August 18 – September 28, 2003

Members of Kopanang, a community-based initiative in South Africa addressing poverty, unemployment, and HIV / AIDS, tell the story of the universe through thirty-one embroidered panels.

Guided Walk & Reception
September 10, 4 – 6 p.m.
(guided walk begins at 4 p.m.)

The Cosmic Walk

“This is a story, the story of the Cosmos, the story of earth, the story of humans, the gazelle, the mountains, the story of you and me. In the beginning was the mystery, the churning of quantum foam of potentiality. Through the mystery all things came to be. Not one thing had its being but through the mystery.”

—Miriam MacGillis, OP, Genesis Farm

The thirty-one embroidered panels presented in The Cosmic Walk tell the story of the universe, exploring the mystery, the potential, and the cosmic link that humans share with all of earth’s organisms—from bacteria to bears. The panels were completed by the women of Kopanang, an innovative, community-based initiative addressing poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS and the legacy of apartheid in South Africa. Located in the townships of Geluksdal and Tsakane, outside of Johannesburg, Kopanang brings together women from different social classes—the township and the camp—to learn a craft as well as how to organize, share feelings and experiences, and overcome difficulties. Commissioned by the Faithful Fools Street Ministry in San Francisco, The Cosmic Walk is just one of several projects at Kopanang; others include papermaking, bookkeeping, and exhibition coordination. The Cosmic Walk was completed with the hopes that it would tour and help raise funds for Kopanang.

Inspired by the writings of Brian Swim and Ernesto Cardinal; Sr. Sheila Flynn, who founded and directs Kopanang, designed each panel. After six months of training in embroidery, eighteen women from Kopanang took on the project, adding their personal aesthetics through color and stitch-choice to make each panel a unique expression of themselves and their place in the universe. The narrative that accompanies the panels was written by Miriam MacGillis, OP, of the Genesis Farm.

The fiber arts—quilting, weaving, stitchery—have always been used to tell stories and mark identity. From the iconography in religious shawls, the colors and patterns in rugs and quilts, the scenes on medieval wall tapestries, the human memorial in Victorian hair jewelry, and more contemporarily the portraits of the deceased in the AIDS quilt, we see how thread is continually used to stitch life’s important moments together in an act of remembering. The Cosmic Walk demonstrates this once again, turning the narrative from the personal to the universal in order to remind its viewers of their shared pasts. When looking at the panels, do not overlook the stitch for the larger story. Dwell on them together in order to begin to grasp your place in the cosmos and the way in which all of our stories are linked. These panels, like the universe, began in darkness—a bolt of black fabric—but with each pattern traced, color chosen, needle threaded and knot tied, the universe began to appear, each stitch bringing us closer to the women of Kopanang.