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Joan Schulze: *Poetic License*

On February 16, Joan Schulze opened a forty-year retrospective of her work at the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles. When she followed her instincts and created her first exploratory fiber pieces, the museum didn't exist. In fact, no museum dedicated to textiles existed in the United States. SAQA hadn't been imagined. The groundbreaking Whitney exhibit of 1971, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, was yet to be, and notes for Robert Shaw's definitive book on art quilts hadn't been typed.

The retrospective, *Poetic License: The Art of Joan Schulze*, is accompanied by a hardcover book/catalog of the same title. In the introductory essay, "Looking back a decade," Schulze writes, "A series, a stand-alone work, or the occasional experiment relates to all that has gone before." This is true of four decades as much as one. Her reputation as a collagist attests to this belief in the power and value of cumulative understanding. It is a credo based on experiences and inherent disposition. Fabric used in one quilt reappears years later in another, an homage to her mother's scrap coverlets; an early quilt may be reworked as a deeper meaning becomes clear; collages best represent the imperfect, subjective, fragmented, and fugitive makeup of our lives.

Schulze, who had been raised in the Midwest, moved with her husband and three young children to southern California in 1966. She was entranced with the place and its vistas, and stimulated by the number of artists living there, in particular a neighbor who produced a painting per day. It was a stimulating environment, and her early thirties, she says, "was the right time to find that I was an artist." A framed arrangement of fabric flowers was her tipping point. Unwilling to pay \$75 for a kit, she organized an applique class in her Newcomers' Club. A second class on design followed and, "That started it for me," she says. She'd been sewing for years, and quickly moved from the prosaic to the poetic.

In those early years, Schulze recalls, "I was all over the place—embroidery, applique (both considered 'stitchery'), and bas relief effects which involved scrunching and pushing the cloth into hills and valleys." She has worked with paper, pantyhose, currency, plastic, and dryer lint. Fabric and stitching, however, remain

her constants. “The way in which I use them has evolved and changed dramatically,” she says. “Sometime in the 80s I simplified my materials and have been consistent in using silk, cotton and paper.” Another early indicator was text, used for the first time in *Crayon Batik* (1968). Schulze’s poetry, whether complementing and adding another layer to her work; underlying her subject (e.g. the *Haiku* series); or published independently; serves her ultimate goal: to make clear, meaningful art. “My artistic challenge is to listen to the new questions and to keep seeking answers.”

Schulze was and is a yin yang of disciplined industry and pure inventiveness. “To teach myself how to make quilts,” she says, “I practiced with a purpose.” She dedicated six months to research and experimentation. She made bed quilts for her two oldest children, then, following a national fervor, a Bicentennial quilt. “Early 1975, I had a great idea for my second Bicentennial piece, *We The People*. It was never intended for the bed. I entered it into a national all media competition in Palo Alto and it was a purchase prize for the city. I was stunned.”

From the beginning, Schulze considered her quilts to be artworks. “Not coming from a university or college art program, I never got involved in discussions about ‘what is art.’ I actively sought commissions for private and public spaces. I sent portfolios to galleries and museums. That was my focus.” Finding the time to do so, however, was a struggle. Now with four children, “that kind of time was almost non-existent. But when I found galleries that showed interesting work, I did make appointments. One director was frustrated and said he didn’t have any experience with textiles, that he didn’t know how to look at my work. I was persistent and asked him to look at my work for composition, color, etc, just like he would view paintings. Over a three year period I may have made five or six appointments to show him my latest. As long as I explained my motivations or reason for choosing materials, we had something to talk about. I enjoyed our conversations. One day, out of the blue, he offered me a show with another artist. The exhibition was very good for my confidence level and from that learning experience, I decided to tackle New York.”

In addition to exhibiting in her adopted home state, Schulze taught and lectured; studied with well-known artists, including Jean Ray Laury and Constance Howard; took college classes in art history and studio; was an active member of art organizations; and received commissions. Eight years after arriving in California as an elementary school teacher, Schulze was a professional artist with her first solo exhibition. By 1990, she was recognized nationally, then internationally, as a teacher,

lecturer, and juror. From her success with the Gayle Willson Gallery, Southampton, New York, she has shown her work around the world.

The catalog to *Poetic License* includes a Chinese translation, and the show will travel there in 2012. Schulze explains the connection: “In 1999 I received an invitation to participate in a tapestry exhibition in Beijing. (My name was familiar in fiber departments in China. Professors had found my work in exhibition catalogs, magazines, etc., including an in-depth feature in *The Taiwan Art Annual*.) Attending the exhibition changed the direction of my work. The participants and I became an advisory committee for future biennales—each time I attend, the experience is richer and more interesting. In the fall of 2010, I will return for the 5th Fiber Art Biennale as a participant and a juror, my seventh trip to China.” Schulze, who speaks some Chinese, is also a visiting professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and was instrumental in bringing the exhibition *Changing Landscapes: Contemporary Chinese Fiber Art* to the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles last year.

