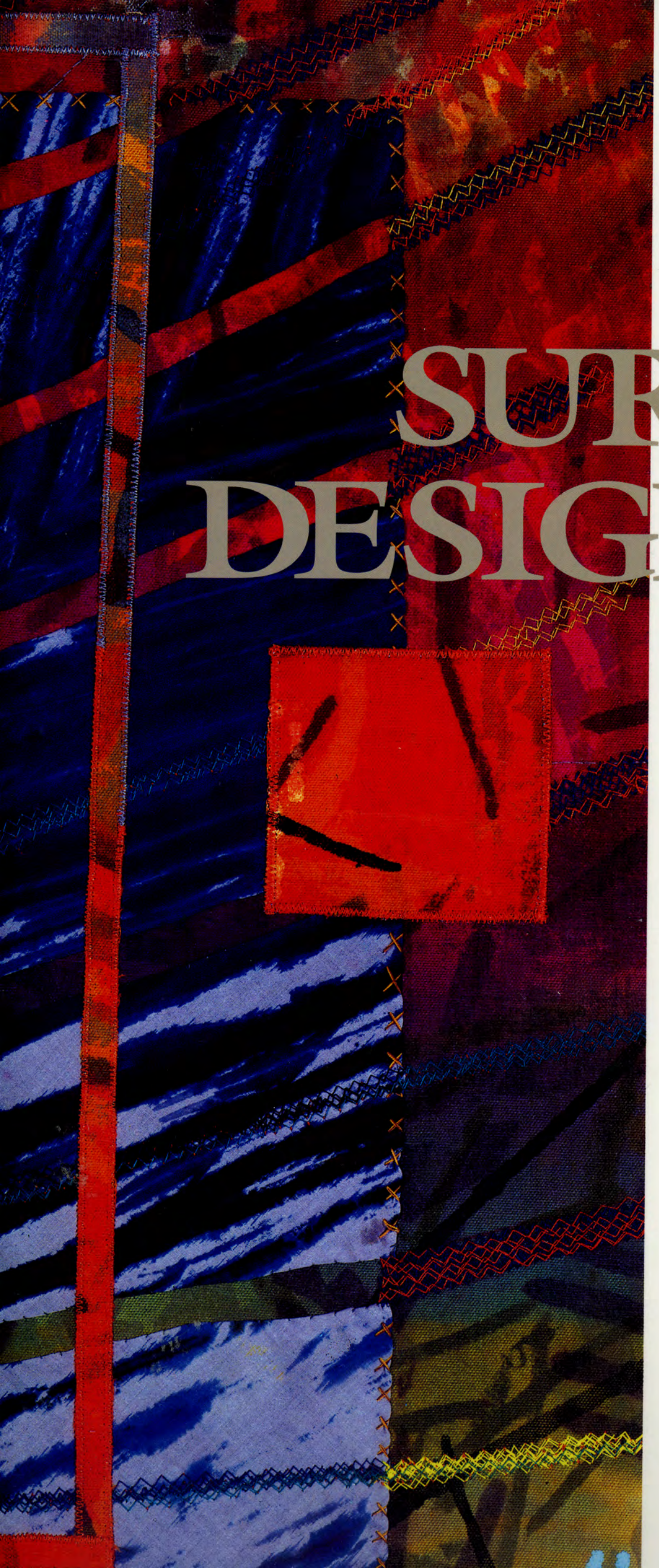
