

Seasonal Palette
A Studio Art Quilt Associates' Exhibit

Tranquil Marsh – Wild Iris

A Journal of My Process
(Or, how I drove myself crazy in a few quick months)
by

Elena Stokes

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Curated by
Kathleen McCabe and Vicki Mangum



BIOGRAPHY

Elena Stokes, whose work has been exhibited throughout the US and France, including the Hunterdon Art Museum and the Center for Contemporary Art in New Jersey, is a self-taught artist. Elena initially pursued a career in the performing arts, graduating from the American Academy of Performing Arts in New York City. Her passion for textiles and antique quilts led her to quilting and her love of impressionism influenced her direction as an artist. Today, Elena's textile constructions balance a loose, impressionistic sensibility with methodical structure to arrive at a visually layered destination of color, light and space. She currently resides in beautiful Hunterdon County, NJ.

July 2011: Two significant things happened this month. First, I decided to close my gallery, a small, private space in Frenchtown, NJ where I had my studio and sold my work along with a few local fiber artists' work as well. In a nutshell, the economics weren't working out. Second, on July 27th, to be exact, I joined SAQA with the specific intention of entering my work into national exhibits. In other words, I was getting my act together and taking it out on the road.

The first call for artists I saw on the SAQA website was Seasonal Palette. My work is inspired by nature so the theme was a good fit. The jurying process was a little usual, though:

Instead of submitting a completed work of art, artists were to choose a season and explain why, describe the technique and palette to be used and submit a four piece portfolio of artwork. Thirty two artists (later increased to 37) would be selected based on these portfolios. The finished works were to premiere at the International Quilt Festival in Houston in November of 2012, and then, would travel around the country for another two years. All the quilts were required to be 32" wide by 78" long, a size and shape I had wanted to work with for a long time. Finally, we were required to journal about our process.

August 2011: I chose WINTER as my season, a change from my usual palette. I described the visual concept, a palette of whites, grays, blacks, blues and tans, and the raw edged strip technique I used in a couple of pieces in my portfolio. Off went my submission with my fingers crossed. So far that summer, I hadn't had a lot of luck being accepted into art exhibits. Rejection is part of the game so I tried not to get too down, but this SAQA exhibit was by far the biggest I'd yet to enter. I thought it was a long shot so I was fully prepared for the rejection.

September 2011: "Congratulations! We're very please to inform you..." Aahhhh! After picking myself up off the floor, I felt a tremendous sense of validation. With my business closing, I saw this as kind of relaunch, a rebirth, a new beginning. And very apropos, too, because I was reassigned to SPRING. Interestingly, more than half of the accepted artists had chosen WINTER. As a result, many of the artists were reassigned. Based on a particular piece in my portfolio (**image 1**), the curators, Kathleen McCabe and Vicki Mangum, decided that SPRING would be a good fit for me and I agree. In my mind, SPRING had been my second choice so I was very happy with it. Of course, I'd have been happy with anything. Hey, I'm no dummy. I'm in!

At the end of September of 2011 the doors of my gallery closed. But, as they say, when one door closes another door opens . . .

October 2011: After moving and settling into my new studio at home, I began to mentally formulate a concept around spring. It was more difficult than I thought it would be. After the euphoria of being accepted into my first national exhibition had worn off, the magnitude of the responsibility of being accepted into my first national exhibition began to dawn on me.

Oh. My. God.

This one had to be good. It was going to be seen by tens of thousands of people, the public and the collectors and the critics. It was going to travel for years, to major quilt venues, museums and galleries. It was going to be published. It would be my national debut.

And, I hadn't the foggiest idea of what I was going to do. I went through a few different ideas:

1. I was thinking of rolling hills so I did a search on line and found an image of rolling green hills with rolling, blue mountains in the distance set against a soft pink sky. Problem was it didn't really say spring. It could have easily been summer. I thought about adding some spring flowers in the foreground but I just wasn't feeling it so I dropped it.
2. I took some pictures on our property of the fall trees almost bare, not unlike how they look in early spring. I love that brief period in spring when the trees starting to bud their leaves and there's just a soft greenness about them. I was suddenly reminded of a Wolf Kahn. I realized our property looks a lot like a Wolf Kahn. (image 2) I thought about a design along these lines, with the strips of fabric running vertically instead of horizontally. Hmmm. But, then I thought, "I don't want to do Wolf Kahn. I want to do Elena Stokes." Next!



