

"Michael James: Interference and Innovation"
by Glen R. Brown

The phenomenon known to psychologists as the interference effect – the momentary confusion that ensues when, for example, one attempts to name the color of green letters that happen to spell the word red – arises out of conflict between fundamentally different modes of processing information. As an experience, the interference effect is revelatory. It tends to make one suddenly conscious of interpretive processes so deeply engrained that under ordinary circumstances they are second nature. As a metaphor, the interference effect suggests subversiveness: obstruction of habitual behavior and inveterate ways of making sense of the world. By invoking the term as the title of a recent series of quilts, Michael James not only describes the consequences of looking at these new works and encountering a momentarily frustrating discontinuity but also neatly summarizes the effect of his perpetually innovative activity in the medium of quilt making since the 1970s. As a matter of artistic principle, his quilts have always favored interference over acquiescence.

In his current work, James has countered conservative expectations for the quilt by incorporating digital technology at its foundation, employing a sophisticated design software called Artbench to process scanned or photographed imagery and a Mimaki TX-1600 S printer to reproduce that imagery in reactive dyes on various fabrics. These procedures have raised hackles in some circles for reasons that are, James contends, more notional than actual. In side-by-side comparison, his digitally printed fabric is materially indistinguishable from its commercially produced counterpart. Technically, his recent works rely on the same piecing and appliquéd used in the construction of any traditional quilt. Imagery that has partly materialized in cyberspace beyond the literal reach of the artist's hand may be difficult to reconcile with the notion of the quilt as symbol of the value of handwork, but James's practice has always been to use interference as a means of stimulating reflection and offering new perspectives on tradition.

The four quilts of the Interference Effect Series are composed of pieces from scores of different fabrics that James has digitally printed over the past several years. The designs on those fabrics have originated in everything from purely geometric software-generated patterns to computer-manipulated photographs of graffiti on a New York warehouse door; walls at a demolition site in Kansas City; a piece of handmade paper at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts; and water plants under the surface of the Sile River where it runs picturesquely through Treviso in Italy. Despite their connections to specific times and places, however, these images are neither sentimentalized in the quilts like scrapbook souvenirs nor presented as passages in a personal narrative. Their value is determined neither by what they denote nor by their place in a larger literal or metaphorical composition. On the contrary, James has described them as analogous to distinct sounds that fit together but without conforming to a recognizable melody.

The fourth and largest quilt of the series, *Interference Effect: (Betrayed) Lover's Knot # 2*, measures nearly fourteen feet in length. Implicitly to be read in sequence like the text and imagery of an unrolling scroll, the four sections of the composition alternate between pieced grids of squares and rectangles and larger panels with appliquéd images, the most prominent of which is the intricate knot to which the title refers. Incorporated

partly as a kind of lover's knot motif redux in digital form, this curious image serves as a figurative comment on the work as a whole: a metaphor for the difficulty of following a coherent linear development in terms of structure (a clear and predictable pattern like that of the traditional lover's knot quilt); or style (i.e., naturalism, abstraction, or non-objectivity); or narrative. In James's image of a knot, the linear is subsumed by the non-linear. The eye cannot follow the length of rope through the tangle but instead jumps sporadically from one highlighted bend to another. This flitting movement, also largely encouraged on the level of the composition as a whole, is, as James observes, like one's reaction to the Picture On Picture feature that allows simultaneous viewing of multiple programs on a television screen.

Since the 1960s, when Robert Rauschenberg incorporated silk-screened Old Master paintings into his montages of contemporary press photographs and abstract brushwork, artists have been sensitive to the metaphorical Picture On Picture quality that ties every work of art at least fragmentarily to precedents in other art. Sometimes the ties are overt and deliberately pursued. The motifs in a few of James's fabrics have, for example, originated in manipulated close-up photographs of works by artists such as Andy Goldsworthy. This conscious homage/appropriation became thematic in the recent solo exhibition *Material Response: Michael James* (The Racine Art Museum, Jan. 22-April 30, 2006) for which the artist created new quilts through a kind of dialogue with the museum's architecture and some objects from its permanent collection. One of the most vibrant of these quilts, *Potsherds*, responds to a large sculptural vessel by British ceramist Ken Eastman (whose work, interestingly, partly responds in turn to works of formalist painters and the postmodern architecture of Frank Gehry).

As obstacles to any simplistic conception of how meaning is generated in art, both the interference effect and the Picture On Picture metaphor are well suited to James's current work. Challenges to conventional linear thinking and to the idea of the autonomous art object have been part and parcel of the digital age. By acknowledging these factors and, moreover, addressing them as the fundamental content of his quilts, James merely continues the project that he began in the 1970s: the labor of demonstrating that the contemporary quilt need not derive its primary conceptual value from its symbolization of the past, its role as holdout for the redeeming properties of manual production. No doubt James's quilts possess this kind of symbolic value as well, since he is no iconoclast plotting the *coup de grace* for a waning craft tradition. After all, the momentum of James's innovation within the art quilt movement has always been maintained through the ability to achieve interference without sacrificing consummate craftsmanship.