

Integrative Project Thesis
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Optical Art Quilting Allyson Zelinski

Optical art and art quilting are two artistic fields that rarely cross each other's boundaries. The objective of my integrative project was to marry the techniques of both op art and art quilting while launching an exploration of color and pattern. Specifically, I wanted to more fully examine the effects of shape, hue, scale, and value within a visually rhythmic composition. At the same time, I wanted to experiment with the viewer's physical perception of the piece. By creating large-scale pieces and exhibiting them in a big gallery space, I wanted to encourage my audience to view the work from up close and far away. I wanted to create two different visual experiences for the viewer, depending on how close they stood while viewing it.

This project has deep roots in color and music, two areas of my perpetual interest. I've always had a natural affinity to color. When I was six, my Crayola 96 Box of Crayons was a prized possession, along with the coloring books I used them on. When I was thirteen, I concocted a plan with my best friend to paint every room in our future house a different color of the rainbow. When I was sixteen, my love for color translated into a desire to paint my room in an exceptionally vibrant hue, an appeal that my mother promptly turned down by saying, "It'll be so bright you'll never be able to sleep!"

Music also played a large role in my childhood. Like art, music speaks to the abstract ideas in my head that I can't seem to describe in words. Musical rhythms are especially intriguing to me, and this fascination is likely what led to my interest in

artistic patterns. By nature, a pattern is a visual rhythm. It creates a sort of optical “tempo” for our eyes to follow throughout a composition. There are endless rhythms that can be created within a pattern, and I never get tired of trying to follow them. I also enjoy the way in which the motif of a pattern may be simple on its own, yet complex when repeated. Furthermore, patterns can offer completely different visual experiences when viewed from up close and far away. It is these dichotomies that drive my interest in visual rhythms, and I wanted to more fully explore this concept my IP project.

Art Quilts

“Art quilt” is a broad term that refers to textile art that uses quilting techniques to make art objects. In other words, the sole function of these quilts is to *be* art, rather than a functional blanket. They do not use traditional quilting patterns, but instead are typically free form. They may be abstract, concept-based, or representational in nature; there is enormous variation in art quilting. To qualify as a quilt, a textile creation must consist of a layer of stuffing sandwiched between two outer layers of fabric and stitched tightly together (Cox, 11). To become an art quilt, a quilt must simply be designed and constructed to function as an art piece instead of a blanket.

Essentially, the nature of art quilting is very similar to painting. Only, instead of paint, the artist uses fabric. This was an initial factor that attracted me to art quilting. The practice of art quilting allows me to play with design elements such as color and shape in the same way as painting, but I love that the quilts are 3-dimensional as opposed to a flat, 2D painting. The tactile nature of a quilt places an emphasis on texture, and thus can add an entirely new aesthetic to an art piece.

History of Quilting

Quilting, as a technique, can be traced back thousands of years to ancient Egypt. There it was used primarily to construct warm garments, since the middle layer of stuffing acts as thermal padding. Quilts as bedcovers date back to fourteenth-century Sicily, and by the time America was colonized quilting was well established throughout Europe. The peak of early American quilting, however, did not begin until the 1830s, when good quality cotton became affordable and needlework was considered a respected domestic accomplishment. Quilting remained a popular activity for women all the way through the 1870s (Cox, 12).

“Crazy quilts” became a fad in the 1870s, and are an approximate equivalent of today’s art quilts. Crazy quilts consisted of primarily nonrepresentational imagery and were made from numerous fabrics of many colors. They were constructed using lavish textiles such as imported silk, velvet, and lace, and were often embroidered extravagantly (Figure 1). They were made mainly by well-off women, who created them with the sole intention of functioning as elegant throws for their fancy parlor sofas (Cox 13).



Figure 1. An example of a typical Crazy Quilt

After World War II, quilting nearly went extinct in America. However, quilting is thriving once again thanks to a quilting renaissance in the 1960s. The industry continues to grow bigger still today. As of 2008, it was estimated that there were a total of 27.7 million quilters in the United States. Not only that, but quilting is a

billion-dollar industry. A survey conducted in 2010 by Quilting in America found that quilting was worth \$3.6 billion annually. It also reported that this number was a 9% financial increase since 2006, despite the economic difficulties that have plagued the nation recently (“Quilts, Inc.”). Quilting encompasses a wide cross section of participants since it functions as a hobby, craft, and fine art form. But no matter the level of expertise, today’s quilters quilt more for artistic enjoyment than necessity, and their numbers continue to grow. The direct-marketing executive of the retailer Keepsake Quilting even stated, “Quilting today is where NASCAR was ten years ago” (Cox, 24).

