

# BACK TO BASICS

## SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF QUILTS AND TEXTILES

*Written by ANTOINETTE SIU Photography by DANIEL GARCIA*

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### LOCAL CURATOR, TEACHER, AND QUILTER, NANCY BAVOR CHALLENGES OUR VIEW OF QUILTS AS CONTEMPORARY ART.

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In August 1971, a young fabric and needlework enthusiast experienced quilts as an art form for the first time while museum-hopping in New York City. Inspired, that summer Nancy Bavor went home and created her own quilt—one patched out of squares, some incorporating shears from her prom dress and other clothes, in double-knit polyester fabric. “Fortunately, it was destroyed,” Bavor thinks back.

As a teenager, she liked crafting what others bought, fueled by home economics classes and a fascination for weaving, embroidery, and making clothes. Whether or not Bavor knew it then, her relationship with the quilt evolved like its production process—varying pieces stitched together somehow form greater cohesion. “For about 20 years I’ve always danced on the edge of that quilt vortex, until about ten years ago when I gave myself permission to just be sucked down into the vortex,” she says. “My dream was to be a curator of textiles, and so that’s pretty much where I am now.”

But paths to our dreams are rarely linear. The Illinois native majored in art history at Northwestern University before moving out to the Bay Area’s burgeoning quilt community. From there, Bavor started working with decorative arts and textiles in museums, first at Yale’s American Arts department art gallery and then Stanford’s Cantor Art Center.

Around 2005, Bavor became a certified appraiser of quilted textiles and earned her master’s in the history of textiles with a quilt studies emphasis from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her classes there helped with studying

for the appraisal certification, but she started exploring the academic side more, documenting the stories of nine California quilt artists in her master’s thesis. In 2008, she took an internship at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, where she has been working as the curator of collections since 2013. She juggles tasks from preparing quilts and organizing inventories to overseeing interns and volunteers and researching for upcoming exhibitions.

Traditional quilts morphed out of the need for warm blankets during colonial times, but Bavor says the pieces are best appreciated by leaving behind your preconceived notions. “You almost have to look at these quilts with the same set of eyes that you would look at contemporary art,” she says. The museum attracts unlikely guests on first Fridays of the month when admission is free, and this is where perspectives really change. “Many have a preconceived idea that it’s going to be stuffy, boring, old,” Bavor says. “It’s, like, let’s go look at some old prints and drawings. I want to surprise them. I want to show them something they haven’t seen before.”

And the quilt industry surprises with its steady growth: the 2014 Quilting in America Survey estimated a market value of \$3.76 billion (a 5 percent growth since 2010) made up of 16.4 million quilters in the US. “A lot has changed since I started quilt-making,” Bavor says. “[Home ec] is not offered anymore, so you have to learn how to sew or thread a sewing machine someplace else. And today’s quilt-makers, even if they’re older or younger, they’re learning from YouTube. They’re learning from the internet. The industry will continue to evolve. How





people learn to make quilts will continue to evolve.”

With more people rediscovering the trade, this momentum is fueling the next generation of quilters. The Modern Quilt Guild network first started in Los Angeles in 2009 as an online forum for modern quilters to connect in person. Now it consists of 8,826 members and more than 150 groups worldwide. In February 2016, the Guild brings their annual conference, QuiltCon, to California, showcasing hundreds of modern quilts made by members everywhere. Back online, emerging learning platforms like Creativebug and Craftsy give quilters of all levels instruction and guidance on-demand.

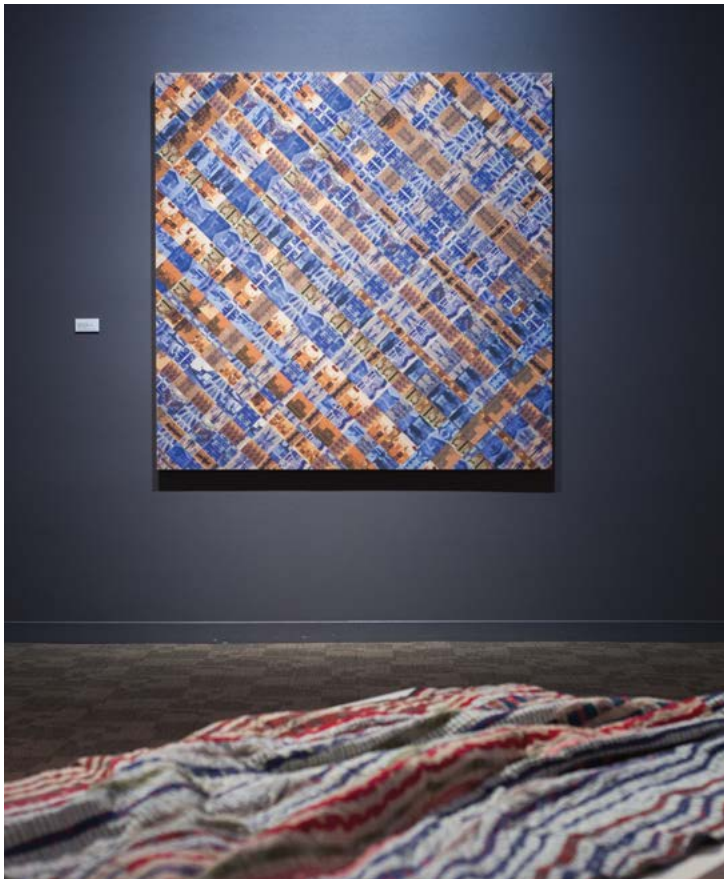
Bavor spends most of her time in the museum backrooms, where the real action takes place behind galleries: making muslin sleeves, building displays, and

prepping pieces for loans and exhibitions. On a Thursday afternoon, Bavor pauses and pulls on one white glove to handle a donated quilt and then checks on staff working on July’s *Found/Made*, an exhibition guest-curated by Roderick Kiracofe. In a time when many schools have retired home economics, when Pinterest and Etsy artisans and artists have taken the creative marketplace by storm, Bavor hopes to put together collections that wow as contemporary pieces yet respect traditions, heritage, and artistic rules.

“I think there’s this real interest in making something of meaning, for a family member, for a friend, that will continue to drive quilt-making,” Bavor says. “Because that’s really what it was all about.”

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