

Surface Design

Creative Exploration of Fiber and Fabric

WINTER 2014 \$10.00

Textiles +



Folk Art & Formalism

by Joyce Beckenstein

"The idea that art can come from nowhere is typically American,"¹ quipped Abstract Expressionist painter Willem deKooning. His mid-20th century reminder that New York School abstraction borrowed copiously from the history of art, European modernism in particular, resonates with a number of Digital Age artists who find homegrown inspiration in American folk art. Some are especially drawn to historical quilts. They find a soft human touch in their unfettered pattern-based abstractions, and an intuitive logic seldom found in the cooler geometries of minimal art, with which this craft is often compared.

The American Folk Art Museum in New York recently explored this trend with *alt_quilts: Sabrina Gschwandtner, Luke Haynes, Stephen Sollins*.² The exhibition paired historical quilts from the Museum's collection with contemporary quilt-inspired works made with modern-day imagery and alternative materials. Senior Curator Stacy Hollander chose artists whose works "bear a relationship to (traditional) quilts... and whose processes recall the complex work of unsung women artists."

Finely crafted quilts found in museum collections were coveted items in their own day. More decorative than utilitarian, women made them for prominent display as parlor throws, wall



hangings and newlywed marriage bed covers. While the industrial revolution made elegant cloth available by the yard, many cherished family heirlooms were pieced with scraps of discarded finery. Iridescent ribbons cut from a swishy taffeta skirt, perhaps, or silk salvaged from a grandmother's wedding dress, were among the textures of family life preserved for posterity.

Robert Rauschenberg catapulted the American quilt to fine art status in 1955, when he raised *The Bed* against a wall—mattress, pillow, sheet, and log cabin-patterned quilt splashed with expressionist color. "So there!" it defiantly said to formal abstraction. In the mid-1970s, the Pattern and Decoration Movement exploded in reaction to Minimalism's mute grids and as a feminist salute to art born of "woman's work." Artists, such as Miriam Shapiro, deliberately blurred the lines between fine art and craft, introducing appliqué, embroidery, and conventional craft designs into their contemporary art.

