

001 – BUILDING A PALETTE OF CLOTH – LESLIE MORGAN

A little bit of history first. I've always been a 'piecer' of quilts and love to use free-cutting and piecing techniques. Between 2001 and 2003 I became distracted and focused on building a series of quilts using predominantly white fabrics. This fabric encompassed a wide variety of fibre types; cotton, silk, viscose and blends thereof. Essentially, I 'foundation' pieced straight on to the wadding (usually a wool/rayon felt) and the backing, and then quilted. At this point, the piece was dyed and/or dye-painted several times - a key part of the desired outcome was extreme texture caused by the shrinkage of the wool-rayon felt (ask Beth Kennedy about it and for more information, go to www.cjunebarnes.co.uk).

I enjoyed the subtle blends of tonal contrast and colours but the driving factor was one of technique; ultimately the direction of the work focused on the texture caused by shrinkage. I eventually found this restricting and missed working in a truly compositional way and also realised that I hadn't created any true 'personal cloth' of note during this period.

I returned to piecing whilst refreshing my surface design skills in the wet workshop - particularly my screen printing techniques (thanks to Jane, via Claire). Unfortunately, I realised my goal of producing great cloth to the point that I became unwilling to cut any of it up! This is not a happy place to be for a quilt-maker who loves to sketch using a rotary cutter. As such, I decided to change direction by revisiting my processes to develop a new way of working. I like to use paper collage as a design tool and to make things less stressful, I created a limited palette of papers in black, grey, and beige. I felt that a restricted colour palette would reduce the risk of clashes and simplify the variables, allowing me to focus on visual texture.

In time, a particular collage emerged that I decided to tackle as a series of quilts. I had to develop my palette of cloth first and my 4-day Independent Study class with Jane was the perfect opportunity to do this. I had no desire to slavishly copy the papers I'd made but simply wanted to use them as a point of reference, a source. I had a strong belief that once pieced, I could achieve the same feel in cloth as I had with the paper collage. As I was determined to cut and piece, I wanted to avoid making art cloth, whilst still working compositionally to achieve variety. This meant that when each length of cloth was cut into units, each unit would have movement and enable me to build relationships throughout the quilt.

My plan was to evolve the neutral colour scheme and gradually develop the palette. As a starting point I pre-dyed a wide range of tones in grey, beige, rust and olive. Some were to be kept as solid colours whilst others would be used as background for further marks and imagery. This meant I could focus on the 'bench' work whilst with Jane, starting with dye paints in cream and beige on un-dyed cloth. The dye element was important to me as I wanted to maintain the integrity of the hand of the cloth. As I worked, I became more and more intrigued by the way the white printing on my paper collage provided freshness to the composition. To achieve this, I worked on some un-dyed cloth and focused on leaving areas of white.

Jet-lag never seemed to leave me so some of my pre-dawn hours were spent preparing tools based on the imagery in my painted papers; specifically camouflage paint and netting – symbols of both protection and concealment. For example, I stuck shapes cut out of contact paper straight on to the back of a screen, focusing on the lines in between to create the feeling of a camouflage net. This particular screen was trialled using discharge paste on a length of pre-dyed silk-cotton and I continued to use it with black dye paint. As I worked with the screen some of the bits of plastic fell off, creating spaces within the line design, so I began to take pieces off in a planned and deliberate manner.

Other approaches included;

- a screen with an acrylic spray paint design that printed two scales of mesh (these were used to make several very densely textured pieces)
- thermofax screens of thorn imagery (again, used in multiple layers)
- 'sketching' straight on to the cloth with a needle-nosed (catsup) bottle, then using a credit card to drag and smear the dye lines (this supported the 'thicket/ entanglement/barrier' quality)
- old plastic cone holders used as scrapers to create swirling, circular imagery.

One particular image contained in the paper collage had been achieved by spraying ink on paper through a floral net curtain. It was effective because it didn't fit with most of the other marks/imagery and provided contrast. Jane suggested I water-proof a piece of net curtain using PVA glue to create a stencil. I did this and used it taped to the back of a screen with partial success, and with more success as a traditional stencil. It was only on my return to the UK did the stencil find its true vocation as a tool for 'Screen Painting' (check out Laura Beehler's class for this fabulous technique – Claire and I were so inspired by it we've written a book, see www.committed-to-cloth.com).

I've recently completed my first quilt using some of my new palette. It was juried into Quilt 2005 at the Festival of Quilts and is a good start to the series. My message to quilt-makers is that it's truly worth spending the time to develop your personal imagery, then hitting the bucket and the bench to develop cloth that's truly your own. If the cloth is yours it becomes a design tool that prompts self-expression. This has to have a positive effect on further design development when building your quilt... and besides, it's fun!