Image 1 – Water lilies



Image 2 – looks like a Wolf Kahn

3. Current elements in my work involve horizons and water and the reflection of a sunrise or sunset. I see these as metaphors for self reflection, life's journey, of endings and beginnings. I wanted to somehow incorporate these into my spring design. I did an online search for 'water in springtime' images. I came across an image of a marsh with sunlight reflecting off the water and mallards with their babies paddling around. I've done a couple of marsh pieces inspired by several visits to Cape Cod years ago. One of my favorite sights was the marshes growing along the main route. Hmmmm . . . marshes, water, sunrise and little baby ducks. Well, that said spring to me! And, it fit into my developing body of work, which was important for me to keep working on.



Sketch 1

November 2011: My construction technique using raw edge strips is pretty straightforward. I only use hand-dyed and batik fabrics. I like the richness of color and the organic textures they bring to the work. I like fabrics with a lot of texture and blotchy splashes of color. They work well in creating an impressionistic effect. I did not dye these fabrics for this project. I have a large stash that I have collected over many years and I'm trying to put a dent in them so, I confined myself to using those.

My design wall is covered with a product called The Quilter's Block, a very tacky material that the fabric will stick to but then pulls off easily. I marked this material with the dimensions of the finished quilt plus a little extra – 34 by 80. I didn't mind permanently marking it because I intend to make more artwork in this dimension. I don't do any cutting and piecing. I take

fabric and tear strips about one inch wide. I don't measure. I like a little variation. I like the soft frayed edges. They add a texture that appeals to me.

Sometimes I do a sketch, sometimes I have just an idea in my head and work intuitively, collaging pieces of fabric to form an image. I always build the design from the top down loosely organized into rows while trying to maintain a level line, which is important for this particular linear style. I keep a large level on hand to keep me on track. The subsequent row covers the preceding row about a quarter of an inch or so. I'll lay out one section and then, rework it, then move on. As I work my way down the length, I often go back and make tweaks and adjustments to the previous sections, which can get a little obsessive. (Little? Did I say little? Ha!) Eventually, the completed design, the batting and the backing are fuse basted together and then quilted.

For this project, I did a simple sketch to help decide the proportion of sky to earth. I sketched out two versions, a 1 to 3 ratio and a 1 to 4 ratio (**sketch 1**). I decided to go with the 1 to 3 ratio. That meant the sky would measure 26 inches long. I decided I wanted to use a particular fabric for the sky. It's an interesting fabric with lots of variation (**image 3**), gray and moody with gold streaks, a bit of blue, a bit of white and streaks of black that could be arranged in dramatic ways. This is one of my favorite fabrics to use for a sky. It's not exactly the kind of fabric that makes one think of a sunrise or sunset but somehow I'd figure out how to work it in.



Image 3 – moody gray sky fabric

I went through a few different sky versions:

Sky 1: Moody gray sky at the top and then the bottom third a pale blue sky emerging with gold shots and streaks of color near the sun (**image 4**). The gray went quickly enough. As I worked in the pale blue with gold and the streaks of color, I began to get frustrated. Something just wasn't working. I took out the bottom third. (I'm like that. If it's not working for me, it's gone. I don't over analyze it. I go by how it feels. I can't explain it better than that.)

Sky 2: Moody gray sky area finished with a darker blue at the bottom (**image 5**). Hmm. Nope.

Sky 3: Moody gray sky softened into a lighter gray sky with streaks of softer color and a sun (**image 6**). Better, but . . . another one bites the dust.



Image 4 - sky 1



Image 5 - sky 2



Image 6 - sky 3

I wasn't happy with any of it. I decided to use only the moody gray sky, just the part I was happy with, which was about 16 inches of sky. That raised the horizon line way up, changing the proportion of sky to earth drastically to a 1 to 5 ratio. Whoa! Very interesting. It dramatically altered the perspective by drawing your eye farther into the distance. While it was very frustrating with all that back and forth, I ended up being much happier with the raised horizon line. Go figure. But that's the creative process.



Image 7 – Japanese water iris, photo by Autan on flickr

December 2011: Finally, on to the marsh. But, by this time, I changed my original concept a little. (In case you haven't noticed yet, changing my mind is an ongoing theme of this journal.) It will still be a marsh but as I kept poking around on line, I found other images of marshes. I kept collecting marsh images with interesting water patterns. Some had cattails that I considered working into the design but then, I found it. Violet blue Japanese water iris (**image 7**) and bingo! I knew that was it. After all, the exhibit was called Seasonal *Palette*. It needed a floral with *color*. That was the missing element. How obvious. I said hello to the water iris and kissed the baby ducks goodbye. Quack, quack.



