

Commentary Quilts:

A SOURCE OF EXPRESSION, HEALING & ACTION

by Lorraine Woodruff-Long



Each of these quilts fall into what I call “commentary quilts.” Created as art quilts for the wall, each pointedly addresses issues facing our world. Topics for these quilts include climate change, reproductive rights, gun violence, democracy, and social justice.

Created during the first weeks of the pandemic and lockdown, “Petri Dishes” came into being after I imagined the thousands of medical researchers delving into testing and learning about COVID-19, exploring the impact that it would have on us all, and diligently working to find a cure or vaccine. The creative result was a variety of neutral fabric backgrounds that form a grid. Petri dishes float on each square, created as applique circles from various hand-dyed and commercial print fabrics. Each was hand-appliqued and then embellished with embroidery to mimic the swab of growing virus culture under a microscope. The background is densely free-motion quilted, leaving the petri dishes to pop on the quilt.

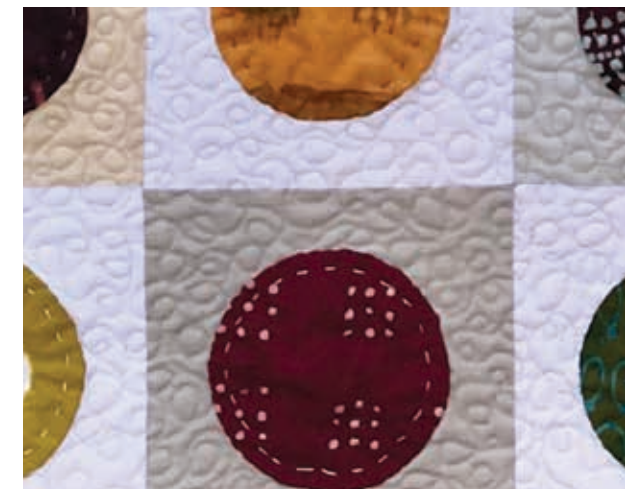
Scientists agree that the climate changes we are seeing are largely caused by human activity, and they are driving sea level rise. This will continue to have a dramatic effect on coastal cities and communities as we know them today. In the U.S. alone, 13 million people could be forced to relocate due to rising sea levels by 2100. As a result, cities throughout the country will grapple with new populations. Effects could include more competition for jobs, increased housing prices, and more pressure on infrastructure networks. “Quilt Melt” illustrates ice caps melting through formal and familiar traditional quilt blocks (current coastal areas) contrasted with the unexpected fluidity and change of a surrealist melting applique (melting ice caps). →



This quilt was inspired by the work of Faig Ahmed, an Azerbaijani artist who is known for his conceptual works that utilize traditional decorative craft and the visual language of carpets into contemporary sculptural works of art. I felt quilts could be similarly expressive in this manner. I created seven traditional blocks, each using 16 half-square triangles in black on white, arranged in an unfinished three-by-three grid. The grid is interrupted by three melting quilt blocks that drip into the remaining space. The piece is free-motion-quilted with lines on the arranged blocks, dripping into echo quilting of the drips and puddles as the eye moves down the quilt.

For weeks, millions of Californians were smothered by smoke from a record explosion of wildfires burning through grass, shrubs, conifer forests, homes, and businesses. Many people cloistered themselves indoors as pollution spiked to hazardous levels, or worse. Smoke transported health dangers to nearly every corner of the state. Even as air quality begins to improve, many remain worried about the long-term health impacts on residents. Experts say these kinds of wildfires will become routine if we do not take significant action to adapt to climate change and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Petri Dishes 34" x 34"

