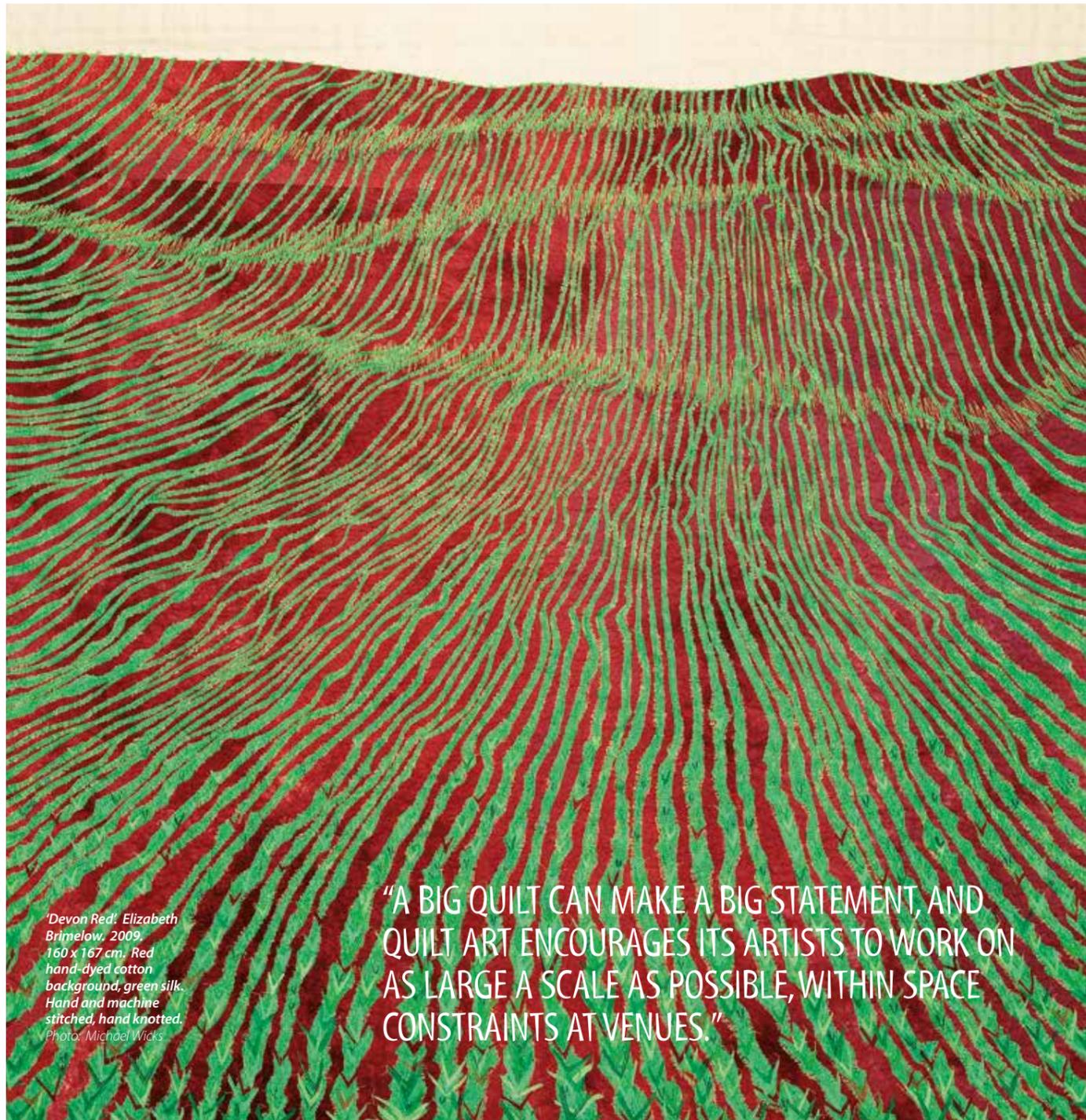


# Thirty Years of Quilt Art

*Sara Impey looks back at the history of the exhibiting group and development of the art quilt*



'Devon Red' Elizabeth Brimelow, 2009. 160 x 167 cm. Red hand-dyed cotton background, green silk. Hand and machine stitched, hand knotted. Photo: Michael Wicks

**"A BIG QUILT CAN MAKE A BIG STATEMENT, AND QUILT ART ENCOURAGES ITS ARTISTS TO WORK ON AS LARGE A SCALE AS POSSIBLE, WITHIN SPACE CONSTRAINTS AT VENUES."**

**The first group of its kind in Europe, Quilt Art celebrates its 30th anniversary this year and was founded in 1985 by a group of textile artists who wanted to raise the profile of art quilting in the public mind, to experiment with the quilt as an art medium and to exhibit and sell their work.** By coming together as a group they could share the administrative burden of staging exhibitions and, since they all worked in isolation, offer one another mutual support and encouragement.

Quilting had been growing in popularity throughout the 1970s, leading to the foundation of The Quilters' Guild in 1979. But the vast majority of its members were traditional quilters and there were few platforms for those whose work was non-functional and which broke away from accepted forms and techniques. The Guild recognised this need and set up a committee to select the first eight members of what was to become the group Quilt Art. For a few years, Quilt Art continued to operate under the auspices of The Guild, but eventually became independent and self-supporting and now has the status of an educational charity.

