

Ambiguity & Enigma

RECENT QUILTS BY MICHAEL JAMES

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International Quilt Study Center & Museum

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Designed by: Candice Friedman

FOREWORD

Carolyn Ducey

Artists have long used their crafts to help them come to terms with grief and sorrow. The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's searing remembrance of his dying sister Sophie in *The Sick Child* comes to mind. *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, composed by the Estonian Arvo Part, is a soulful dirge punctuated by tolling bells and darkly colored by Part's experience of Soviet oppression. These artists, and many more, have made their pain palpable to viewers and listeners through their creative work.

Expressions of grief surface likewise in quilts. In post-mortem photos common during the Victorian era, for example, quilts sometimes wrap children's bodies, as emblems of familial love and protection. In times of conflict, quilts could help their makers cope, show support, or memorialize. The NAMES Project's enormous trove of quilts commemorates the lives of thousands of victims of the AIDS epidemic, and the grassroots Home of the Brave Quilt Project honors military lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ambiguity and Enigma: Recent Quilts by Michael James includes what may be this artist's most cohesive and introspective work to date. Somber, dark, and mysterious, they play bold strokes off ethereal sky spaces, and stabbed marks against lyrical, though interrupted, linear networks. Leaves, branches, grasses and water remind us of the inexorable cycling of the seasons, death and rot leading to new life leading to death yet again. While the broad vistas of the Plains can seem hopeful, they can be lonely and can seem oppressive too, especially when the sky lowers and bears down ominously. The presence of the landscape can be as discomfiting as comforting. Its expanse can as easily fill one with despair as with optimism.

James's newest quilts have grown out of a very personal experience of loss and mourning, yet they aspire to universal resonance. His sorrow and pain are familiar to each of us, and have no less impact for that ubiquity. Our human destiny is to live, to love, to lose, to mourn. These quilts embody one artist's reflections on that destiny.



MICHAEL JAMES: CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION

Janet Koplos

How can an artist convey the feelings of any moment in life? There might be simultaneously love, disappointment, confusion, resignation, contentment, exhaustion, hope, fear or any number of other emotions. Michael James, the noted quilt artist who began his career as a painter and printmaker, demonstrates that the complexity of a life can be symbolically expressed by the quilt practice of piecing, and that the modesty and intimacy of an individual perception can be embodied in the tactility and familiarity of the textile medium.

James's visual conception is far from the geometric and optical patterning that first made his name. He is now using digitally printed imagery—derived from photographs or his own painting, scanned or drawn directly into software by using a pen tablet—plus occasional direct painting on the fabric, which all together brings the overall appearance of the work closer to painting, although its textile character is not compromised.

That he has included in the title of a number of the works the word *aubade*, promises that the tone will be quiet, at the least. It might be fair to describe it as autumnal. But it's an autumn—or a loss, or melancholy, or a passage—of a certain

grace and tranquility. Part of this impression may come from the fact that James refers to the natural world, a source of reassuring imagery because of its balance over time. Sun follows rain, spring follows winter. James makes use of leaves, grasses, ripples on water and especially the continuity of the horizon in the gentle flatness of the Nebraska landscape.

MUSIC

There is no literal, audible music in these quilted works, but a sense of music can arise in several ways. James often constructs his work in panels. For example, *Lament on a wide expanse of plain*, consists of five vertical panels, the first slightly wider than the others. These are literally measures that can be equated with measures of music. No panel is without some subdivision, so there is always variety, but to look at the works in formal terms, it is easy to find slower or faster rhythms as one reads the “canvas” from left to right. There is also a sense of musical flow in the depicted ripples in many passages, derived from water but speaking of other types of movement as well. The water images are also a way of suggesting swelling, as in a musical crescendo; this development, however, is more fully evoked via color, with gradual lightening or darkening recalling crescendo and diminuendo. The color may move

Opposite: *All the spaces of intimacy* (detail).

within a single panel, as here, or it may move across a series of panels, as it does in the stacked horizontal imagery of *Midday darkens over (melancholy)*. In this work, the colors of repetitive imagery are darkest near the top: if one takes this straightforwardly as a day of gloomy weather, the darkness would be the cloudbank and the linear motif would suggest falling rain, not precisely music in that case. It’s possible to see a musical allusion in his themes and variations, and it’s easy to imagine the sound of wind in leaves and grasses as one looks at these works.

Of course, James also hints at music by using “Elegy” in one title (a musical as well as poetic term), and even more interestingly does so by using the less-known word “Aubade” for a group of modest-size works. He defines it as “a morning love song (as opposed to a serenade, which is in the evening), or a song or poem about lovers separating at dawn.” In this case, the group of works assumes an overall character of musical expression, of theme and variation, of development—but not so much of resolution, which might work in music but seems to limit unwisely a visual artwork.

