

# This 'Human Computer' Created a System for Measuring Vast Distances in Our Universe

Visual artist Anna Von Mertens looks to astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt and her vision of the universe for inspiration

BY CAROL SUTTON LEWIS, SOPHIE MCNULTY & THE LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE INITIATIVE



Lily Whear (composite); MIT Press (image)

Space & Physics ▾

Attention Is Discovery, visual artist Anna Von Mertens's thoughtful new exploration of astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt, describes and illuminates Leavitt's decades-long study of stars, including the groundbreaking system she developed for measuring vast distances within our universe simply by looking at photographic plates. Leavitt studied hundreds of thousands of stars captured on the glass plates at the Harvard College Observatory, where she worked as a human computer from the turn of the 20th century until her death in 1921. Von Mertens explores her life, the women she worked alongside and her discoveries, weaving biography, science and visual imagery into a rich tapestry that deepens our understanding of the universe and the power of focused, methodical attention.

**Anna Von Mertens:** Hubble's discovery was not possible without Leavitt's work. It is Leavitt's work that began this understanding of our three-dimensional universe.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** I'm Carol Sutton Lewis, and this is “Lost Women of Science Conversations,” a series where we talk to writers, poets, and artists who focus on forgotten female scientists.

In the late 1800s, the scale of the cosmos was unknowable. But this all started to change at the turn of the 20th century with the meticulous calculations and shrewd observations of astronomer, Henrietta Swan Leavitt. Leavitt, a “human computer” at the Harvard College Observatory, pouring over glass plate photographs of the sky, discovered a system for measuring vast distances within our universe.

She turned what were once unreachable regions of the cosmos into a measurable map of stars, using the power of attention.

For Anna Von Mertens, a visual artist based in New Hampshire, the power of attention was nothing new. Anna makes work that investigates science and history, and her use of paper and pencil or thread and cloth requires time, patience and intense focus. And so when she came across Henrietta Leavitt's work, she immediately felt a kinship. After spending many hours in the archives looking at the examples of early astrophotography, which Leavitt used to make her astral discoveries, Anna created graphite drawings of glass plates and hand stitched quilts inspired by Leavitt's legacy.

And, going even further, she decided to write a book that merges these visual works with lyrical and detailed essays that delve into Leavitt's science. That book, “Attention Is Discovery: The Life and Legacy of Astronomer Henrietta Leavitt,” came out in September, and it's the topic of our conversation today.

So let's get into it. Hi, Anna. Thanks for coming onto the show.

**Anna Von Mertens:** Hi, Carol. Thank you so much for that lovely introduction.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** Anna, you're an artist known for your use of various textile processes and quilt making techniques. So, how did you decide to write a book about Henrietta Swan Leavitt?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So as a visual artist, my work often uses observable phenomena, patterns in nature that reveal structural revelations and understandings.

And so because of this type of work that I do that is so steeped in history and science, I was invited by Jennifer Roberts to the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and Jennifer was the Director of Arts at the time there, and she invited me to develop a research-based exhibition.

And the various archives and libraries on campus at Harvard University were generously opened up to me to investigate as a possible subject for this exhibition. And we toured exquisite archives. But when I arrived at the Harvard College Observatory, I knew I had found my subject matter.

Because there, housed, are over 550,000 glass plate photographs of the night sky. Now this is the oldest and largest archive of those type of photographs in the world. And Harvard, being Harvard, established an observatory in the 19th century in Peru. So that archive covers both the northern and southern hemispheres, and it's the only complete record of the sky.

So viewing some of these glass plate photographs, I first heard Henrietta Leavitt's name. I had never heard her name before. And through these objects, these glass plates, I learned of her name and learned of her discovery and struck by its significance—struck by the profundity of her discovery—I knew that I wanted to develop a project around her life and work.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** And what a project it is. The book is really a wonderful, unusual combination of art and science.

It's a very detailed explanation of Henrietta Swan Leavitt's work and the impact it had on science, but it's also a beautiful, artistic interpretation of the glass plates that you saw. And I could go on and on about this book, but we'll come back to it in a bit. Let's talk a little bit about Leavitt herself. She came to work at the Harvard College Observatory in the 1890s.

What was known about our universe then?

**Anna Von Mertens:** Right. Leavitt studied these photographs of the night sky, but almost nothing was known about the stars that shone in that night sky. So at the time of Leavitt's research, there was no sense of the chemical composition of the stars, and no way to know how far away these lights were from us. So for example, if a bright light shone in the sky, did that mean that it was intrinsically larger and brighter? Or did that mean simply that it was of equal brightness to a dim star, but simply closer to us? So there was no sense of depth to the stars. There was no sense of structure to this sea of stars that we were swimming in.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** And tell me a little bit more about the Harvard College Observatory. How did they come to be on the cutting edge of astronomical research? I mean, what were they doing that the others weren't?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So the glass plate photographs that Leavitt studied were a new kind of technology, dry plate photography, and previously its predecessor, wet collodion photography. An astronomer would need to coat a glass surface with an emulsion, expose it to starlight through a telescope's lens, and then develop that photograph all within a span of 15 minutes, but with dry plate photography—a much more stable substructure—that enabled exposures that were multiple hours in length.

And so with that accumulation of starlight onto the glass surface, these dim stars could be pulled into view over an exposure that might be up to four hours length in time. And so with this new technology, a survey of the stars was possible previously, right?

It would be dependent on a single individual's eye looking through a telescope, studying an individual object and finding observations on that individual celestial object. Here the stars could be studied en masse. So, Edward Pickering, who was the director of the Harvard College Observatory at the time of Leavitt's study, he realized that, that no astronomical research could move forward without building an empirical foundation of knowledge that future discoveries could be made from. So he quickly adopted this new technology, dry plate photography.

And with those glass plates, a huge inundation of data. It was the first sort of flood of big data into the field of astronomy. So with that influx of data, of course, a workforce was needed to process that data. And Edward Pickering, despite being at Harvard, did not have an enormous budget. There was no funding from the college. He had to simply operate the observatory, based on interest from the observatory's endowment. So he had to be quite frugal in how he proceeded. And he realized that women as a labor force could be hired more cheaply than men, and they could analyze these glass plates, again, sort of organizing the data on them so that they could be more readily available for study. One of the things I love about thinking about Leavitt and sort of this access point to the science is that Pickering opened the door to it. It reminds me of this idea of a “Room of One's Own.”

So here Leavitt and her female colleagues, they had a building of their own. So literally only women during her time worked in the brick building where the glass plate collection was housed.



Now, yes, they were cataloging this data, but given access to this data and really given agency within their work from the director, these women not only organized the data, but within that close proximity to the data, went ahead and made the discoveries in their own right.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** And so Anna, initially, what was Leavitt asked to do? What was her task within the observatory, within this group, this building of women?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So, nothing was known about the stars at this time, and director Edward Pickering wanted to survey the stars, and the most basic element of the star, the information that could be gleaned, was the brightness of that star. So, Leavitt was tasked with trying to assess the magnitude, the brightness of each individual star.

And this seemed simple enough. But if you think about what she had to navigate, it is an incredibly nuancing, complex. So the photograph was made by coating a glass plate with a light sensitive emulsion. That plate was placed in the telescope and gathered starlight on its surface. It was then developed and each star would register as a tiny black speck of emulsion. If you think of pepper sort of scattered across the surface of a glass plate that might sort of give a sense of the minute details that she needed to study. So most of the plates she studied were photographic negatives with each star represented as a tiny speck of emulsion.

And so she went about assessing the magnitude of each star by measuring, estimating the sort of diameter of each circle, of each tiny speck. Adding complexity to this task, the photographic medium was nascent and unreliable. And so for example, results would deviate from the center of a glass plate simply to its edges.

Also the color of starlight would affect its results on glass. So for example, red stars barely registered with this new medium. And most significantly, Leavitt had to gather information of photographs made by various telescopes, made by different telescopes, made from different exposure times, so comparing a 15-minute exposure taken by one telescope to a three hour exposure taken by another telescope, so she really had to first understand this new translation of starlight onto glass. And then once she had formed that understanding, she could go and further her research.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** And in the midst of all this meticulous work, what did Leavitt discover? What did she learn about the cosmos?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So in this work of trying to assess their individual brightness and survey the stars, Leavitt noticed that some of these stars changed in their brightness, so called variable stars.

So instead of a consistent amount of light, over time that light would shift brighter, and then dimmer, and then brighter again. And at the time Leavitt began this research, only several hundred variable stars were even known. But Leavitt made this a particular avenue of her research, and one of the most inventive techniques of hers that she developed to identify these variable stars, was to take a glass plate negative of a certain patch of sky.

And, remember, so each star would register as a black speck of emulsion. And then she would take another photograph of that same patch of sky, but on a different night. And she would translate that negative into a positive. She would then superimpose a positive and negative glass plate of the same patch of sky taken on different nights.

And, if it was a traditional star, it would just, right, those specks would fill in the holes on the positive and cancel each other out. But a variable star might announce itself as a tiny white halo of light. And if that indicated that it could be a variable, she would go through time, go through plates and try to track that changing light through time. Now, as I said, only a few hundred variable stars were known at the beginning of Leavitt's research. In her lifetime, Leavitt personally discovered 2,400 variable stars, which is more than half of all known variables at the time. So she was the resident expert in this field of research.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** That is incredible. So, in your book, you lay out all the many inconsistencies of early astrophotography, the plate defects, the differing exposure times, the blurry edges, emulsions, as you said, with different reaction speeds.

She had to take all of those potential inaccuracies into account when she was doing this analysis, which brings me to the title of your book, "Attention is Discovery." So why do you think the work of noticing the work of finding patterns was so important to her work? I mean, clearly she could have just been cataloging this, but why do you think that the noticing, helped her make these discoveries?

**Anna Von Mertens:** Well when something is known, when a scientific discovery is announced, it can seem almost self-evident.

Like there's such a clarity to its truth, and one can, uh, see and observe that truth. And so it's helpful to sort of go back deeper into Leavitt's methodologies to understand really how there were no guideposts. There were no orientation markers to navigate the sea of data. So within that you have to really have faith in the process of - take an observation, see what you can pull from that, and then repeat that action. And you have to have this, this sort of fluid back and forth where you are open to investigation.

You're not closing off certain lines of research, but you have this receptivity to what you are seeing, but then you're allowing that seeing to guide you. And so, Leavitt did exactly that in her groundbreaking discovery is that while she was working, while she was studying variable stars, she decided to turn her attention to the small Magellanic cloud.

Now this is a celestial object that we now know as a satellite galaxy separate from our own, but at the time it was just considered a fuzzy patch of sky. And Leavitt, as she turned her attention to the small Magellanic cloud, as she studied variable stars that she found there, she, she made an incredibly important simplifying assumption. She said, I will treat this as an individual celestial object, the small Magellanic cloud, and so therefore any variable stars I find there will be equal distant to us from Earth, right? So, If she finds a bright star there and a dim star, both within the small Magellanic in a cloud, they're traveling an equal amount of distance to each other to us, and therefore, equally dimmed by that distance. So that means she knows that relationship within the cloud is true. That bright star is truly brighter than the dim star next to it and so, as it translated onto glass, she would know that that relationship held true there. That meant she could turn to her glass plates and study variable stars in the small Magellanic cloud and see what she noticed. As she started to track these stars in their brightening and dimming cycles, she noticed that the brighter stars seemed to take longer to complete their pulsation period, as it traveled through that curve of dim to light and back to dim again.

And it took her several years to follow up on this line of thinking and confirm that, indeed, it was true that the brighter the star, the longer it took to pulse. And Leavitt in 1912 published a paper that graphed this relationship and the smoothness of the logarithmic curve of that graph was so smooth and so pronounced that it was, indeed, a direct relationship.

And in, in fact, it was law. It's now known as the Leavitt Law, the period-luminosity relation, that establishes that the brighter a variable star is, the longer it takes to pulse. And astronomers immediately recognized the significance of this finding. So astronomers could simply observe a variable star pulsing, and based on that observation, determine how bright it should be.

And if it was not as bright as it should be, they could calculate the amount of distance causing that light to dim.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** So, Anna, for those of us listening who are, like me, not quite as well versed in the field of astronomy, in just a sentence or two, can you please summarize for us why Leavitt's Law changed our understanding of the cosmos?

**Anna Von Mertens:** Sure. Leavitt provided an astronomical tool that allowed astronomers to simply observe the pulsation period of a variable star. And from that, determine how far away it is from us. And so this gift of being able to see something quite clearly, just the changing fluctuation of a star, and being able to calculate astronomical distance, opened up an entire new field of research.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** More after the break.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** So Henrietta Swan Leavitt, after all of this painstaking detailed work, determined a system to help us measure the distances to pulsating stars, also known as Cepheid variable stars. How is this groundbreaking discovery then used?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So once this tool was established that astronomers could simply observe the changing brightness of a Cepheid variable star and based on those observations calculate its distance to us. This was most significantly put to use with Edwin Hubble was studying spiral nebulae. And perhaps the most famous astronomical glass plate photograph in the history of astronomy is a plate taken in 1923, where Hubble photographed the Andromeda Nebula, as it was called at the time, and he noticed three new lights. And he identified those as Nova, new star.

But the next night he went back and noticed that one of those Nova, one of those new stars, it changed in brightness. And he realized, aha, that is a Cepheid variable star. That's one of Leavitt's Cepheid variables. And so he crossed out N, Nova for new star, and wrote V A R exclamation point.

And I like to point out that exclamation points don't show up in scientific data very often, but there was good reason for it. Is that Hubble knew just based on that one single star, he could observe its changing brightness over time. And once he established its pulsation period, he could calculate its distance to us.

And so with one single star, he could show that Andromeda was so far away from us, it had to be outside the scope of the Milky Way galaxy, and was a galaxy in its own right. And now, think about that. Think that with one Cepheid variable, he could make this determination. Now, if we go back to the fact that Leavitt discovered 2,400 variable stars in her lifetime, and then within that discovery made this important singular discovery that Cepheid variable star, the brighter it is, the longer it takes to pulse. Hubble's discovery was not possible without Leavitt's work. It is Leavitt's work that began this understanding of our three-dimensional universe.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** So you've just brought up the 2,400 variable stars that through incredibly meticulous, detailed work Leavitt discovered during her lifetime. And so this brings me back to the attention to detail theme that runs through her work and through your own artistic practice. And I want to turn to your art for a moment.

You have a series called the “Artifact Series,” which was inspired by Leavitt's work. Can you tell me about that, how you put it together?

**Anna Von Mertens:** I wanted to practice, as it were, the way that Leavitt studied these glass plates. So I turned and, looking at these glass plates, tried to apply my own attention to them. And one particular plate caught my interest because at the edges of the plate, there was this very pronounced warping.

So as the starlight traveled through the telescope's lens, it warped at the edges of the plate. Now, this was a phenomenon that Leavitt knew well, and she needed to navigate as she tried to pull set data from these surfaces. But I was quite enamored of these artifacts, of the way that the starlight was warped, because it almost seemed to sort of attach wings to these stars, as if they were sort of moths and dragonflies and birds almost taking flight.

And the specificity of those objects caught my attention, and reminded me of how Leavitt built her discovery, that she needed to build it star by star by star. And so I decided to appreciate that specificity by magnifying sections of the plate and drawing these particular artifacts across the surface.

And what I was surprised is how easily my attention was held by their, their elegance, their transparencies, their depth, their peculiarities. And It reminded me how Leavitt, just how evidently committed and engaged Leavitt was in her own work.

And so I've mentioned that part of what drew me to Leavitt's story is that she had this profound discovery that launched modern cosmology, but because she herself did not live to see the impact of that discovery, I wanted to know, well, was she satisfied in her own work?

And reading her scientific papers, reading her letters, and looking at these glass plates myself, I could see how transfixed and engaged and delighted she was by this dedicated work.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** Anna, your enthusiasm and admiration for Leavitt's work is wonderfully clear. But you just mentioned that Leavitt didn't live long enough to see the impact of her work. So, can you tell me about the end of her career? What happened after her groundbreaking discovery?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So, Leavitt spent her life studying variable stars on these glass plates at Harvard and announced her discovery to the world, Leavitt's Law, and astronomers sort of immediately understood its significance and sort of discovery tumbled forth from there. But, Leavitt sadly died in 1921, and, if you think about that famous glass plate photograph that, Hubble took, it was in 1923. So only two years after Leavitt died, Hubble found a Cepheid variable in the Andromeda galaxy and proved it was, indeed, a galaxy. And from there, right, that, that Hubble's work continued, that each time Hubble identified a Cepheid variable star in a spiral nebula, he could calculate the amount of distance to it and prove that. How far away it was and culminating at the end of the 1920s with his 1929 paper showing that not only were there galaxies all around us, but he proved in the redshift of their light, that the farther a galaxy was away from us, the faster it was receding. So, our universe was expanding.

So you think within just a decade, there is this profound shift in our awareness of going from, right? In the night sky, unsure of any sense of depth to them to understanding the shape and scope of our Milky Way and galaxies outside our own. So, I wanted to celebrate this woman, who truly founded modern cosmology, but then also celebrate the life that she lived within it.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** Earlier, you mentioned that Leavitt was one of the many women working at Harvard, and they had their own building to do this work. And yet, even though they had jobs in the field, astronomical work was still very much divided by gender. Women could only catalog and analyze the data while the men collected it. Can you talk a little bit more about the impact that women generally had on astronomy at this time?

**Anna Von Mertens:** You're right in that uh, women were not allowed to make the photographs or observe at night through the eye of the telescope.



They worked by day analyzing the glass plates. What's interesting there is there was sort of a hierarchy given thinking that observations directly made through the telescope was where the science was. The science was actually on, on the plates. That is where the data was and that's where the discoveries were latent. And so the women Leavitt and her colleagues, now known as the "Harvard Computers," were given access, this first access point to the data. And yes, it was, there was only one job description for the women at the time, they were called computers and there was only one pay rate and no sort of chance of ascending up a ladder on a career, but given access to this world, it is evident how committed and dedicated Leavitt and her colleagues were to this work, and you know, Leavitt spent her entire adult life there working at the Harvard College Observatory until her death.

But alongside her were women who you know, I have a list of of certainly, Annie Jim Cannon is well known as her work focused on the studying of stellar spectra, but she worked there for her lifetime. Mabel and Edith Gill were sisters who worked there for decades. Ida Woods, another Harvard computer, worked there for 37 years.

So these women were dedicated to the work and around that, an evident warmth developed both for the work and for each other.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** And it seems that some of the women were given recognition at the time, but why do you think our retelling of history often overlooks the work of these Harvard computers?

**Anna Von Mertens:** that is fascinating component that surfaced in my research for the book, is that I think many of us, assumed that it was the sexism of Leavitt's day that limited her recognition. And looking at that time, the women, the Harvard computers were at the hub, at the very center of international astronomical research. So often in the archive, there's these letters written to the director of the observatory at the time of saying, what are the latest updates? You know, can you tell me more about this finding? Where are we at on this research? So these women and Leavitt in particular with her variable star research, it was well known within the astronomical community, what she was up to and, you know, that their research depended on her work.

So what I found it is that actually it is the retelling of history, of that history, that is more problematic. So often the sort of women are sort of dismissed as like, oh yes, it's very tedious meticulous work and it's recognized, but sort of seen as perfunctory, or just sort of, you know, the needed work to get down to the real research.

And what I found is that, yes, like all science results need to be repeated. Science has a certain amount of tedium to it, just as Hubble needed to measure circles of emulsion on his glass plates to make his own findings. So the process is the same, but somehow the work of the women is diminished as sort of, being in the background where really they were at the leading edge of research, pushing the field of astronomy forward.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** That feels like a great place for us to end. But before we do, do you have any final words on how we should all remember Leavitt and this exciting time in astronomical history?

**Anna Von Mertens:** So certainly celebrating her discovery and her legacy is an enormous part of this book of really seeing the science and seeing the impact that her discovery had on all future discoveries. But returning to that sort of elemental unit of measuring a star's brightness and star by star building a finding, that on attention was, was really helpful for me as a reminder that we can apply that skill to whatever endeavor we are undertaking, whether it's an artistic practice or a scientific one. So, the way that I could see Leavitt's engagement with this "work," see this dedication, this commitment, even she writes the words "pleasure" and delight, recognizing how attention builds and provides a richness to the world around us and what is available to see, that that was such a gift, as part of her legacy as well.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** So beautifully said. Anna, thank you so much for writing this book and for joining us today.

**Anna Von Mertens:** Oh, thank you so much for having me. And yes, thank you for helping tell Leavitt's story.

**Carol Sutton Lewis:** This has been "Lost Women of Science." I'm your host, Carol Sutton Lewis. This episode was produced by Sophie McNulty. Our thanks go to Anna Von Mertens for taking the time to talk with us. Hansdale Hsu was our sound engineer, Lexi Atiya was our fact checker, Lizzie Younan composes all of our music, and Lily Whear designed our art.

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**Host**

Carol Sutton Lewis

**Producer**

Sophie McNulty

**Guest**

Anna Von Mertens

Anna is a visual artist and researcher who has exhibited widely, including in Boston, San Francisco, and Oslo. She was the recipient of an Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Public Understanding of Science and Technology book grant to support the publication of *Attention Is Discovery*. She lives and works in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

**Further Reading**

*Attention Is Discovery: The Life and Legacy of Astronomer Henrietta Leavitt*. Anna Von Mertens. MIT Press, 2024

*The Glass Universe: How the Ladies of the Harvard Observatory Took the Measure of the Stars*. Dava Sobel. Viking Penguin, 2016

*The Rise of the Milky Way*. Presented by João Alves at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, April 3, 2019

“Review: How a Group of Women Launched Modern Cosmology,” by Lucy Tu, in *Scientific American*; September 2024

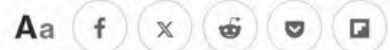
# Henrietta Leavitt Expanded Our Universe

A dedicated investigator who lived her research, Leavitt found meaning not just in the revelatory act of scientific discovery but also on the path that led there.



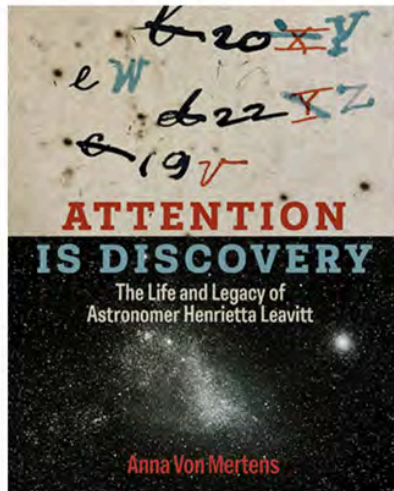
Source photo: Henrietta Leavitt, Harvard College Observatory. Harvard University Archives.

By: Anna Von Mertens



*Henrietta Leavitt worked at the Harvard College Observatory from the turn of the 20th century until her death in 1921. She sat at her desk studying photographs of the night sky — thousands of glass plates that had been coated with a light-sensitive emulsion and exposed to starlight through a telescope's lens. Most were photographic negatives: Each star registered as a speck of emulsion; each plate was a suspension of myriad black dots. Leavitt discovered the period-luminosity relation, which provided astronomers the first means to measure the distance to faraway stars. Before her discovery our imagined universe was flat. There was no sense of depth to the stars, no ability to know where we were in space. Leavitt changed all of this. From a two-dimensional surface, Leavitt revealed an unimaginably vast three-dimensional universe and defined our place in it.*

This article is adapted from Anna Von Merten's book *"Attention Is Discovery: The Life and Legacy of Astronomer Henrietta Leavitt"*



*What follows is an excerpt from Anna Von Merten's layered portrait of astronomer Henrietta Leavitt, "Attention Is Discovery." The piece is situated at the center of the book, amid essays on Leavitt's inventive methodologies, her groundbreaking discovery, its cultural context, and its contemporary scientific relevance. Titled "Name and Present Occupation," it examines the monikers and job titles placed on Leavitt and considers her rightful place in the scientific canon alongside what Leavitt's own inclination might have been.*

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There are times when I use the name Henrietta. In my studio, spending hours at my desk drawing, hours sitting and sewing, her first name surfaces. Repetition — a stitch, a mark, a comma, a choice, a strikethrough — creates intimacy. (When John Kramer and I were finalizing all of the details for the Harvard Radcliffe Institute's "Measure" catalog, we definitely used the name Henrietta.) Among all the colleagues who became friends, Henrietta became one, too. Then again, she might ask: Who the heck are you? In many ways, Henrietta, but not in all ways, I am a stranger.

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She was addressed as Miss Leavitt by her colleagues, a name respectfully formal yet softened by closeness. This was important work, and it was treated as such.

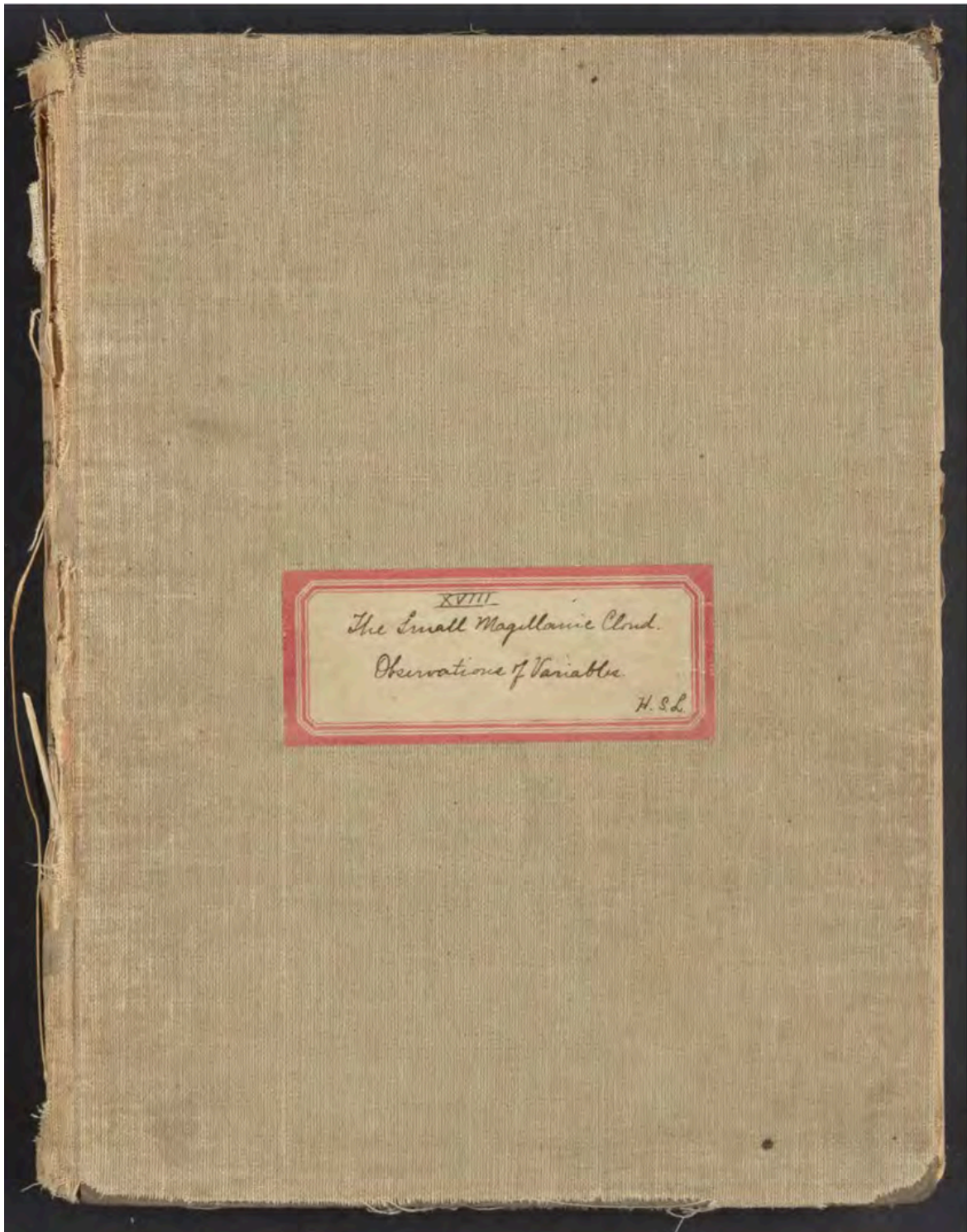
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"H. S. L." is how she asserted her presence in her logbooks, or marked ownership on clarifications that sometimes appear on the manila envelopes sheathing the precious glass plates — a guideline or remark for the next woman pulling that particular plate from the stacks. When her initials appear, there is a period after each letter, always. Once I came across a rare notation on one of the glass plates that included those three letters in red ink, a period after each one. Each dot had the same circumference — a result of her knowing the exact distance needed to bring her pen to glass. Oh, the steadiness of her hand!

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Her full name stretches out: Henrietta Swan Leavitt. Evocative, yes, but that added word feels unnecessary. I don't know Edwin Hubble's middle name. Twice I have looked it up and promptly forgotten it. Encyclopedic entries tend to state his name plainly: Edwin Hubble. I notice that for Henrietta Leavitt, biographical summaries can't seem to resist inserting that Swan. It sends my mind to Cygnus the Swan (our Northern Cross), and within that constellation the X ray binary of a supergiant and an unseen black hole in a perpetual do-si-do that made two famous scientists place a famous bet. With Swan, it's easy to get carried away.



*Henrietta Leavitt, The Small Magellanic Cloud. Observations of Variables, H. S. L., astronomical logbook, volume 18, front cover. Courtesy John G. Wolbach Library, Harvard College Observatory.*



In Gala Bent's poem: unless we dive out into / Henrietta's middle name. It's a poem that sings the songs of women's names that deserve to be sung. In the first line is the name of another scientist who ignored distractions — internal, external — and did the work: Vera! Vera Rubin! (How adjacent is Hubble's "VAR!")

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In the index of a book about how our modern universe became known, a single page number is listed under "Leavitt, Henrietta." When I turn to that page, I find 26 words describing her accomplishments. In another book on cosmology (also to remain nameless), I see "Hubble's Cepheids." I get protective. Those are Leavitt's Cepheids. She understood them better than anyone else.

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Recently I heard a reference to Hubble, the man, in an interview, and in the next sentence Hubble, the telescope, without clarification. The Hubble constant is measured to understand the expansion of space, our cosmic acceleration. Now there is the Hubble tension, the discrepancy between methods for how that expansion rate is calculated. Hubble's name has been condensed to one word, yet is expansively synonymous. Think what Leavitt could become.

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There is another consideration: What word to use for her job, her life's work? The historical term applied to Leavitt and her colleagues based on their original job description, the Harvard Computers, in many ways feels right. A bunch of women sitting around doing math. But it does not acknowledge their individual roles at the observatory, the varied lines of research, or the singular reflections and preferences in the Brick Building.

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Williamina Paton Fleming was born on May 15, 1857, and died on May 21, 1911. Carved into her gravestone is only one additional word: ASTRONOMER.

This is also the word Fleming chose to describe herself in life, evidenced by her 1907 petition for naturalization. (Present for the occasion were Harvard College Observatory director Edward Pickering and astronomer Solon Bailey — her observatory family — as signing witnesses.) To complete the line "My occupation is," Fleming wrote, "Astronomer."

In a 1908 Oberlin College alumni survey to inform its Anniversary Catalogue of Former Students, one line reads: “Present occupation?” The inclusion of a question mark is almost quaint. Leavitt answered “Astronomical Research,” as if in wondering what title to take on she decided instead to write the subject of her study. In the year before her death, Leavitt was living with her widowed mother in an apartment near the observatory. On the 1920 United States census form her mother is listed as the head of the household, followed by “Henrietta S., daughter.” Under the header “Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as spinner, salesman, laborer, etc.” — among the many answers like teacher, maid, salesman, clerk — is that surprising yet obvious word: astronomer.

We can easily designate Leavitt an astronomer, the woman who helped us place the stars. But I like staying for a moment in the ambiguity of her answer to the Oberlin survey. There, in the middle of things, I see Leavitt’s word research as a verb, not a noun. She investigated. Leavitt cared about the work; she dedicated her life to it. Like the faithful placement of dots between her initials and the pursuit of faint stars, it was the work — the action of it — that seems to have been most important to Henrietta.

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*Anna Von Mertens is the author of “Attention is Discovery: The Life and Legacy of Astronomer Henrietta Leavitt,” from which this article is adapted. She is the recipient of a 2010 United States Artists Fellowship in Visual Arts and a 2021–2022 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory.*

# Anna Von Mertens



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Hosted by: [Joseph Gallivan](#)

Produced by: KBOO

Program:: [Art Focus](#)

Air date: Tue, 03/12/2024 - 11:30am to 12:00pm

Joseph Gallivan interviews Anna Von Mertens about her show Elements and Objects

On Tuesday, March 12, 2024 at 11.30 a.m. Joseph Gallivan interviews [Anna Von Mertens](#) about her show Elements and Objects, which is on now at Elizabeth Leach Gallery through April 27.

Von Mertens talks about coloring in her cosmic cyanotypes with gold and silver pens, hand drawing emojis one at a time, and the influence on her work of both her daughter and Henrietta Swan Leavitt, who was an influential astronomer at the Harvard College Observatory a century ago.

This show was recorded on Zoom video conferencing software on March 7 and edited by Joseph Gallivan.

