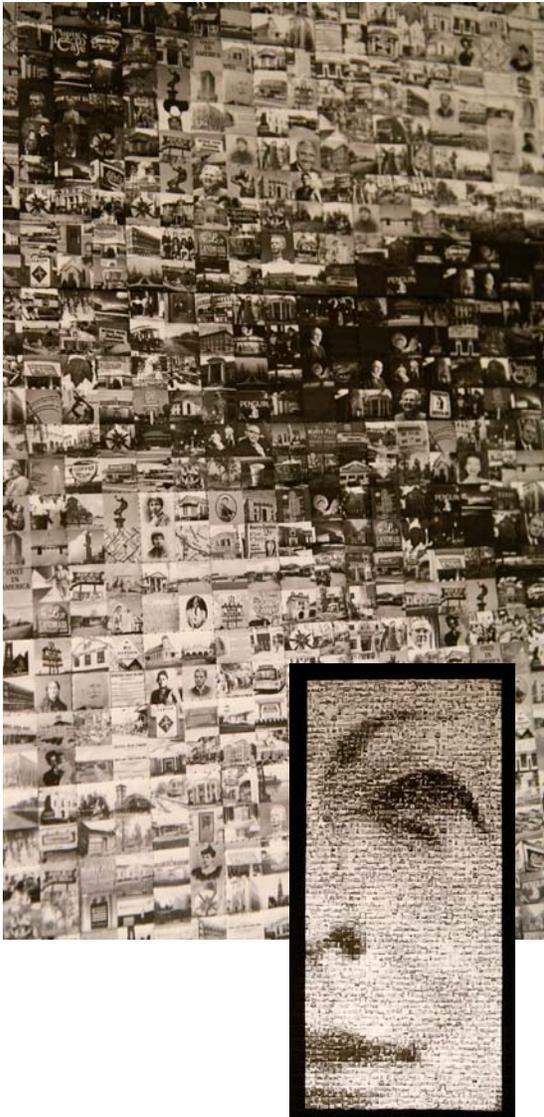


# THINKING PATTERN

OUTSIDE  
THE

By Melissa Goslin

Local fiber artists Ann Flaherty and Jeanette Brockelsby buck quilting tradition for scenes of hand-dyed fabric, upholstery cord, and the occasional recycled wrapper.



Above | Above Their creations truly are works of art as anyone who has seen these quilts can attest, including “Under the Watchful Eye of Queen Charlotte,” by fiber artist Deborah Langsam.

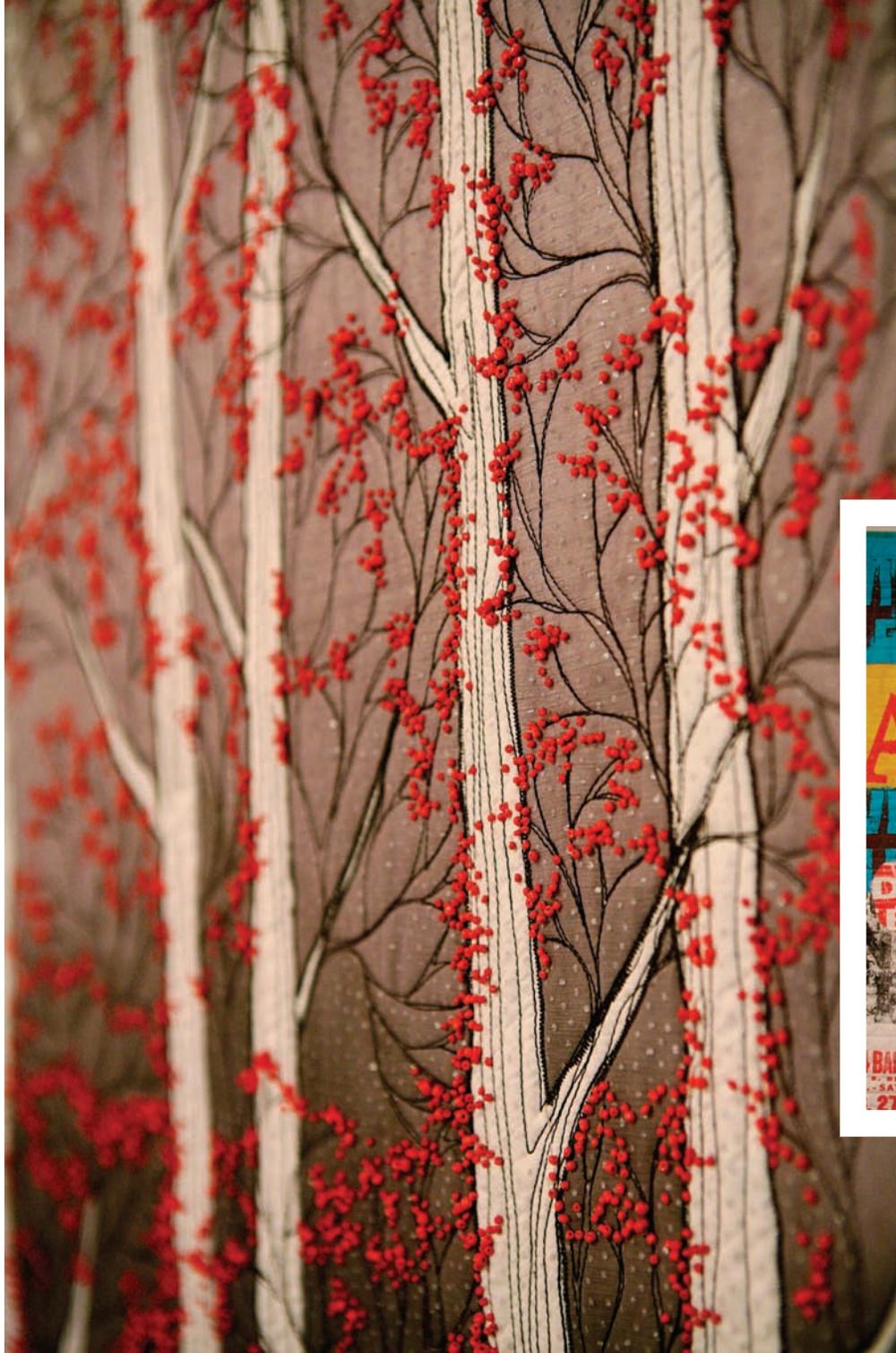
For Ann Flaherty, it started with a pesky art requirement and a hurting grandson. As an adult, she went back to school to study issues of diversity. When her then three-year-old grandson was teased about his own identity, those issues hit home. The result was **Denzel Soup**, an art quilt celebrating all sixteen cultures running through her grandson’s veins.

