

Joy-Lily,

Quilt Alliance
Q.S.O.S.

Tape Number: BOQ-032

Interviewee: Joy-Lily,

Interviewer: Karen Musgrave

Transcriber: Kim Greene

Project Name: The Barack Obama Quilt
QSOS

Location: San Francisco, California

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Time: 12:22 p.m.



Karen Musgrave (KM): This is Karen Musgrave and I'm conducting a Quilters' S.O.S. - Save Our Stories interview with Joy-Lily. Joy-Lily is in San Francisco, California and I am in Naperville, Illinois so we are conducting this interview over the telephone. Today's date is February 6, 2009. It is now 12:22 in the afternoon. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to do this interview with me. Please tell me about your quilt "Help, Hope and Hallelujah."

Joy-Lily (JL): I started this quilt a long time ago. I started making the fabric because I'm basically a surface designer and quilting is one of the things I do with all those wonderful

art fabrics that I make just for fun. I actually had a commission to make a series of Thermofax silk screens. Those are quick little screens that I made on a machine for another quilter who was using a variety of polka-dots. She had me make twenty-two different screens with larger and smaller and denser and thinner groups of polka-dots [even a screen of O's.] and then because she couldn't print them herself easily, she asked me to do the printing. She needed them printed in black and opaque red yellow and blue and she only needed three or four of each piece, so I wound up with a screen full of ink [each color, each print.]. Instead of just wiping it off or scraping it back into the jar, I decided to play and I printed onto fabric in random scattered patterns with the leftover ink, partial prints, all kinds of overlapping prints with these four colors. This one piece of fabric was kind of a pale mint green and has been fascinating me for a long time. I thought that some day I would cut it up and just like Jackson Pollack, make it into random squares, maybe make a grid out of it and then make a simple quilt. I had it out during the election period. The election by the way, I thought I would get so tired of it, but I didn't. I've been interested in Obama ever since the hoopla about his becoming a senator. He obviously had a lot of good qualities so I've had my eye or ear to the radio, so as the primary season wore on I was rooting for him every single primary whether it was an up or a down, the poles were up and down and I became obsessed with all the minutiae of the election. I was thinking about using it [this piece of fabric.] and then one night I'm lying in the bathtub and I saw those squares that I was going to cut out of the mint green polka-dot fabric with red slashes running through them. There is a quilting technique where you slice the fabric, you put in an inch wide strip and then when you sew it back together with half inch seams, you have an exact replacement for the amount of fabric that you took away. So the pattern underneath appears to float behind the stripe. I'm not a night worker usually, but I got out of my bath, threw some clothes on and started putting stripes in this big piece of fabric, intending all the while to cut it up. Then I put in blue stripes and then I put in yellow stripes because they seemed to want to be in there. The piece was so busy that I decided that it needed to look like a triptych. It still wasn't about the election and it got framed, in three pieces with black around the three pieces. The more I looked at it the more it seemed to be about the west, middle and the east of the country. These stripes that went across from one section to the next seemed to be about the way people were communicating across the country. The red stripes and the blue stripes and even the yellow stripes were communicating across the country and I still didn't know what it meant but over time it began to take on my fascination with the election. Those clusters of dense polka-dots in blue or in red started looking like campaign headquarters and maybe the yellow ones that were kind of scattered looked like undecided voters. Then I started realizing I was working in primary colors and all these jokes started getting into it, so I went with it and I decided, 'Okay this is about the election.' This is just about the time, early November, when all of us were holding our breath and many people were thinking, 'Can it really happen? Can he really win?' There was this huge amount of hope and excitement and then he did win. So I wanted to put another layer on the quilt to express that excitement. That became three big swishes, again blue, red, and yellow. Then I spent many hours rearranging these swishes. The yellow one was also a message from my muse because I got this vision that the yellow one needed to be a big multiple zigzag, kind of like you see in cartoons when something really exciting or something blows up. I went with it. It seemed like I'm getting good advice. the swishes finally got arranged in such a way that the blue one was higher, the red one went up and it dipped and it went up a little more and the yellow was one is a big zigzag. They started to look like graph lines running across these three panels. There are all different levels in which you can say, 'Yeah, I understand why this is about the election.' The hallelujah part, the excitement got put on the top layer. A lot of thought went into what quilting technique am I going to use [to create the hallelujah layer.]. At first, it was going to be stripes and I thought, 'Should I slice and replace the stripes? No, I better not because those black borders will offset too much in the long run.'

