

# A CLEVER TWIST ON QUILTS

BY LINNEA SMITH JESSUP

SHOWN, LEFT: The artist in her studio, in front of "Ladies of the Day"; RIGHT: "Cold Winter Quilt".

Q+A



Thirty years and thousands of miles of thread and fabric have passed through the life of Sandi Cummings since she took up the art of quilting. She also teaches the craft of quilting and has recently published a book called *Thinking Outside the Block*.

Don't expect to see traditional quilts come from her talented hands and mind, though. Her abstract and figurative quilts combine vibrant colors in unique combinations of shapes, patterns and tones. Some of her art pieces include printed photographic images of people, creating fabric pictures that combine intense color with images of black and white faces that draw the viewer into the scene. She estimates that she has 150 installations of her work in commercial and civic buildings, including many in the Walnut Creek, Pleasanton and Oakland areas.

**Why do you think quilts are so appealing to people?**

Quilts are a carryover from childhood. The fabric is warm and comforting and quilts remind people of home. Much of my work hangs in hospitals and I think that's because quilts make people feel good. A fabric piece surprises people. Fabrics with big patterns help your eyes move across a quilt. And what else has the patterning that fabric has? Fabric has it all — pattern, texture, the feel and the hand of it. It combines everything. Also, quilts are historically the heritage of women. They show the strength and depth of women.

**How did you get involved in quilting?**

I'd always made things — batiks, ceramics, jewelry, even macramé. Thirty years ago I signed up for a quilting class as something to do while waiting to be accepted into a stained glass class. I started

with traditional quilts, but knew immediately that I wanted to branch out. I worked with the square (the traditional shape in quilts), because it was easy to start, but as my quilts grew, I could see many different ways to go.

**Adding photo images to your quilts — how did that come about?**

(About nine years ago) I saw a photograph in the newspaper that inspired me. It was women marching in Bulgaria to protest economic sanctions. I drew them on muslin, then drew them larger and larger. Then I enlarged the faces photographically because I wanted them to be detailed, and in the photographic halftone process, details became dots. That started me on a whole new track of using halftones. On other quilts I've incorporated photos I've taken, and I've also used historic photos as part of quilt projects. I use a Thermofax screen to print the faces.

**So not only are you cutting and sewing fabric, you've learned about photo printing. Are there other skills you've picked up as a result of quilting?**

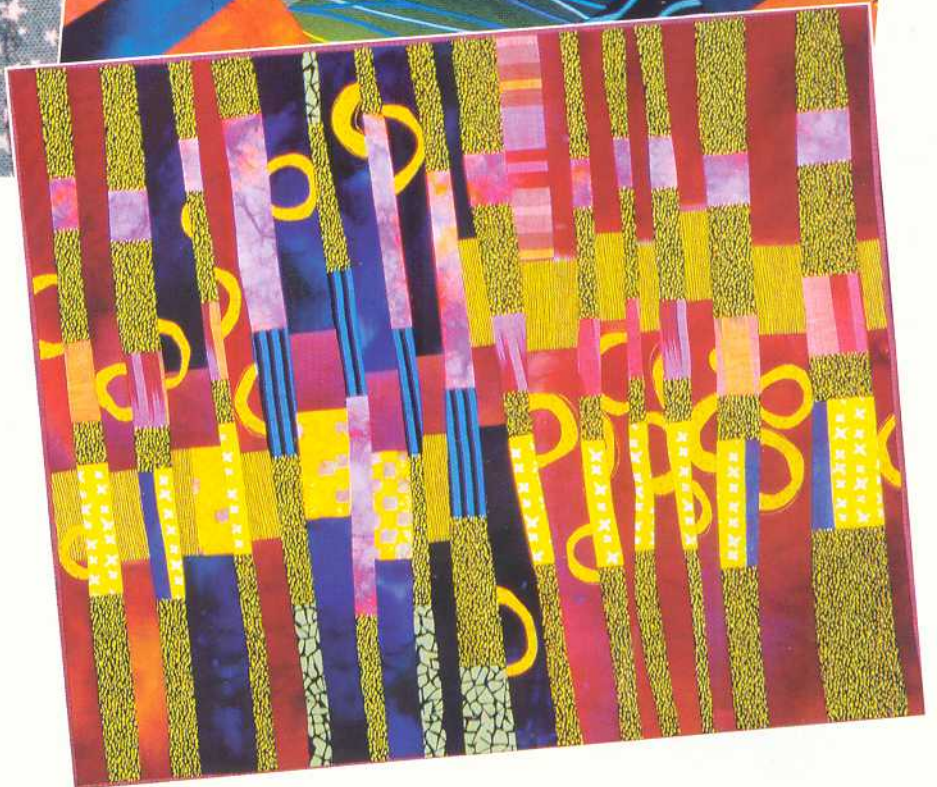
I hand dye a lot of fabrics, in addition to using commercially colored fabrics. This is because a smooth transition of color is necessary to me. I spend 15 or so days each year — usually in the summer — applying dye to fabrics, and that gets me through the year. Some I hand-dye, then screen print, or vice versa. I use high thread-count fabric — mostly silk and cotton blends — to absorb more color, and layer two or more colors. You'll see bright colors in my quilts as a result of this process.



PHOTO BY KEN PERKINS

"I DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE A DESIGN IN MIND WHEN I START A PROJECT; I JUST LET THE DESIGN GO ITS WAY AS I CONSTRUCT THE QUILT."

PHOTOS COURTESY SANDI CUMMINGS



SHOWN, ABOVE: Detail of "A Moment in Time"; ABOVE RIGHT: "Bubble Gum Summer"; RIGHT: "Garden Lattice".

**Obviously color is a big part of your work. What else drives your designs?**

I love color, and I like odd color combinations. When I first started quilting, it would take me days to select my colors, but now I can do it in just a few hours. I'm intuitive, I can combine light, medium and dark colors along with a variation of scale and tones. I don't necessarily have a design in mind when I start a project; I just let the design go its way as I construct the quilt.

You've gone in many directions and your quilts have become quite contemporary and varied.

If anyone saw my first quilts, they'd be very encouraged. Each quilt builds on the one before; each one teaches you something. Thomas Edison said, 'Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.' When I teach my classes, I encourage people to work, and keep on working and trust the small voice inside that tells them to try this way or that design.

I'm willing to experiment. Sometimes I'll see one little part of a quilt that's developing really well. I'll set the rest aside and go in that new direction. I've thrown away many quilt projects, but it's never a waste because I learned something.

Sandi Cummings' new book, *Thinking Outside the Block, Step by Step to Dynamic Quilts*, with Karen Flamme, was published by C&T Publishing of Lafayette and is available at bookstores and quilt and fabric stores. ■

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