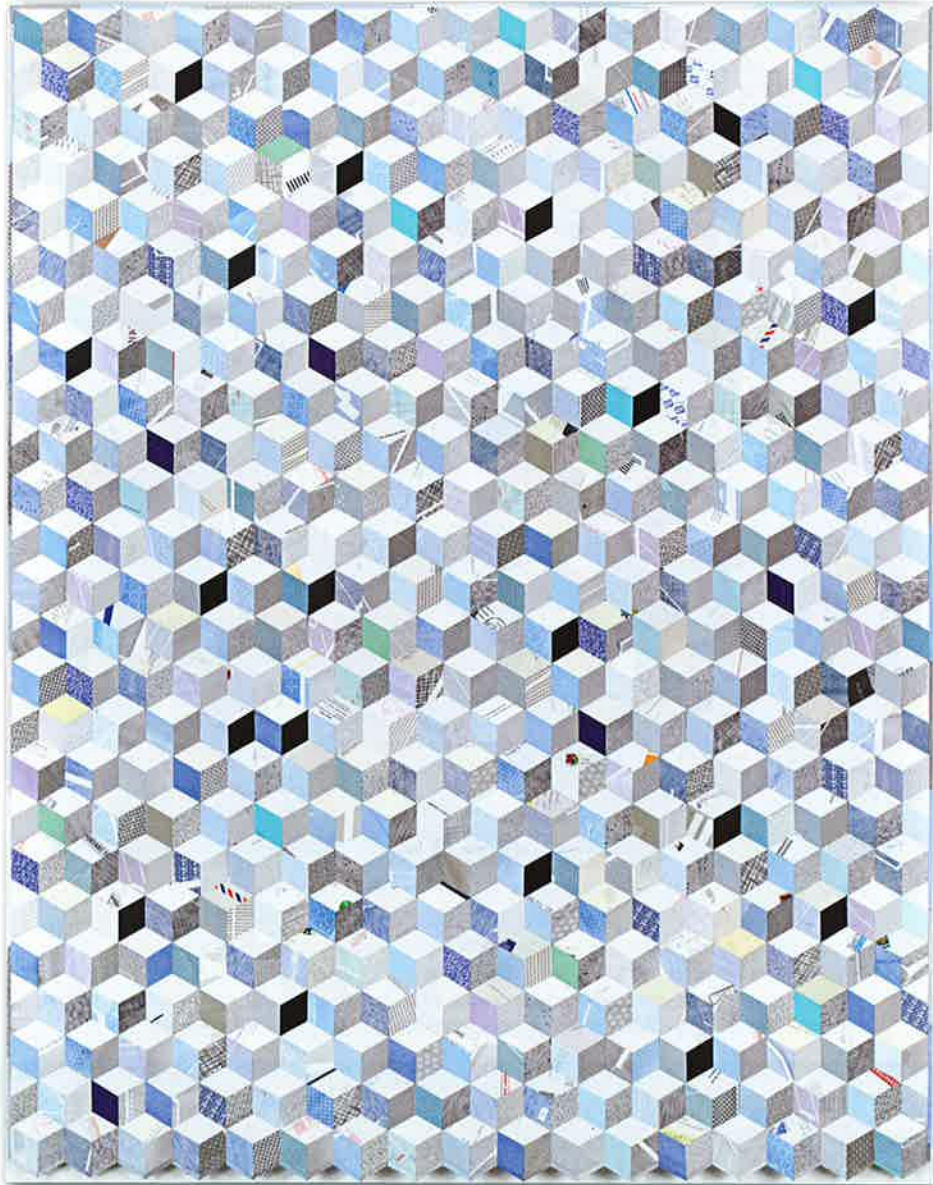
Recalling this blend of formalist concerns with the stuff of real life, Luke Haynes uses repurposed fabric and traditional quilt patterns for his series of bold self-portraits. As the museum wall text notes, "through... his prolific activity in social networking outlets, he has shared private and public moments with the world, offering himself unapologetically." In works such as (*Self Portrait #7*) *Over Here*, he quilts his outgoing presence through a savvy but humorous combination of elements. The work playfully accosts the passerby through the use of anamorphic perspective, an optical device used by Renaissance painters, such as Hans Holbein. It requires approaching the piece from an angle to experience the illusion of three-dimensional imagery emerging from the surface. Haynes further charges the work's in-your-face "out there" presence by juxtaposing raw-edge appliqué with finely stitched log cabin quilting. The results embody the sophistication of an artist well-schooled in both fine arts and traditional crafts, while extending the genre of American portraiture and heirloom as memory to a new millennium obsessed with staying in touch.

Sabrina Gschwandtner and Stephen Sollins are, by contrast, conceptual artists who choose contemporary ephemera in lieu of used fabrics for their abstract compositions. Both find in traditional quilt designs a way to merge their formalist concerns with an underlying philosophical or social message, a consistently evolving process that informs their earliest strategies.



ABOVE: LUKE HAYNES (b. 1982) of Seattle and Los Angeles (*Self-Portrait #7*) *Over Here* Fabric, batting, thread, machine stitching, 90" x 90", 2013. Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York. Gift of the artist with funds from Moda, Accuquilt, and the American Folk Art Museum, New York, 2013.2.1. Detail LEFT. Photos: Gavin Ashworth, New York. BELOW: When seen from the side (far right), the anamorphic perspective in the composition compresses to reveal Luke's face. Partial installation view of the *alt_quilt* exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum, New York, 2013. Photo: Marci Rae McDade.





STEPHEN SOLLINS (b. 1967) of Brooklyn, New York *Untitled (Postscript)* Used envelopes (printed paper, ink, pencil, acetate, foil), 76" x 60", 2009. Shown courtesy of Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York. Detail *RIGHT, BOTTOM*. Photos: Tom Powel Imaging.