Context

Although neither the medium nor imagery in my project is revolutionary, the combination of art quilting with optical art is relatively unexplored within the world of fine arts. A small number of artists have created optical art quilts, including Kent Williams and Michael James (Figures 2 and 3). Both of these artists make abstract work with an emphasis on color and visual rhythm, which made them primary role models for my own creative work.

In the pieces shown below, hue, value, and shape are expertly manipulated in order to create intriguing visual progressions.



Figure 2. An art quilt by Kent Williams

Interestingly enough, it seems that Kent Williams and I share a similar perspective about our work. When he was asked about his artwork during a 2011 interview, Kent stated, “Because of the time that went into them, my quilts could be considered precious objects, but that’s only part of what I’m after. I also want them to engage the mind” (Turner). Likewise, my quilts were intended to be visually stimulating, but the irregular rhythms that I created were meant to be mentally stimulating as well. I also draw from a similar pool of inspiration as Kent. He stated, “Modernism,’ whatever we mean by that term, remains a rich source of ideas to me” (Turner). Like me, Kent is influenced by Op Art and the Pattern and Decoration Movement, as well as modern abstract artists such as Bridget Riley and Piet Mondrian.



Figure 3. An art quilt by Michael James

Another major source of inspiration for me was the design duo Mija. Mija creates abstract textile art from vintage clothing. By intricately mixing a variety of patterned and colored fabric, Mija manages to invent highly detailed compositions that convey depth and illumination (Figure 4). Looking at the work of Mija taught me that a quilt design could be simple in form yet complex in image. Like traditional quilts,



Figure 4. An example of Mija’s work

Mija's artwork uses simple squares to make a pattern. Each square contains a variety of fabrics pieced together in the exact same way. Although the layout of each square never changes, the fabrics that are chosen for each square form gradients of color and pattern that help to create the illusion of depth (Figure 5). Studying this technique influenced me to learn how to accomplish this in my own work.



Figure 5. Close-up of a Mija quilt

Quilt Imagery

Initially, I knew that I wanted the imagery on my quilts to be abstract. However, I wanted to dig slightly deeper than my simple fascination with color and pattern. I looked for inspiration within art movements that emphasized hue and shape. These included Cubism, Orphism, and Optical Art. Through my research, I discovered that I was greatly influenced by shapes and forms used in Cubism, and the colors and techniques used in Op Art. I dug deeper into the Op Art movement and found that there are numerous design elements employed in order to create visual illusions. These include the assimilation and contrast of shapes, figure/ground relationships, repetition, and perspective. I began to experiment with some of these design elements on my computer to gain a better understanding of how they worked so I could use them in my own designs.

A few individual artists, namely Bridget Riley and Paul Klee, influenced me greatly. Both of these artists used color and form to create a signature abstract style



Figure 6. *Carnival*, Bridget Riley

that was uniquely their own. They used color theory and value contrast in complex ways to create distinct moods for each of their paintings. I was particularly drawn to Bridget Riley's work because it crossed into the realm of Op Art. Specifically, I loved the distorted and off-kilter shapes that many of her compositions contained (Figure 6).

My goal for the quilts was to produce a design that made a strong visual impact on the viewer both physically (in terms of scale) and aesthetically. I wanted to make a bold statement through the use of sharp, dynamic lines and vibrant colors. I also wanted to create depth by using tones that formed an overall gradient of light to dark values. Like Mija's artwork, I wanted the structure of the design to be simple, and therefore chose to base my entire



Figure 7. The basic square on which I based my quilt design for *Zig*

composition off of a single square design. The square that I created for my first quilt, *Zig*, is shown to the right (Figure 7). Within each square, the value of the colors moves from light to dark (from left to right) and the complimentary turquoise and red hues create contrast, thus enhancing visual interest.

I created my entire quilt composition by repeating this same square over and over again but orienting each one differently to create various design motifs with the piece. The repeated shapes create visual rhythms throughout the composition, but there is no overall repeated pattern. This was an important detail related to the artistic goal

for my work. I wanted to give the illusion that the squares formed a repeating pattern, but upon closer inspection the viewer would not be able to find where the pattern starts and begins. Rather, they would discover many disjointed visual pathways formed by the places in which the dark or light values of each square matched up with the same values in another square. These areas formed various shapes and lines that I used to lead the viewer's eye around the piece (Figure 8).

