanings are forgotten, are given new, if different, life and relevance, by association with current work and contexts. In the whole cloth quilt, her respect for the ‘magic’ of handwork is given full expression; Welsh whole-cloth quilts in her own collection are a constant reminder of and testament to that respect.

Gwen’s work is two-dimensional, concerned chiefly with surfaces, and the decorative qualities of a great collection of fascinating fabrics. Visual illusion, when it occurs, has to do with colour-play, rather than the third dimension. The design of the work follows from a sensual pleasure in the materials.

Quilting is generally perceived as an American folk art – understandably, since that is where it reached the magnificent heights of artistry which were achieved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No one who has seen one of these wondrous objects can fail to be impressed by, not only the industry, but also the vision, the integration of art and structure, that they embody.

Her six-week visit to Britain in 1990, strengthened Gwen’s reverence for these works, and enhanced her knowledge of their European forebears and contemporaries. Her own work in the genre recognises – pays homage to – the past, while acknowledging the present; recognises, too, her own link with Europe and with quiltmakers through the ages, while acknowledging her New Zealand home. It is to be hoped that the work of such artist/quiltmakers as Gwen Wanigasckera will help to encourage appreciation for the quilt as an entity, whose art is in its own form and decoration, and whose historical and sociological links are valued and maintained, in order to ensure a vital future.

Sue Carnaw
February 1993



So, I Have Made Them a Quilt 1992

every known society, have played a significant role in domestic and ceremonial events; in our own society parallels include the Red Carpet and the bridal veil, for example, and not so long ago every bride had a trousseau and a ‘glory box’ full of household linens. As Gwen has observed, all of the primal events in life – birth, death, conception – take place in bed; bed quilts therefore have even deeper connotations. So they are potent symbols indeed, even when abstracted – as most of these are – from their primary purpose.

The *Shield for Maximilian* work connects past and present patterns of the forces of destruction versus the urge to comfort; the unspoken compliance of women in the aggressive acts of men, by knitting socks, or quilting undershirts, or providing other solace, when they make wars. Her own need to provide comfort is acknowledged in *So I Have Made Them A Quilt* – an ‘embryonic’ quilt which suggests the potential for quilts to come, having many of the sensual elements of comfort, including pockets of the sweet herbs historically used to sweeten straw

¹ Lucy Lippard, *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. Charlotte Robinson, New York 1983.

² Michael James, *Quilt Art at Germany's End. American Quilts*, Fall 1992.

Catalogue

*Tama Tu, Tama Oua, Tama Aoe,
Tama Maie* 1987

cotton, hand appliqued and
quilted triptych
2350 x 1050 overall
carved ends by Bob Te Huia,
Aotearoa Institute, Te Awamutu
collection: Coats Enzed Crafts,
Auckland

Sun Cloak 1989

ties and silk in five panels
1000 x 1000 overall
collection: Coats Enzed Crafts,
Auckland

Autumn Cloak 1989

ties and silk in five panels
760 x 750 overall
private collection, Auckland

Autumn Lilies 1989

cotton, machine pieced,
hand quilted
470 x 1470
private collection, Auckland

Windows 1990

cotton, silk, satin,
machine pieced, hand quilted
2000 x 1600

Changes – Past, Windsails 1992

cotton, machine stitched, hand quilted
1530 x 1820

Fine Madras – Gentle Obsession 1992

ties, cotton, silk, satin, machine
pieced and quilted
1880 x 2260

The Rules Keep Changing II 1992

cotton, silk, satin, machine
pieced and quilted
1580 x 1800

Tumbling Blocks 1992

ties, silk, satin, hand pieced
2020 x 1800
from traditional design

Patterns 1992/5

cotton wholecloth, hand quilted,
dyed and painted
2100 x 1800
from Fourth Century doorsill,
collection of the British Museum