Schulze has always had a penchant for technique and technology—printmaking, dyeing, machine sewing and embroidery, soft sculpture, and photography. In the latter, she transitioned eagerly into the digital age. She is a pioneer of “alternative photographic processes.” Yet fabric and stitching remain a constant, and quilts—“I remember making my first quilt and knowing that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.” Many of her quilts are two-sided “because the idea continued on the other side, more as a line drawing. I love the drawings made as I quilt.” One example, *Blossom and Fragrance* (2003), is as ethereal and transitory as its title suggests.

“In 2003 I went back to my early work in embroidery and used the ‘found’ drawing as a new beginning. This re-imagining of the possibilities led to my toner drawings. [*Fan of Jack Kerouac* (2007) is a fan shaped, toner drawing on silk.] I think if I hadn’t been a stitcher, I wouldn’t have seen the new way for me to draw and incorporate it into my big love, silk quilts. I am still pushing the envelope of what is possible with this way of drawing and crazy as it seems, I am interested to see where it takes me.”

Collage and mixed media quilts allow Schulze both an archeological examination and an opportunity to leap forward into uncharted territory. She has written, “I am enamored with surfaces and how they disintegrate over time. I layer and scratch away to reveal what is beneath the surface, much like the effect one sees on old frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, and urban walls. These erasures and fragments are combined, manipulated and rearranged to form a new experience.”

From the beginning, a recurring subject is landscape. “I worked intuitively, did what felt good to me,” Schulze says. “I made myself happy. I think that is why the early work is landscape. Being in California opened up a whole other world—you can see far away, you can see the change of light.” The earliest piece in the exhibition is *Dunescape* (1974), a bas relief embroidered in windswept lines. The batting is covered with stretched pantyhose, which gives the air a perfect, gritty “feel.” Schulze returns to landscape again and again. It records her worldwide travels and grounds her in the experience. *Sunset from the Bullet Train* (1988) is a flash of warm reds; *Unknown Country* (2006), an abstract, almost jazz scat-improv toned toner painting.

Architecture is a specialized landscape. Construction, work, process, and the idea of cities are explored in the *Frameworks* series of small quilts (2004). *Beijing: The Summer Palace* (2000) uses silk, paper, cotton, and metal leaf, a photocopier and sewing machine to create a remarkable pieced and quilted 47²-inch travel journal of her first trip to China. In this case, architecture is a framework containing observations and memories. In *Walled Garden* (1978), Schulze has taken the concept of architecture quite literally in this 3-D, embroidered garden bed. It’s superimposed on a plexiglass box containing dryer lint, and resembling a cross-section of earth. In contrast, *Over Paris* (2009) reveals photographs of windows through a window cut into a vintage image of Montmartre. It is a trompe-l’oeil of sorts, as if the view of the street is the one seen from the windows (which would put us behind those windows)—or maybe it is the play of windows we look up at as we walk along a street. The kimono shaped opening reminds us of the multi-layered influences present in every urban area.

Schulze is as competent at multi-tasking as she is layering. “I am my own manager, publicist, photographer, you name it. I can’t imagine someone quilting for me... People have offered from time to time to help me. The way I work, it would be impossible for me to step back and direct. I go with the energy, the flow, change my mind and do something else, drop something for a while, find something else of interest, work hours if needed.” Her oldest granddaughter, Charissa, was an exception—“She organized my digital life.” But the computer is her biggest assistant. “I would only be able to accomplish 1/3 of what I do without it. Computer skills are paramount if you are going to have a serious career. It isn’t enough to do the art.”

Over four decades, Schulze has continually grown, challenged herself, learned, traveled, and evolved. The best institutions similarly change. The San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles was the first museum in the United States to focus exclusively on quilts and textiles as an art form. It started in 1977, when the Santa Clara

Valley Quilt Association opened the American Museum of Quilts and Related Arts “to promote the art, craft and history of quilts and textiles.” In the ensuing—and evolving—years, it changed locations and names several times before finding today’s permanent identity and address. Schulze remembers an exhibition of her work in 1986, when it was called the American Museum of Quilts & Textiles: “Installing the show was stressful. I was too *out there* for the committee. As we laid out the show, they complained to me that the quilts weren’t ready. At that time, to visually hide the placket [which Schulze considered a distraction, although a necessary one], I matched the fabric, even when it was a pieced back. Once we got over that and the found the plackets, things got better, a bit.”

There was no such tension in the current exhibition. Curator Deborah Corsini concludes her catalog essay, “Poetic License: thoughts on Joan Schulze,” in this way:

In a world where there is a constant bombardment of images and messages, Schulze manages to condense this overload and present it in a thought provoking, original and personal way. In this retrospective, Schulze shares her vision of the world and hones it with a beautiful and poetic voice. It has been my pleasure to know and work with her, and to see the depth and breadth of her poetic and artistic license.