I wound up backing the quilting cotton swishes, especially the yellow. Other darker colors always show through yellow so I backed it with a fairly heavy layer of fusible interfacing. Then I topped stitched it on with a sewing machine zigzag and that seemed to work. Before I was finished, the [swish.] pieces were hanging off the [lower left.] end and then I thought, 'Okay, let's make them hang off the end.' It looks like they are coming before the election and moving on out. The hardest thing about the whole quilt was binding those bottom left hand corners where the swishes actually pass beyond the boundary of the quilt edge. So I learned some new technical things [laughs.] about how to do that. Anyway, so the quilt became 'help' because of all this activity, this chaotic activity in the back group, 'hope' and 'hallelujah' for Obama winning the election. Then I had to think about how I'm going to top stitch it because I've got these different colors and the stitching is going to cross the swishes in red, yellow, and blue. What color of topstitching thread am I going to use? All kinds of problems. The morning I was scheduled to go to an appointment at the long arm quilting machine, which I adore using, I was in the bathtub again. [laughs.] I got an inspiration. My bathtub should be a write-off on my taxes. Meanwhile, the inspiration was to use words that each of the candidates had said and use words from the public. Somewhere along the way my old roommate came to town and when he saw the quilt in progress he said, 'You know, what that yellow means don't you?' He is from the Philippines and he said, 'The color of the People's Revolution in the Philippines was yellow, so the yellow stands for the people.' I went, 'Oh, of course.' The blue quotes are comments that Obama has made in various speeches about how we have to help each other and there is always hope. For the ones from [John.] McCain I had to find something really quick. So I went to look at his concession speech online. One of his statements during his speech that moved me very much was, 'I pledge tonight, to do everything in my power to help him,' so there is the 'help' context again and of course one of the red lines says 'the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull is lipstick' and in yellow it says things like, 'I never believed I would live to see the day that an African American would be elected president.' 'We did it!' 'Hallelujah,' and things like that. That is the story of my quilt.

KM: What are your plans for this quilt?

JL: I am hoping that it will continue to go on tour for a while, other than that I haven't thought about it. [on second thought, I'd be happy if someone bought it.]

KM: Are you planning to go to the opening?

JL: Yes, I am.

KM: Whose works are you looking forward to seeing up close and personal?

JL: I haven't been looking on the website enough to really have a feeling for it. Susan Shie is a famous quilter, so it will be interesting to see what techniques she used to get to that kind of imagery she used on hers. I'm as much interested in how you make marks on fabric as I am in how you put it together to quilt it. I guess in general, I will be looking for my particular interest in surface design as much as I will be looking at people, how they sewed it and what their content was. I'm fascinated by the fact that there are so many different directions people have gone in. In fact, I'm in the show because my quilt does not have a picture of President Obama on it. At first when I emailed Sue Walen she said that it [the exhibit.] was pretty much filled up and she would put me on the waiting list. Then a couple days later, she emailed me back and said 'Is your quilt something other than a picture of the candidate (at that point) Obama, because we need a little diversity in our show?' I said, 'Yes as a matter of fact it is,' so voila, I'm in the show. It turns out that they opened up another floor, I understand, in the gallery, so that all of the

quilts will be able to be shown, even though some people did two or three quilts. I was a little anxious for a while, worried about whether my quilt was so far off topic kind of, that it might not get exhibited.

KM: How did you hear about the exhibit?

JL: Good question. It was because of my Thermofax again - the silk screen making machine. I teach a surface design class and some of my students know that I have it so they order screens from me. There is one woman who is in the show, Bonnie Smith, who ordered a screen and when I saw what she was wanting me to make it was a stylized portrait of Obama. She previously had a quilt in Japanese show and won some kind of award. It was a stylized portrait, I think, of herself repeated in various squares and I thought 'I bet she is going to make a quilt like that about Obama'. When I brought her the screen I said, 'Is there some kind of show about Obama or the election?' and she said, 'Yes.' So she gave me the link and I got in touch with Sue. That is how it all started - my trusty little Thermofax machine.

KM: Tell me about your interest in quiltmaking.

