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Art From Nature

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Art From Nature

Seeing beauty in the simplest aspects of nature inspires me to create art as a testament to our world. Being raised on a farm in rural Virginia gave me an appreciation of and reverence for all life. The inherent forms along with color and value establish nature as the master of aesthetics. An early introduction to Japanese art showed me that all nature was worthy and significant as subjects for art. Using materials derived from nature, cotton, linen, wool, and silk, adds a tactile quality that I believe elevates the enjoyment of art.

Art From Nature

Where to Begin

Married and in my thirties, my husband encouraged me to attend college to become an art teacher. That was my dream, but I was afraid that I was too old and I didn't have the talent necessary to succeed in college art classes. I signed up for a drawing class as an elective and was soon enrolled in a degree program in art. I knew immediately that three-dimensional work was my calling. During my senior year at Mary Washington College (MWC), I wove five yards of wool fabric on a complex eight harness loom and from that fabric I designed and made myself a winter coat. I graduated from MWC in May of 1992 with highest honors of distinction at the age of forty.

After teaching middle school art for several years, I realized that my own art had fallen by the wayside. I started taking classes in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I felt renewed and inspired by working with other artists and teachers. I found the instructors for this program to be very encouraging and contributive to my success. I entered the program after both of my daughters had finished their bachelor degrees. I felt that they needed my support, time, and financial assistance. Both of my daughters said that my example of always trying to give my best effort had a great influence on their college work ethic.

The MIS program required two areas of concentration and I selected crafts and printmaking. I used my electives for sculpture classes and this allowed me to incorporate a great deal of dimensionality into my artwork. My last printmaking class was an independent study in printing only on fabric. This allowed me to use my own fabric prints

in my quilting. The MIS program encouraged and sometimes forced me to schedule time for creating my own art. Teaching in the public school system often requires me to make art in which the end product is predetermined by the needs of the curriculum. The graduate program provided the opportunity for me to develop my artistic abilities on a higher plane.

Elements From Nature

Pristine nature appeals to humans in many cultures. I was exposed early to Japanese culture through a program in Washington D.C. at the Japanese Embassy. There I learned that the Japanese have a very sophisticated appreciation for all elements in nature. Their gardens, art, and even everyday utensils reflect this reverence and elevation of natural forms. At the Embassy, I observed that the Japanese did not place a vase full of flowers on the table. A single, perfect blossom placed in a simple vase graced the table. When the flower was alone in the vase, I could see the lines, colors, shapes, and delicate beauty of the form. When a vase is full of flowers, there is a confusion of color and I notice very little about the individual beauty of each flower. Another lasting memory of my Japanese Embassy visits was the calm and harmonious approach to things, like having tea in the garden. The garden was simple with one tree, one large stone, and a small stream of water. The Japanese cultural guides taught me that you had to take time to appreciate the shape of the cup, the feeling of the cup in your hand, the fragrance of the tea, the taste of the tea, and the surroundings. The *kimono* clad women emphasized that all nature had spirit and a life force. Therefore, art associated with nature should have the

same spirit. This approach to viewing nature in its essential forms had a big impact on what I consider beautiful.

Line is the first element that I look for in nature. In my work, lines play an important role in creating prints and quilts. Lines define space and are important in determining how I use the space. Some lines are dominant, like bold horizon lines, while other lines seem subtler, like veins in a leaf. To create interest in the quilt *Green Leaf* (Figure 1), I used batik dyed fabrics for a modeled effect. This allows the quilting lines to be more visible. I used intersecting, parallel, and curving lines to create visual tension in the tree branches. I then quilted branches and leaves with the same detail. *Green Leaf* is asymmetrical and has different measurements on all four sides to add to the visual effects of the lines. Another example can be seen in the bold vertical lines that dominate the monoprint *Silver Birches* (Figure 2). I created this print with a subtractive ink technique that made the lines very prominent. In the subtractive ink process the printing plate is covered with layers of ink and then ink is wiped away to create the image.

