



PIECING THE FUTURE

Alisa Golden

Artists often create various kinds of work in parallel, a main work and what some might call *other* work. The latter might be considered a hobby, not shown or sold, possibly kept private, but like past experiences can help guide future work. The concepts and methods I developed as a child and in bookmaking have helped shape a shift to textiles.

I grew up in a craft era where all handwork seemed equal. My mother kept a *project closet* for us, which had odds and ends to repurpose and an assortment of art materials from colored pencils to beads to yarn to clay. In addition to drawing and writing I made candles, learned to knit and embroider, macramé, needlepoint, quilt, do calligraphy and carve linoleum blocks improperly, needing a band-aid every time. I fell in love with tactile materials and never ran out of things to make. It was like having a palette of infinite colors always with something new to use. If I didn't feel like drawing, I could write; if I didn't feel like embroidering, I could paint.

Letterpress printing was part of a graphic arts class in junior high, and I took that knowledge and love of its tactile nature with me to art college. Setting metal and wood type by hand slowed the writing process, clarifying my thoughts. Every letter was work and every word had to count. If I ran out of one letter, I had to change a word. Merging letterpress and linocuts with my writing practice,

I began making books and got a degree in printmaking, exploring printing and new structures until I felt I had covered every angle. After 30 years of printing on paper to make book art, I gradually found myself printing on cloth and making art quilts.

I've heard that when people are under stress or experiencing hardship or trauma they do what they do best, be it cleaning, baking or making things. I had continued making quilts for practical purposes for our family, not thinking about wall hangings or art pieces. Also, because our son's health kept us on alert, I continued making things to cope. For my young son's quilt, I took him in his wheelchair to the fabric store, brought bolts over to him and made a quilt from the fabrics he chose. There is no easy way to say that he lived a very short life. I made book after book as I grieved.

A few years later, thinking about a tree that grows a scar, I felt the need to make a quilt about learning to heal. I printed a poem on cotton, then layered, stitched and ripped and tore it, like one does in mourning in my tradition. I titled it *Undone*, and called it an *art quilt* since it was expressive and small and had no practical purpose, not knowing that art quilts were a thing. I carried the experience of loss, grieving and healing with me as I began thinking about textile work.

Although I preferred to sew, my books always ended up folded and glued instead. My sister-in-law taught me how to make felt from wool roving and I began making



felted books. Sewing the wool felt pleasing to me, but I couldn't print on it, and I still loved to print. While I could needlefelt short texts, the longer works I wrote could not be included in a felted book. I was looking for a process that blended writing, printing and cloth instead of paper.

In 2015 I was doing union work with SEIU and the adjuncts and lecturers at my school and was thinking about strength in numbers, being stronger together. I felt energized. A dream inspired me to carve a woman's profile in linoleum, but she wanted company. I pulled out a box of linocuts from past books and prints and sorted through them, raiding my own image library for reuse. With different colored inks I printed and overprinted until I had a stack of pieces. Sewn together, this became a quilt called *Strength*. Here was a chance to work on a much larger scale, something I couldn't do with my books.

In 2016, when I had no class to teach, I asked myself what would I do, housework? *Housework* became the title of a series that merged books and textiles. I printed on cloth to wrap handmade, house-shaped boxes, and took the leftover pieces and made a house-shaped quilt their neighborhood. I discovered that the slot-and-tab binding my husband had designed worked much better with cloth than paper, so I made the book, *In the Wake of the Dream*, which combined text and linocuts on muslin. Printing on cloth sparked new ideas.

In 2017, realizing that making art quilts was no longer a hobby, I made a commitment and joined the California Society of Printmakers and Studio Art Quilt Associates and found opportunities to show my work, including my printed quilts. I used letterpress, photopolymer plates,

linocuts, stenciling, printing from Solarfast dyes and embroidered text. My quilt, *Hand Gun*, with letterpress words and solar prints of my hand, was exhibited in a group show, *Guns: Loaded Conversations* and is now in the collection of Central Michigan University Art Gallery. CSP featured my quilts as well. Making art quilts was now my main work.

During our time of sheltering-in-place I made smaller scrap quilts, responding emotionally to the news, trying to process the world, using materials at hand as stores were temporarily closed. In the fall of 2021, I exhibited these among 47 quilts at Piedmont Center for the Arts in a solo show, *Nature on Loan*. A shift had been made. I was not making three-dimensional book art anymore. My focus was completely on the larger, flat plane of textiles. I could include my writing and hand printing, and explore the excitement and challenges of new materials and methods.

Although the works are flat, the quilts still feel like books to me. I make each of the pages separately, then organize and bind them together. And if I get stuck I do what I did when I was young; I put one project aside and just keep my hands moving. Every experiment, even if it seems like *other* work, is useful.

Having worked small for decades, making quilts allows me to continue paying attention to detail, piecing smaller parts together into a larger cohesive whole. I like the challenge of working with new materials, learning new skills and the puzzle of how to express what I need to say. The past, present and future are intertwined in the art process. All the media I have explored, and all the events I have experienced travel with me, informing forward

motion. Curiosity pushes me to push my art, wherever it may travel next. As if we are trees or shells building layers each year, we carry our past with us into the future.



Artist Information

Alisa Golden writes, makes art and edits an art and literary magazine, *Star 82 Review*, that is both online and in print. She taught for 12 years as an adjunct professor in Printmaking and has taught workshops at the San Francisco Center for the Book and other Bay Area universities and venues. Her book art may be found in the special collections departments of universities and libraries across the country and her writing has been published in many literary magazines. She is the author of *Making Handmade Books* and *Painted Paper* and other instructional books. www.neverbook.com
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Image Documentation

Housework, letterpress printed from wood type, linocuts, engravings, pressure printing, collagraphs; boxes: 5.5" x 3.5" x 3.5", quilt: 38.5" x 31", 2016

Undone, letterpress printed from hand set type, 36.5" x 25", 2008

What Next/What Nest, hand stenciled, 25" x 32", 2022

Hand Gun, letterpress printed from wood type; solar printing, 39" x 45.5", 2017

City Share, hand stenciled, 40" x 25", 2021

What Are We Becoming (detail), letterpress printing from wood type and linocuts, 59.5" x 26.5", 2018

