

Quilts' Messages Speak to the Heart **By Arzu Tittus, New York**

My work is about the evolution of women, who are the givers of life and love. In our many roles as friends and lovers, mothers and sisters, we laugh, cry, contemplate, support, suffer, struggle and through all this, we continually develop and grow. All of my pictorial quilts are freeze frames that capture the moment when this evolutionary process actually occurs. The prevalent scene throughout my work is women discovering the dignity in their lives as they undergo the experiences of seeking, loving, losing and winning. In many ways, my quilts reflect my own spiritual path and evolution as a woman. My style is a collaborative work between my creative energy and the inherent will of the fabric. The results are pieces that emit a life beyond the ability of the fabric to do alone. —Arzu Tittus

IN late 1993, someone I knew from the beginning of my practice told me that he was dying from AIDS. Not knowing what to say or do, I decided to make him a quilt. After all, that was the thing to do at the time. The only problem was, I didn't know how to quilt. I didn't even know how to use a sewing machine.

When I told a couple of my friends who are artists that I had decided to make a quilt and needed help, one of them gave me fifty pounds of fabric and the other took me to quilting shops and loaned me books on how to quilt. "Just make the quilt and stop talking about it," they said.

At the time I was serving as a law librarian to the district attorney in Queens County, N.Y. I was appointed to design and build the law library, which was an overwhelming, time-consuming job. I really had no time to quilt, but by now I had developed a burning urge to do it. I had a lot of supplies but I still did not know what I was doing or where to begin.

My mother helped me convince my sister, a Fashion Institute of Technology student at the time, to help me with the selection of fabric. My mother also agreed to talk me through my first quilt. She began by telling me that I had made a beautiful, embroidered twelve-panel quilt when I was 7; that it had taken me a whole year to do it.

My mother also taught me a method of communicating with the fabric as though it were an entity. We laid all the fabric pieces on the floor and I would stare at them until I felt they told me where they wanted to go. I would hear the story in my mind and would then arrange them as they requested, creating a picture. The last part of the task would be to sew the pieces together by any means necessary. I chose to sew by hand since I did not own a sewing machine.

I would work all day at the district attorney's office and then come home and stare at fabric all night. I was chronically late getting to work and sleeping only one or two hours, but I did not care. I absolutely had to do this because in my entire life, there had never been anything that had given me so much joy. I would drag myself to work day after day and could not wait for the day to be

done so that I could get home to my quilting. I couldn't have done all this without the tremendous support from my husband, Edgard, and our sons Nicholas, now 16, and Sammy, 15.

I BEGAN to create several pieces at a time. By the time I had created fifteen pieces, I realized that each quilt was telling me something crucial about my life. Every piece was not just telling a story. It was telling me a story. The first one told me it was time to leave the district attorney's office because I had grown miserable there. I was more than accomplished in my field: I was head law librarian, I had designed my own law library, I was a lecturer for the American Association of Law Libraries and the Special Libraries Association. I lectured on the mutually beneficial relationships of law librarians and MIS (management information systems) personnel at Yale University. I wrote and taught my own graduate course called "How to Find the Law." I recently rewrote it and called it "How to Find the Law on the Internet." My theories on multicultural curriculum reform in the library and information sciences were published by Haworth Press and widely accepted by curriculum developers nationwide. I had a perfectly secure career, and I just walked away.

Not knowing how I would support myself or what I would do, I decided to sell my quilts. The first one was purchased by an assistant district attorney and so was the second. Then a friend gave me a small loan so that I could, as she said, "Just quilt." She told me I had to make more quilts. She also helped me purchase my first sewing machine. Someone else gave me fabric from India. I began meeting people who just happened to have some rare and unique fabric they wanted to give me. One friend invited me to her house just so that I could select the silks I liked, which she then gave to me. I also began receiving boxes in the mail containing beautiful fabric pieces from people I did not know. In a way you could say that the fabric began to find me.

I continued to make more quilts until they piled up in my closet. None of the quilts I made had been good enough, I felt, to give to my friend who was dying from AIDS. Every time I sat down to make him a quilt, it would turn into something else. It was now the end of 1995 and my friend called and asked me where his quilt was. I told him it was not finished and that he could not die yet.

By now I had amassed over twenty quilts, each telling its own story.

After another of my friends convinced me to have an exhibit, I was offered a generous venue in Soho, N.Y.—a good gallery located in a perfect spot that would present me to New York as a new and upcoming artist. It was my dream come true, or so I thought. The title of my exhibit was "ARZU IN PIECES," and I was.

When the gallery owner asked me to pick up some of the expenses because I was an unknown and that he was taking a financial risk in exhibiting my work, I agreed. Several days before the show, he asked me for more money, saying he had underestimated the expenses. In the same breath, he asked me for my mailing list. I agreed again. Instinctively I knew at that moment that not only was he swindling me out of money but also out of my mailing list. It seemed too late to cancel the show since I would be the only loser.