Esther Warner Dendel, an artist and author, stated in her book *Designing From Nature* (1958, p.24) that, “One cannot really respond to shapes unless he is able to feel tension, both in a single shape and between groups of shapes”. I feel that this tension of relationships of shapes in a composition is essential to creating a quilt. Shapes from nature are a major element in my design work. I use circles and organic shapes to give my quilts a theme or narrative quality. The circle is a shape with no beginning or end. It represents the continuance of life and its cycles. I used this shape in the *Bubbles* (Figure 3) quilted wall hanging which is based on water bubbles. I used scraps of fabric that were

grayed down in values to create a soft look. I sewed large squares together and then appliquéd different size circles in clusters on the quilt top. I hand quilted the work adding additional circles for the illusion of transparent bubbles, which added a whimsical feel. Several of my quilts have trees and landscapes where the positive and negative shapes provide that tension between groups of shapes.

Texture is found in everything in the physical world. Our red oak that was over three hundred years old had bark with deep grooves that ran in rugged, random shapes. Our Heritage birch, growing along the creek, has bark that peels in thin layers of white and gray. Both textures are dramatic and extremely different. These are the types of textural elements in nature that inspire my work. In my monoprint, *Silver Birches* (Figure 2), I show the circular texture and silver-gray color that appears at night on the bark of the tree. In this print I added a metallic overlay. When I pulled the print from the plate the ink was still damp, so I dusted it with a silver powder. I used a professional heat gun to melt the silver and make it permanent. This image will be utilized on a quilt. I find that creating prints on paper first and then using the images on fabric for quilts solves a lot of technical and practical problems and therefore does not waste valuable hand dyed fabrics. First, I draw an image and when I am satisfied with the image, I carve a linoleum or wood block to print on fabric. I often reuse the images in several projects.

Looking for proportional relationships in nature is another productive way for me to find inspirations for new art projects. Awareness of the golden rectangle can help me determine a point of interest or decide where I want to place images and shapes in a composition. The golden rectangle has a ratio of the length to the width of 1:1.618 and is

often considered the most aesthetically pleasing of all rectangular shapes. Instead of measuring and calculating, I find it easier to look for this ratio in nature by visually approximating a square and a half. I can find this ratio in aspects of trees, seashells, humans, and animals. When I see these ratios in nature it assures me that our world is not a big accident. Earth is a carefully planned, balanced creation. Traditional quilting is based on pattern and proportions and in this media I want to point out that sense of order in nature.

Pattern and rhythm are other constants in nature. For instance the repetition of lines on a tiger or zebra present a striking design. The repetition of lines creates pattern. In my wall hanging *Hazelnuts* (Figure 4), I use repetition of line to create the background patterns. The composition is comprised of four blocks depicting four sprigs from a hazelnut tree. Each block is appliquéd with a different technique using a variety of natural fibers including wool, cotton, and suede. The block in the upper left is machine quilted in shapes similar to tiger stripes. The upper right block utilizes echo quilting, which follows the contours of an initial shape. In using this echo quilting technique I created the illusion of ripples on water. Dozens of small leaves are hand quilted on the lower left block and the lower right is quilted in continuous swirls, where the stitching resembles the flow of leaves in the wind. Although the blocks are patterned dissimilarly on distinct fabrics, the orange circle of the hazelnuts, the leaves, and strips of orange joining the four blocks unify the composition. Using the formal elements of art as I observe them in my natural surroundings gives me an abundance of creative ideas.

Fabulous Color

Colors in nature provide perfect dynamics for art. For example, looking at a winter evening sky I saw many shades of blues and pure violet. A single band of yellow-orange brought drama to this scene. This same color relationship exists in my garden with the bearded iris. The small, intense yellow-orange is the beard of the iris that lies on top of the true violet petal. I realized that the drama of an entire landscape can be found in a single flower.

When I created the monoprint *Bearded Iris I* (Figure 5), I copied the colors from the actual flowers. Ansel Adams, known for his photography of nature in black and white, wrote notes for a book on color. In *Ansel Adams In Color* (1993, p.13) he stated:

I have come to the conclusion that the understanding and appreciation of color involves: 1. The illusion that the color photograph represents the colors of the world as we think we perceive them to be. The images are, at best, poor simulations....

When I first started the MIS program I worked a lot from my photographs. After reading this book, I started working from nature, directly. I understood that I would get a truer sense of the color from nature than from reproduced color.

