

'Unsung Muses'

Gillian Cooper launches her gallery at FoQ

'Unsung Muses' was Gillian's gallery at this year's Festival of Quilts. The work was a tribute to forgotten goddesses of time past, the memory of whom has been washed away by the waves of time. Here she explains the process of making and exhibiting her work.

WHEN I FIRST set off down the creative path of quilt artist, I had no idea how much time and energy I would need to dedicate to administration and marketing. I have since discovered that really you should only spend 60% of your time in the studio, using the other 40% to attend to the business side of your work. Like many artists, I tend to neglect this 40% as I would prefer be in the studio creating. But your work needs to be seen. Producing in a vacuum is fine, but to really move the art forward, you need it to be viewed and criticised by the public and your peers. The quilt world has many ways to do this. There are numerous groups that exhibit regularly and several shows you can enter. But your work has to fit into these categories and, somewhat perversely, I seem to be driven to create work that does not...

Several years ago, I decided I wanted to create a large quilt installation. Before I could commit the time, I needed to have somewhere to show it lined up. I approached Andrew Salmon of Creative Exhibitions, the organisers of the Festival of Quilts. Andrew was receptive to the idea and suggested that the 2011 Festival would be the one to aim for. I was very grateful for this show of trust, as at that point I did not have anything to show beyond prior work. When I finally got in touch with Andrew in autumn 2010, it was already too late for me to produce my original idea. I just didn't have the time to make the work or to find the grants and

sponsors to support what would be an enormous cost. So I suggested something different called 'Unsung Muses'. I sent Andrew a rough sketch of what I proposed to show and he agreed. Had I realised the enormity of the task then I'm not sure I would have started!

Rather than dive in and start making straight away, I spent a few months contemplating what I wanted to make and what the symbolism would be. During January and February I did rough sketches and, as my inspiration was ancient clay goddess figures, I also made some figures out of clay. However, I felt the installation would need more than just the figures, and decided to emphasise the passing of time washing away the details of what we remember of eras gone by, either personally or passed on to us in folklore. I settled on waves as the metaphor for this and started incorporating them into my drawings. Finally, in March, I started sampling in fabric and was pleased that my ideas worked almost immediately, perhaps reflecting the thought and preparation that had gone into them before I started.

Now, with the concept, samples and techniques lined up, all I needed to do was make the work. Of course, things changed as I went along. It's fine having a plan, but you have to be open to new ideas as they arise. Also, given the scale of the work – the figures range from 5 to 8 feet tall – small samples couldn't give a full impression of what it would be like to make a





full-size piece, so things evolved during the making.

Like many of us, I always think things will take less time to make than they do. By June, I had lots of pieces in progress but none that was actually finished. Each process was taking longer than I had anticipated. The family holiday was curtailed and I spent every minute I possibly could in my studio. This was quite a strain, but luckily I thrive on pressure, and having a valid excuse to immerse myself in my work was heaven. (I found it harder after it was over and a sense of normality had to return.)

With my work completed in the nick of time and workshop brochures and notelets ready, it was off to Birmingham for the Festival. As my installation consisted of eight hanging figures and four panels of waves made to fill a gallery space approximately 15 x 25 feet, I had not been able to trial the final display. However, once in the space it felt very intuitive and the hanging was surprisingly quick, thanks in part to the help of my husband, who has the great advantage of being well over 6 feet tall.

The gallery experience was amazing. Yes, at an ego-boosting level, it was great to hear so many people react positively to and engage with my work. But it's more than just looking for flattery. When you work in isolation then you don't know if what you are producing is good or if you're just deluding yourself; the work needs to be made public to be validated.

The four days passed quickly and now the work is lying on my studio floor. I'm currently undertaking the marketing I should have done in the 12 months before the Festival. I'm writing proposals to exhibit the work in galleries – if anyone would like to show it then do get in touch – and am also looking for other ways of selling my work, such as using websites like folksy.com.

I'm still evaluating whether it was a worthwhile thing to do. It was brilliant to have the opportunity to showcase my work to a wider public, but from a business viewpoint the jury is still out. I think my aspirations for the show were unrealistic: selling the work, being offered more exhibitions and taking lots of workshop bookings. In the initial post-exhibition blues, the world looked a little gloomy, but I believe that's a common feeling amongst artists after a big event. In reality, I won't know the impact of showing my work for months to come; it takes time for things to trickle through – and who knows what opportunities will arise as a result of people having seen the exhibition. In terms of personal development, it was an invaluable experience and my work has changed in ways I could not have imagined prior to making these pieces. It was a privilege to share them with thousands of fellow quilters.

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"A tribute to forgotten goddesses of time past"