JL: My mother was a dressmaker. Actually her father was a tailor, and when she came to this country from Russia, she worked in the dress factories of New York. When I was a child, there were always scraps of fabric under her sewing table to play with. I thought I would be a fashion designer, but I quickly discovered that making clothes was quite a chore and I was never quite up to the level of the 'fashion of this week.' I just kept the sewing skills in the background and I became a graphic designer. I did that for many years when I lived in New York City. In those days it was called commercial art, but I learned that it was more commercial than it was art. So I started doing actual batik one summer when I was visiting my brother and his wife in Santa Barbara, California. People started buying my little batik dyed pieces and so that's how I came back to the fabric. I guess my interest in quilting came from the fact that I had batiks and I had marbled fabrics and I needed to do something with them. Also for a short while I had a little job of sewing up quilt squares into potholders for another quilter. I wasn't a quilter yet, but this lady was selling them at craft shows and she just needed production work. The patterns so fascinated me that I went and took a quilting class. Before I had learned very much about that, I found myself volunteering at the local senior center teaching those seniors quilting. Boy, did I learn a lot doing that! I've been teaching quilting ever since. I eventually got a grant from the California Arts Council to teach at that senior center. I taught three days a week. One day was quilting, one day was silk painting, and one day was printmaking on fabric. I was in hog heaven doing that and that led me to what I do now, which is I teach quilting and surface design for the local Adult Education Districts as well as making scarves and marketing them. I also sell occasional quilts and do the occasional lecture and workshop for a quilt guild or a fiber art guild.

KM: Whose works are you drawn to and why?

JL: Can I think about that and get back to you? [The Gee's Bend quilters, Nancy Crow, and Mary Mashuta because they are improvisational and innovative quilters who use also use color dramatically.]

KM: Tell me about your favorite techniques and materials. You talked about Thermofax.

JL: I like to manipulate fabric. I like to paint it, print it, dye it, bleach it. I even sometimes pleat it and chop it up. I like to use silk as well as cotton as I have a background that led to silk painting. Lately I've gotten into felting. The very first piece of

sample felting I made went into a quilt. I see felt work as another potential quiltmaking material, although whole quilts might not be made out of it. It could include surfaces that are partly felt as well, on the surface and with fabric. I'm not so interested in weaving and crocheting and knitting - the yarn media, but the felt is more like Play-Dough. You can make pictures in it. You can make shapes out of it. You can do all kinds of things with it that are very exciting but still work at the surface.

KM: Is "Help, Hope and Hallelujah" typical of your work?

JL: No, it is not. It is extremely unusual in that it doesn't have a lot of piece work in it. The only thing that is typical about it is that I used some hand printed fabric.

KM: What would your work typically look like?

JL: I have several different styles. Another style that doesn't have a lot of piece work in it would be a whole cloth piece of silk bordered by another patterned silk. I'm a closet fabric designer. I never wanted to go to school and learn fabric design and go into that industry but I have always designed fabric. Some of my fabrics look great around the other pictorial pieces of silk painting. Lately, I've been matching them up and making quilts that are pretty much a whole cloth quilt, so that is one style. Another style is to take a patchwork design and do it in kind of an off beat way, kind of liberated or Gee's Bend style. In fact, in my class right now my students are having an awful lot of fun doing things where the corners don't match. We trim the square afterwards so that it will be easy to assemble them, but for the time you are doing it, as long as you can sew a straight line, it is fine. [laughs.] So I like the Gee's Bend quilting, improvisational quilting style. I like to work with found scraps; the most exciting things I do seem to be the things that come from what was on my quilting room floor or what was left after I did another project. I quickly throw these pieces together and that is the most fun. I like to work with gradient fabric. A little side story here; I did actually get to design and have printed some fabric for the quilt market. It turns out a friend of mine is an art director for one of the companies that create quilt fabrics. So [when I showed her my work.] she picked a couple of my marbled designs and they put them into production. They are called "Swirls." At the same time, they were going to do a matching series of gradient fabrics where it [the value.] went from dark on the edges to light in the middle and back to dark on the far selvage. But at that particular time there were several other companies doing something similar, so they never went ahead with the gradient line. But I wound up with all the practice prints of gradient fabric and I also wound up thinking about how wonderful these fabrics could be, used just in replacement for flat colored fabrics. If you use a graded fabric or an ombré fabric, your quilts are going to start shimmering and glowing with these changing colors. I'm working on a book [laughs.] for using ombré fabrics in quiltmaking, experimenting with that. That is another whole look that I have; what happens when you substitute graded fabric for plain fabric. I'm sure I have a couple of other styles and maybe we can get back to that.

KM: You talk about using a longarm [quilting machine]. Do you use a longarm to quilt all of your quilts?

JL: Mostly, it is so much faster. I was trained not only as a graphic artist but also as a fine artist, so I love to draw. The longarm machine is sort of a drawing tool, a little bit like--what do they call that kind of drawing where you're doing a continuous line? Contour drawing. It's an automated contour drawing machine and it also feels a little bit like you are riding a motorcycle standing up, so it is a power position. I've taught myself to go slowly and deliberately and draw what I want to draw. For example, one of my silk whole cloth quilts is nasturtium flowers and lots of leaves. I've drawn with stitching around the

leaves and also stitched big loopy circles with nasturtium [leaf.] veins in the middle. When you turn the quilt over, on the back its all muslin and so you see a drawing. I have a lot of fun with it. I'm very comfortable using the longarm machine freehand.

