

Patchwork Gilde, #159, June 2025, pages 46- 49

Ann Johnston:
"Art can also be functional and viewed on a bed!"
Interview by Uta Lenk

I have known Ann Johnston for many years, when I attended dyeing courses with her and also translated for her. Our conversation about her quilts, how she collects ideas for them and then uses them, starts with Ann telling us that she had found a full grown *Deer* (on. Red deer, significantly larger than deer in Germany) dead in their garden and are still in the process of organizing how the animal can be removed. So we are right into the topic of 'outdoor'. The view from her window suggests that Ann lives in a remote rural area, but the fact is that she lives just minutes away from one of Portland's freeways, and the commercial helicopters that monitor the flow of traffic often circle above her house.

In 2016, Ann had a large exhibition in Ste. Marie-aux-Mines with quilts from her series "The Contact", large-format quilts about the Sierra Nevada, a mountain range in the west of the USA. At that time, the series included 25 finished quilts, today there are already 40. Ann was able to start this series when she received an offer for a solo exhibition in 2009 that gave her complete freedom in choice of quilts – and for which she still had three years to prepare. "All my quilting life I had been thinking about how I would make a quilt about the Sierra Nevada. Our family is out a lot in the mountains, the topic was close to my heart – and this was my chance, because I knew it couldn't be done with one quilt. Knowing that the quilts would show many different aspects of the place, and that they would also appear to be very different from each other in color, composition and construction, I decided to set the size as the unifying element and to relate to the vertical landscape of the high Sierra. In the first exhibition, my 14 quilts were all just over 2m tall, with varying widths." Later she started to include large square and horizontal pieces as well as two made for queen beds, about 2.5m x 2.8 m.

There had been a few precursors in which she tried to depict the details of granite stones or wildflowers with her printed fabrics. A whole year of

preparations followed, because she had to learn to produce the right colors and patterns on her fabrics. "Before, my quilts were intensely colored, with strong, bright and saturated colors. Now I had to completely change my palette, because in nature, in the mountains, the colors are more neutral – and more diverse. There are certainly a thousand different shades of color in a piece of white rock, and patterns appear but don't repeat exactly. Working out these subtleties was a particular challenge. I started experimenting with different resist and other printing techniques and really got into it," says Ann. "In this series, I first decided what the quilt was about and then what techniques would work best for me. Some are whole cloth, monoprinted or dye painted, others are pieced, others are applique. Many of them used techniques I adapted and required practice.

The first quilt for this series was finished in 2011, and Ann is still working on the series today, having recently completed another titled *The Contact: Four Gables*. But of course she also has other ideas that are still burning under her fingers. "I have so many different fabrics on my shelf that I would like to think about and use in new quilts. I have dyed or printed a large piece and have only cut out a relatively small corner, or used only some of it, there are still many pieces left, waiting on the shelf. They always rumble a bit in the back of my mind."

At this moment, Ann points to the work that can be seen behind her on the design wall. "I had the blue and orange pieces of fabric hanging on the wall for over a month, moved a few pieces back and forth every now and then and thought about it. All I knew is that I would use these two fabrics,—that had been waiting for me—and also that I wanted to work large. With my compositions, my first rule is that I have to know why I want a piece of fabric in a particular place; there has to be a reason for it. There were too many opportunities here, no reason. Until I realized that it was starting to become a representation of water, that I am making a quilt about the time of day immediately after sunset, when the sun has already sunk behind the ocean horizon, when the brilliance in the sky is far from finished. Now I have reasons where to put the pieces of fabric, and I climb the ladder every now and then to move them. I started looking at my many photos of sunsets at the ocean to help me make my decisions. The lower parts are sewn together, but everything is still only pinned at the top half so I can change my mind. I will soon put everything on the table and continue to do the puzzles, because the seam allowances will cause shrinkage when sewn together, which I still have to compensate for." What you see now is close to a final design about 2.5 m square. It might sometime go on a bed.

Another series that has to do with the theme of 'outdoor' is Ann's *Wave Series*, and this one is also ongoing since 1999. "I've watched the waves all my life, my sons are avid surfers. That had to find its way into my quilts at some point. When painting dye on fabric, my body often repeats the same large motor movements, and it often looks circular like a wave."

This example shows a piece of dye painted fabric that she initially just liked and didn't want to cut. At that time, however, the fabric had not yet 'said' what it wanted to be. It wasn't until she posted a photo on Instagram (@annjohnstonquilts) that she saw that it was a fabric that belonged in her series about waves. She was reminded of one of her deepest fears, namely the so-called "sneaker wave". Again and again it happens that beachgoers are swept away by these unusually high, surprising waves that do not correspond to the predominant wave pattern. The fear of such a wave has not been defeated by making this quilt, she says, "this quilt more like the warning signs at the beach." The wave series has grown by a small but impressive quilt.

Ann also works on various quilts about wildflowers, which she sees on her hikes and walks. To give these little quilts stability and a presence she stretches them to hang a bit away from the wall. Rather than having the edges of the quilt wrapped around the bars, she sews them to cloth which is then wrapped, which preserves the natural edge of the quilt. She hopes that she will get an exhibition opportunity for all her contact quilts and would like to integrate the wildflower quilts into this exhibition as well.

Ann is best known by many for her dyeing activities, teaching dyeing classes in many places. "I learned how to dye the hard way. When I first started, there were different dye products, and each gave different instructions. I had to work out the techniques myself. When I realized that there was a great need for knowledge about these techniques, I wrote my books." By now, Ann has free videos on youtube [Ann's Video Channel](#) and the full version of her first dye book *[Color by Accident: Low Water Immersion Dyeing](#)* is free to download. A newer, longer version is available on DVD or to stream with her new videos about surface painting and printing with dye, called *[Beyond the Book: Paint and Print with Dye](#)*. "Every time I dye or teach the processes, I also learn something new. I'm far from done with it. When students ask me 'what happens if...', I often can't answer directly, but I advise them to just give it a try."

For Ann, every quilt is still a journey into the unknown, and it still happens to her that she makes mistakes, such as printing on the wrong side of a sateen fabric, or forgetting to add the soda ash. "I have an idea. Then I think about how I can

implement this idea, what construction techniques I want to use, which fabrics are in my supply and can be used here. It may develop as I planned, in a straight line, or it can quickly turn into something else, with several new ideas popping up. I finish most of my quilts because I am curious—I want to see what they will actually look like at the end."

Ann emphasizes how important it is for her to work with her own fabrics. The personal connection to the colors, markings and values is necessary: "I couldn't make my quilts with other people's fabrics. I will keep making as long as I can, because I can't stop, even if the ladder climbing and reaching to the wall sometimes become hard work. I still have ideas and fabric that I want to work with for many years."

Then our conversation turns to the more general aspects of the quilting world and quilt makers. "I can't do much with the categories quilts are divided into today," Ann points out. "I've quilted for 50 years, and the point of making art is not whether I want to fit into a certain category, but it's my process itself that is important. I submit my quilts as Art Quilts, simply because they are clearly not traditional quilts. But I also make quilts that can be placed on beds and used, and that doesn't make them any less art. At an exhibition I had, the curator put up two beds and exhibited quilts on them, which completely thrilled me. Just because it fits on a bed doesn't disqualify a quilt from being art."