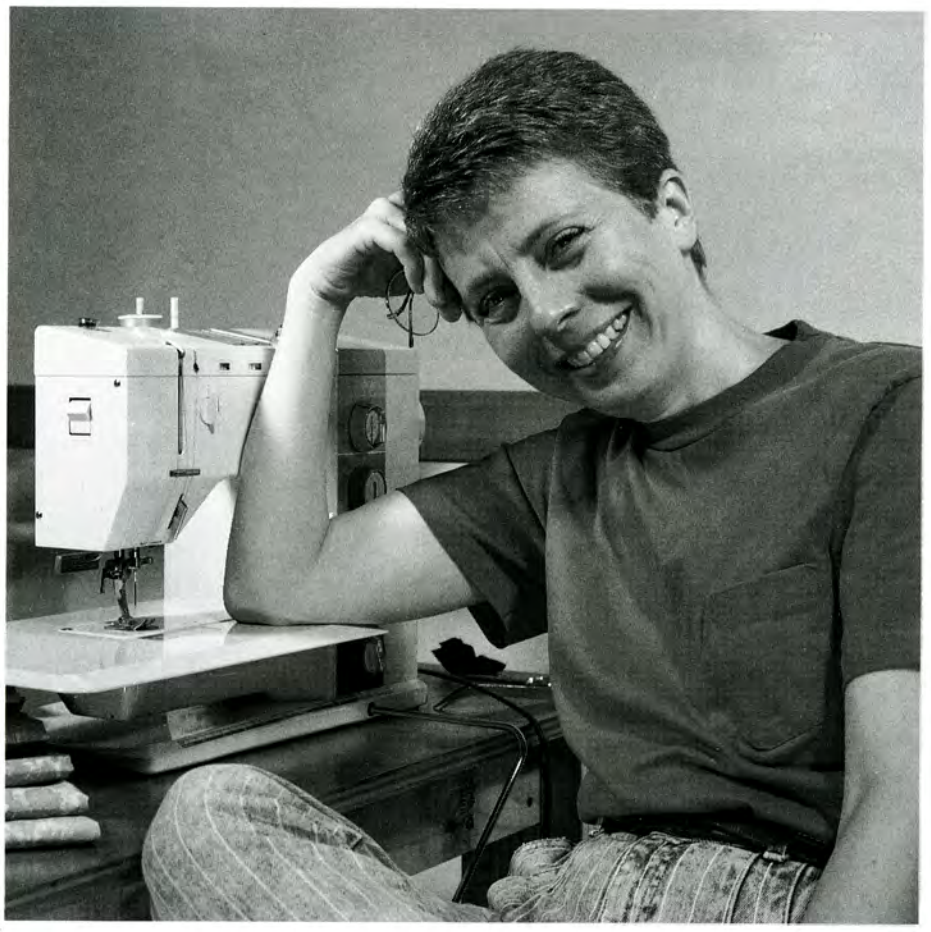