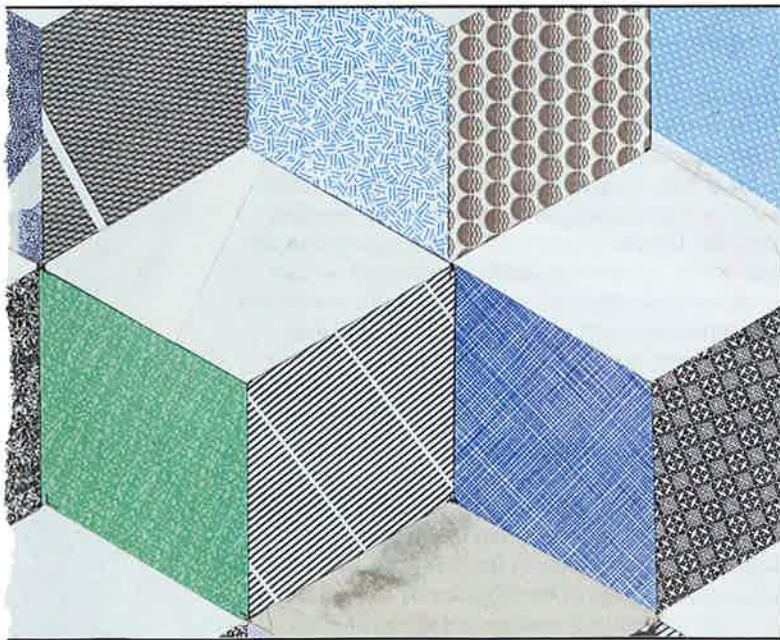
Sollins came of age during the Postmodern era. He asks: Where do poetry and logic intersect? Unexpected possibilities turned up several years ago in a thrift store among some dusty finds of cross-stitched embroideries and dime store tablecloths. Beyond kitsch, Sollins saw an underlying soul in these works made by anonymous craftspeople simply wanting to create something beautiful. He decided to deconstruct these pieces. Counting the number of

stitches dedicated to a given color in a given embroidery, he removed the original stitches and replaced them with a rectangle made of an equal number of stitches in that same color. The result: a minimalist schemata of the original work's color code; a visualization, according to Sollins, of the relationship between good intentions and its graphic representation, an idea he further pursues in his quilt-inspired abstractions.

An avid collector of snail-mail postal



MRS. ED LANTZ (dates unknown) of Elkhart, Indiana *Tumbling Blocks Quilt* Cotton, 80.5" x 66.25", 1910–1920. Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York. Gift of David Pottinger, 1980.37.62.



materials, Sollins is intrigued by security envelopes lined with quilt-like patterns of tumbling blocks, starbursts, and parallelograms. This correspondence tracks his life, from the hospital bill for his daughter's birth to news from a friend, much as historical quilt patches might recall a wedding or first communion. In *Untitled (Postscript)*, he replaces vintage fabric with paper and Tyvek to form a pattern similar to *Tumbling Blocks Quilt* (1910–1920) by Mrs. Ed Lantz. Vibrant solid colors run rampant in her illusionist composition of cubes tumbling down the quilt's surface. Sollins's homage creates movement through assorted envelopes in more muted lavenders, grays, and blues, all punctuated by postage stamps and bits of handwriting.

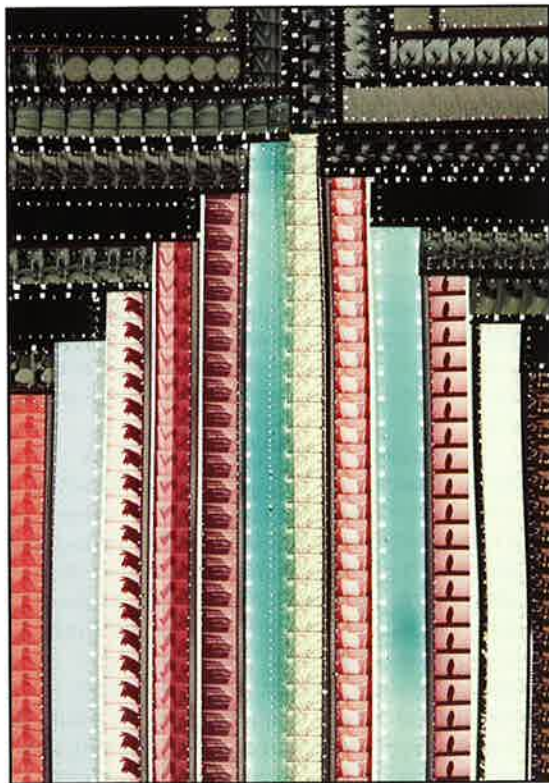
One of the Museum's most compelling historical pieces, *Log Cabin Quilt, Barn Raising Variation* by Mary Jane Smith (1833–1869) and Mary Morrell Smith (1798–1869), anticipates 20th century Op Art. Juxtapositions of light and dark squares produce oscillating concentric diamonds that recede and advance in space. But Sollins notes something more, a quirkiness: "It's diagonally symmetrical up to a point, then it's not."³ He discovered its secret by cutting up, square by square, an enlarged photograph of the quilt. Putting the pieces back together like a puzzle, he found anomalies in the way some color combinations turned up in random places. He replicated this improvised design using his envelope linings—a symbolic interpretation of his personal past connected to American tradition.

