

Barbara Campbell Thomas, Artist Statement 2022

My paintings harness geometric abstraction and a materially diverse surface of paint, collage and sewn fabric to explore how the everyday experience of living and being is an arena for spiritual growth and perception. In her essay about my work, *Contemplating Forms*, Jennie Carlisle, Director of App State's Smith Gallery wrote that I use abstraction "not as a way to empty a composition of content, but to understand and picture phenomena that are not perceivable by the senses under ordinary conditions." My paintings meditate on physicality as a way into questions of ontology, questions of being. By making paintings—by moving paint around year after year until I grasp some of what paint is and how it functions—I have come to see painting as a practice which allows me incremental knowledge of what it is to inhabit a living, breathing human body. As my understanding of what paint is unfolds, through the movement and experience of my body, I see that comprehension of painting is analogous to comprehension of being. Pathways to comprehension of painting and being are similarly life long, and in both instances, one is engaging with an experience that is simultaneously material and immaterial, with an experience in which the corporeal (paint and the body) is a gateway into the metaphysical.

After reading that last paragraph, it might be tempting to think my paintings are not much about anything that has to do with day-to-day life. But I have come into my maturity as a painter while raising children, and little grounds one more than the consuming task of insuring the growth and development of two human beings. My paintings locate a language of abstraction, a language made up of bright color and softened geometry, in the self-defining crucible of motherhood, a state-of-being United States culture loves to laud (and devalue) as self-emptying but which I have found to be a battleground in which I have had to stake out personhood through painting. Unsurprisingly, the most important development in my practice occurred eight years ago when my own mother taught me how to make a quilt. I quickly perceived the necessity of this knowledge, believing quilting was the flipside to painting for me. Upon reflection, this realization seems inevitable, given that quilts have long been a means for women to work with complex languages of abstraction, while maintaining their domestic obligations.

Soon after learning to make quilts, I began melding the medium of painting with the medium of quilting to create my own reworked definition of painting. In terms of material, I literally join quilting with painting. Every one of my paintings begins with a pile of fabric scraps and a sewing machine. As quilters have done for generations, much of my fabric is culled from domestic sources—cast-off dinner napkins, old towels, and too small or too worn clothing. I cut geometric fabric shapes, arrange them side by side and sew them together. This bit-by-bit pieced cloth expanse—what quilters call the top layer of a quilt—becomes my painting ground, because once the pieced textile is large enough, I stretch it over a stretcher bar and begin to add paint and collaged fabric. The paintings are then built slowly and methodically, their ultimate expression my means of declaring the coexistence of outwardly focused maternal care with a deeply interior selfhood.