The seasons also influence my use of color. In spring, I see all the tints (pure color with white) in the beautiful blossoms. I look forward to my yellow jonquils, pink, lavender, peach, and yellow hyacinth, along with the yellow-green buds of new vegetation. The tints of spring appear clean, fresh, and delicate, a welcome sight at the end of winter. My late spring garden exhibits the pure hues associated with summer. I have tulips in primary yellow and red. The grass and leaves change from the spring green to pure green. In our area of Virginia, summer itself can have subtle changes in color due

to heat and moisture. When I add black to colors, the warm shades of autumn appear. But as the temperatures drop and winter sets in, nature's colors reduce even further. The deep shades in a winter landscape are balanced by the blue and violet tones.

The Valley, Daddy, and Me (Figure 6) begins as a winter scene on the left that changes into spring on the right. I first created a watercolor monoprint of the Shenandoah Valley using winter tones. I used the cool analogous colors of blues, greens, and violet that I associate with this valley. I scanned old black and white images of my father and myself dressed in old-fashioned clothing. I printed the images on transfer paper and heat set them onto the monoprint. I blended the transferred images into the valley scene with watercolor. The final product was a soft color palette that changes from left to right, winter to spring, and generation to generation as evident by the images of my father and myself.

One of my favorite works based on summer hues is *Magical Landscape* (Figure 7). I hand dyed every piece of fiber used in this quilted wall hanging. The piece includes hand painted silks, wools, cottons, and linens boiled with walnut shells, polk berries, and other natural materials as dyeing agents. Japanese *shibori* and *arashi*, discharge dyeing, silkscreen, and block printing were techniques that I used for surface design on the fabrics. *Shibori* is a technique of dyeing fabric in which the fabric is folded in different ways to form little bundles and then dipped in the dye bath. When the fabric is unfolded, interesting patterns are formed where the dye did not penetrate. In *arashi*, the fabric is wrapped on a pole with string and then shirred tightly together. The resulting patterns resemble zebra stripes with gradation of color that creates a sense of depth. I utilized

discharge dyeing, which involves a weak bleach solution to create earthy patterns on darker fabrics. This quilt contains sixty distinct fabrics. I used lines created by the dye process to add direction. I cut out pieces of fabric in shapes to mimic water, vegetation, and hills. This landscape expresses my love of nature, color, and fiber.

The quilt *Furrowed Fields* (Figure 8) was created in the fall. Naturally, I employed the warm, darker colors associated with the fall season. The concept for the design came from local farm fields. Many of these fields were left with rows of corn and wheat stubble. Some flat fields were turned up to allow the land to freeze and thaw over the winter to break up the clay. Fields with slope were furrowed and sown with rye to prevent erosion. The process of selecting fabrics and composing a stylized arrangement for the work is the most creative aspect of the process. On this piece, I quilted the furrows or rows in different directions to visually divide the bordered spaces around the blocks of fields.

Just as seasons impose subtle and dramatic changes in color, atmospheric conditions can transform a landscape with varying shades and tonal alterations. Claude Monet's (1840-1926) legacy of color and light variation is a testament to this theory. *Times of Day* (Figure 9) is a quilt based on this idea of transformed color. I carved a large linoleum block of a tree and printed it on tan fabric. I over dyed the tan fabrics attempting to capture the variations in values and tones of the atmospheric landscape around the tree. The tree itself modulated from warm browns in the morning to black by evening. This required mixing fabric inks for another printing. These prints compose the top third of the quilt. I pieced the remainder of the quilt as three tree trunks utilizing monochromatic

shades to form the branches. Most of this fabric was used without alteration with the exception of a few pieces that I toned down with the discharge technique. I quilted this large section with seventy stylized tree branches reaching upward. Using nature's color schemes in my art is a way of honoring nature, as well as developing a workable palette in the studio.

Natural Fibers and Materials

My passion for natural fibers started very early in my life. Touching cotton bolls still on the plant gives a tactile sensation that cannot be reproduced by synthetic fibers. As a child, I enjoyed the same sense of lush softness when I bathed sheep for the fair. The lanolin coating on each fiber gives the wool an incredibly downy feel. I was an adult when I encountered the unique qualities of silk and linen, but I was equally convinced of their importance in my life and artwork.

