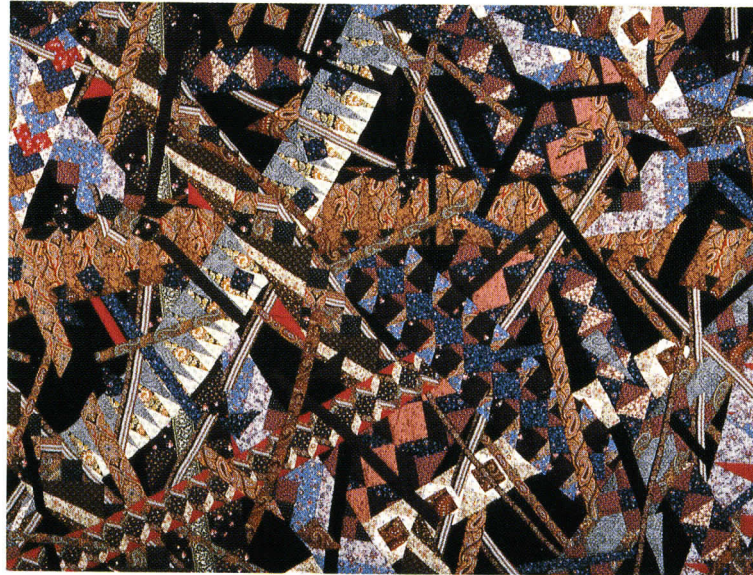


Dianne Higgins:

QUILTS

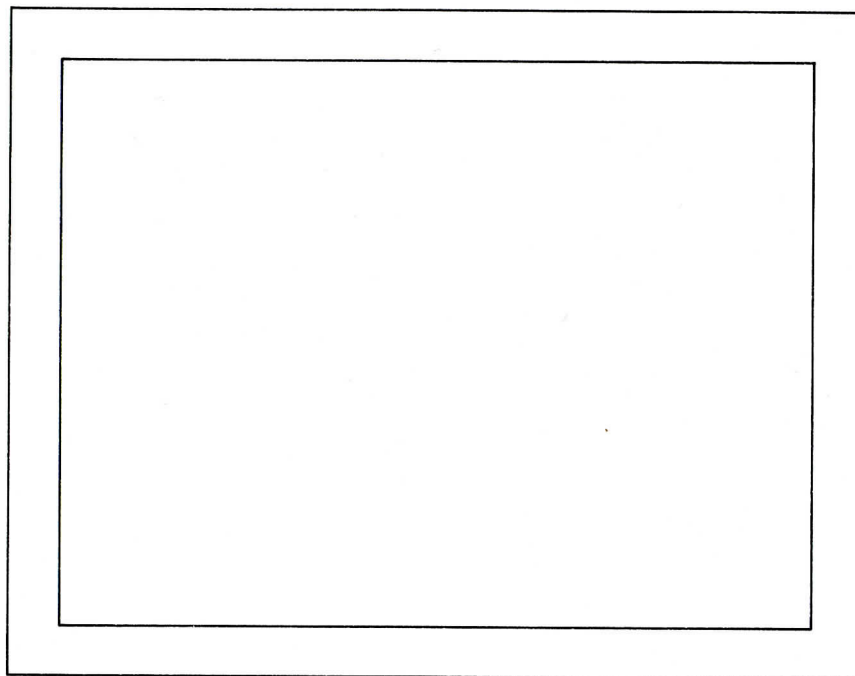


Gallery 1.1.1., School of Art, The University of Manitoba,

March 23-April 13, 1988

Dianne Higgins:

QUILTS





Untitled, Quilt, 212cm x 212cm

The association between modernist painting and the traditional art of quilting is not new. Both are participants in an ongoing dialogue that has taken many forms.

The grid, the fundamental structure of many traditional quilt patterns, has been utilized by many modern painters. Flattened, geometricized shapes, solid areas of color and repetition have also been used by quilters and painters alike. In the 1950s Rauschenberg used quilts as painting surfaces, covering them with splashes of pigment in a manner reminiscent of abstract expressionist painting.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many graduates of fine art schools, male and female, traded in their paint and canvas for needle, thread and fabric. In many cases, this response was part of a renewed interest in fibre arts and craft work in general—a trend that characterized artistic activity in those decades. For some feminist artists such as Miriam Schapiro, the decision reflected political, personal as well as aesthetic concerns and signified a rediscovery and validation of traditional feminine art practice.