KM: You go some place to do this?

JL: Yes I do. I have a friend here in the city who rents her longarm machine and she is about a mile away. When she is not available I can rent one in a quilt shop that is down in San Mateo, which is about fifteen minutes south of San Francisco. They have a couple of them. They trained me to use the longarm there. It is called Always Quilting.

KM: Very cool. Do you belong to any art or quilt groups?

JL: Yes I do. I belong to the San Francisco Quilters Guild and the Northern California Council of Quilters, which is a [clears throat.] an uber guild. The teachers, the quilt shops and the guilds belong to it, so I belong to it as a teacher. I belong to the Southern California Council of Quilt Guilds, the same kind of organization. At various times I have also belonged to the American Crafts Council, Surface Design Association and to Peninsula Wearable Arts Guild and to Contemporary Quilters and Fabric Artists. I don't belong to those last groups at the moment, but there are an awful lot of groups to join so I kind of rotate around them over the years.

KM: Why is it important to you to belong to these groups?

JL: The contact with other quilters, whether they are quilt artists or not. I always see something new and exciting and it is networking and stimulating because they have speakers who are really interesting and they get you going in new directions and teach me about new materials. They [other members.] are my friends. They are the people who speak my language.

KM: What advice would you offer someone starting out?

JL: Don't try to be perfect. 'Perfection is optional' is one of the mottos in my classroom. At any given time I have about twenty beginning quilters in class so they usually come into the class with a project for a bedspread or something large or something half finished. I encourage them to make something small so that they can see it, go through all the processes and get it finished.

KM: What do you think is the biggest challenge confronting quilters today?

JL: I'm particularly interested in the challenges of art quilters because our art is often looked at as a home craft and it isn't that any more. It is as much a fine art as painting and sculpture and digital photography, but because it's made out of homey materials sometimes we get degraded, 'that is not real art, that is just a quilt', so that is our challenge to make the public aware that art quilts are real art.

KM: How do you balance your time? You talk about surface design, making quilts, teaching.

JL: My time revolves around my teaching schedule and I'm fortunate enough to be able to make a living teaching half time, two and a half days a week, Thursdays and Fridays are available to do art. Occasionally on weekends I'll have a workshop one day or take a workshop, but usually I have that four day time span of Thursday through Sunday that I can use to catch up with my life and catch up with my art work. [laughs.] Sometimes I

get ideas while I'm in class. One of the wonderful things about working with students is that they do things I never would have thought of and that leads me off in new directions. I can even try my hand while I'm at class, showing other people and learning from them. Some weeks go by and I don't do any quilting and other weeks that's all I do, almost all I do: I eat and sleep and do a few other things, but spend a lot of hours quilting. It goes in bursts. I'm not the sort of person who gets up and quilts for two hours in the morning like a writer. [laughs.]

KM: Describe your studio.

JL: My studio is three quarters of my bedroom. I'm fortunate that I have a house with really big rooms and my bedroom is about 18 foot long. So one corner by the window is the bed and the stereo and the rest of the room is walls of bookshelves - open bookshelves with the fabrics piled up by color and kind. In the middle of the room is a 60 inch standing high quilting table and it has my sewing machine on it. If I turn my chair around to the wall, I have a desk there. The ironing board is back in there somewhere. On the open shelves where I have the quilt fabric, I also have some boards that are about 48 inches high and about 30 inches wide and they kind of act like sliding cupboard doors to protect the fabrics from the light, even though they are not attached. They are covered with flannel and I use those as work boards. If I have a really big quilt piece that I'm trying to organize, I put a flannel tablecloth on top of my bed with the flannel side up and I use that as a work table. Then when I'm done or I need to go to bed, I roll it up with all those pieces caught in the flannel. The plastic on the back keeps them from sliding around because if it were just a piece of flannel the fabric on the back would cause them to move. So I can have several pieces wrapped up in flannel tablecloths waiting for the next step.

KM: So you work on more than one thing at a time?

JL: Oh absolutely. I have drawers and file folders full of unfinished projects!

KM: What do you think makes a great quilt?

JL: One of the teachers that, whose ideas I like, Mary Mashuta said that a great quilt has three levels of interest: that you spot it all the way across the room and it excites your eye and then when you get up closer kind of middle distance you have another level of interest going on that you can see. Then when you get really, really close you see something else that you couldn't have seen at those other two distances. Perhaps a tiny texture pattern in the fabric or perhaps all those yellows that you thought were all the same are actually all different fabrics. It has interest at different levels and I kind of go by that particular wisdom. Also my sense of balance and color as a visual artist come into play. If something strikes my eye, I just like it. What else makes a good quilt? Something interesting going on in the stitching. Something interesting going on in the fabrics that are being used. Perhaps some hand dyed fabric used in an unusual way, something that makes your eye move all around the quilt and appreciate all its different aspects. A message in it.

