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Political Voices of Three Left Coast Artists: Gyongy Laky, Linda Gass, Linda MacDonald

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When circumstances prevented all three of these artists from participating in a panel I hoped to chair at our Symposium, I agreed to tell their stories largely in their own words. I interviewed each of them at length. The West Coast, and especially Northern California, is a hot bed for political activism. In addition to their Left Coast location, what links these three particular artists is their devotion to their chosen political causes. Their political voices are authentic and are inseparable from the art they produce. There is no gratuitous political overlay here, only the pure expression of the artist's true voice.



Figure 1, Gyongy Laky in her Studio January 2012, Photo: Barbara Shapiro.

Much has already been written about **GYONGY LAKY**. When I last visited her studio there was a large sculpture on one wall of the word, "Invent," but there is nothing invented in the sense of "inauthentic" about this woman or her artwork. She admits freely that she is a serious person (it was hard to get her to smile for a photograph), but it is a hopeful seriousness, one that refuses to give up the struggle to make the world better, one twig, one screw, one toy soldier at a time. It is perhaps this additive quality that allows us to continue to see her sculptures as falling under the textile umbrella. "My life has been punctuated by war," says Laky, as an explanation of her work. Born in Hungary in 1944, she lived in that war torn and then Communist-controlled country until she was 4 when she and her family fled to the United States. Both her mother and her father had spent time in Communist prisons. Her earliest memories include a harrowing escape from Hungary. She talks about growing up seeing the physical effects of war. What Gyongy calls her "anti-militarist" sentiments date to this early age. "We

are smart enough,” she laments, “to have moved beyond war as a means of dealing with problems by now.”

Laky entered UC Berkeley’s Design Department at the age of 25. She had the good fortune to study with Ed Rossbach. This was during the Vietnam War and her design studio was soon turned into a factory for anti-war posters. She marched and protested and made artwork in a seamless transition. After Berkeley, she founded Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts, an internationally acclaimed “all-inclusive, forward thinking school dedicated to the preservation and advancement of the textile arts as a fine art form.” Even as a young woman, her artwork always referred to the issues she found important, especially the wasteful practice of burning tree trimmings. These trimmings became her materials of choice. This is YOSHIKO’S TREE II, 1992 Acacia and telephone wire.



Figure 2, left. Globalization IV - WAR: Collateral Damage, 2006, 32" x 97" x 4" Artist Collection.

Figure 3, right. DADA, 2007, 36" x 1.5", Collection Jody and John Arnhold.

Photos: Ben Blackwell.

Here is GLOBALIZATION IV – WAR: Collateral Damage, 2006) Laky’s first solo New York City exhibit opened on September 6, 2001 and closed 5 days later after 9/11. And then came the Afghan war, which she could almost understand, but Iraq, she says, was another story. Gyongy saw a newspaper photo of a man running away from the bombing with three his children. Reminded of her own harrowing childhood escape from Hungary, all her earlier anti-war sentiments resurged and she was moved to create works like this. Another version of WAR from 2003 speaks of the waste of the environment and the horrors of war. That one is constructed of apple prunings painted black and punctuated by toy soldiers.

After Obama was elected, she stopped doing Globalization – WAR pieces, feeling that the war would soon be over, but the toy soldiers kept creeping back into her work. Here we see DADA, 2007, plastic babies and sealant. One cannot remain insensitive to the contrast between the plastic babies and this very realistically posed soldier.

Globalization II: Homogenization, 2004, in a digitally arranged multi version created by Tom Grotta) Multi-lingual as few Americans are, Laky claims she learned her 5 or 6 languages visually. We see this reflected in her interest in words that can be read different ways. Here we can read WAR as: RAW, ARM, RAM AND MAR, all of which only serve to reinforce Laky’s political message.

In 2004 she started the Currency Series with a large dollar sign representing the way that the Iraq war was “bankrupting our nation when there was so much else that needed to be done.” **BOTTOM LINE**, 2005, Mesquite Charcoal, black caulking and plastic soldiers. I have lightened it up: it is really charcoal black.



Figure 4, left. Globalization II: Homogenization, 2004, 32" x 97" x 4", Collection Barbara/Eric Dobkin, Digitally arranged multi version photo: Tom Grotta.

Figure 5, right. Bottom Line, 2005, 33" x 22" x 4", photo, Private Collection, Photo: Ben Blackwell.

