

Studio Art Quilt Associates

art quilt QUARTERLY

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Michael James
Quilt National 2023
Racine Art Museum

131 art
quilts



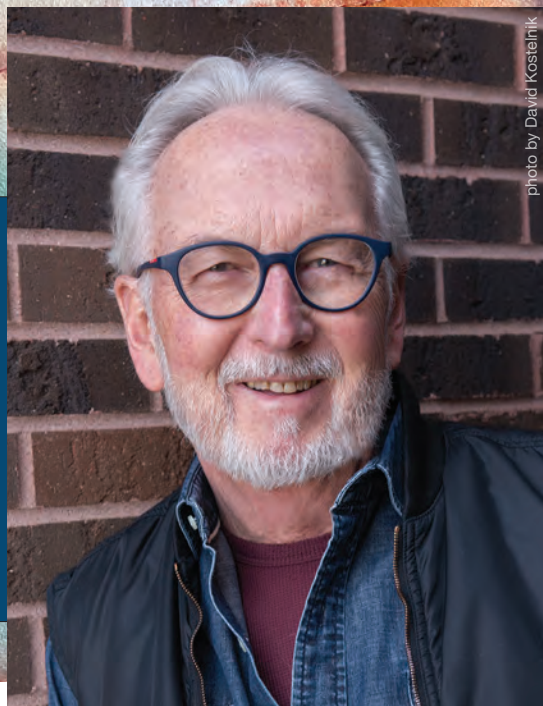


photo by David Kostelnik

*“The places where
we live form us.”*

Michael James



Wild Dreams (collage #9)
19.5 x 28 inches (50 x 72 cm), 2023

Michael James spent the first fifty years of his life on the Massachusetts coast. Then, in the summer of 2000, he transitioned from full-time studio artist, author, and workshop instructor to professor and eventually, textiles department chair at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, a place with vast open land, farms, and prairies. This East coast native was transformed not only by geography, but also by the unexpected and surprising delights to be found in this unknown landscape.

James’s impact on the art quilt movement from the early 1970s to the present has been, quite simply, profound. His work sets a bar that demands consideration on equal footing with painting and sculpture. Through exhibitions, commissions, and acquisitions, he has carved impressive inroads for the entire art quilt movement and the acceptance of quilts as art on par with any other medium. James and his work have been formed not only by his choices within the art



Haveli 3 (Varanasi)
50 x 65 inches (127 x 165 cm), 2018

form he pursued, but also by the domestic roles of husband and father that influenced his work and initially motivated him to pursue an art career in textiles.

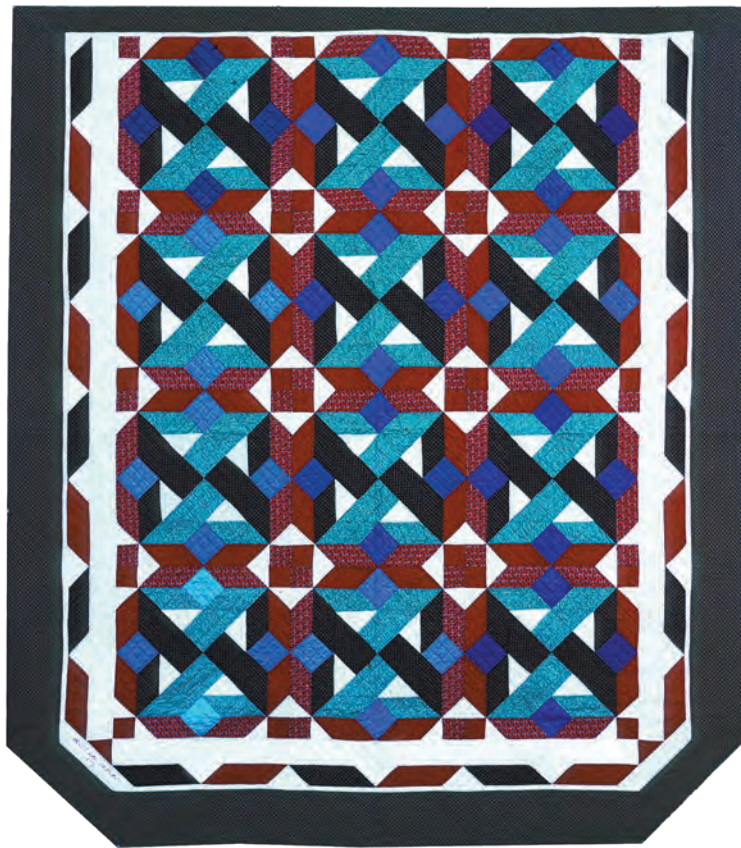
Formally trained as a painter and printmaker, James earned a BFA from the University of Massachusetts/Dartmouth, followed by an MFA at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 1973. The desire to be a hands-on father to his newborn son Trevor motivated him to pursue an art form that would allow him to work in a home studio. He also had concerns about the toxicity of the materials used in both painting and printmaking. Although he had dabbled a bit in textiles in graduate school, he had not considered textile art a possible serious pursuit, let alone a career path.