THE SURFACE DESIGNER'S ART

CONTEMPORARY FABRIC PRINTERS PAINTERS AND DYERS

INTRODUCTION BY
KATHERINE WESTPHAL

Excerpt from: ***The Surface Designer's Art: Contemporary Fabric Printers, Painters, and Dyers,*** Lark Books,1993, pp. 118-123.

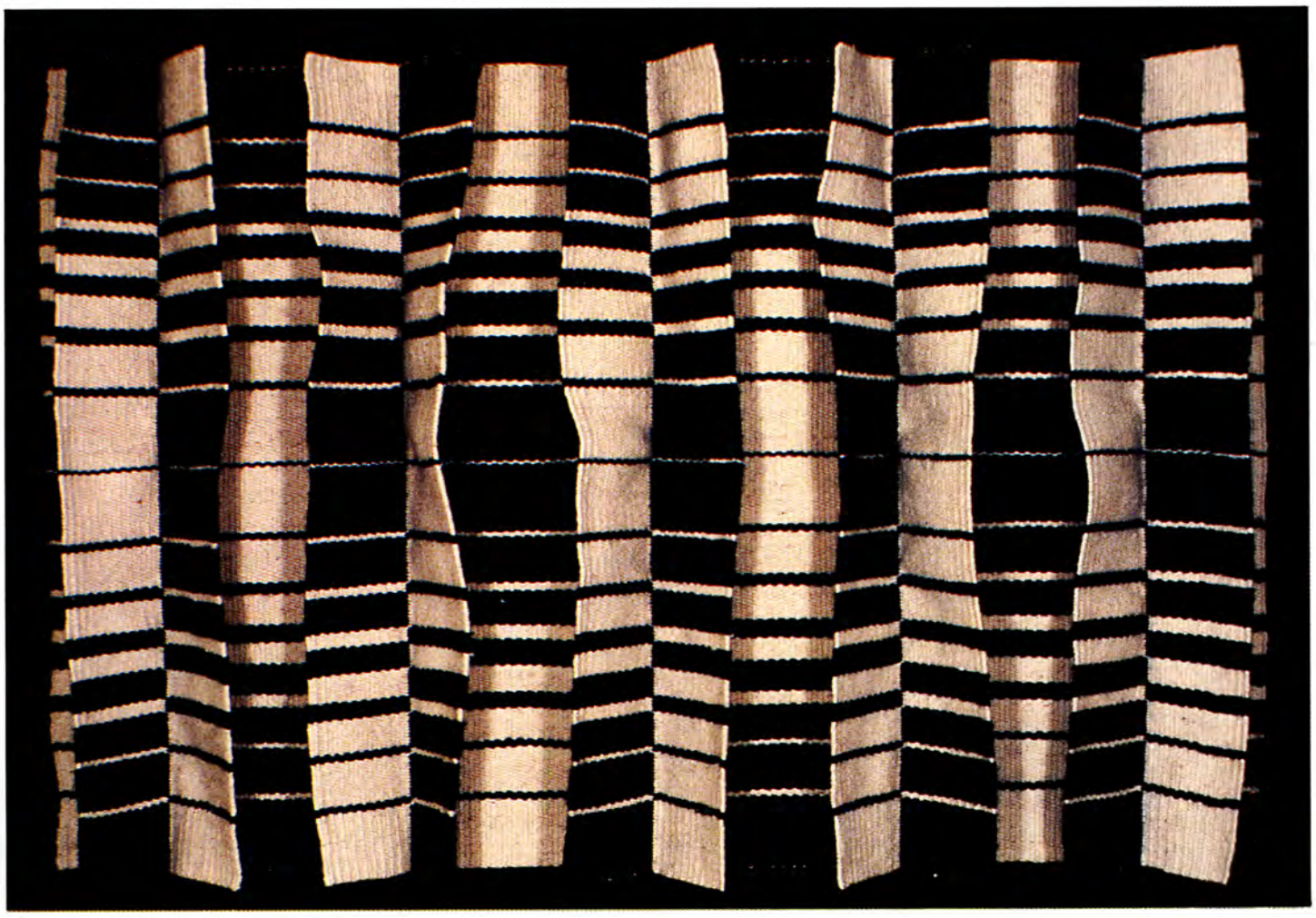


SUSAN WILCHINS

Textiles provide a breadth and flexibility of expression which make all other materials seem limited by comparison. They combine the texture and relief qualities of sculpture or pottery, the color range of paint, and the literal expressive potential of photography. There is little I cannot say effectively with a textile of some kind. Textiles also have a special personal resonance because they are tied to important early life and family experiences: hand-knitted clothing, embroidered linens, a tradition of quiltmaking among my female forebears, the feeling of cloth and thread in my hands. I find fabric work as natural as breathing and its expressions a "language" often more eloquent than English itself.

I began as a weaver. Weaving was magic. The cloth itself seemed to appear from nowhere, materializing before my eyes. My initial woven work was flat, clean, and geometric. Through experimentation with other woven structures, I began incorporating more relief and color. This led to a series of doubleweaves, with flaps protruding from the surface, enabling me to play with optical illusions.

Inspired by the works of Matisse, Klee, Vuillard, Klimt, and the Austrian painter Hundertwasser, I wanted to attain a sense of vitality in my work. Each of these artists' work expresses the differentiation—even the dissolution—of form through the juxtaposition of patterned objects and color. And each has a fluidity, a joy, I felt was missing in my work.



STUDY IN BLACK AND WHITE, 1978; WOOL WEFT, LINEN WARP; DOUBLEWEAVE; 36-3/4 BY 23-1/2 INCHES.