All of my quilts begin with natural materials and many contain all four of the basic natural fibers: cotton, wool, silk, and linen. Using more than one fiber adds texture and gives me freedom with color since I hand dye the fabric. For instance, in *Magical Landscape* (Figure 8) I painted the silk in the direction that the water flows in the image. The wools make the rocks and mountains appear more rugged and the plain weave of the linens with their soft nubs increased the surface appeal.

An example of the extent of influence that natural fiber has on my work is found in my silk jacket, *Evening Garden Jacket* (Figure 10). I constructed this piece with a heavy weight silk and dyed it in mottled tones of golden browns. The jacket pieces were

quilted with a thin batting and backing before the garment was assembled. I used a rayon thread variegated in tans and browns to quilt a tall, graceful iris and clematis on the front, back, and sleeves of the jacket. I topped this with stars quilted on the shoulders. I enhanced the flower blossoms with antiqued beads in copper, brass, bronze, and verdigris finishes. All of the elements in the composition are enriched by the elegance of the pure silk.

Many of my quilted works employ only cotton. The diversity of surface treatment for this fiber can create all the interest necessary for a completed work of art. The *Sail Away* (Figure 11) landscape is on one piece of bleached muslin. The colored cotton threads in the hand quilting along with the dense stitching create the image. Antique buttons complete the diminutive scene. *Quilted Cube* (Figure 12) is another study composed of cotton. Three sides have a speckled fabric and three have a fern pattern in earth tones of green and brown. I quilted all the sides in different repetitive patterns so that the cube is equally engaging from any viewpoint.

I also utilize all natural materials in making handmade papers and books. Natural materials provide a greater challenge because they take a lot of time to process, but the variety and richness of the completed project is worth the effort. *My Quilt Journal* (Figure 13) is covered with handmade paper of cotton and *abaca* (the leaf fiber from manila hemp plants). The paper contains inclusions of leaves from herbs. The end papers are made of flax fiber, which is the same fiber used in producing linen cloth. Preparing plant fibers to use in handmade papers requires harvesting, cleaning, cooking, and beating them with a wooden mallet to properly break down the fibers. I formed *Leaf*

Tableware (Figure 14) from local cornhusk reinforced with *abaca*. The process took two days. I decorated a bowl and four plates with strips of paper made from pineapple tops. Dried green leaves and leaf skeletons were applied to the surface to complete the set.

I created the *Button Book* (Figure 15) from flax and *abaca* dyed with English black tea leaves. While the paper was wet, I put it in a press between pieces of course linen. When the paper dried, the linen provided a woven texture. I sewed the antique pearl buttons on to the thick paper with linen cord. The book spine is fastened with bamboo skewers laced together with waxed, linen cord. The antique buttons placed inside the book are British, French, and American in origin. I purchased some of them on a European trip and the prices are marked on the button cards with the symbols of the pound and franc. On a personal level this element reminds me of the wonderful trip.

My *Contemplation Book* (Figure 16) is fashioned with a Japanese theme. I ordered *kozo* bark from Japan. This plant is native and is farm raised as a crop. *Kozo* regenerates so that the harvesting does not have an environmental impact, another reason I carefully choose my materials. I soaked and cleaned the bark fiber before boiling it all day on an outside burner and then pounded the material into small fiber bundles. The *kozo* is sticky and difficult to work with, but it translates into a resilient paper with a soft translucency. I painted small watercolor vignettes in the book of relaxing oriental icons including iris, wheat, a lucky cricket, a *kimono*, and *sumi e* ink style drawings. Some pages are accented with black and gold silk ribbons woven through slits in the paper. The materials utilized in this book, as well as the depicted objects are natural and softened to produce a serene experience.

Washi, the Japanese word for traditional hand made papers, has been produced since the first century. *Kozo*, because of its characteristics of strength and translucency, is ideal for screens and lamps. I used large sheets of *kozo* paper on a tri-fold screen, *Plum Branch Screen* (Figure 17), which I built from bamboo. The *kozo* shrinks slightly as it dries, tightening it to the bamboo frame. I painted a life size plum tree branch across the screen. The watercolors create an effect similar to traditional *sumi e* Japanese ink brush painting, which has a spiritual component in the reductive brush strokes. This provides me with a feeling of closeness to nature. Combining oriental materials with subjects of the natural world reinforces the sense of serenity and purity in art from nature.

