

Barbara Campbell Thomas, 2021 Artist Statement

Several years ago, my mother journeyed south to my North Carolina home with a singular goal in mind. She sat me down at the dining room table, threaded my unused sewing machine, and with the help of a plastic bin of secondhand fabric scraps, she taught me how to make a quilt. At the end of the day, I held up my first finished quilt—a mishmash of color and shape made from the odds and ends of leftovers.

In the months following my mother's visit, I spent many evenings piecing together quilt blocks. The visual thinking at work as I sewed together color and pattern was deeply linked to the paintings simultaneously underway in my studio. But the material was new and unfamiliar, and initially I could not see where my sewing machine met my paint brush. I continued this foray into quilt-making, propelled to make quilts by a visceral realization: had I lived just 150 or 200 years ago, I would likely not have been a painter, because such an occupation would not have been readily open to me as a woman. Instead, I understood with eerie clarity, I would have made quilts. The knowledge my hands and head gain through the discipline of making paintings, the delight I receive in manipulating color and shape, and the satisfaction I glean from the slow process of bringing something into physical existence, would have been fulfilled by making quilts. Surprisingly, I started to see quilting as the flipside of painting, and immediately a brand-new strain of influence and possibility opened up before me, eventually leading me to meld the medium of painting with the medium of quilting in order to create a reworked definition of painting.

The instinctive, practitioner-based connection I made between painting and quilting established an alternate foundation for my painting practice, one that finally allowed in all I knew was missing from the definition I had received in art school, a definition in which women were conspicuously absent. That old definition of painting brims with painters who are white, male and western, with studio lives uncomplicated by the obligations of raising children. Their paintings embody the romantic narrative of the singular genius toiling away for days on end, uninterrupted and hegemonic.

My paintings, equal parts acrylic paint, fabric collage and fabric piecing, could not be more different in their origination. My life as a painter intertwines with my life as a mother; obligations to care for my children condition every hour of the day, handing me a studio schedule that dances between home and workspace, necessitating a fluid focus that “makes do” with what I am given—both in time and in visual inspiration. Like my great-grandmother Mildred Bame Herman, who saved every scrap of wool she came across in order to make beautiful hooked rugs for her home, I embrace a spirit of frugality, using any subject matter immediately at hand, not wasting, making do. Practically, this means I find the elements of my paintings in the varied letter X's marked across my sons' chore lists, in the worn patterned towel saved from childhood and from a sketchbook collage made out of a cut-up Cheerios box. Embracing “making do” as a visual strategy has a distinct visual correlate; bits and pieces of color and shape scatter across the white expanse of the canvas, creating an ever-unfolding space that plays with scale and depth perception. The surface is active, shifting between flat, unadorned white gesso and paint washes, to thick layers of collaged fabric, to inset sections of machine-stitched textile. For me, these cobbled-together paintings are my *Mappae Mundi*, to borrow a medieval phrase meaning *cloth chart of the world*. Like the medieval *Mappae Mundi*, maps which were concerned with recording subjective world view more than mimetic geographic accuracy, my paintings condition my own external reality through subjective internal reality in order to create the invented spatial realm of my paintings—aggregating the colloquial in service of illuminating the transcendent.

