

A feel-good exhibition

Broaden audiences' appreciation with art quilts they see, touch, and hear



Deb Cashatt runs the threads of Chiaki Dosho's small, untitled art quilt over her palm.

by Deb Cashatt

We've all experienced that moment in a gallery where our instinct is to reach out and touch the art. Then we stop short, seized by the realization that such interaction could prompt sirens, alarms, or at least a sharp intake of breath from an art guard.

But we still want to touch the art. What if you had permission? What if you made a piece that invited tactile application? *Sensational!*, a SAQA call for entry that will be open June 1-30, 2026, offers that possibility. Makers are asked to create art quilts that gallery attendees can enjoy through sight, touch, and/or sound.

After all, fiber art is alluring. Through layering, embellishment, and stitching, we alter surfaces in ways that invite touch. Yet we are repeatedly told not to touch the art quilts. Oils from our skin can damage textiles. Curators and gallerists warn that if visitors are allowed to touch one artwork, they'll want to touch everything. Artists worry we've worked too long for recognition of art quilts as fine art for them to possibly be viewed as everyday objects, even if just for one exhibition. These concerns are real—but perhaps not as insurmountable as we've been led to believe.

Touching scenarios

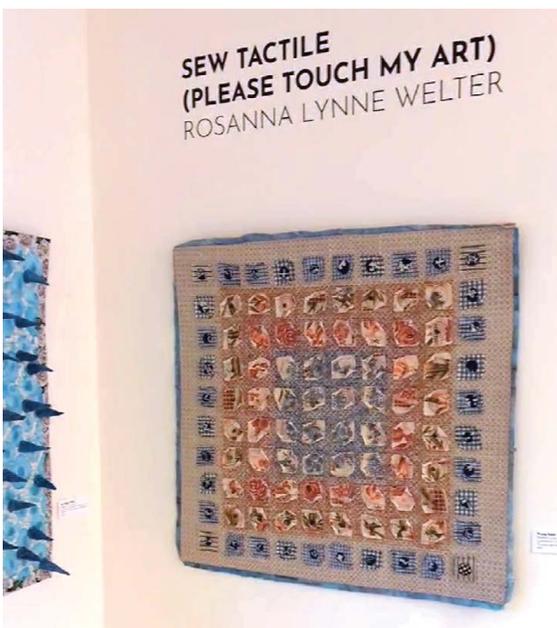
In 2023, Rosanna Lynne Welter's exhibition *Sew Tactile (Please Touch My Art)* at the Bountiful Davis Art Center in Bountiful, Utah, invited viewers to do just that. "Many art lovers understand brushstrokes; they understand painting techniques, but they are

clueless about the structure of textiles. Touching is an invitation to explore and come to know," she says. The gallery was initially hesitant, so Welter provided the winning compromise: compostable wipes for visitors to clean their hands before touching the work.

In a SAQA webinar about *Sensational!*, Annina Collier, dean of the Thomas K. McKeon Center for Creativity at Tulsa [Oklahoma] Community College, spoke about the center's exhibition, *Please Touch the Art*. She described how visually impaired visitors were able to "see" the artwork through touch—and how respectful all visitors were. In the same webinar, Laura Fogg discussed her piece *California Cuisine*, a two-layer art quilt. Viewers first see a couple being served in a fine-dining restaurant. When they lift the upper layer using the fabric tabs she included, they discover farmworkers harvesting produce and people diving into dumpsters behind the restaurant to reclaim discarded food. Fogg says the quilt was returned to her after exhibition in pristine condition, right down to the tabs.

The secret's out

I asked members of the SAQA - Members Only Facebook group which artists' work they would most like to touch. Donna Deaver mentioned Chiaki Dosho. As it happens, a small Dosho piece has hung next to my computer for over ten years. The dimensionality is visible in photographs, but a photo doesn't make it clear that the fabric is unstiffened



Rosanna Lynne Welter's 2023 exhibition was installed at the Bountiful Davis Art Center in Bountiful, Utah.

kimono silk that is so light it's almost weightless. And only by touching and closely examining the piece is it possible to know that the threads hanging from the surface are actually extensions of the threads she used to machine stitch the squares to the backing. Being able to touch the work deepened my respect for her art practice; I can only imagine the time and care invested in her larger pieces.

Research into consumer behavior supports these experiences. Studies on “need for touch” suggest that haptic people (those with a predilection for the sense of touch) generally fall into two categories. Some need to touch objects to gather information. Others are driven by sensory experience and pleasure—what researchers call “hedonic appreciation.” If you're an information gatherer, you might be satisfied with my description of Dosho's work. But if you're sensory-driven, no amount of description can replace the pleasure derived from gathering the hanging threads and gently running them across your palm.