At RIT, James was attracted to work being made by students studying craft — fiber, metalwork, jewelry, and ceramics. He began researching quilts and quilt history, realizing he had found his niche. His commitment was unwavering and has continued throughout his professional life, with utmost concentration on materials, process, and artistic



The Concept of Qi
52 x 50 inches (132 x 128 cm), 2008

photo by Larry Gawel



Razzle Dazzle

96 x 84 inches (244 x 213 cm), 1975

vision. James believes that quiltmakers must be open to and study other mediums, in an effort to inspire and motivate themselves and to balance out the long hours spent alone in a studio. As an avid reader, traveler, and music and theater lover who is preoccupied with national and local politics, culture, and cuisine, James is wide-ranging in his interests. His eclectic life experience has provided the basis for inventive work that continues to evolve.

In 1975, James began working with traditional quilt concepts, learning methods, techniques, and color, some of which were based on his study of Amish designs. He approached making quilts with the same serious intent that he had for painting, bringing to the work his art training and its intellectual framework. He was a modern artist working in a traditional, primarily female, medium, and his self-imposed demands and high standards of technical excellence aligned him with the values of the best traditional makers. The first quilts were pieced and hand quilted, and each successive piece was another exploration into the possibilities of the quilt as art.

In 1985, James began working at a far more complex level, reflecting his ambition and desire to establish himself in the field. In his thirties, he invested himself completely, both mentally and physically, in the pursuit of his work. Painting stripes on watercolor paper, he realized he could create plays of color, light, and pattern with panels of fabric strips. Thus began a decade of using these strip-pieced fabrics in technically challenging ways, resulting in a signature style that brought recognition in the wider domain of studio craft. Commissions and sales, both corporate and private, followed. Eventually, James began to feel that he had exhausted all of the questions he had about the striped figurations.

During the 1990s, he began working again with pieced figures reminiscent of traditional quilts, inspired in part by patterns in icons of the Eastern Orthodox Church. His brilliant palette was limited, in some works, to just two colors. Although many would consider setting aside such a recognizable style risky, James saw this transition as a creative impulse worth pursuing.

His move to Nebraska in 2000, away from friends and family, becoming a professor rather than a full-time studio artist, was artistically and personally challenging. Yet James, buoyed by a short list of initial requirements — a good coffee shop, public radio station, art cinema, and a successful literary scene, embraced the inspiring peace and vastness of the plains and prairie. In 2002, a cutting-edge digital textile printer was purchased by James's textiles department. He spent two years learning to use it, inspiring another pivot in style and technique. Creating digital fabrics opened innovative expressive opportunities.



Moonshadow

100 x 80 inches (254 x 203 cm), 1979

photo by David Caras

Sky/Wind Variations II

51 x 86 inches (130 x 214 cm), 1990

photo by David Cara





In Matsuzaki

51 x 89 inches (130 x 225 cm), 1999

photo by David Caras

Sadly, less than a decade later, his beloved wife, Judy, began a descent into early-stage Alzheimer's disease, a diagnosis that would affect their personal life in a drastic way and alter his work. The pieces made during this period reflect the personal loss they were both suffering and the changes the disease effected in their lives. James's somber, melancholy quilts from this time reflect an artistic voice not heard previously. Following Judy's death, and feeling the need to place himself in completely unfamiliar territory, he traveled in late 2016 to India. This experience inspired yet another shift in style, color, and construction. He found peace in this diverse foreign land, returning to Nebraska renewed and full of inspiration.