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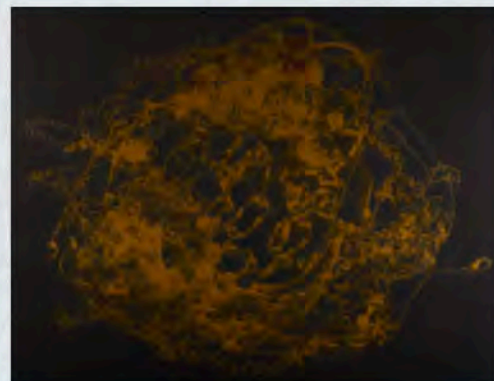
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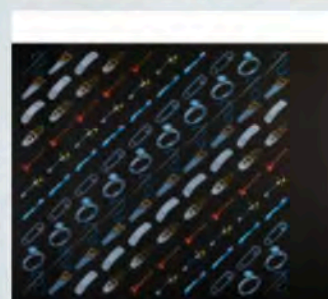
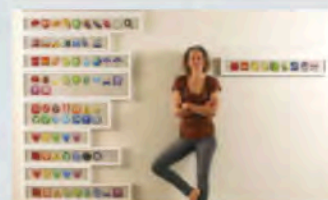
March 7 - April 27, 2024

Opening Reception: March 7, 2024, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

Elizabeth Leach Gallery is pleased to present Anna Von Mertens's exhibition Elements and Objects, which brings together two new bodies of work created meticulously with colored pencils on black paper. One series references the cosmos while the other is sourced from the digital world. Both speak to how these abstract realms are tangibly present in our everyday lives.



More Images:





In her series *Remnants*, Von Mertens devised an iterative process to create each drawing that references the generative life cycles of stars. She arranged tangles of jewelry on sun-sensitive paper into forms reminiscent of cosmic phenomena. Exposing these arrangements to the sun, a chemical reaction occurred anywhere sunlight hit the paper, creating a record of both where the jewelry was in full contact with the paper and where the jewelry lifted slightly from it. Von Mertens used these patterns of touch points and slippages as sketches, then refined them into finished drawings using metallic pencils against black backgrounds. This step-by-step creation is a testament to the connection between all things - each of us is a slow gathering of stardust - yet with each step the preceding steps recede.

The three drawings from Von Mertens's continuing series *Objects (100 Emojis)* use pattern to animate the symbols that populate our phones. In one drawing, items of mending, tending, cutting, and repairing repeat in a diagonal cascade. In another, the repeated shapes of four emojis are arranged to echo the geometry of the traditional Tumbling Blocks quilt pattern. Giving these objects hours of attention with her careful rendering, Von Mertens offers the reminder that these images in our phones are as much a part of this world as anything else. We share the same ecosystem.

In both aspects of her show Von Mertens finds value in pulling remote worlds closer, making distant realms feel more present. Experiencing a broader perspective helps make the connections we build precious, and create value in our human existence.

**Anna Von Mertens** was born in Boston and currently lives and works in New Hampshire. She received her MFA from California College of the Arts, and BA from Brown University. Most recently Von Mertens exhibited a solo show in 2018 at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University (Cambridge, MA); in 2023 this exhibition *Measure* then traveled to the University Galleries of Illinois State University and Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College. MIT Press will be publishing a book on her expanded Radcliffe project in September 2024. Other recent exhibitions include a 2013 Rijswijk Textile Biennial (Netherlands), *40 under 40: Craft Futures* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery (Washington, DC) and the 2012 DeCordova Biennial (Lincoln, MA). Von Mertens's work is in the permanent collections of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum (Saratoga Springs, NY), the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), the Berkeley Art Museum (Berkeley, CA), the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery (Washington, DC) and the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Art and Design (Providence, RI), among other institutions.

Anna Von Mertens has had numerous solo exhibitions throughout the United States including [Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute](#); [Berkeley Art Museum](#); Ithaca College; [Boston Center for the Arts](#); University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara; [Crisp-Ellert Art Museum](#), [Flagler College](#); Mills College Art Museum; [University Art Museum, Cal State Long Beach](#); University of San Francisco's Thacher Gallery; Headlands Center for the Arts; [Elizabeth Leach Gallery](#); [Jack Hanley Gallery](#); and Sara Meltzer Gallery.

Group exhibitions include The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College; Kansas City Art Institute's Artspace; Needle's Eye at [KODE, Art Museums of Bergen](#), Norway, which traveled to the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway; [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#); a 2012 commissioned work for [Ballroom Marfa](#); [Aspen Art Museum](#); [The 2012 DeCordova Biennial](#); and the 40th anniversary exhibition at the [Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery](#).

Von Mertens is the recipient of a 2010 [United States Artists Fellowship in Visual Arts](#) and a 2007 [Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award](#).



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Joseph Gallivan has been a reporter since 1990. He has covered music for the London Independent, Technology for the New York Post, and arts and culture for the Portland Tribune, where he is currently a Feature Writer. He is the author of two novels, "Oi, Ref!" and "England All Over" which are available on Amazon.com

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## Episode Playlist

Time	Artist	Song	Album	Label
11:00	Marina Underbow	Dj Hiphop Soul	Dj Hiphop Soul	Marina underbow
11:06	The Relaxing Sounds Of Violet Noise	Violet Noise With Farm Animals (Loopable) - Original Mix	The Sound Of Violet Noise, Rivers, Waves And Animals	Hard House Collective
11:10	The Beatles	All You Need Is Love - Remastered 2009	Magical Mystery Tour (Remastered)	EMI Catalogue
11:13	Positive Nature Music Concepts	Patient Ocean Guitar Effect	Oneness With Nature	Real Rhythms
11:13	The Relaxing Sounds Of Violet Noise	Violet Noise With Farm Animals (Loopable) - Original Mix	The Sound Of Violet Noise, Rivers, Waves And Animals	Hard House Collective
11:16	Marty Muke	Buffalo Bill	Billionaires and Spidergoats	Marty Muke

## 🔧 Art Snack: Anna Von Mertens and the cosmic emojis



Joseph Gallivan



"100 Emojis" by Anna Von Mertens is in Portland through April 27. Photo: Courtesy of the Elizabeth Leach Gallery

[Anna Von Mertens](#) draws emojis in colored pencil on black paper. She was surprised at how detailed they are, blown up on a phone: The toilet plunger is glossy, and the paper clip has a metallic sheen.

**The latest:** Her work is on display at [Elizabeth Leach Gallery](#) through April 27, in two sections.

- In "[100 Emojis](#)," Von Mertens drew emojis over and over, in patterns taken from quilting.
- In "[Remnants](#)," Von Mertens placed jewelry on light-sensitive paper and used metallic [gold and silver](#) pencils loved by middle schoolers to craft drawings.



**Zoom in:** "Remnants" is meant to capture the formation of elements in exploding stars.

- It all relates to hero-scientist [Henrietta Leavitt](#) who worked at the Harvard College Observatory as a [pioneer measuring](#) the brightness of stars.

**Between the lines:** Both series were inspired by Von Mertens's middle-school-aged daughter, who loves her phone and colored pens.

**If you go:** Tell us which series you're most drawn to.

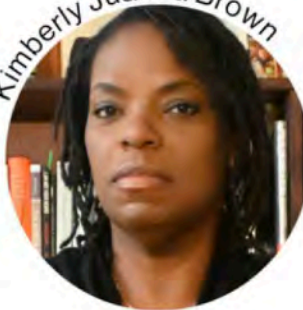
## The MIT Press announces Grant Program for Diverse Voices recipients for 2024

From a scholarly monograph on Haitian language to a feminist history of social media photography, grant recipients bring new perspectives to the world through the MIT Press.

Jessica Pellien | MIT Press  
February 28, 2024

### 2023 - 2024 Grant Program for Diverse Voices

Kimberly Juanita Brown



Michel DeGraff



Amanda Greene



Silas Munro



Anna Von Mertens



Launched in 2021, the Grant Program for Diverse Voices from the MIT Press provides direct support for new work by authors who bring excluded or chronically

underrepresented perspectives to the fields in which the press publishes, which include the sciences, arts, and humanities.

Recipients are selected after submitting a book proposal and completing a successful peer review. Grants can support a variety of needs, including research travel, copyright permission fees, parental/family care, developmental editing, and other costs associated with the research and writing process.

For 2024, the press will support five projects, including “Our Own Language: The Power of Kreyòl and Other Native Languages for Liberation and Justice in Haiti and Beyond,” by MIT professor of linguistics Michel DeGraff. The book will provide a much-needed reassessment of what learning might look like in Kreyòl-based, as opposed to French-language, classrooms in Haiti.

Additionally, Kimberly Juanita Brown has been selected for “Black Elegies,” which will be the second book in the “On Seeing” series, which is published in simultaneous print and expanded digital formats. Brown says, “I am thrilled to be a recipient of the Grant Program for Diverse Voices. This award is an investment in the work that we do; work that responds to sites of inquiry that deserve illumination.”

“The recipients of this year’s grant program have produced exceptional proposals that surface new ideas, voices, and perspectives within their respective fields,” says Amy Brand, director and publisher, the MIT Press. “We are proud to lend our support and look forward to publishing these works in the near future.”

Recipients for 2024 include:

**“Black Elegies,” by Kimberly Juanita Brown**

“Black Elegies” explores the art of mourning in contemporary cultural productions. Structured around the sensorial, the book moves through sight, sound, and touch in order to complicate what Okwui Enwezor calls the “national emergency of black grief.”

Using fiction, photography, music, film, and poetry, “Black Elegies” delves into explorations of mourning that take into account the multiple losses sustained by black subjects, from forced migration and enslavement to bodily violations, imprisonment, and death. “Black Elegies” is in the “On Seeing” series and will be published in collaboration with Brown University Digital Publications.

Kimberly Juanita Brown is the inaugural director of the Institute for Black Intellectual and Cultural Life at Dartmouth College, where she is also an associate professor of English and creative writing. She is the author of “The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary” and “Mortevivum.”

**“Our Own Language: The Power of Kreyòl and Other Native Languages for Liberation and Justice in Haiti and Beyond,” by Michel DeGraff**

Kreyòl is the only language spoken by all Haitians in Haiti. Yet, most schoolchildren in Haiti are still being taught with manuals written in a language they do not speak — French. DeGraff challenges and corrects the assumptions and errors in the linguistics discipline that regard Creole languages as inferior, and puts forth what learning might look like in Kreyòl-based classrooms in Haiti. Published in a dual-language edition, “Our Own Language” will use Haiti and Kreyòl as a case study of linguistic and educational justice for human rights, liberation, sovereignty, and nation building.

Michel DeGraff is an MIT professor of linguistics, co-founder and co-director of the MIT-Haiti Initiative, founding member of Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen, and in 2022 was named a fellow of the Linguistic Society of America.

**“Glitchy Vision: A Feminist History of the Social Photo,” by Amanda K. Greene**

“Glitchy Vision” examines how new photographic social media cultures can change human bodies through the glitches they introduce into quotidian habits of feeling and seeing. Focusing on glitchiness provides new, needed vantages on the familiar by troubling the typical trajectories of bodies and technologies. Greene’s research operates

at the nexus of visual culture, digital studies, and the health humanities, attending especially to the relationship between new media and chronic pain and vulnerability. Shining a light on an underserved area of analysis, her scholarship focuses on how illness, pain, and disability are encountered and “read” in everyday life.

Amanda Greene is a researcher at the Center for Bioethics and Social Sciences in Medicine at the University of Michigan.

**“Data by Design: A Counterhistory of Data Visualization, 1789-1900,” by Silas Munro, et al.**

“Data by Design: A Counterhistory of Data Visualization, 1789-1900” excavates the hidden history of data visualization through evocative argument and bold visual detail. Developed by the project team of Lauren F. Klein with Tanvi Sharma, Jay Varner, Nicholas Yang, Dan Jutan, Jianing Fu, Anna Mola, Zhou Fang, Marguerite Adams, Shiyao Li, Yang Li, and Silas Munro, “Data by Design” is both an interactive website and a lavishly illustrated book expertly adapted for print by Munro. The project interweaves cultural-critical analyses of historical visualization examples, culled from archival research, with new visualizations.

Silas Munro is founder of the LGBTQ+ and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color)-owned graphic design studio Polymode, based in Los Angeles and Raleigh, North Carolina. Munro is faculty co-chair for the Museum of Fine Arts Program in Graphic Design at the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

**“Attention is Discovery: The Life and Work of Henrietta Leavitt,” by Anna Von Mertens**

“Attention is Discovery” is a layered portrait of Henrietta Leavitt, the woman who laid the foundation for modern cosmology. Through her attentive study of the two-dimensional surface of thousands of glass plates, Leavitt revealed a way to calculate the distance to faraway stars and envision a previously inconceivable three-dimensional universe. In



this compelling story of an underrecognized female scientist, Leavitt's achievement, long subsumed under the headlining work of Edwin Hubble, receives its due spotlight.

Anna Von Mertens received her MFA from the California College of the Arts and her BA from Brown University.

# Smithsonian Announces Its 2021 Artist Research Fellows

July 27, 2021 News Release



The Smithsonian has awarded fellowships to 14 accomplished visual artists from an international pool of candidates as part of the 2021 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship Program. Over the course of a one- to two-month residency, each fellow will conduct research at Smithsonian museums and research centers to inform the development of innovative, cross-disciplinary work.

Artists are nominated by art curators, scholars and former fellows, and then selected by a panel of art experts. Over 100 artists from around the world have received Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship Awards since the program began in 2007.

The 2021 fellows and their projects will be:

- **Jananne Al-Ani (Based in the U.K.): *Time Travelers***

During her fellowship at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Al-Ani will examine Islamic metalwork to inform an upcoming video installation. Her research will connect the history of military and political upheaval in the Middle East with the movement of peoples and material culture.

- **Diana Al-Hadid (Based in the U.S.)**

Al-Hadid will study the artists, materials and cultural contexts of the Islamic Golden Age. Inspired by the miniaturist techniques found in Islamic illuminated manuscripts, Al-Hadid's research at the Freer Gallery of Art will inform the creation of large-scale sculptural works.

- **Shiraz Bayjoo (Based in the U.K. and Mauritius): *The Coral Continent: Language and Fluidity on the Swahili Coast***

Bayjoo's research at the National Museum of African Art and the Freer Gallery of Art will focus on the Swahili Coast and Zanzibar as sites for cultural exchange. By examining the region's trade between the 16th and 20th centuries, Bayjoo will reposition the area as a powerful intersection of culture, ideas and people.

- **Milagros de la Torre (Based in the U.S.): *Patterns and Diagrams: The Face as an Experiment***

De la Torre will study the history of visualizing, manipulating and programming the human face at the National Portrait Gallery. Through her research, de la Torre will explore the relationship between depictions of the face and the sociopolitical contexts producing them.

- **Theo Eshetu (Based in Germany): *Fragile Languages***

Influenced by themes of fragility and mortality, Eshetu will study the origin of cultures at the National Museum of African Art. Eshetu's work will examine language loss and the resulting decay of cultural and ideological diversity.

- **Mariam Ghani (Based in the U.S.): *Dis-Ease***

In a cross-disciplinary approach, Ghani will investigate the "war on disease" at the Natural Museum of Natural History. Ghani's research will support a full-length documentary exploring the history, philosophy and culture surrounding infectious diseases.

- **Autumn Knight (Based in the U.S.): *Humor and Radical Resistance***

Knight, an interdisciplinary artist, will study humor as a critical aspect of Black American social and personal development at the National Portrait Gallery. Her investigation of resistance through satire and coded language will inform her work at the intersection of Blackness, politics and humor.

- **Natalia Lassalle-Morillo (Based in Puerto Rico and the U.S.): *Cómo desde la ausencia, imaginamos la distancia (How from absence, we imagine distance)***

Lassalle-Morillo will study ceremonial objects of Haitian Voudoun and Arawak Taíno origin at the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of Natural History. By examining ceremonial objects specific to the Caribbean, Lassalle-Morillo will deepen an understanding of Puerto Rican history and spiritual cosmology.

- **Reynier Leyva Novo (Based in Cuba): *Homeland, Death and Sugar. The slave trade from the Caribbean to the United States of America***

Building on a project developed for the 2019 XIII Havana Biennial, Leyva Novo will expand his study of historic materials of the U.S. slave trade at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

- **Matthew Mazzotta (Based in the U.S.): *If people can sit together, they can dream together: Examining metamorphosing furniture at the Cooper Hewitt***

As an artist concerned with urbanism and the built environment, Mazzotta will research the chair as a space for community gathering. Mazzotta's research with Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum will inform public artworks that blur the line between seating and architecture.

- **Jefferson Pinder (Based in the U.S.): *Black Nostalgia, Black Joy***

Pinder will delve into archival films and materials documenting the everyday lives of Black Americans at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Pinder's research will support a video artwork celebrating Black joy.

- **Rodrigo Valenzuela (Based in the U.S.): *The Unwaged***

Valenzuela will investigate the history of labor at the National Museum of American History. Inspired by the museum's photographic archives, Valenzuela will ultimately create an experimental series reflecting the stress generated by unpaid labor and the decline of collective bargaining rights.

- **Sara VanDerBeek (Based in the U.S.): *Future Variations***

Drawing from resources at the Archives of American Art, VanDerBeek will explore historical materials related to the seminal 1965 performance piece, "Variations V." Looking ahead to a restaging of the original work, VanDerBeek will examine the role of documentation and interpretation when modifying an ephemeral work from the past.

- **Anna Von Mertens (Based in the U.S.): *Structuring the Light: The Story of Dark Matter***

Von Mertens will study how dark matter structures the cosmos with the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory. As a conceptual textile artist, Von Mertens's work will explore the patterns formed between art and science.

# Behind the Radcliffe Wave, Creative Inspiration

 [radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/in-news/behind-radcliffe-wave-creative-inspiration](https://radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/in-news/behind-radcliffe-wave-creative-inspiration)

January 7,  
2020

Joao Alves speaking at Radcliffe about the rise of the Milky Way. Photo by Kevin Grady/Radcliffe Institute

One and a half million kilometers from Earth, the Gaia space observatory is carefully plotting the position, brightness, distance, and motion of a billion stars, giving us a new way of seeing and knowing our galaxy. Far from the glare and pull of our planet, its gaze is helping scientists redraw the map of the Milky Way and revealing giants hidden in plain sight.



In a practical sense, the cornucopia of data flowing from Gaia is what motivated João Alves, a professor at the University of Vienna, to apply for a fellowship at Radcliffe, where he could collaborate more easily with fellow astronomers at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. But a year at the Institute is about finding inspiration outside your comfort zone. At Radcliffe, it was the visual arts that ignited Alves's imagination and guided him to a new astronomical discovery.

**"I came to Radcliffe to make a map of the galaxy, but I found many things I didn't know I was looking for,"** said Alves, who was the 2018–2019 Edward, Frances, and Shirley B. Daniels Fellow. "When I first arrived, I attended an exhibition of Anna Von Mertens's work. She was talking about how the women 'computers' [at Harvard] had opened up the universe by measuring distances in the galaxy—a story astronomers know well. But she was telling this story with a quilt, which had these trails of stars. It brought me right back to when I was six, when I first saw those long-exposure images of stars going over the horizon and leaving trails.

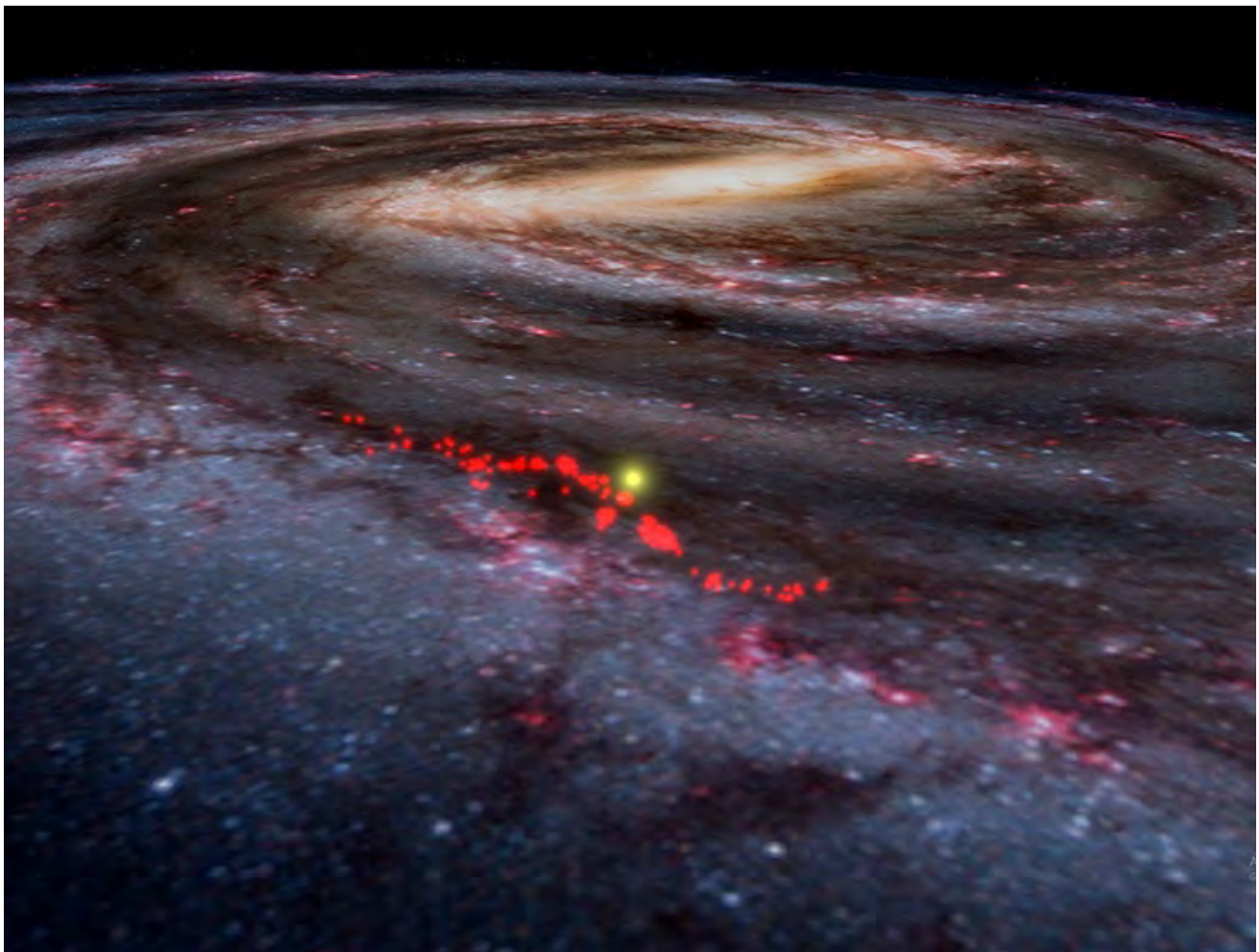
"I got to meet the artist, and we started talking more and more, looking together at the scientific astronomical images I was working with. What blew my mind was how differently she looked at the image. She would talk about how the universe opens up, and ask all these questions no one else would ask. I realized that if I started thinking like a visual artist, I could see much more in my own work. That was a very important moment."



As Alves and his colleagues worked on drafting a new map of the stars, they were drawn to a particular set of dust clouds—star-forming regions—in the Milky Way. The scientists explored whether these clouds might be connected, perhaps in a ramp shape between Orion and the Milky Way plane. But as he thought about it, Alves kept returning to the stitching Von Mertens used in her work. Looking at the galaxy through the eyes of an artist, he wondered whether the ramp might be something more: an arc, a wave, or even a series of waves and ripples, just like a stitch on the Milky Way plane.

Harvard GSAS student Catherine Zucker was at the heart of the collaboration, working with Alyssa Goodman, an astronomer and a faculty codirector of Radcliffe's science program, to expand statistical tools so that they could crunch the immense data set from Gaia.

The team's discovery of the "Radcliffe Wave," with Alves as lead author, was published in *Nature* on Tuesday. The findings provide a new 3-D map of our galactic neighborhood, giving scientists a revised view of the Milky Way and opening the door to other major discoveries.

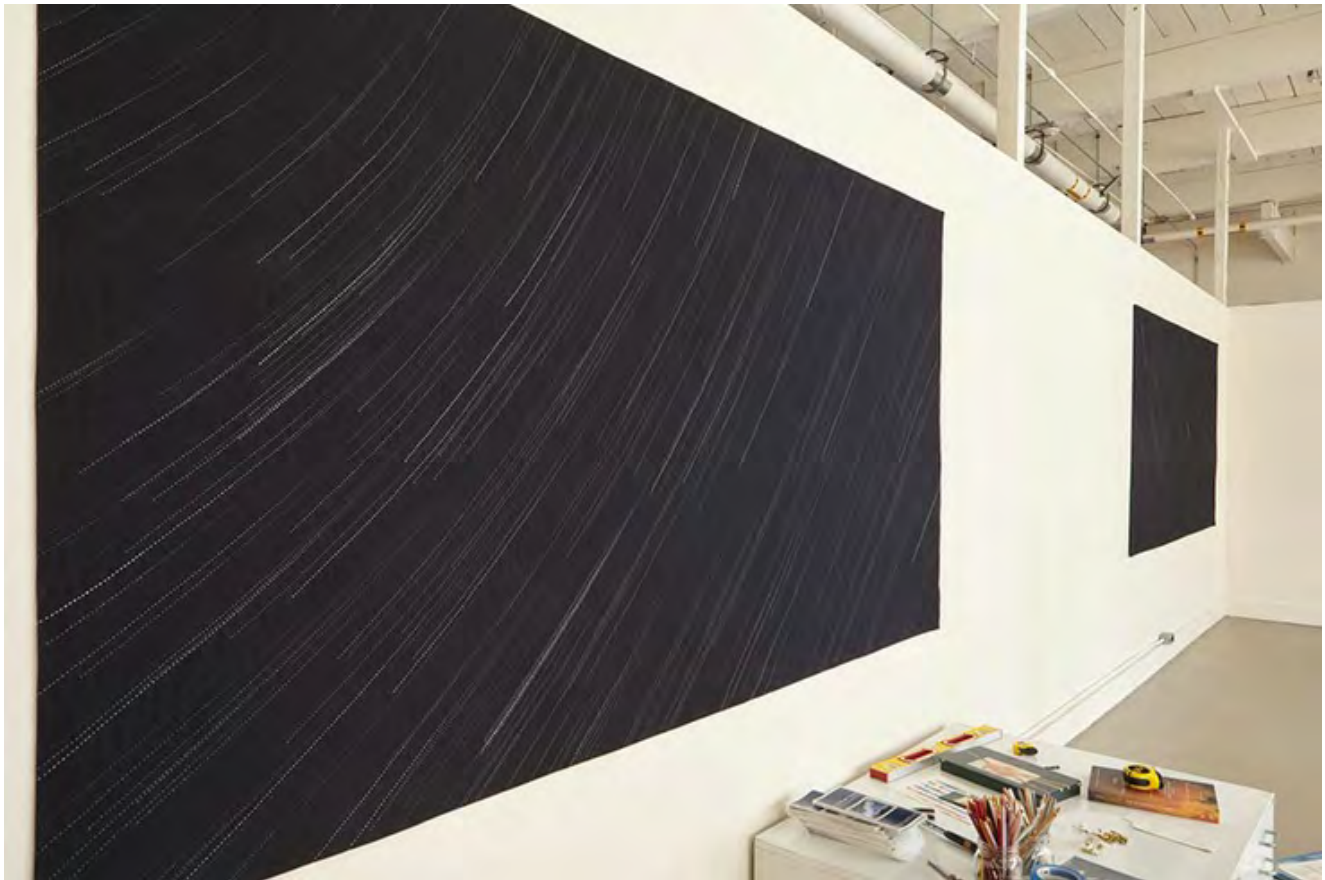


Radcliffe Wave data superimposed on artist's rendering of Milky Way galaxy, taken from the Worldwide Telescope. Image courtesy of Alyssa Goodman, Harvard University

“Catherine made this heroic effort to run a compute-intensive calculation and *bang*, it was there,” said Alves. “An arc, right where we expected it to be. At a certain point, we were finding clouds on the other side of the galactic plane that could match the giant galactic stitch idea—but where was the link? The plane can be confusing, as too many clouds align along the same line-of-sight. But with the idea of a galactic stitch, we kept searching and found the linking clouds. The arc became a wave, and our view of the sun’s galactic neighborhood changed. We are all so surprised—we’ve been sitting next to a giant for millions of years, and never realized it.”

The research intersected perfectly with Von Mertens’s exhibition, which emerged from her study of Harvard’s Astronomical Photographic Plate Collection at the invitation of Jennifer Roberts, the Johnson-Kulukundis Family Faculty Director of the Arts at Radcliffe and Elizabeth Cary Agassiz Professor of the Humanities in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The glass plates are among the oldest recordings of the night sky, some dating back to the mid-1800s.

“Henrietta’s work was about noticing,” said Von Mertens. “Seeing clearly is not as easy as it sounds—we either don’t have the technology or we have a set belief in place that you have to see against. So, the idea that seeing is the primary action of a scientist—that’s just like an artist. Another thing João and I share is that we both use fundamental, elemental tools in our work. For João that tool is parallax, the original way to measure distance to the stars, only now he’s using it at a new volume. For me, it’s the simple element of the hand stitch or the making of a mark. Through volume and repetition, it builds into something.”



Installation: The stars fading from view on the morning of Henrietta Leavitt's birth, July 4, 1868, Lancaster, Massachusetts; The stars returning into view on the evening of Henrietta Leavitt's death, December 12, 1921, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2018, hand-stitched cotton, each 54 x 100 in. Courtesy of Anna Von Mertens and Elizabeth Leach Gallery

"Astronomers should learn from visual artists," said Alves. "We're trained in ways that are optimized for instrumentation and technology, and that can narrow our horizons. By collaborating with artists, whether it's music, textiles, or poetry, we have still another new way of seeing the universe."

For both the artist and the astrophysicist, their time at Radcliffe—a chance to share ideas with people in science, art, and humanities—was a defining experience.

"What I loved about it was the first time we set up a meeting there wasn't an agenda—it was just exploratory," said Von Mertens. "We met several times throughout the year without having a set idea of what we were going to get at. That feeling was particular to Radcliffe."

"You never know where inspiration will come from," said Alves. "If I had stayed in my usual place in Vienna, we would have found little connections here and there, and I would have been content with finding an arc. Instead, I started to see things I wouldn't have looked for, and we discovered the Radcliffe Wave."



# ON VIEW AT RADCLIFFE

Exhibitions at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study | Harvard University

## MEASURE

AN EXHIBITION BY ANNA VON MERTENS

**NOVEMBER 9, 2018–JANUARY 19, 2019**

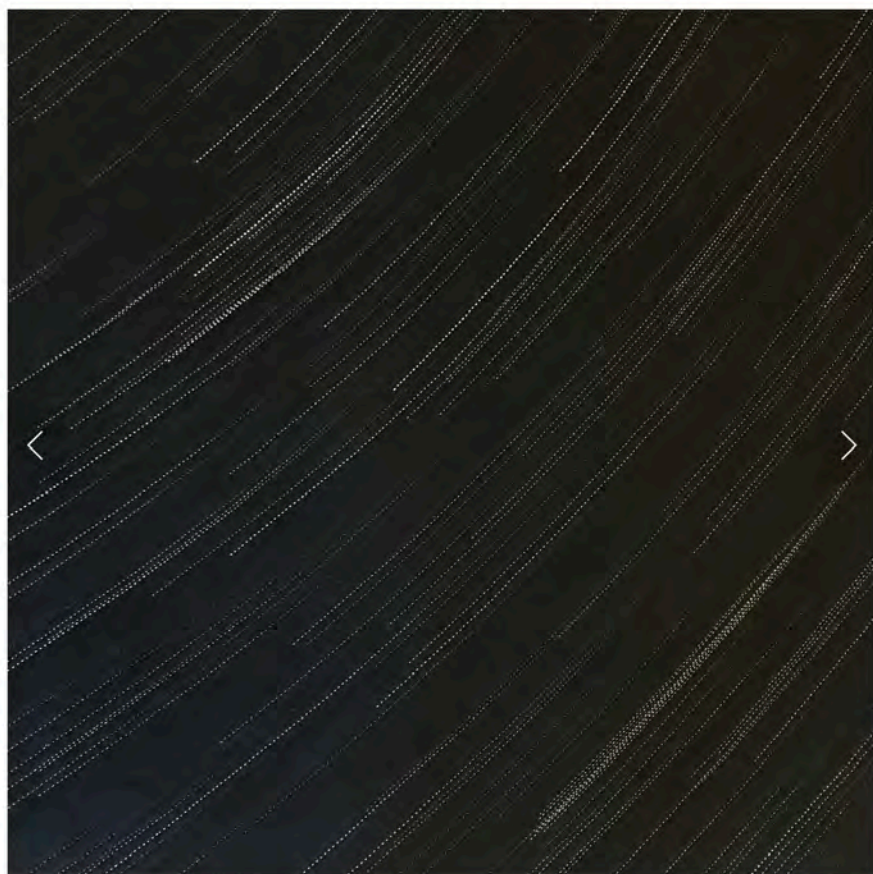
Johnson-Kulukundis Family Gallery

Hours: Noon–5 PM, Monday–Saturday

Byerly Hall, 8 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

Opening discussion: November 8, 2018, at 5 PM in the Knafel Center

Reception to follow, Johnson-Kulukundis Family Gallery



Anna Von Mertens uses the structures of quilting and drawing to examine the frontiers of human understanding. In this exhibition commissioned for the Radcliffe Institute, Von Mertens explores the life and work of Henrietta Leavitt, one of the women “computers” hired a century ago to study glass-plate astronomical photographs at the Harvard College Observatory. Leavitt searched for patterns among these glassy stars, and her findings provided a unit of measurement for galactic distances and led to our current understanding of the shape of the cosmos. Von Mertens’s meticulous stitches and intricate graphite marks reimagine Leavitt’s patient work, exploring the potency of single, measured actions as units of understanding.