Sketch 2

I sketched out a design that combined different elements from different images I had found on line (**sketch 2**). It featured a long marshy estuary that cut a long swath down the length of the quilt. I was playing with the idea of possibly adding fronds and blotches of flowers toward the bottom in the foreground. I wouldn't have to decide that until later. Working the top end of the marsh edge was tedious with a lot fussy cutting, which wasn't how I normally worked with this technique. I continued down, using various greens to build the marsh. I frayed the edges of a few strips and staggered them about to suggest long grasses growing and enhance the marshy feeling. I wanted the water color and value to slightly gradate down the length. I started with very pale blues and whites with touches of very pale golds that picked up on the golds in the sky and gradually worked in darker blues and golds. I was finally seeing progress until . . .



Image 8 – first marsh

January 2012: Working my way down the marsh, something began to bother me. (Imagine that.) Something about the hard line of the marsh edge just didn't work (**image 8**). It was too severe. It didn't allow for a soft impressionistic effect. I did like the way the water gradation was developing and the marsh greens were blending nicely. But that edge was all wrong. I was about two thirds down the length of the overall design trying to feather in a reflection of a sun when something snapped. No. No, no, no. This is all wrong. I had to rethink my marsh. I've kindly edited out all the expletives.

About this time, real fear began to set in. I felt like I was never going to complete this project. "I'm not an artist. I'm a fraud. Who do you think you're fooling?" All the self doubt and self flagellation we all go through as artists, especially in the early years, began to plague me. Part of my brain was freaking out and the other part knew I was just feeling the pressure of my first major exhibit. So, I took a deep breath and moved on.

One of the things that bothered me was my decision to form my design using various elements of several images, other people's images. Usually, I just use images for inspiration, as a starting point to develop my own design. But this time I amalgamated a few different elements from different images. The marsh line was a major design element that I had borrowed. I was never completely comfortable about working off of these images this way, even if I did crop, flip and merge them. But, that's what this was, a composite of other people's work and not wholly my own. So, I felt a huge sense of relief when I let it go.



Image 9 – Marshland

I turned instead to a previous work of my own for inspiration, a small piece called Marshland. Marshland was based on my own memories of the marshes on Cape Cod. It also had some of the moody gray sky fabric. I played around with the image on my computer, cropping it long and narrow (**image 9**). Here, I could see what I always loved about those marshes, the narrow strips of water slicing through the marshy grasses.

I did another quick sketch (**sketch 3**) to work out how I was going to approach color, light and how the iris were going to play out in the design. Again, I toyed with the idea of a few iris fronds at the bottom. And, I was still trying to decide about adding a sun.

On the design wall, the gray sky had a soft, dim glow of white just above the horizon in addition to the streaks of gold light breaking through the clouds above that suggested the sun could be just behind the clouds about to peak out. I wanted the effect of a soft light hitting the marshes so I decided to use lighter yellow greens the top edge and gradually introducing darker and bluer greens and finishing with purple fabrics along the bottom edge, giving the impression of water iris. They probably wouldn't grow that way in real life but this is art. I was creating the feeling of a marsh, not the reality of it. It just felt right.

As I got to my first water's edge, I staggered fabrics with a lot of texture to create a soft blurred effect. By the time I completed the first water section and was building next marsh area, I knew I was moving in the right direction. The farther along I went, the happier I was with my decision to change the design. This was the impressionistic effect I loved to create. I realized after I started to deconstruct and redesign my marsh, I had neglected to photograph my progress up to that point. My apologies, but I was still in the throes of self-flagellation. But as I started to build the new design, you can still see the remnants of the old design (**image 10**) and how far along it was.