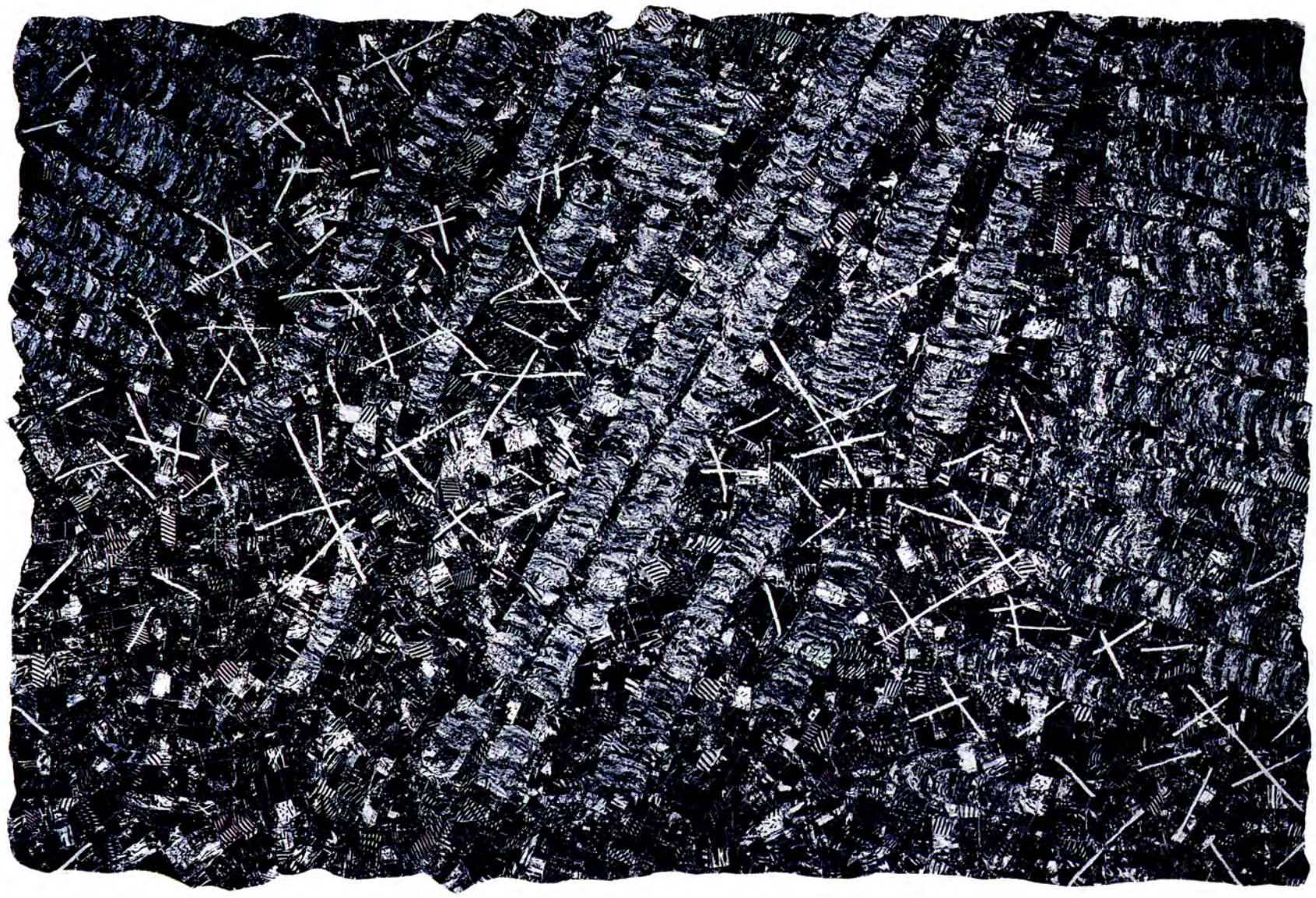
Frustrated by the limitations of the loom and its grid-like structure, I began experimenting with dyed and pieced compositions, using flip-and-sew piecing techniques. While I deliberately chose expressive instead of realistic color, the pieces were still completely flat. I was working with curved sections but still seeking to make a clean rectangular piece. Sewing was often a nightmare.

