

FINE ARTS

In a secret gallery, simple stories told in textiles



NedRa Bonds recalls recent environmental disasters with her 2011 quilt “The Price.”
 RAY MARK RINALDI — SPECIAL TO THE DENVER POST

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Although it has been open for a dozen years now, and producing ponder-worthy exhibitions all along, the Fulginiti Gallery on the Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora remains something of a mystery to many people in this region.

Tucked deep within the sprawling complex of educational buildings — I would describe it as

behind the dental school and diagonal from the student cafeteria — it is hard to see and difficult to reach. The gallery does not bring a lot of attention to itself in the way other art galleries do, in their efforts to lure a large number of visitors from the community.

The Fulginiti Gallery seems content to address its primary concern, using art to teach the finer points of health care to the future doctors and nurses who go to this outpost of the University of Colorado to study medicine. The theory goes that artists, with their unique and compelling way of saying things, can instruct in a way that scientists cannot, pushing students to think profoundly about the emotional experiences of the patients they will serve. It is part of the larger mission of CU's Center for Bioethics and Humanities.

The current exhibition, "Raw Material: Quilts by NedRa Bonds," is a good example of how this works. Plus, it serves as a solid reason for local art fans to take advantage of this free and welcoming cultural resource, even if it is off the beaten path of museums here.

Bonds, who lives and sews in Kansas City, has been using quilts as a form of expression throughout various periods of her life. She is a great-grandmother now, so there is a lot of life experience stitched into the sampling of textiles on display.

And a lot of the quilts — the best of them, actually — address medical care directly. In the early 2010s, Bonds was treated for breast cancer and she used quilts to talk about her physical and psychological journey.

The show's centerpiece is a 2011 work titled "Windows." It is a relatively large quilt, just over 6 feet tall and 5 feet wide, and Bonds sewed into it what appears to be a series of windows, all with black frames. Inside each window is a patchwork of multiple fabrics with endlessly different shapes, colors and patterns. Each window is radically different than the next and each is full of unique personality.

As the show's catalog explains, Bonds was capturing her own experience of looking through various windows during a hospital stay and seeing other patients, all on their own medical journeys and all with individual and complicated paths.

It is a captivating work. Bonds tells these stories in an abstract way, using a hodgepodge of rich hues and distinct fabric prints to get at the emotional truth of each patient's experience. You cannot see the details of medical procedures or know specific diagnoses, but you can understand just how intense and affecting, and solitary, hospital stays can be.

Could a college professor, tasked with lecturing on how our gastrointestinal systems work or explaining the technical points of neuroanatomy, teach with such candid sincerity about the patient ordeal? It would be a challenge.

There are a series of quilts with the same power, including Bonds' self-portrait "I Have Cancer. It Doesn't Have Me," where she inserts a picture of the comic character Wonder

Woman next to her own image; and her tribute to the myths and challenges of motherhood that are apparent in a piece titled “The Mommy Quilt.”

“Raw Material,” which was curated by Kendall Taylor, is not a large show, just a dozen or so quilts are on display from 25 years of Bonds’ output. It is also casually installed; the works are informally tacked up on the gallery walls and the room itself is full of distractions — tables, chairs, a donation jar. This gallery does not do itself any favors when it comes to the actual visitor experience.

But Taylor edited the selections deftly, and economically, and a visitor can really come to understand Bonds and her aims as an artist.

There are notable pieces that reach beyond medical themes. Bonds also has used quilting to talk about racism, the environment, social history and consumerism.

The 1994 quilt “Get Off Me” is a feminist statement rejecting the traditional gender roles of Western society. The quilt depicts a female figure who appears to be running away from the pressure imposed on women by religion and motherhood.

The 2011 quilt “The Price” depicts a human figure crying, shedding tears over an image of planet Earth. Bonds has added text to the piece, a list of recent industrial disasters, among them “Exxon Valdez,” “3 Mile Island” and “Chernobyl.”

The works can also get very personal. “Working While Black,” from 2008, is a self-portrait of Bonds on the job at a call center. She rejects the invisibility of being just another office worker by wearing clothing, jewelry and a hairstyle that reflect her identity as a Black woman.

In that way, “Raw Material” functions on two levels. It does seem to be an effective teaching tool and it is impressive that the medical school understands the need to educate students holistically. One hopes the students spend some time in the gallery absorbing Bonds’ considerable gifts at storytelling.

But it is also a show with broad themes anyone can appreciate. Seeing Bonds’ expressions of humanity — growing up, getting by, witnessing current events, surviving trauma and the threat of personal demise — is a rich pleasure. These quilts, bought together in this overlooked art space, are a wonder.

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