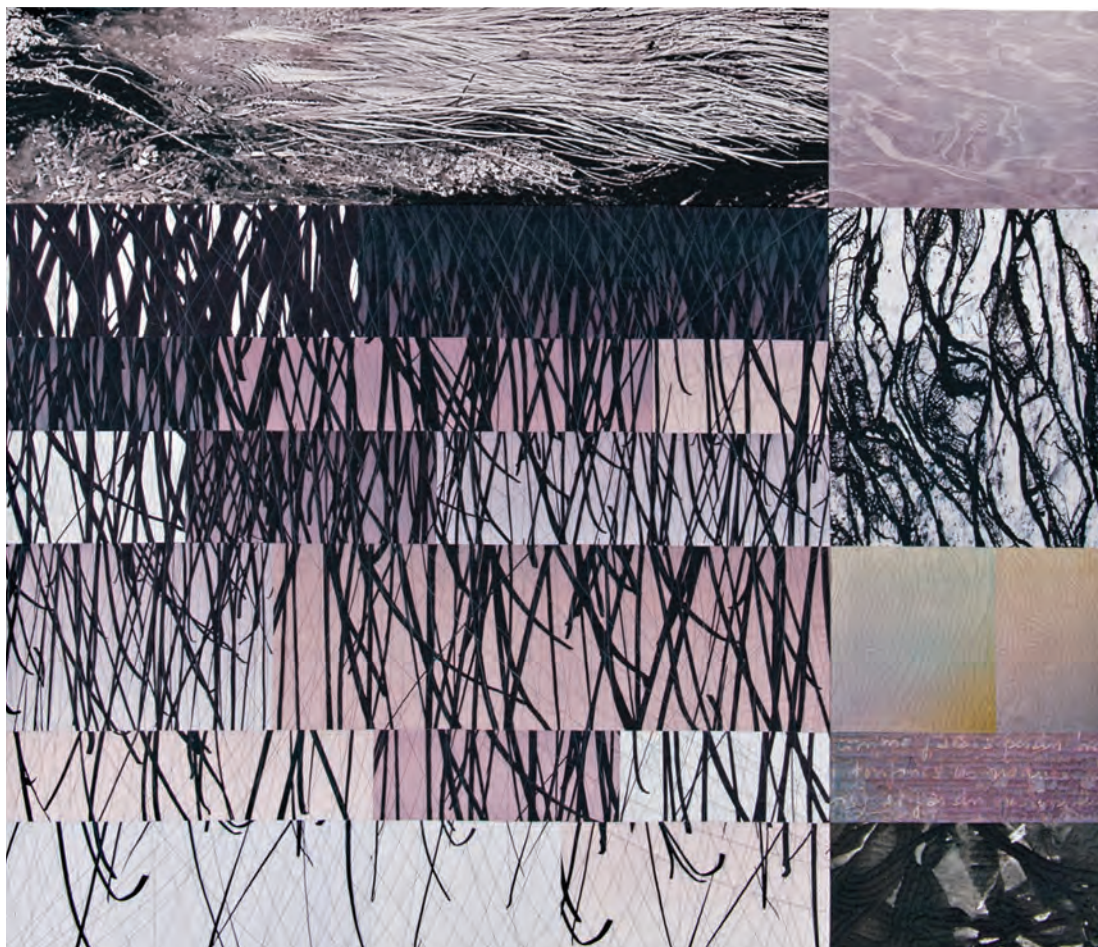
James remarried in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic put him and his wife, Linda Esterling, into lockdown just as both launched into "retirement." James began hand stitching English paper patchworks, using the digital fabrics he had printed on campus. These new works, typically framed under glass, are made with an obsessive's precision. Although they were tedious to construct, James found the process meditative.

During lockdown, James decided to write a memoir of his and Judy's experience of her illness—the slow ebbing of her life and the fading of their long

marriage. That recently published memoir, *Dear Judy — A Love Story Rewritten by Alzheimer's*, is a compelling window into the life of a husband and artist struggling with a diabolical and confounding enemy. *Kirkus Reviews* describes the book as "A sadly tender and fiercely intelligent remembrance of a loved one and loss."

James has now turned his focus to mixed-media collages, a better fit with the smaller studio space in the new home he and Linda share. He continues to work with the latest digital tools, using various software programs to paint digitally, often working on his iPad. As a model of seriousness of purpose and belief in the value of "just doing the work," this consummate artist has inspired makers the world over to pursue their own paths and to find their own individual voices.

Patty Kennedy-Zafred is an award-winning textile artist, printmaker, and writer who lives and works in southwestern Pennsylvania. Her work, evincing a passion for photography, history, and stitch, is included in public and private collections.



Midday darkens over
(melancholy)
58 x 68 inches (148 x 174 cm), 2014



Untitled (No. 4)
25 x 35 inches (64 x 88 cm), 2021

*“I have not known another quilter,
artist, teacher, administrator,
or writer, who has shown more
intelligence, intellectual curiosity,
and excellence than
Michael James.”*

—Jan Myers-Newbury