Sketch 3

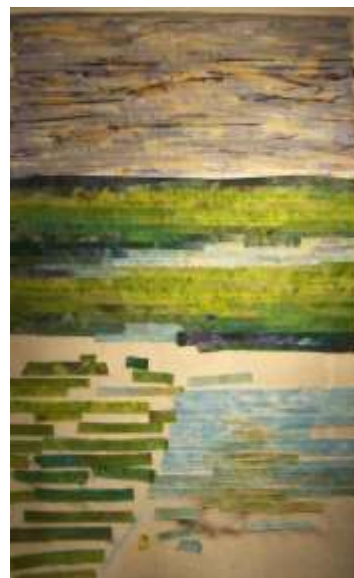


Image 10 – bye-bye old, hello new

Although I'd made a sketch, it was more of a study of color and light than a design layout. I loosely followed the lay out but mostly just improvised, worked freely, letting the marsh and

water areas tell me where they wanted to go. Where I got a little crazy was in finessing the color work, especially with the marsh and water iris edges. Please, don't ask me to describe this part of the process. Just think OCD. I kept working it until it felt right.

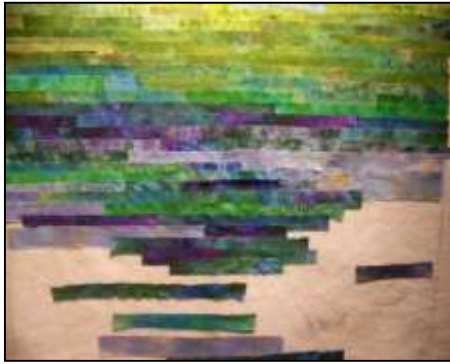


Image 11



Image 12

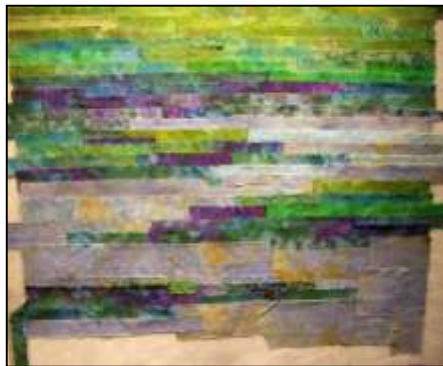


Image 13

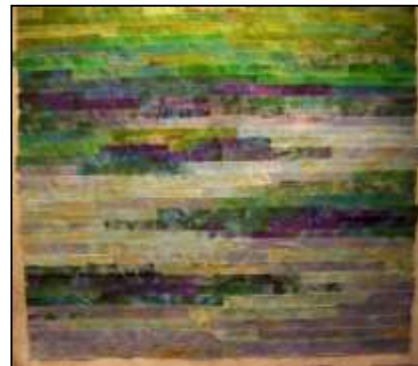


Image 14

I did take a few pictures of an area toward the bottom as I was building it to show how it morphs as I tweak it along (images 11 – 14). I decided against putting the iris fronds at the bottom. I wanted to keep it simple. Less is more. Adding extraneous details would distract. So, no fronds. And no sun and reflection either. It would be too much. Just a little gold glinting on the water.

Finished. At last. And, very pleased with how it turned out. Phew! And, I didn't take it down or change my mind either. Hallelujah. Though, I did leave the design alone for a few days just to live with it and to see if anything needing tweaking. There was something a little flat about the marsh areas so I slipped in narrow strips of a splotchy dark magenta and soft green fabric to help define the upper marsh edges. I added a few very narrow strips of water to the upper and mid marsh areas to enhance the feeling of depth. Lastly, I increased the soft, dim glow just above the horizon by adding a few more white strips. Okay. This time it's really done. (image 15).



Image 15 – done!

Now, to get it off the wall and onto the sewing table. At this point, all I had was a lot of pieces of fabric stuck to a wall. Getting it off the wall intact is always a critical step. One of my favorite multi-purpose tools is Reynolds freezer paper (image 16). I ironed it directly onto the face of the design right on the wall (image 17). After I had completely covered it with freezer paper, I carefully peeled it off the design wall (image 18). I laid out my design, still attached to the freezer paper, onto my living room floor. I don't have a large studio with a large work table so the living room floor had to suffice. I ironed on a fusible product called Wonder Under, onto the back of the design. Once it was completely backed with the fusible, I carefully removed the freezer paper.



Image 16 – freezer paper with iris fabric



Image 17 – iron on



Image 18 – peel off

I ironed Wonder Under onto the backing fabric. It's a Hoffman print I've had for 20 years, loved but never even cut into, of Japanese iris on a navy background. I fused it onto the batting, Hobbs Heirloom 80/20 (image 19). Then, I laid the fused marsh design on top of the batting with backing fabric, carefully lined up the edges, and fused the whole thing together (image 20). With a sigh of relief, I had my design secured and intact. I now had a basted sandwich all ready for quilting.