I have always been fascinated with ambiguous imagery: the way in which objects viewed from great distance or incredible closeness are rendered abstract, and possibly unrecognizable. I studied satellite images, aerial photography, maps, and microscopic sections of plant tissue. All of these images ran together in my mind. In their beautiful abstraction they seemed far more alike than different. I wanted to "do something" with them in my work.

Trying to incorporate a feeling of texture, I began to work with collage. I deliberately allowed dyes to bleed, tore exposed edges, exaggerated colors, and incorporated a variety of stuffings, pleatings, and puckerings in the assembly of the final piece.

After graduate school, I began experimenting intensively with screen printing. This led to screen printing over screen printing, stitching together

ELEVEN TINY FAIENCE AND GOLD BEADS AND SOME REMNANTS OF CLOTH WERE FOUND IN A TERRA-COTTA BOX AT THE TROY II, CA. 2500 B.C., DIG ON THE AEGEAN SEA.



STREET LIGHTS, 1990; COTTON; SCREEN PRINTED, PIECED, APPLIQUED, STITCHED; 48 BY 72 INCHES.

layered strips or images from different printings, then placing more appliqued forms on top of these. This process combined the best aspects of everything I had tried before; it incorporated treasured historical techniques yet was entirely my own—something that constituted a "language" instead of just a "vocabulary." I was excited. The possibilities seemed endless.

In the warm, humid part of North Carolina where I live, the landscape was fragrant and thick with vining, trailing, flowering plants and trees. Working in my yard, I noticed soil texture, debris, all the little things that live, die, and fall around trees. I was also walking regularly in a local forest. When there, I always felt at peace. Forests are like cathedrals in their feeling of enclosed space and dappled light, of vibrant color but spiritual removal from worldly cares. I did a series of "forest floor" pieces, trying simultaneously to convey through vivid color my emotional response to the forest and to suggest with layered textures and composition the nature of the forest itself—its tactile quality and light, its synthesis of harmony and diversity, the exquisite details contained in its large spaces.