From the dollar signs there evolved a series of symbols all dealing with the real human and environmental cost of war. In **THE WILLING**, 2010, fallen toy soldiers raise questions never asked by those Coalition Soldiers who gave their lives in Iraq. Laky is clearly horrified by precious resources, both human and monetary, wasted on war.



Figure 6, left. The Willing, 2010, 26" x 23" xlx 2.5", Private Collection. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree.

Figure 7, center. Past Tense, 2004, 22.5" x 22.5" x3", Private Collection, Photo: Ben Blackwell.

Figure 8, right. Why? 2011, 48" x 26" x 7", Artist Collection, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree.

In 2005, Laky retired after 27 years of teaching at UC Davis. While there, she had fought Prop 209 that

had disallowed any preference as to gender or race in hiring faculty. This law had resulted in the sharp reduction of the number of women and people of color hired by the University. Thanks to Laky and others, that trend has now been reversed. She says, “ I care, I care. I’m a soapbox kind of person. And (the art) is a natural occurrence, a part of my life.” She admits to being critical of a lot of things, but basically an optimist believing that change can happen. Her involvement with Women’s Rights and the Environment are her legacy at UC Davis where sustainable art practices remain a focal point in the Design Department.¹ This work is called PAST TENSE, 2004, and it appeared in her final exhibit at UC Davis. The Ampersand which mean “and also” is a hopeful symbol for Laky and pointed enthusiastically toward the work she would to do after her long teaching career.

Finally, in WHY?, 2011, with commercial wood and toy soldiers, is a diabolical red question mark punctuated with those toy soldiers again and asking again for an end to war. When I asked Laky, as I did all three artists, if she thinks that what we do as artists affects people, makes a difference, she responded that she is an “ARTIST PARTICIPANT” with no time for art for art’s sake. And of the work itself she said, “It is all I know how to do. It is my best voice.”



Figure 9, Linda Gass studio shot, January 2012, Photo: Barbara Shapiro.

LINDA GASS, born in Southern California and raised in LA, spent two years at Brandeis University, the school that gave us 60’s icons Abby Hoffman and Angela Davis. Gass says some of their legacy had lingered on. She transferred to Stanford to study Mathematics in 1979-81, living in a vegetarian co-op where recycling was done long before it became fashionable. Gass, a “natural mathematician,” was one of the few women in the Stanford Mathematics Department. She did her Grad work in Computer Science at Stanford while participating in the campus anti-military movement. All of her research was supported by the Department of Defense (DOD), so she and her colleagues filed a Freedom of Information Act search document to find out how their research was going to be used. (Remember Internet started out as part of the DOD.) After university, she joined the fledgling Adobe Systems where she was the 11th employee. Gass admits it was a “whirlwind career at the leading edge of the desktop publishing revolution,” but she still found time to take art classes. In 1993 she left Adobe and turned to

¹ American Craft Ap/May 12

making art full time. Her short venture into designing “smart travel clothes” for adventure travel never materialized because, thinking locally, she refused to outsource manufacturing to Asia.



Figure 10, left. *After the Gold Rush*, 1998, 26" x 21", Artist collection. Photo: Don Tuttle.

Figure 11, center. *Fields of Salt*, 2007, 30" x 30", Collection Susan Loesser, Photo: Don Tuttle.

Figure 12, right. *Sanitary?*, 2009, 30" x 30", Collection Mitchell Kapor Foundation, Photo: Don Tuttle.

Gass found her medium of choice in silk painting with acid dyes. She paints beautifully. She started doing hand-painted clothing and then learned to quilt in order to finish off the painted landscapes she found herself most drawn to. Quilting added dimension to her vivid paintings.

All of her quilts are painted and machine quilted. Her third quilt, AFTER THE GOLD RUSH, 1998, was accepted at Quilt National and won the Rookie (now Emerging artist) Award. Her inspiration has always been water issues, specifically the water of California on which she has become an expert. An avid hiker, Gass likes to visit the sites she paints for her quilts, although her point of view is usually aerial, often using the historical photographs taken by the USGS and also Google Earth.