Tumbling Blocks 1992

So, I Have Made Them a Quilt 1992

cotton, silk, satin, linen,
various techniques
2400 x 2080

Red Fragments 1992

cotton, silk, satin, velvet,
machine pieced and embroidered
710 x 970

Blue Fragments 1992

cotton, silk, satin, velvet,
machine pieced and embroidered
710 x 970

Fragments I – III 1993

all cotton, silk, satin, velvet, machine
pieced and embroidered
200 x 300

Te Mouta 1992-3

cotton, silk, satin, machine
pieced and quilted
2000 x 2000

Lines/Squares 1993

cotton, silk, satin, machine pieced
1080 x 1320

Blue Log Cabin 1993

cotton, silk, satin, machine pieced,
hand quilted
1350 x 1600
(from traditional design)

Amal 1992

cotton, silk, satin, machine pieced
and hand quilted,
500 x 500
(from traditional miniature design)

Log Cabin 1992

cotton, silk, satin, machine pieced
370 x 370
(from traditional court house steps
design)

Log Cabin 1993

cotton, silk, satin, machine pieced
420 x 420
from traditional miniature design

Look After the Discus 1993

silk, cotton, machine pieced
and quilted
1000 x 1500

Shield for Pedagog 1992-3

lead, chain mail, satin, silk, dyed,
machine and hand quilted

Shield for Maximilian 1992-3

lead, satin, silk, hand quilted

After the Crusade 1992-3

lead, linen, hand quilted

Survival/Destruction I-III 1992-3

satin, silk, hand quilted

All measurements are in millimetres.

All works unless otherwise stated are in
the collection of the artist.

Previous exhibitions

1989 Hamilton, Waikato Society
of Arts, July – September

1989/90 Te Awamutu, Aotearoa
Institute, (invited group
exhibition), December –
February

1990 Auckland, Aotea Centre,
*1990 Enzed Sewing Limited
Nationwide Patchwork and
Quilting Competition*.
Received Overall Best Quilt
(*Pūtangi O Te Ra/Birth of
the Sun*) and Merit Award
(*Autumn Lilies*).

1990 Wellington, New Zealand
Academy of Fine Arts,
New Zealand Craft 1990

1990 Wenderholm, Gallery on One,
Quilts, Offerings and Other Work,
December

1991 Auckland, Lopsdell House,
Changes, February

Grants

1991 QEII Arts Council Study Grant
to United Kingdom

Workshops

1987 part-time study of Batik and
Shibori with Susan Flight

1988 Shibori Summer School with
Susan Flight

1989 part-time papermaking course
with John Mitchell

The artist has also taught a number of
workshops

References

Pacific Quilts, September 1989, 'Ties with
the Past', Pam Anstice, pp 26

Diane Dolan and John Dolan, *Quilt New
Zealand*, Auckland, New House 1990,
pp 36-38, 48-49

Textile Fibre Forum, No 31, 1991, pp 28

Pacific Quilts, March 1991, No 9, pp 6-8

Acknowledgements

The Fisher Gallery and the artist would
like to acknowledge the assistance of
Coats Enzed Crafts for their generous
assistance towards the exhibition and
concurrent workshop programme.

We are greatly indebted for the per-
mission to reproduce works and to those
who have lent works for the exhibition.

This catalogue is published in
association with the exhibition *Gaea
Wanigashera: Quilts* organised by the
Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, Manukau City
and held there from Friday 26 February –
Sunday 28 March 1993.

Gallery Curator: Louis Johnson
Education Officer: Michael Easton
Administration Secretary: Diana Hector Taylor
Photography: John Dolan
Publication Design: Paradigms
Set in New Baskerville
Printing: The Printing Express

© 1993 The Fisher Gallery and the artist

This publication is copyright. Apart from fair dealing
for the purpose of private study, research, criticism
or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no
part may be reproduced by any process without the
permission of the publishers.

Cover: *Te Hana 1992-3*

ISBN: 0-00-0905-01-6