

'Quiltscapes and Quiltline' by Pauline Burbidge

Gillian Cooper visits The Bowes Museum to view this significant new exhibition

PAULINE BURBIDGE HAS been quilting for 40 years. She was one of the founding members of The Quilters' Guild in 1979 and has been leading the way in British quilting ever since. In 2012 there was a large retrospective of her work at The Festival of Quilts, which could be said to show the development of quilting as an art form and not just the progression of Pauline's own work. So it was with great interest that I visited her latest exhibition at The Bowes Museum, not just as a fan of her work but to see where quilting is heading.

New pieces

While her last exhibition was about looking back and reflecting over many years of her quilting practice, this exhibition is all about Pauline's current work and where she wants to take it in the future. The pieces are definitely recognisable as Pauline's, but she has not stood still, and is constantly looking to push her work forward, technically and artistically. Her latest work is even more grounded in the countryside, with her large pieces dominating the room, filling the viewer's vision with grasses and plants as though

they were standing in the middle of a giant overgrown field. Her bold, confident marks cover the quilt top through a mixture of monoprint drawings and rubbings directly onto the fabric from leaves and seedpods. This gives a connection back to Pauline's earlier work, notably the lamination of seedpods onto the quilt's surface in a series of quilts in the early 2000s. However, the handling of them here is so much more assured and integrated into the work.

Pauline has been living in the Scottish borders for over 20 years. She also makes frequent trips to Northumberland, just over the border. Her current work is based entirely on this landscape. It is not about giving the viewer a recognisable view of a specific place, but rather imbuing her work with a sense of an environment. Instead of looking at the large features or manmade additions, she concentrates on the small, sometimes overlooked, beauty of the wild fields and hedgerows, the exquisiteness of the form of a fern or a spiky teasel, and her old favourite, honesty seedpods. This fits perfectly with the concepts of the Slow Movement which is currently in favour – taking time to appreciate what is around us,



Top:
Honesty Skyline, detail

Above:
Pauline working on a
'Quiltscapes' piece in her
studio

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finding contentment in the simple and the everyday. The ethos also fits with Pauline's techniques, as her large pieces can take up to eight months to make and involve significant hand stitching.

As well as her latest 'Quiltsapes', the exhibition also includes her 'Quiltline' pieces. These are less intensive, intended for practical use rather than for display on the wall, using simpler techniques to keep them more affordable. Pauline compares the 'Quiltline' pieces with her drawings to the 'Quiltsapes' paintings, and I think this is a useful way of thinking about of them. They are white with black paint and crayon marks added to the surface, with more detail added in stitch. Like many of her works, there is a strong sense of horizontal bands. This is partly due to Pauline's use of a longarm quilting machine, which involves quilting a single section of the work at a time. However, this adds to the feel of a landscape as it fades away towards the horizon. It's a great example of how technical restrictions and artistic vision can merge successfully.

New technique

I've left the biggest innovation

in Pauline's current work to last. Not because I don't like it – I think it's wonderful – but because I don't want her technical skill to dominate this review. Too often as quilters we spend more time trying to understand and appreciate a quilt technically than looking at the design or artistic intention. Nonetheless, not mentioning the latest technical string to Pauline's bow would be a mistake, as it adds so much to these quilts.

She has started using cyanotype printing. This is a technique similar to early photography. Paper or fabric is coated in special chemicals and kept in the dark. When it is exposed to light the fabric turns blue. It becomes interesting where the light has been blocked by objects – in Pauline's case fern leaves, seedpods, etc. – as here the fabric remains white. Pauline's years of experience with different fabrics comes to the fore as she has created the blue and white on different textiles, some transparent and some thick, confidently layering them in position on her quilts. This has the effect of creating a huge, brilliant, blue sky at the top of the work, turning them from abstract landscapes into something more defined.

Also in the exhibition

Above left:
Starscape, detail

Above right:
Pauline at work on a
'Quiltline' piece

are examples from Pauline's sketchbooks, giving details of her materials and handling samples. There are also two videos: one is a loop of some of Pauline's beautiful inspiration photos; the other shows Pauline at work printing and stitching onto her quilts. As you wander around, you are accompanied by specially composed music, which lends a haunting feel to the experience.

It is most certainly worth a visit to immerse yourself in Pauline's amazing quilts and to gain an understanding of how one of our top practitioners works.

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- *Until 10 April*
The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham DL12 8NP
www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk
- *23 April – 10 July*
Ruthin Craft Centre, Park Road, Ruthin, Denbighshire LL15 1BB
www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk

There is also a book accompanying the exhibition and many of the quilts are for sale.

For more information about Pauline, her work and her annual Open Studio event visit: www.paulineburbidge-quilts.com