

THE ART OF Quiet Activism

by Harriet Cherry Cheney

Calico Cornfield 19½" x 42" x 3"



As I grow older, the line between art and activism fades. As the world falls deeper into despair, as we search for ways to connect and express our feelings, I feel a stronger need to do what I can to add more positivity into the world. There is a concept in Judaism called “tikkun olam” that means repairing the world; this goes hand in hand with my art. It transcends any one religion; it speaks to our highest nature as human beings. And it’s not unselfish — it’s where I find, renew, and nourish myself.

My art speaks about humanity — it’s intimate, emotional, and celebrates the hand. Part of why I love fiber art is that its tactile nature speaks of touch and love. I came to fiber partly through the kindness of friends and through a desire to help the people of Japan after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. My talented friend Wanda taught me everything I know about quilting; I was the beneficiary of the many classes and workshops she had taken. She enabled me to produce several quilts that I sent to Japan through a non-profit organization.

More importantly, the same friend encouraged me to make a “memory quilt” for my dad, Herbie, when his health was failing in 2014. I could never have done it without her generosity, patience, and inspiration. Wanda helped me hand-tie the quilt in the Amish way so I could finish in record time. My dad’s delight in receiving the gift remains a treasured moment of my life. I must digress here to say that I find quilters to be uniquely wonderful people — perhaps it’s because they are interested in making things for others. There’s a warmth, kindness, and lack of pretension I often see in serious artists — they know how to stuff their egos in with the batting.

Where did it start? My dad manufactured children’s jackets, so I grew up surrounded by fabric swatches and samples of trim. I can clearly picture that 8-year-old girl sitting on the floor playing with the loot and happily making things. I am still this girl, but at 70, it’s a bit harder to get up. And thanks also go to my mom, who let me leave my mess on the floor, as long as it was neatly piled under her grand piano. More than satisfaction, this process is my utter delight. The hunting/gathering, decisions about design, attention to detail, chance to play deeply — each step is part of an exciting adventure. The pandemic has shifted much of the hunt online, but serendipity still plays a role. I often marvel at my luck when zeroing in on a particular website where the perfect bead, yarn, or fabric hides in wait. →



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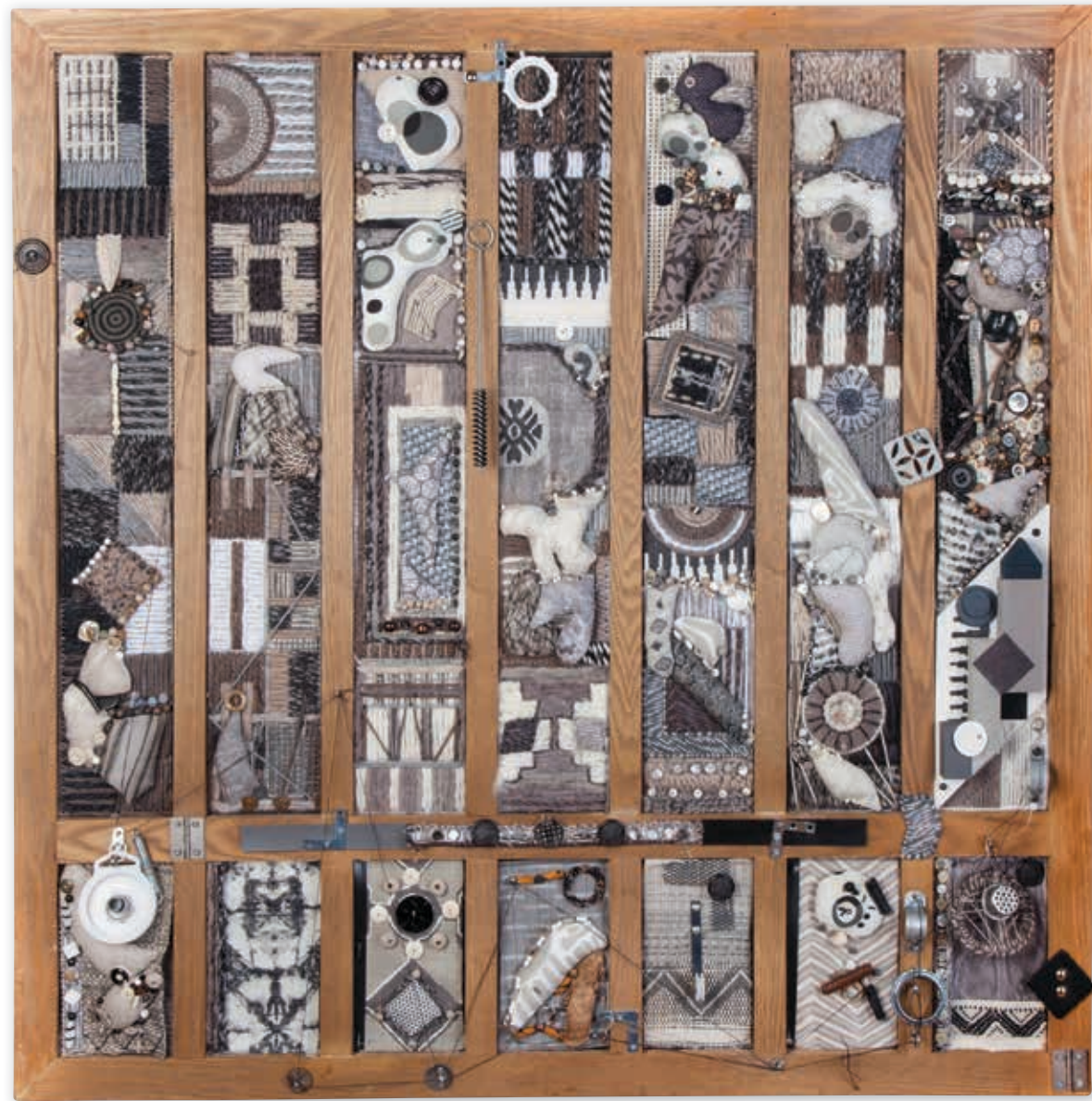
Many Little Suns 22" x 38" x 2½"