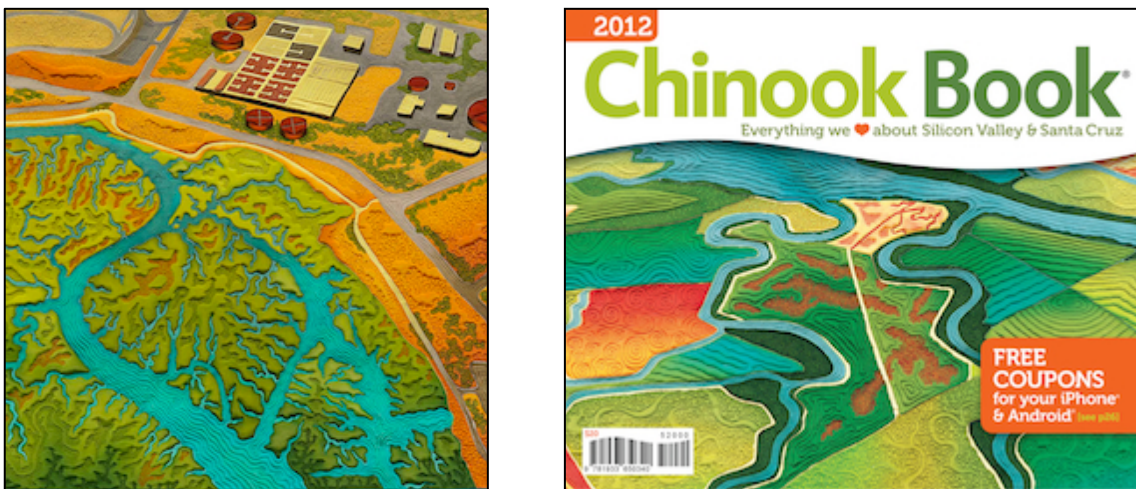


Figure 13, left. *Treatment?*, 2009, 30" x 30", Collection Michell Kapor Foundation, Photo: Don Tuttle. Figure 14, right. *Chinook Book* Cover, 2012, Photo provided by artist.

Gass has created an extensive series of works about the fate of the SF Bay. In *FIELDS OF SALT*, we have the artificial Salt Ponds you see near San Jose as you descend to land at SFO. She laments the destruction of precious and shrinking Bay wetlands for commercial benefits.

SANITARY? is an aerial view of Newby Island Sanitary Landfill in Milpitas, one of several former garbage dumps on the San Francisco Bay. Gass paints unappealing subjects such as where our garbage and sewage go to underline the importance of knowing the whole local water cycle and the processing of human waste. This work questions the placement of landfills so close to the delicate Bay environment.

Gass' *TREATMENT?* was featured in the Textile Museum's recent exhibit *Green: The Color and the Cause*. *TREATMENT?* deals with the dicey subject of wastewater, which is now so thoroughly treated that when it is poured into the Bay, it causes little pollution, but alters the salinity necessary to native salt marsh species. There are evidently no easy answers to the water issues it seems.

Gass is active in local Environmental organizations such as Acterra and Green Town Los Altos, which advocated for a new waste contract including food waste composting to reduce methane-producing greenhouse gasses. She often seeks alternate venues for her artwork so as to influence a wider audience than the usual gallery crowd. I came upon this sustainable green resource coupon book at a local grocery store. In 2010, she was a keynote speaker at the 6th Biennale Bay Delta Science Conference, a gathering of 1000 of the State's top scientists and policy makers. Her artwork was featured there.

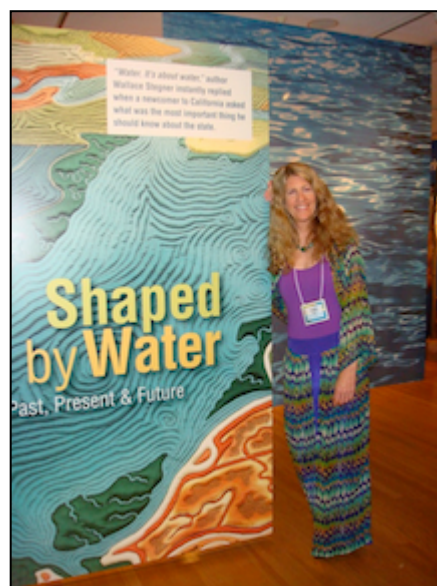


Figure 15, Shaped By Water Exhibit Opening, July 2012, Photo: Barbara Shapiro.