Anna Von Mertens received her MFA from the California College of the Arts and her BA from Brown University. Her work has been exhibited widely throughout the United States, including at Ballroom Marfa, the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, the deCordova Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the RISD Museum, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She is the recipient of a 2010 United States Artist fellowship in the visual arts and a 2007 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award.

*Exhibition organized by Jennifer L. Roberts, Johnson-Kulukundis Family Faculty Director of the Arts, Radcliffe Institute, and Elizabeth Cary Agassiz Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University*

GALLERIES | CATE MCQUAID

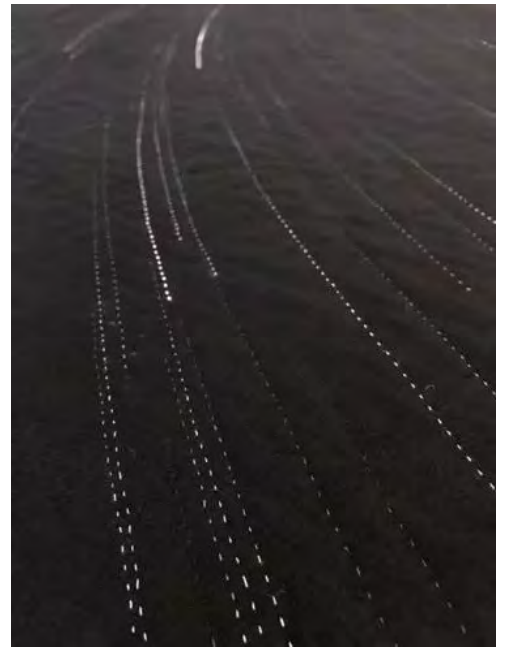
# Cosmic images, captured in quilts at Harvard exhibit ‘Measure’

By Cate McQuaid

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 09, 2019

CAMBRIDGE — Anna Von Mertens stitches patterns of stars and galaxies into quilts, charting their movement with astronomical software. Invited to exhibit at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, she went to the Harvard College Observatory to study the “computers” — women who, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, [scrutinized more than 500,000 glass-plate astronomical photographs](#).

Among them was [Henrietta Swan Leavitt](#), whose life and work Von Mertens celebrates in her remarkable show, “Measure.” Poring over astral images and leaving inky notations on the glass plates, Leavitt devised the first method for measuring distances to far-away stars and galaxies, paving the way for astronomers to better comprehend the universe.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND  
ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

**Detail of a quilt by Anna Von Mertens depicting stars fading from view on the morning of Henrietta Leavitt's birth.**

ADVERTISING





July 9, 2018



Today we'd like to introduce you to Anna Von Mertens.

**Anna, please kick things off for us by telling us about yourself and your journey so far.**

I've wanted to be an artist since the first grade. I studied visual arts in college, but it was in my final year when it all clicked into place. I made a traditional patchwork quilt on a whim (it was two-dollar dress day at the Salvation Army which provided the fabric for my project) and the experience of using those materials, thinking about how the context and history of quilt making could shape and form my work...I was hooked. The intimacy of the medium, and the ability for an object to carry a story forward felt like the best way to support my conceptual practice.

Whether taking the form of drawing or sewing, as I invest time in the work, building the work line by line, stitch by stitch, meaning builds from there.

**Can you give our readers some background on your art?**

I seek out systems of knowledge that provide an avenue to help us understand the world around us. I have mapped the stars over violent moments in American history and stitched the tree ring growth patterns of ancient trees during the fall of the Roman empire. In recent work I have looked at emojis, a system of meaning we are actively shaping

collectively and individually. By carefully hand-drawing a text chain between two people a different kind of meaning surfaces underneath the slickness of our screens.

For my current project at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute I am celebrating the group of all women "computers" at the turn of the 19th century who analyzed glass plate photographs of the night sky and made foundational astronomical discoveries.

I enjoy navigating these territories, both contemporary and historical, to see what connections can be made, how individual voices surface and how we build meaning as a whole.

**What would you recommend to an artist new to the city, or to art, in terms of meeting and connecting with other artists and creatives?**

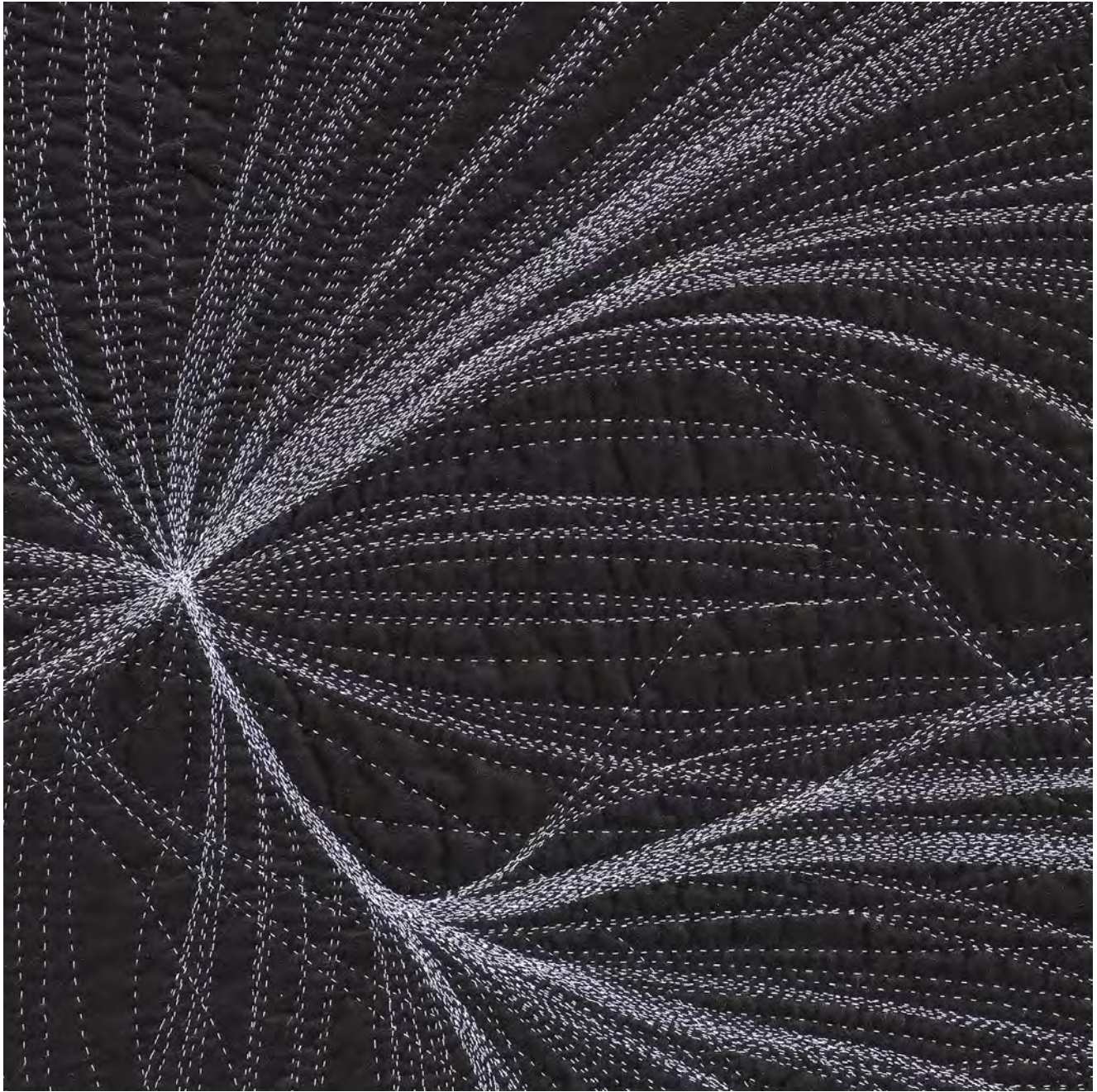
I love being alone in my studio! My studio in Harrisville in the central historic mill building (a connection of textiles over the centuries!) is a joy to be in. That said, conversations between artists are important. Seeing as much work as you can (Boston has so many great institutions for outstanding exhibitions) or a road trip to Mass MoCA or NYC is a great way to get inspired and engage with ideas. I recommend just connecting with what you love, whatever piques your interest. Conversations can happen just telling friends and fellow makers what you are up to, but conversations can happen reaching out to artists wherever they might live. Ideas and passions will always bring us together.

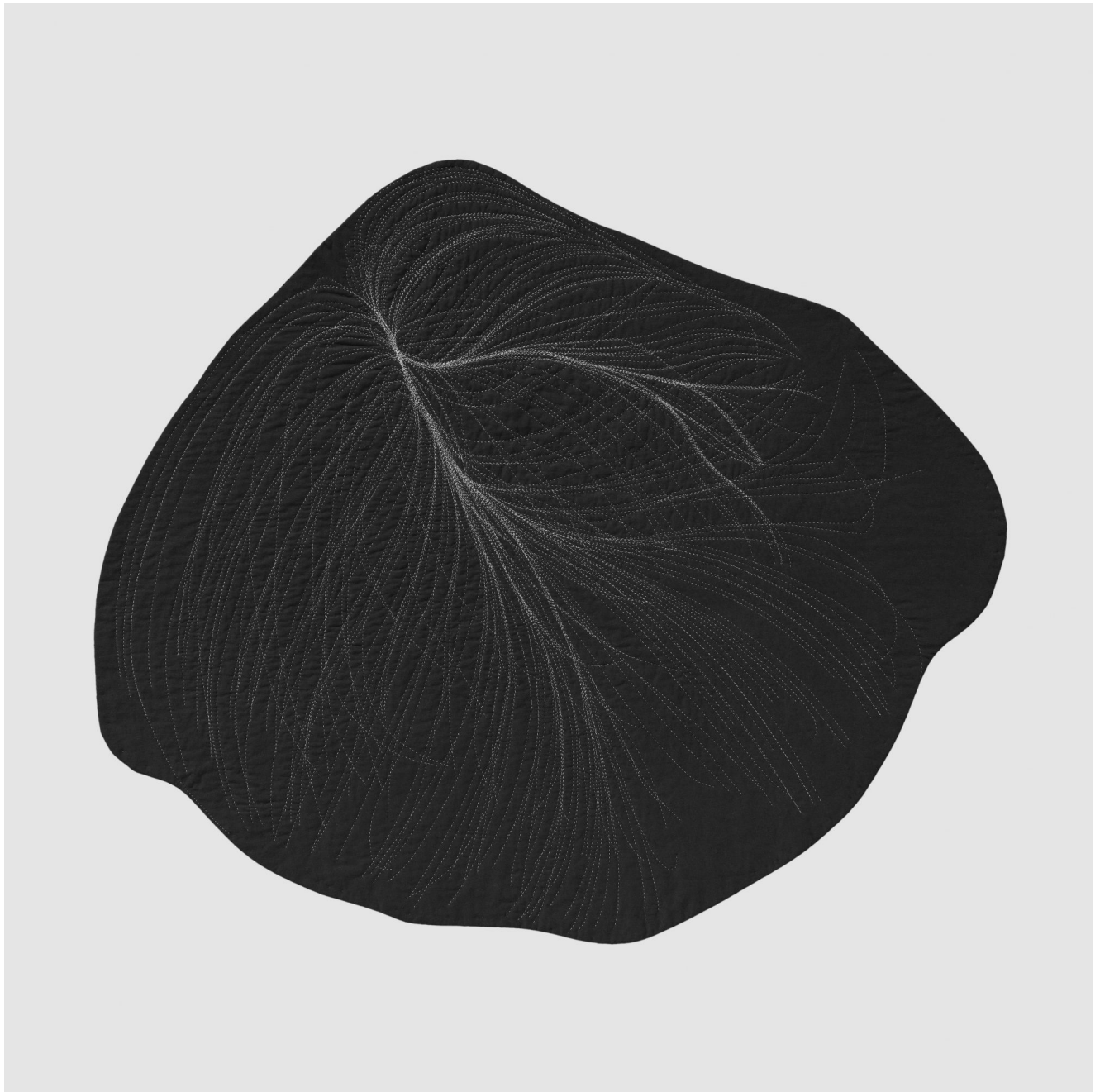
**What's the best way for someone to check out your work and provide support?**

My work will be part of exhibitions at Wayne State University and San Juan Island National Historic Park, but locally in New England my exhibition at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute will open November 8th and run November 9th, 2018 through January 19, 2019

**Website:** [www.annavonmertens.com](http://www.annavonmertens.com)



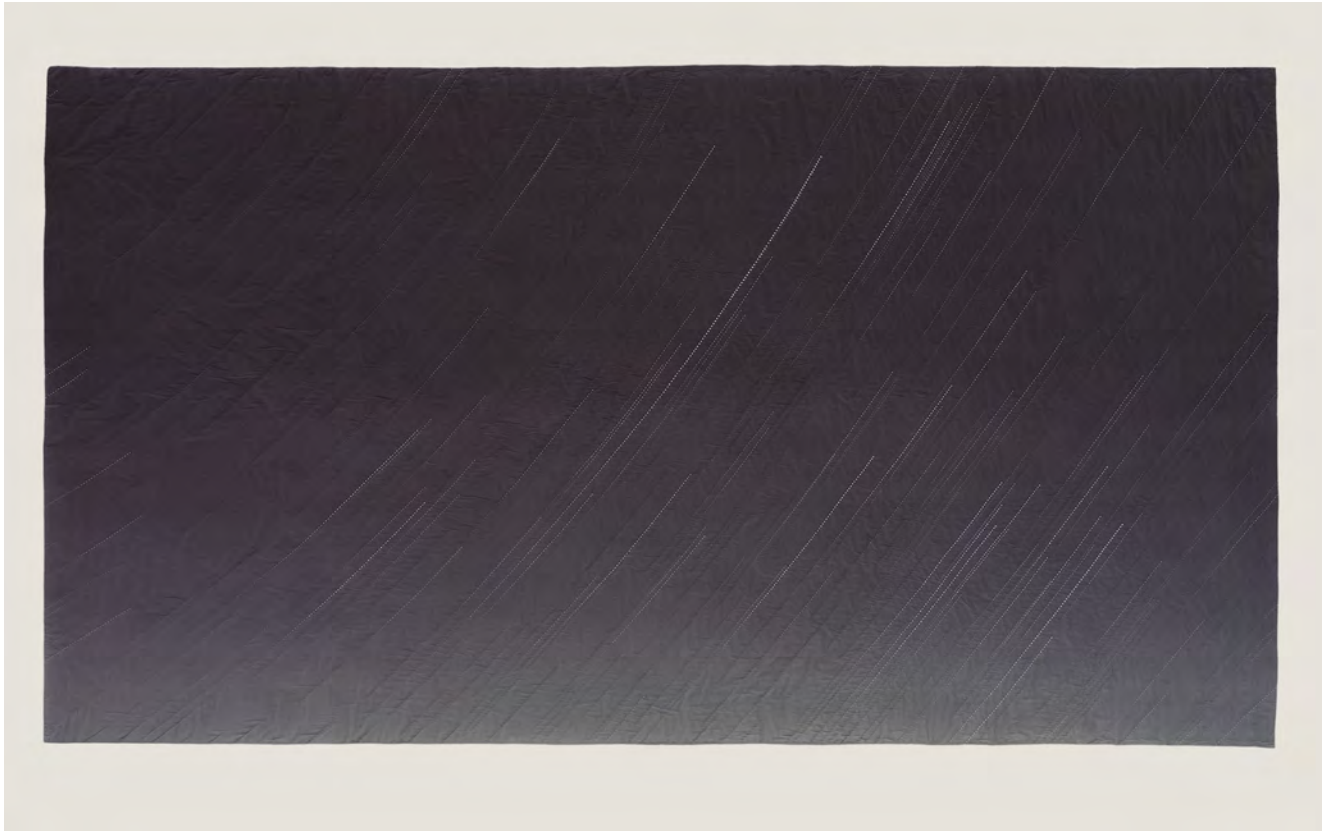












**Image Credit:**

Annie Card (photo of me with emoji drawings and two installation shots of emoji drawings) Don Tuttle (any individual stitched works and details) Dan Kvitka (installation shot of four black stitched works).

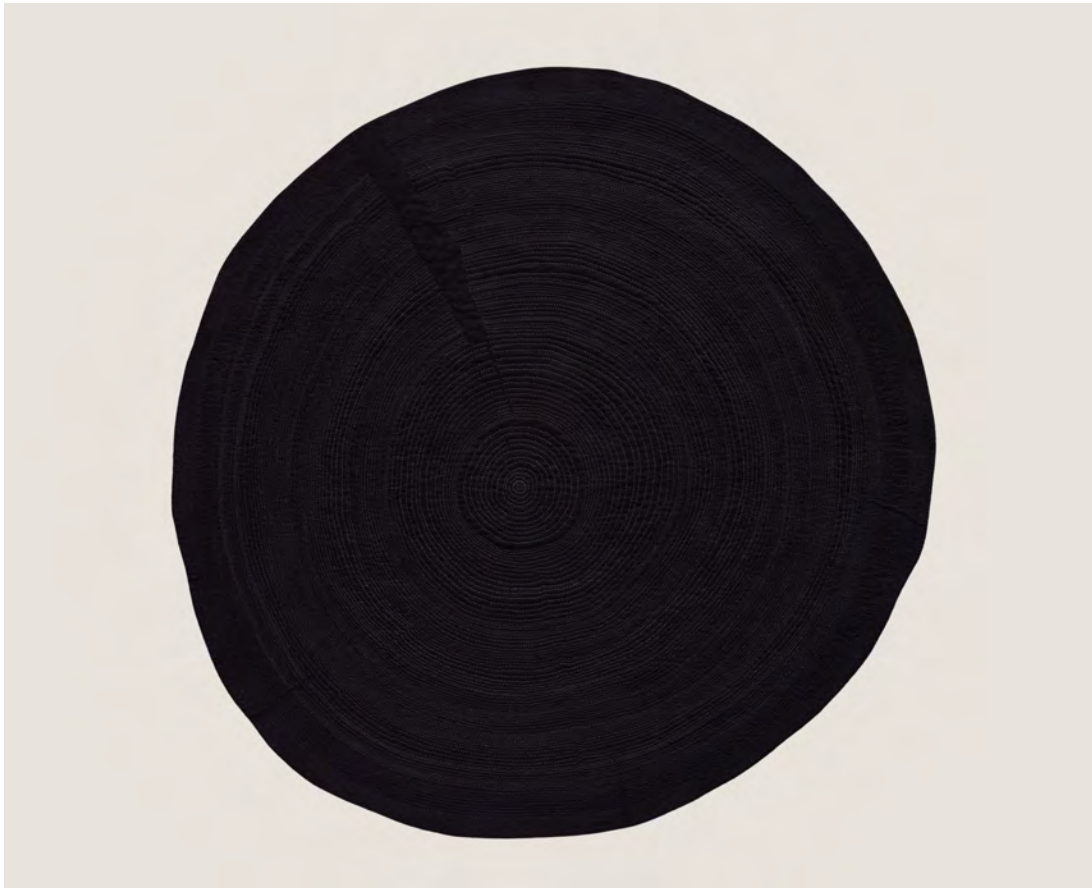
Getting in touch: BostonVoyager is built on recommendations from the community; it's how we uncover hidden gems, so if you know someone who deserves recognition please let us know here.



## The Art of Sewing Science Into Beautiful Quilts

By Nick Stockton

09.10.14



**Anna Von Mertens**, *Anasazi 12th century migration*, 2013, hand-stitched cotton, 55" diameter

Thirteen years ago, when American Airlines Flight 11 collided with the North Tower of the World Trade Center, no one could see the stars. But the stars were there, and the pattern above is what they would have looked like rotating behind the daylight, smoke, and fire. Anna Von Mertens stitched this piece shortly after the attacks, as a way to come to grips with what had happened.

“I had this background in mapping, and the most existential form of mapping is looking up at the stars and knowing where we fit in the giant puzzle of things,” she said. A friend showed her some software that modeled the stars from any time and place on earth, and she set about memorializing 9/11.

Von Mertens [is an artist](#) who explores humanity's highs and lows. And while needle, thread and fabric are her medium, she typically finds some scientific phenomena that helps her translate how she feels about an event or subject. The September 11th piece was part of a series of time-lapsed stars over a series of American tragedies. She's also knitted tree rings to examine drought and empires, a nuclear blast to represent the media's lack of subtlety in politics, and a black hole to describe her relationship to the East Coast, among other works.

Von Mertens started her art career in more traditional mediums like painting and illustration, making quilts in her free time. Eventually, she saw quilting as a better way to represent her ideas. She approaches each piece methodically, beginning with intense research into her topic. She says she doesn't start out seeking a scientific angle, but usually finds science offers a compelling tableau.

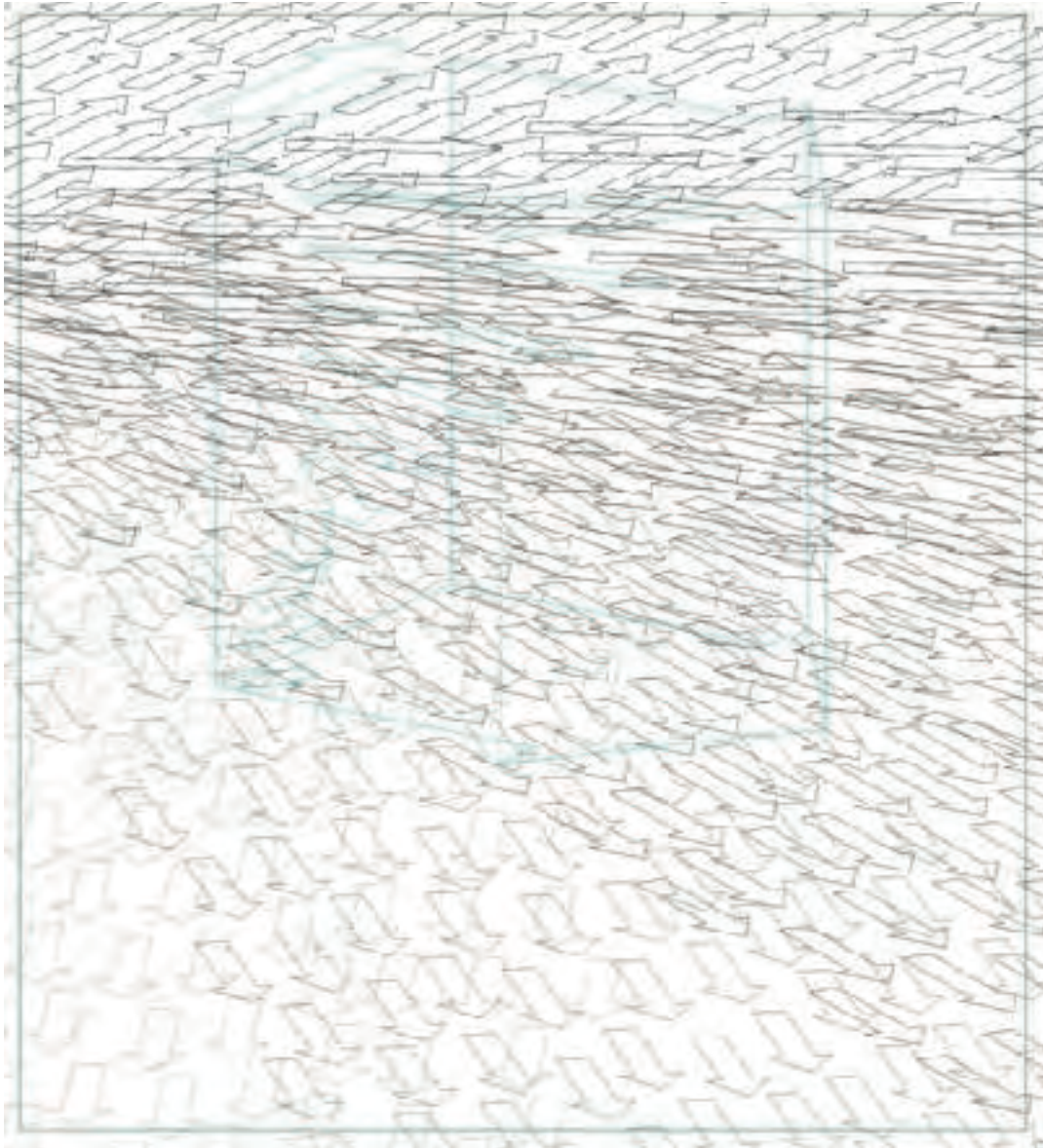
She designs her first patterns on the computer, sometimes drafting them from scratch. Once that's complete, she uses a projector to draw the pattern onto the fabric. "I transfer each line by hand, with chalk. I chalk out my stitch pattern onto the piece. If the piece happens to include color, I hand dye it too," she said. During the long weeks she spends stitching, she tries to immerse herself in the topic of her work. For example, while she was stitching the movement of stars during the Tet Offensive, she watched a 17-hour documentary on the Vietnam War. She says that she typically works on only one piece at a time.

Recently, the scientific aspect of her work has gotten notice within the physics community, and she was asked to join a panel on artistic interpretations of science as part of the COSMO 2014 physics conference at the University of Chicago. She says she was nervous to present her work in front of physicists, because she felt pressure to get the information correct. She says the physicists were interested and receptive to her work, and after the meeting, she laughed at her nervousness. "Artists and scientists are not that different," she said. "We're in our own little worlds grinding away at ideas."



Gray Area/Ocean Currents. All of Von Mertens quilts are hand-stitched and hand-dyed. The pattern on this piece depicts the corkscrew feature of oceanic currents called the Ekman Spiral.



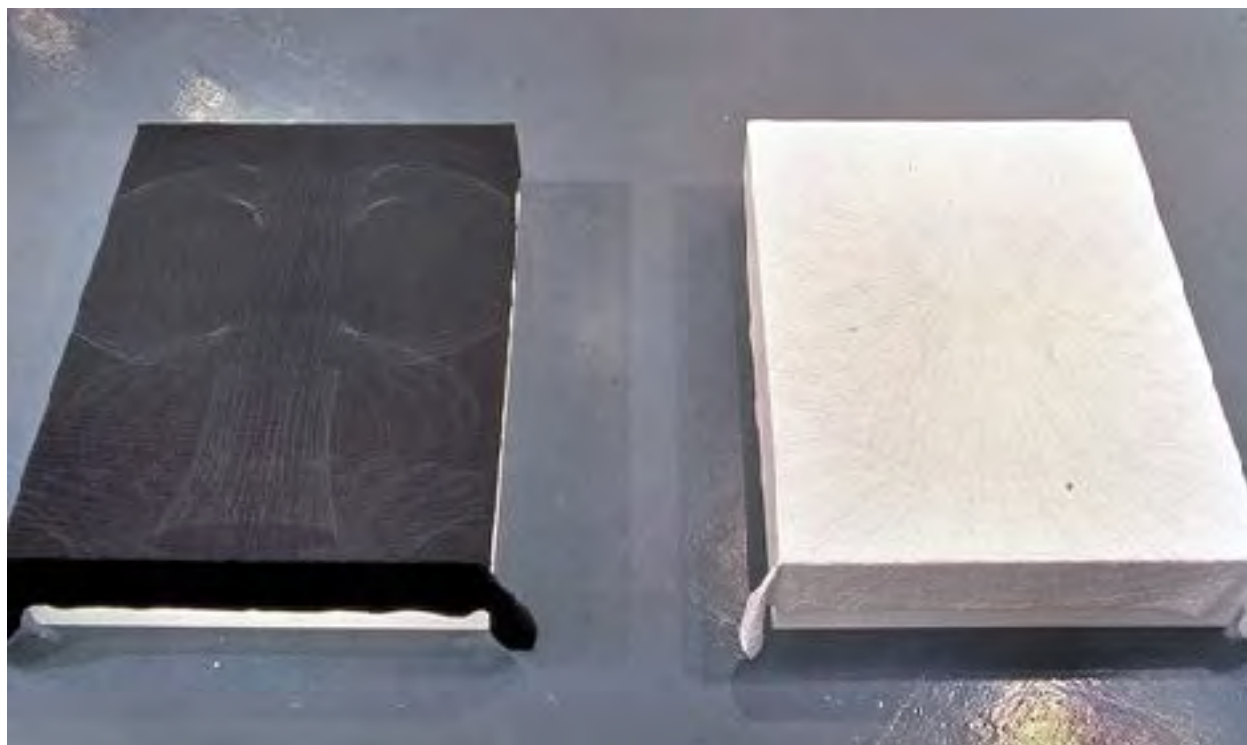


Von Mertens develops her patterns using computer software, traces them onto the fabric using chalk, then spends weeks to months hand-stitching them. Here is the computer detail for the Ekman Spiral stitch.

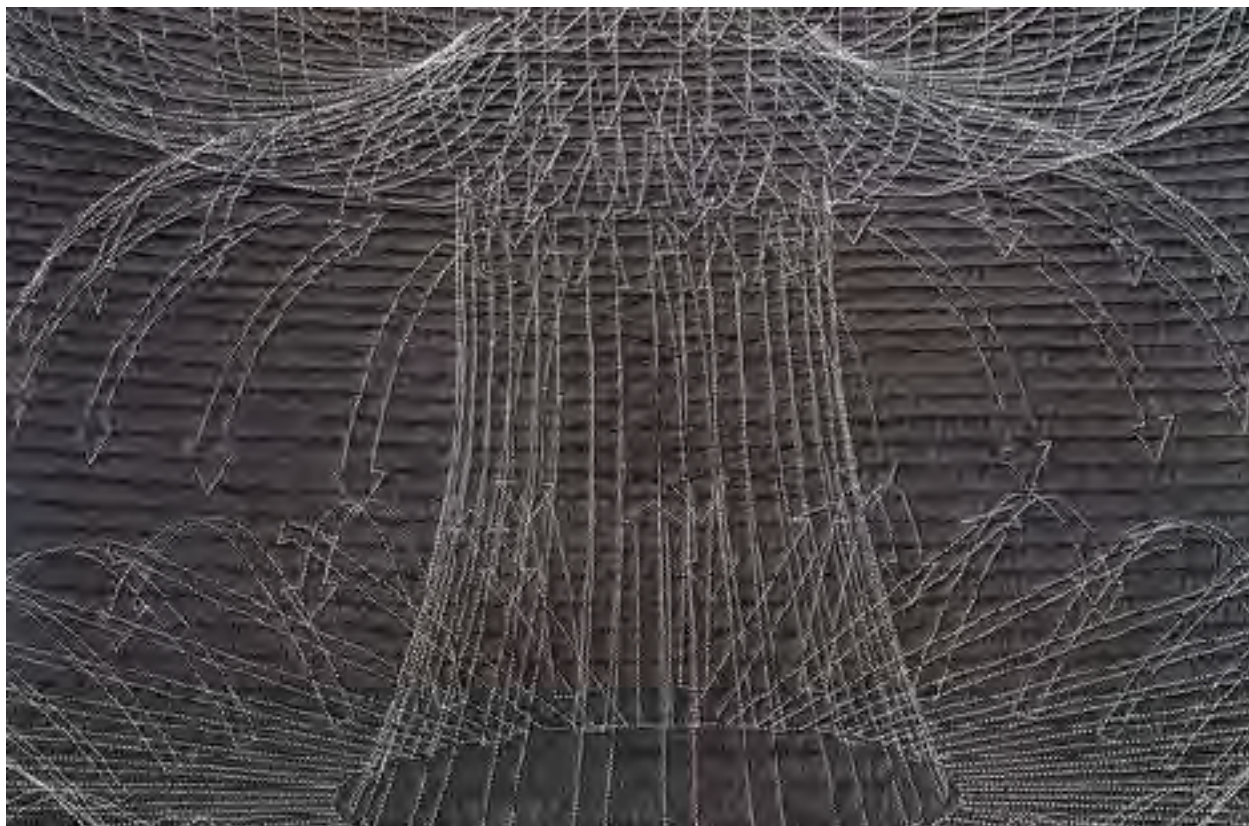




Aurora. Von Merten's most recent work is all-dyed fabric representing the Aurora borealis. "I am interested in the structure of this phenomenon, how different colors manifest at different altitudes and with different elements," she said.



Black and White. The stitching on these quilts show different views of a nuclear bomb blast. The black is a side view, while the white is from the top.



Black and White (Black). A detail of the energy pattern from a nuclear explosion.