“It was my first statement in fabric, and I was hooked from there,” she said. After Flaherty was done clipping and stitching, a fabric garden emerged where ancestors from the likes of Peru, Ireland, and Puerto Rico stood side by side. Back then, original photos had to be sent off to Colorado for transfer onto cloth. Her work remains image-based, so she’s glad home technology has caught up.

Flaherty’s art quilts are reactions to both private battles and international events. “I’m a born advocate,” she said. Her quilted response to the 9/11 terror attacks was shown among the 365 pieces at *America from the Heart*, a national exhibit-turned-book. From there, it was chosen as 1 of 100 to travel and 1 of 20 to show in Manhattan’s Hudson River Museum. Her subjects range from a dear friend’s hollyhocks to the scandal that faced her childhood church. She even sewed her own brain scans into a series now hanging in Boston Medical Center.

In December, Flaherty will be five years cancer free. On her first trip after recovery, she stopped at a canal and saw branches dipped into the water. “They looked like people dancing,” she said. She snapped a photo and later played with it on the computer, working to get it just right and print a custom pattern for her piece, **Just Dance**. No matter what seemingly tragic event brings her to the sewing room, Flaherty always manages to transform image to art, pain to hope.

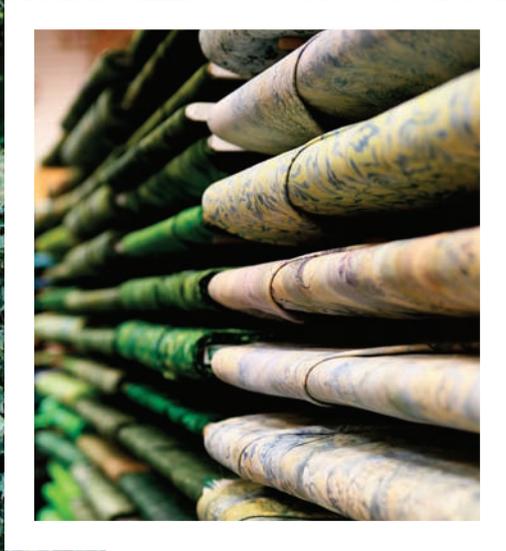
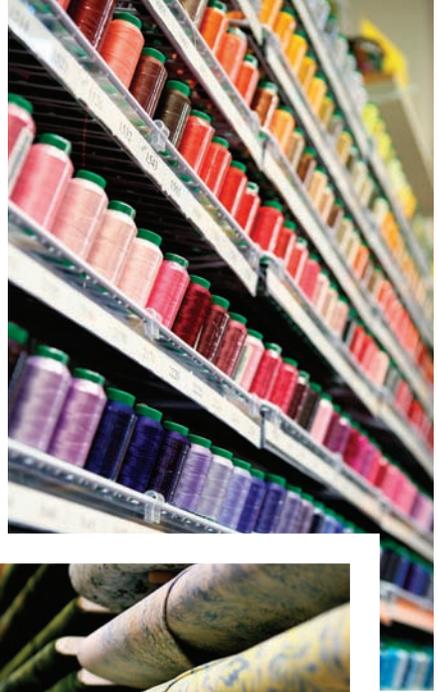
Her response to another hurting grandson has offered comfort to thousands of military families. At eighteen-months-old, her grandson was having a tough time dealing with his father’s deployment. “He was having tantrums and not eating,” she said. “My daughter noticed he was taking photos of his father from the living room



