

# Celebrating 15 Yrs. of the Quilt Divas

By Amber Donofrio | Posted: Friday, July 8, 2016 6:00 am

As if we need more testament to the varied and impressive array of art emerging from upstate New York, this month the Community School of Music and Art (CSMA) showcases yet another genre: quilting. “Fifteen: Celebrating 15 Years of the Quilt Divas” is a show designed to do just as its title proclaims, celebrating fiber artists, who founded their local group the Quilt Divas in 2001 and have since continued to exhibit their love and fascination of the craft. The show contains two parts: a 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Challenge, in which artists created 15 x 15 inch works that reference the number, and numerous open format new works and favorites by the artists.

What interests me about this show is the artists’ bridging of the forced dichotomy of craft and fine art that unfortunately continues to exist in the art world of today.

Historically (at least in more modern times), quilting has been viewed as a domestic art, potentially amusing but undermined, thanks to its inherent utility. But the Quilt Divas’ works, though some more traditional than others, all aim to subvert previous notions, paying respect to the rich history of the craft while also experimenting with technique and purpose. Thus they inhabit two realms: at once domestic while also entering more fully into the institutional, so-called high art field.

Take *In the Grate* for example, a piece by Joan Lockburner Deuel that is raggedly shaped. Different colored fabrics and stitches add definition, emphasizing bends, and the entire piece has wired edges sculpted three-dimensional, the sides folded over and protruding forward. Graphing lines only add to the newfound dimensionality: an artwork previously flat but eager for definition. Deuel’s work contains quilting aspects and materials, but it challenges normal two-dimensionality and quite literally breaks into a new realm.

A personal favorite and immediate standout in the show is *Cross Section IX and X* by Rebecca Howdeshell. Equally abstract, both are squares of white industrial felt, in which shapes have been formed with thick patches of stitches (also white) that populate the otherwise soft material with texture. At first the shapes appear like simple abstractions, but with a step back their imagery becomes more clear, revealing spinal columns and the curve of a tail. The utter whiteness of the visual scenes, then, appears more fully appropriate, as white is also the color of bone, and felt and fiber, at least initially both natural materials, bode well with a natural subject.



Joan Lockburner Deuel behind her piece “In The Grate”

But “Fifteen” as a whole contains handfuls of topics and visions from artists who each display their own unique ways of seeing. *I Don't Know! I'm Not Ready!* by Alice Grant depicts a playful scene of foxes playing music as a black bear and a crow sing along. *Safe in My Mother's Arms* and *Nesting*, both by Donna Faivre-Roberts, are surprising as they are sculptures that seem reference to classic mythology and visions of intimate motherhood. Noel Keith's *The Distance in Their Eyes* is a larger piece, created using a more usual quilting square method, that contains a spectral of colors from bright yellows to the darkest of reds. The shapes and shades merge with one another, creating abstract eyes that look onward.

The quilts in the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Challenge are also engaging and diverse in how artists chose to go about the theme. *Braggadocio 15*, another work by Noel Keith, is straightforward as it explores the shape and nuance of the number 15 fifteen times in braggadocio font. *Scene 15* by Kristin Thompson leaves a little more up to the imagination: a sunset watched at a lake. Its title adds intrigue as it implies there is more happening, a narrative within which this scene is only one part. Sally Dutko's *15 Years of Creative Spark* is also worth mentioning, with its intricate design and stitch work, all centered around a middle focal point of what looks to be a startlingly immense night sky.

All in all, “Fifteen” is enjoyable to see, whether the works are appreciated for their techniques or the depth of thought that lies between the stitches.

*Fifteen is on display at the CSMA, 330 E. MLK/ State St., through July 29.*