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A look inside quilter Ann Johnston's studio.



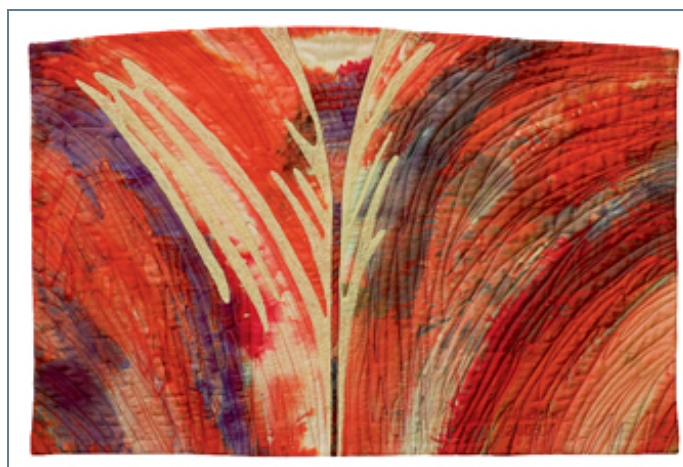
WELL-LIGHTED PLACE: Johnston's studio at her home in Lake Oswego, Ore., features lots of natural light, and walls and sliding closet doors where she can "audition" fabrics.

Andy Batt

THINK OF A QUILT store and the spectrum its bolts of calico represent. No disrespect meant, but Ann Johnston is done with that. A quilter for 35 years, she now works with fabrics entirely of her own dyeing—each swath of cotton broadcloth and billow of silk unlike any other. "I can paint the cloth like a painter," says Johnson, '69, and the result is "soft—not stiff like canvas—and ready to be stitched."

Her work lives at a tricky intersection where quilters tend to ask, Why don't you

just frame that painting, and painters tend to ask, Why do you have to sew that? The answer to both questions is that "the dimension of stitching is what makes it" work in her eyes.

**"Opening Up," 14 by 21 inches, 2009****"Opening Up," detail**

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Courtesy Ann Johnston (2)

Johnston creates, teaches and writes instructional books such as *The Quilter's Book of Design* at her home in Lake Oswego, Ore. Her studio features a wall and sliding panels where she "auditions" her fabric, sometimes working on a dozen projects at a time. Across the room there's a long-arm quilting machine—a combination of computerized sewing machine and 10-foot-wide quilt table. She bought it about six years ago. "I had to decide how much of a professional I was. Did I want to buy a car or the sewing machine?"

The following did not appear in the print edition of STANFORD.

ANN DOHERTY JOHNSTON and her husband, Jim, also '69, were volunteer workers in Peru (she was an English major; he was a history major, so "the Peace Corps assigned us to teach New Math"), when she attempted her first quilt—a project meant to brighten a cement-tile room. In the decades since then, years of traditional quilt making expanded into experimentation that has led Johnston to an international reputation as a fabric dyer and maker of art quilts. A reviewer has written that Johnston's work, imbued with "ease and fearlessness," is "abstract in the purest sense, without trickery or coy allusion."

Although her quilts have hung in many exhibitions, she rarely participates in traditional quilt shows. Her preference is for her work to be "mixed up with other artwork. The more people see art quilts, the more they might think they need one hung up in their living room." That said, she adds that she still sometimes makes "art quilts for beds. Obviously I haven't let go of that tradition."

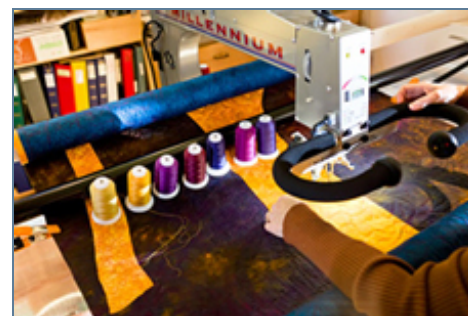
She's a prolific artist—more than 400 quilts and heaps of art cloth—yet one whose process can be very lengthy. A 2009 quilt featured a large piece of fabric that was dyed in rusts and green about a decade earlier. She pulled fabric out, hung it on the wall, contemplated it, put it away, returned to it when she had the idea of combining it with small pieces from another cloth—this one white dyed in a multistep process with a crackled finish of gray.

There was more time—about a week—spent deciding what to do. The large piece went on her huge long-arm sewing machine for stitching and got some reverse appliqué, in which parts of the large fabric were cut away to reveal streaks of a darker green fabric showing



EASY REACH: The long arm of the quilting machine is 24 inches—so the area in which a quilter can work feels relatively vast.

Andy Batt



DRAWN THREAD: Steering the needle in the "free motion" quilting technique is akin to drawing with thread.

Andy Batt

through. Pieces of the white fabric—shapes that might be interpreted as branches or bones or pavers—were arranged and considered and rearranged and reconsidered until they were stitched, with her standard sewing machine, over the course of three days onto the background. Then the piece went back to the large machine to be quilted with batting and back. The title "Countless" came last.



"Countless," 34 by 56 inches, 2009



"Countless," detail

Courtesy Ann Johnston (2)

She "pretty much lives" in her studio, which includes an adjacent dye room about the size of a two-car garage. Storage is important: Undyed fabric arrives in 100-yard rolls. She travels to teach—invited to Spain one April and to Switzerland by July—but she is pleased now to have enough space to offer intensive classes a few weeks a year at home in Oregon. The space is handy, too, for Jim, a retired high school teacher, or her visiting sons, Scott, '99, MS '00, and Tod, '01. "They all know how to dye fabric. Todd and Molly dyed gifts for their wedding."

Decades of quilting can take a toll: She hand-quilts only sparingly in deference to her wrists and stopped making double-bed quilts with a standard sewing machine when she decided "you ruin your shoulders that way." She's learned to do all the stretches she needs to protect her hands and elbows." Which is a good thing, because "I've been doing this for 35 years and I can't stop," she says, elation as apparent in her voice as the sheen on sateen. "I always want people to realize how lucky I am to be able to do this.



"Balance #32," 49 by 93 inches, 2010

Courtesy Ann Johnston (2)



"Balance #32," detail

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