

## PAST FORWARD

A SOLO EXHIBITION OF NEW AND RECENT WORK  
WALLSPACE-LNK  
NOVEMBER 23 – 26, 2022

### ARTIST STATEMENT

At the height of the pandemic, our personal worlds closed in on themselves in a host of ways. I'd retired from my "day job" only a handful of months earlier, and that retreat, combined with the larger social one forced on us by Covid-19, led me to focus on what was closest at hand. In my basement studio I felt doubly isolated. From its high windows I can catch narrow glimpses of a neighbor's house, of a bit of sky backlighting the pergola that sits on our outdoor terrace a level up from where one of my worktables is positioned. I hear almost nothing from the outside, though, and feel cocooned and remote and protected, not bad things when what's beyond seemed dangerous, even life-threatening.

I was ready at the outset to work differently. Just before leaving the university, I'd finished the final work in a series that sprang from a trip I'd made to India in 2017. That group of works had helped me to process and interpret everything I'd seen and experienced while I was there. It was time to change tack. Curiously, a decision to spend our pandemic evenings working our way through a long and successful television series that I'd never seen when it originally aired – my wife, Linda Esterling, prompted this when she asked me, "Have you ever watched *The Sopranos*?" – pushed me to revive a patchwork method best executed entirely by hand. I'd used this type of paper-foundation construction many decades ago when I demonstrated the technique to students. Pieces of fabric are ironed over and basted to thin paper shapes and then sewn along their edges with very tiny and closely sequenced "whip" stitches. This offers an ease of handling and a degree of precision that would be far more difficult to achieve using a machine. I could work from the comfort of a favorite upholstered chair, feet up on the ottoman and warmed by the fireplace, watching Tony Soprano protect his New Jersey "good life."

The method was a practical choice that suited the time of day (evening) and the parallel undertaking (working our way through 86 streamed episodes of a once popular tv series). It also lent itself to the geometric abstraction that has been the basis of my work in one form or

another for nearly fifty years. While I've worked on a relatively large scale often enough, here I knew I wanted to limit the scale, to keep it compatible with the idea of "slow patchwork" stitched with a fine needle and finer thread, at the tips of ten mildly arthritic fingers.

I'd been looking again at the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist painter Charles Sheeler, as I have periodically throughout my career. I think of him as a precisionist and admire his often-surprising points of view, and his careful use of delicate color gradations and transparencies that strengthen his works' other-worldly spatial dynamics. While his subject matter is



Charles Sheeler, Red Against White, 1957

consistently figurative, its geometric architecture often overrides that representational intent.

There's poetry in how Sheeler uses light to cleanse space and to activate pattern, a strategy I've likewise engaged. That his artmaking practice, its execution, was often home-based – over the course of his career he photographed, painted, and drew in a succession of homes, from Doylestown, PA to South Salem and Irvington, NY – is another aspect of his work to which I relate. Although my own use of photography to develop the surface imagery of my fabrics is radically different, engaging photography in my working process is as key to my output as it was to his.

When I launched into these latest constructions, I arbitrarily grouped them under the label "Precise Imprecisions"; I'm thinking now they could justifiably be called "Imprecise Precisions." The work of the hand is visible: slight irregularities at the edges and along seams; gentle puckering that is inherent in building almost anything with fabric; creases ironed in at angles to some seams, to capture more light; the faint marks of straight pins and basting as pale evidence of the original process. That process felt close and intimate, and suited the circumstances perfectly.

The results of my pandemic enterprise make up the main body of work in this show. I've also included several pieces from the previous – the **PAST** – group, "India Through Beginner's Eyes," that have a different sensibility and were, in many ways, transitional, not just in my art but also in my personal life. They developed through a moment of change, when I set myself to reconstructing that life – successfully, I'm happy to say.

Finally, I've included the first of a group of textile collages that I anticipate will carry me **FORWARD** from this point. These developed from an impulse to work more freely after the

tight methodology of the precisionist “pandemic” works. I’ve found that my iPad lends itself to spontaneous and painterly image development, and this stylus-guided drawing and mark-making and painting work well for me in the evening when an hour or two of whatever we happen to be streaming closes out the day. The print-on-demand vendors to which I upload my files provide me with textile realizations of those images, ready to be built on and amplified with mixed media modifications. I expect the energy these are generating will sustain me for some time to come.

Every solo exhibition is a reckoning. I look back at what I’ve accomplished and what I’ve learned, and ahead to what awaits. No pledges, no promises. Just the practice...

– Michael James, November 2022