MOTIFS

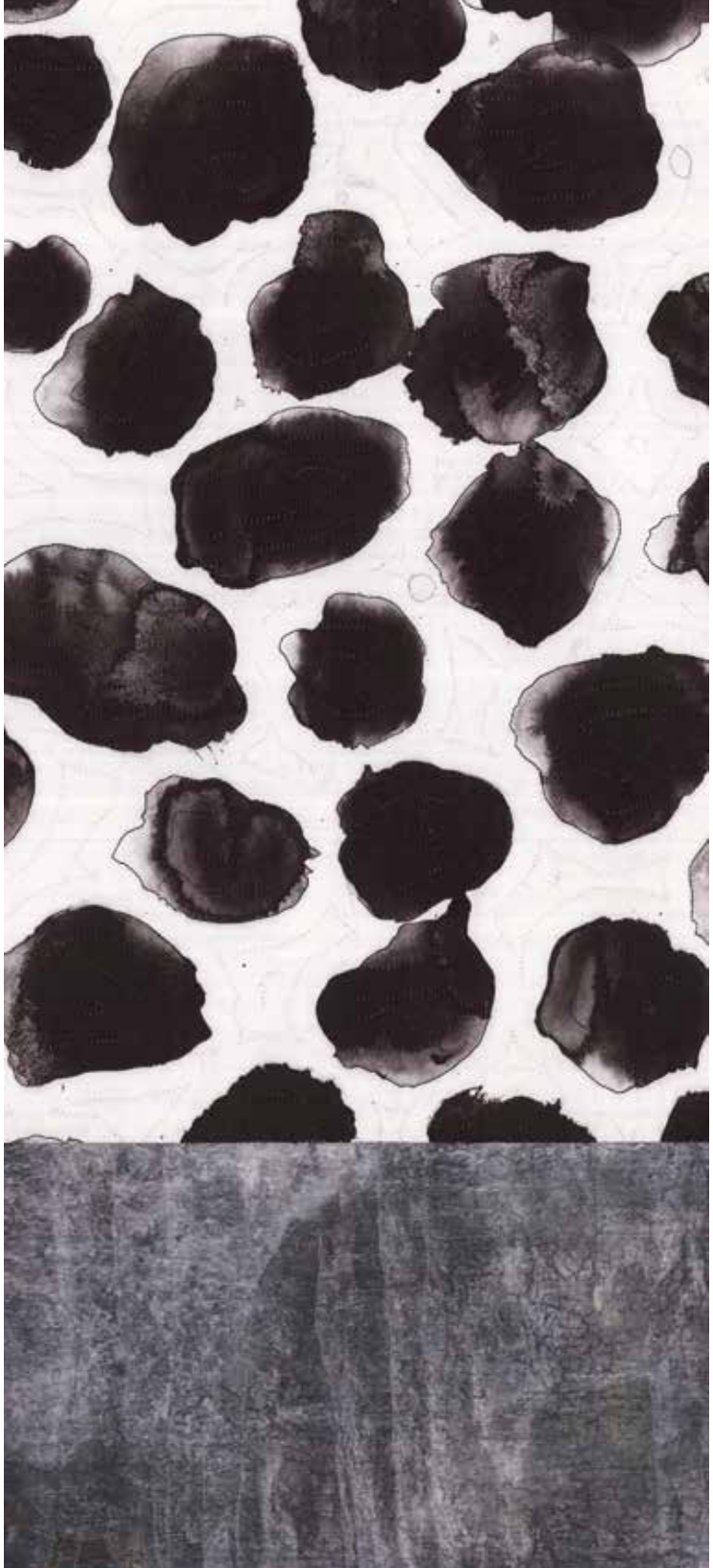
The pattern of vertical lines across horizontal panels, as in *Midday darkens over (melancholy)*, there evoking rain, can be read several other ways. James avoids any pedantic meaning and favors an abstracted quality even when his images are explicit—which they are not, in this case. The vertical lines appear in several densities, so that the stacks of horizontal panels in this work can be dense or sparse. Thus he can use them in sequence, increasing or diminishing, to suggest a physical movement—or an emotional one. In some works,

such as *All the spaces of intimacy*, the background growing lighter as the vertical lines become more spaced out suggests growing light or brightening color and seems to relieve the implied darkness.

These vertical lines may appear as part of a single panel, without this sense of development of movement. That occurs in *Aubade (still hour)*, where it might be understood as a single dark cloud, or it might be read as a notation, like a reminder pinned along the edge of a landscape “painting” in the studio. The vertical lines are nonspecific, of course. They might also evoke pendant branches, as of a willow tree. Or on another scale, they might refer to hair. Or in a more general sense they could be no more than scribbles that run off the page.

Leaves are another motif that appear in many works. In *Lament on a wide expanse of plain* there are five—or perhaps six—versions of leaves, all photo-based. In two, the full leaves are oval or almost heart-shaped and appear nearly translucent so that the veins show, skeletally. Others have different shapes, more opacity, and are rendered in black and white—although a small, obscure oval shape in magenta is the warmest color in the entire work. A close-up group of leaves in *Aubade (still hour)*—a sampler of different shapes—appears to be a photogram, while another photo segment in that work is a more distant view of foliage; it, too, is black and white, which makes it less specific, more abstracted.

Another motif, this one particularly striking, depicts sandhill cranes in flight. The image is so naturalistic and specific, and conveys such a feeling of grandeur because of the extended wings of the great birds, that James uses it sparingly. Once it forms the ostensible subject, in *The Long Flight: Sanctuary*.



Another time it cues a feeling, in *Aubade (ascent)*. In both of these it is placed high in the composition.

Two more motifs, both digital prints from a hand-painted original, are easy to distinguish: one is black daubs on white that suggests a scattering of pebbles; the other is little, truncated brushstrokes, which have a blade-like angularity. This latter field appears in various colorways in four of the five *Aubade* works (colorways being the jargon of repeat textile print design, a coursework subject area that he has taught in the department that he heads at UNL).

LANDSCAPE

Landscape is such a common understanding that we use it (with the opposing “portrait”) to indicate directional orientation. And James uses it that way in nearly all of the works on view here. In most of them a dark band occupies a quarter or a fifth of the vertical dimension, a classic disposition of a big-sky landscape. In a few works, such as the already mentioned *Lament on a wide expanse of plain* he allows the association to be fairly clear—although two of the three segments of that bottom panel could as easily be seen as expanses of water rather than land. The six *Aubade* panels have various atmospheric effects of color, implied light, cloudy texture. Scattered across some are smaller panels with the leaf imagery noted earlier—vegetation mediating between land and sky. Few of the works are that explicit, however. More often they are fractured into panels that make the viewer’s vision churn rather than rest, with lower/earth and upper/sky sections only partial and deflected or suctioned by color, motion or allusive imagery, so that the parts, like one’s thoughts, flutter and drift.