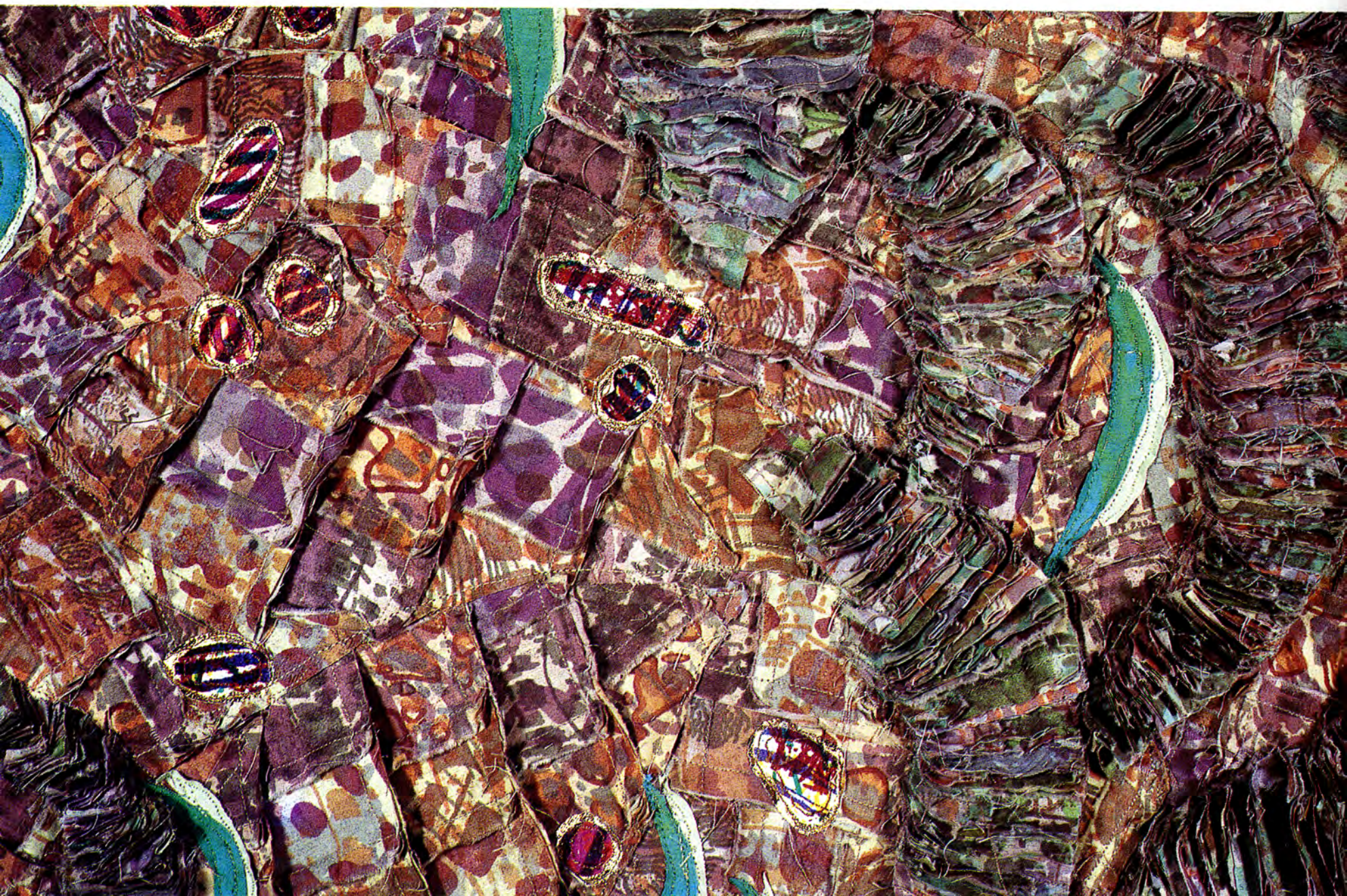
During this time I took note of other details. Every morning the wooden window shutters make patterns on my kitchen floor, shifting with the sun. I began to trace the patterns and elaborate on them, compiling a notebook of drawings: slats and rectangles, negative and positive space. I also collected photographs of surf, waves, shells. My recent work is a series of sea mantles based on experiences with the ocean, and a series of small pieces based on the window shutter light patterns. In the sea mantles, I try to emulate ocean colors and wave rhythms and, as in the forest pieces, to convey the intersection of tranquility with constant change. The window pieces are heavily beaded to suggest the dance and glitter of light reflections. Where stitching on my previous work was used almost solely for assembly of the work, the window pieces use machine and hand embroidery for mark making.

In a world where forests and oceans are despoiled by greed, where the sun itself becomes a source of sickness, I begin to feel like an archivist of disappearing things. We live, unfortunately, in a world where the simple attempt to celebrate nature's beauty is itself becoming a "statement."

INNER-SPACE ATLAS, PAGE 51, 1981; COTTON; DYED, PIECED, APPLIQUED, STITCHED; 55 BY 59-1/2 INCHES.

SEA MANTLE: COQUINA, 1992; DYED, SCREEN PRINTED, PIECED, APPLIQUED, STITCHED FABRICS; 44 BY 53 INCHES.

SEA MANTLE: COQUINA, DETAIL.



WINDOWS SERIES, #7, 1992; COTTON, BEADS; DYED, SCREEN PRINTED, APPLIQUED, REVERSE APPLIQUED, MACHINE STITCHED, HAND EMBROIDERED; 11-1/4 BY 17 INCHES.