Sabrina Gschwandtner's art packs a feminist punch. Relating handcraft to filmmaking, she provokes questions about the relationship between objects traditionally made by women and their evolving roles within Western culture. "What does a stitched work say about the political underpinnings of women's lives?"⁴ Her conceptual work searches for answers through the wide-angle lens of history, magnified by her own family stories of women as mothers, wives, and artists.

For her seminal piece *Crochet Film*, Gschwandtner filmed herself in a room crocheting a long fiber cable; her great-grandmother's quilt hung on the wall behind her. She strung the resulting 80-foot-long textile along 16mm film spools running the length of a corridor at the Sculpture Center in New York in 2004. Whirring like a projection, this fiber cord advanced towards a TV-sized projection of her performance. Though it took Gschwandtner 10 hours to crochet the yarn cable and record the event, she pared the 16mm film down to an 80-foot long



MARY JANE SMITH (1833–1869) and MARY MORRELL SMITH (1798–1869)
of Whitestone, New York **Log Cabin Quilt, Barn Raising Variation**
Cotton, wool, silk, 81" x 74", 1861–1865.
Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York. Gift of Mary D.
Bromham, grandniece of Mary Jane Smith, 1987.9.1.
Photo: Schechter Lee, New York.



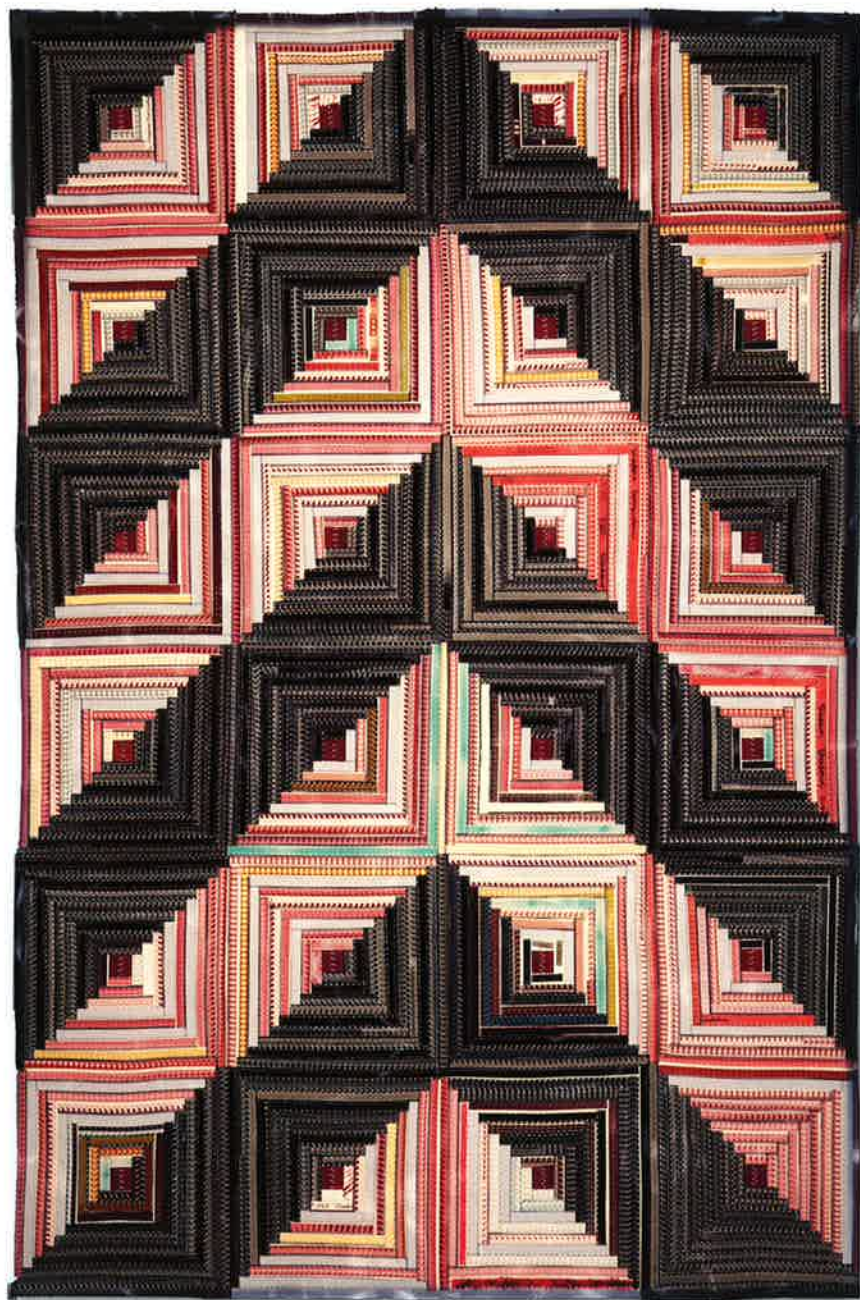
strip to match their lengths. The edited movie runs only two minutes (projected at 24 frames of film per second) and dramatizes the inconsequential value historically placed on women's work and their creative energies.