Image 19



Image 20

February 2012: I knew from the beginning what I wanted for the quilting: close horizontal lines echoing the horizontal strips. I wanted the long vertical length to be counterbalanced by horizontal lines. As with the irregular width of the strips, I didn't mind a little irregularity, some closer together, some farther apart, to add a nice organic quality. One of the reasons I like working in this medium is the quilting. It gives it an entirely different dimension, a wonderful rich texture, which brings it all to life.



Image 21 – quilting on my antique 201 Singer

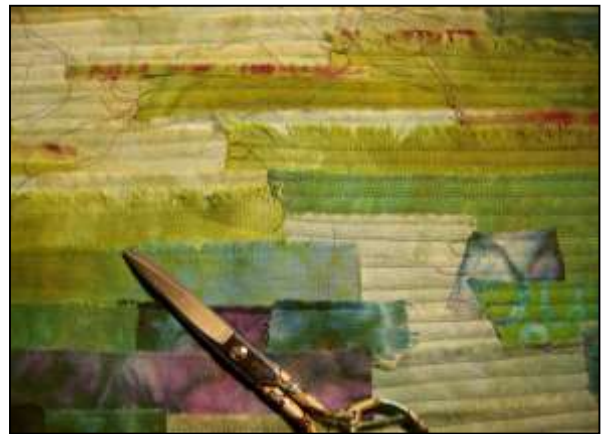


Image 22 – quilting and tying off

I sew on an antique 201 Singer that runs like Sherman tank. I did not do free motion quilting but instead used a simple straight stitch. I quilted the water areas first, beginning and ending under the marsh fabrics. I brought up the bobbin threads, tied them off and cut. Other areas, like the sky, I started on one side and ran off the other. For many places in the marshes, I started where it met the water and either ran off the side or ended at another water edge (**image 21**). All marsh bobbin threads were brought to the top and tied off, knots showing, and trimmed to half inch tails to add a little texture. In the past, I've left my threads long and shaggy but I'm not fond of that choice anymore unless it is integral to the design (**image 22**). Here, it would distract.

But even before I took one quilting stitch, I had a huge dilemma. Normally, when I make a quilt, I create the design without caring about the dimensions. The size is what it is. Done. Not with this one. One of the requirements of this project was it needed to be a specific size. That presented a problem: the quilting. Quilting reduces the overall size of a quilt. If I had made the top to be exactly 32 x 78 and then quilted it, disaster. It would be too small. Okay, so just make it a little bigger. But how much bigger? How much will it shrink? Will my horizontal lines have an effect in both directions or just one? Which one? I have never made a piece this long and narrow so I really didn't know how to anticipate the shrinkage.

To further complicate matters, I didn't want a visible binding. I wanted the scene to feel as if it just continued on. A binding would stop your eye and stop the energy. But, a binding would have been the easiest method. Simply trim it to size and slap on the binding. I had considered other approaches including just letting the edges be raw and ragged but I didn't want that as a design choice for this project.

So, this is what I did. While I was designing on the design wall, I had extended the sides about two inches in both directions and added about five inches to the length. That left plenty of fabric beyond the edges of the batting to wrap to the back and stitch down. I figured if it's a common technique to wrap the backing to the front and sew it down to create the look of a binding, why can't I wrap the front to the back to eliminate any binding? I cut the batting 32 plus $\frac{1}{4}$ inches x 81 inches to allow for shrinkage. My guesstimation was it would shrink length-wise and possibly a little of the width. I felt pretty confident in that guess but I had no way of knowing for sure. If the length shrunk more than that, I could always add a little length. If the width didn't shrink at all, I'd live with the extra quarter of an inch. So, sue me.

So, that was the plan. Here's what happened. I was correct. The length shrunk and the width was not affected at all. But, the length shrank a bit more than I had allowed for. I had to add a couple more strips of fabric and batting to the top and bottom and add few more lines of quilting. A pretty easy fix. The top and bottom edges got wrapped to the back, fused, and quilted down. Then, I cut clean straight edges along the sides, bound the edges in the same fabric as the backing. I wrapped the sides back and slip stitched them down. Nice and tidy. The front looks exactly as I wanted - clean edges that allow the scene to continue in the viewers mind.

Final thoughts . . .