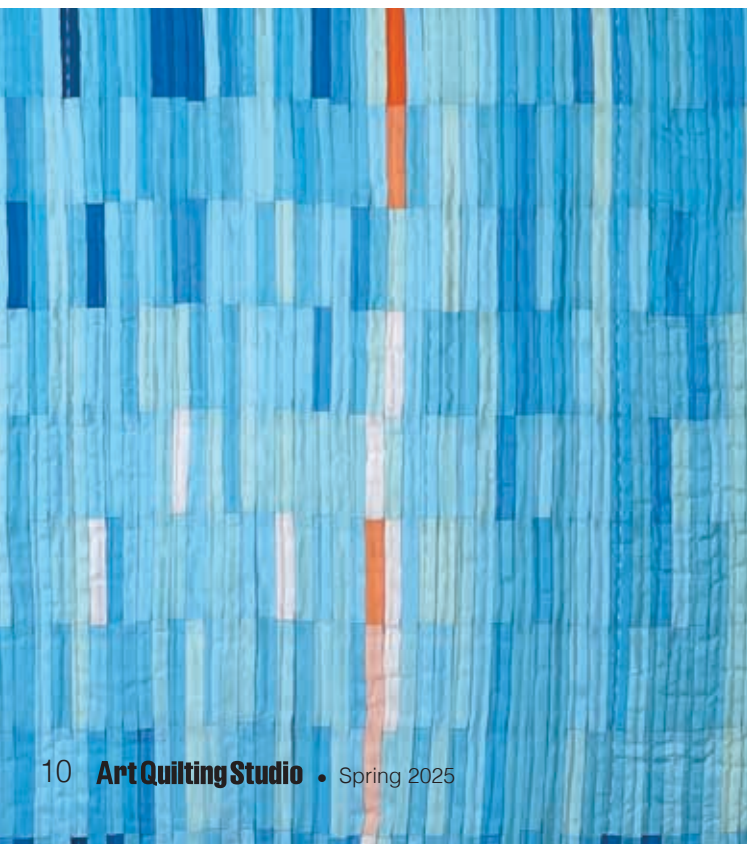


The quilt "San Francisco Air Quality Fall 2020" was made as the fires raged from September 3 (top left) through the first rains of the season on November 8, 2020 (bottom right). Each 4-inch square was modeled from screenshots captured on purpleair.com of the outdoor air-quality index (AQI) of San Francisco: the higher the AQI value, the greater the level of air pollution and the greater the health concern. Air quality ranged from purple/red (hazardous/unhealthy), to orange/yellow (unhealthy for sensitive groups/moderate), to green (good/satisfactory). San Francisco's microclimates and hilly terrain cause great variety within the small 7-mile by 7-mile city, as indicated by the varied confetti and bar colors at any one point in time. This piece was selected to appear in the U.S. Government's official Fifth Global Climate Change report issued by NOAA, Smithsonian, NASA, and more, to illustrate the scientific findings of climate change impacts on air quality. For more info on the making of this quilt, you can check out my blog post that includes photos of the making of this quilt, for visual reference.

The quilt "You're Getting Warmer: Rising Global Temperatures 1850–2022" illustrates the global change in temperature for every year and month between 1850–2022, reflecting the striking trend toward hotter temperatures in recent decades as a result of human-caused climate change. Vertical lines represent temperature data for the 12 months of that year. Blue reflects cooler periods, while red reflects warmer. Darker colors indicate more extreme temperatures in both directions. The color of each ½" x 3" finished piece represents the temperature change of that month and year relative to the 1961–1990 average (beige color, which equals zero).

I made the quilt based off of a yearly/monthly data set courtesy of Professor Ed Hawkins MBE, National Centre for Atmospheric Science, from the University of Reading, U.K. (showyourstripes.info). The data during this 172-year time period reflected monthly ranges from -1.0 to +1.2, which required 22 different colors ranging from blue to red. For more info on the making of this quilt, check out my blog post. →

You're Getting Warmer: Rising Global Temperatures 1850–2022 92" x 36"



CREATED AS ART
QUILTS FOR THE WALL,
EACH POINTEDLY
ADDRESSES ISSUES
FACING OUR WORLD.

