

Raised by a Quilter

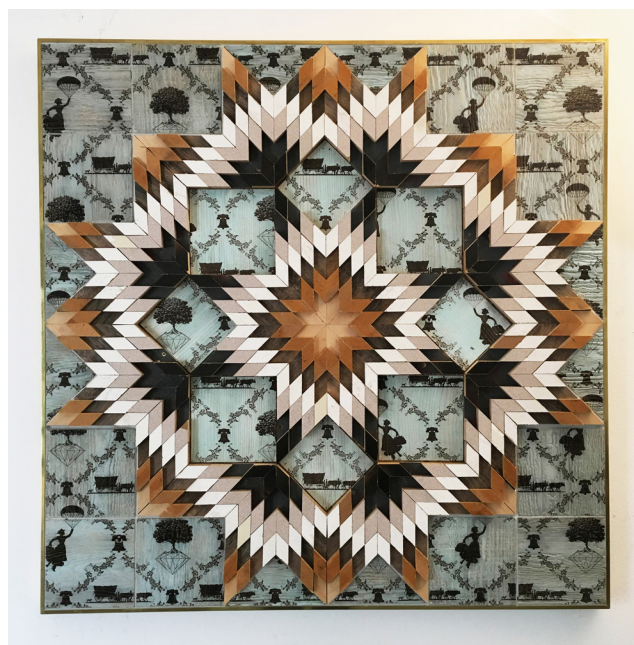
by Troy Murrah

My first instinct when making art is to start drawing the human figure. This made sense for the first “serious” pieces I completed 20 years ago, fresh out of college, but now with my current body of work you would never recognize the reference. The main concept for my recent work is the mosaic, inspired by quilt block patterns and made of mostly wood, but also metal and plexiglass. Yet while I am developing the layout and composition of my geometric mosaic compositions, I’m thinking of a pattern that could be engraved onto the negative space of the mosaic or “quilt.” The geometric forms become the figure’s clothing or make up the body of a car or horse the human is riding. The material I choose is just as important. Each bit of material, which is either donated, found, or reclaimed, has its own backstory, like an old piano that no longer functions, or some wood taken from a home renovation project.

What sparked this new approach to my visual art? How did I evolve, you ask, from creating classical, figurative paintings and shadow box assemblages reminiscent of **Joseph Cornell’s** work to non-textile quilts? Up until a few years ago my visual art had taken a back seat to my other careers in music, production design and recording studio construction. In late 2017, my mom passed away. She had the biggest influence on my creative life.



Troy Murrah, *Cheetah Express*, 2021. Mixed media, reclaimed materials, lone star quilt pattern, 53.25 x 53.25 inches. Photo: Troy Murrah.



Troy Murrah, *Go West Mary*, 2018. Laser-engraved broken star quilt pattern, mixed media, reclaimed materials, brass, 36 x 36 inches. Made in memory of Judy Murrah. Photo: Troy Murrah.