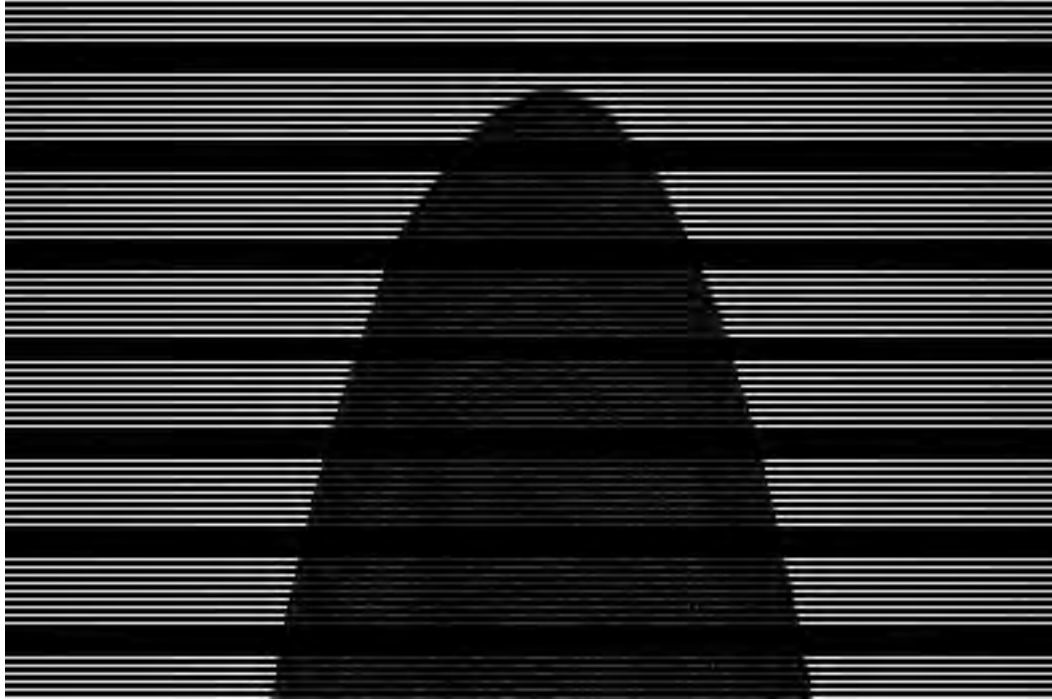


Von Mertens sometimes uses scientific phenomena to explore her own relationships to places or events. In *West*, she stitched the Big Bang over sunset colors to represent California's vivid energy. The pattern on *East*, the quilt at the top, uses a black hole to represent introversion.



Palette (Arkanoid). Von Mertens translated the color palette and pixellation from the 80s video game Arkanoid into a traditional patchwork pattern. Look closely, and the needlework shows circuitry.





Anasazi 12th century migration. After reading a study describing how drought cycles—recorded in tree rings—correlate to human historic events, Von Mertens embarked on a series exploring how the lives of various human empires correlated with the lives of trees that lived in the same places and times.



Anasazi 12th century migration, detail. Von Mertens' stitching perfectly matches the trees ring pattern, while the thread color—from white to gray to black—signifies the health of the human civilization. "The Anasazi had a rolling cycle of droughts, and it was years before their settlements were truly abandoned," she said.



#### 4.2.13 Beneath a Thread of Stars: A Conversation with Anna Von Mertens by Beth Maycumber and Julie Dickover

Anna Von Mertens creates intricately hand-dyed, hand-stitched fabric works that reveal seemingly allusive moments of existence and time. She explores themes such as the aura surrounding figures in famous paintings, the circulation patterns of currents between magnetic poles, and the actual stars as seen above violent moments in American history. Von Mertens has recently exhibited at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery, Berkeley Art Museum, and Ballroom Marfa, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has just acquired a piece of her work, which now hangs in the Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Arts. She is currently exhibiting in galleries in Florida and Maryland, and will show in Boston and the Netherlands later this year. We caught up with Von Mertens on February 28 in Saint Augustine, Florida, the day before the opening of her solo exhibit "What Could Be".



Portrait series, Installation image, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, March 2013

Beth Maycumber: Could you start by describing your process for creating the aura portraits?

Anna Von Mertens: Typically, I start a series by creating a system, fleshed out with research, and then build the work visually from there. This series came at me sideways: while working on a previous series, observing how the dye was running together, I thought, these really remind me of aura photographs, the way the colors come and go, and the boundaries between them. I got stuck on the idea of auras—I couldn't shake it. I wanted to shake it. I was like, "Auras? Come on!" But they stuck with me.

The premise is to create auras of famous paintings. I would select a famous painting, the sort referred to in Art History 101, paintings that live larger than the actual object itself. I chose paintings with an intense relationship between painter and sitter, as well as portraits of strong personalities, and used that context to

build my story of the painting's aura.

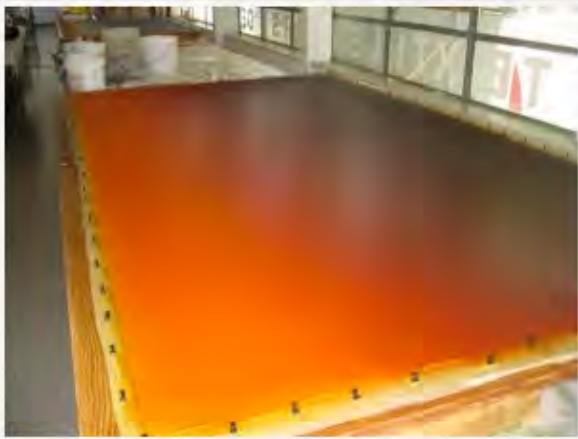
When you get your aura photographed, you place your hands on an electromagnetic sensor and the computer translates those electrical frequencies into the color spectrum. A Polaroid photo of you is then placed over it, so it's actually two superimposed layers.

Julie Dickover: The image that is translated to the computer then is the electromagnetic current?

AVM: Right, that's your aura reading, and they superimpose a Polaroid on top to make it seem like it's around you, but they are actually separate. So with my series, the two layers of dyeing and stitching make sense. You have the aura itself, and then I'm superimposing art history on top of that by using the original image. It mirrors the process of getting your aura photographed.

There is a "science" to aura interpretation. Each color has significant meanings, and the location of the various colors—whether manifesting above your head, or coming in on your left side, or exhibiting outward on your right—is important. So I would reverse engineer these auras by creating narratives about who was Philip IV or Mona Lisa, and try to represent that with these rules of color.

For the dyeing process, I stretched white cotton onto a frame and painted the dye on with a brush, building the color slowly because the dye is like a loose watercolor, but it immediately starts chemically bonding with the fabric. The colors bleed into one another, and while you want those edges to leak, you also want to be in control of them. You're right on the edge, falling in and out of control with the color.



"Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" (Sunset, January 24, 1848, Sutter's Mill, Coloma, California) during the dyeing process, courtesy of the artist.

Each piece has seven to ten layers of dye, and I would build up the layers until it had the intensity I wanted. I was working much more intuitively than normal, just responding to the color in front of me. But because I had this system of analyzing auras to follow, I tricked myself into working intuitively.

JD: Did you have failures? Pieces that just didn't work?

AVM: I did—I had almost forgotten this. I started with the Mona Lisa—a logical starting point: the most famous painting. It took maybe four attempts, four failures. I didn't know if technically I could pull off the effect I wanted to achieve. It's challenging to keep the dye behaving the way you want while allowing it to do its own thing, but that was the fun part. So after those four passes, I almost gave up. Once I learned that you can never go backwards with the dye, as long as I built the color up slowly enough, I felt like, okay, this is going to work.

BM: So you dye first, and then begin stitching?

AVM: Yes, you have to do the dyeing first because the fabric needs to be tight to get those even transitions. It's funny to even say that because over the years, I've felt in competition with painting, and have tried to embrace textiles on its own terms. Here I'm taking painting head on, stretching out this canvas with a brush in hand—and the subject matter is obviously all about painting. It was interesting to inhabit the world I had been avoiding.

Back to your question, the dyeing comes first, and once I'm happy with the color, I project the original painting onto the fabric and chalk out the figure's silhouette. My auras are the same proportions as the original painting, so the two fit to scale. Here you can kind of see Philip IV's body, his front foot pointed out, and he's got this high, strange collar on, that gives him this very unique silhouette. After chalking the silhouette onto the fabric, I then mark the figure's chakra points, and from that create my own aura-like emanation. The original painting is recognizable while a suggestion of something else.



Mona Lisa, hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 2009, courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR





JD: How do you dye the stitching?

AVM: I wanted the stitching to be an invisible layer, so I matched the color of the thread to the background aura. There's enough range that I'm able to buy commercially available dyed thread. I'm glad you think the thread is hand-dyed because I wanted that to appear seamless. Sometimes I would have to change thread color every couple of stitches to pull it off.

To clarify, I am not a craft martyr; I don't take the stance that it has to be done by hand. If you can only achieve an effect by hand, it needs to be done that way. The dyeing can obviously only be done by hand, and the quality of texture that you get from hand quilting is only achievable through the hand. Because of the two interlocking threads, machine quilting would just flatten it, versus the dotted line of the hand stitching. I hand stitch simply because it is the only means to reach the end that I want. If there is commercially dyed thread that is the color I want, I have no problem going out and buying that.



JD: Your work makes me think about how a quilt is a domesticated, functional craft object, and yet, you're treating it as an art object, a painting. There has been a lot of work over the past ten or so years that has brought craft to the forefront of contemporary art making. Have you always made work like this? Did you use to be a painter and then transitioned to textile work? How do you negotiate the line between craft and fine art?

AVM: I studied fine art; since first grade I knew I wanted to be an artist. Originally, I followed a more traditional path of drawing and printmaking. I made my first patchwork quilt on a whim senior year in college, and fell in love with the materials and the process. It took a while, but slowly the two roads of craft and fine arts converged. I wanted to use the subtext, the meaning inherent in the quilt, and have that be my foundation for building my ideas. The two worlds came together.



Frida Kahlo's aura, with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 2009, collection of Ann Hatch, San Francisco, CA

I have thought these dyed auras are so beautiful on their own, could I just stretch them like canvases? Ultimately, there is some transformation that happens when they become objects; they have more of a presence in the form of the quilt. I see hand quilting as my own way of "framing." There's also an accessibility that's different if they didn't have that layer of hand stitching to them. Even though these pieces are very far removed from the bed and the original context of the quilt, they still carry those meanings that then transform the work.

BM: It's interesting that you say that, because I know with at least some of your earlier work, you displayed pieces on flat platforms that resembled beds. I am curious about what made you change to showing the works on the wall.

AVM: In grad school, I practically signed my own personal manifesto: my quilts needed to be displayed in the form of the bed. I wanted my work to address the site of the bed as a way to stay true to the origins and meaning of quilts. For a long time, I only displayed them in that format. I loved using that constraint as a conceptual jumping off point. But after a while I didn't want such a strong association with the bed. I kept looking at the wall, wanting to put my works there, but because I had sort of signed this manifesto, I couldn't do it. Finally, I

realized the wall is not the enemy. The wall is about the act of looking, so if I make the works about the act of looking, they belong on the wall.



The Duke and Duchess of Urbino's auras, after Piero della Francesca, hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 2009, courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR

That's how I landed on the idea of stargazing as the ultimate form of looking, this existential looking as a way of locating ourselves in this world. Thinking how the act of looking allows you to be more conscious of where you stand, I launched into the whole star series. The work in this gallery [the Portraits series] obviously belongs on the wall because it specifically refers to the history of painting, but it's not like I've ruled out the sculptural; maybe a new series will come up where it becomes again about the space of the every day, the space where we live and walk, and then I'll return to sculpture.

JD: One thing that is interesting about your work is how you tow the line between craft and formal aspects, but also the conceptual ideas and the research that goes into each series. Do you regard those issues as being equally important, or do you place a greater importance on one or the other? Is it important for the people viewing your work to know everything that goes into it?

AVM: Not that one trumps the other, but I definitely start the work from a conceptual framework and the idea carries me through the process. Beauty and formal decisions are important to me, but I spend so much time and work with the piece itself, if I didn't have an idea or narrative to carry me through, I wouldn't get to the other side; I wouldn't finish the piece. It's not that one is more important than the other, but that I couldn't have one without the other.

Aesthetically, I am a minimalist at heart, but it sometimes can leave you cold. Minimalism's original goal was to be much more accessible—by distilling the essence it would gain that much more. But it turned out it can be quite the opposite. In some ways, I'm trying to bridge to that original goal, distilling my idea down to its purest aesthetic form, while still maintaining its accessibility.





Black Gold (Sunrise, January 10th, 1901, Spindletop, Texas), 2011, detail, from the series Endings, courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR

In terms of what the audience knows and what's revealed to them, I try to have the titles be an entry point, to launch the viewer with that piece of information. I also often have additional materials that accompany the work. I used to think of that as a weakness, that the work itself should contain everything. Then I thought of conceptual work from the '60s and '70s, and realized that stories were attached to these works, almost a mythos was created around them, that ended up augmenting the work. That became part of my process.

A tipping point for me was when I first showed the series "As the Stars Go By" at Jack Hanley Gallery. That work is so historically based—it shows violent moments in American history and the stars above them. I wrote up what occurred during those historical moments, and why they were such pivotal events. At the opening, word got out that this text was available, and the gallery said they had never printed so many handouts for any show before. I realized there is a hunger for that.

JD: Yet, not unlike wall text in huge museums, there is sometimes a backlash against it.

AVM: I think the backlash often for wall text is that it's trying to describe what your experience should be of the piece—

JD: —Interpreting the piece for you.

AVM: Exactly. With my work, I provide information, either facts or circumstances, to accompany the work. Quilts have always had stories told about them; the story gets tied to the object. But quilts and stories are not sexy terms. Conceptual art, however, has its construct, or it has a long-winded title. These, too, are stories. Just because one is craft and the other art, there shouldn't be a hierarchy. So I am trying to reclaim the idea of story.

BM: Can we talk about these pieces ["You and Me" series] here?



You and Me series, Installation image, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, March 2013

AVM: Right after my second child was born—I mean literally two days after—I needed to get back into the studio to restore my sanity. I had typical postpartum spikes of joy, and complete love for this child, along with a real sense of feeling overwhelmed. I had this image, on maybe day five of my son's life, of how current circulates around two magnetic poles, how that was a metaphor for the push and pull of this intense relationship.

Using the same source image for each piece, I treat the poles differently: using the gray scale, I shift the color of the thread to highlight different areas of the piece. I named each piece after a rock song because I liked playing off the idea of romantic love, that melodramatic, intense love—like this piece named for a song by The Smiths ["Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now"]. But hidden underneath the melodrama of young love was for me this relationship between mother and child.

At the outset of this series I also knew, with the realities of having two young kids, I wouldn't be able to get in to the dye lab for a while. I wanted to work on a small, intimate scale, work in black and white, and work really simply, to mirror my year of becoming a mother of two. The irony was, despite this simple concept, this series was insanely technically challenging to pull off. The transitions between thread had to be precise. In certain works, I had fifteen shades of thread within two inches. This simple, beautiful idea at times drove me crazy, but I came out the other side, just like I came out the other side of those newborn sleepless nights.





You and Me (Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now), detail, hand-stitched cotton, 2011, courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR

The intensity of those threads so close together is like the point in a relationship where you lose your sense of self. With the hand quilting, at times I love it, and at times I hate it. I only make one piece at a time, which creates a nice cycle: the research phase, the dyeing process, the hand stitching. Taking it one step at a time makes it continually feel fresh.

The remaining three works in the show ["Jupiter Rising", "Black Gold", and "Gold Rush"] are from two different series, but share the same premise. They use star calculation software to map stars above historic events.



Endings series, Installation image from Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, March 2013. Left: Black Gold (Sunrise, January 10th, 1901, Spindletop, Texas), 2011, hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR. Right: "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" (Sunset, January 24, 1848, Sutter's Mill, Coloma, California), 2008, hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, Private Collection

This diptych ["Black Gold" and "Gold Rush"] is about dawn and dusk, an obvious transition point between one thing ending and another beginning. I wanted to use that moment as a broader metaphor for those times when we close one chapter of our lives and look forward to the future. The piece on the right ["Gold Rush"] shows stars coming into view on the evening gold was first discovered in California, leading to the California Gold Rush. The piece on the left ["Black Gold"] shows the stars on the morning the Spindletop geyser blew in 1901, and the modern oil industry began. They represent the allure and pull of the future, as well as the events these discoveries set in motion. Reading like Hollywood film stills, one is a black-and-white Western, while the other conjures the idea of riding off into the sunset.

BM: Am I correct that you were commissioned to do a piece for Ballroom Marfa? Can you speak about that experience?

Yes, this diptych ["Black Gold" and "Gold Rush"] was that commission. I had never done a commission before, but was up for the challenge. Thinking about topics relevant to Texas, I started looking into the drought Texas is currently

experiencing. That launched me into research about the history of drought cycles and I came across recent international studies linking climate change with the fall of empires. Thinking of the United States and the eventual fall of its oil empire, I was excited to make this connection. But I was dependent on scientists who were generously collaborating with me, so realized I wouldn't make my Marfa deadline, but it was still an amazing process because it launched an entire series I am working on now, linking drought cycles to catastrophic events.

So with oil on my mind, and thinking of Marfa's rich film history, I returned to the stars and made the Spindletop piece. The reference to film stills really clicked when the diptych was shown at Ballroom Marfa— the film *Giant* is shown continuously at a hotel in downtown Marfa and there is a film poster with an orange background that reads just like the "Gold Rush" piece.

It was also a thrill to get to travel to Marfa after hearing about it for so many years. It is one of those places where the legend looms large, and when you get there, it still lives up to all of your expectations.





This piece ["Jupiter Rising"] is from a different series, "Look to the Heavens." I had been depicting the stars, but not with any particular relation to astronomy. So for "Look to the Heavens," I turned to actual astronomical events where what is seen above is clouded by our belief systems below. This piece is the evening Galileo first spotted Jupiter's moons, which validated Copernicus' theory that the earth was not the center of the universe. In his diary, Galileo wrote the exact time and date of his sighting so the software program is a way to time travel and see the stars Galileo saw. Galileo was put on house arrest for the rest of his life because of this discovery, so this series highlights how even observable facts can be controversial.

BM: In your historically based pieces, how do you choose which moments to focus on?

AVM: With the "As the Stars Go By" series, showing the stars above violent moments in American history, I chose these pivot points where what came before

changed what followed. The Vietnam War changed our idea of war, but within that, I chose the Tet Offensive because, while strategically it was not a successful mission for the Viet Cong, it was a mental tipping point for the American public. Another example is the Wounded Knee Massacre, the last "battle" in the American Indian Wars.



But sometimes the image comes first. Like with the "Gold Rush" piece I wanted to do the most over-the-top Hollywood sunset, and watched some old Westerns trying to find that quintessential moment of riding off into the sunset. Only later did I figure out the piece should be about the California Gold Rush. So the historic references come in different ways, but they're all about the idea of one thing ending and another beginning.

BM: Do you feel like your work is going in a certain direction at the moment?

AVM: The series I'm working on now uses historic tree ring cross-sections pulled from studies that link climate change with periods of human instability: the Fall of the Roman Empire, the Aztec Conquest, the Black Plague. My work is increasingly political, perhaps just a sign of our times. But we'll see. I never know where a new series will take me, which is scary and delightful at the same time.

**"What Could Be" is on view at the Crisp-Ellert Art Museum through April 12. Von Mertens' work can also be seen at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Arts; Salisbury University Art Galleries, Salisbury, Maryland, from March 4-April 6; Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, from April 19-June 30; and at the 2013 Rijswijk Textile Biennial at Museum Rijswijk, in the Netherlands, from June-November.**

**Beth Maycumber** is currently working on a Master's degree in Library and Information Studies at Florida State University; she also holds an M.A. in U.S. History from the University of North Florida, and a B.A. in History and Art History from Flagler College. Her recent projects include curating two special exhibits about Jean Ribault's 1562 voyage to Florida at Fort Caroline National Monument, and participating in artist Harrell Fletcher's "Before and After 1565" project at the Crisp Ellert Art Museum. She lives in St. Augustine, Florida, with her husband and son.

**Julie Dickover** is the director of the Crisp-Ellert Art Museum at Flagler College in Saint Augustine, Florida, where she has organized exhibitions by artists such as Montreal based video artist Julie Lequin and photographer Mark Ruwedel, as well as a collaborative interdisciplinary project and exhibition with Portland, Oregon based artist Harrell Fletcher. Dickover is also an advisory editor for *At Length*. Prior to living in northeast Florida, she lived in Los Angeles where she worked as a registrar at UCLA's Hammer Museum.



April 28, 2011

# ‘ART/SEWN’: ‘Tradition, Innovation, Expression’

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

*Five Myles*

*558 St. Johns Place, Crown Heights, Brooklyn*

*Through May 8*

Off the beaten art world path in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, with no budget and a leaky roof, the alternative space called Five Myles has been producing polished, offbeat shows for more than a decade. “Art/Sewn: Tradition, Innovation, Expression” is the latest. The guest curator, Ward Mintz, executive director of the Coby Foundation, which supports projects in the textile arts field, has picked nine artists, all women, who together cover a good stretch of the ground being explored with needle and thread these days.

Sandy Benjamin-Hannibal comes the closest to doing the sort of abstract piecework we know from 19th-century Crazy Quilts, to which format Denise Burge adds real-world forms like mountains and skyscrapers. Three artists apply stitching to sculpture: Cyrilla Mozenter, in boxlike forms made from industrial wool and felt; Janet Henry, on a three-dimensional, tchotchke-bespangled character she calls Assimilata Lefkowitz; and Elisa D’Arrigo, in gnarly, boulderlike wall reliefs made from painted cloth and paper. Two artists use paper as a primary medium: Linnea Glatt traces an Agnes Martin-like grid in dots of thread on tea-colored mulberry paper; Emily Barletta embroiders columns of invented script in red thread on small paper sheets. Jessica Rankin’s “Empty Night” is one of the more complicated pieces. A wall hanging with flowers, vines and a half-vanishing moon embroidered on sheets of ash-colored organdy, it’s absolutely beautiful.

The installation is pulled together by Anna Von Mertens’s two hand-sewn cotton quilts stretched horizontally, like bedspreads, over low platforms. In one, a rainbow-colored band runs off to a vanishing point; in the other, white lines on a black ground seem to radiate from a single point of light. “I use the stitch as a measure of time to place the individual self within this vast universe,” writes Ms. Von Mertens in the exhibition brochure. Alternative spaces like Five Myles are invaluable individual nodes in the ever-expanding sameness of the art-world universe.



The Oregonian

Jan. 14-20, 2011

## Drawn to the light

Two exhibits  
at Elizabeth  
Leach Gallery  
illuminate the  
psychological  
and literal  
meanings



Photo courtesy of DAN KUITKA

The atmospheric light and space installation of Hap Tivey returns the Elizabeth Leach Gallery to its early roots with the light and space movement.

By JOHN MOTLEY  
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

This month, the Elizabeth Leach Gallery commences its 30th anniversary programming with a double bill that dovetails nicely around the idea of light, both inner and outer.

In the works of the New Hampshire-based fabric artist Anna Von Mertens, she imagines the auras of the sitters in some of art history's most famous portraits, many of which she has never seen in person. Her psychological analysis of these subjects manages to vest familiar likenesses with a more explicit emotional back story than, say, Mona Lisa's pursed lips betray.

In the rear gallery, Portland native Hap Tivey addresses "light" in more direct and literal terms, creating an installation that features a pair of projections of pure color that shift in gradient with slow and moody intensity.

Where Von Mertens' project is inspired by the frequent experience of interacting with works of art in reproduction (i.e. photos reprinted in books and magazines or, worse, pixelated images on the Web), Tivey also focuses on the irreplaceable impact of looking at art in the flesh with an installation viewers must immerse themselves in to fully experience.

Please turn to Page 38

### review

Anna Von Mertens:  
"Portraits" and  
Hap Tivey:  
"Folded Light"

Where: Elizabeth  
Leach Gallery, 417  
N.W. Ninth Ave., 503-  
224-0521

Hours: 10:30 a.m. to  
5:30 p.m. Tuesday to  
Saturday  
Closes: Saturday,  
Feb. 12

Admissions: Free  
Website:  
elizabethleach.com

Continued from Page 37

At first blush, Von Mertens' hand-dyed and hand-stitched works scan as lovely abstractions: amorphous orbs of hot and cold colors that radiate out of darkness. But they are actually painstakingly representational images, whose imminently recognizable forms have been systematically obfuscated.

Beginning with German theorist Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura" as described in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Von Mertens began to consider that elusive, spiritual quality that seems to emanate from the greatest artworks when we stand in their presence.

From there, she substituted our modern, New Age-y idea of the aura for the animating spirit Benjamin apprehended, leading her to study the pseudo-scientific practice of aura photography, in which electromagnetic fields are captured as colors and, in turn, interpreted as the psychic makeup of the photographed subject.

Thus, these abstractions are Von Mertens' psychic portraits of art history's masterpieces, from Whistler's mother to Warhol's silk-screened Marilyn Monroes wringing clues about the sitters from a combination of biographical research and scrutinizing the paintings themselves.

Each aura reading is then meticulously stitched over with the subject's chakra patterns—apparently, where auras originate—and spread outward in concentric silhouettes. The effect is akin to a topographical map describing some electric-hued geography.

While this somewhat fussy conceit raises plenty of fascinating questions—how the artist interprets the psychology of the sitter; whether art, in fact, contains an aura and, if it does, whether it can be represented visually—none of them is exactly illuminated for the viewer in the resulting works.

That's not to say that they are not lovely in formal terms but that there is an imbalance between the richness of Von Mertens' method and the paucity of substance she manages to communicate. Perhaps unintentionally, it echoes the experience of viewing art in reproduction: Something's missing.

By contrast, Tivey's site-specific installation was refreshing for its guileless presentation, unencumbered by layers of theoretical discourse.

On opposing walls, the artist sketched out a pair of oblique half-frames in black paint and mounted an arching sculptural form (one parallel with the floor like a horizon line; the other a slashing diagonal), over which a pair of projections cast video of slowly morphing fields of color.

The passage from soft peach and mauve tones to enveloping azures and purples is barely perceptible from moment to moment, but, when the chromatic saturation of the projections peak, the sculptural components of the installation trick the eye, suddenly seeming punched out and deep, not affixed to the wall.

That is, Tivey's installation is entirely predicated on a viewer's presence in the space and his patient faith in a slow-release payoff.

Like watching the sun rise or set, the installation reveals its meaning through quietude and stillness over time, nudging viewers to experience the work in a more physical, bodily manner.

Of course, to luxuriate within the precise context of a work of art's presentation—to surrender to its rules of time and space, and perceive its mysterious energy—is to behold an aura that is real, not just imagined.

John Motley is a Portland freelance writer; motleyjohn@gmail.com



# FiberARTS

NOV/DEC 2010

## Aura Quilts

by Sabrina Gschwandtner

Anna Von Mertens creates vibrant hand-dyed and handstitched art quilts based on the auras of famous paintings.

New Hampshire-based artist Anna Von Mertens combines traditional quilting with methods of scientific observation. In past series, she has translated historic events and cosmological phenomena into intimate handstitched relics of the here and now. At the heart of her new work is an existential inquiry into what can be seen and known, which is expressed through a beautiful bridging of the objective and the abstract and of painting and domestic craft.

In *Portraits* (2009–ongoing), the artist has created quilts based on *aura photography*, a field of study popularized in the 1970s wherein specially designed hand sensors interpret electromagnetic energy emanating from a person in a photograph as bands of color. The colors are meant to reflect a subject's personality, mood, or state of health, such as red for passion and yellow for sickness. Though the artist first resisted exploring aura photography, which has been rejected by most scientific communities, she eventually decided to create her own interpretative auras by working within its preexisting code of color interpretation. "I like that at the heart of this exploration, amid the questions of belief and representation, is a search for beauty," she explains.

Drawn to portraits she studied as an undergraduate, such as Caravaggio's *Bacchus* (circa 1595) and Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother* (1871), Von Mertens says, "I remember traveling to Italy and being surprised by what some of the real paintings looked like versus what they looked like projected in my art history class." She acknowledges as inspiration twentieth-century German cultural critic Walter Benjamin's notion of aura, which he defined as "a sense of awe viewers feel in the presence of an original art-

work." Von Mertens explains, "These works are so well known that the real painting and the idea of the painting become two different things. Flipping Benjamin's definition of the aura, my auras reference what is layered over the unique work of art."

After Von Mertens selects a portrait, she researches the relationship between painter and sitter, their personalities, and the historical context of the painting. She then dyes and stitches an interpretive aura onto cotton, in the same proportions as the original painting. Informed by her studies into the meaning and placement of colors in aura photography, her vibrant, glowing color fields both reflect and produce an emotional effect. "I found that in building a narrative of the subject's life through color, an emotional presence surfaced," the artist says. "I could see van Gogh's personality reflected in the colors I chose to match the

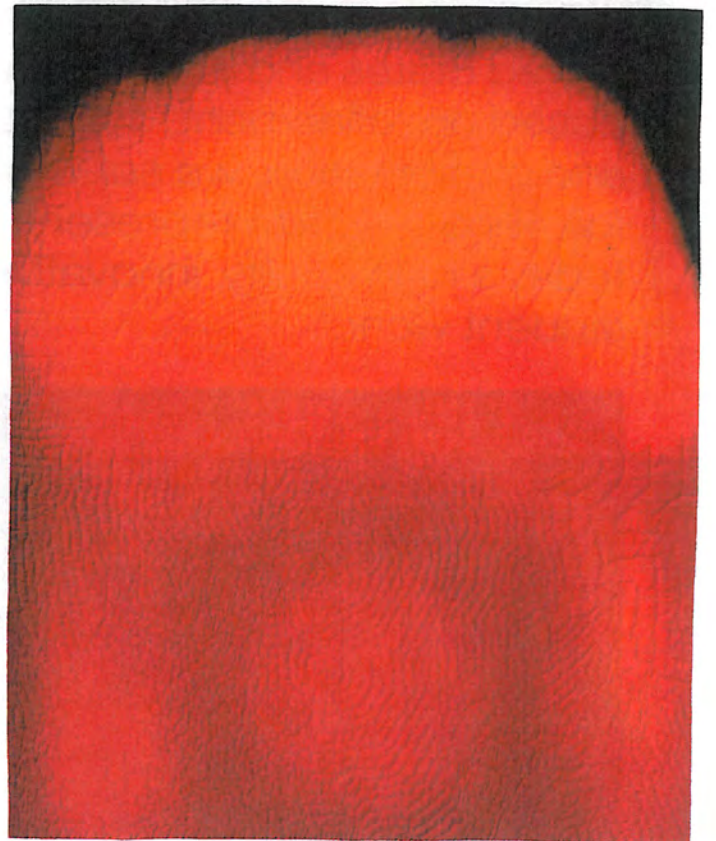
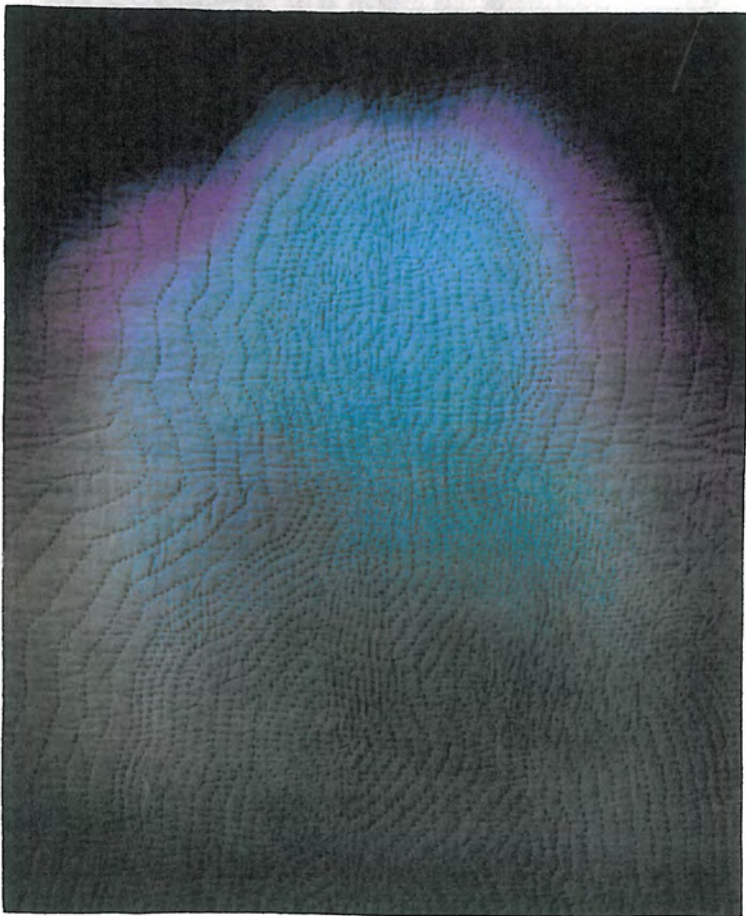
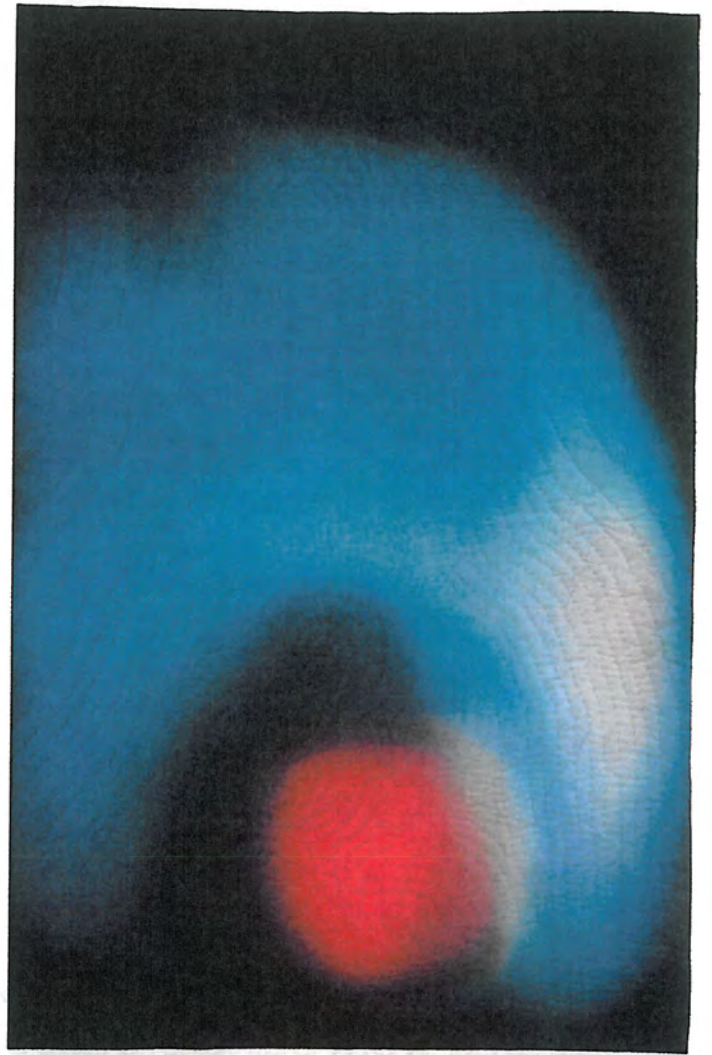
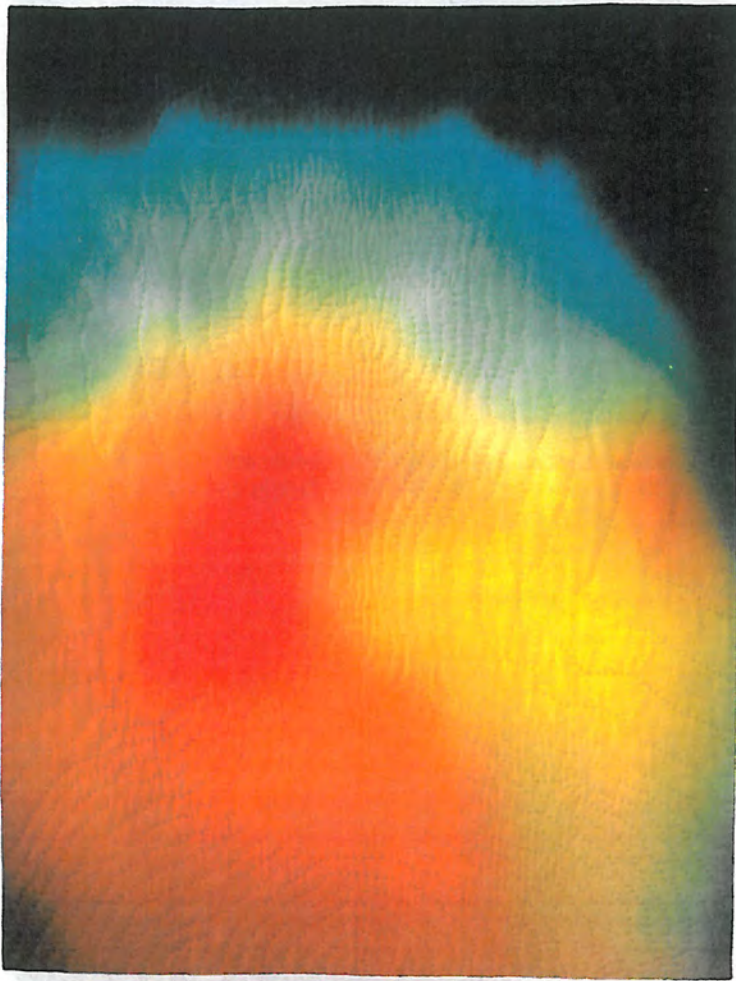
narrative I was telling myself about him as an individual." To achieve the right color bleeding, she slowly brushes up to seven or more layers of protein chemical dyes onto each stretched surface. Afterwards, she projects a pattern onto the dyed fabric and outlines it in chalk. Her handquilted stitches help to create outlines of human forms within a color field; they also bring to mind painterly brushwork and enlarged thumbprints.

