A Quilter's Tale

When Valerie Schadt '99, G'03 pieces together a quilt, she covers a lot of territory. Schadt goes far beyond the boundaries of traditional quilting, turning her creations into artistic self-explorations. Her eclectic interests range from mythology and medieval art to quantum physics and nature, and she often mingles these themes in her unique quilts. "I mull over a lot of stuff in my life and the quilts are a convenient place to dump it," says Schadt, who holds a B.F.A. degree in surface pattern design and an M.F.A. degree in fiber arts, both from the College of Visual and Performing Arts.

At the Master of Fine Arts Exhibition in the Lowe Art Gallery last semester, Schadt displayed nine quilts. Among them were The Pillars of October, December—Winter Solstice, January Looks in Both Directions, and The Pomegranate Descent. "I'm really driven by the seasons," she says, "so the beginning layer of each quilt's fabric—which makes the initial impact—is usually generated by a seasonal image." The Pillars of October, for instance, features patchwork of a creek, trees, and deer. The work also blends in vinyl clouds, a plastic bonsai tree, and a red kite on a string. In The Pomegranate Descent, Schadt delves into the Greek myth of Persephone, who was abducted by Pluto and taken to the underworld, where she ate three pomegranate seeds that came to symbolize the winter months. Schadt also likes to sprinkle her quilts with quotations, origami figures, holographic foils, polka dots, and assorted coins. "The coins are my pennies from heaven," she says. "I'm trying to invoke prosperity."

Fiber arts professor Ann Clarke, who served as Schadt's M.F.A. advisor, marvels at the sophisticated, unusual imagery and storytelling of Schadt's quilts. "Her works have a great deal of curiosity, metaphor, and mystery to them," Clarke says. "Each one is not a place to stop—it's an invitation to study the quilt and search for meaning. That's where her work becomes really interesting."

For Schadt, making the transition from being a self-taught, traditional quilter with two decades of experience into the realm of art was a challenge. She experimented with new techniques and technology and, as Clarke points out, was able to "maintain her dual citizenship" as artist and artisan. "She can walk that line," Clarke says. "She's a master craftsman whose techniques are beyond reproach. She's able to let go of issues and allow her ability to create images and tell stories to come forward."

Schadt, who teaches quilting classes at University College, has shown works in both quilting and general art exhibitions. No matter her direction on any particular project, she maintains an intense desire to sew and transform fibers and fabrics into visual statements. "I have a deep-seated connection with fiber, but it's taken me a lot of education to realize why," she says. "What can you do with a piece of string? You can essentially conquer the universe, but you need to know which techniques to use."

—Jay Cox