

IRENE MacWILLIAM OPENING: TOWER MUSEUM - Speech

Thursday, 16 February 2012

- We are here to celebrate 25 years plus of Irene MacWilliam's 'YEAR' Quilts and to acknowledge the outstanding contribution Irene, as a textile artist has made to the visual arts both locally and internationally.

-But first, I would like to thank the Curator of the exhibition, Roberta Bacic for inviting me to speak.

-I have known and admired Irene's work over many years, but I had never had a conversation with her. When I accepted Roberta's invite, it was obvious that I had to meet and talk to Irene in her workspace – and what an enjoyable and stimulating occasion that turned out to be! – So, thank you Roberta for the introduction.

-Before I talk in detail about the 'YEAR' quilts that we see around us, I would like to give some background to Irene's way of working, which I hope will set in context why she is such an important and relevant artist today.

-The medium Irene uses to communicate her work is 'quilting' and the 'quilt,' and her main tool is the sewing machine.

-She tells me that everything started to come together for her when in 1985 she attended a NI Patchwork Guild talk on appliqué.....she decided to "have a go" at machine appliqué. Then the following year when she was a volunteer in the Textile Dept at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, working with old textiles, she became fascinated with the whole area of contextualising history.

-Also, in 1986 she discovered free machine embroidery which meant she could write and draw with a sewing machine.....This she says "opened up a whole new world of possibilities" to her.

-The techniques and materials she incorporates in her work include appliqué, embroidery, free machine drawing, digital transfer printing, plain, screen printed and hand dyed fabrics. These she has developed and honed to produce work of the highest quality of craftsmanship and design.

-It is important to realize that as well as her 'YEAR' quilts Irene continuously creates work for invited and selected exhibitions, and this can include 3-D work.

-She also teaches, runs workshops, and gives lectures. She is computer literate and has designed her own (and other people's) websites. I would encourage you to look at her website, where her generosity of spirit is clearly evident.

www.macwilliam.f9.co.uk

-Since 1986 Irene has been exhibiting nationally and internationally, to an audience **mainly within the textile world** - including the UK and Europe, USA, Japan and further afield. She is keen to point out that working with Roberta has brought her work to a **whole new audience** nationally and internationally.

-I think that now sets the scene to talk about the 'YEAR' quilts which we are celebrating today.

-There are a total of 26 year quilts in the exhibition, displayed in chronological order, dating from 1986-2011.

-Every year since 1986 (alongside the other work that I've mentioned) Irene has made a quilt documenting world events. If you have had the chance to look around you will have realized that these events range from major international world shattering incidents to the local and very idiosyncratic.

-The events are recorded by image and text in panels – there are 19 panels in each quilt plus a title panel showing the year. Around 3 of the 4 borders, free machine writing lists further news stories of the particular year.

-The 20 panels are assembled in a traditional quilt making format, each quilt measuring approx. 216 x 140 cms (nb although the finished art works are called quilts, and they are 'quilts' in the traditional sense....in the world of textiles art they are referred to as 'hangings'.)

-The 19 individual panels are made throughout the year as events happen and stories unfold; the final panels aren't completed until the beginning of the following year. The quilt is then assembled, usually in February or March, by which time the next year's quilt is underway. That is the practical side.....

..... now to the even more interesting part!! Irene's **Creative Process**.

-The 'events' or contents of each quilt are Irene's personal selection – they are representative of her concerns and empathies – and this is the core of what makes her work so distinctive and special....

.....Not only do **we**, as the viewer, have a '**ready reckoner**' of benchmarks and milestones in the past 26 years of **our** lives, we have a wonderful insight into the character and personality of the artist.

-Environmental and humanitarian issues are strongly evident. Over the years the marked recurrence of natural phenomena such as earthquakes, famine, floods, and volcanoes is unnerving. Wars and unrest throughout the world, including our own troubled recent past are recorded. Issues such as AIDS and BSE are addressed.

-BUT the good news is that there is also plenty of evidence that reflects Irene's quirky sense of humour – you will be able to find your own evidencefor me it is reflected in the 'Clinton Scandal' panel of the 1998 quilt!!!

-During each year's process of creating a quilt Irene collects and documents a large research file of newspaper cuttings and articles. The primary sources for this material are local and national newspapers and in recent years the web. This collection of files in itself is an invaluable historical archive.... but alongside the quilts the entirety is immense. nb the file for last year, 2011 is displayed in the glass cabinet alongside the quilt.

-The body of work on show is a splendid insight into an artist's way of working – from the initial idea through to each realized piece. It takes us right into the heart of what makes this an exceptional exhibition...ie...the historical referencing over a quarter of a century, the intellectual thinking and the processes used to test boundaries in creative 'needlework'; and the innovation and quality of craftsmanship in the resolved pieces.

-Above all it is the artist's ability to communicate and engage with us the viewer; inviting us to explore, react, and reflect...we are drawn in and our memories are invoked – and indeed our emotions.

-This body of work will be a true and lasting LEGACY and it will be built on, as Irene intends to continue producing her 'YEAR' quilts into the future.

-A true artist crafts person is one whose work is rooted in techniques inherited from the past, but who wants to go beyond traditional forms and practices – to push boundaries.

-The work in this exhibition is firmly rooted in the techniques of embroidery and quilting that is such a rich vein of Ireland's textile heritage – Irene has pushed these boundaries with her risk taking and inventiveness.....

.....and by taking risks yet staying true to the traditional practices the outcome is a body of work of true integrity that is distinctive and very desirable.

-This work is an exemplar of best practice, and where better to appreciate and celebrate it than in Derry~Londonderry, City of Culture 2013, but even more significantly in Derry city, one of the most important locations of textile heritage in the world.

-This work is innovative, sophisticated and intelligent.....above all it is timeless.

-I hope you will enjoy engaging with it as much as I have!

-Thank you to Irene and Roberta for giving me the opportunity to share in the celebration and I look forward to the **next** of many more 'YEAR' quilts to come.

-Finally, although I've enjoyed speaking about Irene's work (the work itself speaks volumes) I hope you will have an opportunity to talk to her today....because.... that will be much more interesting!! **Anne Montgomery: 16/02/12 thank you + congratulations!**