Opposite: *All the spaces of intimacy* (detail).

POETIC ELISION

Besides James’s direct nods to poetry—his use of the terms elegy and aubade—he also evokes poetry in his use of subtitles, which are often parenthetical and not capitalized, so that they seem whispered, like some sort of internal conversation or commentary. But more than that, his approach to organization and imagery in these quilts is movingly poetic: his beautiful fragments create feeling rather than story. Here James seems to be a master of elision, in both of the opposing senses of that word, merging thoughts and leaving things out. Admirably, he never says precisely what he’s thinking, so that while his works are coherent in tone and thus seem generated by intentional reference, he does not expect us to read precisely those thoughts. There is room for viewers to add their own memories and visions.

That speculation, of course, has to operate within a certain framework of suggestions that the work provides. And thus we can catalog the metaphors offered by those various motifs. Landscape, for example, could refer to the great art tradition in general, or it could refer more emotively to a sense of groundedness, to the factual reality of daily life and the landscape we know because we tread on it. It also can refer to identity with a particular place, and the nature of communities that develop out of certain landscape conditions. Consider the difference between how people live in Hawaii and how they live in Minnesota! The ground itself might also refer to stability. Or to isolation, since the abstraction of individual images often communicates a sense of being alone in the landscape or at the lakeshore. Nature feels big and inevitable.

But landscape is not just land. In these works it is very much sky as well, and the metaphors that sky provides include breath, expansiveness, freedom, escape. Vegetation is a common means of expressing cycles of life, growth and decay, birth and death. The leaves that appear so often in these works speak of ephemerality, especially as James presents them in their various states. The cranes are a far more ambiguous referent, for they might refer to a specific place, the Platte River Valley of Nebraska, or they might refer more broadly to flight and freedom. Cranes are a popular motif in Japanese art, where they symbolize good fortune, longevity (based on the belief that they live 1,000 years) and fidelity (since they mate for life).

The merging of the constructive method, the images and their associations, and the largely autumnal or twilight colors of the works give the whole a gentle expression of sadness. It’s not morbid or angry, and is less like grief (the very word sounds abrupt and curled in on itself) and more like mourning (emotion extended into a process of acceptance). The mood is gently resigned, with constant hints of optimism: the light in the sky, the community of birds, the rich complexity of structure. And those repeated horizontal bands of hairlike or rainlike vertical lines? They sometimes appear singly, but James repeatedly groups them in a sequence that reads, from top to bottom, as emptying out. But at the same time, the top to bottom progression is toward greater light, always a sign of hope.

Janet Koplos is a freelance art critic based in St. Paul, Minnesota. She was for many years an editor at *Art in America* magazine in New York and is the co-author of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010). She is currently completing a manuscript on functional pottery and beginning research on a book about the *New Art Examiner*, an alternative art magazine published in Chicago 1973-2002.

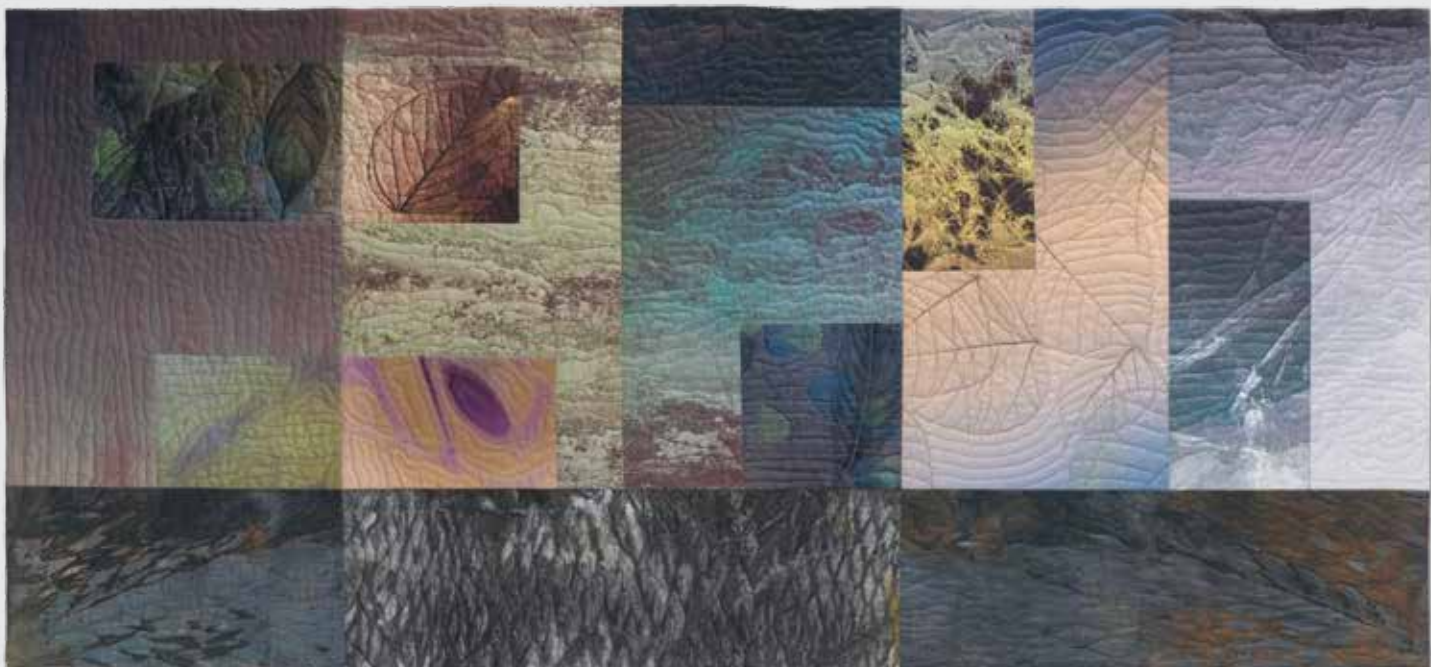


Elegy (flatland)
2015
73" h x 76" w (estimated size)
shown as work-in-progress
digitally-developed & digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes; hand-painted cotton;
machine-pieced & machine-quilted.