In 2012, Gschwandtner received discarded 16mm documentary films from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Viewing them for content, she discovered repeat patterns in the miniscule celluloid frames similar to those found in textile design. She stitched sections of filmstrip into quilt-inspired patterns, then displayed them in light boxes. Their illuminated imagery suggests underlying, often conflicting, narratives. *Camouflage* symbolically relates the light and dark divisions of a log cabin quilt pattern to two different documentaries. One, about the Bradford Dyeing Association (a military cloth finisher since the Civil War), paints a happy portrait of textile workers without mentioning the company's record of labor law abuse and environmental pollution. Cut strips of the propaganda flick compose the dark side of Gschwandtner's abstracted log cabin pattern. The light areas use film from a children's movie portraying young hands making rows of innocent shadow puppets.

Her film collages explore personal narratives enlivening history. *Wave Hill Sunroom Square*, for example, includes film strips from "Quilts in Women's Lives," which features documentary interviews with women quilters about how their art enhances their feelings of self-worth. Gschwandtner interspersed these collage clips with scratched and hand-inked leader film, inserting herself into the story and reinventing the filmstrip as a work of art unto itself.

Like quilters of yore, Haynes, Sollins, and Gschwandtner are nostalgic recyclers. They value handmade objects that preserve memories of their own time and place. But unlike traditional craft artists, they, as new millennium fine artists, wish to capture larger truths about contemporary life. They suggest that today's ephemera are evermore ephemeral: "selfies" captured on cell phones have replaced studio portraits; hand-written letters are relics of the past; film is digital, with videos getting shorter to satisfy YouTube attention spans. Their abstractions differ from their sources of inspiration, favoring production and concept over spontaneity and intuition.

These are homages to today's disposable culture, not to the durable textures or well-worn warmth of yesteryear. This is no shortcoming on their part. True to form, it is an affirmation of art continuing to do what it has always done—provide a visual perspective of life evolving.



ABOVE: **SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER** (b. 1977) of New York City *Camouflage* 16mm film, polyamide thread, lithography ink, stitching, 69.5" x 45.5", 2012. Shown courtesy of LMAKprojects, New York. Detail *LEFT, BOTTOM*. Photos: Matt Suib, Greenhouse Media.

¹Rosenberg, Harold, "Transatlantic Anxieties, Especially Bill's Folly," in *Abstract Expressionism, The International Context*, Joan Marter, ed., (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 66.

²The exhibition *alt_quilts: Sabrina Gschwandtner, Luke Haynes, Stephen Sollins* was presented at the American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY, October 1, 2013-January 5, 2014.

^{3,4} Quotes by Stephen Sollins and Sabrina Gschwandtner are based on August 2013 interviews.

Folk Couture: Fashion and Folk Art is on view at the American Folk Art Museum in New York (January 21-April 23, 2014), www.folkartmuseum.org.

Sabrina Gschwandtner, www.sabrinag.com

Luke Haynes, www.lukehaynes.com

Stephen Sollins, www.stephensollins.com

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