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Feminine Form of
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Energy

Best in Show

Jane Rae talks to the winner of Quilt 2007



This year's Best in Show at the Festival of Quilts 2007 was created over 5000 miles away in India by fashion artist Padmaja Krishnan. *Shakti – The Feminine Form of Divinity/Cosmic Energy* had six female forms drawn in the traditional Bengal style and finely rendered through variations of the basic running stitch. The jury were "united in the choice of the winning quilt, excellence in colour, design and stitch" said Janice Gunner, President of the Quilters' Guild. It took Padmaja

five months to finish the winning quilt which was hand-stitched in the Kaantha style using anchor threads in a wonderful pallet of primary colours onto pieces of recycled handloom cotton sourced from the off-cuts in her design shop. "Kaantha being a woman's craft, I wanted to depict the feminine energy through this piece," said Padmaja.

Kaantha embroidery (from the word Kontha, which in Sanskrit means rags) originates from West Bengal and Bangladesh and was

originally used by women to breath new life into old pieces of textiles and clothing. Discarded saris and dhotis were layered together to create blankets using threads taken from the very material being recycled. Gold threads from the borders of worn out saris or threads coloured using vegetable dyes were used to decorate the surfaces and to anchor the layers together. What were once discarded rags were transformed into things of great beauty. Each piece was very personal to its creator and could never really be remade exactly the same way. Patterns, colour and shape were spontaneously determined insofar as different fabrics would distort in shape depending on the intensity of the stitching and the threads used and. Patterns were not drawn, but evolved as they were stitched inspired by their immediate environment including, for example, birds, horses or elephants.

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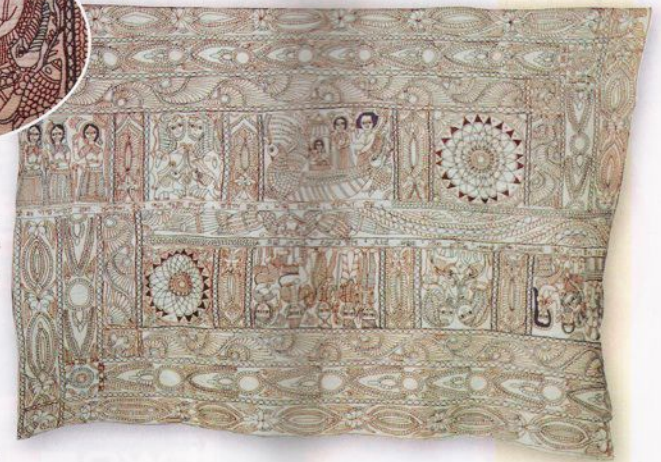
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"The patterns symbolised things in the environment that were appealing or were popular objects of desire or social status." While some of the pieces Padmaja makes recreate traditional designs, there are also others that are contemporary off shoots of the same thought process. "The motifs in my miniature quilt *Mobile Excess* reflects a world that has been affected by an excess of mobility and mobiles [cell phones]," she said.

Padmaja entered five pieces at the Festival of Quilts, not only winning best in show, but also 3rd place in the Use of Embroidery Award with her quilt *Chitralekha* which means story telling through pictures. *Chitralekha* tells the story of a village in Bengal set during the times of the British Raj and was adapted from an actual quilt retrieved from a village over a century ago. It is a perfect example of Padmaja's skills in hand quilting. Her meticulous attention to detail creates a complex surface using just a single running stitch.



After graduating from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi, Padmaja opened up her own studio lab called "Transit" in the city of Calcutta.

Her entry in the Innovative Small category entitled *Clothes Factory* is a visual portrait of the effect of materialism on nature depicted by a lone single sparrow on a floral background drowned out by clothes.

Kaantha is said to be the ultimate form of self-expression, narrating the life and emotions of the artist. It's indeed a pleasure for us to have been given a window into the world of Padmaja Krishnan at this year's Festival of Quilts. ♦



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