Indeed, how we interpret beauty, history, and the painted sitter's gaze is all in the eye of the beholder. Though she was first dubious about aura photography, Von Mertens has come to respect its proponents' desire to investigate our existence. "Perhaps it is not a question of whether [aura photography] is true or not," the artist says, "but of what information is there to be learned." ●

The artist's website is [www.annavonmertens.com](http://www.annavonmertens.com). Von Mertens will present solo shows at: ProjectRoom in Lincoln, Nebraska, through October 30, [www.projectroom.us](http://www.projectroom.us) and Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon, January 6–February 12, 2011, [www.elizabethleach.com](http://www.elizabethleach.com). Her work will also be included in Craft+Concept at the Oakland Art Gallery in Oakland, California, through October 23, [www.oaklandartgallery.org](http://www.oaklandartgallery.org) and Cosmic: Artists Consider Astronomy at the Sun Valley Center for the Arts in Sun Valley, Idaho, November 12–January 7, 2011, [www.sunvalleycenter.org](http://www.sunvalleycenter.org).

ABOVE, LEFT: Arrangement in Grey and Black's aura (Whistler's Mother), after James Whistler; 54½" x 63½". OPPOSITE PAGE: TOP LEFT: Frida Kahlo's aura, with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird; 24¼" x 18½". TOP RIGHT: Mona Lisa's aura, after Leonardo da Vinci; 34¾" x 25¾". BOTTOM LEFT: Aura Self-Portrait, after Vincent Van Gogh; 25½" x 21¼". BOTTOM RIGHT: Bacchus's aura, after Caravaggio; 39¾" x 33". All work is cotton fabric; hand-dyed and handstitched; 2009. Courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon. Photos: Don Tuttle Photography.







# Surface Design

Creative Exploration of Fiber and Fabric

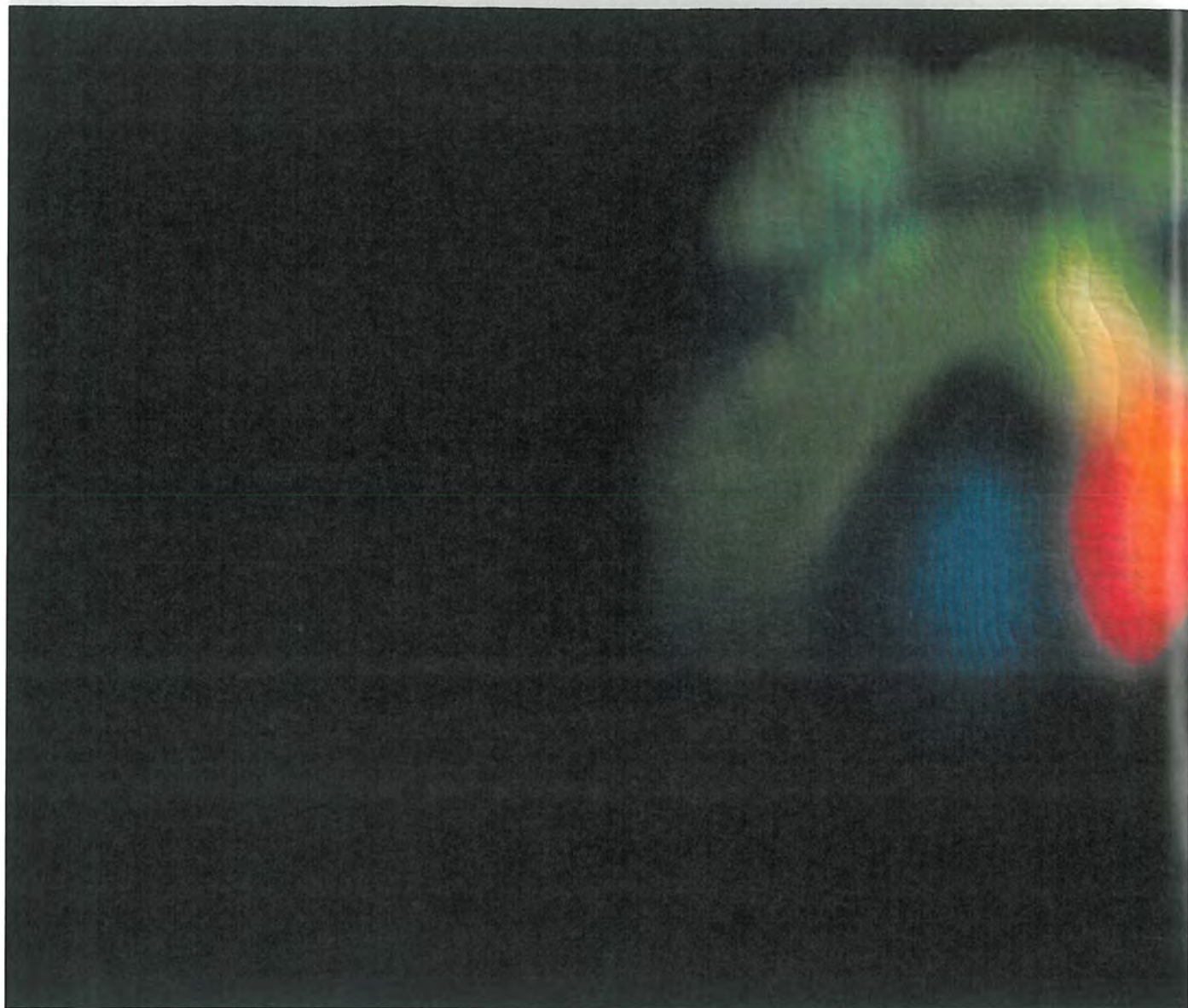
FALL 2010

**A n n a V o n M e r t e n s**

## Emanations in Cloth

*by Jessica Hemmings*

**"Backwards"** is how Anna Von Mertens first describes the approach to her most recent series of quilts, explaining that her new working process was "determined much more through technique" informing research rather than research determining process. Systematic data collection has been a hallmark of Von Mertens's previous work: childhood heights measured against the door jam in the family home, ocean currents and sea depths, the colors of sunsets and constellations in the sky at key points in history, have all provided regulations by which she has colored and constructed her hand-stitched compositions.



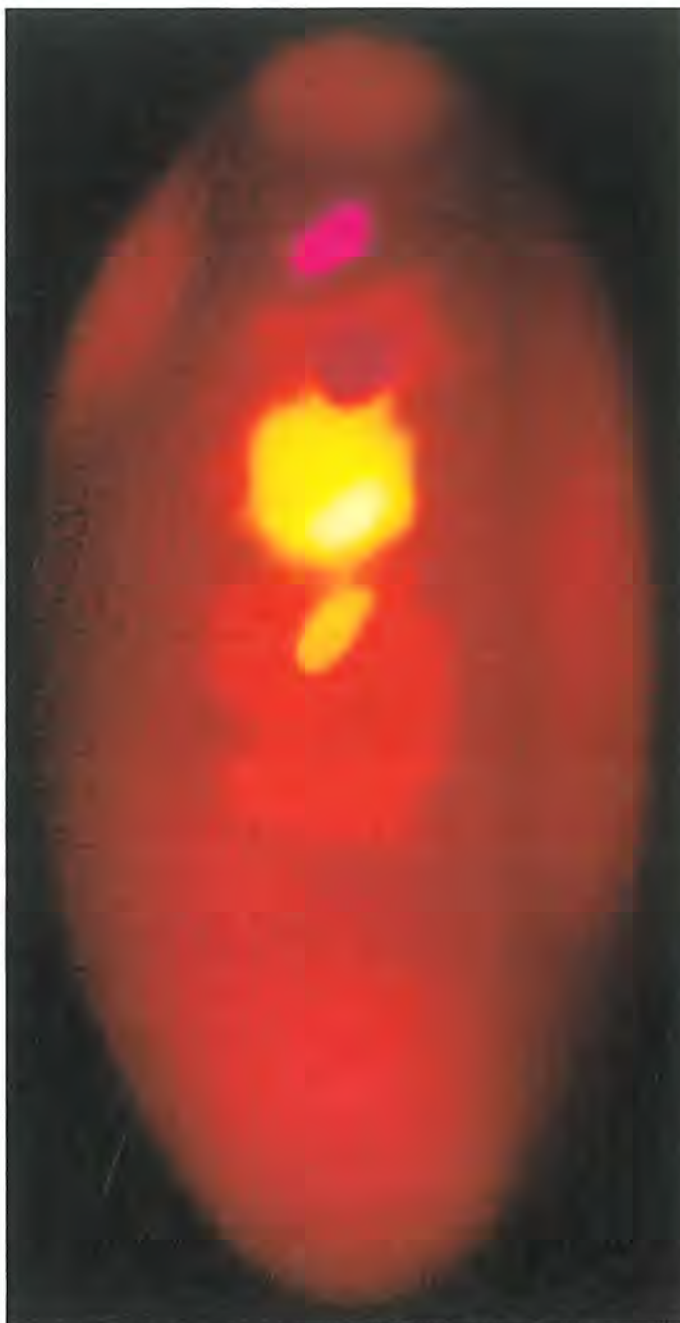


Von Mertens admits that when she first lit upon the subject of her most recent series—auras—she found it to be both “too absurd” and one that “wouldn’t go away.”

In 1936 the philosopher Walter Benjamin observed: “That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.” Throughout his now celebrated essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin considers the peculiar attributes of reproductions and determines that the “presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” This thinking—and an offhand comment about how her new experiments with painted dyes seemed to suggest auras—led to Von Mertens’s most recent series of quilts: *Portraits*. She explains: “If Benjamin’s ‘aura’ is the sense of awe felt in the presence of a unique work of art, my works acknowledge the myth built around each painting as it becomes more a story of the artwork than the actual artwork itself.”

“Flipping Benjamin’s definition of the aura, my auras reference what is layered over the unique work of art,” Von Mertens explains. Her “flip” borrows from the pseudoscientific world of aura photography, which produces an image of the electromagnetic field surrounding the individual’s body. Von Mertens describes aura photography as an image that is both “abstract and specific,” layering the subject’s tangible silhouette with an intangible image of color. In her statement for the *Portraits* series she articulates her curiosity and skepticism: “The strange bedfellows of technology and New Age beliefs are brought together in the aura photograph, a process involving hand sensors that translate the electromagnetic field of an individual into a Polaroid print... The tension of belief informs this work.”

Each portrait selected for the series enjoys canonical status in art history: *Mary Cassatt’s aura*, after Degas; *Frida Kahlo’s aura*, with *Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*; *Gertrude Stein’s aura*, after Picasso; *Madame X’s aura*, after John Singer Sargent; *Arrangement in Grey and Black’s aura* (Whistler’s Mother), after James Whistler; to name only a few in the series that currently numbers seventeen. Each is also known to the artist predominately through reproductions of the original, remembered as a

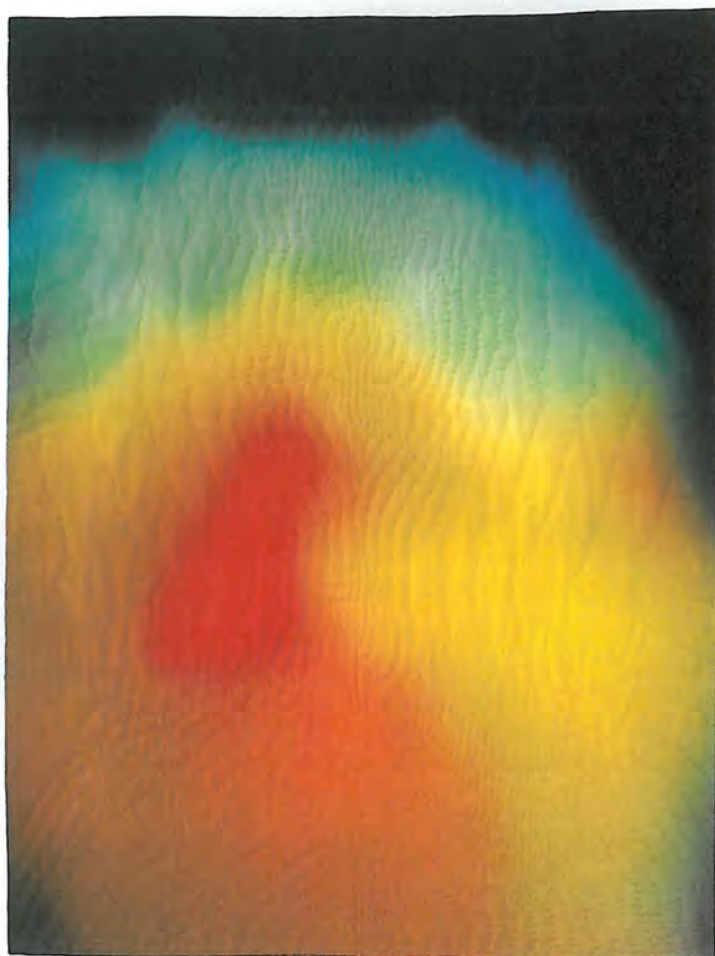


ABOVE: ANNA VON MERTENS *Madame X's Aura after John Singer Sargent*. Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 83" x 43.25", 2009.

LEFT: ANNA VON MERTENS *Arrangement in Grey and Black's Aura (Whistler's Mother) after James Whistler*. Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 54.5" x 63.5", 2009.

slide from art history class, or seen as a jpg on the Internet. While the colors in Von Mertens’s finished works often share a resemblance to the original portrait, this similarity is a quirk of the research process. Von Mertens’s palette was in fact established to match the personality traits of artist and subject unearthed during research to create what she describes as a “reverse engineering” of the environment in which the original portrait was painted. To create her own aura versions, Von Mertens looked to historical facts surrounding the creation of each of her reference portraits: “My process involves





ANNA VON MERTENS *Frida Kahlo's Aura, with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 24.25" x 18.5", 2009.  
 RIGHT: ANNA VON MERTENS *Mary Cassatt's Aura, after Degas*. Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 32.5" x 24", 2009.

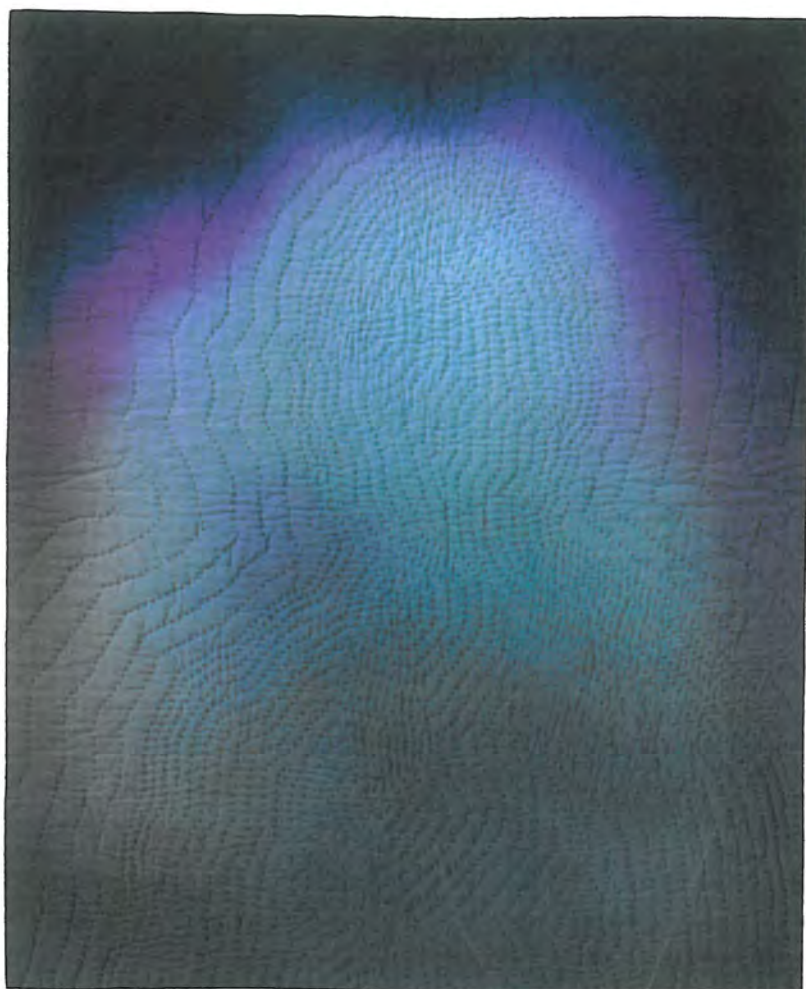
researching the relationship between sitter and painter, the character and personality of both, and the historical context of the painting. I then paint dye onto fabric to create an aura in the same proportions as the original painting. Superimposed is a layer of hand-stitching that includes the silhouette from the source painting and the subject's chakra pattern. The result is a defined figure with an aura-like emanation."

Von Mertens admits to seeing textiles in an "oppositional relationship" to the tradition of painting for much of her career and has in the past exhibited her quilts on low frames of bed-like proportions. Her 2006 series *As the Stars Go By* moved her work back to a conventional setting on the wall by way of the proportions of the film screen. The format and orientation of this series commented on the trite narratives churned out by the

Hollywood machine and projected onto film screens, in contrast to the literally earth-changing moments captured by Von Mertens's quilted constellations. In *Portraits* the work remains on the gallery wall and adopts a scale identical to the original painting. The wall, she explains, now suggests the idea of the aura's "energy moving outwards" and the aura of the sitter "looking back at you."

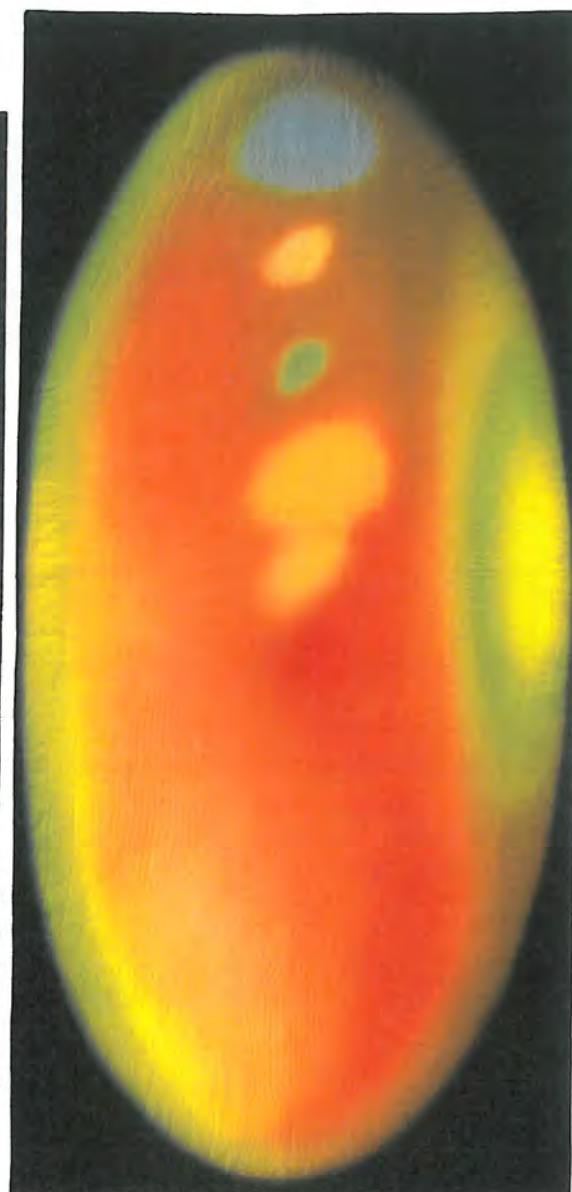
In her newest work these intangible themes continue, but rather than the relationship between subject and artist, Von Mertens has moved on to explore the overlapping auras of couples. Adam and Eve—she coins them the "quintessential couple"—are the first pair to undergo her scrutiny. "While I admit to an element of the ridiculous—painting auras of dead people—these works are sincere portraits," she explains. "As I researched how to read the prescribed distinctions





**ANNA VON MERTENS** *Aura Self-Portrait, after Vincent Van Gogh.*  
Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 25.5" x 21.25", 2009.

**RIGHT: ANNA VON MERTENS** *Philip IV's aura, after Velasquez.*  
Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, 80" x 38.5", 2009.



of the tones and placement of colors in an aura photograph, I found myself getting seduced by belief. I found that in building a narrative of the subject's life through color, an emotional presence surfaced. Allowing myself to believe seemed part of the process."

Putting the thinking and planning aside for a moment, *Portraits* deserves recognition as Von Mertens's most stunningly beautiful series to date. Her working process has often resulted in unusual combinations of color and pattern, but here the tension between the controlled and uncontrollable elements has allowed a little more of the artist's instinct to flourish. But I have to confess that my experience of the work is mediated through digital images rather than firsthand experience. When interviewing Von Mertens by telephone I fret that I might be missing some of the stitch work present

in the quilts because I am not viewing the series in person. What am I missing? She is quick to remind me that Benjamin was also acutely aware of this increasingly common predicament in visual culture. In fact, several layers of reproduction are already at work: Von Mertens worked from memories that prompted a search for digital images of master works of art, translated these into the quilts that I then experience, not in a material sense, but as digital images. Viewing the images reproduced for this article represents yet another step removed, but in a way not necessarily identical to the reproductions experienced by either the artist or myself. This seems, in part, to be the point.

—Jessica Hemmings is Head of Context, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, Scotland.



## : artist profile **anna von mertens**

In her latest series of quilts, *As the Stars Go By*, Anna Von Mertens charts the star rotation patterns over violent moments in American history. The serene designs—hundreds of delicate lines swirling across inky black grounds—contrast sharply with the chaos of events like the Battle of Wounded Knee, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, or September 11. Vaulting above the fray, they remind us that the world keeps turning, indifferent to human suffering. While Von Mertens finds this continuity reassuring, she also sees the work as a memorial. "At the same time that I'm removing myself from violence and thinking about the comfort of this cycle," she says, "I'm also positioning the viewer from the point of view of somebody dying, thousands of people dying."

This fusion of natural phenomena, scientific diagrams, and emotional appeal defines Von Mertens' work. In previous projects she has quilted the patterns of ocean currents, bird migrations, and the energy dispersion of a nuclear blast, linking them to states of mind. "I see these external phenomena as metaphors for how we psychologically navigate through our own lives," she says. By stitching, "I'm translating these patterns and trying to internalize them." Hand sewing—she sews every stitch herself—is a way of deliberately slowing down and seeing global events from a different perspective.



Von Mertens made her first quilt as a preschooler but didn't return to the medium until she was an undergrad at Brown University, studying printmaking. "I just got it under my skin that I wanted to make a quilt," she recalls. But it took several years and an MFA from the California College of the Arts to accept quilting as a primary practice. "I was still trying to make my artwork, but was thinking 'What's the deal with this quilting thing?' Ultimately I realized I want my art to be my quilts."

Since graduating in 2000, the Berkeley-based artist has produced an increasingly sophisticated and genre-defying body of work. Blurring the line between fine and folk art, science and domesticity, her quilts have been dubbed "conceptual craft," a term Von Mertens finds glib, but apt. "I do think very conceptually, because the idea comes first, and it often has prescribed rules that go with it," she says. "But what I like about craft is that the object itself has more of a presence, independent of the idea." Prior to *Stars*, she presented her pieces as "bed sculptures" on the ground, a move that evoked Minimalist sculptural traditions (privileging physical presence over visual appeal), but also reinforced the quilts' humble role as bed covering.

Similarly, Von Mertens sees a parallel between the elaborate explanations that often accompany conceptual artworks and the stories behind heirloom quilts. "A lot of quilts are for somebody's wedding, or they have an inscription on them," she says. "At my openings, there's often this crazy fever to hear stories about the pieces. The act of storytelling goes with my work. It's a rephrasing of conceptual art."

By juxtaposing disparate traditions and systems, Von Mertens forges new connections: oceanography informs psychology; astronomy becomes mourning. Her work reminds us that the universal can always be traced back to the personal. "I see the bed and domestic space as a hub in our lives," she asserts, "Everything kind of spins from there."

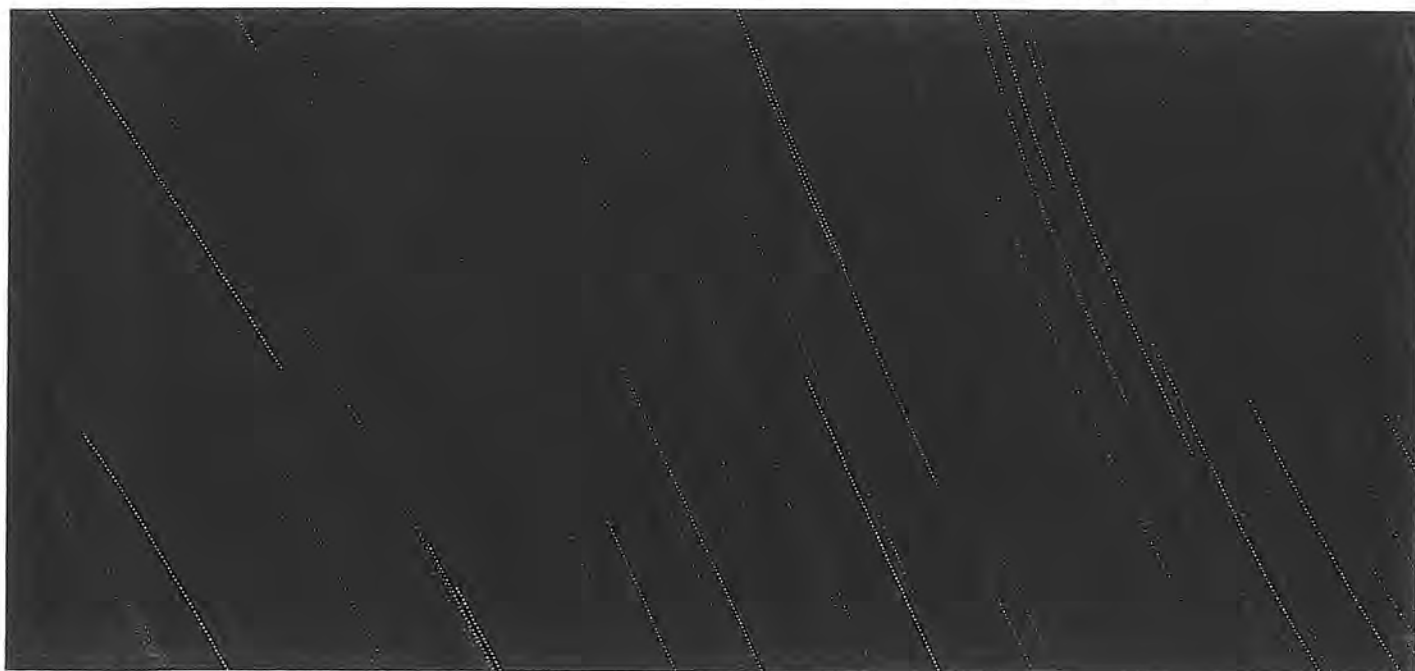
—SHARON MIZOTA

*Anna Von Mertens' solo exhibition, "Burned Out by the Rising Sun," was on view at the University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, from February 1 to April 8, 2007. She is represented by Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery in Los Angeles and Jack Hanley Gallery in San Francisco.*

"MIDNIGHT UNTIL THE FIRST SIGHTING OF LAND, OCTOBER 12, 1492, SIX MILES OFF THE COAST OF CURRENT DAY SAN SALVADOR ISLAND, BAHAMAS" 2006

HAND-STITCHED COTTON  
41" x 97½"

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK HANLEY GALLERY







**UAM  
CSULB**

BURNED OUT BY THE RISING SUN:  
WORKS BY **ANNA VON MERTENS**



## BURNED OUT BY THE RISING SUN: WORKS BY ANNA VON MERTENS



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

### UNDER STARRY SKIES

Lynn LaBate

*The fibers of all things have their tension and are strained like the strings of an instrument.*

—Henry David Thoreau

Anna Von Mertens's new work in the exhibition *Burned Out by the Rising Sun* is eloquent and perplexing. When looking at her imagery, the temptation exists to categorize her large flat surfaces interwoven with stark linear compositions as minimalist, but that is simply not the case. Rather than creating abstract patterns, the artist uses scientific theory as a framework upon which to hang representations of cosmic phenomena. Von Mertens herself states that she is "transforming abstract ideas into something that is tangible and knowable."<sup>1</sup>

As others before her, Anna Von Mertens employs the natural world to help us understand our own actions. Where nineteenth-century American philosopher Henry David Thoreau turned to Walden Pond, Bay Area artist Anna Von Mertens looks to the heavens. In *Walden*, Thoreau likens the stars to the "noblest written words."<sup>2</sup> Von Mertens quilts, substituting stitch for brushstroke, to create her own vocabulary. The act of stargazing, antithetical to the pace of contemporary culture, offers the opportunity for contemplation, the act of thoughtful observation. Stargazing, however, is neither fast paced nor requires the visual literacy necessary to decode the bombardment of imagery seen on a daily basis. Rather, it is a timeless act, chosen by Von Mertens, "because stargazing, as an ancient form of existential observation, is one of the most universal acts of looking. It is a way we locate where we are literally and metaphorically."<sup>3</sup>

Providing the viewer with something to facilitate active engagement in the act of looking enabled Von Mertens to take a dramatic step in the development of her work, moving from the bed to the wall.