In the 1970s, feminist writers and critics such as Norma Broude and Lucy Lippard questioned the distinction made between “high” and “low” art, suggesting that the development of modern art was intimately linked with that of the decorative arts. They proposed that quilting is one example of an art form that has been ignored by the art establishment—not because it is aesthetically inferior—but simply because the “wrong” people (i.e.) women have traditionally made quilts.

Dianne Higgins’ quilts clearly participate in and extend this ongoing dialogue. While her early quilts, dating back to 1984, reflect a reliance on traditional quilt patterns, this is not the case in her most recent works. Here the repetition and grid-like

patterning of traditional motifs has given way to a fragmented and scrambled profusion of irregular shapes. Narrow, rectangular strips of fabric, the fundamental unit of the log cabin pattern, have been turned, angled, stacked, altered and repeated in a complex geometric dance. In other instances, the log cabin pattern explodes and is made to run wild in a confusion of appliquéd shapes, angled lines and triangles gone awry: a discordant multitude of innovative variations on a simple theme.

Precedents for this playful exploration of traditional forms can be found in the “crazy quilts” that date back several centuries—also in the discoveries of modernist painting. The fragmentation of Cubism, the energy of Abstract Expressionism, the dynamism of Futurism, the color staining of color-field painting, and the geometrics of Op art provide visual inspiration and permission for experimentation.

Higgins’ working process also relates to painting practice. Like a painter, she hangs the work in its initial stage, adding and deleting strips and shapes of fabric on a colored backing sheet, which functions much like a canvas. The strips of fabric, like brush strokes, are laid over one another, crisscrossing, built up in the manner that a painter applies paint.

It is this dual heritage and identity, this participation in two often opposing histories that accounts for the unique role that these quilts play as art objects. For unlike modernist paintings, quilts do not evoke the anxiety that many non-representational paintings produce in viewers who have not been exposed to modern art. They are not “anxious objects,” as Harold Rosenberg labelled art works that baffle, disturb or confuse because their validity as “genuine” art objects is difficult to determine.

Neither do these quilts elicit responses of boredom and disdain in those who are familiar with the history and products of modernism—but critical of

modernism's ideology and disappointed in its outcome.

Higgins' works do not engender these responses because they are not modern paintings, even if they are influenced by modernist history and practice. Her works are still quilts; sandwiches of stitched fabric and as such they participate in another history. A quilt is immersed in associations with "creature comforts" and feelings of nostalgia. A quilt represents the home, hearth and "the good old days." It functions to relax our defenses; it is a non-threatening, comforting object.

The origin of the quilt as a utilitarian object relieves the viewer of the need and responsibility to evaluate it as an art object: the viewer is free to indulge in a purely visual and sensual experience; to consider the object's colors, shapes and textures.

Prolonging this experience is the intricate and obsessive handstitching used to construct the quilt. The contemporary viewer is fascinated (perhaps titillated) by the excessive expenditure of labour required to piece together these visually complex works.

What Higgins' quilts *do* then, is allow us to feel and see—they heighten the experience of the senses. In our hyperactive culture, where information and image overload function to paralyze the senses and dull critical thinking, this is no small feat.

Sigrid Dahle

February 1988



Untitled, Quilt, 217cm x 194cm



Untitled, Quilt, 193cm x 235cm



Untitled, Quilt, 205cm x 223cm

Works in Exhibition

1. Untitled, Quilt, 198cm x 203cm, 1985
2. Untitled, Quilt, 217cm x 194cm, 1986
3. Untitled, Quilt, 193cm x 235cm, 1987
4. Untitled, Quilt, 196cm x 167cm, 1987
5. Untitled, Quilt, 114cm x 136cm, 1987
6. Untitled, Quilt, 120cm x 142cm, 1987
7. Untitled, Quilt, 205cm x 223cm, 1987
8. Untitled, Quilt, 212cm x 212cm, 1987
9. Untitled, Quilt, 153cm x 172cm, 1988
10. Untitled, Quilt, 163cm x 201cm, 1988
11. Untitled, Quilt, 181cm x 181cm, 1988

Biography

Dianne Higgins was born in Fargo, North Dakota, U.S.A. and came to Canada as a landed immigrant in 1974. She received her B.A. in Art at the University of Washington in Seattle. Dianne has exhibited throughout Canada and has works in both private and public collections.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Canada Arts Council for their financial support. I would also like to thank Grace Thomson of Gallery 1.1.1. for her attention to the details of the exhibition and to Sigrid Dahle for her insightful essay and support. My appreciation to Bob Talbot who photographed the quilts and Leo Simoens who designed the catalogue. To Ruth Gregory and Tom Wood my thanks for their help and involvement