SUPPLIES

- Basic sewing supplies
- Batting: cotton
- Fabric: Kona cotton; backing, beige sheet
- Iron
- Liquid fabric stabilizer: (Terial Magic)
- Sewing machine: (Janome - M7)
- Thread: pearl cotton

TECHNIQUE

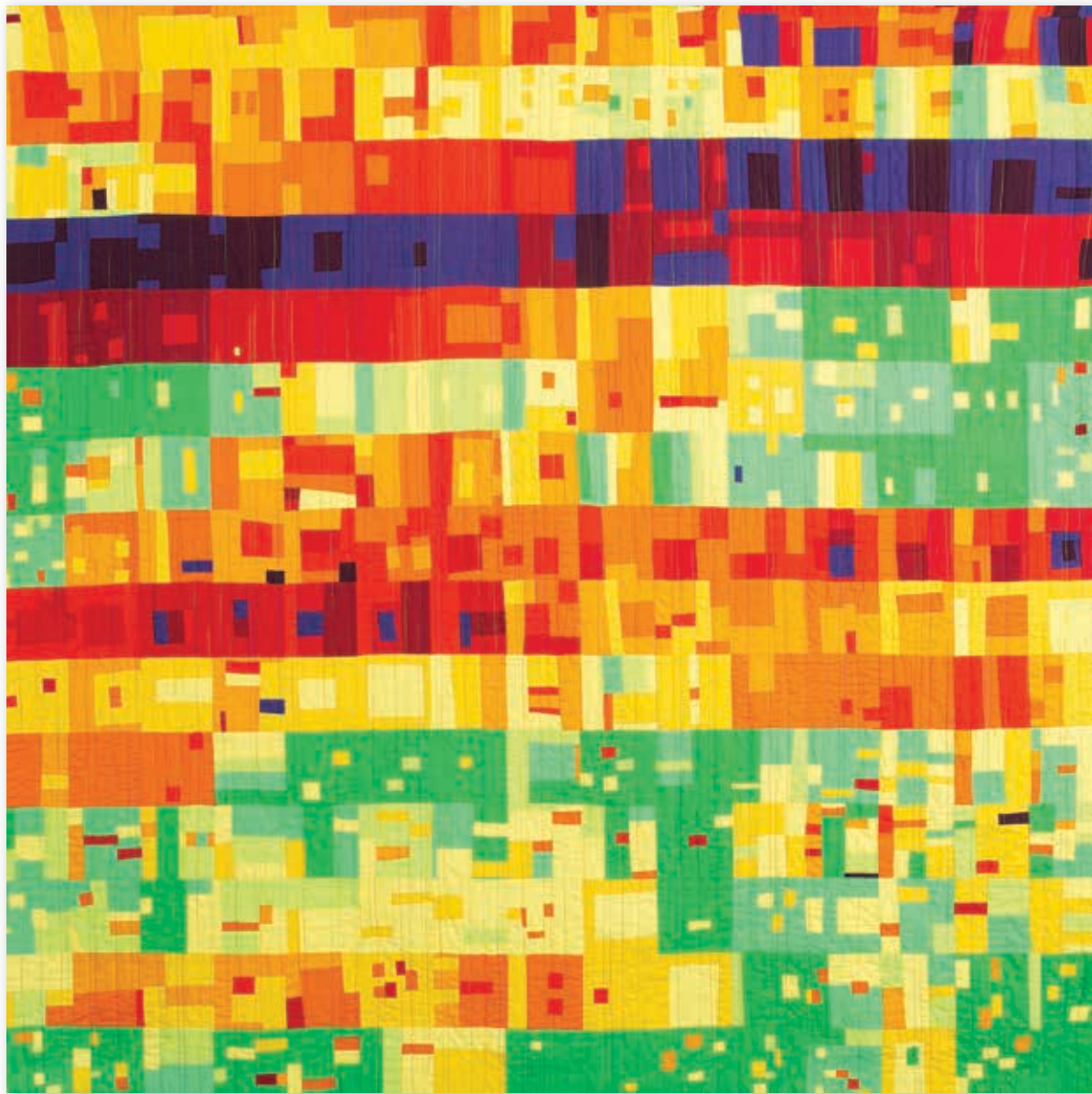
For “You’re Getting Warmer: Rising Global Temperatures 1850–2022,” I counted up the number of each color/number required for the entire quilt, and cut out that number of 1½" x 3½" pieces (unfinished) so once each month was sewn, it would be represented by a 1" x 3" finished piece. I wished to ensure each piece was cut with utmost accuracy and that, once sewn into long 12-month yearly rows, the fabric would remain stiff and straight, so I used a liquid fabric stabilizer. I pre-washed each color fabric, and while still damp, generously doused each pre-cut fabric piece with the liquid fabric stabilizer, which can be sprayed on or dipped. While still damp, I ironed each piece until it was completely dry. The result was fabric with the texture and consistency of paper. I could cleanly cut each color into 1½-inch-long strips, and then cut each strip into individual 1½" x 3½" pieces. This process was done for each of the 22 fabric colors.