As stated by the artist, "While I loved working with the site of the bed—all of its rich associations with the body, a place of the familiar, a place of the everyday, the relationship it allowed viewers to have with the work—I was limited to a specific kind of content when dealing with the bed, and after having explored that terrain for many years, I was ready to move beyond those limitations."<sup>4</sup>

Von Mertens began by making window-sized works for the wall that tracked the star rotations of historic battlefields in American history. The scope of the project changed dramatically when she discovered the computer software program, *Starry Night*. With mathematical accuracy, she could pinpoint the exact location and point in time to display the star patterns, choose a vantage point, and then play time backwards and forwards. Thus, Von Mertens virtually traveled through time to depict the same celestial configurations that those living in the moment would have witnessed. Von Mertens chose an epic, cinematic format, as if conjoining the magnitude of the heavens with the significance of each historic battle. "Returning to the literal site of someone's death, and with violence so present in our current environment, I found a strange sense of comfort in the continuing cycle of these stars especially as they were juxtaposed against the cycles of humankind."<sup>5</sup>

Seven moments are offered for our contemplation, each of which has violent ramifications in this country's history. The impact of these momentary occurrences is anything but transitory, having severe consequences on those involved and on future generations. Chronologically, the events begin with the first sighting of land on October 12, 1492, and end with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In between, we move from the Battle of Antietam in 1862, still the having the distinction of being the day the most Americans were lost in battle, 23,000, to Wounded Knee Creek in 1890, where the American genocide on native peoples resulted in the massacre of a group of Lakota Sioux by U.S. troops. The 1944 Battle of the Bulge was the bloodiest battle of WWII, with tremendous losses to both





Fig. 3



Fig. 4

the Allies and the Axis powers. Seen as a turning point in public opinion against the war, due unprecedented media coverage, the Tet offensive in 1968 resulted in 1000 to 1 (or more) ratio in loss of life between the North Vietnamese and the U.S. troops. September 11, 2001, a defining date etched into U.S. consciousness, is also memorialized by Von Mertens.<sup>6</sup> "I narrowed the scope of the series to violent moments in American history, because I was interested in investigating how the identity [of] our nation is burned into these moments."<sup>7</sup> Through this work, Von Mertens has created an arena that encourages the viewer to formulate questions about these moments in time and how together they weave a pattern of violence that has been implicit since the colonization of the Americas and continues to this day.

Earlier works, investigations of physical energy patterns, remain on the floor between the starscapes. In tandem, *Tank Shrapnel* and *Vanishing Point* represent the totality of time, finite and infinite, knowable and unknowable. Thus, the direct consequences of our actions—the chaos, the knowable—are inextricably linked with their complement—the incorporeal, the infinite, the unknowable. Nestled below the heavens, lie the two levels of the allegorical Baroque house constructed by seventeenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz that encompass the metaphysical and the sensual, where the "pleats of matter gives way to the folds of the soul."<sup>8</sup>

In looking for paradigms of thought and action to help us grapple with the implications of Von Mertens's work, we again may wish to turn to Thoreau, a model of personal responsibility, who felt that divinity can be found within and refused to pay his taxes in opposition to the Mexican-America War and slavery.<sup>9</sup> Or we can return to Leibniz who states, "[Two] parts of really distinct matter can be inseparable."<sup>10</sup> In other words, we can move beyond the precept of colonialism that separates humanity into us and them, altern and subaltern, victor and victim. As the artist suggests with each connective stitch, the separateness that has allowed humankind to perpetuate acceptance

of archaic and contemporary means of warfare, can be replaced with an understanding of and respect for the inseparability of matter; because to kill another, would be like killing ourselves.

Von Mertens refers to the transitory nature of life in the title of the exhibition, *Burned Out by the Rising Sun*, when the luminosity of the sun overshadows the specific moments in time rendered in her work. Experiencing the art of Anna Von Mertens, however, has a powerful impact that will resonate well into the future for those who have been fortunate enough to see it.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence with the artist. Letter dated November 29, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. <http://Thoreau.eserver.org/walden03.html>, Chapter 3, paragraph 4.

<sup>3</sup> Von Mertens, November 7, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., November 7, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., November 21, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> All figures regarding casualties were taken from Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, an on-line resource, from the following sections: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tet\\_Offensive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tet_Offensive), [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Bulge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Bulge), [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003\\_invasion\\_of\\_Iraq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_invasion_of_Iraq), [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Antietam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Antietam), [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wounded\\_Knee\\_Massacre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wounded_Knee_Massacre).

<sup>7</sup> Von Mertens, November 7, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> <http://Thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html>

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, p.5.

Fig. 1: 2:45 am until sunrise on Tet, the Lunar New Year, January 31, 1968, U.S. Embassy, Saigon, Vietnam (looking north), 2006.

Fig. 2: 8:45 am to 10:28 am, September 11, 2001 (above New York City looking toward Boston), 2006.

Fig. 3: Midnight until the first sighting of land, October 12, 1492, six miles off the coast of current-day San Salvador Island, Bahamas, 2006.

Fig. 4: Sunrise to Sunset, September 17, 1862, Antietam Creek, Maryland (from the North looking South), 2006.

**LYNN LABATE** currently serves as the Interim Exhibition Administrator for the University Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach. Since 2003, she has been an independent curator working on exhibitions such as *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Interpreting Devotion and Legacy and Legend: Siqueiros and America Tropical/Censorship Defied* (in development). LaBate holds a B.A. from the University of Arizona and an M.A. in Art from California State University Fullerton. Winner of the American Association of Museum's Curator's Committee Award for Excellence in 1996, LaBate has curated over 20 exhibitions. Her expertise in education has earned her posts with the American Association of Museums, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Fullerton Museum Center in Fullerton, Calif. LaBate is a former President of the Board of Directors for the Museum Educators of Southern California.



## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. *2:45 am until sunrise on Tet, the Lunar New Year, January 31, 1968, U.S. Embassy, Saigon, Vietnam (looking north), 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
2. *8:45 am to 10:28 am, September 11, 2001 (above New York City looking toward Boston), 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
3. *5:34 am until sunrise, March 20, 2003, Baghdad, Iraq (from the Palestine Hotel looking toward the Presidential Palace on the Tigris River), 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; collection of Alden and Daniel Miller.
4. *Midnight until the first sighting of land, October 12, 1492, six miles off the coast of current-day San Salvador Island, Bahamas, 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
5. *Sunrise to Sunset, September 17, 1862, Antietam Creek, Maryland (from the North looking South), 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
6. *December 29, 1890, Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, the Seven Stars of the Big Dipper in the final hour before dawn, 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
7. *5:30 am until sunrise, December 16, 1944 (above the Ardennes looking east), 2006*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 41" x 97.5"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
8. *Tank Shrapnel, 2005*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 17" x 60" x 80"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.
9. *Vanishing Point, 2005*  
Hand-stitched cotton, 17" x 60" x 80"; courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, and Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles.

Photo credit: Don Tuttle Photography

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Anna Von Mertens was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1973. She received her B.A. from Brown University in 1995 and her M.F.A. in 2000 from the California College of the Arts. In 2000, Von Mertens received the M.F.A. Studio Award at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, California, where she was an Affiliate Artist the following year; and in 2002, she was awarded a New Hampshire Fellowship as an Artist-in-Residence at the prestigious MacDowell Colony. Von Mertens's work has been shown in exhibitions at Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco; Lizbeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles; University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara; Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley; Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco; Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York, White Box, New York; Pasadena Museum of California Art, Pasadena; Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, among others. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Artweek*, *artUS*, *Cabinet*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Fiberarts*, *Flash Art*, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Surface Design Journal*, and *The Independent*. Von Mertens currently teaches at the University of California, Berkeley and California College of the Arts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The UAM extends a special thank you to Dr. Ronald & Sylvia Hartman for support of this exhibition. The UAM is grateful for the continued support from the Instructionally Related Activities Fund, the Constance W. Glenn Fund for Exhibition and Education Programs at the UAM, CSULB Department of Art, College of the Arts, the Bess Hodges Foundation, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services for their programming support. Image: AVM, *Vanishing Point*, 2005.



**University Art Museum**

College of the Arts

California State University Long Beach

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Artist's Project  
Cabinet Magazine  
Issue 23

ANNA VON MERTENS

This body of work takes violent moments in American history that act as pivot points—where what came before seems separate from what follows—and depicts the star rotation pattern above these moments in time. My hand-stitched works have the proportions of a movie screen, intended to suggest a representation of historical events through the distanced lens of observation, but through this format also offering a literal vista, a window onto a world.

Events portrayed in the series include the Civil War Battle of Antietam, which remains the greatest one-day loss of life in America's history; the stars seen from the balcony of Memphis's Lorraine Motel on 4 April 1968, as dusk settles during the hour between the time that Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and the time he was pronounced dead; and the first sighting of land by Christopher Columbus off the coast of the Bahamas, a moment at which the stars are both a navigational tool and an indicator of the changes to come.

The work is intended to act on many levels: as a memorial, as an actual vantage from a specific moment in history, but ultimately I am simply documenting an impassive natural cycle that is oblivious to the violence below.

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Pages 34–35: Anna Von Mertens, *Midnight until the first sighting of land. October 12, 1492, six miles off the coast of current-day San Salvador Island, Bahamas, 2006.*

*This work shows the stars as Christopher Columbus and his crew would have seen them when they first sighted land off the coast of the present-day Bahamas. From Columbus's journal: "The crew of the Nina saw other signs of land, and a stalk loaded with rose berries. These signs encouraged them, and they all grew cheerful. ... After sunset, steered their original course west and sailed twelve miles an hour till two hours after midnight ... and as the Pinta was the swiftest sailer, and kept ahead of the Admiral [Columbus's phrase for himself], she discovered land and made the signals which had been ordered." I chose this pivotal event in American history not for any violence contained in those few hours, but for the violence that would ensue from that moment.*

Pages 36–37: Anna Von Mertens, *5:34 am until sunrise. March 20, 2003. Baghdad, Iraq (from the Palestine Hotel looking toward the Presidential Palace on the Tigris River), 2006.*

*This work documents the star rotation pattern above Baghdad—with the constellation Scorpio tracking across the southwestern sky—as the bombing began on 20 March 2003 during the second war between Iraq and the United States. The vantage point from the Palestine Hotel is familiar to many Americans, as that is where most members of the foreign press were staying. I remember hearing witnesses describing the bombs that lit up the Baghdad sky that night as looking like fireworks. In this instance, the sense of mediated, distanced observation that characterized the American experience of the war is mirrored in the impassive wheeling of the stars.*

## Kevin Appel BY R. ASHER

Angles Gallery, Santa Monica CA September 8 • October 14, 2006

Over the last 12 years Kevin Appel's inquiry into the connections between architecture and painting has proceeded along two parallel trajectories, one describing the slow and messy dissolution of the structural integrity of the house, the other involving a gradual flattening of the picture plane. With the five large paintings and several supplemental collaged drawings in his sixth solo show at Angles Gallery, the artist stretches these two narrative threads to the breaking point—the strange tree-house structures seen in his *The Unholding Center* (2004) reappear, but just barely. Now they've been reduced to rubble, compacted by the same force of nature that reduced his perspective to one of pure surface.

Appel doesn't like to talk about his work. He'll gladly talk about yours, or Adam Ross's, or the history of painting—but when it comes to his own stuff, he's happy to let it speak for itself. I was only able to extract a brief but telling comment from him during the recent Angles opening. It was in reference to the cartoon pipe with two sad little drips appearing in a couple of the large paintings, and the three little chocolate-brown "waves" flowing down along the "wall" of one of the "houses" that occasionally materialize out of the flotsam and jetsam swirling around their epicenters. I wanted to know if the apparent references to plumbing—bluntly, piss and shit—might signify a dramatic shift in his work, hinting at the very thing always absent from his house paintings, those tell-tale traces of human habitation. But he cut me off before I could finish my spiel. "You know," he said, pausing ever so slightly, "a house is more than just pretty surfaces."

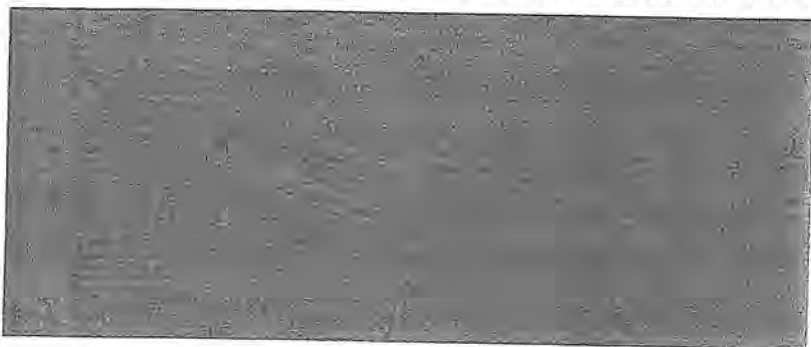
And indeed, his offhand remark bears consideration. In the four main paintings in the west gallery, *Country Home 5*, *Cabin Essence*, *Country*

*Home 4 (Bridge)* and *Country Home 6 (Grumpy)* (all 2006), one or more barely recognizable thatched-roof tree houses can be seen dissolving into or rising out of an exquisitely rendered, painstakingly detailed trash heap. The resulting piles are made up of shards of wood paneling and floorboards, swatches of textiles, wallpaper and linoleum, some of that tacky contact paper once used to line kitchen drawers, those 1960s Vera bed sheets today found in the back of linen closets, and yes, pipes and plumbing hinting at unseen inhabitants. It is as if some sort of terrible crisis has occurred, or at least the aftermath of one. This would not of course be a material crisis, for Appel's canvases veritably bristle with consummate skill. Nor would it be a crisis of imagination, for these are smart, extremely intricate works, both inside (the painting) and out (the picture). No, the crisis depicted here feels personal, far beneath the surface.

A house is made up of more than just pretty surfaces. But those other aspects, those dark and dirty discharges, are supposed to be kept private, internalized, tucked out of sight, masked by drywall and wallpaper and paint, reduced to the made-up or made-over surfaces we allow the world to see. With these new paintings, Appel exposes what is meant to stay hidden. His emblematic house has been turned literally inside out. And the results are stunning. Rarely has demolition looked so gorgeous.

## Anna Von Mertens BY YELLE AMIR

Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco CA August 5 • September 2, 2006



Bay Area artist Anna Von Mertens's "As the Stars Go By" provides a subtle yet far-reaching reflection on down-to-earth American affairs. From afar, the seven wall hangings are seemingly indistinguishable—black rectangular pieces of quilted cotton tacked onto a white wall flow in almost one continuous band around the room. It is only on closer inspection that the white, gray, tan, and blue hand-stitches become apparent, revealing in turn a diverse set of celestial patterns.

As with her previous work, Von Mertens translates information bytes into embroidered abstractions, making them less objective and thus more approachable. In the past, she overlaid complicated topographical, geographical, or biological data, and presented them as alternative mapping systems. For this new series, however, she refashions pivotal episodes in American history by reproducing the rotating star charts that were seen overhead at the time. To address the U.S. military assault on Baghdad of March 20, 2003, Von Mertens chose analogous rotations as seen between

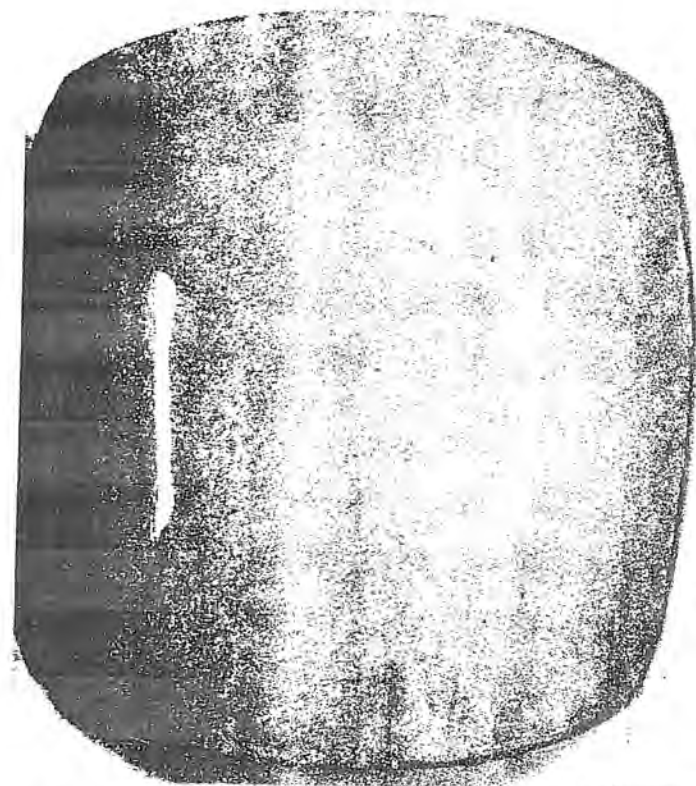
5:34am and sunrise from the Palestine Hotel, where most of the foreign press was then residing. Another quilt corresponds to rotations as viewed on April 4, 1968 between 6:01pm and 7:05pm from the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN, looking in the direction from which the bullet that killed Martin Luther King Jr. was fired. Von Mertens cites these works as quasi-memorials—by compressing time, space, and world history into a single frame, she offers the viewer occasions for quiet reverie. Like the stars themselves, spectators thus become at once distant "bystanders" and active participants in these horrendous events.

At the same time, "As the Stars Go By" marks a significant departure for Von Mertens, as she no longer displays the quilts as sculptural elements on bed-like platforms. Even if she still processes hard data without compromising any of her earlier sense of intimacy, the formula has somewhat changed. Von Mertens sees the shift as having a cinematic connection, not unlike the screen or filter of a camera lens—able to offer new perspectives on past events yet (contrary to Hollywood) without affording cathartic release. What we are confronted with instead is something quite abstract, but still not entirely out of the picture, thus enabling us to look at the world in a different light.

Despite the suggested astrological nature of this new series, Von Mertens avoids conjecturing as to why or how these events occurred. By embedding alternative worldviews on the ground as it were, "As the Stars Go By" calls into question the configuration of our own national destiny.

(THIS PAGE) ANNA VON MERTENS, 5:34 AM UNTIL SUNRISE, MARCH 20, 2003, BAGHDAD, IRAQ (FROM THE PALESTINE HOTEL LOOKING TOWARD THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE ON THE TIERS RIVER), 2006, HAND-STITCHED COTTON, 41 x 97.5 in., COURTESY THE ARTIST & JACK HANLEY GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO. (OPPOSITE LEFT TOP TO BOTTOM) KEVIN APPEL, COUNTRY HOME 4 (BRIDGE), 2006, OIL, ENAMEL, ACRYLIC ON COTTON OVER PAPER, 90 x 84 in., COURTESY ANGLES GALLERY, SANTA MONICA; DAVID NOONAN, INSTALLATION VIEWS. (OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT) UNDATED, 2006, SCREEN PRINT ON LAMINATED PLYWOOD, 74.06 x 52.38 in., PHOTO JOSHUA WHITE. COURTESY THE ARTIST & DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

# Art in Review



sses," a 1979 painting by Ron Gorchov, on display at P.S. 1.

that sometimes hold more art-  
s, and a small roll-top desk that  
des a row of small black notes  
filled with writing and sketch-

forth wall displays 40 good-  
pieces of plasterboard, each  
-d with a woman's name and  
hone number (part of which is  
eerly obscured), and, below, a  
ay of nearly a dozen pairs of  
worn, stylish shoes that give  
meaning to the phrase down at  
eels. (The combined message:  
rust may be poor, but he's a  
y and a gentleman.)

single part of this show is as  
ing as its totality, but the indi-  
a, works indicate several tal-  
for outline drawing, intimate  
shots and amusing phrases  
day or Roger Dalry?" asks  
rawing, in red), for various  
-t mapmaking (some works  
-st: the streets of Greenwich Vil-  
except that the names have

end of the oldest church in Harlem,  
the deputy director of a major New  
York museum, a scholar who is also  
the daughter of two prominent civil  
rights activists, and a Harlem-based  
architectural historian and city plan-  
ner."

They were each asked to contrib-  
ute an ordinary object, one that they  
didn't use for its original purpose,  
but kept anyway. These are dis-  
played side by side on plain wood  
planks, accompanied, as in any self-  
respecting Conceptualist show, by  
extensive text labels, in this case  
written by the owners.

The range of items is wide and un-

spectacular: a baseball cap, a sock, a  
Plaza Hotel ashtray, a stone chip.  
Certain items were acquired or  
found by their present owners; oth-  
ers were hand-me-downs or gifts. A  
few are said to have Proustian pow-  
ers to evoke a time, place or person-  
ality.

From the Harlem pastor, for ex-  
ample, comes a little still life of four  
separate objects: a metal pyx for  
holding liturgical ashes, surmounted  
by a dried ear of corn and two nuts.  
The pyx was a gift from his prede-  
cessor at the church; the ear of corn  
is from the farm where his grand-  
mother was born; the nuts were car-  
ried around as a charm by his grand-  
father. As an ensemble they form a  
little personal altar.

By contrast, other objects in the  
show carry a weight of what you  
might call negative charisma. The  
owner of the baseball cap has a seri-  
ously conflicted relationship with her  
item of choice. She received it as a  
present from a boss she hated, kept it  
at the back of a drawer and gave it to  
the show on the condition that it not  
be returned.

So, is this an art show or what? It  
certainly gave me an art experience.  
I found the labels absorbing, and  
most of the objects at least as inter-  
esting as what I've seen in Chelsea  
this summer, for the sense of lives,  
values and ideas they convey. It's the  
old Duchamp lesson, which is also a  
history lesson: art is an attitude, and  
the mind is every bit as much a shap-  
ing organ as the hand and the eye.

HOLLAND COTTER

about environmental conditions. Joy  
Garnett's paintings of fiery, storm-  
swollen skies are about turbulence in  
a larger sense, as is Christoph  
Draeger's jigsaw-puzzle photograph  
of the aftermath of a tsunami.

Boukje Janssen's small silhouette  
paintings of running figures, com-  
bined with Yumi Janairo Roth's  
sculptures of mirrored police barri-  
cades (she calls them disco barri-  
ers), introduce that greater distur-  
bance on a light-touch note. Joan Lin-  
der gives it weight in a life-size draw-  
ing, half realistic, half cartoon, of a  
gas-masked soldier. And in a hand-  
stitched wall piece by Anna von Mer-  
tens, danger becomes specific. Titled  
"8:45 a.m. to 10:28 a.m., Sept. 11, 2001  
(Above New York City Looking  
Towards Boston)," the piece, which  
suggests the image of readings on a  
radar screen, records the position of  
stars at a fateful moment in recent  
history.

Catarina Leitão's forest-green pla-  
tent in the center of the gallery is de-  
signed for meditative retreat, though  
it seems far too fragile to withstand  
the explosion in John Jurayj's "Unti-  
tled (Bomb 2005, #2)." Of Lebanese  
descent, Mr. Jurayj derived the im-  
ages in his paintings from news pho-  
tographs, including some of the dev-  
astation of Beirut in the 1990's.  
Enough to say that his new work  
catches the current climate in that  
brilliant and unfortunate city all too  
well.

HOLLAND COTTER

## Pepe Mar

### Hunga Bunga

Freight & Volume  
542 West 24th Street, Chelsea  
Through Aug. 18

Pepe Mar constructs delightful,  
funny and scary child-size monsters  
in three dimensions out of glue and  
scraps of paper cut from all kinds of  
found printed material. The one- and  
two-footed figures have snarling  
faces with big, staring eyes lifted  
from fashion photographs and other  
sources, and carnivorous animal  
mouths or swollen human lips and  
dirty teeth derived from photo-  
graphic images

## Prevailing Climate

Sara Meltzer Gallery  
525-531 West 26th Street, Chelsea  
Through Aug. 18

This intelligent group show, organ-  
ized by Rachel Gugelberger and Jeff-  
rey Walkowiak, is as much about  
psychic and political weather as it is







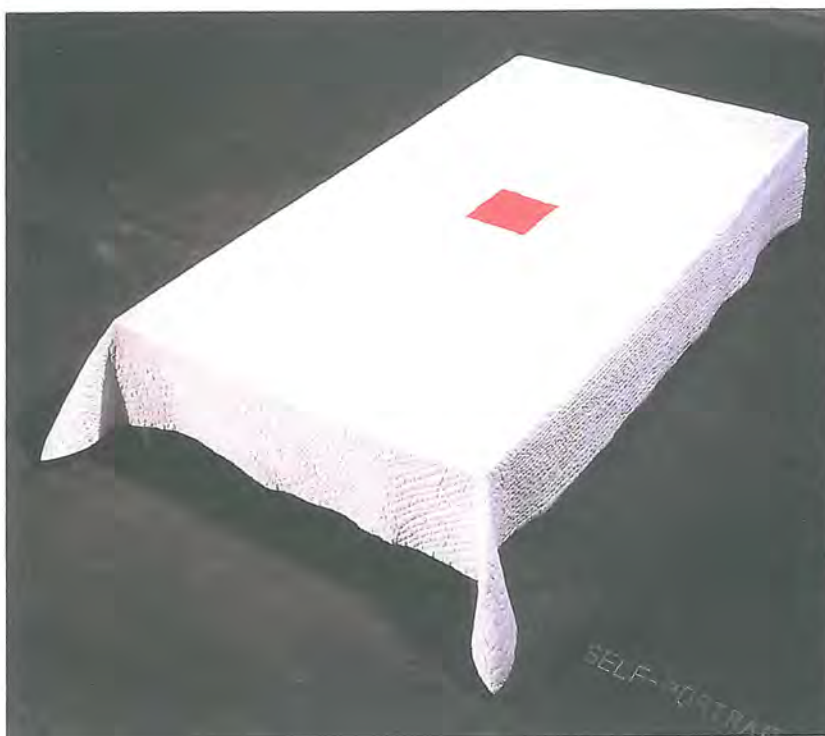
# Anna Von Mertens: Conceptual Craft

In her novel, *Still Life*, A. S. Byatt's narrator questions, "How would one find the exact word for the colour of the plum skins?...There was a problem with accurate notation, which was partly a problem of sufficiency of adjectives. Do we have enough words, synonyms, near synonyms for purple? What is the greyish, or maybe white, or whitish, or silvery, or dusty mist or haze or smokiness over the purple shine? How do you describe the dark cleft from stalk pit to oval end, its inky shadow? Partly with adjectives; it is interesting that adjectives in prose or verse style are felt to be signs of looseness and vagueness when in fact they are the opposite, at their best, an instrument for precision."

Anna Von Mertens's quilts are, to borrow from Byatt, precision instruments. Cold statistics, bare diagrams, and descriptions of places she has never witnessed are translated into the color and pattern of functional objects. Rather than aspire to a spot on gallery walls, the quilts are exhibited as they would function, on horizontal bed-sized platforms. In this orientation they begin to evoke the domestic, but stop long before the messy stains and detritus of sleep found in works such as *My Bed* 1998/1999 by the British artist Tracey Emin. Perhaps a

ANNA VON MERTENS *Matrix 207/Suggested North Points* Installation at Berkeley Art Museum, 2003.





ANNA VON MERTENS *Self-Portrait* Hand-stitched, hand-dyed cotton, steel angle, wire screen, 41" x 75" x 15", 1999.



ANNA VON MERTENS *Self-Portrait* Detail.

more fair comparison, despite its place on the gallery wall, is Robert Rauschenberg's early use of the quilt as canvas in *Bed* from 1955. But Von Mertens's quilts also inhabit a space quite their own, like giant architectural blueprints of an unknown land.

As is often observed of first novels, the early work, *Self-Portrait*, is autobiographical. But instead of a recognizable portrait of the upright body with its familiar contours, Von Mertens documents the topography of her body lying under cloth. Using a laser leveller, lines charted in quarter-inch increments create a topographic map of her exterior. When translated into stitches, the overall composition is reminiscent of a thumbprint. At the center, a red square contains the topographic map of the artist's pelvic area. The fabric references both the onset of menses as well as the custom in some cultures of displaying the nuptial sheets as proof of a bride's virginity. The public display of such events is contrasted here with the modest and concealing role that bed linen also plays. This translation of data from a common or public perspective into an unusual or private one is a technique that recurs throughout these works.

*I Was Taller from 1978 to 1987* also maps the body. Like many families, hers recorded the heights of brother and sister between the years 1975 and 1990 in marks on a door jam. Von Mertens uses colors associated with boys and girls (blue and red/pink) as color-coding to plot the bands of colour that make up the quilt. This documentation of growth is continued in the stitch pattern of neuron development for boys and girls, stitched in pink and blue to distinguish the two charts. While a systematic use of color-coding distinguishes male from female, Von



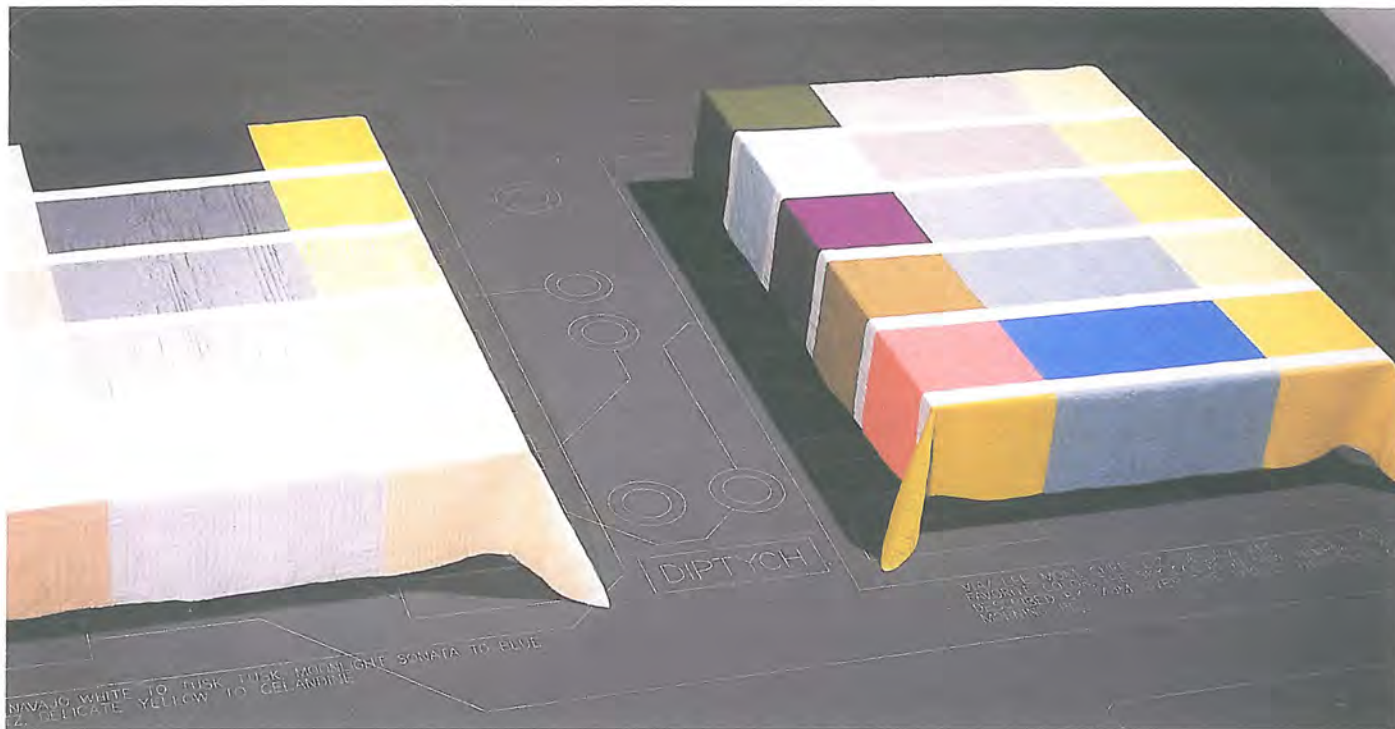
ANNA VON MERTENS *Black* Hand-stitched, hand-dyed cotton, steel angle, wire screen, 41" x 75" x 15"

Mertens suggests that the quilt's strength lies in its ability to contain both closeness and difference in the same space.

Ironically, the content of *Self-Portrait* and *I Was Taller...* are straightforward when compared to the far more obscure juxtapositions that make up the core of her work. For example, *Depths and Heights* translates the terrain of the sea floor at the ocean's deepest point in the Mariana Trench, the shipping routes taken to measure the depth of the ocean floor, and the percentage of the earth's surface above and below sea level in thousand metre increments. The diptych *Black and White* is derived from a view of the world in which views are polarized to either white or black. The spider web of white stitched thread across the surface of *Black* is the energy pattern of a nuclear explosion. The stitch pattern for *White* is taken from the same mushroom image but rotated. Von Mertens explains, "I like how the typical nuclear explosion gets obscured when seen from an aerial view. It is from this angle that the chaos and symmetry play together beautifully, and the horror of what the stitching actually represents is camouflaged or forgotten."

While these works translate measurements and statistics into color and pattern, other works address the challenge of capturing colors described by language. The diptych, *Via/Navajo White to Tusk Tusk, Moonlight Sonata to Blue Waltz, Delicate Yellow to Celandine, with Via/Lee, Mom, Chris, Liz, Jessica and Lisa's least favorite color, the New Hampshire sky color at 4p.m. described by Mom over the phone, the color of my*





**ANNA VON MERTENS** *Via/...* Diptych, hand-stitched, hand-dyed cotton, steel angle and tubing, plastic sheet, each piece 60" x 80" x 15"

*morning pee*, is based on hardware store paint chips and personal interpretations of the paint chip colors. On one side, Von Mertens proves her considerable skill in the dye lab by matching her dye color to the paint chips. But on the other, she interprets verbal, often anecdotal, descriptions of color onto cloth. The artist explains that the title, *Via*, refers to the holes that allow information to pass from one layer of a circuit board to another. While the holes are identical, each circuit pattern (stitched on the top of each quilt) is different. In other words, while the points of connection are the same, the routes they take are unique.

Finally, *Western Sky/The Sky of Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle at 4 p.m., October 23-29th* is based on the artist's interpretation of verbal descriptions of the sky given by friends living in various cities at different latitudes along the West Coast of the United States at the same time of day. In this work we must shift Byatt's query to ask if, in fact, we have enough colors to capture the words, charts, and statistics unearthed by Von Mertens. While each color palette and stitch pattern is derived from exceedingly specific references, their beauty and sophistication belie a seemingly random genesis. It is here, at the meeting of material and concept, that Von Mertens's work may be understood as conceptual craft.

