

A colorful journey

In the early 1970s, I made traditional quilts that were pieced and hand-quilted. Because it was a long drive to stores with limited selections of cotton fabrics, I learned to dye my own colors. Instructions were few and contradictory, so it was a learn-by-trying situation.

I think that the power to make my own colors and marks on fabric led me to make art quilts. By the 1980s, all of my quilts included only my hand-dyed cotton and silk fabrics and were original, nontra-



photo by NashCO Photo

Ann Johnston

Lake Oswego, Oregon

Ann Johnston paints dye on cloth, creating the perfect hue and at the same time capturing her gestures. The end result is a sweeping work that is a powerful and beautiful art quilt.

ditional designs. In the early 1990s, a quilt teacher told me that my whole-cloth quilts —hand-dyed and hand-quilted — were not quilts because they were not pieced. After that I became dedicated to making quilts any way that I wanted and I intended all of them as art.

Finding new methods

Immersion dyeing was cumbersome and unpredictable, so I started applying dye to the surface of the fabric, painting and printing. This required understanding how the dyes work and finding ways to fix the colors with a realistic process. I also wanted large pieces of solid colors, so by the 1990s I had adapted immersion dyeing to what I call low-water immersion. I got excited about the idea of sharing what I know. I wrote my first book, *Dye Painting!*, and started to teach workshops.



Wave #19
21 x 26 inches (53 cm x 66 cm), 2022

My quilts fall into broad themes developed over time: balance, waves, sunsets, games, gardens, rust, and woven textiles. I have too many ideas, so I sort and choose. I always have five to eight pieces in progress. Some take shape slowly, some have a clear path, and some evolve into something else entirely.

Most recently, I pursued an idea that I call *The Contact*, a series of large quilts about the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California. This encompasses many of the aspects of the landscape, both real and imagined. I didn't know how to handle a subject that seemed so big until I realized it wasn't one quilt, but individual compositions joined visually as a series. The Martin Museum of Art in Waco, Texas, offered me a solo exhibition. In 2013, I exhibited fourteen quilts unified by their 7-foot vertical design. Today, some of the quilts in this series are horizontal and square as well.

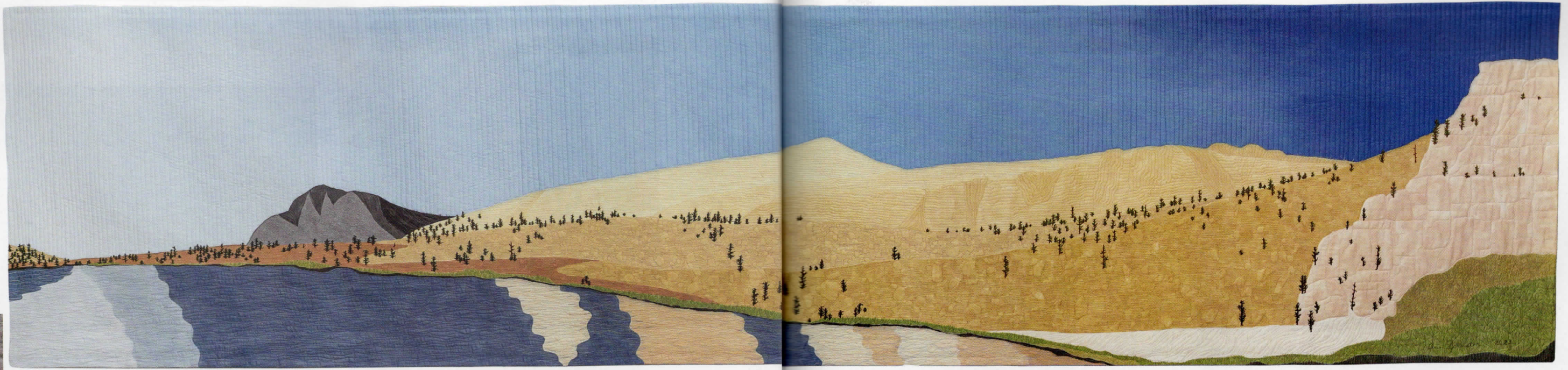
Heart of inspiration

Curiosity motivates me. I like the challenge of seeing what I can do with ideas inspired by the world around me. First, I decide what the quilt will be about and then answer the question, "Why am I making this?" I consider roughly the size and shape. Then I consider my construction options. As I work, I acknowledge that the original concept will either emerge or it

The Contact: Meander
84 x 29 inches (213 x 74 cm), 2021

quilt photos by Jim Lommasson





The Contact: Tree Line at Dawn
27 x 119 inches (69 x 302 cm), 2023



might change entirely. Each time I arrive at a crossroads, I return to my original question. I finish my quilts because I'm curious to see what they look like and because it's training for the next piece.

