

Surface Design

Creative Exploration of Fiber and Fabric

FALL 2010 \$10.00

QUILTS: Continuity & Change



THE ART QUILT:

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Michael James

Editor to writer: "I'm hoping you might be interested in contributing an article that would be a brief critique of the field, primarily dealing with content. I'd like this issue to have a more inquiring approach to the 'art quilt' than is usually taken. Since you are such a respected voice in the field, I think you are the right person to do this." Ah, flattery ...

Writer to editor: "I should be able to do this by your deadline. I will want to avoid 'criticizing' since I just get dissed when I criticize, and the message doesn't get across [to the reader]. I would like to write about some artists whose work I'm particularly taken with at the moment." Life lesson learned the hard way: be positive.

Editor to writer: "I should clarify: when I say 'critical' I really mean 'analytical,' which is not 'dissing' but examining work in order to understand how-and whether-material, process, concept, and context all work together. I'm interested in work that holds up to that scrutiny."

So am I. Oh, and that was me getting dissed ...

Writer to editor: "Maybe I can write in broad conceptual terms and make points about what I do find provocative and inspiring."

In my humble opinion. (..

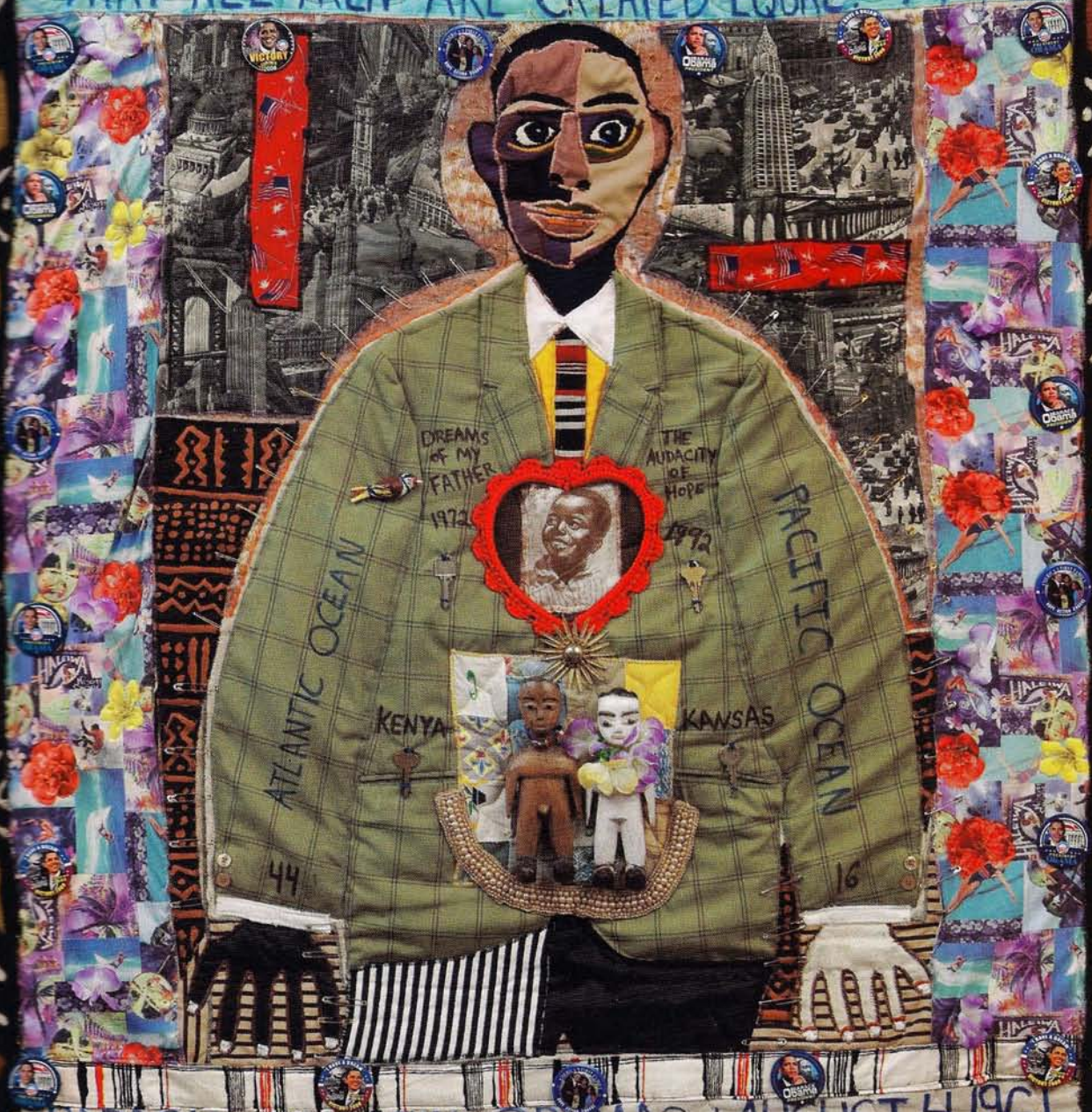
Given the charge to this writer, you'll understand that the end result is an opinion piece. Opinions are in part subjective; they're informed by training and education, experience, culture, and many other factors. In the realm of the arts, a critique usually involves an exercise in interpretation and may conclude in some form of judgment, favorable or otherwise. So at the outset I'll state that relative to this latter point, and in regard to the work I'm about to discuss, my judgment is that it's good-that it works, is thoughtful and/or inventive, demonstrates seriousness of purpose, and seems to arise from a process of inquiry that is both intellectual and emotional. Consequently, this work moves me in some way, and I connect with it. I hope the reader/viewer does as well.