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However, when I showed up to install the artwork the day before the show, I found the gallery absolutely filthy with dirt and garbage all over the floor. I did not know how I could possibly have a show there. The gallery owner told me he needed to borrow money from me again to pay someone to clean the gallery and that I could not install my work before then. He also told me that every single press release sent out had been returned for lack of postage and that he did not have the additional twelve cents each to mail them.

It was the day before the show and I was in utter hell. But I had one foot in and I'm not a quitter, so I began to chant for the wisdom to deal with this in the most graceful way. Of course I wanted to kill him, but I could not afford to be distracted by this hellish experience. At the time, SGI President Ikeda was due to visit New York in ten days and I wanted to make sure every one of my members had the opportunity to participate in the activities. It was also my responsibility to help with World Tribune coverage. I wanted my quilt exhibit to be over and done with by the time President Ikeda came.

I was forced to install the quilts the same morning as the show opening even though the gallery owner had just painted the walls. But people were coming and the show had to go on. I did not know if my quilts would be permanently stuck to the gallery walls or not. In spite of everything, the opening was wonderful and very well attended. I was just glad it was over so that I could go on with my life, maybe get a job to pay the debt I had incurred trying to put on the show.

The following day, the gallery owner disappeared, along with my artwork, and the phone was disconnected. The third day I received scores of phone calls from people asking why they could not get into the gallery. I had no idea so many people were interested in my work. Even without press releases the word about my exhibit had gotten out far and wide. I stopped answering the phone because I could not take it anymore. I ran out of things to tell people. By now I believed I would never see my quilts again. So I decided to chant all day.

For the first time in my eighteen years of practice, I found chanting almost impossible. The rage and pain I felt made even chanting a hellish experience. But it was better than any alternative and I knew from experience that I couldn't go wrong if I chanted. I did not know where the pain was coming from. Why was this hurting so much?

I chanted until I had no voice left and my face was swollen from crying. The pain still would not go away. I felt as though someone had taken away everything I loved and would not give it back. I did not care about the show anymore. I just wanted my artwork back. How could anyone be so evil and do this to me or to anyone?

The answer came quietly and unmistakably clear. A little voice inside my ear said, "Because you have no appreciation for anything you create." I knew the little voice was right. But now I hurt more than when I didn't know the answer. As far back as I can remember, nothing I ever made was ever good enough for me. I have been creating and slandering simultaneously all of my life. This cycle

had to be stopped. I had been neglecting my worth and now, through this pain, the universe was forcing me to claim my worth. For once I did not care how imperfect my work was. It was mine and I had created it. I just wanted it back.

That evening, the gallery owner called me. With the help of the police, some friends and local gallery owners who by now had become involved, I was able to retrieve all of my artwork unharmed. By now I had attracted the attention of Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi, the founder of the Women of Color Quilters Network. She loved my work and invited me to become a member of a worldwide women's network that produces museum quality art quilts. I attracted a lot of attention in the art world because of what had happened so I got a lot of offers from a lot of venues, but I had grown very suspicious of everyone.

DR. Mazloomi solved that problem for me. She guided me to the institutions that were reputable and just. She made sure that I remained faithful to my style while at the same time honing and polishing my skills. She became my mentor and even though we live in two separate states, we are never apart. Because of her encouragement, I have been accepted as an artist in the genre of fiber arts.

At the end of 1996, three years after I began quilting, I was invited by the New York Park Alliance to exhibit one of my quilts (*Palula's Daughter*) at the Lefferts Homestead in the New York Botanical Garden. It was a big hit. I was interviewed by the news cable network New York 1 and my work was seen all over the world. During the exhibit, Dr. Mazloomi asked me if she could include my work in her new book, *Spirit of the Cloth*, which is being published by Random House and is due out next spring. A total of seven of my quilts will be included along with their stories.

By January 10 this year, I had held seven exhibitions and as of this writing, I am booked through next summer. My venues have included The African American Museum in Tampa, Fla., the American Craft Museum in Manhattan, N.Y., Octagon Gallery in Clearwater, Fla., MaryMount College Gallery in Manhattan, N. Y., CRT Gallery in Hartford, Conn., the Standard & Poors building in Denver, and many more. I am currently preparing for an exhibit to be hosted by the Bermuda National Gallery, and another book publishing my work is under way.

I recently spoke to my friend who was dying from AIDS. He is now producing his own T cells and he is living more than dying. When I showed him my work, we both cried like babies. I am so glad he is alive. I think I will finish his quilt now.

I love President Ikeda. I love his life and everything that he is doing for the world. Were it not for him, I would not know of this Buddhism and I would not be who I am and I would not be as happy as I am. I have made several pieces for him and they were not good enough, I felt. I'm getting better though. I would certainly like him to have one of my pieces. Any one he wanted actually. □