The biggest change in my style occurred around 2010, when I figured out how to assemble organic shapes and lines with raw-edge appliqué and no adhesives, which stiffen the layers. I can compose freely and still create a soft quilt that responds to hand or machine stitching with corresponding wrinkles and shadows. The same year, I started on my large quilt series about the Sierra Nevada, requiring a new color palette, new printing and painting techniques, and more complex drawing and planning.

Construction concerns

For small- and medium-sized pieces, I often start with a piece of fabric that I have dyed, adapting it in any number of ways with more fabric or stitching. For large quilts, I often start by drawing on scratch paper. When I have a rough composition, I may make a small-scale drawing to keep the elements in a particular relationship to each other. Then I decide how I'll make it.

Sometimes I work from the small drawing by placing fabrics directly onto my design wall, with tape



Wild Garden-Pinedrops
13 x 13 inches (33 x 33 cm), 2023

marking the rough outline and assembling it in portions. At other times, I draw the composition to its full size on paper. I may put the drawing under clear vinyl on the dye table and paint the whole design. Sometimes I use a full-size drawing to help know what size pieces of fabric to dye. Then it acts as a guide to place them on the wall. Occasionally I use the full-size drawing as a paper pattern, assembling the shapes and adding details almost exactly where I had placed them.

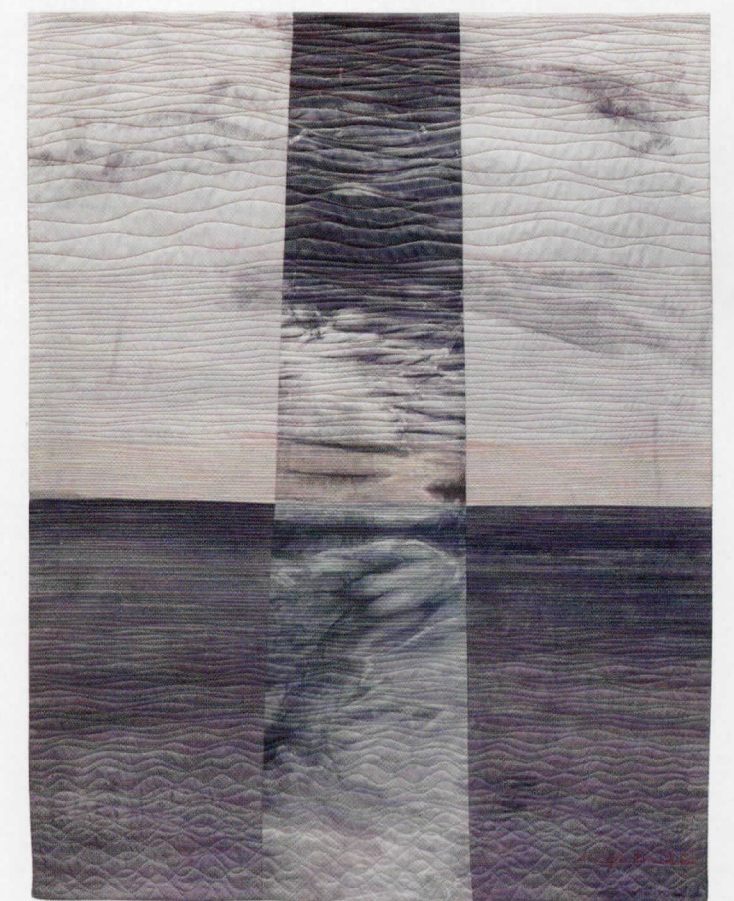
I wait to decide about quilting until the top is done. Thread color and weight, density and pattern add a layer of design that enhances the idea in the quilt. Sometimes I first draw on tracing paper over the finished top to get an idea of what to do, but in the end, I just have to start and find out what will happen.

Meeting goals

My goal is to make and exhibit eloquent quilts that speak in my voice about the things I see in our world. I have had more than twenty solo exhibitions in venues all over the world. *The Contact* now consists of more than forty large quilts, and I look forward to exhibiting them again together after I've finished a few more.

It's still a goal of mine to share what I know, and on my website I have made available my newest streaming video class, *Beyond the Book: Paint & Print with Dye*. Most recently, I've been trying something completely new to me — two three-dimensional projects, both in the problem-solving stage.

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Sunset 17
35 x 27 inches (89 x 69 cm), 2020