Conclusion: The End is a New Beginning

The MIS program taught me a lot more than what I learned in the individual classes. I started trusting in my own abilities to produce viable art. The requirement of a graduate exhibition forced me to bring my best works to a presentation level. Organizing the exhibit to the point that I was pleased with the final show entailed a lot of decision-making and work. The number of people that attended the opening of the exhibition and having a few pieces sell gave me confidence. Other people besides my family and myself are now enjoying my art.

There are many concepts that will always affect my work. I learned to keep sketch journals with me at all times. I have multiple sketchbooks in the house, studio, and school. Creative ideas may only last a few seconds and being able to write and draw while the vision is fresh is essential. I have dozens of ideas for new quilts in my studio

journal. Three classes with Warren Corrado taught me that I could try anything in printmaking. Just like in science, I have to isolate the variables for experimentation. Then I document the results with examples mounted in a binder. I can utilize the examples as a personal reference guide.

When I started out using nature as a basis for my art, I felt as though I needed to defend my work. I sensed that other teachers and artists discounted the subjects as trite and stereotypical. After reading books about Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986), Ansel Adams (1902-1984), Winslow Homer (1836-1910), and other nature based artists I was encouraged to trust my own ideas. For example, Britta Benke wrote in her book *O’Keeffe* (2000, p.88) that:

Her (O’Keeffe) art echoed her belief in the power and imperishability of nature, a belief which she expressed in countless landscapes and still lifes. Her ideal of beauty— harmony, proportionality, simplicity and elegance – finds parallels in the art and lifestyle of the Far East, in which even the smallest everyday things are assigned a significance.

I find this sentiment to echo my own relationship with nature, which influences my art and sustains my faith.

My future direction will involve printing on fabric and creating unique looks for quilting. I enjoy the entire creative process from drawing the ideas, carving the blocks, to printing. Once the prints are made on multiple fabric backgrounds, I relish the challenge of finding and creating fabrics to compliment the prints. Cutting and sewing are more technical processes, but accuracy is critical to the final results. I am too much of a purist to cut corners on construction. I want my art to last for generations. Quilting the composition allows for many creative options in pattern and design, as well as choices in

threads for hand or machine quilting.

I am starting to relax and really enjoy creating my own art. I have stopped worrying about how others may perceive fiber arts and my art. I have two quilts on display in historic Fredericksburg and I hope that when people see my art that they will recognize my focus on nature and its serenity. I plan to have more time to spend in natural surroundings and more time to work on my prints and quilting. My relationship with nature provides me with more inspiration than I could express in a lifetime.

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Appendix

List of Images

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Images



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Figure 3. *Bubbles*, quilted wall hanging, 53.5" X 43.5", 2002.

