LIFE AND ART: AN ARTIST'S VIEWPOINT

By Judy Bales

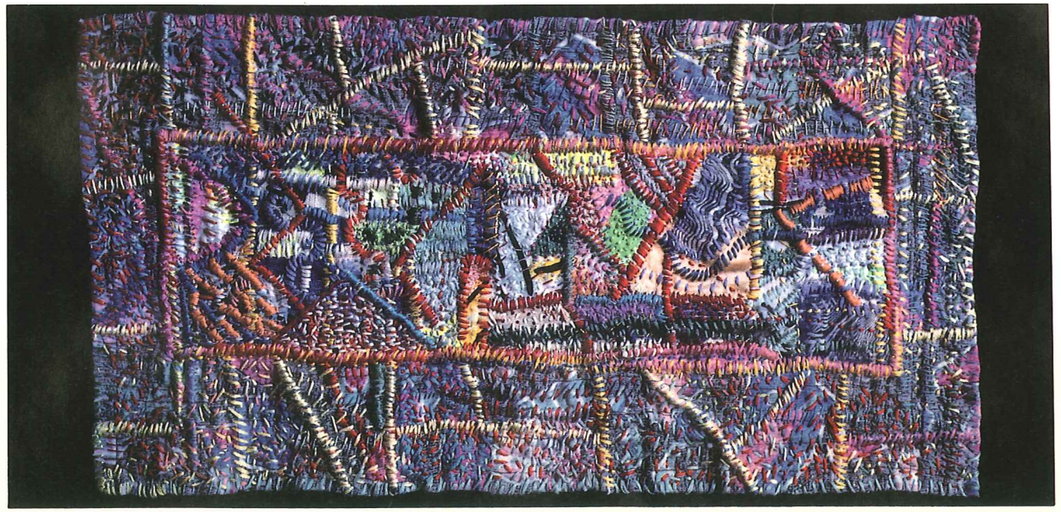
Since early childhood I have felt a need to preserve the experiences evoked by the world around me. I still feel the rapture I experienced as a child upon sighting a rabbit in a thicket or watching a thunderstorm on a summer evening and the desire I had to express those experiences.

Art education during those early years steered me only in the direction of drawing, coloring, and painting. These disciplines gave me great excitement, but I often wonder how much more interesting my early years would have been had I been exposed to the delights of other materials and methods—clay, collage, found-object sculpture, and all the wonderful things children are now introduced to in a well-rounded art education program.

It was only after teaching art to children for several years during my twenties that I realized I was even more excited with other materials. I taught in a school that had little funding for art materials and a large number of children funneling through my art room each week. Creative lesson planning and inventive use of materials became a job requirement. By the time I returned to graduate school I was especially fascinated with fiber and all its possibilities, as well as the possibility of combining textile techniques and nonfibrous materials. Traditional methods of working with fabric and fiber did not suit me, however. Sewing clothing during my early years had been an exercise in frustration. I could get the job done with some effort but it always felt constricted and confining.

In the late 1970s I saw an exhibition that changed my perception of what working with fabric, thread, and needle could mean. This was the first exhibition of African-American quilts I had seen, and the quilts struck me as having a spirit similar to some crib quilts I had made for friends. Other viewers thought the quilts were poorly made attempts at piecing quilts. After all, the designs did not repeat properly, the edges often were not perfectly straight, and the quilting created puckers and lumps. What I saw in the quilts was tremendous energy, dynamic patterning with elements connected but rarely repeated, and intense, percussive colors. Straight, exactly measured pieces, neat stitches, and matching thread seemed less important to the makers than movement, rhythm, and punch.

Until this time I had felt that the way I tended to work—loosely and with much improvisation—was an inferior method of fabric manipulation. Seeing these quilts gave me the first seed of confidence in my method as a valid alternative. The African-American quilts were not free-form, "anything goes" patterns, or crazy quilts; they were quilts which adhered to clear, organized rules of working. The makers had a different set of priorities than those I had seen in other quilters, and their work helped me acknowledge certain things about myself. I love asymmetry, syncopated rhythms, and the unexpected. I love improvising on a pattern or theme. Looking at nature, I see those qualities rather than symmetry and rigid repetition. Nature builds pattern upon pattern, always changing but ever the same.