All the spaces of intimacy
 2015
 60.75" h x 67.75" w
 digitally-developed & digitally-
 printed cotton, reactive dyes;
 hand-painted cotton; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.

Each of these leaves
 2015
 59.5" h x 51.5" w
 digitally-developed & digitally-
 printed cotton, reactive dyes;
 hand-painted cotton; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



Lament on a wide expanse of plain
2014
25" h x 52.75" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive dyes;
hand-painted cotton; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.

LAMENT ON A WIDE EXPANSE OF PLAIN

©*Michael James*

The morning
of a bad day
sadness seems to reach
to the horizon
and beyond.

No soft rise or hill
or mesa or butte
can dam it.

It fills every rut, every gully,
it spreads over rocks
around fenceposts
under brush and leaves
and purposefully,
like a spring flood rising,
it flattens every surface feature
from here to
the ends of the earth.

No forecast can say
when it will retreat
and puddle
and leave dry ground enough
that flowers might
sprout again
then bloom.

It just sits here
formless, stagnant,
gray, resolute.
There's no plug to pull
to drain it.
It reflects a sullen sky
and resists
any natural tendency
to evaporate.



Aubade (still hour)
 2014
 27.25" h x 30" w (unframed)
 digitally-developed & digitally-printed
 cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



Aubade (ascent)
 2014
 31.25" h x 32.75" w (unframed)
 digitally-developed & digitally-printed
 cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



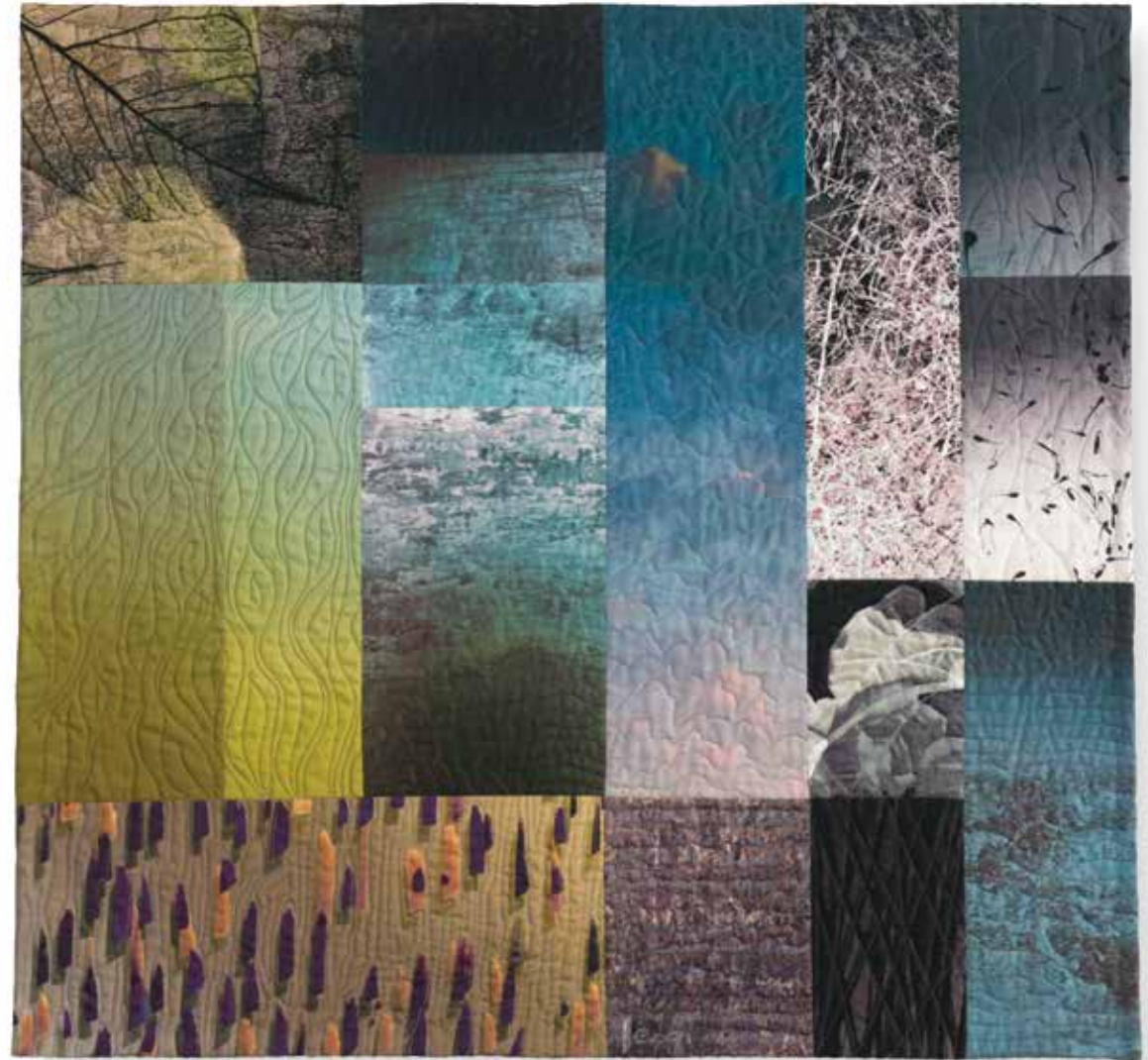
Aubade (after storm)
 2014
 32" h x 35.5" w (unframed)
 digitally-developed & digitally-printed
 cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



Aubade (mourning song)
 2014
 31" h x 33.25" w (unframed)
 digitally-developed & digitally-printed
 cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



Aubade (playing for time)
 2014
 32.25" h x 33.25" w (unframed)
 digitally-developed & digitally-printed
 cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



Aubade (to the last)
 2014
 31.5" h x 33.75" w (unframed)
 digitally-developed & digitally-printed
 cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
 & machine-quilted.