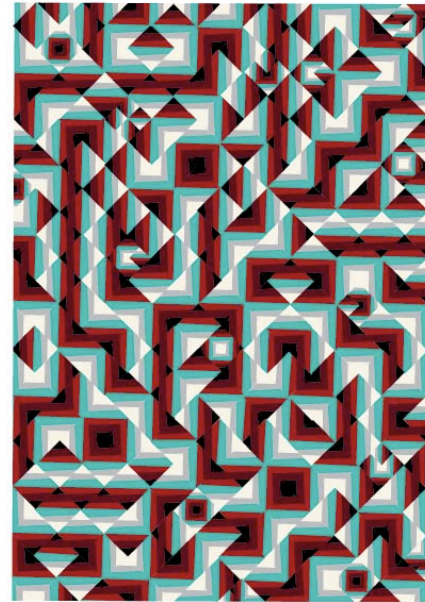


Figure 8. Computer image of quilt design

Process

My creative process began on the computer. Adobe Illustrator made it easy for me to see the immediate and overall effects of my design ideas, which was essential for planning a large-scale quilt. After I created a computer design that I was happy with, I made a small mock-up of it in fabric. If the mock-up proved my design still looked good outside of the computer screen, I attained the fabric I wanted and made small pattern templates for each shape in the quilt. I traced the templates, cut out the shapes with my rotary cutter, and sewed them together to form the top layer of the quilt (Figures 9 and 10). After this I sewed large pieces of fabric together for the back of the quilt, attached the batting in the middle, and sewed all three layers together.



Figure 9. Fabric shapes after they have been traced and cut out

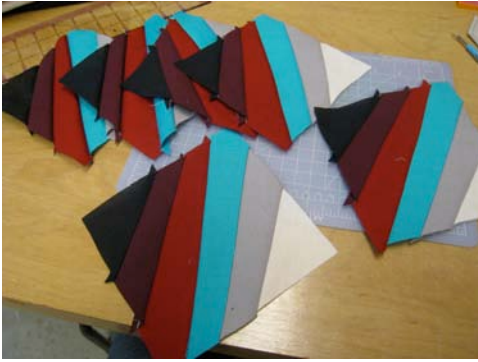


Figure 10. Some of the completed quilt blocks

My final project consists of 2 large art quilts, entitled *Zig* and *Labyrinth* (Figures 11 and 12). They are primarily constructed from cotton fabric. Most of the textiles I used were store bought, but one I hand-dyed in order to achieve the perfect shade. The quilts were sewn by machine, and include small metal rings on the back in order to hang them on the wall.

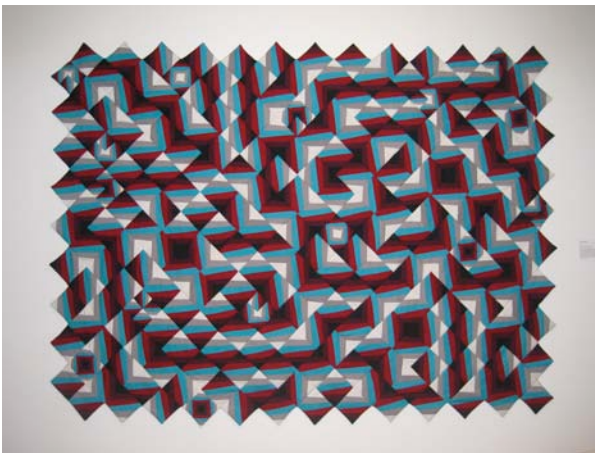


Figure 11. *Zig*

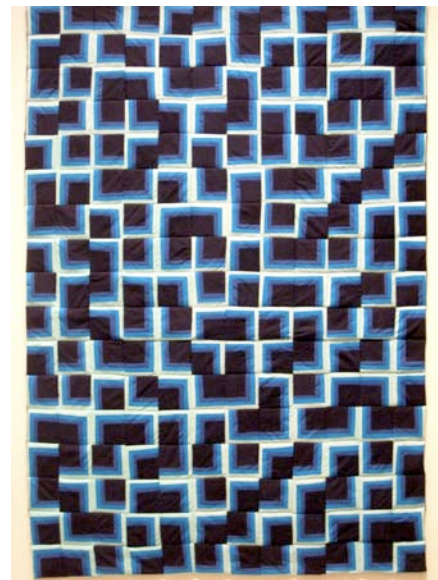


Figure 12. *Labyrinth*

Conclusion

My intention for this project was to fully delve into the realm of visual rhythm. The patterns I have created are highly dependent on color, scale, and shape, and they offer different visual experiences for the audience depending on whether they are viewed up close or far away. I wanted to draw viewers in by creating the illusion that the quilt squares formed a repeated pattern, while in reality there was no clear pattern at all. In

addition to my artistic goals for this project, I also had a social one. I wanted to prove to my viewers that quilting is not an outdated artistic pursuit and, furthermore, does not cater only to the interests of elderly women. It was my intent to show a modern side of quilting, one that attracts supporters of all ages. By combining the conventions of optical art with the practice of art quilting, I have helped to create a new realm of textile art. I am excited to continue my exploration of this field in my future artistic career, and I hope that my project has inspired a similar interest in other artists as well.

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