In 2011 Gass curated *SHAPED BY WATER*, an interactive museum exhibit on all aspects of Bay Area Water. This huge poster of her own work graced the entry way to the exhibits. Gass hopes to inform the largest possible public of the need to appreciate and respect water. She was just awarded the Eureka Fellowship from the Fleishacker Foundation. The \$25,000.00 award will permit her to explore translating her work into architectural materials with the intention of pursuing public art commissions. With her sensually attractive painted silks and clear vision of what is important to our thirsty planet, Linda Gass is someone to watch!



Figure 16, Linda MacDonald studio shot, 2012.

LINDA MacDONALD told me, “I was never a political person, do not go to protests or marches... except possibly for those dealing with women’s Reproductive rights.” She does however belong to the local Save the Redwoods League and successfully petitioned County Supervisors to prevent timber harvesting on land along the historic Skunk Train route. She exhibits with WEAD (Women Environmental Arts Directory), as do Laky and Gass. Linda MacDonald is a child of the 60’s in the Bay Area. She is political without even knowing it. Born in Berkeley, Ca, her undergraduate degree at SFSU was in Art focused on painting, but she took a few textile classes with weaver Margery Livingston. These classes resonated strongly with her although weaving was not her “thing.” She was too interested in imagery and didn’t want to do tapestry. So she graduated as a painter.



Figure 17, left. Chasing Red Dogs, 1985, 92” x 92”, Collection K & R Kirkpatrick, Photo: Sharon Risedorph.

Figure 18, right. Spotted Owl vs. Chain Saw - Trespasser, 1992, 65” x 51”, Artist Collection, Photo: Amy Melious.

In an early quilt, CHASING RED DOGS (1985), MacDonald achieves a 3 dimensionality that is very painterly. In 1969 she and her artist husband moved to Willits in inland Mendocino County. She was 25 years old and found herself living the “Back to The Land Movement.” She and her husband bought 14 acres with a cabin on it and did “a lot of gardening.” The Women’s movement was just gaining steam in Mendocino. After attending her first large gathering of women, she joined a quilt group, one of several smaller groups that splintered off from the movement. At that time all quilting still meant traditional geometrics. Women were seeking family roots, and the self-sufficiency and reuse of materials characteristic of the early settlers was an inspiration. She also noticed that people in her community were attracted to quilts. MacDonald’s earlier paintings had been mostly geometrics, and the geometric quilt patterns came to her naturally. She bought an antique New Home brand treadle sewing machine and started quilting, happy to feel connection to her grandmothers and aunts from the Mid West who had been steeped in this textile tradition. She raised her family, acquired a teaching credential and taught single subject Art in a continuation high school for 20 years. Around 1980 she started putting painting on her quilts.

SPOTTED OWL VS. CHAIN SAW – TRESPASSER. 1992. After reading about the first Quilt National in 1979, MacDonald successfully entered the succeeding ones. Through Quilt National she met people and learned that she was part of “an Art Movement” devoted to new possibilities in this most American of textile traditions. Quilts had always been the “poor Sister” of the textile arts using leftovers and recycled materials. Through the Women’s Movement and venues such as Quilt National, quilts had become Art. MacDonald liked this dichotomy that brought her art closer to her roots with her Ohio relatives. She believes “we only have one life to live and if we don’t treat it with seriousness and as an opportunity to act, then our chance to speak is lost.” In 1989 she started Grad School in Art with a concentration in Textiles at SFSU to which she commuted, bunking overnight with friends, for 3 years. Mendocino County, where she lived, is partially coastal but mostly mountainous and very rural, and SF is urban with a different climate. On the frequent long drives home, she became acutely aware of the difference of the two places and where she fit into that dichotomy. The spotted owl had become the pawn in the struggle between logging and environmentalists. Its listing as a “threatened species” led to more restrictions on logging. The owl is surrounded in this quilt by a chain saw blade motif, and not happy about it. For Linda these serious subjects are best conveyed with a bit of humor that grabs the viewer’s attention long enough to make a serious impact. Hers was an unusual and authentic voice at an urban university, and people paid attention.

EVEN THE OLD GROWTH MUST WORK FOR ITS KEEP, 2002, which indicates that the old trees in tourist attractions, like the few remaining great redwood forests, would have been cut down long ago if they did not make money. In preparation for her Graduate exhibit, MacDonald asked herself, “What do I really care about?” Her long commutes to San Francisco provided the answer. She took advantage of the MFA platform to talk about our blindness to the true value of natural resources.

