

in their own words



# TRUSTING the PROCESS and Creating Public Art

BY ELIZABETH BUSCH



RESPONDING TO A NATIONAL COMPETITION FOR A PUBLIC ART PROJECT for the Scientific Laboratories of the State of New Mexico (NMSL) in Albuquerque, I had great hopes for my unique ideas. From 200 internet submittals for this competition, the committee selected five finalists to interview. My proposal, *Outside, Inside*, was selected for the project. I was ecstatic! The year ahead would be day after glorious day creating this 65-foot long commission in my studios.

## EVOLUTION

All the years as a child creating designs on graph paper, the bachelor of fine arts in painting and art education from the Rhode Island School of Design, the eighteen years as an architectural designer, the paintings becoming wall quilts, the wall quilts becoming

commissions, eventually led me to this public art commission.

All along the way opportunities came and I acted. Architecture was never in my plan, but I needed to work when we moved to Maine in 1966 and found employment with a local architectural firm. Little did I know that subsequent experiences would lead in such diverse directions. Clearly, nothing happens by mistake.

During those years as an architectural designer, I learned to read and create architectural drawings for schools, hospitals, banks, libraries, and other commercial buildings. Envisioning and designing public spaces was easy for me and allowed me to use that part of my brain that loves numbers, challenges, and problem solving. It also taught

me how to work with committees and building contractors, how to do presentations and prepare materials and budgets for clients, how to write specifications and read contracts. I did not know during those eighteen years of wanting to be home painting, that I was being given the tools to create large scale public art sculpture.

Making art and teaching are my passions. That I have been able to follow these passions to support myself for the last twenty-six years still amazes me. I heard once that if you do what you love, the money will follow, and I cannot deny that it is true.

The first opportunity to make art at a large scale came when I was commissioned to paint an 8-foot by 16-foot mural for a tourist information center in Maine. I loved the scale! Subsequently in 1985 I created a 3-foot-6-inch by 22-foot painted quilt,

*Continuum*, for the Memorial Southeast Hospital in Houston, Texas. It was exciting to be able to create permanent installations of such scale. While *Continuum* was commissioned through a gallery, I began to seek other commission work as advertised in the opportunities section of fiber and art magazines. More quilt commissions followed in Fort Lauderdale, Florida ; Austin, Texas ; and Augusta, Maine.

In 1987, as a finalist for a space that was not suitable for a quilt, I used the problem-solving part of my brain to come up with materials similar to those I use for sculpture commissions today: plastic netting, polyester film, steel armatures. It had been a huge struggle to invent this work, but clearly it was worth the effort; I knew it would either open new doors, or I'd never have to deal with plastic again. Needless to say, I've become very fond of plastic, and many doors have opened.



TOP LEFT: Elizabeth's Prismacolor pencil drawing on 1/8" scale graph paper for *Outside, Inside*.  
BOTTOM LEFT: Elizabeth in her studio.  
ABOVE: Elizabeth making a final adjustment of woven strips before sewing.

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LEFT: Completed view of this permanent installation in the public lobby of New Mexico Scientific Laboratories, an entry and waiting area for all scientists, conference attendees and visitors.

BELOW: Detail of **Outside, Inside**.

Today, there are many public art Requests for Qualifications/Proposals (RFQ, RFP) on the internet and I encourage anyone who wishes to work at a large scale to go for one. Each site offers guidelines and assistance for its particular project, and many of us who do public art commissions teach process workshops.

#### OUTSIDE, INSIDE

*Outside, Inside* was selected because I considered the needs of the site architecturally, aesthetically, and personally. A public art project is a collaboration. It is not like gallery work, which for me is a totally personal process. For a commission,

I must use my aesthetic to solve a spatial problem and consider the public using the site. In the NMSL site, the public consists of scientists, conference attendees, and the general public. Knowing this, I created imagery referring to the Rio Grande and the Sandia Mountains, painting and weaving the colors of New Mexico's earth and sky. I created eleven separate units that would install as one 65-foot-long landscape.

At first glance, visitors to the Lab are aware only of a glorious New Mexican landscape floating in the overhead space of the 35-foot high entry lobby. Then, on closer scrutiny, each viewer can discover image

fragments of microscopic cells. At a scale unlike their microscopic reality, I combined 28 different cell images with my painted strips and wove a new landscape. The 24-inch square images Asian Flu, Elodea, onion cells, etc. are hidden in plain sight as the texture of the landscape, just as they are in reality. We do not see them, but they are there, both outside and inside. The digital cell images were provided by both the NMSL and the Center for Disease Control (CDC). I had the images printed on clear UV acetate, the transparent media on which I also paint.

For over 12 months I worked in my studio painting, cutting, weaving, sewing. I used my initial Prismacolor drawings and kept measurements to scale, so that the panels would fit together in the space. I worked on adjacent panels, two at a time to insure a smooth transition from one to the other. While I was doing this, the steel fabricator was making the armatures from which each section would hang. I designed and drew the plan for the steel, considering how I wanted each unit to relate to the next. About three-quarters of the way

through the studio work, I put the project installation out to bid and hired a contractor for hanging the panels. I also hired a floor crew to assist with the actual installation. I always supervise an installation, but it takes many hands to get the work up. While I anticipated three to four days for this complex task, it took only eight hours! I attribute that to a superb collaboration of all and NO problems. I was VERY fortunate and no, that does not always happen.

#### AFTERMATH

I continue to apply for suitable commissions, and know that one is out there waiting for me. During the time when I do not have a commission, I have ample time for my personal work. At this writing, painting, and quilting are flowing profusely. Still, there is a part of me that yearns to get back to using that other part of my brain that is challenged with the complex issues of people, architecture, problem solving, numbers. It will come in due time. I trust the process to notify me when it's my turn again.

*Elizabeth Busch* is a full time artist who works from her studios in Maine. She creates Public Art commissions, teaches workshops internationally, and makes art quilts and paintings. She can be reached at her website, [www.elizabethbusch.com](http://www.elizabethbusch.com) or at [ebartist@infionline.net](mailto:ebartist@infionline.net).



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