Although this turned into a much longer and more difficult project than I expected, mostly between my ears, I am extremely pleased with the end result (**image 23**). I needed to knock this one out of the park and I feel that I did. From this process I learned to trust my own instincts and to relax and allow these shifts in direction to occur without guilt or insecurity. I also know that as I mature as an artist, I will more quickly anticipate and recognize design problems. Making design changes midway is difficult and risky, but as I look back, I know that every major design change was correct and essential in staying true to my own artistic vision. I'm very glad I took those risks.

P. S. The Artist Statement

Because I ended up having a Japanese aspect to this piece, I decided to write haiku for the artist statement. I ended up writing two haiku which I feel capture the mood of the marsh. I found that using haiku as my artist statement added another layer to the overall artistic expression. Plus, in the process of writing them, I found the perfect title for my marsh, Tranquil Marsh – Wild Iris. I love the contradiction.



warm golden light
shrugs off the chill of gray...

blinking open

lush violet
blooms in a tranquil marsh...

wild iris

Image 23

STATEMENT

My stitched textile constructions, which balance a loose, impressionistic sensibility with methodical structure, depict landscapes fabricated from memories of places I've been or seen. Sometimes the vaguer the memory, the better, as it affords me the flexibility and freedom to piece the scene together more intuitively. My goal is not to recreate any particular place or time of day but to convey a mood or reawaken a memory of a time and place that seems familiar.

The materials themselves lend a sense of familiarity as well, in the simple cottons and silks of our everyday lives and the soft quilted textures. They are hard to resist touching. But my primary focus is always on the organic colors and textures of the hand-dyed fabrics. Although some of the fabrics in my collection are of my own creation, the vast majority are hand-dyed by artisans; others are commercial batiks. When I come across a particular fabric, I have to own it. I see things in fabrics: dappled leaves, moody gray skies or light and shadows bouncing underneath the water's surface. This is the beginning of my process and the source of my inspiration.

I am trained in the tradition of American patchwork quilt making, and this is the basis of my construction technique, though I have simplified the geometry. The uniformly layered and meticulously collaged fabric strips create a sense of space and depth, of a landscape receding in the distance. This orderly formal construct is counterbalanced by the chaotic sparks of colors and textures created by the variegated fabrics. Along with the torn raw edges of the fabric strips, which I intentionally leave exposed, it is these nuances in color and texture that give the work its abstract impressionistic quality. By blending malleable memory and textiles with rigid order and structure, I arrive at a visually layered destination of color, light and space.

CV

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EXHIBITIONS

2012	International Quilt Festival, Houston, TX	Studio Art Quilt Association's Seasonal Palette
2012	Lincoln Center, Fort Collins, CO	New Legacies 30: Contemporary Art Quilts
2012	Hunterdon Art Museum, Clinton, NJ	Grand Finale Artisan Showcase
2011	Some Things Looming, Reading, PA	Size Matters
2010	New Hope Arts Center, New Hope, PA	Second Skin, 2010
2009	New Hope Arts Center, New Hope, PA	Second Skin, 2009
2006	Prallsville Mills, Stockton, NJ	Quilts in the Mill
2004	Lancaster Host Resort, Lancaster, PA	Quilter's Heritage Celebration
2004	Prallsville Mills, Stockton, NJ	Quilts in the Mill
2004	Nova Fine Art, Clinton, NJ	Black and White
2003	Gallery Petite, High Bridge, NJ	Natural Wonders
2003	GalleryOneMain, High Bridge, NJ	Summertime Hues
2003	Convention & Expo Center, Edison, NJ	New Jersey Quilt Convention, Lone Star Lunacy
1998	Orleans, France	Le Automne Exposition de Patchwork
1997	32nd St. Armory, New York, NY	Spring Festival of Quilts
1995	The Puck Building, New York, NY	Fall Harvest of Quilts
1993	John Jay College, New York, NY	Quilts in Miniature

AWARDS

1999	32nd St. Armory, New York City	1st Place and Best Innovative Award
1998	Vermont Quilt Festival, Northfield	2nd Place and Judge's Choice Award
1997	Vermont Quilt Festival, Northfield	3rd Place

GALLERIES

2009– 11	Focus on Fiber Art, Frenchtown, NJ	Owner and resident artist
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"Who Made That Quilt?", Quilt Lover's Forum article, *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, December 2000

EDUCATION

1981, AOS, American Academy of Dramatic Arts, New York, NY

1976-1978, Montgomery College, Rockville, MD