

'Fast Forward'

Michael James' exhibition displays 3 bodies of work

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"Fast Forward," the WallSpace-LNK exhibition by Michael James, puts together three bodies of work that revisit his decades as one of the country's most acclaimed studio quilt makers and take his work into the digital future.

Those bodies of work, however, are not presented in chronological order. Instead, the first pieces that visitors encounter are a set of framed-under-glass, hand-sewn, brightly colored, geometric constructions of digitally developed and printed cotton, created as James watched "The Sopranos" during the pandemic.

"Linda (Esterling, James' wife) asked me, 'Have you ever seen 'The Sopranos? and we decided to watch it, but I can't just sit and watch. I needed something I could hold in my hands on my lap sitting in front of the smart TV... The fact I could do this with my 10 fingers with no other apparatus than scissors, thread and a needle was perfect."

With a couple exceptions like "North Rim" that include bits of landscape imagery, the 14 works in the series are pure abstractions that demonstrate James' skilled handling of color – from the choice and creation of the fabric through the juxtaposition of the strips of fabric – and reflect, to some measure, the influence of the precise architecture and spatial dynamics of 20th century modernist painter Charles Scheeler.

In fact, because of their size, shape and

framed presentation, the "Soprano" works read as paintings – a connection that goes back to James' 1960s training as a painter and the change in his audience.

"For years, my audience were the quilt people, the collectors, who want to get right up into the fabric, look at the stitching, the construction, the texture," James said. "They're not my audience so much anymore. The people who are buying my work now tend to be collecting generally. They're more comfortable with glass."

Those constructions, however, ran their

course and, in the exhibition, they serve as the space between "Past" and "Forward."

"Past" is represented by a half dozen quilts that were part of "India Through Beginner's Eyes," a series made from 2017 to 2019 inspired by a trip to India and his interactions with artists there.

Beautiful examples of James' work, the quilts masterfully combine inlaid pieces, digitally printed fabrics and imagery such as elephants and temples from India.

The "Forward" in the exhibition is



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WALLSPACE-LNK
"Untitled (No. 15)" 2022 by Michael James.

made up of eight collages of printed cotton, paper, felt, gold leaf, and linen and hemp cords, created this year on James' iPad.

Using a digital pencil and a number of apps, James creates the printed elements that are combined into the collages, choosing color, shade and weight, and marks – circles, grids, squares and slashing lines.

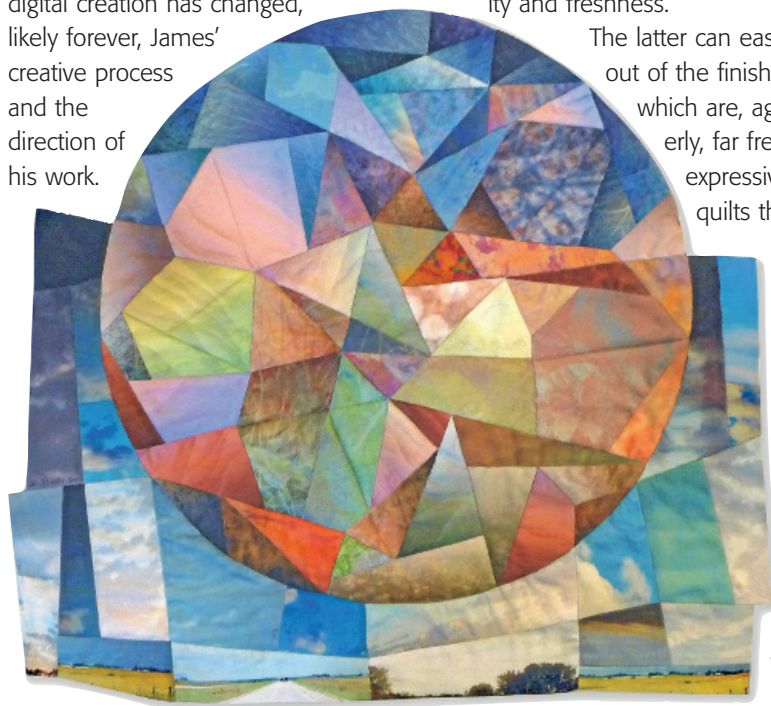
"I may make 20 or 30 marks, and if they don't strike me as what I have in my head, I just hit back and delete it," James



"Haveli3 (Varanasi)" 2018 by Michael James.

said of working on the iPad. "Maybe the 15th or 20th mark, I get it and then it's printed. You're not going to do that in physical form."

The scale of the collages – the largest is 22 inches by 31 inches – and their digital creation has changed, likely forever, James' creative process and the direction of his work.



"Untitled (No. 9)" 2021 by Michael James.

"I made quilts for 45 years," he said. "They're so labor intensive. I got eight pieces done in four months; I could never have done that with quilts. With these, I can do 24 pieces a year or so. It's not as physical or about material. Instead, it's spontaneity and freshness."

The latter can easily be sussed out of the finished collages, which are, again, more painterly, far freer and more expressive than the quilts that hang on the nearby walls.

"They're like poems," James said of the collages. "They're collections of thoughts and impressions. They're little pieces that capture moments in a way that quilts don't really do because they're



"State of Affairs (collage No. 8)" 2022 by Michael James.



"Chevron (collage No. 1)" 2022 by Michael James.

made over a long period of time."

The collages also demonstrate, in a different way than the geometric pieces, James' skill in working with color while freeing the rigid lines and shapes to, in places, appear to be watercolor, and in others, shape making straight out of '50s/'60s abstract expressionism and color field painting.

As we talked in the gallery, James, who

retired from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2020, said the new iPad works could carry him through the rest of his art-making career. If so, it will be productive, technologically innovative and, as the "Forward" part of the exhibition shows, artistically moving and impressive.

For more information, visit www.michael-jamesstudioquilts.com and www.wallspace-lnk.com.