Relying on experience

Sue Bianchi creates richly textured art quilts with buttons. Originally, she says she didn't think about people touching her work. She simply loved running her own hand across the surface as she created it. But despite “Do not touch” signs at exhibitions, people would sneak a touch. Now, when she sees a child engaging with her work, she encourages them to run their hands over it and talk about what they feel. Does it feel different than it looks? When I asked if she would change any conditions of the *Sensational!* exhibition, Bianchi said she would not. Her quilts are far sturdier than people imagine—and they've already survived rough handling, she says.



Laura Fogg discusses her quilt, *California Cuisine*, during the SAQA webinar about *Sensational!* You can see how the tabs allowed viewers to reveal the piece's second layer.



Sue Bianchi

On the Other Side

35 x 35 inches | 90 x 90 cm | 2020

Photo by Curt Bianchi

Welter noted that adults tend to approach touch from an information-gathering perspective, while children experience pure joy in running their hands across the work. Texas-based artist Kathy York encapsulated the sensory viewpoint perfectly: “Touching

can be too limiting. Some of the quilts I love, I want to ROLL in.”

Even traditionally pieced quilts with limited stitching are novel and unfamiliar to some people. In the interview *Immaterial: Blankets and Quilts: Threads of Identity*, Gee's Bend quilter



Deb Cashatt

AI Altarpiece: Palm Springs

40 x 79 inches | 102 x 201 cm | 2025



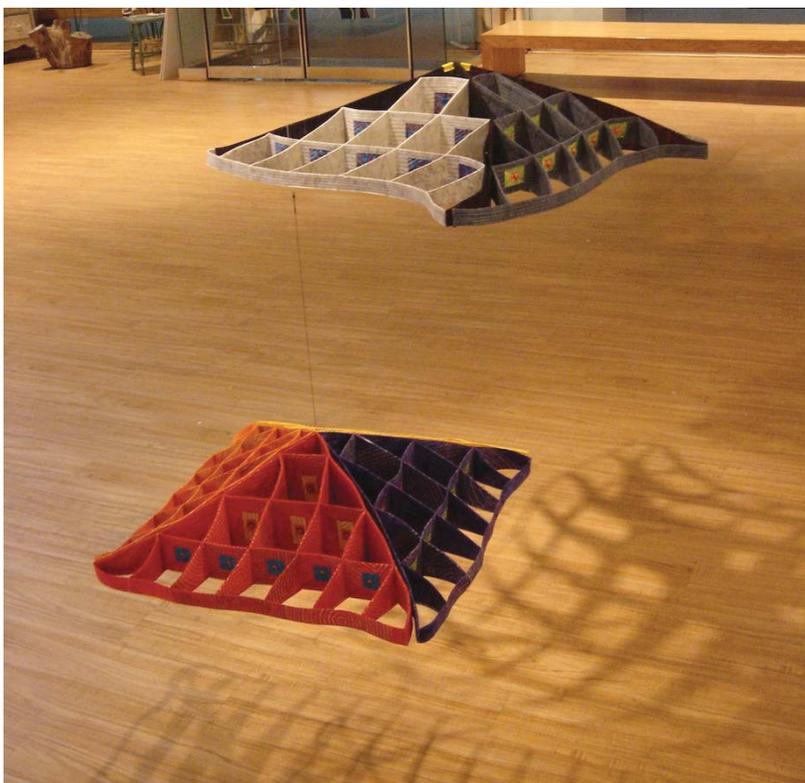
Shannon Conley

Vining

42 x 24 x 3 inches
107 x 61 x 8 cm | 2023

Loretta Pettway Bennett recalls that she once watched someone reach out to touch a quilt on a wall, only to be stopped. “You can’t touch the quilt?” she asked. “This quilt has been on the floor! We’ve been lying on the quilt. Now we can’t touch the quilt?”

Touch can also be transformative—something happens when a viewer engages physically with the work. A button activates sound. Movement creates shadows. Modular components allow viewers to reconfigure a composition. In my own piece, *AI Altarpiece: Palm Springs*, I mounted a quilt on stretched canvas and added hinged side panels containing screenshots of my conversations with the AI programs Midjourney and ChatGPT, along with images showing my subsequent edits in Adobe Photoshop. I intended viewers to move the panels, touch them, and read them. Ironically, by the time the piece was finished, the rules governing those AI programs had already changed. I could no longer reproduce the same results. The panels now function as historical documents—records of a fleeting moment in technological time.



Diane Núñez

Six Squared

(two of three parts)

27 x 27 x 9 | 69 x 69 x 23 cm | 2014

21 x 21 x 7 | 53 x 53 x 18 cm | 2014

Photo taken by Ralph Núñez

Beyond wall art

Wearable and sculptural textile art expand the relationship between touch and meaning. In the 1990s, e-textile pioneer Maggie Orth created *Musical Jacket*, a garment embroidered with conductive thread that functioned as a keypad connected to a music synthesizer. Touching the embroidered numbers produced sound. In another piece, a dress lit up when fabric brushed against the wearer's body while walking. Touch wasn't just allowed—it was essential. Notably, *Sensational!* also invites works that incorporate sound.