—Jessica Hemmings holds a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh and teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.



# By Hand

The Use of Craft  
in Contemporary Art



Shu Hung and Joseph Magliaro, editors

In a response to the sleek forms and perfect angles of late-1990s objects, many of today's artists are returning to handmade work: hand lettering, hand drawing, hand sewing. From books to pillows to T-shirts to toys, their work defines an alternate view of contemporary design. *By Hand* features an international collection of the most noteworthy artists working by hand and shows their work in detailed photography and insightful texts. Here detail is emphasized over perfection and the personality of the artist is made a key element of the finished product. From Kiki Smith's lovingly etched birds to dynamo-ville's one-of-a-kind puppets to Barb Hunt's knitted land mines to Evil Twin's hand-bound publications, today's art revels in the care and consideration of craft.

Artists in *By Hand* include

Satoru Aoyama	electricwig	Project Alabama
BB&PPINC	Evil Twin Publications	Karen Reimer
Kelly Breslin	Tess Giberson	Carolyn Salas
Margarita Cabrera	Kirsten Hassenfeld	Tucker Schwarz
Rachel Cattle	Kent Henricksen	Slow and Steady Wins
Dave Cole	Barb Hunt	the Race
Robert Conger	Aya Kakeda	Kiki Smith
Daphne and Vera Correll	Andrew Kuo	Aaron Spangler
Frederique Daubal	Robyn Love	Anna Von Mertens
Rowena Dring	Victoria May	Shane Waltener
dynamo-ville	Brendan Monroe	Rob Wynne

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Princeton Architectural Press  
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## Anna Von Mertens

Berkeley, California

Because I started as a traditional quilt maker, producing quilts from clothes from the Salvation Army, I was originally simply attracted to the materials—the play of color in pattern and the tactility of the fabric. After making the shift from using quilts as my medium to using the bed itself as my medium, the content that was latent in the materials became more meaningful. Instead of embracing the intimacy and appeal of the materials just for their own sake, I used the intimacy evoked by the materials to match the content in my work.

I find it ironic that I am caught in a place where I am pushing the craft of quilting forward by making the work conceptual, but I am also an ultra-traditionalist, as all of my works are made to fit a single or queen-size bed and shown on the form of a bed. All of my works are hand-stitched, which is the most traditional element of all. For me rich associations come from the site of the bed and the evidence of the hand, so those are the elements I keep.

I try not to focus too much on how much time it takes me to make a piece, otherwise I'd never start a new one. It can take up to three months to make a piece. I start with an abstract idea that I then try to link with a pattern. After completing my research I draw my stitch pattern on the computer.

The hand-stitched line is an important element in my work. The evidence of the hand evokes time and contemplation, almost as a commitment to the ideas contained within the work. When I stitch diagrams of military explosions, those explosions are seen from a different vantage point because they are stitched in a slow, deliberate way. The hand-stitched line acts as a tracing—as if my fingers were slowly tracing the pathways that I am stitching as a way to map them and as a way to understand them.



## AROUND THE GALLERIES

[Galleries, from Page E28]

pended from the ceiling. And the gray concrete floor appears to liquefy into silvery ripples, formed by layered concentric rings of electrical wire that fill a room 20 feet by 22 feet.

The most exotic material, used for perhaps the most powerful piece in this show, is tar paper. Donovan has stacked hundreds of sheets of carefully torn black tar paper in an enormous rectangle, more than 35 feet long, 15 feet wide and 4½ feet high.

The top surface of this massive, plinth-like slab undulates like the surface of an angry, churning sea, or a topographical map charting a charred and devastated landscape. The sculpture seems to suck the light out of the room, exuding a density and weight that undoes the material associations of shelter and comfort that come with humble roofing paper. This specific object is a welter of contradictions — at once elegant and crude, industrial and homemade, poetic and banal, fluid and inert.

At the opposite end of Donovan's spectrum are several remarkable drawings made with soap bubbles on foam-core board. Tinting the soapy water with blue ink or dye, she scattered foam across the foam-core. As the bubbles burst, they left pale blue traces of both their form and their explosion. The linear webs of color recall cloud chambers.

Sometimes the work feels gimmicky, flat or even pointless, as in stalagmites composed from stacks of purple and white buttons glued together, or white stickers on Mylar sheets layered in light boxes to suggest kaleidoscopic patterns extending into infinity. They don't repay attention with wonder, seeming instead like earnest efforts to fill the gallery's enormous spaces.

At her best, however, Donovan is a veritable Rumpelstiltskin, spinning straw into gold. The cubes, the tar paper slab, the bubble drawings and several others make for one of the most rewarding shows this season.

**Art Gallery** 5514 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 935-4411, through May 31. Closed Sunday and Monday.

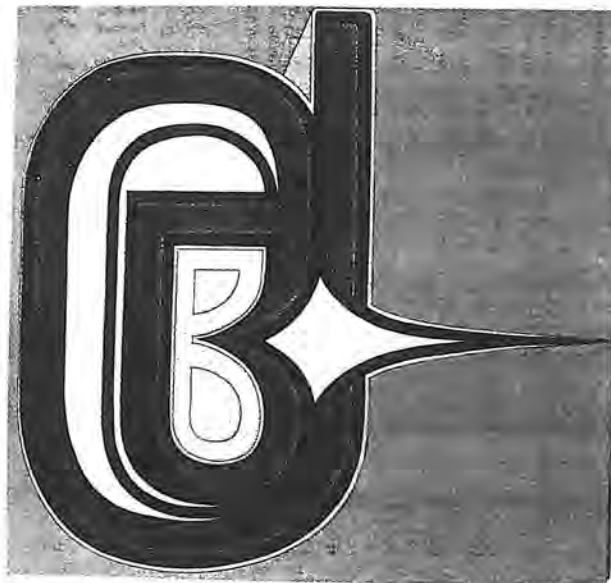
### Slippery by design

Bart Exposito is among the more accomplished of the Neo-Hard-Edge painters who have emerged in recent years. (Speaking of which, the time is ripe for a serious, analytical group show that would distinguish this work from superficial 1980s Neo-Geo.) Five new paintings in acrylic and marker on canvas and four new drawings at Black Dragon Society demonstrate his continuing verve.

Interlaces of precise bands of color, frequently outlined in black or white, initially look like rejects from a branding project for an unidentified corporate client. It's the "reject" part that holds your interest. These sleek, flat, punchy graphic images are too visually slippery to conform to the narrow demands of product identification.

Exposito has waded into an increasingly crowded territory marked by the conflation of post-war art and industrial design. Turning the conventional tables, he has used the latter to energize the former. The drawings show how he plots his paintings' courses, but it's the paintings themselves that are arresting.

The patterns are as suggestive of Pacific Northwest Indian art as they are of hip graphic design, which suggests something about our blindness to contem-



**NEO-HARD-EDGE:** Bart Exposito's "Standoff" (2005) was composed freehand with acrylic and marker on canvas.

### A debate put to rest

The otherwise remarkable recent museum exhibition of quilts created by a group of women who live in the isolated African American hamlet of Gee's Bend, Ala., was seriously marred by unwitting condescension. The quilts were hung on the wall, and many art critics promptly gushed that they were great because they looked like abstract paintings.

But who knows? Maybe abstract paintings, first made by establishment white men, are great because they look like

**Black Dragon Society**, 961 Chung King Road, Chinatown, (213) 620-0030, through Feb. 26. Closed Sun. through Wed.

quilts made by disenfranchised black women.

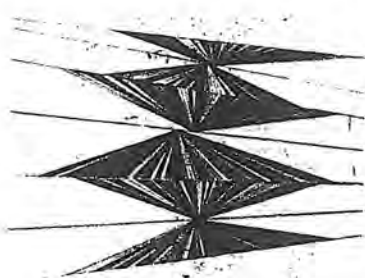
At Elizabeth Oliveria Gallery, Bay Area artist **Anna Von Mertens** fixes the false hierarchy of such irrelevant comparisons by emphasizing her quilts' utilitarian substance as sculptural objects. Each of five quilts — one two-part work and three single panels — are displayed on low white platforms, which act as the Minimalist equivalent of beds. Quilts, like many textiles, spring to life when their bodily associations are manifest.

The patterns Von Mertens stitches in her quilts show fields of energy — a nuclear explosion, a radiating mandala, prism-like rays of color and clusters of arrows that a gallery handout says refer to ocean currents but that also make reference to the directional process of stitching itself. Death, sex, spirit and cycles of life are subtly entwined in Von Mertens' lovely work. All four are greatly enhanced by her savvy decision to lay them out on beds.

**Elizabeth Oliveria Gallery**, 2712 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 837-1073, through Feb. 26. Closed Sun. and Mon.

### Drawn in by an emerging artist

Mark Grotjahn, whose rich abstract paintings stand out from the pack in Pittsburgh's current Carnegie International, is showing a group of recent large-scale drawings in the suitably chapel-like Projects Gallery at the UCLA Hammer Museum. Five employ his so-called "butterfly" motif of radiating fans of color drawn in pencil against a white ground; the two newest, which represent a new direction, are dubbed "black flowers" for their fluid, all-over patterns drawn in black graph-



**BUTTERFLIES:** Mark Grotjahn's work uses color pencil on paper.

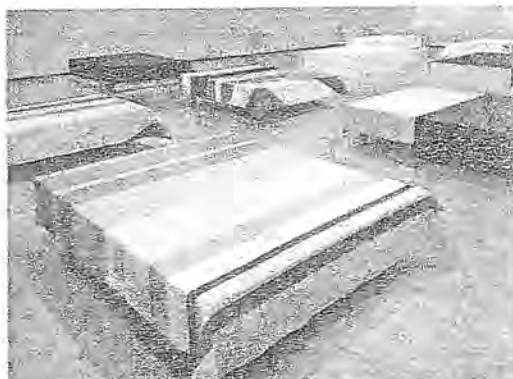
ite. All seven are exquisite.

What's most appealing about Grotjahn's work is the sheer acuity of its contemplative substance. His drawings, like his paintings, effortlessly pull you into their networks of fabrication.

The splayed patterns of random color, reminiscent of light turning into a rainbow after passing through a prism, seem to emanate from a mysterious place deep within the sheet of paper. The nested undulations of black graphite are repetitive, as if ritualistically applied, and they absorb light into the innards of the page.

In neither case, however, is Grotjahn suggesting some enigmatic "inner world," locked away in art and unavailable to mere mortals. Instead, keenness of physical perception is exalted. Visually unique, Grotjahn creates intuitive systems reminiscent of those that animated the extraordinary work of Albrecht Jensen (1903-1981). He is rapidly emerging as a major talent.

**UCLA Hammer Museum**, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood, (310) 443-7000, through April 17. Closed Monday.



Anna von Mertens was adamant that her hand-stitched quilts, on exhibit at UCSB's University Art Museum, be displayed on beds.

## Sewn Together

Anna von Mertens' *Matrix 297/Suggested North Points*. At UCSB's University Art Museum, through August 28.

Reviewed by **Charles Donelan**

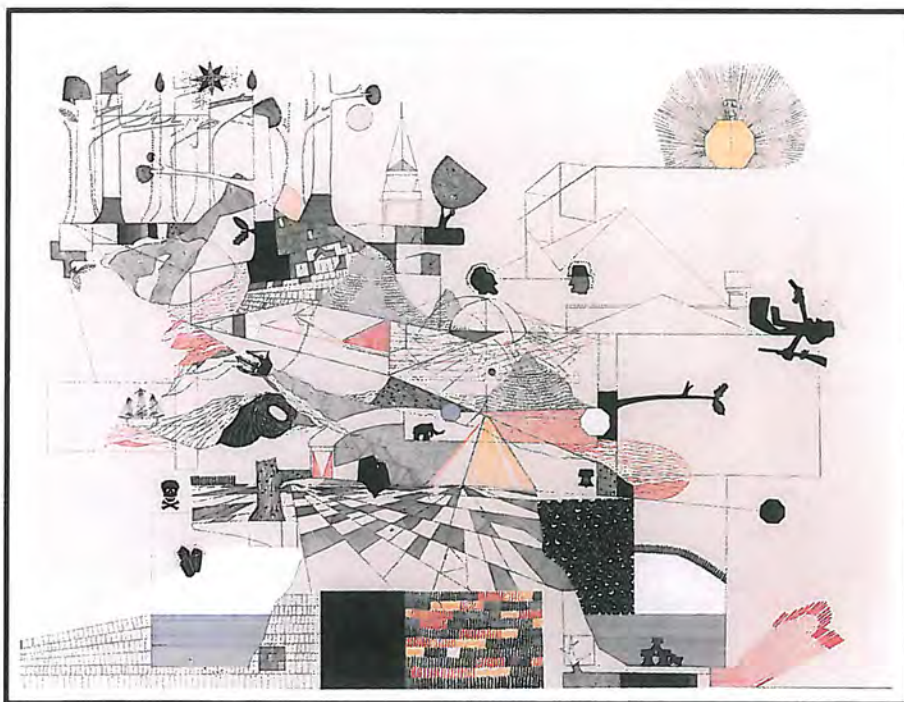
**T**he University Art Museum is full of beds. This is how Anna von Mertens insists on exhibiting her fabric-based art: horizontally on bed-shaped frames, rather than as wall hangings. The pieces are traditionally hand-stitched quilts of extraordinary intricacy and sophistication, but they are shown flat to respect the artist's intention that her medium be perceived as the bed itself, rather than just the textile on it. This is only the first of a series of surprising and delightful aesthetic decisions that become apparent as one encounters the work

of this gifted and enterprising artist, whose subjects are as global and cosmic as her medium is homespun and down-to-earth.

The apparent simplicity of the geometric patterns and bold colors used in *Matrix 297/Suggested North Points* is deceptive. The amalgam of disparate elements that von Mertens combines in her work—AutoCAD and the bed, hand-stitching and nuclear physics, personal history and global politics—lurks very close to the decorative surface of these objects, and is initially disclosed by attention to that surface. Based on her AutoCAD drawings, their surface designs are marvelously intricate. These quilts have nothing to do with the machine-made monotony of what's on the shelves at Linens 'n' Things. They often depict the systems that appear on the screens of the laboratory technician. Brought to alternate life by the hours of hand labor von Mertens devotes to them, the result is magical.

This exhibit communicates a sense of continual discovery, both for the artist personally, and for the viewer as he or she becomes more informed and absorbed by it. Anna von Mertens is thinking about things that concern all of us—energy levels and transformation, place and time, where to live, and what to do there. Ultimately, her subject is the idea of plotting a personal course through life. The work dwells on the individual's relation with whatever—after we factor in all the things we can know about the systems in which we are caught—can still be felt as destiny. It's a great show for young people in particular, because von Mertens balances so gracefully such a range of impulses. Everything is seemingly available to her, and her insights into science and politics are as personal and meditative as the countless hours of hand stitching that have gone into these remarkable objects. See it with a budding artist, and let her tell you what it means. ■

DORSKY  
GALLERY  
Curatorial Programs



**MENTAL MAPS**

JANICE CASWELL, ROB de MAR, AUGUSTO DI STEFANO, SHALINI O'DELL,  
JESSICA RANKIN, MATTHEW SONTHEIMER, ANNA VON MERTINS

Curated by Kate Green  
September 11 – November 14, 2005

Opening reception: Sunday, September 11, 2:00–5:00 p.m.



which coincided with a period of intense therapy. While the jagged red marks convey acute emotion, ultimately the passages are illegible, as is the word CASE, which the installed images spell together, but in text written with white-out. This piece, like Sontheimer's others, organizes the disorder of human experience and relationships while turning the illuminating quality of words against themselves.

**Anna Von Mertens'** hand-dyed, hand-sewn quilts draw on the cartographic tradition of describing the individual's relationship to the whole. Into the soft, domestic medium she stitches schematic sketches depicting concerns of global import. Past projects have diagrammed the explosive beginnings of the universe, the atmospheric collapse around a black hole, and the migration patterns of birds. *Black and White, Shades of Gray* (2004) approaches politics. The five quilts of the project, like all of Von Mertens', are draped over bed-like wooden platforms that further an intimate contemplation of what is inscribed. The first two works depict nuclear explosions in a monochromatic palate, suggesting the destructive impact of dichotomous reactions to conflict. The redemptive power of a more forgiving and organic approach is explored in the three quilts subtitled *Gray Area*. Each features rays of color bursting through a field of white. Lines and patterns threaded into the cloth describe the cyclical give and take of tidal currents. Just as surely as water moves from one shore to the next, it can be counted upon to return. *Black and White, Shades of Gray* collides the personal with the external to map the solitary's relation to the world at large.

The artists in *Mental Maps* follow in Debord's footsteps and have taken up Jameson's task. They organize the puzzling world around them through their per-



Anna Von Mertens *Black and White, Shades of Gray*, 2004

ception of it—not through locational coordinates. While geographic maps are rooted in the physical, these works are grounded in the psyche. Janice Caswell, Rob de Mar, Augusto Di Stefano, Shaun O'Dell, Jessica Rankin, Matthew Sontheimer, and Anna Von Mertens fabricate their understandings of the world by way of emotional, temporal, and psychophysical responses to it. They create links between memory, perception and physicality—simultaneously destabilizing notions about traditional maps and offering alternatives. They question whether the methodical graphing of space is any more useful than the depiction of what one might experience in it. These maps may be personal guides to our surroundings, but they are no less useful for making sense of the often-bewildering contemporary landscape. □

— Kate Green

#### NOTES

1. An example of that work is *Discours sur les passions de l'amour* (1957), which was included in *Mapping*, a 1994 exhibition curated by Robert Storr at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY which focused on the geographic map as an artistic motif.
2. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 347-357.
3. Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," 349.
4. The term "cognitive mapping" was first introduced by Jameson in 1984 in "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July-August): 59-92.

#### BIOGRAPHY

As Assistant Curator at Artpace San Antonio, TX, Kate Green has organized projects with artists such as Trisha Donnelly, Luis Gispert, and Yunhee Min. She is currently working on the group exhibition *Spanglish*. Previously she was with P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and Dia Art Foundation, both in New York, NY. In 2003 she received her M.A. from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.

## ART ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

You'd invite your date to come up to look at your etchings, but what have you got instead? A faded Fillmore poster that looked better on eBay, the obligatory foggy Golden Gate Bridge photo (strategically positioned to cover spackle marks from the previous occupant's Golden Gate Bridge photo) and a stark-naked bathroom you briefly considered wallpapering with dot-bomb stock certificates. So you dutifully book your flight for and hotel for the next big art fair, held in some European city best known for smog and schnitzel. Fighting off jet lag and Germans, you're the first through the door at the fair—success!—only to discover that the painting that really speaks to you was sold the night before at a *vernissage* preview for private dealers and corporate sponsors. Ouch.



**Kota Ezawa**

**Known for...** Actions that resemble low-tech paper cutouts in motion capturing fragments of the O.J. trial verdict, directing lectures by Susan Sontag and Jochen Beuys and the death of Beth Taylor titled *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

**Early exposure** San Francisco Commission Commission (1997)  
Artists' Television Access (1998)  
New Langton (2004)

**Early acclaim** Murphy & Co. Fellowship (2000)  
YBCA Bay Area (2002)  
Artadia Award (2005)  
SECA Art Award (2006)

**International art-star cred.** Shanghai Biennale and Art Base Beach, where light-box versions of photographic masterworks are shown by day two of the year's fair

**But still show locally at...** Haines Gallery (49 Geary St.) hainesgallery.com

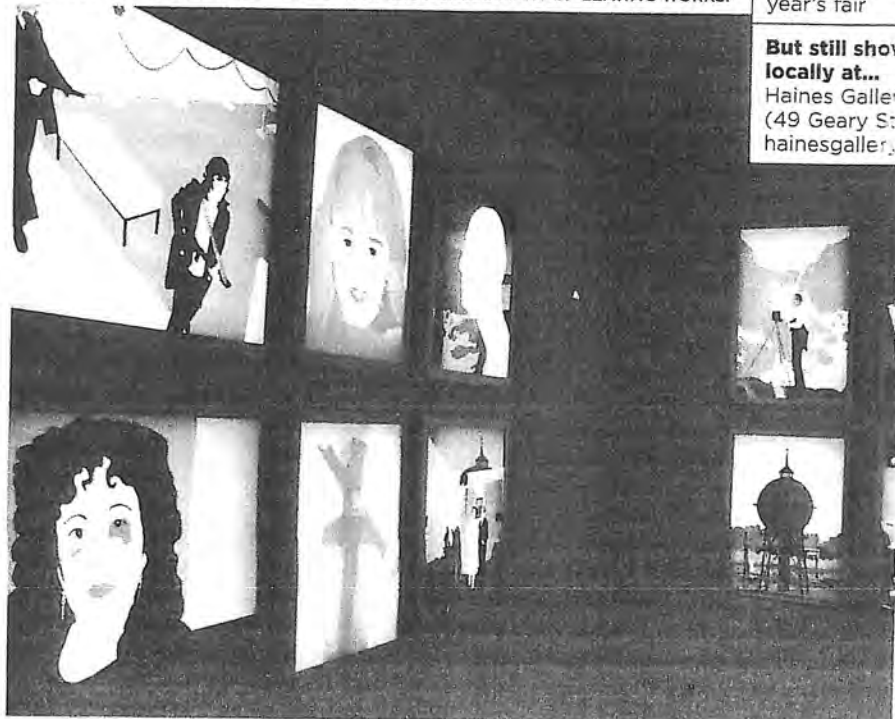
# Watch THIS SPACE

Looking for art in all the wrong places? Yes, if you're ignoring the treasure trove of A-list painters, sculptors and more right here at home.  
by Alison Bing

But don't give up yet. You can beat the international art market at its own game by playing your wild card: You live in precocious San Francisco, where Bruce Nauman pioneered video art back in the 1960s, an SF-born J. Crew model named Matthew Barney was granted a breakthrough SFMOMA show in 1991 and a graffiti artist known as Twist crossed over to art stardom as Barry McGee in the '90s. Here are a few of the SF-based artists making their mark on the international art scene lately—and that's just for starters. You never know what will surface here, where new technology rubs up against old-school craftsmanship and Pacific Rim elegance meets scrappy DIY diligence. Heed risk-taking local arts nonprofits and galleries, and you'll spot future museum pieces and major talents in their natural habitat, long before any art-fair *vernissage*.



A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST (TOP) BY THE ARTIST; (ABOVE) LENNON SONTAG BEUYS (2004), AS INSTALLED AT NEW LANGTON ARTS; (BELOW) THE HAINES GALLERY BOOTH AT 2005'S ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH SHOWCASED MANY OF EZAWA'S WORKS.





## Rojas



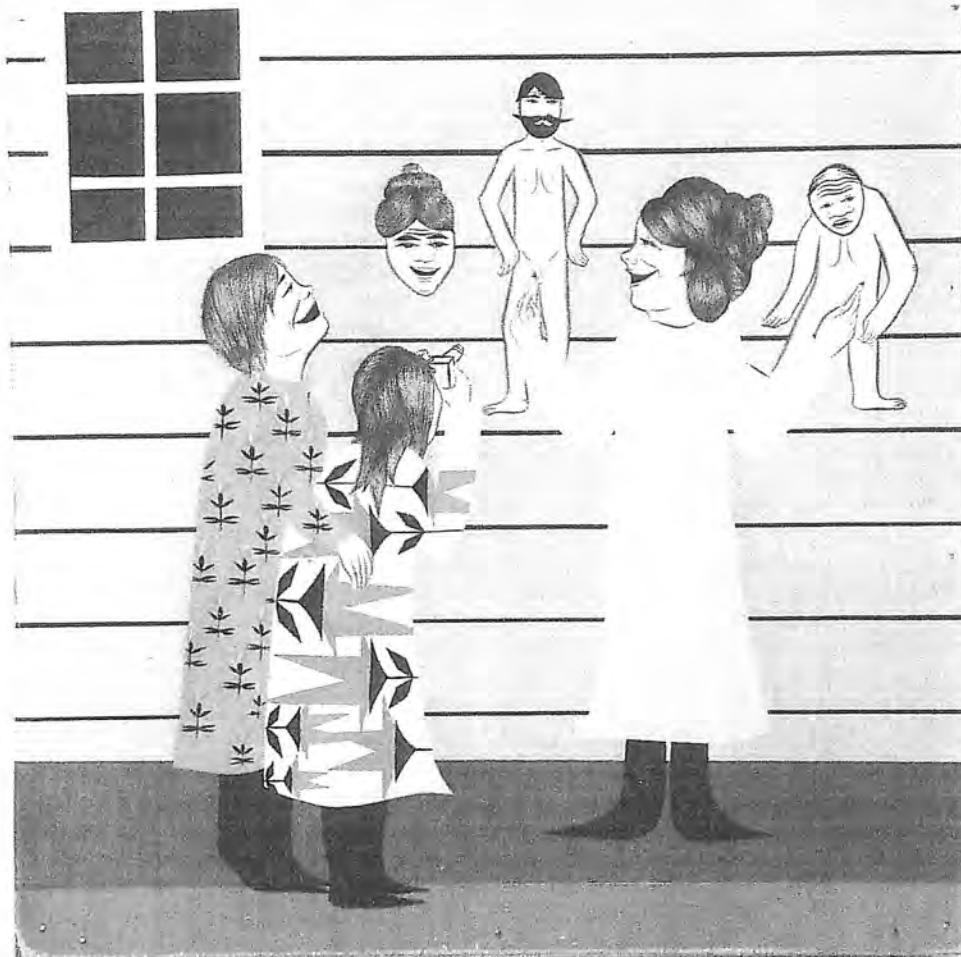
**for...** Her ominously winged girls, y bears and ly shrunkened her the it star of erwise rone-heavy "ul Losers" g showcase art at Yerba Center for the 2004 (most r seen in Milan).

**Early exposure...**  
Luggage Store Gallery (2003)

**Early acclaim...**  
Headlands  
Tournesol  
Award (2004)  
Artadia Award  
(2005)

**International art-star cred...**  
Deitch Projects  
(NYC), Prague  
Biennale

**But still shows locally at...**  
Gallery Paule  
Anglim  
(14 Geary St.,  
gallerypaule  
anglim.com)



UNTITLED, 2006 (SHOW #4), BY CLARE ROJAS, FROM A GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM SHOW IN THE SAME YEAR.

## ca Bollinger



**for...** Web surf- an art form: dig- vies made from icture collected computer over and sketches from image d searches on b. Her sketches ed Brian Eno, Rashid and even ize's crashed SFMOMA's indmark show l: Art in ilogical Times."

**Early exposure...**  
The LAB (1996)

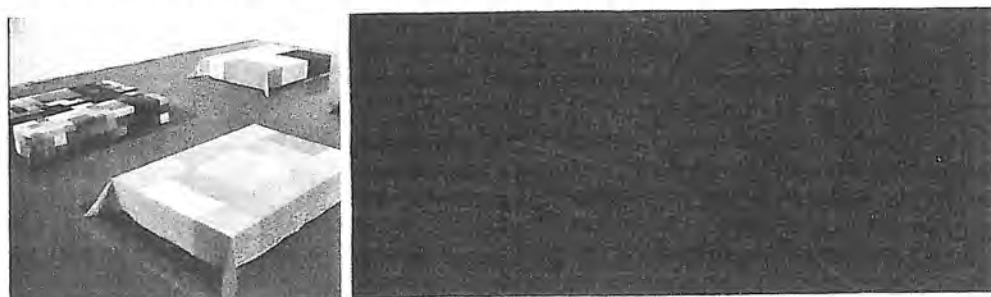
**Early acclaim...**  
Headlands  
Center for the  
Arts residency  
(1996)

SECA Art Award  
(1996)  
Artadia Award  
(2001)

**International art-star cred...**  
PULSE Miami

**But still shows locally at...**  
Rena Bransten  
Gallery  
(77 Geary St.,  
renabransten  
gallery.com)

BOLLINGER'S NICE WAS A PART OF S "SIMILAR SAME" EXHIBITION IN 1999.



AT SOUTHERN EXPOSURE, VIA (ABOVE LEFT), AN INSTALLATION BY ANNA VON MERTENS; HER 5:34 AM UNTIL SUNRISE, MARCH 20, 2003, BAGHDAD, IRAQ, FROM THE SHOW "AS THE STARS GO BY," AT JACK HANLEY GALLERY.

## Anna Von Mertens



**Known for...**  
Platform  
beds covered  
with uniquely  
discomfiting quilts,  
stitched with  
abstract patterns  
drawn from  
mushroom-cloud explosions,  
WWII bombing raids and star trails  
from the morning of 9/11.

**Early exposure...**  
Southern Exposure  
(2001)  
San Francisco Arts  
Commission Gallery  
(2002)

**Early acclaim...**  
Headlands residency  
(2000-2002)  
YBCA Bay Area Now  
(2005)

**International art-star cred...**  
Armory Show (NYC); col-  
lector interest has reached  
a fever pitch this spring  
with back-to-back New York  
shows and coverage in *The  
New York Times*

**But still shows locally at...**  
Jack Hanley Gallery  
(395 Valencia St.,  
jackhanley.com)



Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

Bay Area Now 4 catalog

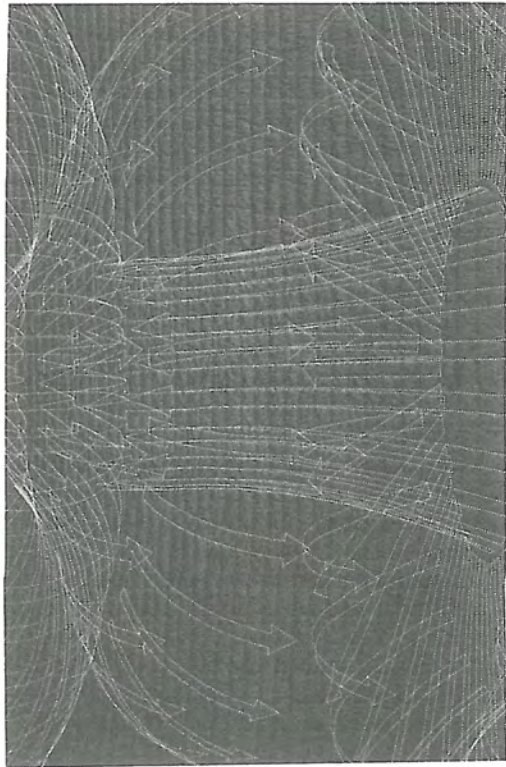
*Black and White* (detail)  
2004

Hand-stitched cotton  
80 x 60 x 17 in

Courtesy of the artist  
and Luzabath Olvera Gallery, Los Angeles

### anna von mertens

The stitches that hold together sculptor Anna Von Mertens's hand-dyed abstract quilts diagram mapping systems, scientific phenomena and forms of knowledge both intimate and institutional. A recent diptych titled *Black and White* contains delicate threads that delineate the energy patterns of a nuclear explosion, the mushroom cloud's perfect symmetry offering a surreal contrast to the chaos and annihilation instigated by its detonation. Von Mertens's two new works for *Bay Area Now 4* show a further interest in investigating the physics of dispersed energy. The stitches on one sculpture depict an AutoCAD drawing of the scatter pattern of an exploding military tank, while the other sculpture focuses on the vanishing point of a hundred straight white lines that appear to simultaneously implode and explode in an optical illusion. Von Mertens translates the concept of thermodynamic entropy—the theory that everything moves spontaneously in the direction of maximum chaos or disorder—into our current place and time in the globalized world, where everything is growing closer together as it drifts farther apart.



#### CONTACT US

► David Wiegand,  
Daily Datebook Editor  
datebook@sfrchronicle.com  
(415) 777-7006

#### ONLINE

► sfgate.com/datebook

San Francisco Chronicle

June 13 5 7

SECTION



Saturday,  
August 9, 2003

# DATEBOOK

## Artist Anna Von Mertens has quilting down to a science at the Berkeley Art Museum

Where "sculpture" once implied merely something made of metal, wood or stone, the term stretched in the '60s to encompass nearly anything made with the intent to engage viewers' sense of themselves as mobile, embodied and receptive.

Under that expanded definition Anna Von Mertens' quilts qualify as sculpture. Five of them make up the latest in the continuing Matrix series at the Berkeley Art Museum.

Von Mertens dyes and sews by hand the fabrics that compose her quilts. This resort to traditional craft has almost become a cliché of feminist art and art history. Quilts remain emblems of a gendered division of labor and a largely bygone solidarity among women. Recently museum curators have discovered pieced quilts as a sort of folk abstract art.

Von Mertens' methods allude to that history, but she does much more.

The viewer of the works at the Berkeley museum at first sees only the quilts' bold patterns, which bring to mind hard-edge color field painting. "North" (2003) recalls the abstract paintings of Jo Baer.

A closer look discovers the intricate patterns Von Mertens has sewn into her quilts. Four of those in the present ensemble derive from mathematical and scientific illustrations, with their peculiar systemic elegance.

Like the markings Von

**Anna Von Mertens: Suggested North Points:** Fabric sculpture. Through Sept. 7 UC Berkeley Art Museum, 2626 Bancroft Way, Berkeley. (510) 642-0808, [www.bampfa.berkeley.edu](http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu).

**Makeshift World:** Works in many media by 20 contemporary artists. Through Aug. 23. Stephen Wirtz Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 433-6879, [www.wirtzgallery.com](http://www.wirtzgallery.com).