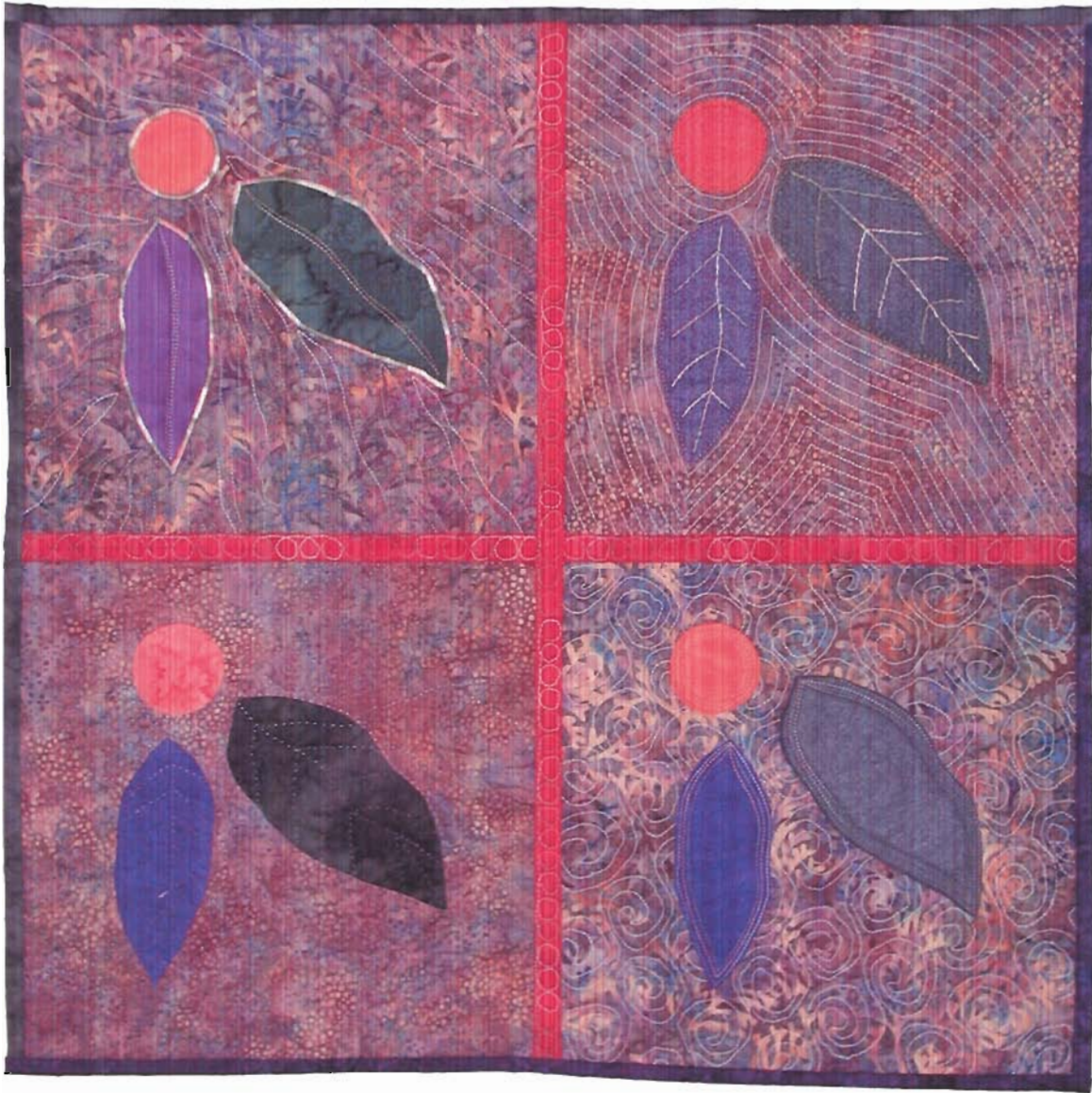


Figure 4. *Hazelnuts*, quilted wall hanging, 23" X 23", 2004.