Michael Cummings has been working with the quilt form since the early 1980s. Cummings has successfully synthesized aesthetic qualities found in folk art, in African and African-American art (think Romare Bearden:1), in music (specifically, jazz), and in diverse textile and non-textile narrative traditions, to arrive at a unique and sincere expression that trumps the frequently overwrought and sentimental picture quilts of less able makers. He's committed to telling the stories of African-Americans across a broad historical, social, cultural, philosophical, and mythological spectrum. His recent *A Young Obama* takes an objective, biographical approach to representing the first African-American president, but Cummings's pride and admiration are palpable. Here are two black men-the artist and the politician-looking purposefully and unblinkingly at new American paradigms and at a future of possibility that fulfills the dreams of their fathers.

I continue to be reassured by the work of German artist Ursula Rauch-reassured that the quilt medium can be a locus for right

MICHAEL CUMMINGS *A Young Obama* Mixed fabrics, dyed, screen and transfer printing, textile paint, election buttons, safety pins, African sculptures, wooden beads, found object; quilted by Bonnie Eng; applique construction, machine- and hand-sewn, 66" x 50"; 2009. Photo: DJames Dee.

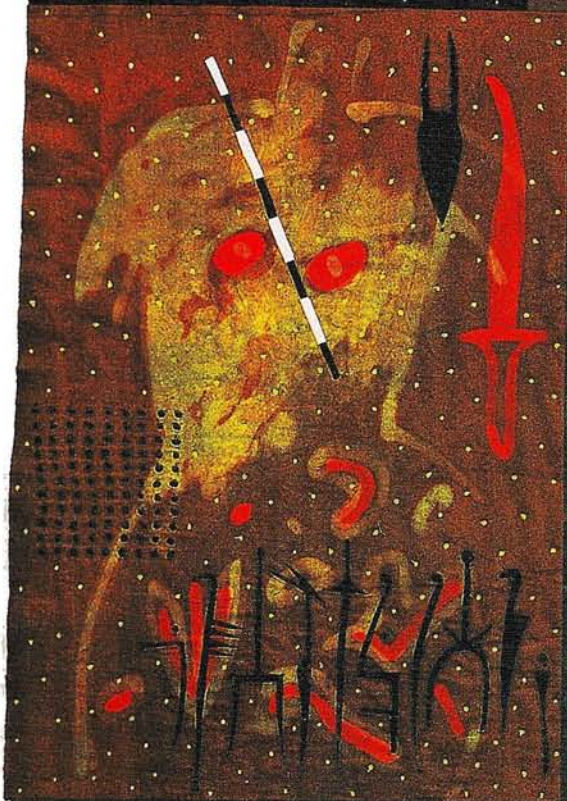
OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE - COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
LAW DEGREE HARVARD - UNITED STATES SENATOR
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING HOUSING PROJECTS 1985
"WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF EVIDENT. JULY 4
THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL" 1776



BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA 2nd AUGUST 4 1961
ANN DUNHAM - MOTHER - HONOLULU HAWAII
LIVED JAKARTA INDONESIA - LOS ANGELES
NEW YORK - BOSTON - CHICAGO - WASHINGTON D.C.

MICHAEL A. CUMMINGS 5-30-09

LE CONTINENT NOIR
PERDU C'EST
L'AFRIQUE





LEFT: URSULA RAUCH *continent non-perdu (The not-lost continent)* Fabric, pigment, thread, mixed mediums, 80" x 60"; 2004.

ABOVE: AI KIJIMA *Jane Assorted* printed fabrics, fused and quilted, 23.5" x 44", 2009.

action, feminist discourse, playful technical enterprise, and arresting visual imagery. Rauch doesn't limit herself to work in textiles. She moves fluidly between relief and free-standing sculpture, collage and mixed media constructions, and patchwork and quilts, often combining elements of each of these in single works. Her semi-abstract surfaces share ground with collections of pictographic forms, texts both legible and not, and painterly, usually headless, female torsos. These recurring elements allude to a cause for which the artist has lobbied energetically: the abolition of the practice of female genital mutilation and more generally, the rights of women to govern their bodies. Rauch is one of the few artists I know who can so successfully fuse the polemical and the aesthetic.

Informed by *mango* and by other elements of popular culture, Ai Kijima's pastiches of super heroes, animated action figures, playful forest creatures and pulp-fiction cover girls draw from an eclectic repertory of fictional and non-fictional players. Familiar to any Baby Boomer, Gen X, or Gen Y'er, and to Millennials maybe more so, these household names are the stuff of our childhoods and of our coming-of-age narratives. Their free association in improbable, unpredictable, and sometimes panoramic fantasy landscapes seems to critique the excesses of media and especially the hyper-vigorous global advertising machine. At the same time they take pleasure in the kind of hilarity that can ensue when East meets West and once-distinct pop cultures hybridize. Kijima smartly makes expressive meat of "cute," "adorable," and

"sexy," turning the tables on pictorial quilts and the sentimentality, nostalgia, and melodrama often associated with them.

Radically different in sensibility from Ai Kijima's quilts are those of English maker Lynn Settingington. The notion of quilts as intimate objects, connected to the privacies of domestic life and close family relationships, is one that many makers profess to subscribe to, or to be inspired by. Their works, however, seldom ring true in this regard, perhaps because they seem to lack understanding of how to convey true intimacy. Settingington's quilts whisper to the viewer's consciousness the way a mother's breath warms the nape of her child's neck, the way her lips brush the fair hairs found there. This artist looks honestly and lovingly at the common features of everyday family life and makes of them something distinguished, even heroic. In Settingington's work, the simple act of composing a shopping list, its recitation of the needed items a document of ordinariness, somehow takes on a larger-than-life scale. This modest poetry acknowledges the daily task we struggle with: to accept our mortality, to accept that each new day moves us closer to it. Settingington puts the spotlight on the mundane because it's there that she finds her center. Her example may help us to locate our own.