Among the founder members were such well-known names as Pauline Burbidge, Mary Fogg, Dinah Prentice and Michele Walker. Another was Inge Hueber, from Germany, who was instrumental in attracting members from Europe. This international reach continues to this day and is another element that makes Quilt Art distinctive. More than half the members come from outside the UK – from Germany, Ireland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark and Hungary. One member – Dominie Nash – comes from the United States. Their very different textile backgrounds contribute a variety and diversity to Quilt Art exhibitions.

Exhibitions have always been the lifeblood of Quilt Art and the group has staged major touring shows every two or three years, sometimes with smaller ones in between. The first exhibition was at the Cooper Gallery in Barnsley in 1987. Most exhibitions have toured overseas, with members able to liaise with galleries and museums in their own countries. As well as many parts of Europe, Quilt Art has exhibited in Japan and Canada. A three-year tour of the United States ended in 2014. The most ambitious venture to date was in Russia in 2013. A total of 75 quilts, which consisted of the three most recent exhibitions put together, travelled to the Tsaritsyno Palace just south of Moscow, formerly a residence of Catherine the Great and now a cultural centre. Getting all these quilts boxed up with the necessary paperwork in place was a huge endeavour for a small group.

Quilt Art also publishes a book to accompany its exhibitions. Charlotte Yde, from Denmark, uses her graphic design skills to create books that are all in the Quilt Art 'style' yet different from one another. Because the books are self-published, members are responsible for selling them and sales have proved very successful over the years. The thirtieth anniversary book is far more than just a catalogue, since the group has broken new ground by inviting the quilt academic and historian, Dr Sue Marks, to write about each artist individually so that her 'dialogues' with them form the basis of the text. To reflect this, the main anniversary exhibition, which opens at The Quilt Museum in York in September, is called 'Dialogues.' A smaller exhibition called 'Small Talk,' will be at the Festival of Quilts in August.

'Small Talk' features work that is more experimental in nature than is possible with large touring exhibitions, where the quilts have to be flexible so they can be rolled around one another for transportation. Any rigid element increases the shipping costs hugely. Some members feel constrained by these restrictions, so an exhibition like 'Small Talk' gives them the opportunity to experiment with three dimensions, unexpected materials and unusual forms of display.

In fact, the name Quilt Art can be slightly misleading, since the group does not insist that all the work has to conform to the strict definition of a quilt, and welcomes textile artists from other media. Members include Allie Kay, whose background is weaving, Yael David-Cohen, a painter and printmaker, and Val Jackson, an embroiderer.

Looking back to the 1980s, it's interesting to note that art quilts then were on average much larger than today, reflecting the connection that they still had with bed coverings, something which is much less pronounced now. The recent tendency for smaller quilts, while in many ways understandable, is regretted by some. A big quilt can make a big statement, and Quilt Art encourages its artists to work on as large a scale as possible, within space constraints at venues.

The early art quilts also contained far more patchwork than today, even though the artists had largely abandoned traditional patterns. Two members of Quilt Art still work primarily with intricate piecing. Janet Twinn and Inge Hueber have both spent their quilting lifetimes working with the interplay of colour and form in their abstract quilts. Others, like Elizabeth Brimelow and myself, are happy to work entirely with fabric and stitch, though with less emphasis on patchwork. Karina Thompson and Charlotte Yde are both pioneers in the exciting new field of digitally programmed stitching, whose expressive possibilities are only just beginning to be explored.

But for many art quilters both in the group and elsewhere, the trend has shifted away from pure patchwork and quilting techniques towards surface design in all its forms – printing, dyeing, painting, layering, foiling, fabric manipulation and the use of found objects, creating a dynamic and often highly textured surface. Although these quilts could hardly be described as pictorial, some include elements of representational imagery through the use of photography, screen-printing and free-motion machine quilting. The shift away from geometric piecing has also led to a freer, less tightly controlled and often more painterly visual style.

Quilt Art has always been a small group, partly for administrative reasons and partly because exhibition space is often limited. At the moment, there are 18 members. The group welcomes applications for membership. To maintain artistic and technical standards, there is a two-stage selection process – a viewing of images of the work followed by an interview.

Thirty years on, Quilt Art has established an international reputation. Today there are many similar exhibiting organisations, but the group has managed to remain distinctive in a textile world that has blossomed around it. Quilt Art has always been a closely-knit and supportive group, despite the obstacles posed by geographical distance and the fact that the members can only meet a few times a year. Speaking personally, the last fifteen years of my life have been hugely enriched by the international friendships in Quilt Art. The artists are united by their enthusiasm, commitment to their work and delight in the expressive possibilities of the textile surface. That is what brought the founder members together thirty years ago and still holds good today. **Be**

Quilt Art 30: Small Talk The Festival of Quilts, NEC Birmingham, 6 – 9 August 2015

The Silk Museum, Macclesfield, 15 September – 30 October 2015

Quilt Art 30: Dialogues The Quilt Museum, York, 11 September to 31 October 2015

Copies of the book Quilt Art: Dialogues, will be available at these venues and from Quilt Art's website [www.quiltart.eu](http://www.quiltart.eu)