Fiber art allows me to use a range of materials — I love them all, particularly if they're Japanese. I love experimenting and making it up as I go along. I'm not a big proponent of perfecting technique, which I think can get in the way of authenticity; however, I do have raging internal battles with the perfectionistic side of my nature ... so this remains unresolved. Beads move around and loosen, but I've grown to accept this as it's an exercise in dealing with the messiness of life. And sometimes the component I've labored on all day must be cast aside because I've lost sight of the big picture.

When scrolling through my photos the other day, I realized that the majority are shots of tree bark. A large part of my work deals with the environment; nature is the be-all and end-all of my inspiration. Consequently, the simple geometric motifs of indigenous art and its reverence for nature resonate deeply for me. I am drawn to those artists who investigate the link between simple geometry and spirituality, like the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. The series The Great Spirit or Wakan Tanka, partly shown here, speaks to my respect for Native American wisdom, tradition, and motifs. The indigenous view of man's relationship with the earth — a view lacking hubris — serves as a guiding principle for me. I believe that our species' inflated image of itself has perverted our relationship to the earth, to ourselves, and to each other. This imbalance is creating despair and disease on a personal, interpersonal, and international level.

I consider The Great Spirit series to be my most successful work because something clicked in the balance between freedom and restraint, the material and spiritual. Circles are magical; I'll always return to them. I particularly like the quote attributed to Hellenistic writer Hermes Trismegistus: "God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." "Many Little Suns" is a meditation on simultaneous universes, a concept that I find endlessly fascinating. The yellow, blue, and orange were celebratory for me. When making "Calico Cornfield," I researched stories and images of corn and its symbolism. I took a trip to The Met to sit with Aztec art. →



The tight composition of all these pieces allowed me a structure from which to take off, experiment, and experience many happy accidents, most of which are examples of a stuffed 3-D collage technique I often use. "Wakan Tanka" is one of two similarly named pieces, and the largest is included here. These are attempts to represent heaven ... at least, my personal view of it. Another attempt to represent heaven lies tucked away in a closet; I consider it a failure. Mounting these pieces is still a challenge. Framing is prohibitively expensive, although I did invest in framing a piece sent to a quilt exhibit in Washington State. One day, the piece fell off the wall and the plexiglass frame broke, so I haven't framed a piece since. This discourages me from entering competitions that require long-distance mailing. Each work has many moving parts, and I'm working on accepting that their fragility is part of their strength.

Lastly, "Wooden Blanket" happened because I came upon an intriguing wooden "thing" in the clearance aisle of a discount store that spoke to me. What you see is the dialogue that ensued. I live with this piece and look at it every day. Art empowers us to challenge anger, negativity, cynicism — and often our egos — with love and beauty. Art and activism go hand in hand; I am an activist but one with a soft voice. Art has a tremendous power to heal, and I am dedicated to maximizing this power for myself and others. Those of us who make magic with our hands are the lucky ones.

To learn more about Harriet Cherry Cheney, visit harrietcheney.com.