Whether there's any significance to be found in the fact that some of the most out-of-the-box thinking today about quilts is carried on in the minds and expressed by the hands of non-American artists is open to consideration. I think

THE ART QUILT¹

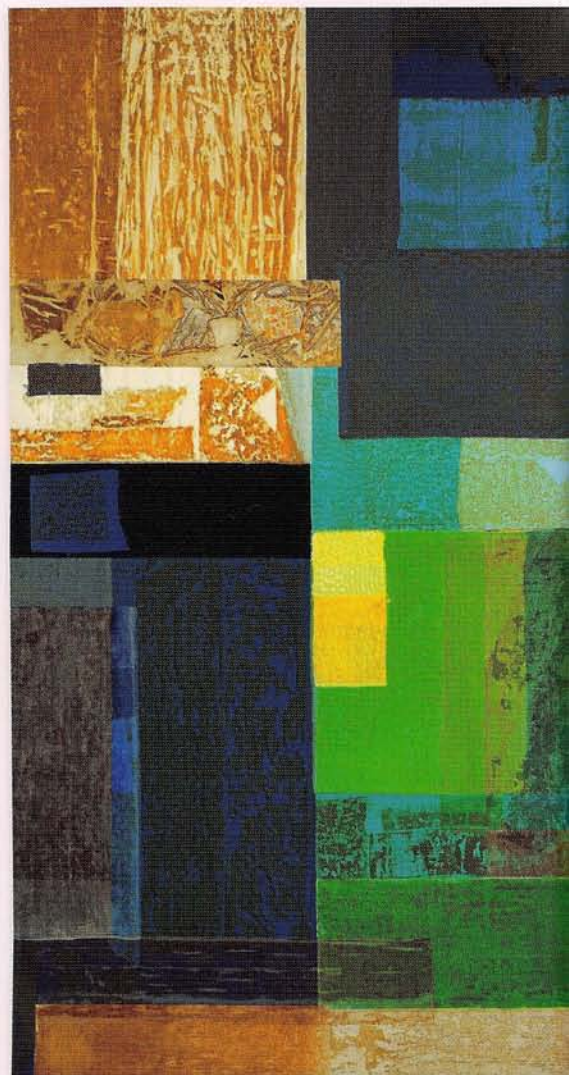
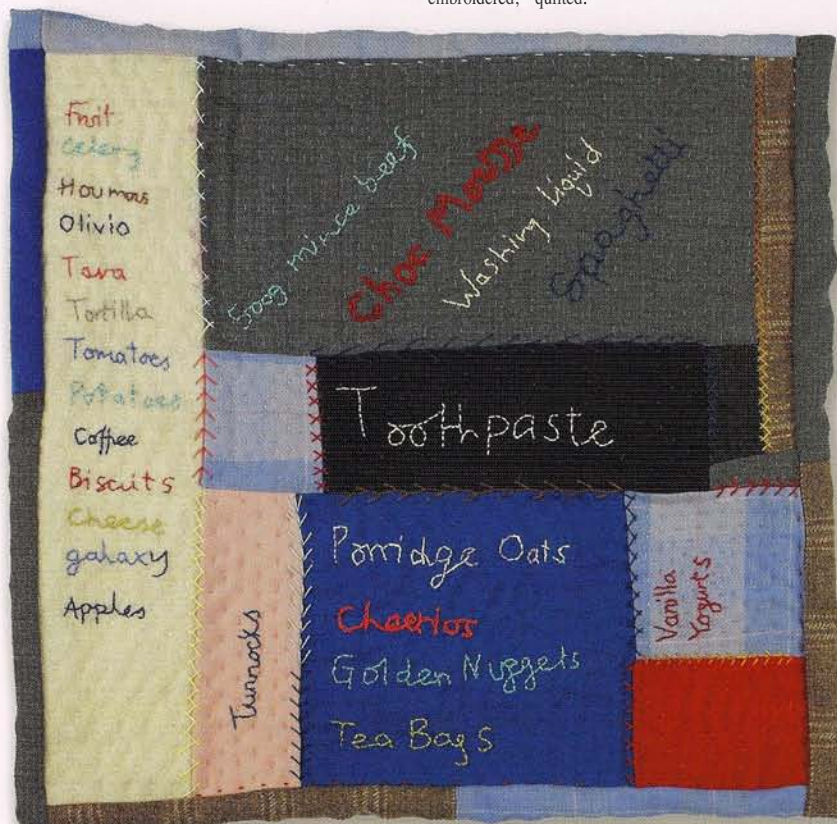
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

that our American propensity to "bond" with others who think like us, and to join groups or associations of like-minded individuals may serve a sense of community, but may also contribute to the "seen-it-before" predictability that we often find in new editions of such exhibitions as *Quilt National*, and in many group and solo exhibition catalogues. The workshop industry may also contribute something to the various tendencies centered on "new" (read "reconstituted") color trends, new modes of reconfiguring "this old grid," and new materials and processes. A consciousness of and respect for tradition and the role that quilts have played in women's lives may also add to this conservative tendency.