Midday darkens over (melancholy)

2014
58.25" h x 68.5" w
digitally-developed & digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.

Next, then, afterward (at loose ends)

2014
64.5" h x 60" w
digitally-developed & digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.

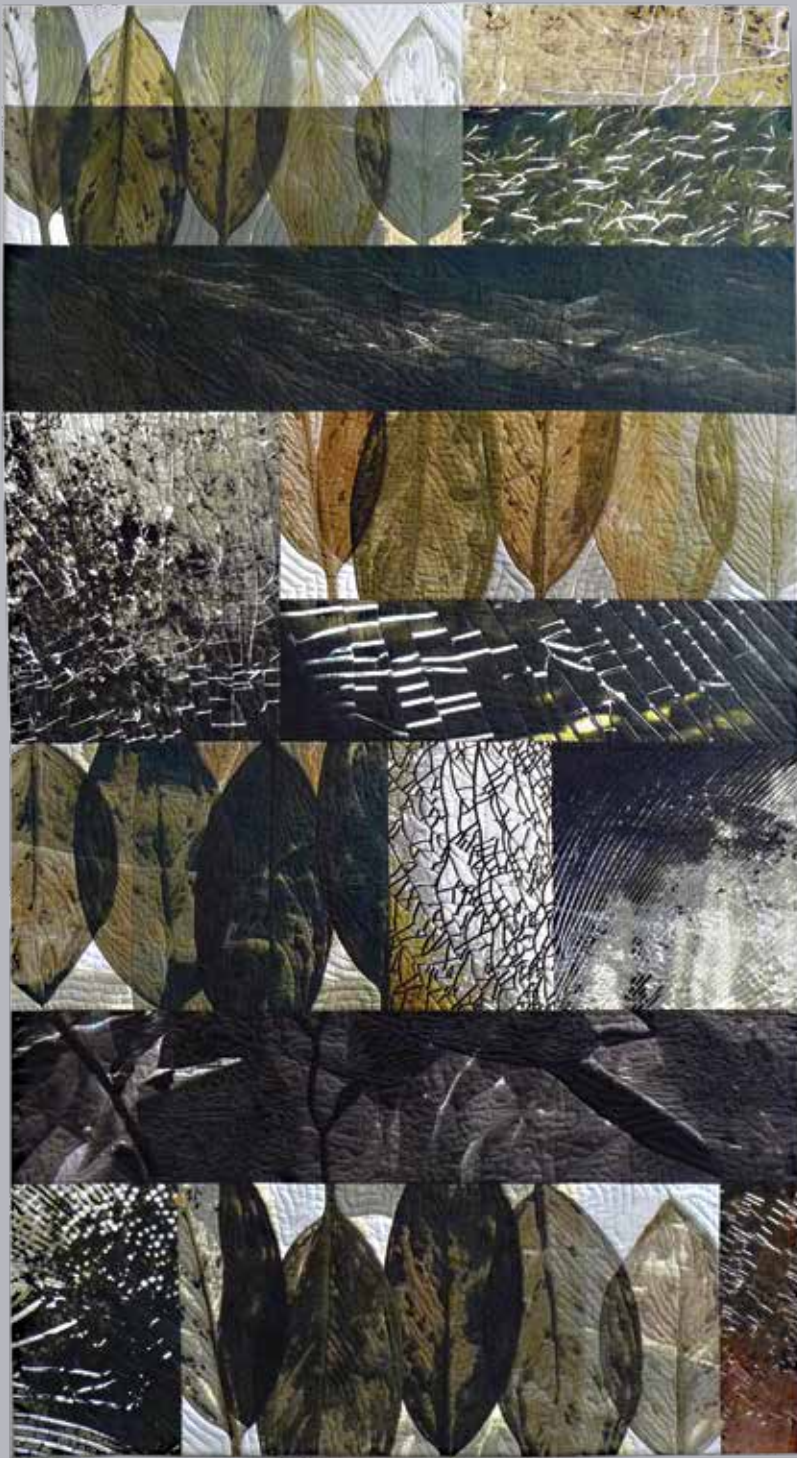




*For now we see through
a glass, darkly*
2013
70.25" h x 63" w
Private collection
digitally-developed
& digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes;
machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.
Private collection.



*The Long Flight:
Sanctuary*
2014
53.5" h x 50.5" w
digitally-developed
& digitally-printed
cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.



MAKING SENSE: AMBIGUOUS ABSTRACTIONS AND ENIGMATIC MEANINGS

Michael James

Pattern and its culturally diverse origins are a mainstay of patchwork design, and have been the constant element in my work, going back nearly forty years. I use pattern as a stand-in for the physical, emotional, and psychological systems that condition our sentient selves. Pattern is a metaphor for the order implicit in these systems, and the play with pattern – altered, de-constructed and re-constructed – anticipates the inevitability that order will give way to disorder, to the unexpected and the unpredictable. This constant tension between order and disorder runs through most of my work. Furthermore, working within geometric frameworks, sometimes using representational images or images that occupy the ambiguous realm between the recognizable and the indeterminate, I attempt to give visual form to metaphysical domains. I am comfortable in dream spaces and in the malleable and fluid territory of memory, and in my work I try to reach into and limn these psychic spaces.