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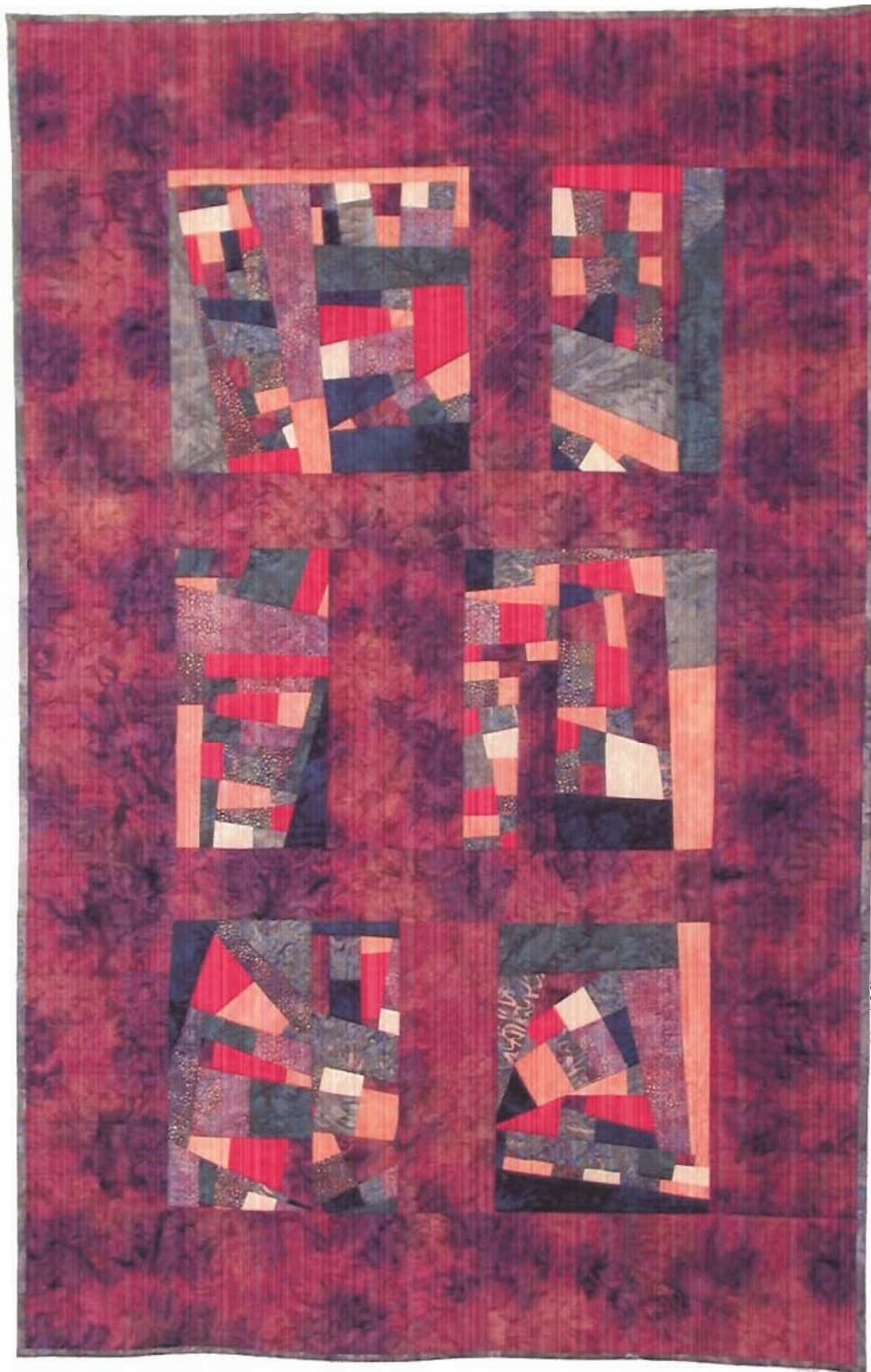