That's not to say that there's any lack of fresh and inventive work being produced currently. In addition to the makers considered here, artists including Dorothy Caldwell (Canada); Pauline Burbidge, Diana Harrison and Tracey Emin (UK); Clare Plug (New Zealand); and Anna Von Mertens, Linda MacDonald, M. Joan Lintault, Susan Shie and Terrie Mangat (US), to name a few, continue to set a standard of excellence others can aspire to.

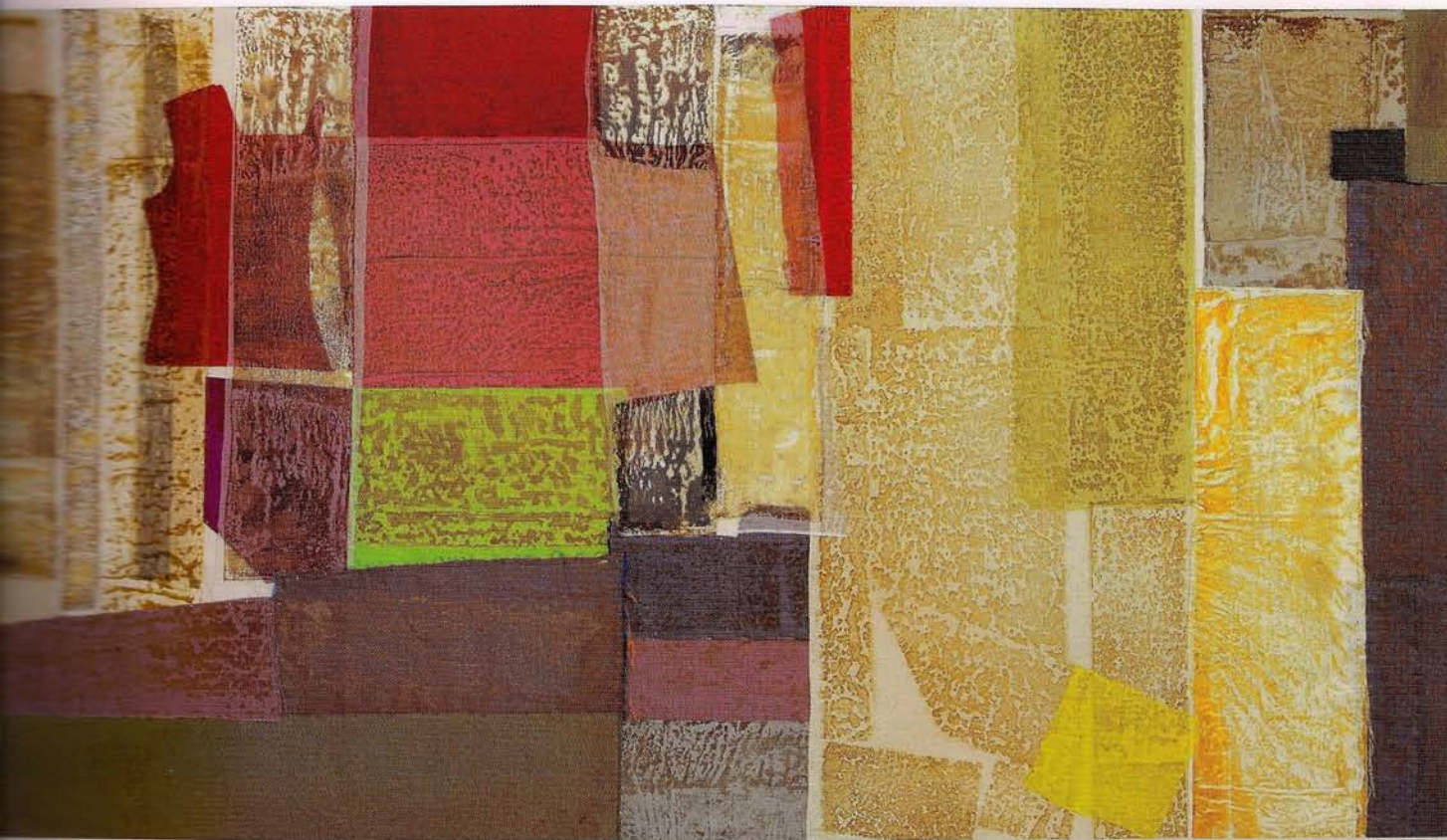
The work of Jo Budd, another English artist, demonstrates that characteristics unique to fabric and its ability to absorb and to respond to pigment and thread can be manipulated to achieve new communicative value. While Budd's quilts