Credits

Exhibition Curator: **Grace Thomson**

Catalogue Essay: **Sigrid Dahle,**
Brandon Allied Arts Council

Catalogue Photography: **Bob Talbot**

Installation Technician: **Thomas Wood**

Catalogue Design: **Leo Simoens**

Funding Assistance from the
Manitoba Arts Council

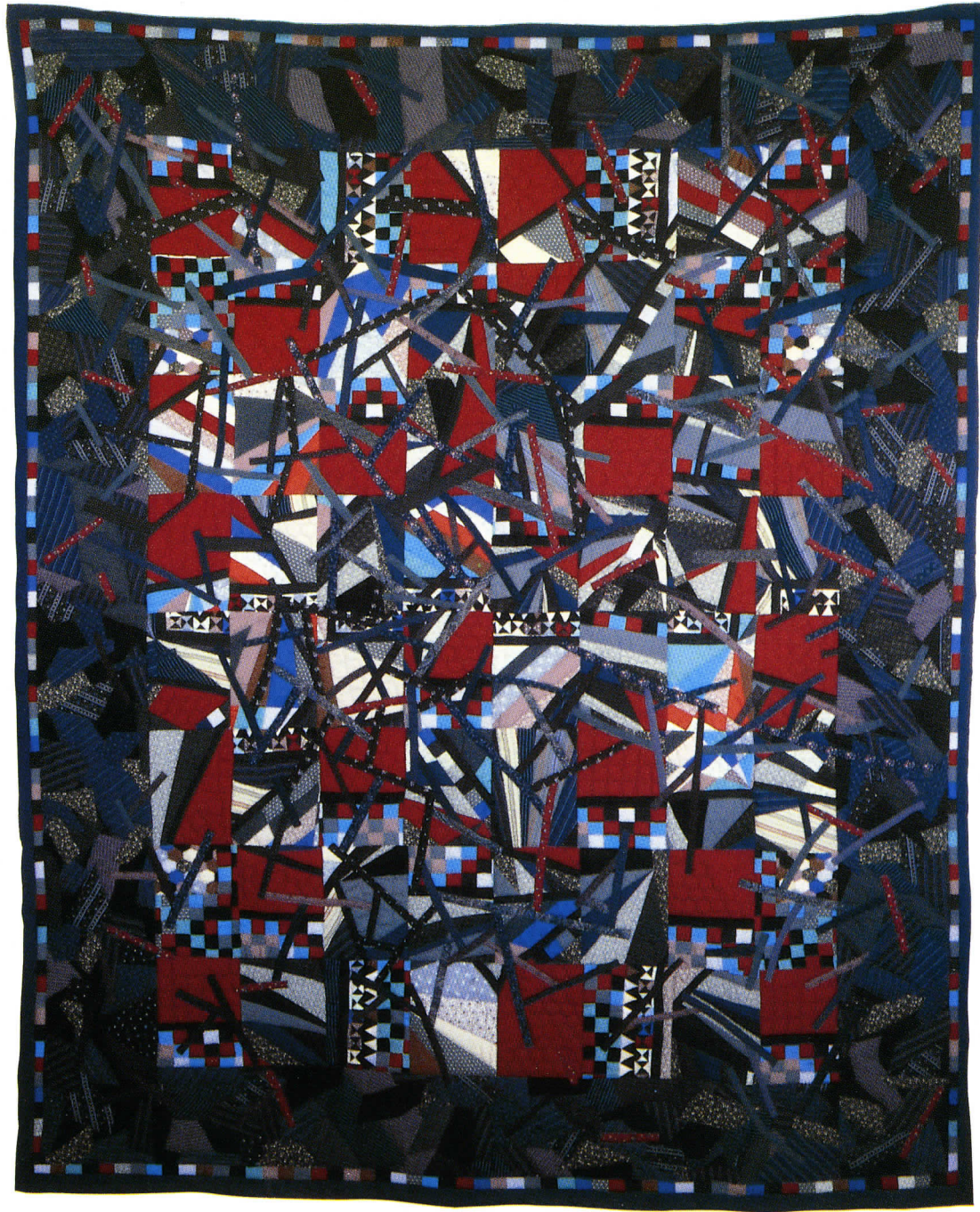
Exhibition: **Brandon Allied Arts Centre,**
Brandon, Manitoba
June 2-12, 1988



Untitled, Quilt, 196cm x 167cm



Untitled, Quilt, 153cm x 172cm



Untitled, Quilt, 163cm x 201cm



Untitled, Quilt, 181cm x 181cm