KM: Do you think of yourself more as an artist or a quilter or do you even make the distinction?

JL: I'm an artist first and for a long time I've been working with fiber. Sometimes I go back to painting, for example in silk painting or printmaking or printing on fabric, but I come to my quilting from the point of view as an artist. I have only one bed quilt and it's on my bed [laughs.] and it is a piece of art too.

KM: Did you make it?

JL: I did.

KM: Its nice sleeping under a quilt.

JL: Let me tell you a minute's worth about this quilt. It's made up of stripes that are from samples and demonstration pieces that I've done in my classrooms over the years and unfinished squares and extra half squares [batteries run out, interview briefly stops.]

KM: Okay, so tell me about the quilt on your bed.

JL: The quilt on my bed is made up of leftover pieces and demonstration pieces. I have three different quilting classes so when I demonstrate something I usually do it three times. Little checkerboards, half squares, curved piecing, and things like that and they are organized in long stripes based on how wide they are. It is a bar quilt, and the strips are intermixed with stripes of a sarong fabric that I happened onto which is all very dark colored pattern in kind of browns and golds and a little navy blue. Somehow that pattern works with it all. Most of the pieces in between are solids, because I tend to work in solid color but that pattern fabric just goes perfectly with everything. So the bars are all different sizes and there is no border. I call it "Joy's Bend." I was very much influenced by the Gee's Bend quilters (show at the local museum} at that particular moment. It is kind of funny because it's the biggest quilt I've ever made. It is 85 inches [each way.] but it was one of the fastest I ever made and that comes back to the theme of the scraps and the leftovers are the things that excite me.

KM: How do you want to be remembered?

JL: As a woman who inspired, as a teacher who inspired a lot of other people to become not just quilters but artists.

KM: Very nice. What do you have in the works right now? Any more plans for more Obama quilts?

JL: I had one more idea [for another Obama quilt.] and I was talking with a cartoonist about it. Before we could go any further, I heard that someone had done a political cartoon like that so obviously it is one of those 'gestalt of the universe' things. It occurred to me before he was inaugurated that there were so many things on his plate, fixing the economy, fixing the environment, fixing the Middle East, fixing Afghanistan and Iraq and getting a puppy and all these things. I was picturing a cartoon appliquéd quilt of him arriving on his office window ledge in his Superman costume with a big "O" on his chest. On the inside wall there is a bunch of Post-It notes, (they could actually be flaps sticking up from the quilt) with all of these to do things on them. I heard that a political cartoonist did just about the same thing, describing him as 'he'd better be Superman to pull this one off.' I'm kind of glad I didn't get started on that. I had enough on my plate.

KM: I don't remember in my lifetime a president-elect or a president inspiring so much quilt art. Why do you think so many art quilters decided to do Obama quilts?

JL: Boy is that a good question. I think because he inspires people like no president has in recent history, because he speaks to the people as one of us, not as somebody from the political elite, even though he is on some levels. He touches the hearts and minds of our everyday lives, of our needs of getting the kids fed and earning a living and talks

about people losing their jobs and all of these things going on. Also because the black people in our community and of the United States have been so disenfranchised for so long in politics that this is a real wonderful--what am I trying to say? It's a new world. It's a new time in which, there is wonderful validation (that is the word I wanted) for their equality.

KM: What do you want people to walk away from viewing your quilt?

JL: Because it's not a picture of Obama I want them to walk away remembering the days of the election. It's like having a baby; the election is over and all that agony [laughs.] is forgotten. There is something about our collective system that makes us forget the agony now that we have the baby. I want people to remember what the election was like and how maybe it was different from previous elections and I want them to remember it with the various puns and jokes [in my quilt] and I want them to have a good laugh about it. There is one more piece in it that I'm particularly amused by: the red swish has a little bump up and then it kind of levels off again. I call that "the Sarah Palin" effect.

KM: How cute. We have been talking almost forty-five minutes. Is there anything you would like to share that you haven't touched upon before we conclude?

JL: I can't think of anything right now.

KM: I want to thank you for taking time out of your day to talk to me. I hope you have a good time at the opening.

JL: Thank you. I wish you could be there.

KM: I'll be there in spirit. We are going to conclude our Quilters' S.O.S. - Save Our Stories at 12:58.