LYNNE SMERINGTON *Shopping list* Crazy Fabric, thread, pieced, embroidered, quilted.



are ambitious and often adopt a larger-than-life scale, there's a sense of the "micro" within her "macro," a sense that her appreciation of pattern and texture simultaneously acknowledges the subtle modulations in small areas on the textile's surfaces as well the broader abstract territory of the composition that stretches between the object's edges.

Trained in fine arts like most of the makers discussed here, Budd came of age as expressionist abstraction was losing favor; but she absorbed its lessons. In works such as *Winter/Male* and *Summer/Female*, a diptych commissioned by the Victoria & Albert Museum for its exhibition *Quilts: 7700-2070*, Budd carefully locates each segment of her composition in a fully mindful act of both design and poetry. Her evocation of the seasons as well as gender constructs benefits by their interpretation in fabric: fabric softens and quiets, inviting the



Jo BUDD *Summer/Female* Fabric, dyes, rust, printing, dyeing, stitching, 67" x 123.5", 2009.
 LEFT: Jo BUDD *Winter/Male* Fabric, dyes, rust, printing, dyeing, stitching, 125" x 70.5", 2009. Photos: V&A Images.

viewer to contemplate and to use multiple senses in doing so. A preoccupation with measured readings of purely formal relationships may not satisfy a culture of continual renovation and instant gratification that is likely to see it as *retardataire*.

"Abstract painting," artist Laurie Fendrich tells us, "... presents an ineffable balance of sensation, experience, and knowledge. In the midst of a world in which everything we see is morphing into something else, abstract painting is one of the few things left that allows us to see the possibility in something's remaining constant." That constancy is the ultimate reward that Jo Budd's works offer.

The so-called "art quilt" or "studio quilt," or at least the concept of same, is soon to turn forty. Will it have a mid life crisis? Will it then be over the hill? There is some reason to be concerned at the graying of the creative contingent that sparked its genesis and development since the mid 1970s, and the failure, thus far, to grow a vigorous retail market and a strong list of serious and committed collectors. The spare entree of younger practitioners, not currently reproducing as prolifically as ceramists, glassblowers, woodworkers, and metalsmiths have, is likewise worrisome. The textile arts, a kind of

catch-all for the range of processes and expressions that fibers encompass, offer a situational context for studio quilt practice, and as these communities of fiberists integrate more fully, the "art quilt" will respond and evolve. It will have to grow a knowledgeable and enthusiastic audience beyond this community of like-minded choristers, however, if it's to have any bearing in the discourses developing around twenty-first century art and craft practice. I think the makers represented here, and others that I've mentioned, have set for themselves and their work appropriate directions that take into consideration some of these challenges and suggest that there are ways to resolve them.

-Michael James is the Ardis James Professor of Textiles, Clothing and Design in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he also serves as Chair of that department, the academic home of the International Quilt Study Center and Museum. He teaches in the areas of visual literacy, textile design, and quilt studies, and continues development of an ongoing body of work integrating the quilt form and digital technology. His work is represented by Modern Arts Midwest in Lincoln, Nebraska.