The ambiguity inherent in much of the imagery that I employ in developing my quilt surfaces also qualifies the objects themselves: What are they? Even people who would seem to be well informed have asked “Why are these quilts? Why aren’t they paintings?” Neither “fish nor fowl,” they’ve been difficult for some people to categorize. I’ve always embraced the word *quilt* in describing these objects and the traditions from which they’ve developed, and I’ll continue to use that descriptor. “Mixed media” has become a favored term in the art and studio craft worlds, but in some ways that’s even more ambiguous.

Opposite:
The Geometric Organization of Nature
2010
67.5" h x 37" w
digitally-developed & digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.

Quiltmakers 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 technology, 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 quiltmakers 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 (the way it falls, and feels to the touch) 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.

Because I work with photographic images and processes in developing all of my fabric surfaces, I see my work as strongly linked to that visual practice as well. Photographic processes executed on fabric substrates go back to the early years in the development of photography, and numerous examples found their

way into quilts in the 19th century. Some of the painted patternings I work with – for example, the dots, pours, and brushstrokes in *Next, then, afterward* (at loose ends) and *Aubade* (after storm) – were first created on paper with gouache or ink or marker, and these marks were then scanned and further manipulated in Adobe Photoshop® before being output on cotton sateen.

In some cases (for example, *Each of these leaves* and *All the spaces of intimacy*) I've incorporated both hand-painted cotton as well as digitally printed fabric developed from scans of hand-painted cotton. The technologies have improved so much in the dozen years since I first began working with digital textile printing that color saturation and resonance are no longer an issue; the problem of getting truly black blacks has been resolved. Digital printing is an amazingly adaptable way to deliver dye to fabric substrates and lends itself to nimble and quick turnaround variations in scale, color, saturation, and value. The use of the electronic pen tablet presents additional possibilities, allowing me to draw directly into the software to create free-flowing figures, as for example, the interrupted/fractured gradings of descending lines in *Next, then, afterward* (at loose ends) and *Midday darkens over* (melancholy), among others.

The collection of which these works are a part, presented as *Ambiguity and Enigma: Recent Quilts by Michael James*, provides an opportunity to bring to the public a cohesive body of mature work focused on creative inquiry that has slowly coalesced over the course of the last half-dozen years, driven by difficult personal circumstances.



Michael James and studio assistant Leah Sorensen-Hayes at work on the Mimaki DS1600 digital textile printer. Photo: Greg Nathan.



The Forgetting
2010
36.25" h x 58" w
digitally-developed & digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.

In 2009 I became, unexpectedly, the primary caregiver for my artist spouse diagnosed with younger-onset Alzheimer's disease. Initially, art and art making offered neither comfort nor solace, my studio no refuge, and in fact they became for a time unsatisfying, even irrelevant. Long road trips allowed us, for a time, to escape. The panoramas of flatland we drove through, and the evolving details of soil, stone, plants, and water that populate those wide landscapes, seemed the only grounding, the only anchor to which we could tether our damaged craft.

Nonetheless, I continued the work, if often distractedly, with atypical emotional effort and force of will, searching for a way to revive in myself a sense of its relevance and importance. Transitional works like *The Forgetting* (2010) and *Past Tense* (2011) reduced the quilts' architecture to side-by-side whole cloth panels. This reductive approach to these quilts' structures seemed appropriately succinct and concise – simple statements as counterpoints to the complex situation with which we were struggling. Their ambiguous imagery quietly reflected the slow erasure of personality and identity that is the disease's modus operandi.

By 2013 I felt ready to purposefully acknowledge in my work our respective *dis-ease* and associated depression, the mutual experience of isolation, and anxieties about the unknown future. *For now we see through a glass, darkly* touched on the difficulty of seeing our new condition in its fullness – the inability to step away from it, to see it objectively. This would only occur over time, as anxiety gave way to experience, and experience to understanding – for me as primary caregiver, that is. For the dementia sufferer, there do not appear to be any evolving and deepening insights past a certain point in the disease's progression; *anosognosia* takes over – this, the inability to recognize that one has a disease or a disability.



Past Tense
2011
31.25" h x 50" w
digitally-developed & digitally-printed
cotton, reactive dyes; machine-pieced
& machine-quilted.

My enthusiasm for making slowly renewed itself as I found ways to translate into visual form my struggle to come to terms with the messiness of the grief, anger, frustration and hopelessness that accompany the dementia experience for those living or sharing it. This inner struggle, and the small measure of transcendence, however imperfect, that has tempered it, played itself out in part in my studio. There I eventually rekindled a sense of creative possibility, something that seems very much at odds with the slow progress of waste and destruction that dementias take as their natural course. This renewed creativity has helped me to produce what I feel may be my most important work to date, and certainly work that a lifetime of experience informs.

I believe that to describe the dementia experience, or any experience that brings with it a significant sense of ongoing loss and mourning, most meaningfully and powerfully, one has to use poetry over narrative. I see visual art (and visual abstraction more specifically) as possessing, at its best, poetic capacity. Like poetry it allows people to examine it through their own lenses, to locate meaning in varied and personal ways. It encourages them to “read” with, through, and beyond the imagery that evokes or alludes to a particular experience, whatever that experience is, to a new and personal understanding. Poet Rachel Hadas exploited this capacity in telling the story of her composer husband George Edward's loss to dementia¹, as has poet Margaret Gibson about her poet-husband David McKain, in *The Broken Cup*². I am revealing similar experiences of anguish and despair, struggle and accommodation, although through a different approach as a visual artist. Using a personal and unique catalogue of imagery and processes of execution consistent with the textile medium with which I have worked for four decades, I am working to articulate an emotional and psychological territory whose navigation is unguided and whose horizons are blurred and indeterminate.