Contemporary fashion continues to inspire this impulse. SAQA member Lena Meszaros mentioned her desire to touch the sculptural garments of Iris van Herpen, whose materials flex, shift, and respond to the body. Still images do not do van Herpen's garments justice. She created an Instagram reel showing how her creations respond to touch. Wouldn't an art quilt with moveable pieces be a great idea for the *Sensational!* exhibition?

I'm also drawn to the shadows cast by artwork. For me, they can be an integral part of a piece. With the right lighting, works by Diane Núñez cast dramatic shadows. If viewers can touch and move the piece, those shadows shift—adding another dimension to already three-dimensional work.

Another view

Many artists who answered my Facebook query create work that appeals strongly to the information-gathering side of touch. This curiosity draws me to Shannon Conley's smocked pieces. In *Vining*, her color blending is beautiful, but my haptic curiosity wants to know: are they soft or stiffened? Supported by mesh? Something else entirely? While Conley feels much of her work is too fragile for touch, she believes her smocked pieces could withstand it. She loves exploring the crevices, folds, and textures as she sculpts.

Despite examples like these, many fiber artists hesitate at the thought of artwork being touched. It's easy to remember fabric storybooks from

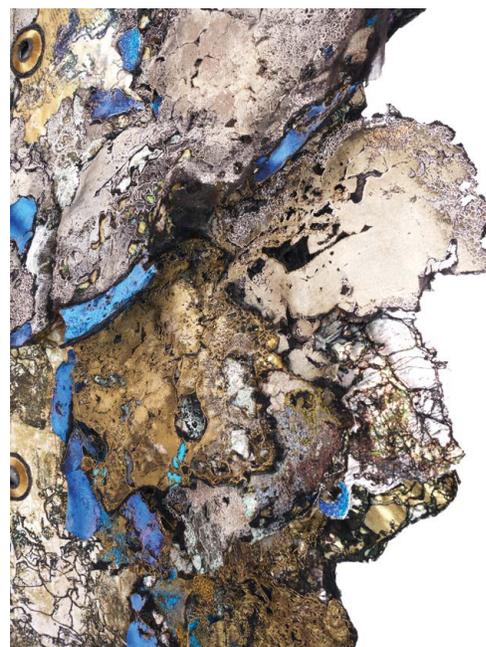


Sue Hotchkis

Flake

59 x 22 x 6 inches | 150 x 57 x 15 cm | 2025

Below: Detail





Jayne Gaskins
Options

32 x 27 x 2 inches | 81 x 69 x 5 cm | 2012



Jayne Gaskins
Options
Side View

childhood—learning to button and unbutton, zip zippers, tie bows. We think of fidget quilts for people with Alzheimer’s disease, designed to occupy restless hands. Some therefore question whether such interaction invites our artwork to be compared to everyday objects.

Susan Hotchkis, who made *Flake*, says she would tell someone before they touched her quilt, “Please don’t!” But, if she were to enter the upcoming call for entry, she would create a piece she considered disposable—one she wouldn’t mind if it were damaged.

Jayne Gaskins’s dimensional thread-painted *Options* seems to beg for touch, yet she remains firmly opposed to such action. “The craftsmanship of the art quilt has been highly regarded for years, but we are just now gaining respect for our composition and content as fine artists. That is a much higher priority.” So, if you want to touch Gaskins’s work, you’ll have to

purchase a piece as I did. I can touch my Spotlight Auction quilt made by her as much as I want.

There are many reasons to consider allowing touch in an exhibition: memory, understanding, pleasure, activation, inclusion. And now there is an opportunity to broaden the experience of enjoying art quilts. *Sensational!* invites artists to imagine fiber work that embraces the tactile rather than prohibiting it. In a world increasingly dominated by screens, an exhibition that invites touch may be more powerful than ever.

To learn more about *Sensational!* visit www.saqa.com/sensational. The exhibition’s first installment will be at the Brigham City Museum of Art & History in Brigham City, Utah. ■

Deb Cashatt is a SAQA Juried Artist who resides in Cameron Park, California. You can view her work at www.debcashatt.com.

To learn more about Sensational! and other tactile experiences with artworks, visit these online sources:

SAQA’s panel discussion on Sensational!:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhL8HVINqdE

Iris van Herpen and her dimensional fabric:
www.instagram.com/reels/DQ9tys5jDQI/

Loretta Pettway Bennet in The New York Met’s Podcast Immaterial: Blankets and Quilts: Threads of Identity:
www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/immaterial-blankets

Maggie Orth’s TEDx presentation:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wep18raY348

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