



Judith Epstein-Williams

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Simona Petrica, Interviewer

An interview with Judith Epstein-Williams / By Simona Petrica

Judith Epstein-Williams has always lived her life with a needle and thread in her hands. She started with a printed cross-stitch kit when she was a child, progressed to crewel work, and then to needlepoint.

She has prepared a selection of her work for an exhibition at SNAD this March and I spoke with her about being a member of the San Francisco Quilters Guild, her improvisational style, and quilting.

**In 1987 you moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco where you established your own film-cutting business. Can you tell us more about this experience and what you've learned from it?**

I moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco to work in advertising. After a few years at a prestigious agency, I realized that working for a big company was not for me. I started my own film negative cutting business to fill a need here in San Francisco; that type of work had to be

sent down to Los Angeles. The job involved physically cutting and piecing the film by hand with splicers and glue. It was very solitary work and involved a lot of close attention and concentration. This is exactly the kind of work I do with my quilts. Having my own business also gave me the freedom to explore other interests, and it was during this time that I began sewing, quilting and performing.

**I also know that you are close to the San Francisco Quilters Guild. Can you tell me about being a part of that community? How does it help you as an artist?**

Quilting can be a very solitary or very social activity. For many years I worked alone, following my instincts. But after a while I was craving the feedback and/or validation that could only come from other quilters. I went to a meeting of the SF Quilters Guild and immediately fell in with a fantastic group of seven women who meet most Tuesdays to stitch, share, and work out ideas. Through this group — and through the larger Guild, I have also learned about classes and workshops that have offered additional friendships and ideas. Last year, for the first time, I exhibited in both the SF Quilters Guild show and the Pacific International Quilt Festival. I found the experience to be enormously rewarding and educational. And then there's the Dorcas Quilters, a group of people that have been meeting weekly for over 80 years to carry on the tradition of hand quilting. Between all these groups of magnificently talented people, I have no shortage of inspiration and support.

**Did meeting the Quilters Guild community influence your focus on quilts, or did this interest come from somewhere else in your life?**

When I started performing with the Lamplighters Music Theater back in 1992, I fell in with the costume crew and started volunteering. It is a very special group of talented people. In 1993, a group of us went to the SF Quilters Guild show and decided to make challenge quilts. I was the only one that finished and I just kept on quilting. I still do costuming, but quilting has become my life. In 2014 the whole costume shop collaborated on a quilt using fabrics that represented the costumes from all the shows in our repertoire. We auctioned it off at our annual fundraiser for the theater.

**Do you feel that it's important to be part of a group and to build collective memories when you are taking up a hobby or when you're trying to learn a craft by yourself?**

I feel lucky that I initially had the time to work out ideas on my own, because I think if I was taught to quilt traditionally, my work would not be as unique. I love traditional quilts, but when I started, uniformity and precision was the norm, and I was impatient and frustrated by the results I got. These days, it seems there are many quilt makers going for a less rigid style. That said, now I depend on the many circles of sewing friends for support, inspiration, and just a lot of fun.

**Why did you make the decision of following a more improvisational style in quilting?**

My improvisational style is a direct response to my impatience and frustration at not being very good at following directions. I was also quite moved by the Gee's Bend exhibit [at the de Young museum] in 2006. These quilts gave me the validation I needed to not worry about precision unless I wanted to. It was also around this time that my voice teacher recommended the book *The Inner Game of Music*. The philosophy teaches that when something happens that's not quite what you want or expect, rather than stop, you tell yourself "this is interesting, let's go with it and see what happens."

**You often say that you like working with your hands. Is this a ritual for you?**

I love deep focus, which is why I was a good film editor back in the day. I consider stitching my meditation practice, and it is my discipline to do it every day. Although I still waste a lot of time staring at my phone, I consider it vital to spend quality time each day concentrating on the work, being mindful of my hands connecting to the cloth, needle and thread.

**You'll be exhibiting at SNAD. Can you share with us some stories about the show?**

This series of quilts came about when I wanted to make a very special quilt for my dear friend, Marin artist Juline Beier. I felt a bit intimidated due to her highly developed artistic sensibility. At that point I hadn't made anything but traditional quilts and I knew I wanted to stretch. Juline took me to the Gee's Bend exhibit, and I had the revelation to not worry about precision and trust my instincts. Juline's home reflects an African vibe, and the first quilt in the series was made with that in mind. The next quilt in the series I used a traditional Japanese blue and white palette, but I added a variety of browns for warmth. This quilt illustrates my first attempts at sashiko using traditional designs. Later I branched out from warmer tones to cool ones, and started incorporating my own, more modern motifs rendered in sashiko. The latest completed quilt, Taupe Sampler, shows a big leap into applique, as well as a deep dive into Japanese taupe fabrics. The smaller, mounted panels show where I'm headed next: using the same techniques in silk, and expanding on some of my favorite ideas explored in these samplers.

My process is a messy one. My sewing room is a riot of fabrics, pictures, clippings, and anything that I find interesting and inspiring. While I am capable of deeply focusing on something for a good bit of time, I always have about 20 ideas in development. I always have a variety of projects to choose from: portable sewing to take with me to sewing circles, really portable projects to take on long trips, TV sewing, mindless sewing, and sewing that takes extreme concentration.

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