Potentially Interesting Paths; *1992; embroidery and appliqué; 8½" x 15½".*

As when I was a child, I have a strong emotional response to the landscape and to daily and seasonal patterns and rhythms. These things constantly feed my need for expression through visual art. I love the openness of the huge Midwestern sky of my present Iowa home as much as I love the dense, rounded lushness of my Southern childhood home. In response to watching the daily changes in the earth and sky, I build blocks of pattern with fabric and thread. I repeat general shapes and build these textures and patterns in an improvisational manner.

Although I have worked on large-scale pieces, I am most comfortable with a scale that I can hold in my lap and manipulate within arms' range. Embroidery has suited me perfectly in this way. I construct my work much as I would an abstract painting. I begin with a rough blocking out of colors and shapes, cutting fabrics, and placing them on a stiff fabric backing. I usually anchor them with machine stitches or secure them with loose hand stitches. I then work into this pattern, building layers of other fabric bits combined with embroidery.

At the present I have a need for a part-time job. This makes production of art more of a challenge. However, I refuse to allow the demands of a job or home to defeat my creative impulses and aspirations. I often compare creating art with child raising. If a person waits until everything is perfect before having a baby, it just may never happen; perhaps the nursery is under construction or the child will have to be in day care some days. If the parents are conscientious, the child can still turn out fine, even if they couldn't make everything perfect for him. An artist must just go ahead and do the work—anything else is an excuse. There will always be obstacles but process can go on.

One way I compensate for lack of time is by using crevices of time throughout the day, which can add up to large blocks. I tend to incorporate my work into other activities of my life. That is one beautiful aspect of needlework; all my supplies can be kept in a large bag or backpack which I can have handy wherever I am. I also put my unfinished pieces in places where I will see them when doing housework or by my bed at night so I see them when I wake up in the morning. This allows me to see my work fresh over and over and often gives me an objective view of the pieces. I guess I am fortunate in that it is ultimately harder for me not to work than to work. It is the most enjoyable activity I do. I am always revitalized rather than exhausted by it. Playing with colors and shapes is almost irresistible to me.

Although I don't usually consider creative block to be a problem for me, I sometimes do have trouble getting started with a project. My personal axiom is: "If you can't do something, do something you can do." If I have difficulty starting a project, I begin doing something else—cutting fabrics, filling bobbins, cleaning my

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studio—anything that is a useful, somewhat mindless activity. Before I know it I am easing into the project that I need to work on. Sometimes I go through longer periods of time when I don't feel like actually producing the art. If I do not have a deadline pending, I allow myself to use this time to look at books that inspire me, or to gather and prepare materials, or take slides of existing work. That way, I keep revitalizing my enthusiasm and laying the groundwork for future projects.

Rather than judging my progress based solely on my subjective feelings, I also ask myself these questions: Am I producing several complex pieces each month? Is my work changing and evolving over a period of several months? Am I exhibiting my work frequently and in different parts of the country? This helps keep things in perspective.