1. Hadas, Rachel. *Strange Relation: A Memoir of Marriage, Dementia and Poetry*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2011; and The Golden Road. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012

2. Gibson, Margaret. *The Broken Cup*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014.



Blue Undercurrents
1983
70.5" h x 69" w
Machine-pieced & machine-quilted cotton and silk. Collection, International Quilt Study Center & Museum, Lincoln, NE.

I chose to pursue *making* with textiles early in my career in part because it was conducive to the caregiving that I had committed myself to doing when our son was a newborn. Building a studio life around textiles and quilts was compatible with being a stay-at-home parent – both requiring commitment and patience – and my choice to abandon painting and printmaking, and the toxic products and processes associated with them, was part and parcel of this intent to situate my work in the domestic sphere.

This reflected conscious risk-taking, because I fully realized then that shifting to a medium associated almost exclusively with “craft” and with “women’s work” could be problematic in the sphere of contemporary art practice. Over the course of my career I’ve negotiated that contested terrain (art/craft, male/female, professional/amateur) and its associated baggage, producing a solid body of creative work on my terms, largely indifferent to hierarchical and categorical labels. It’s allowed me to live a fully integrated and productive creative life.

Now, in returning to the domestic role of caregiver, the compatibility of my creative practice with my home life and routines is again, as it was forty some years ago, fortuitous. Doubly so, because these parallel practices now inform one another: the subjective and objective experiences of dementia (from the patient’s as well as the caregiver’s perspectives) driving its graphic representation in my work, and the studio practice seeding patience, temperance, and empathy, and itself being fertilized by these.

Creativity is a necessarily constructive process, and as such is the inverse of the destructive pathologies that express themselves in dementia. The one rises from cognition, the other destroys it. Yet, each is singular, internal, and intimate; each process remains blurred, even incomprehensible, to the outside observer (and, in the case of Alzheimer’s type diseases, to the sufferer as the disease progresses). In this recent body of work, I have tried to make visible and comprehensible the parallel yet conflicting experiences that we’ve had to negotiate these last several years. I present these quilts as a way to honor the humanity of my loved one and of dementia sufferers everywhere, and to offer a visual balm to the wounded and isolated population of caregivers like myself, and those close to them.

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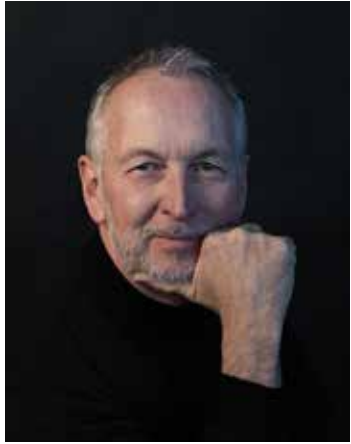
The Alzheimer’s Association, Great Plains Chapter, Lincoln, NE

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ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Although the fabric constructions for which Michael James is known are strongly rooted in the traditions associated with American quilting, their source lies as much in James's familial connections to the textile industry and in his longstanding interest in its numerous histories. When textile manufacturing constituted the economic backbone of many New England cities and towns, James's great-grandparents emigrated from Canada and from England to labor in the mills of southeastern Massachusetts, in one of whose shadows James grew up.

Born and raised in New Bedford, MA, James witnessed while still a child the slow disappearance of the last vestiges of the New England textile industry which, by the late 1950s, had completely collapsed. That collapse dramatically altered the economic landscape for the working class who had been employed

in those mills, James's grandparents and great-grandparents included. Their stories of the textile industry's heyday became a familiar family narrative that cemented James's interest in its history, culture and its technologies.

James's parents, neither of whom completed high school, strongly supported his ambition to complete an undergraduate degree, which he pursued at what was then Southeastern Massachusetts University, now the University of Massachusetts (UMASS)/Dartmouth. James majored in painting and minored in printmaking, and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1971, the first member of his family to earn an undergraduate degree. At UMASS/Dartmouth, James carried out his academic and studio work on what was then a new commuter campus designed by the architect Paul Rudolph. James found Rudolph's style – typically identified as “brutalist” – both innovative and inspiring, and while there he felt completely in sync with its structures and surfaces, drawing on that physical context to help construct his own visual vocabulary.

James next secured a Master of Fine Arts degree from Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), again majoring in painting and minoring in printmaking. Although not enrolled in the School for American Crafts at RIT, while there James had his first serious exposure to the domain of studio craft and its associated practices. This was fortuitous, as it was shortly after receiving his graduate degree that James redirected his creative energies toward textiles and fabric, and more specifically, toward American quilts and quilting.

James's approach to making has been influenced as much by his training as a painter as by his study of the history and development of American quilting. This dual orientation is reflected in the content of the artist's first two books, *THE QUILTMAKER'S HANDBOOK* and *THE SECOND QUILTMAKER'S HANDBOOK*, published originally by Prentice-Hall, Inc. in 1978 and 1981 respectively, and re-published in 1993.

