

Off the bed, onto the wall

Contemporary quilts on display at arts center

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COURTESY PHOTOS/SANGRE DE CRISTO ARTS CENTER

‘The Beckoning,’ Marti Plager

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By ROY SONNEMA | SPECIAL TO THE CHIEFTAIN |

Everyone appreciates quilting as one of America’s great folk-art forms, and indeed, many of us are proud to possess a quilted coverlet by a grandmother, aunt or some other relative as a treasured family heirloom.

But did you know that quilting is also a vibrant contemporary art form? Artists across the country cut and sew patches of fabric to create images and expressive works of art with aspirations that go far beyond grandmother’s comforter.

From now through Jan. 21, the Hoag Gallery at the Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center is hosting “Structures in Cloth,” a selection of contemporary art quilts that will enlarge any preconceived ideas you may have about what quilting is, both as a process and as art.

This exhibition was organized in association with the Studio Art Quilt Associates, an international organization with some 3,000 members who champion the notion of quilting as a full-fledged art form, not just a craft for stitching bedspreads. SAQA often mounts themed exhibits; this one is focused on

architecture. All the quilts on display represent buildings or architectural structures, or have some reference to architectonic forms.

The pleasant surprise here comes from the discovery of how quilting, because of its inherent nature and traditional associations, tends to soften and warm the architectural geometry in each work of art.

Each artist takes her own personal approach to the subject of architecture.

Beth Carney is a New York fiber artist who is, by her own reckoning, in love with fabric and color. "My strong draw to architectural structures is inherited from my father and grandfathers, all who were structural engineers," she explains. Her "Structured Chaos 2: City Lights" is a scintillating patchwork of color and light, abstractly representing layers of New York skyscrapers with their evening lights playfully aglow.

For Marti Plager, who turned to quilting as an expression of her lifelong love of thread, fabric and sewing machine, stitching the thread is a particularly important way to enhance the cut-out design. Two of her quilts are shown in this exhibition, "The Beckoning" and "Vertigo," each displaying strong diagonal lines. Both are inspired by the steel trusses from the Kennedy Bridge on I-65 where it crosses the Ohio River from Louisville, Ky. But the bold, diagonal patterns feel soft because of the fabric medium; and the engineered steel has a human warmth and interest because of the freehand spiral stitching within the fabric shapes.

The most eye-catching quilt on display in this exhibit is "Tori Gates" by Nancy Mirman. Here a succession of traditional Japanese temple gateways recede one after the other into the dark distance of the landscape. The varied brocades of the fabric and attached sequins create textured and sparkling effects that set off the bright orange gates.

But forget about mere bridges and buildings. Getting to the very architectonic essence of things, "String Theory" by Betty Busby presents what appears to be a nucleus surrounded by electrons, or perhaps an exploding nova of cosmic proportions. Narrow strips of cloth are sewn to make up the dense patterns that expand in circular forms.

Quantum physicists these days speculate that the very nature of reality may be composed of subatomic "strings" of matter, which the artist reconstructs here with full artistic irony and aplomb. And who knows? Maybe the universe is just one enormous "quilt" made up of strings of matter, each of us occupying our patch in the grand scheme of things.

"Structures in Cloth" is one of several art exhibitions on view at the arts center through the holidays.

The arts center is located at 210 N. Santa Fe Drive. Galleries are open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Call 295-7200 for more information.

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