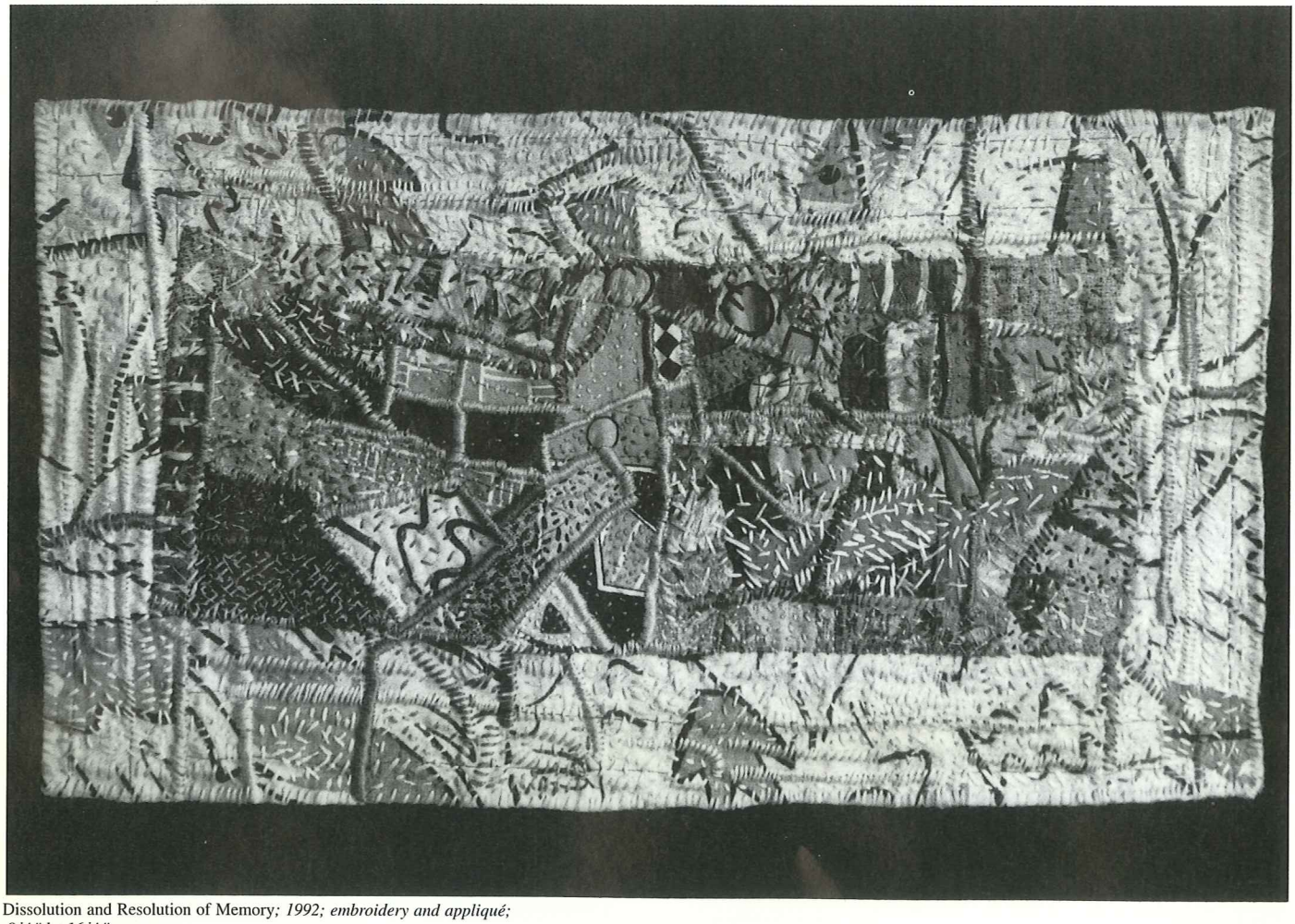
I usually work on three to five pieces at any one time. I inevitably come to several stages within one work when I need to back away, let it jell, decide what to do next. This process seems to be aided by working on a different stage of another piece; they seem to move each other along. I would find it extremely difficult to create a piece start to finish without multiple pauses in the process.

I consider myself to be a fine artist. The ongoing dispute about whether work falls into the realm of simple craft or fine art concerns me but doesn't overwhelm me. What an artist does with materials and methods is what is important, not what those materials are. Fiber is an intimate part of our lives, from the cradle to the grave; it can consequently be considered very mundane or very lofty, whichever one chooses.

I tend to be a lone worker. I do not feel a desire to belong to an artist support group. I do, however, have a strong need for books and museums, which allow me to see what other artists are doing and have done throughout the centuries. I often purposely look at work that doesn't directly relate to my own. Many of my most useful ideas and inspirations come from unrelated sources.

I do not really concern myself with the direction my work will take in the future. If I tried to predict that, I would most likely be proven incorrect. What is important is simply to keep working. □

Judy Bales lives in Fairfield, Iowa. Her work was included in "Needle Expressions '92."



Dissolution and Resolution of Memory*; 1992; embroidery and appliqué; 9 ½" by 16 ½".*