MICHAEL JAMES: STUDIO QUILTS, a monograph examining the development of the artist's work over a period of more than twenty years, was published in 1995 by Editions Victor Attinger of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. With an analytical essay by David Lyon and Patricia Harris and an interview by Patricia Malarcher, the book documents not only the metamorphosis of the artist's work, but also the working processes that produced that work. In 1997 the book was nominated for the Patricia & Phillip Frost Prize for distinguished scholarship in American Crafts, sponsored by the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Throughout his career James has exhibited his work widely in both solo and group exhibitions. His first European solo exhibition took place in 1988 at Galerie Jonas in Petit Cortailod, near Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where he again mounted one-person shows in 1990, 1995, 1999 and 2007. He was one of five American textile artists invited to participate in the 8th International Triennial of Tapestry held in 1995 at the Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz, Poland. There his fabric construction *The Metaphysics of Action: Entropic Forms* received a jury citation.

Other solo exhibitions of James's work have been mounted at the Clark University Gallery (Worcester, MA, 1990); the Hillestad Textiles Gallery (University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2000); Textilmuseum Max Berk (Heidelberg, Germany, 2001); Fuller Craft Museum (Brockton, MA, 2005); Racine Art Museum (Racine, WI, 2006); Memorial Art Gallery (University of Rochester, Rochester NY, 2008); Modern Arts Midwest (Lincoln, NE, 2008); Modern Arts Midtown (Omaha, NE, 2010) and the Rogers Gallery of the Southwest School of Art (San Antonio, TX, 2013), among others.

In 1985 James was commissioned by the Newark Museum in New Jersey, through a grant from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, to create a work for the museum's permanent collection. His studio and commissioned works are included in numerous museum, private and corporate collections. Among these are the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, NY; the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC; the Baltimore Museum of Art in Baltimore, MD; the Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC; the Indianapolis Museum of Art in Indianapolis, IN; the Racine Art Museum in Racine, WI; The Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, VT; and the International Quilt Study Center & Museum at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.

In 1978 and again in 1988 James was the recipient of Visual Artists' Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and in 1979 and 1988, of Craftsmen's Fellowships from the Artists' Foundation

in Boston, MA. For three months in the Fall of 1990 he lived and worked alongside fifteen other American and European artists at the La Napoule Art Foundation near Cannes, as a beneficiary of a U.S./France Exchange Fellowship also offered by the NEA.

James's alma mater, UMASS/Dartmouth, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree in May 1992. In 1994, he was one of four artists honored with the first biennial Society of Arts and Crafts Award in Boston. In 2001 he was named a Fellow of the American Craft Council. James was honored in 2008 with the Nebraska Arts Council's Governor's Arts Award as Visual Artist of the year, and in 2009 with the University of Nebraska's system-wide “Outstanding Research and Creative Activity” Award, given for a sustained record of excellent accomplishment in research or creative activity while at the university.

In 2015, The James Renwick Alliance awarded him its Master of the Medium Award in fiber.

Since 2002 he has focused his creative efforts on digital textile printing and its interface with the quilt as mixed media platform. His current work explores the liminal and fluid borderland between the physical and metaphysical worlds.

James also has participated frequently in the U.S. Department of State's *Art in Embassies* program. His work has been included in installations in the U.S. Ambassadors' residences in Tblisi, Georgia (2013 – 2016); Seoul, South Korea (2005 – 2008); Moscow, Russia (2002 – 2005); Islamabad, Pakistan (1994 – 1997); Warsaw, Poland (1990

– 1993); and the NATO Ambassador's residence in Brussels, Belgium (1998 – 2001). In conjunction with the Seoul residence installation James was invited in 2007 by the *Art in Embassies* Program, along with two other program artists, to travel as an “arts ambassador” to Seoul to participate in events surrounding the opening of an exhibition of the artists' works at Seoul National University's Museum of Art. His fabric construction *Island* (2001, 42.5" h x 109" w) was acquired in 2010 by the US Embassy Fiji for its permanent collection, through *Art in Embassies*.

From 1975 to 2000 James worked as an independent artist and maintained his studio in Somerset, MA, as creative principal of *Michael James Studio Quilts*. In addition to his studio practice, James lectured widely on his own work and that of other innovative textile artists, and led workshops and seminars on color and design internationally.

In 2000 James relocated to Lincoln, Nebraska, to join the faculty of the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, the home of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum. He is now a tenured professor and since 2005 has served as chair of the Department of Textiles, Merchandising & Fashion Design in the College of Education and Human Sciences. In addition to his administrative duties, he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in design foundations, textile design and quilt studies. He coordinated the university's interdepartmental *Visual Literacy Program* from 2004 – 2007.

His work is represented by Modern Arts Midtown in Omaha, NE.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Elegy (flatland)

2015
73" h x 76" w (estimated size)
shown as work-in-progress
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive dyes;
hand-painted cotton; machine-
pieced & machine-quilted.

Each of these leaves

2015
59.5" h x 51.5" w
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive dyes;
hand-painted cotton; machine-
pieced & machine-quilted.

All the spaces of intimacy

2015
60.75" h x 67.75" w
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive dyes;
hand-painted cotton; machine-
pieced & machine-quilted.

Lament on a wide expanse of plain

2014
25" h x 52.75" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive dyes;
hand-painted cotton; machine-
pieced & machine-quilted.

Aubade (still hour)

2014
27.25" h x 30" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Aubade (ascent)

2014
31.25" h x 32.75" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Aubade (after storm)

2014
32" h x 35.5" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Aubade (mourning song)

2014
31" h x 33.25" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Aubade (playing for time)

2014
32.25" h x 33.25" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Aubade (to the last)

2014
31.5" h x 33.75" w (unframed)
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Midday darkens over (melancholy)

2014
58.25" h x 68.5" w
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

Next, then, afterward (at loose ends)

2014
64.5" h x 60" w
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

The Long Flight: Sanctuary

2014
53.5" h x 50.5" w
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.

*For now we see through
a glass, darkly*

2013
70.25" h x 63" w
digitally-developed & digitally-
printed cotton, reactive
dyes; machine-pieced &
machine-quilted.
Private collection.