



Contemporary Needle Felting

A Conversation with Dancing Threads Studios

Today we're having a conversation with Cindi Huss of Dancing Threads Studio. Her work consists of three-dimensional wall pieces. The look is accomplished through various techniques such as needle felting and machine quilting and materials such as wool roving and hand dyed fabrics. (A quick legal note: All images are copyrighted by the artist and may not be reproduced in any form without written permission.)

Read on to find out about the interesting methods that she has developed herself...

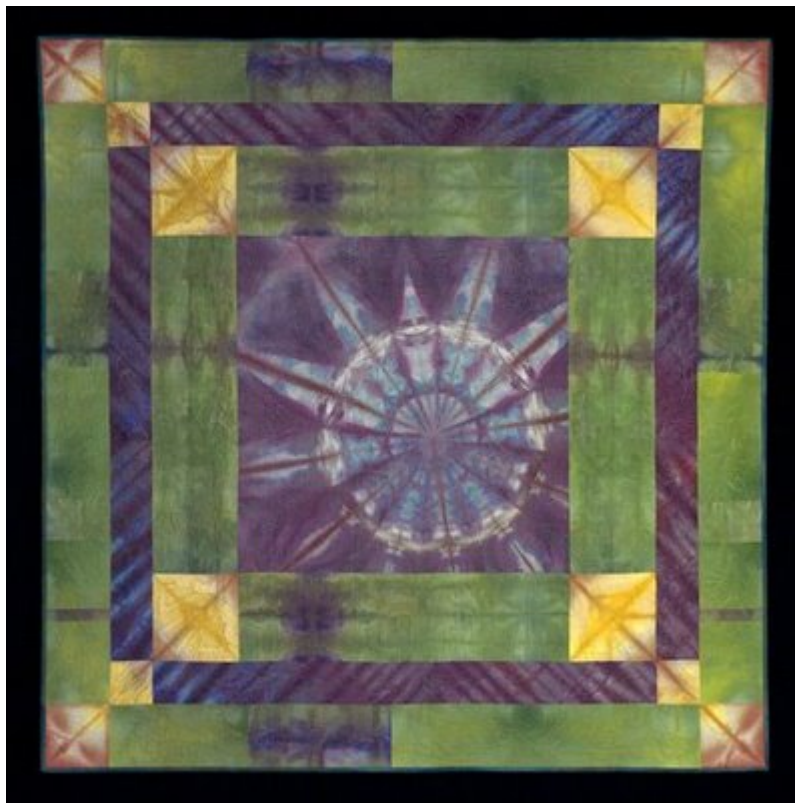
Can you give me a quick and dirty explanation of the three dimensionality of your work and how you accomplish that, technically?

I think in three dimensions. From the time I begin to think about a concept through the final binding and mounting I'm planning the dimensional aspects. Making the dimensional elements work is a problem-solving exercise that takes some time and sometimes a couple of "drafts" (batting and muslin "studies") to figure out. I really go about my work as a sculptor rather than a painter.

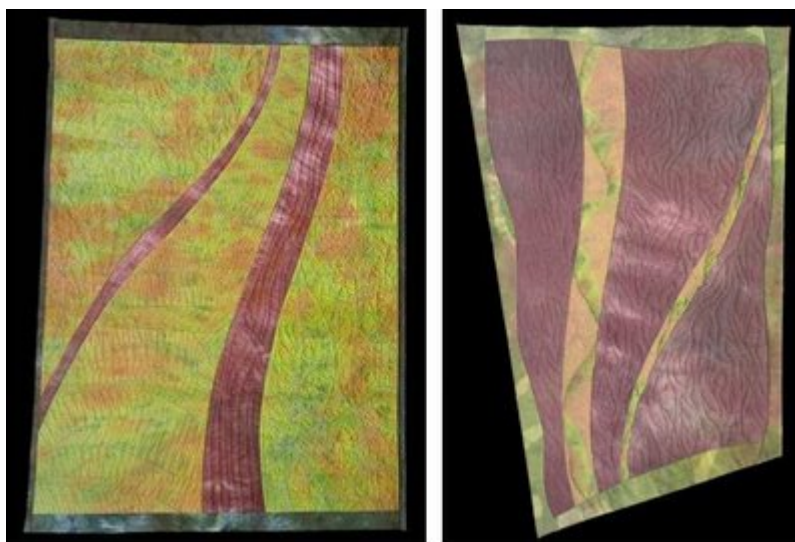
I first realized I could get dimension with a traditional quilt sandwich. "The Truth As I See It" is a good example of a traditional style of quilt with understated dimension created by stippling and relatively conservative (although still original) quilting designs.



After the Storm I



The Truth As I See It



The Road Not Taken/Feymaker

Works like "The Road Not Taken" and "Feymaker" were the next step in my evolution from traditional quilter to fiber artist. I began using overlapping quilting stitches that made the sandwich even flatter than a regular stipple or a traditional crosshatch design.

