

## Karin Franzen

Since I started making art quilts in 2003, my efforts have mostly been directed at mastering the medium. This includes developing or learning techniques that give me the results I envision. Before 2003, I had never seen art quilts. I was in a bead store when a woman came in with a book of Ruth McDowell's. Seeing her artwork made me want to try my hand at it. The only other medium I've worked in and entered into art shows had been beaded jewelry.

I have an art minor but have continued to take classes regularly over the years — mostly in drawing, painting, ceramics, and metal smithing. I like drawing in particular, because it trains you to become a good observer and to pay close attention to your subject. The power of observation is an important skill for any artist to cultivate. As a retired structural engineer, I have a good working knowledge of mathematics and physics which is helpful in solving construction challenges.

I was raised within the context of a religious tradition. My father was a mortician and ran an ambulance service for the community. His business was right next door to our home and the whole family shared the responsibility for taking emergency calls. As I was growing up, I was very much aware of both the material and spiritual aspects of the human condition. I feel a constant presence of the divine in everyday life, and I try to capture these intangible qualities in my subjects.

I've had many mentors over the years. University art professors and gallery owners are a very important resource and keep me informed about shows and other opportunities. I regularly associate with other artists (of all media) for critiques and to share information. Within the framework of art quilting, Ree Nancarrow of Denali Park, AK and Ingrid Taylor of Fairbanks, AK are both important mentors. They are long-time fiber artists with a wealth of experience



and generously share their knowledge. So do my friends in the Cabin Fever Quilt Guild and other smaller groups I belong to.

My style is representational, or realistic. I would also call myself a colorist since I love to experiment with the interplay of complex colors.

I have two very different and somewhat polar opposite (left brain, right brain) sources of inspiration. It's my habit to pay attention to every detail of light, color, form, line, texture, etc. in nature. It's a preoccupation, an obsession, and it fuels my artwork. That's a large part of why I've chosen Alaska as my home. But the other

**Pirouette #2**  
36" x 42"

This is an experiment using a new technique: layer a number of fabrics, stitch through all layers, slash upper layers to reveal underlying layers.







**All Fly Away**  
52" x 77", © 2006

create a sense of movement (by creating "shadow" figures in and around my birds), or a sense of atmospheric perspective (by layering them over important design elements), or for creating an aura of mystery. I'm now buying silk organza that I dye, discharge, and print to create my own organic-looking fabrics. I experiment with incorporating other materials such as Tyvek®, plastic, paper, acrylic paints, but sparingly, because I like the "hand" of fabrics.

Not counting my time, I'd estimate spending an average of about \$8,000 per year on expenses related to my artwork. I consider this a business and keep track of all related expenses including studio, utilities, vehicle, travel, photography, equipment, materials, education, memberships, entry fees, shipping, etc.

My primary focus as an artist is to continue to grow, to keep improving, to keep exploring and trying new

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source of inspiration stems from my engineer's brain. I thrive on problem solving and figuring out how to construct complex images. Challenge inspires me.

I'm definitely process driven. I enjoy designing, problem-solving, conceptualizing, exploring new techniques, and assembling the pieces. That said, I do finish almost all of my pieces and rarely have more than a few going at a time. Unfinished (unresolved) artwork nags at me. I can't set it aside mentally.

When I started college 30+ years ago, my intention was to major in art. But out of a general fear about my artwork not being good enough and concerns about not being to make a living at it, I gave it up. In some ways I've considered that a mis-step, since now that I'm making art full time I feel very fulfilled, like I'm doing what's really right for me. But then all of the other skills and maturity I've acquired along the way are very important to where I'm at now and I don't think I would change a thing.

It's my habit to stay mostly focused on my current artwork and its progress. I've never had to look very far for an interesting opportunity and I put most of my energy into fulfilling present commitments. I joined SAQA because I need to develop a greater awareness of what's happen-

ing in the world of art quilts. I'm hoping I can get the lay of the land and start planning with a more comprehensive idea of all of my options.

During the past few years, I really focused on developing the look that I want. A key change was to stop restricting myself to quilting cottons, and to start using a rich variety of textiles. One of my favorite developments has been the use of sheer fabrics. I've explored using them to



**Barley Eaters.** 35" x 48", © 2007



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things. I also believe it's important to show on a regular basis. I get flooded with ideas, and I only have time to try a small number of them.

Committing to shows gets me to focus on a short-term specific goal and whatever set of ideas is appropriate to its accomplishment.

In 2008 I'll have a solo show at the International Gallery of Contemporary Art in Anchorage, Alaska. I'm planning a multimedia installation of translucent hanging panels that simulate an aspen grove, complimented by wall pieces that detail their seasonal relationship with leaf miner infestations.

In April of 2009 I'm scheduled for a solo show at the La Conner Quilt Museum in La Conner, Washington. I have yet to finalize the concept for that show, but it will certainly focus on my favorite subject, birds.

I'm also on the Visual Arts Committee of the Fairbanks Arts Associa-

tion. I'm involved with the planning and production of art exhibitions. It keeps me aware and connected with what's happening on the local art scene. Just being involved helps me get to know all kinds of people and leads to opportunities.

Keeping my artwork represented in the larger art community is of major importance to me. I watch for opportunities to collaborate with other artists who are working in other media as well as to submit to multimedia juried shows.

Publicity leads to name recognition and reinforces your reputation as an artist worthy of collecting. And of course, selling artwork helps to cover expenses. People ask me sometimes if it's difficult for me to let go of my artwork. My answer is, "No!" In fact, my first gallery show in 2003 sold out. Selling artwork prevents it from accumulating at home — it purges my space, clears my mind, and allows me

to keep moving forward. I find that the more my artwork is valued, the more incentive I feel to pull out all the stops and do the absolute best artwork I'm capable of. And that makes the artwork more valuable. It's an upward spiral.

As my artwork matures, it becomes more intricate, more complex, and more finished. A piece has to work on many levels. I like a strong overall graphic design with well-developed value patterns that reads well from a distance. But then it has to have layers of design that are more subtle so that as the viewer moves closer, there is more and more to look at. Having refined my construction methods, I'm now focusing more on improving my compositions and incorporating more abstraction into my designs. ▼

*SAQA active member Karin Franzen lives in Fairbanks, Alaska.*



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