I organized each color/number deviation into a little plastic organizing box, and cut all fabric prior to starting. Using the data set, I began sewing each year into vertical columns, starting with January of that year and ending with December. I added gray leader and ender pieces to each year, writing the year of each column on the leader and tacking each year onto the design wall, and continued to sew years/columns from 1850–2022 (for a total of 2,064 pieces!).

To sew the years/columns together, I pressed the seams of the even years going down the column/year, and for the odd years I pressed the seams to go up the column/year so the seams for each month neatly nested together once the columns were sewn together. Once all years were sewn together, I pressed all seams to the same side direction. The liquid fabric stabilizer remained in place to keep the entire piece very firm and easy to manage.

I backed the completed piece with a neutral beige sheet and cotton batting, and quilted in vertical straight lines down the center of each year/column on a tabletop domestic sewing machine. I added visible hand stitching to the columns/years for decades ending in zero every 10 years to help give a subtle sense of time. I purposefully did not want to have any years marked on the quilt so the warming colors, rapidly increasing, told the story of a warming planet.

To finish and bind, I cut off the leaders (with the years marked) and the footers that were attached to each column/year, leaving just the color representing January–December for each column/year. To determine the color of the binding, I averaged the data for each decade and used the resulting deviation/color to create a pieced binding that moves from cooler to warmer as the years progress. The right-side binding is the average of the first year of data, and the left-side binding the average of the last year of data. On the back, I created an embroidered legend as well as a complete artist statement to ensure that wherever this quilt goes, this information will go with it. →



TIP

- I discovered Terial Magic liquid fabric stabilizer while making "You're Getting Warmer." I needed to cut and organize thousands of small pieces by color/temperature to assemble and sew. I wanted the columns/years to be sewn into, and stay into, very straight columns. Prior to cutting, I washed each fabric color, and before drying, sprayed or dipped the fabric into Terial Magic. While it was still damp, I ironed the fabric until dry. The result was fabric that had the texture of heavy paper and was easy to cut into accurate pieces that retained the size and shape desired. Additionally, it prevents fabric from fraying, even after much handling. It is a terrific product to use to cut out shapes for applique. It is water soluble and can be washed out or kept in. This product was the key for me to make this project!

Lorraine Woodruff-Long is a self-taught quilter with a primary focus on color, improvisation, and recycled/repurposed fabrics, living in San Francisco. She loves to create quilts that are unexpected mediums to provoke and communicate about critical issues of our times. She is familiar under her quilting name "Quilting in the Fog." To learn more, visit quiltinginthefog.com and follow along on Instagram (@quiltinginthefog). Lorraine's work has been juried into museum art exhibitions, including the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the California Heritage Museum in Santa Monica, Museo Museum & Cultural Center in Anaheim, the International Quilt Festival in Houston, and QuiltCon. She currently teaches quilting at City College of San Francisco Extension and workshops online and to guilds around the country.