Then I discovered needle felting (2006) and found my voice.

The first needle-felted piece I made was "Stream of Consciousness" and it began as a study to see if I could create at least three discrete visual layers--I successfully managed four.



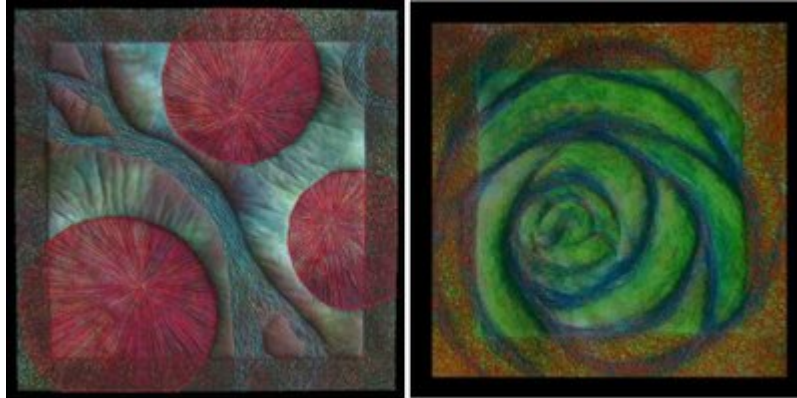
Stream of Consciousness

To make it I used multiple layers of batting and different densities of quilting. It is a whole-cloth quilt. The "Y" in the middle was created by needle felting, designer wool roving (deep fuschia) and torn hand-dyed silk strips (yellow) into the background fabric (pink). All the other colors in the quilt, including the green background, were layed in with thread during the quilting process. This is NOT thread painting. It is what I like to call "extreme quilting." I think I can get away with it because very shortly after I start quilting this densely I can no longer pick it out. Just as I would in any other extreme activity I have to commit to success while plunging through any number of opportunities for spectacular failure.

Technically, the process consists of creating a sketch or painting or mental image to begin solidifying my thoughts, finding the right fabric to do the right job, picking my battings (I generally use several layers of wool with a foundation layer of needle-punched cotton for stability. I also tend to use a sturdy backing fabric [like canvas] and on my most recent one used Peltex under some areas for added stability since the piece had to hang from a slat rather than be mounted to hang from a picture wire.) Other than that it's quilt like the wind with loads of different beautiful threads for several days to create the effects I'm looking for, trying to decide if I've done enough and trying like mad not to overdo it since that's hard to fix.

Please tell about creative inspiration and how your art progresses.

I am really drawn to strong graphic elements--they usually slap me across the face. "Labyrinth II" was inspired by the top of a turnip.



Wending Onward/Labyrinth II

"Wending Onward" was inspired by a satellite photo of Mt. Taranaki from the Smithsonian's traveling Earth from Space exhibit. As you can see in "Wending Onward," my mind uses whatever inspires it as a jumping-off point but freely wanders off on its own tangents looking for a path to the finished product.

I always know where a piece will start but no quilt I've ever made has ended where I predicted. They all take on a life and voice of their own. For me at least half the fun is listening to the quilt, hearing where it wants to go, and figuring out how to get there. Any quilt I've tried to force to go "my" way has gone poorly. Quilting is a great teacher of life philosophy!

"Contemplating Madness" began with the central branch figure on raw silk.



Contemplating Madness

I just wanted to play around with the more painterly effects (shading, perspective) I could achieve with needle felting. However, as I worked on the quilt it became a meditation on life, how we strive to make a difference only to become discouraged or seek time alone only to crave company, how modern life is a constant struggle between solitude and overload. So when it came time to quilt the outer border, it was clear to me that I needed an image to contrast with the lone limb, hence the abundance of branches.

So sometimes I begin with an image, sometimes with an idea, sometimes with a particular design element I'd like to get better at, but always it evolves into something more than I thought it would be.

Knowing good technique, practicing it, doing it, and ultimately teaching it, has been invaluable. Quality technique allows me create a durable high-quality product. However, it also helps when I need to solve a construction conundrum--if at first I don't succeed with one approach, I have a whole stable of techniques to try, try again. It also allows me to break the rules--if I know the "why" of a rule I can understand when it's OK to break it (which I dearly love to do).

For instance, the quilt rules say not to let two quilting stitches cross one another. Fair enough, you don't want them rubbing and weakening each other over time. But if I lay down layers upon layers of quilting to completely flatten the background none of those threads will shift anywhere, and even if they do there are hundreds of others in the same few square inches to keep holding things together. Technique cannot make good design, but it can make good design a quality product. My, don't I sound preachy!

Finally, what is on the horizon? What is exciting for you right now?

I am very excited about having the time and now the space to work. I am working on developing a larger cohesive body of work, exhibiting and teaching regionally and nationally, and getting classes going in my studio. It's not a great time to sell just now, but it is a great time to create and teach, and it feeds my soul!

Thanks for a great interview, Cindi! Visit www.cindihuss.com to find out more.

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