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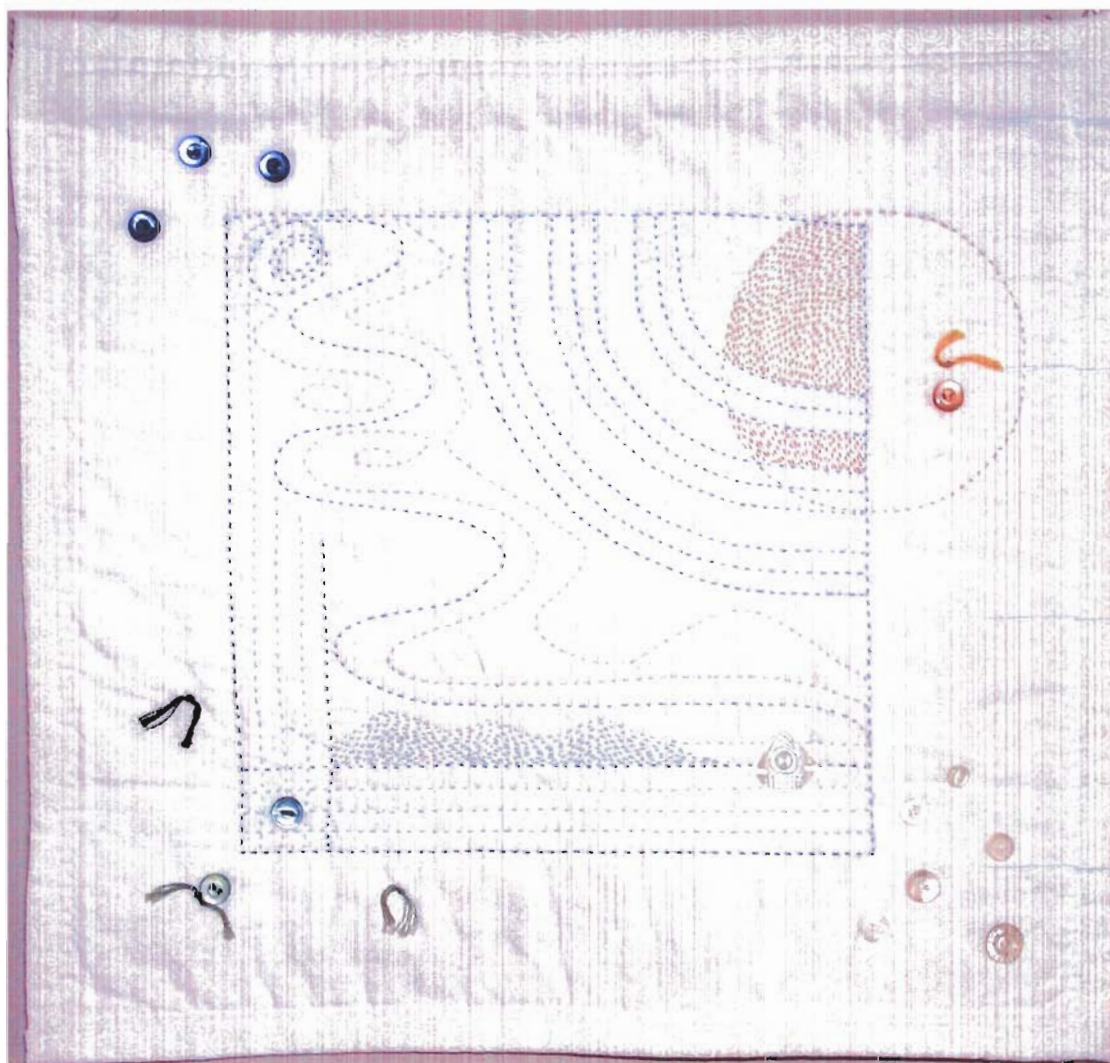


Figure 11. *Sail Away*, quilted wall hanging, 12.5" X 13", 2004.



Figure 12. *Quilted Cube* , soft sculpture, 4.5" X 4.5" X 4.5", 2004.

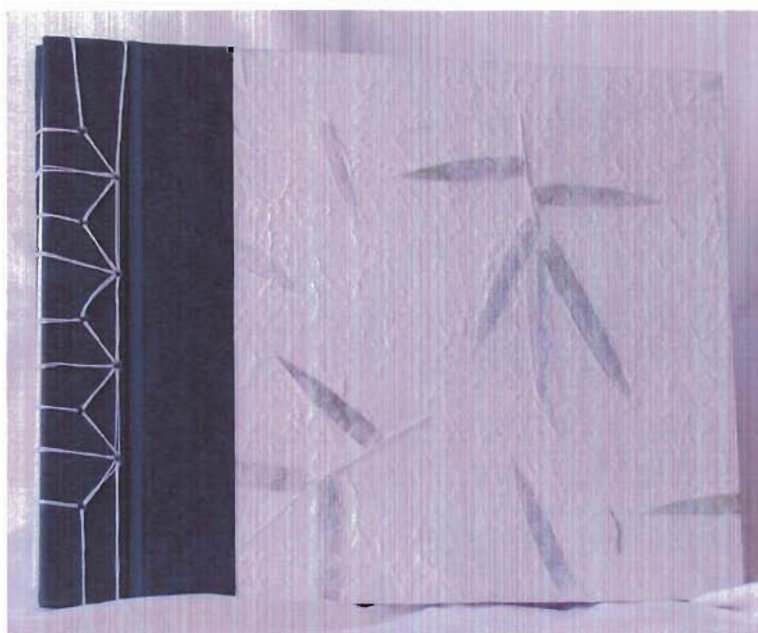


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Figure 16. *Contemplation Book*, handmade book, 10" X 6", 2003.



Figure 17. *Plum Branch Screen*, handmade paper, 51" X 38", 2003.

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- 2003-2004 *Art Teacher Exhibition*
Alvin Bandy Administration Complex
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- 1992 *Senior Exhibition*
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