**Bric-A-Brac: Kathy McNeil –Landscape Quilter**

**Words by Stacey Eldridge**

“That is the ugliest quilt, I have ever seen,” talented quilter Kathy McNeil overheard, standing anonymously next to one of her first quilts to be accepted into a big American quilt show. “Looking back it kinda was,” she reflects. “But it did not let it paralyse me it inspired me to try harder, to learn more about composition, colour and design.” Today her award winning quilts are frequently featured in museums, magazines, calendars and in quilt shows around the world.

Kathy’s quilting journey began when her eldest daughter, who was heading off to college, asked her mum to make a quilt for her dorm room bed. Kathy had not touched a sewing machine for 25 years, after her sister tried to teach her to sew in a zipper. “She made me take it out four times because it wasn’t good enough!” Kathy laughs. While the intensive care nurse and mother of four, was not confident in her quilt-making abilities, she vowed at least to try. In a popular Seattle quilt store purchasing her first bundle of fabric, Kathy envisioned her first pictorial quilt. An ocean landscape which used a wide variety of small 2.5 in watercolour prints. “Using so many little prints taught me a lot about blending colours, the importance of value and trying to achieve subtle transitions,” she reflects.

Today Kathy travels to destinations around the globe teaching classes on quilting cruises, makes appearances on popular shows like ‘The Quilt Show, conducts quilting workshops for guilds across the United States, and is regularly invited to judge at national quilting competitions including the American Quilting Society Awards and Indiana Heritage.

 In 2012 with a solid quilting career built up, Kathy retired from her 35-year career as an intensive care nurse to focus on her quilting. “Quilting has brought me adventures that I never even knew to dream about when I was a nurse,” she beams. “A creative life is so much more fulfilling and interesting. Even when a project is frustrating and I feel like tearing my hair out, the second I figure it out and it all comes together, oh my gosh the highs are incredible!” she says.

Her work has won numerous prestigious awards including three ‘Best of Show’ awards at the international quilting shows Mancuso Savannah, Road to California (for ‘Gone Fishin’ now in the Mark Twain Museum) and Pacific International (for ‘Natural Wonders’ purchased by Superior Threads). Each of her quilts is hand appliquéd using hundreds of small pieces with turned under edges, and each take between 400 and 600 hours to complete. With so many hours needed to create each masterpiece, Kathy is lucky to have a supportive husband, who since his retirement has been able to take over the business aspect of Kathy’s quilting. “He is incredible. It has left me so much more time to actually quilt and design new student projects or workshops,” she says.

Surprisingly for Kathy, the highlight of her phenomenal career is not the many awards she has won, or her bestselling book on landscape quilting; instead her biggest achievement is finally having the confidence to publicly call herself an artist. “It took me years to do that,” she reveals. “Children all embrace themselves as artists but along the way we lose that confidence and conviction.” An artist Kathy says is as a person who dedicates time and space in their life to having a love affair with their art. A person whose creativity brings them so much joy they want to share it with others.  “The process of creating has made me a real artist,” she says.

Kathy was raised in one of the most visited forests in the United States: Mt. Baker National Forest which is located east of Seattle, Washington. Growing up Kathy was surrounded by glacier-covered peaks, spectacular mountain meadows and old-growth forests rich in history. “I have retained that childlike wonder of gurgling streams, meadows and sea caves,” she says. Today, this prolific quilter lives in the Pacific North West. “We are surrounded by the islands of Puget sound, forests, the Great Craggy Mountain Range and ancient volcanoes,” she says.

Kathy’s biggest regret when it comes to quilting is setting aside her passion for creating for 25 years. “It would have only made me a better mom, nurse and wife,” she reflects. Quilting however does come with its challenges, and for Kathy her biggest challenges include ‘beastly bindings,’ picking up pins, and trying to keep track of all of where all her quilts are around the country. When it comes to quilting Kathy likes taking risks and trying new techniques. Sometimes it works out brilliantly, but of course not every experiment of hers has worked out so well. “A word to the wise - working with Gold lame is like trying to put socks on a rooster. Use something else shiny instead!!” she laughs.

 To achieve her realistic landscapes Kathy begins by enlarging a photograph or sketching out her idea to the scale size. She then uses her tracer art projector to simplify and eliminate unnecessary details and then trace around all the major shapes. While she prefers to work using turned edge appliqué, she often combines different stitching methods in the same piece. “Easy shapes are turned after spraying with sizing and using my iron to turn over the approximate seam allowances,” she explains. On precise shapes, like the side of a building, Kathy uses the Apliquick method and glues her edges over a light weight interfacing that remains in the piece. “The interfacing adds a little loft and extra dimension. If a shape is too tiny, my last resort is needle turning,” she explains.

Kathy has many exciting ventures on the horizon. This summer she plans to write a new quilting book, in Autumn she will be filming a new iquilt workshop on her delightful ‘Language of Flowers’ pattern which will be available to purchase through the American Quilter’s Society website. Designing unique landscape fabric for the American Quilter’s Society that captures natures beauty, Kathy reveals may also be on the cards for the coming year. We can’t wait to see what she comes up with next!

* If you would like to know more about Kathy McNeil please visit her website at [www.kathymcneilquilts.com](http://www.kathymcneilquilts.com)