### Kenneth Baker Galleries

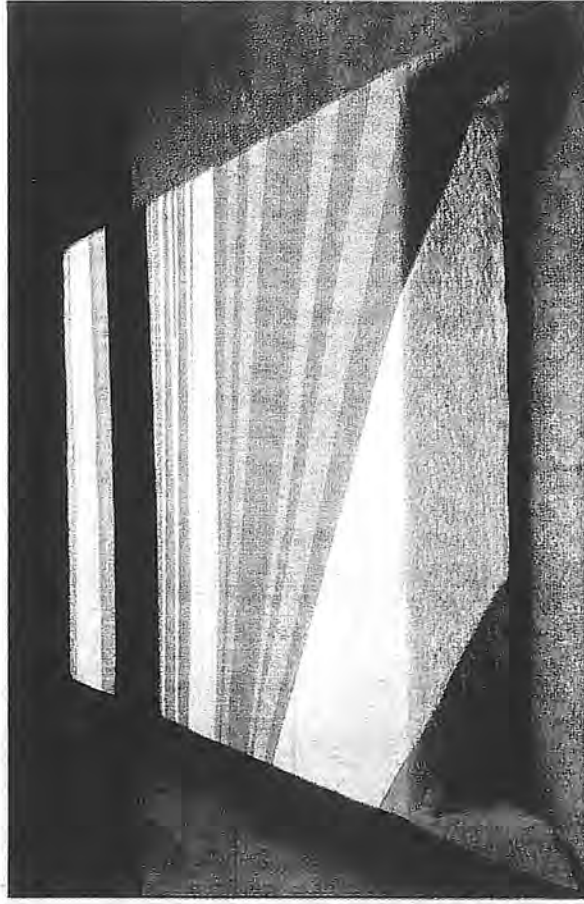
Mertens has painted on the floor, compass arrows pointing north, the stitched diagrams refer to her and everyone's search for orientation in a realm where the tangible and the imperceptible — such as imperceptible or unrecognized influences — meet.

Von Mertens displays her quilts spread upon platforms the size of a queen-size bed, enabling us to see them nearly whole and keeping the thought of beds in our minds, with their rich associations.

Few contemporary artworks make such an unforced avowal of unconscious depths feeding them and our responses to them.

Von Mertens' fastidious craft produces a kind of radiance, beyond that of the objects' colors,

► **GALLERIES:** Page D10



Anna Von Mertens sews intricate patterns into her boldly designed quilts, such as "North."

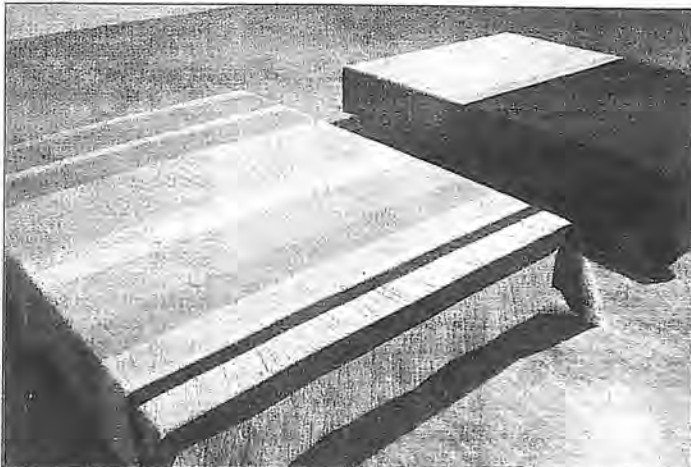


# Bay Area Living

insidebayarea.com

FRIDAY

August 29, 2003



**TEXTILE ARTIST** Anna Von Mertens has created "West" (left) and "East," two quilts that are part of her installation "Suggested North Points" on display at the Berkeley Art Museum.

## Existential quilting? Yes, and Von Mertens does it

By Susan Parker

CONTRIBUTOR

I first met South Berkeley resident and textile sculptor Anna Von Mertens when we were both artists-in-residence at Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County. Anna had recently completed a master's degree in textiles at California College of Arts and Crafts and was working on a quilt installation.

This was not your run-of-the-mill, grandma-type quilting bee stuff. This was extreme quilt making — quilting that grapples with the existential.

Anna was getting under yards of cloth while her husband, Chris, a con-

tractor, traced the lines made by a laser leveler onto the material draped over her body. Using cotton fabric she hand-dyed, Anna then hand-sewed the topography of her physical contours into the quilt. The result was an amazing topo map of the ridges, rises, folds and valleys of herself intricately portrayed on a canvas traditionally used to spread across the family bed.

Anna, 30, has since done many other projects that connect the historic beginnings of quilt making with modern concepts. Colonial quilts had practical and symbolic uses, from con-

See **QUILT**, Living 4

## Maps a reference for 'North Points' artist

► **QUILT**, from Living 1

trolling dust and draping a coffin, to recording family history and friendships. Anna's quilts go several steps beyond the norm, exploring complex human relationships and the interaction between the personal and the empirical.

"Maps are my point of reference: bird migration patterns as traces from nature, circuit boards as paths of communication, topography as a foreign landscape, cell structures as an inner landscape," says the artist on her Web site ([www.annavonmertens.com/press.html](http://www.annavonmertens.com/press.html)). "I stitch these patterns to internalize them and build my own sense of place."

Anna's current solo show at the Berkeley Art Museum is titled "Suggested North Points." It reflects her interest in home, politics and science. Five platforms as big as queen-size beds sit in a white room, covered in Anna's newest quilts. On the floor, Anna has drawn with a grease pencil stylized compass points taken from an early 20th century cartography book. The first four quilts represent North, South, East and West and Anna's personal journey to the Pacific Coast.

To the left is "West," the brilliant, neon colors of a Hollywood sunset re-

flected in its pattern. Stitched into the fabric are circular arrows spiraling upward, representing exploding energy and the Big Bang. To the right is "East," with subdued, muted shades and stitches circling inward, toward a metaphorical Black Hole. Next is "South," with the subtle, desert colors of Red Rocks, Nev. The stitching is intricate, tighter and more abstract. It denotes metabolic pathways and the interconnectedness of our ecosystem. "North," with its subtle browns, greens and blues, shows potential, hidden winter energy. Thousands of stitched circles overlap and connect, a symbolic representation of cells merging, reacting, cross-pollinating and changing.

The fifth quilt, "Influence," is off by itself on a concrete frame, unmovable, cold and impersonal. Initially appearing monochromatic, the pattern emerges slowly: black thread on black fabric. The stitching once again is complex, but a distinct outline of the United States surfaces.

A subtle shift of the pattern makes the borders soft, appearing and disappearing, a quiet perspective on global politics.

When I asked Anna how she got into quilt design, we discovered that we had a mutual friend in Willa Etta Graham.

a 93-year-old Oakland quilt maker who died several years ago. Anna started quilting when she was a junior visual arts major at Brown University.

Later, after moving to California, she would visit Mrs. Graham at her home on West MacArthur Boulevard.

"We'd watch a lot of soap operas together while she quilted in her dining room," Anna says. "On one visit she showed me a bedroom closet stacked high with folded quilts. She piled them one after another onto her bed, and I was blown away by the work of this woman's life."

Her next project is documenting the energy patterns of military explosions.

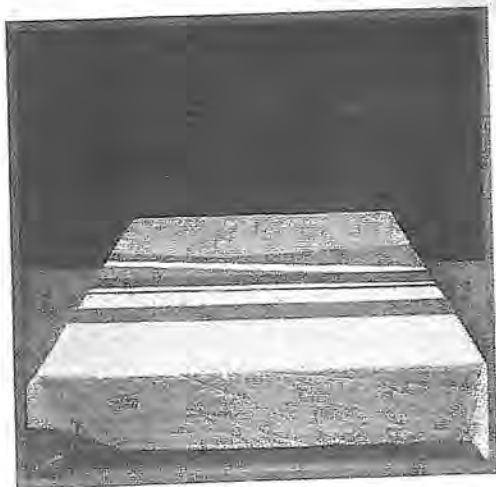
"I'm continuing to reference the policies of our current administration in my work," she says.

From the practical to the symbolic, the scientific to the metaphoric, Anna carries on a time-honored tradition in a very modern, non-traditional way.

► Anna Von Mertens' fabric sculptures, "Suggested North Points," are on display through Sept. 7 at the UC Berkeley Art Museum, 2626 Bancroft Way. Call (510) 642-0808 or visit [www.bampfa.berkeley.edu](http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu).

Susan Parker is an East Bay writer and author of "Tumbling After."





Anna Von Mertens, *South*, 2003, hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, laminate, 60" x 80" x 17", at University Art Museum, UCSB, Santa Barbara.

## Anna Von Mertens at University Art Museum, UCSB

**T**echnically, Anna Von Mertens works in the realm of textile art, dealing with the traditional materials of fabric and stitching, as noun and verb, as end result and as process. Despite such classic quilt-making conventions as hand-dyeing and hand-stitching, the artist pushes way beyond her chosen medium to create dichotomous artworks that are at once minimal, yet secretly dense with intention and imagery. In *Suggested North Points* and *Black and White, Shades of Gray*, Von Mertens extends beyond her usual discrete, singular and intimate bed-like structures into an installation. Markings on the floor added cross-references to directionality—of topography and emotional bearings—and sociopolitical meaning.

When seen from afar, or with a cursory glance, the elaborately stitched quilts on platforms just literally lay there, prettily. Closer scrutiny and conceptual backstory bring us into the vortex of a richer and more expansive aesthetic, one in which Von Mertens uses her venerable art-craft-domestic supplies in the service of a restless intellectual discourse.

The quiltworks making up *Black and White, Shades of Gray* deal with aspects and dangers of extremism, and the grounding force of more neutral positions—a grayer way. Woven into the stitched pattern (designed on computer and then fastidiously hand-worked) are images of nuclear mushroom clouds, while the linear patterns elsewhere lean on markings and energies of more non-militarized, scientific and natural sources.

Drawing on the implicitly rational

markings and delineations of cartography, Von Mertens has created a yet more complex system of psychological associations with *Suggested North Points*. Rectangular "bedding" platforms are placed in the gallery in ways that both give rhythm to the space and assert their own physical presence. These quilts allude to our precarious place amidst the matrix of directions, in the concrete world and within our mental terrain. Varying energy modes are stitched—in her way, drawn—into the fabric. Radiating arrows represent the big bang theory, while spiraling designs are more implosive.

While Von Mertens's work contains echoes of post-feminist art and the playful subversions of various absurdistisms—dada on forward—the artist is in pursuit of a unique fusion of form and concept. The effect of is contingent on the careful interplay of seeming opposites. Soft elements remain in her work—i.e., the cozy, innocent air of craft and the actual gentleness of the fabric and stitching—run up against the insertion of hard thought processes and dark, real world themes.

—Josef Woodard

Anna Von Mertens: *Suggested North Points* closed in August at the University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara.

Josef Woodard is a freelance writer based in Santa Barbara.

## 'Inside Out' at L2kontemporary

**I**n literature and visual art, the body and mind seem forever entrenched in exhibiting the outer surface and inner psyche that comprises an identity. Curated by Los Angeles artist David Early, the premise of *Inside Out* frames the works to be figurative in nature with a focus on some psychic aspect of the body. Comprised of twelve artists, most of whom are located in the United States, the works in the show represent a broad interpretation of this well-worn body/mind relationship.

Many pieces approach what Early terms as "life's internal or external boundaries" from a symbolic format, with the figure representing one's inner turmoil. Moody portraiture by Chris Mann and Sean Hopp are at this end of the spectrum; the two artists seem intent on using the figure as a way to symbolize the psychological drama that lies under-

neath. It is a more direct and intimate approach to the discussion of mind and body as the facial expressions and muted tones address the emotions within the subject. While interesting on their own, these works appear almost too personal and limited in the ways they address the contemporary social issues pertaining to the curatorial premise.

Other pieces that seem to resonate beyond the individual come at the body/mind theme from a subtler terrain, drawing on the evidence of life as a means of portraying the inner workings

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of the self. The collaborative puppet theater scene by Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet, *Dante's Inferno: A Puppet Movie - #2521 scene 1 & 2 set*, takes on Early's theme of "privacy, obscurity, fame and misfortune" in its entirety. Designed after nineteenth-century toy theaters, Birk and Pignolet portray *The Divine Comedy* with a contemporary twist depicting Dante as a

Southern Californian led by a mullet-sporting Virgil. It is one of the theater sets designed by the artists for a film of the literary work that is to be performed by the toy theater. The humor and witty anachronism of contemporizing Dante through an antiquated children's pastime, offsets the human conundrum of existence. This oblique manner of discussing the turmoil of life opens up the show's premise to examine not only the subject at hand, but also the manner in which society deals with the mind as it is lived within the body.

Tyler Stallings's paintings also reflect Early's curatorial premise from a more observational stance that eventually leads into the experience of one's own presence in the world. Stallings's enigmatic interpretations can be read as either

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Top: Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet, *Inferno: A Puppet Movie - #2521 scene 1 & 2 set*, 2005, mixed media; Tyler Stallings, *#5*, 2005, alkylid on canvas, at L2kontemporary, Los Angeles.



## Anna Von Mertens/MATRIX 207

### *Suggested North Points*

July 13–September 7, 2003

**University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum**

**MATRIX**

#### *Anna Von Mertens/MATRIX 207*

In his poem "The American Sublime" (1935), Wallace Stevens asks, "How does one stand / To behold the sublime?" Later in the work he continues, "But how does one feel? / One grows used to the weather; / The landscape and that; / And the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself." Like many American artists, writers, and musicians who precede her, sculptor Anna Von Mertens looks to landscape as a conduit for both spirituality and identity. Her newest works, *North*, *South*, *East*, and *West*, fuse physical science with the natural environment as a way to wrestle with the presence or existence of God and how increased knowledge in science reflects upon the individual's role in the universe.<sup>1</sup> Duality is recurrent throughout the artist's work, which is abstract in form but conceptual in content.

Von Mertens hand-dyes and hand-sews the fabric of her sculptures, all of which take the form of nontraditional quilts. The patterns of colors and the stitching embedded in the surface propose separate strands of meaning. Draped over frames with the familiar proportions of a standard double bed, the quilts suggest themselves as objects with a unique vantage point from which to explore complex human relations. The artist's theory is that the bed has become the central component of the home, the locus of interpersonal relationships and communication. Examining how we identify a place as home and how we define our sense of place is a recurrent theme in her work. For an installation in the Project Space at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, CA, Von Mertens drew a map of the world on the floor of the gallery. Viewers were invited to indicate the places in which they had lived and to connect the locations. A corresponding logbook, a record of when and why each move occurred, voyeuristically provides a fascinating social anthropological study.

*Suggested North Points*, Von Mertens's MATRIX installation, is about living in America and the artist's own westward migration. The exhibition includes a floor drawing as well as five quilt sculptures. Four of the five quilts suggest specific places in the North American landscape to form a personal, geographic portrait of the artist, while the floor work—drawing on nineteenth-century cartography—and fifth quilt allegorically posit the age-old quandary of the relationship between an individual and the collective whole: the attempt to find one's own direction while working within an existing system.

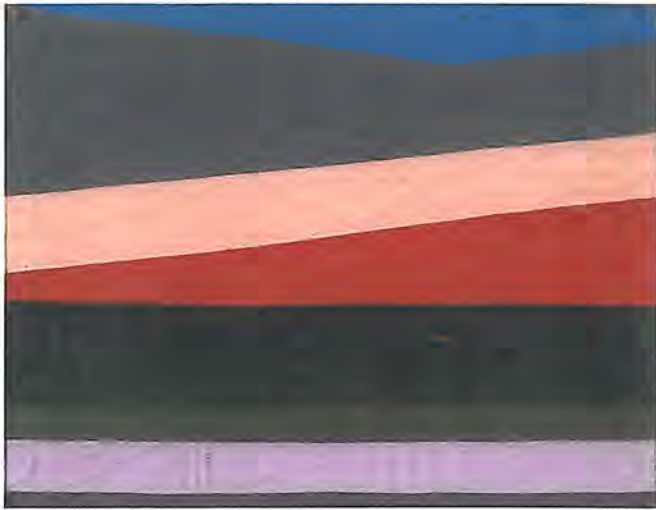
The horizontal and at times diagonal bands of color in each landscape quilt abstractly delineate iconic natural elements: a brilliant, Hollywood-tinged Western sunset, the truncated horizon at the edge of a snow-covered New England field, or Red Rocks National Park, just outside Las Vegas. Each graphic illustration is of a precise spot, with both a specific meaning for the artist and a universal resonance.

Von Mertens's reductivist, geometric compositions and alternately magnificent and subdued palettes, as well as her interest in sense of place, individual identity, and spirituality, all posit compelling affinities with the work of American artist Mark Rothko. Some of Rothko's works are also made up of horizontal bands, which may represent geological strata and metaphorically stand for the unconscious. He intended his large canvas work to be "intimate and human," not "grandiose" and removed.<sup>2</sup> For both artists color and structure are inseparable. Rothko said, "Art to me is an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness."<sup>3</sup> For Von Mertens, art is also a location of the sublime.

Sublimity is achieved in part through the prolonged, close interaction with her pieces during their creation. Through her stitch work Von Mertens addresses such diverse themes as the complexities of the universe and the intricate history of her own life by articulating them on an intimate level. "I choose to work in a very labor-intensive medium, not out of some kind of martyrdom, but because I believe the aspect of touch,

COVER: *West and East*, 2003 (details); hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; each 12 x 60 x 80 in.; installation view; photo courtesy of Jean-Michelle Addor.





a kind of narration with my hands, brings an intimacy to my pieces that could not be obtained any other way."<sup>4</sup> This physical contact translates into an attempt to situate oneself, to understand one's presence in the face of that which is awe-inspiring.

In this way, Von Mertens is connected to the only other MATRIX artist to exhibit quilts in the twenty-five year history of the program. In 1997, Lawrence Rinder showed the work of Richmond, California-based African American artist Rosie Lee Tompkins. While the conceptual approaches of Tompkins and Von Mertens are vastly different, they share a link to many twentieth-century abstract painters and the transcendentalist claims of Modernism. Rinder writes, "In front of Tompkins's work I feel that certain Modernist ambitions may in fact be achievable.... Here are feelings of awe, elation, and sublimity; here is inventiveness and originality so palpable and intense that each work seems like a new and total risk."<sup>5</sup> The primary risk in Von Mertens's work is in fact her choice of media. Interested neither in the dialogue between art and craft nor in feminist reclamation of traditional skills, perhaps the greatest challenge for this artist is persuading viewers to look past their initial assumptions of her practice or intention. Von Mertens's physical and conceptual practice initially references, but ultimately replaces the utility of traditional quilt making.

Historically, quilt making was always associated with women and a female camaraderie in which women came together to share patterns and provide help to one another. It was a form based largely on utility, rather than display. Quilts had both practical and symbolic uses, from controlling dust and draping a coffin to recording history and exchange as symbols of friendship. Whole-cloth quilting, one of the methods employed by Von Mertens, was among the first quilting styles brought to the colonies. Stitching the delicate and elaborate floral and geometric patterns of these quilts required very fine skill.<sup>6</sup>

Von Mertens's complex stitching patterns have revealed and described such things as the migration of birds in the northern hemisphere and the topography of her own body. In her MATRIX works the theme of the stitch work is energy, how it is exhausted as well as generated. Specifically, *West* and *East* address physics, the Big Bang? (extroversion) and a black hole (introversion), respectively. In the former, time is represented on the vertical axis and space on the horizontal, combining to move toward the ultimate expansion; in the latter, space is denoted as collapsing, with

*South, 2003* (detail); hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; 17 x 60 x 80 in.; photo courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography.



yellow stitching indicating beams of light sent one degree in every direction. The stitching in *North* and *South* similarly details elements of chemistry. In *South*, we see the metabolic pathways in a cell, a sample of the thousands of reactions that occur every second to determine a body's metabolism. The stitch work both literally and symbolically demonstrates interconnectedness.

Von Mertens's juxtaposition of real time (documenting moments of scientific existence) and space (recording geographic places) and the attempt to establish an interrelated matrix corresponds with a new field of science, the study of Complex Systems. Examining how parts of a system interact with its environment, this study is about "understanding indirect effects."<sup>8</sup> The patterns, systems, and maps found in Von Mertens's works are chosen by the artist to form questions about how seemingly diverse elements—physical, psychic or philosophical—cross-pollinate and effect change.

The artist's maps are biological, technological, and political. In one such work, as critic Kenneth Baker noted, "the title holds the key to the odd irregular pattern, with its curious modernist formal echoes: *Allied Bombing of German Town/ Scale Model of Germania*."<sup>9</sup> *Influence*, the fifth sculpture in the MATRIX exhibition, displayed apart from the others, contains a political view. Initially appearing monochromatic, the pattern appears slowly: black thread on black fabric. *Influence* addresses the policies of the current administration and its apparent tendency toward an American "expansionism." Borders rather than beliefs define nations. The effects of the American government can literally be seen on the map of the world, in places ranging from the former Soviet block to the Middle East. Redrawing occurs as countries appear and disappear. The exterior boundaries of the domestic United States are, however, essentially iconic. The subtle shift of pattern that occurs here in the stitching at the U.S. borders posits a quiet perspective on what happens to the rest of the world when the U.S. gets involved.

Like other MATRIX artists Terésita Fernandez, Yehudit Sasportas, and Wolfgang Laib, Von Mertens's installation occupies the space of the gallery floor, leaving all of the walls—the traditional location of works of visual art—bare. The floor is a more mundane space, but also a more sacred and ritualistic one, the location of spiritually focused artistic practices from Tibetan mandala practice to Navajo sand painting.

*North, 2003*; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; 17 x 60 x 80 in.; photo courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography.





For Von Mertens, the placement of her work on the floor falls somewhere in between these two poles of the sacred and the mundane. In a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to another age-old American quest, self-discovery, Von Mertens's sculptural objects and floor drawings rest on the floor for the most basic and honest reason: the floor is where we stand, what supports us literally as we make our way through life, where we are grounded. As if in response to Wallace Stevens's question, Von Mertens's work answers, we stand to behold the sublime right here, exactly where we are, acknowledging where we were, and looking forward to where we might one day be.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson  
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> Anna Von Mertens, in an e-mail to the author on May 22, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Rothko, "Mark Rothko" [Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1998], <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/classic4.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/abstraction4.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Von Mertens, "The Well Appointed Garage: 'Emerge' 2001" (San Francisco: GenArtSF, 2001), <http://www.stephart.com/emerge01.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Rinder, "Rosie Lee Tompkins MATRIX/Berkeley 173," *MATRIX Berkeley Twenty Years* (Berkeley: The Regents of the University of California, 1998), n.p.

<sup>6</sup> "European American Quilting Traditions" [Charlottesville: American Studies at the University of Virginia, 2003], <http://xroads.virginia.edu/#UG97/quilt/etrads.html>, and Anne Johnson, "America's Quilting History: Pioneer Quilts, Comfort Through Hardship" [Womenfolk, 2002], <http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts/pioneer.html>.

<sup>7</sup> With the creation of the Big Bang theory, the universe can no longer be considered an infinite system, and rather must have a finite beginning and evolution.

<sup>8</sup> Yaneer Bar-Yam, "About Complex Systems" [Cambridge: New England Complex Systems Institute, 2003], <http://necsi.org/guide/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Baker, "New Threads at Lind," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 12, 2003, D10.

*Influence*, 2003 (detail); hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, concrete; 17 x 60 x 80 in.; photo courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography.



Anna Von Mertens was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1973. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1995 from Brown University and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 2000. This is the artist's first one-person museum exhibition. She lives and works in Berkeley, California.

#### **Selected Solo Exhibitions**

2001

"VIA," Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA

"Migrations," Project Space, Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA

#### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

2003

"Sewn Together," Gregory Lind Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2002

"Introductions 2002," Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA

"Maps and Charts," Penrose Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA

"Conceptual Color: In Albers' Afterimage," The Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA

"High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids: Art in a Digital Age," Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA

"Commission 02," San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA

"Night Skies and Imaginary Coordinates: The Artist as Navigator," Palo Alto Art Center, Palo Alto, CA

2001

"Emerge," GenArt SF, San Francisco, CA

"Mapping," Works Gallery, San Jose, CA

"Body: Inner and Outer Landscapes," Balazo Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2000

"Bay Area Selections: The Annual Ernie Kim Award," Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA

"Chill Factor," New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA

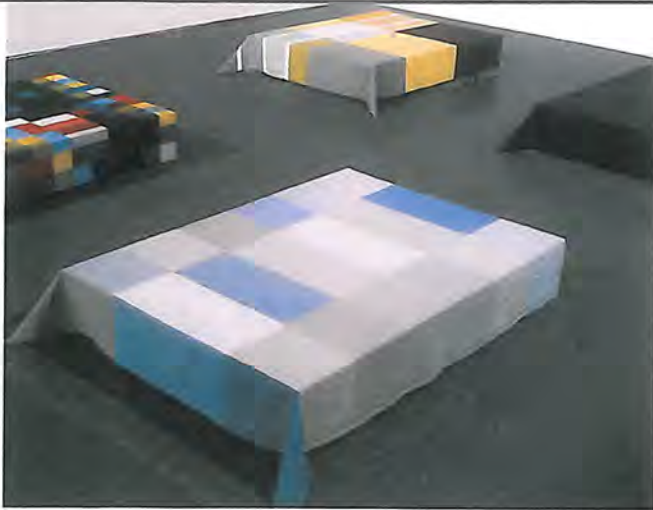
"It Can Change, 2000," 3012 Harrison, Oakland, CA

"Annual Invitational Auction," Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

1999

"Topography/Typography," Paulette Long and Shepard Pollack Gallery, San Francisco, CA

*Migrations*, 2001; installation view, Project Spaces Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA; photo courtesy of Liz Cohen.



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 Wetter, Terri D. "Brave New Works: Making Art in the Digital Age." *Diablo Arts Magazine*, April–June 2002, 16–20.

#### Work in MATRIX

**East, 2003**  
 Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton,  
 mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
 17 x 60 x 80 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist

**Influence, 2003**  
 Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, concrete  
 17 x 60 x 80 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist

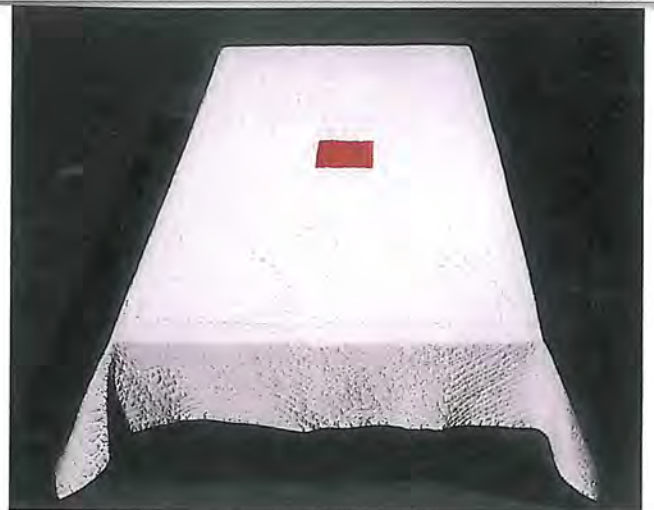
**North, 2003**  
 Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton,  
 mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
 17 x 60 x 80 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist

**South, 2003**  
 Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton,  
 mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
 17 x 60 x 80 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist

**Suggested North Points, 2003**  
 Grease marker  
 Dimensions variable  
 Courtesy of the artist

**West, 2003**  
 Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton,  
 mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
 17 x 60 x 80 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist

**Via, 2001**; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, steel angle, steel tubing, and plastic sheet; each 15 x 60 x 80 in.; installation view, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA; photo courtesy of Jean-Michelle Addor.



The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis C. Wattis.

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Special support for Anna Von Mertens/MATRIX 207 *Suggested North Points* is provided by Christopher Vroom and Illya Szilak.

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*Self-Portrait*, 1999; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, steel angle, and wire screen; 15 x 41 x 75 in.; collection Christopher Vroom and Illya Szilak, New York; photo courtesy of Jean-Michelle Addor.

## ANNA VON MERTENS

## BERKELEY ART MUSEUM

If some dreams are distinctly American, the same can be said of some nightmares. For her first museum solo show, "Suggested North Points" (all works 2003), Anna Von Mertens has translated the geography of the United States into a series of quilts that appear to rest atop a grid of double beds. To create *North, South, East* and *West*, Von Mertens hand-dyed fabrics in hues meant to evoke each region, from the electric-orange of a Hollywood sunset to the icy blues of a New England winter. She then assembled bands of the cloth into quilts resembling reclining color field paintings. Each quilt is overlaid with an elaborately stitched pattern inspired by astrophysics or biochemistry: *West* depicts the Big Bang; *North* and *South* reflect aspects of the body's metabolic process. The focus seems to be on the mythic dimensions of American landscape and the absorption and expansion of energy that results from its enormous appetites.

A fifth quilt, *Influence*, lies slightly apart from the others, its awkward position and black-on-black stitching making it seem both ominous and off-kilter. A field of parallel lines runs diagonally across the fabric's surface, but its uniformity is marred: each ray alters course where it touches an invisible border, allowing the outline of the continental United States to slowly reveal itself. Addressing America's role on the global stage, Von Mertens depicts the country as a patch of black ice, an invisible force that sends whatever it touches careening off course. With its colorless play of lines and angles, *Influence* is imbued with a grim magnetism, pulling viewers vertiginously toward a pool of obsidian quicksand.

There is something anxious in Von Mertens' exacting stitch work, evidence of a compulsive hand repeatedly signaling toward the unseen forces that impact our everyday existence. In response, one imagines crawling into bed and finding comfort underneath the quilts that comprise the exhibition, much the same way we seek repose through contact with the natural landscape. Cloaked in the kool-aid color fields of a uniquely American geography, we would not rest, but awaken, having learned something about the pleasure and the terror of a country whose will to power should not be mistaken for a force of nature.

David Spalding

## SAN FRANCISCO

## SIMON EVANS

## JACK HANLEY

Simon Evans, a 29-year-old former pro skater from London, moved to San Francisco as a teenager, to follow his sponsors and live the skateboarding dream. Today he is officially only an artist, and his show at Jack Hanley is his first solo exhibition in the Bay Area.

Small paper objects picked up on the street or



CHARLENE LIU, Day 23, Journey from the West, 2003. Mixed media, 122 x 274 cm.



CATHERINE GFELLER, Multi-Voices, 2003. Transprint on Rives paper, 40 x 84 cm.



## Anna Von Mertens: Suggested North Points



*West and East (details), 2003; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frames, plywood, laminate; each 17 by 60 by 80 inches. Photo: Jean-Michelle Addor.*

The Matrix Program for Contemporary Art at the Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, enjoys wide acclaim for its exhibitions of cutting-edge art. Installations, paintings, video, and photography are the usual fare, but from July 13 through September 7, the museum exhibited “Suggested North Points,” five quilts and a floor drawing by Bay Area-based Anna Von Mertens; this was only the second exhibition of quilts in the program’s 25 years.

At first glance—and from a distance—Von Mertens’ work fittingly

seemed to fall within the vernacular of minimalism. Upon closer inspection, however, each of her hand-sewn, hand-dyed quilts revealed multiple layers of dazzlingly intricate webs of stitching, which added depth and complexity to the visual and symbolic aspects of her work.

Quilts have traditionally recorded the personal or historical. Von Mertens’ exhibition not only chronicled her philosophical and spiritual views but also referenced the landscape and the broader realm of physics and its impact on life.

The quilts were arranged atop

double-bed-sized platforms distributed across a black floor limned with compass points and headings reminiscent of 19th-century cartography. These geographic indicators, coupled with the fact that four of the quilts stylistically represented specific locations in North America, suggested a sense of place, as well as the process of journeying. The fifth quilt, *Influence*, according to the exhibition brochure, explored the relationship between “the individual and the collective whole.” Entirely black and with alternating directions of stitching, this fifth quilt looked topographical when viewed from above.

*South*, the most figurative piece, resonated of the wide open spaces of the Southwest: earthen brown and tan, muted purple and lavender, and azure evoked desert, mountains, and sky (this scene was inspired by Nevada’s Red Rocks Canyon National Conservation Area). *North* was equally expansive, and its colors as carefully chosen: a cool palette of mostly white and icy grays and blues hinted of a Nordic tableau (Von Mertens was actually thinking of a snow-covered field in New England). Circles stitched over the work’s entire surface resembled molecules.

Although more abstract, *West and East* bore the most elaborate surface stitching, representing, respectively, the Big Bang (extroversion) and the black hole (introversion). Unlike the previous works, which dealt with an individual’s discoveries on earth, this duo of quilts pondered the greater conundrum of the universe. Von Mertens expressed the Big Bang (the dominant, yet unproven, scientific theory about the universe’s origins from a cosmic explosion that hurled matter in all directions) with dozens of radiating arched lines and arrows. The black hole was depicted as



swirling vortices emanating from, or collapsing in on, an enormous sphere (black holes are remnants of collapsed stars 10 to 15 times as massive as the sun).

Given her profound subject matter, one might wonder why the installation intentionally recalled something as mundane as bedspreads or the bedroom. Because Von Mertens considers the bedroom to be “the symbolic hearth of the 21st-century home,” this setting is as sacred as it is ordinary—and, within this exhibition’s scope, this most intimate of spaces also finds a connection to the infinite.

—Victoria Alba

*Victoria Alba is a freelance arts writer in the San Francisco Bay Area.*



**Above:** *Influence*, 2003; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, concrete; 17 by 60 by 80 inches. Photo: Don Tuttle Photography.

*Images courtesy of the Berkeley Art Museum.*

**Below:** *North*, 2003; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; 17 by 60 by 80 inches. Photo: Don Tuttle Photography.