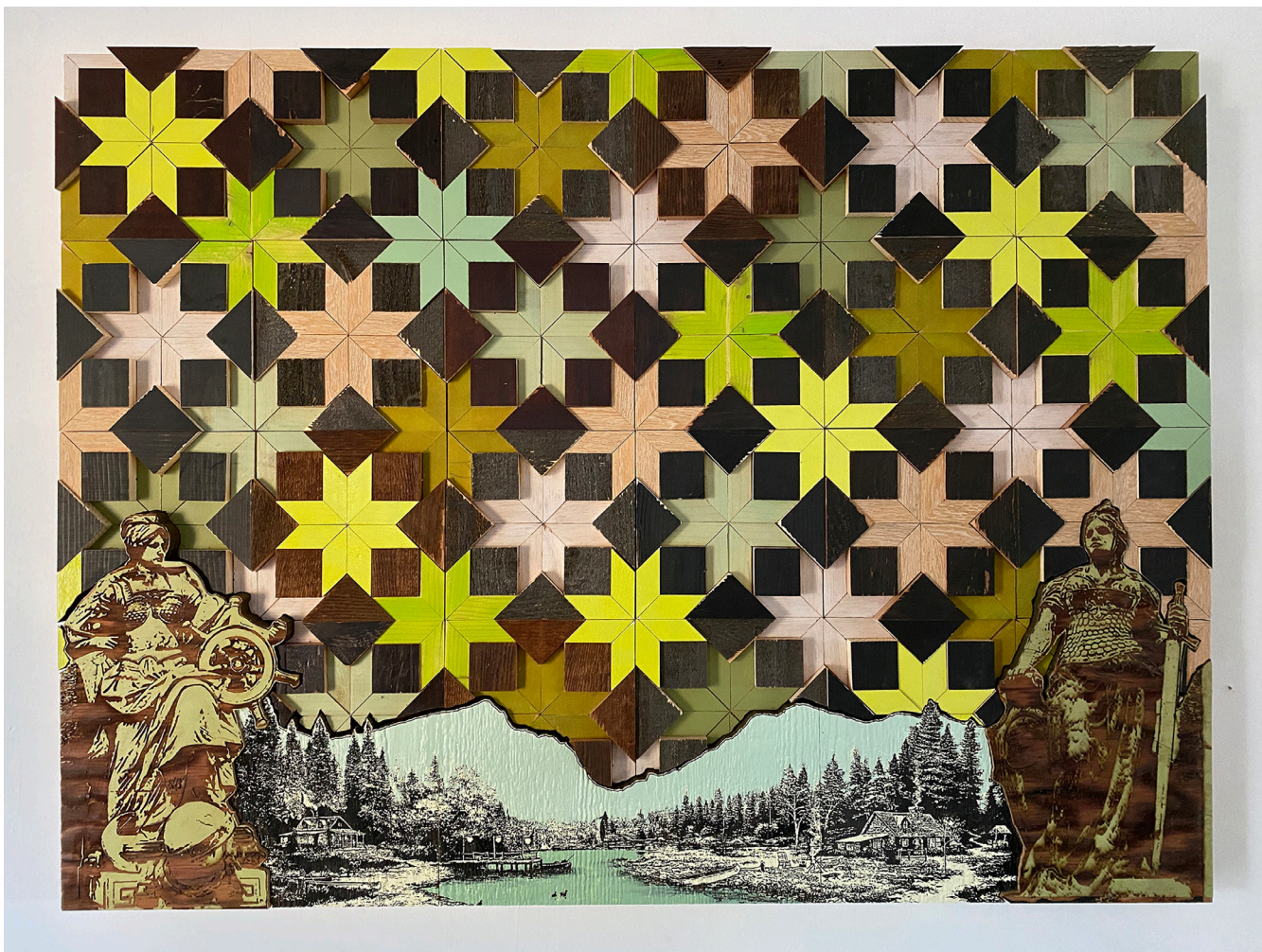
Supportive and creative herself, she was a quilter, wearable art designer, pattern maker, art educator, and later, Vice President of Education at **Quilts, Inc.** She was always asking me to incorporate quilts into my artwork. I couldn’t fathom how a quilt could come into the mix. “Sorry, mom, but I don’t think it could work... that’s your world of creativity, not mine.” Now, years after I stepped away from visual art, I returned. I decided to finally make something based off a quilt, in her memory, as if to say, “See, mom? I did it.”

Surprisingly, it came easy, almost instinctual. It made sense. I was surrounded by quilts most of my life. I was often with her in her studio, watching her sew. I feel like I already knew how the pieces fit together—through osmosis—to make a quilt, the patterns, fractions, compositions. It was exciting and fun. The process involved my love for constructing, my love for materials, and the skills I’d picked up over the years.

The funny thing is, building a non-textile quilt comes together a lot like a traditional quilt. However, instead of using a rotary cutter and ruler, you’re using a tape measure and saws. Instead of a needle and thread, you use glue and nails. For my mother’s memorial piece “Go West, Mary,” I created imagery linked to my memories of her. For example, I drew **Mary Poppins** with a parachute and used it to create a wallpaper-like pattern. My mom loved **Julie Andrews** and the parachute was symbolic of how



Troy Murrah, *Win*, 2020. Mixed media, reclaimed materials, log cabin quilt pattern, 36 x 72 inches. Photo: Troy Murrah.



Troy Murrah, *Grass Ain't Always Greener*, 2021. Laser-engraved variable star quilt pattern, mixed media, reclaimed materials, 36 x 48 inches. Photo: Troy Murrah.

she always made us feel safe. Throughout the whole process, there was never any hesitation. It *flowed*. It was definitely one of those “this was meant to be” moments. I’d just wished she was around to see it.

Like many quilters, my mother loved saving fabrics like our old sports jerseys, shirts and other embellishments to create meaningful quilts. Sometimes, quilters do it out of necessity or a spirit of resourcefulness. For me, salvaging material and seeing which tones and grains will work, with the goal to do the least amount of altering, is another exciting aspect of this art form.

Ultimately, my work stems from the past: the traditions of quilt making, the craft traditions that have been passed down, the

material salvaged from the discarded, the imagery inspired by historical references. Today, I’ve made more than 50 non-textile quilts and it still feels as invigorating as the first 4 x 4 feet memorial piece. I guess mom was right all along.

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—Troy Murrah resides in Torrance, CA and holds a BFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas, Austin. When he’s not making art, he’s making music with his band RESTAVRANT! or enjoying life with his wife Michelle and their three sons. He will be featured in a special exhibit *RECLAIMED: Wood Mosaic Art* at this year’s International Quilt Festival in Long Beach, California.



Troy Murrah with *Good Answer, Good Answer*, 2022. Mixed media, reclaimed materials, flying geese quilt pattern, laser engraved, 96 x 60 inches. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Troy Murrah with childhood quilts, date unknown. Photo: family archives.



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