

Michael James – Creative Statement

Pattern has been the constant element in my work, going back more than thirty-five years. I use pattern as a metaphor for the complex systems that work through our world: physical systems, emotional systems, psychological systems, etc. Pattern embodies the order implicit in these systems, but the play with pattern, altering and deconstructing it, allows for the likelihood that order will give way to disorder, to the unexpected and the unpredictable. This constant tension between order and disorder is a unifying thread that runs through my work.

I'm also interested in the unseen world that constitutes much of the emotional and psychological territory that we occupy. Using abstract constructions, sometimes with representational images, or images that occupy that ambiguous realm between the recognizable and the indeterminate, I attempt to give visual form to these metaphysical domains. I'm comfortable in dream spaces and in the malleable and fluid territory of memory, and in my work I try to reach into these psychic spaces. I hope that the work evokes in the viewer some experience of these worlds held just below the outward surface of things.

In my work of the last decade I've concentrated on using a variety of techniques to develop surface imagery, but regardless of the method I choose, the processing is digital - that is, images are scanned or otherwise imported into design software and then manipulated until I arrive at the 'look' or color or textural qualities that I have in mind. Working this way, I have unlimited options in terms of color adjustments and in regards to size and proportional changes.

The images are then printed onto a cotton substrate (either broadcloth or sateen) with reactive dyes, working on a Mimaki DSI 600 digital textile printer. The pre-treated fabric readily accepts the dyes, and a post-printing steaming procedure fixes them permanently. The final preparatory step involves washing the fabric at a high temperature with mild detergent, followed by at least two cold rinses. This helps to eliminate excess dye and returns the fabric to its original suppleness. It then joins my studio "working stock" or is directed into a work-in-progress.

The way I've been working since 2002, my pieces develop both through planning and through spontaneous engagement with the materials and processes. Since I create all of the printed fabric that I use, I invest a fair amount of time in planning and developing those fabrics. This part is a bit more calculated and purposeful. Once I get the fabrics in my studio, I begin to play with them, usually without a fixed idea in my head of what the end result will look like. I don't do a lot of sketching, although I will make simple diagrams to work out size and scale problems. I like to get the fabric on my studio wall and

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then enter into a dialogue with it. I do something, then I step back and take in what's there. I listen for the work to respond, and then I respond in turn. It's a dialogue, and if I'm really listening the result is usually a work that reveals a certain rightness and integrity. At least that's the goal.

The viewer may question why my works take the form of quilts, when the idea of a quilt implies a repeat modular design of some configuration of geometric or floral figures, two of the most popular types of traditional quilts. Aren't my works really more like paintings?

Quilt makers have long capitalized on printed fabric and the variations in texture, pattern and color that such fabrics make possible. For hundreds of years, each development in fabric printing, both at the artisanal level (for example, woodblock printing) and eventually at the industrial level (roller and screen printing) has produced fabrics that have altered and changed the look and the design of quilts. Today a large part of the market for printed fabrics is made up of legions of quilt makers not just in this country but around the world.

My work in quilts has always been allied with those traditions, and they've nurtured its development and growth as much as the mainstream art world has nourished my thinking about what quilts might be. I value fabric as the richly expressive material that it is. Its drape and hand make it the ideal complement to the human body, and that flexibility is something that I feel is integral to what a fabric construction such as a quilt is.

It's true that having jettisoned their traditional function as bed covers, quilts such as mine stand more squarely in the world of fine art than they do in the world of the applied arts. I think of them as bridging or straddling different but related domains of visual practice, helping to break down divisions and leading to a more inclusive view of what art practice can be in the twenty-first century.

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