**Left and Above |** A recent exhibit at the Fayetteville Museum of Art, in partnership with the Professional Art Quilters Alliance – South, was entitled ARTQUILTstransitions, featuring quilts depicting the concept of transitioning, either through subtle shifts or bold change.

and slipping them under his crib.” Flaherty dug in and started sewing. Family photos of all sorts adorned the resulting quilt, which soon got noticed by others at daycare. She approached the Armed Services YMCA on Ft. Bragg with the idea, and Operation Kid Comfort was born. Three thousand quilts later, Flaherty is still stunned. “I knew when I was making the quilt that something special was happening,” she said, “but I don’t think I could have realized the scope of it.” The program now operates in several locations across the United States and abroad.

Flaherty also helps promote the work of other art quilters as a member of Professional Art Quilters Alliance (PAQA) South. Their 7<sup>th</sup> annual juried show, ARTQUILTstransitions, recently traveled to the Fayetteville Museum of Art. “Where traditional quilts are utilitarian, our fiber art is meant to be hung on a wall or showcased,” she said. Flaherty experiments with non-traditional techniques such as



**Above |** Jeanette Brockelsby strikes a pose in one of her colorful creations, affectionately dubbed her “chicken coat.” Color is but one element of the quilting art.

rusting fabric and heating wrappers. “You think of the fiber and cloth as your palette and go from there,” she said. “It’s very freeing.”

It seems fiber is in her blood. “I can’t fathom my life without fabric in it,” she said. Her great-grandmother, a seamstress, made clothing now found on display at The Boston Museum of Fine Art.

In a very different twist of fate, Jeanette Brockelsby came to fabric accidentally. All she wanted was a floor-length nightgown, a luxury prohibited by her tall stature. Fed up, she stepped into Loving Stitches to try and make one herself. During a free class aimed at acquainting her with her new sewing machine, it became painfully evident that quarter-inch seams weren’t her cup of tea. She and her Bernina had other plans.

Brockelsby made her living in the fast lane, teaching motorcycle safety to

Fittingly, one of her favorite pieces is a floor-dragging jacket she affectionately calls her chicken coat. “I think it helps not knowing how to sew properly,” she said. Without a firm grip on the rules, she didn’t have to give much thought to breaking them. And break them she does. She sketches out a design then twists, stitches and layers her fibers into submission.

soldiers. Her quilting style mimics her motorcycling – fast and furious. “I put the floor pedal wide open, drop the feed dogs, and let ‘er roll,” she said.

Fittingly, one of her favorite pieces is a floor-dragging jacket she affectionately calls her *chicken coat*. “I think it helps not knowing how to sew properly,” she said. Without a firm grip on the rules, she didn’t have to give much thought to breaking them. And break them she does. She sketches out a design then twists, stitches and layers her fibers into submission. Using anything she can shove through her machine, she creates complex underwater scenes and one-of-a-kind sea turtles. Three layers of tulle, plastic wrap, and free motion embroidery

become coral. In her charge, even a hand-stitched Victorian crazy quilt is pushed to its limit.

A slender manila folder holds only a few photos of quilts she has sold, and one or two reminders of awards she has won. For Brockelsby, satisfaction is not in prize ribbons or sales slips. She refuses to sell the last quilt from her sea turtle series, even at offers well-exceeding the sticker price. Instead, proof is in the process – turning visual concepts into a physical reality is her ultimate gratification. When she looks through her materials stash, she doesn’t see fiber. She looks at a bolt of fabric and envisions trees, dragonflies, or ladies hidden throughout a landscape.

She also knows about working through

pain. Osteoarthritis – and definitely *not* a lack of ideas – recently forced her into a quilting hiatus. She can’t work like she did before, all-nighters fueled by Mellow Yellow and artistic vision. But she is starting to find her way back.

“I’ve never been a normal person, but I had a little gift from God to be artistic,” she said. “I am the happiest and most functioning when I am creating.”

Like Flaherty, Brockelsby finds a transformative power in her art. The *process* may be healing for her, but the *product* is balm for the viewer. Wherever she unveils her new pieces, there is certain to be a line of people waiting to ogle, admire, and – if she will let them – buy. ©



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