

Thoroughly modern quilting

Andres Rosales traded the relentless pursuit of epic gear in World of Warcraft for the equally laborious, but no less thrilling, craft of quilting. His work is on display at the California Oil Museum.

When Andres Rosales first got into quilting, his friends couldn't believe it. Until then, the 33 year-old had mostly spent his downtime playing World of Warcraft. His buddy scoffed. "He was like, 'Quilting — what the hell?' I'm like, 'dude, it's artistic. It's tough. It requires a lot of effort, and time, and *math*. There's no reset button. You screw up — oh, man.' "



Rosales — tall, thin, sporting a pair of high-top, hand-dyed converse sneakers — is one of a new breed of quilters quietly spearheading a revolution in that most traditional of American handicrafts. Launched in L.A. in 2009 and spreading online faster than a prairie wildfire via social media sites like Flickr, Pinterest and Etsy, the Modern Quilt Guild now boasts branches as far-flung as Brisbane, Australia, and São Paulo, Brazil. QuiltCon, the first national gathering devoted to modern quilting, will be held in Austin, Texas, early next year.

Earlier this year, a Ventura branch was founded as a division of the L.A.-based national organization. A new exhibit at Santa Paula's California Oil Museum, guest curated by Linda Wilkinson, showcases blankets designed by the guild's members through Feb. 17.

Before taking up a needle himself, Rosales attended quilting shows with his roommate Maureen Timmons, president and co-founder of the Ventura Modern Quilt Guild. "It would bore the tar out of me," he says, "always the same patterns and colors." Then he got a whiff of the modern movement.

"There's no checklist" of features, says Kelly Stevens, who owns Superbuzzy, the supply store where the guild holds its meetings, and who along with Timmons started the Ventura guild. But the rebels generally subscribe to a few common principles: a preference for minimalist solids over gingerbread prints; use of asymmetry and negative space (the empty area around an image); creation of texture through intricate stitching; and an overall hipper, sleeker aesthetic inspired by mid-century modern design.

Of course, "modern" is a bit of a misnomer. "There are incredibly avant-garde quilt artists that have been doing this in Japan for 60 years," says Stevens. "They fell in love with American quilting, but then made it their own. They didn't have the capsule of an American tradition that contained their vision to a particular aesthetic."

The movement has existed in pockets for years. But the time was ripe for an American flowering. The DIY movement has glamorized everything from knitting to home brewing. "We've been so inundated with convenience and technology that there's a tidal wave going back the other direction," says

Stevens. “It’s a cultural shift in appreciating things that have a hand touch, instead of being mass-manufactured.”

Liberated from conventional patterns like the Civil War-era “Dear Jane,” brand-new quilters like Rosales feel free to reimagine and reinterpret. Inspired by a trip to L.A., for his first quilt he pieced together fabric strips in teal, butter, charcoal and lime hues to simulate railroad ties. The carefully off-kilter squares show cohesion, but lack the rigid symmetry of more conventional patterns. “Angels Flight” now hangs in the Santa Paula exhibit.

Across the room, Timmons’ homage to Pee-wee Herman, “I Know You Are, But What Am I?” depicts a smattering of red bow ties amid a field of gray and white squares. Peering closely, you can just detect another enormous bow tie stitched atop for added texture. Nearby, Becky Haycox’s “Capturing Phase Dynamics” tracks the peaks and valleys of REM sleep cycles. (Pictured below.)

Haycox started quilting independently in 2000, but says it wasn’t until she joined the guild that she felt she’d found her “people.” Despite women’s usual predominance in quilting circles, six of the 32 members are male. They range in age from mid-20s to 80s, and the group is considering allowing junior members. Meetings take place at night, so working people can attend.

Misty Revell, the chapter’s secretary and Stevens’ employee for three years, grew up in a quilting family: Her mother owned a pattern business, and Revell often accompanied her to shows as a child. At 30, she worried she was too young for a guild, but soon felt at home amid like-minded crafters.

Revell still turns to the familiar patterns for inspiration. She hesitates to identify herself as either a traditionalist or a modernist, but meanwhile, she's learning to adopt an aesthetic that embraces the strengths of each.

"I don't know what I am now," she says. "Somewhere in between. I love them both."

"Quilts Go Modern! A Fresh Take on Tradition," through Feb. 17 at California Oil Museum, 1001 E. Main St., Santa Paula, (805) 933-0076, www.oilmuseum.net. For information on the Ventura Modern Quilt Guild, visit www.venturamodernquiltguild.com.