The hot topic in Mendocino in the early 90’s pitted Big Logging against the Endangered Species Act of 1972. These were the last throes of the once all-powerful logging concerns like Georgia Pacific. The battle was pitched and eventually the environmentalists won. Today forests are more controlled and timber permits stricter. Linda’s quilts were part of this battle.



Figure 19, left. Even Old Growth Must Work for its Keep, 2002, 47" x 32", Artist Collection, Photo: Hap Sakwa.



Figure 20, right. Wildlife Sanctuaries, 2002, 35" x 45", Private Collection, Photo: Robert Comings.

As seen in *WILD LIFE SANCTUARIES*, 2002, Mac Donald's post MFA work, the artist questions whether we really want to allow unbridled population growth to use up our natural resources while ignoring our species' impact on the rest of the animal world.



Figure 21, Mountain Lion in the City, 2006, 20" x 20", Artist Collection, Photo: Robert Comings.

Similarly, *MOUNTAIN LION IN THE CITY*, 2006, deals with this infringement of man on the animal's natural environment. Starting in the 1990's, the controversy over Global Warming was just getting started, with many disbelievers. MacDonald found such issues "exciting and heart breaking." Her recurring subjects are human overpopulation and urban sprawl and their negative effect on animals and forests even in the rural life she has chosen to live. Painted whole cloth quilts, as well as prints and painting, are her mediums, and humor is her voice. She feels that horrible imagery of death and

destruction does not draw the viewer in. A bit of humor in a well-executed image does, making us receptive to thinking about the issue. In MacDonald's hands humor is a powerful tool.

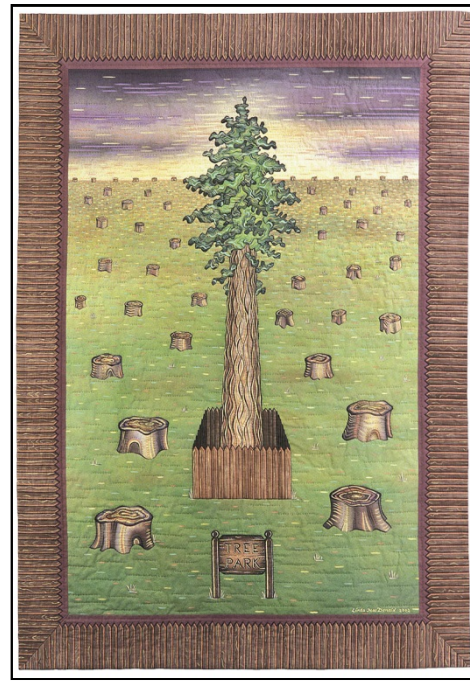


Figure 22, left. Spotted Owl vs Chain Saw - Wild and Tasty, 1992, 65" x 51" Artist Collection, Photo: Amy Melious.

Figure 23, right. Tree Park, 2002, 48" x 36", Artist Collection, Photo: Hap Sakwa.

MacDonald advises the artists in this audience "to read and look at the world around you and figure out what moves you, this should be your message." She believes that: "There is power in a political statement in cloth as it forces us to ask questions. We see what should be a nice and cuddly quilt, but it is not. Guns and saws and dying animals contrast with the comfort of the traditional quilt." This is her SPOTTED OWL VS CHAIN SAW - WILD AND TASTY, where the spotted owl seems to be destined to a violent end. She advises us to: "Focus on the Memorable. Forget about what you think you should be doing. Work with whatever medium best suits your message." Like Linda Gass she gladly let her work be used in posters, newsletters, and anywhere else that would promote the message. When asked if she thinks her art has had an effect in helping people make decisions on the environment, she replies she does not know for sure, but that she, like the other two artists, is very hopeful.

In summary, as we look at MacDonald's TREE PARK, an ode to over-harvesting, we note that each with each of these dedicated artists, one particular quality draws us deeply in to the work and makes the message more palpable. For Gyongy Laky, it is strength and clarity of the materials and design, for Linda Gass it is the luscious beauty of her painted silk landscapes, for Linda MacDonald it is the humor she finds in awful ecological situations. And with each of them it is the sincerity of their devotion to cause that gives authenticity to the work. Thank you.

All quotes are the artists' words transcribed during our interviews: Gyongy Laky 1/19/2012, Linda Gass 1/30/2012, Linda MacDonald 3/5/12. All images provided by the artists for this purpose.