



COVER
ARTIST

CREATING ORDER FROM CHAOS

VIRGINIA GREAVES REVEALS
HOW TO CREATE STRIKING
QUILTED PORTRAITS WITH
THAT MAGICAL SPARK
OF PERSONALITY



Portraiture is about looking into the eyes of a subject, studying their posture and facial expression, and finding that spark of identity that makes them who they are. And for a long time, I thought that the eyes were where all the magic was. Certainly, if you can capture the eyes well you will have succeeded in creating a spark, but I have discovered there is more to it than that. The hands, especially, hold a lot of personality – how they're held, how they've weathered – and facial expression and posture all hold secrets.

I didn't intend to work in fiber, nor really to be an artist, but it was in my bones all along, waiting to come to the surface. When I became an adult and met with trial and tribulation, art was a welcome respite, a creative place to retreat to. If I could create something positive from utter chaos, then it satisfied a drive in me to make things right, to put in order at least a small corner of the universe which I could affect.

My process has always involved photographs. In the beginning, my pieces were largely posturized pieces, very simple. Over time, however, I wanted more. I went from monochromatic pieces, to ones that involved a colour conversation. I deviated from the colours in the photographs and in the end, to get the sense of story correct, I learned how to draw. Many people believe that

working from photographs is merely copying, but the truth is that photographs are not nearly as good as the human eye. There is so much that photographs don't tell us. Using photographs means understanding what information we can use from the photograph and what we need to discard and just draw. The primary object to consider is the eye. Unless it's an extreme close up and very well done, photographs don't hold what is needed to properly depict an eye. But as you go along, you realise how much more there is – the line separating the jaw from the neck, the shade of the collar to separate it from the person's neck, the ears, the deep shadows between the fingers of the hand, the subtle wrinkles around the joints of the fingers.

So, an important part of my process is drafting the piece, working with the photograph, taking some things, drawing others, until I've created a skeleton from which to work. When that is done, I choose my fabrics, another under-appreciated task, which involves combing through my bins of fabrics, finding a set of values in particular colours and using basic colour theory to ensure that the colours work harmoniously together throughout the piece. Then, if I don't have what I need in my stash, I go out searching for it.

The bulk of my time is spent on construction. Compared to painting, fused appliqué is a time consuming process, >>>



Previous page:
Irish Eyes, detail.
Clockwise from top:
Golden Moment, detail;
Loyal; Firecracker;
Golden Moment.



Clockwise from left:
The White Raven,
 (inspired by a photo by
 Mike Yip, the Tower of
 London inspired by a pic
 by Viki Male); *Justice &
 Freedom*; *Justice*, detail;
Worn, (inspired by a photo
 by Dorothea Lange).



“TO CREATE A PORTRAIT THAT INVITES THE INTEREST OF VIEWERS THAT DON’T KNOW THAT PERSON IS ANOTHER THING ENTIRELY. IT’S A SUBTLE DISTINCTION BUT AN IMPORTANT ONE”

but it reminds me of being a child, and cutting out dresses for paper dolls. There’s something therapeutic about cutting intricate shapes and then fusing them together into a cohesive design, watching the portrait come alive. This is definitely my favourite part.

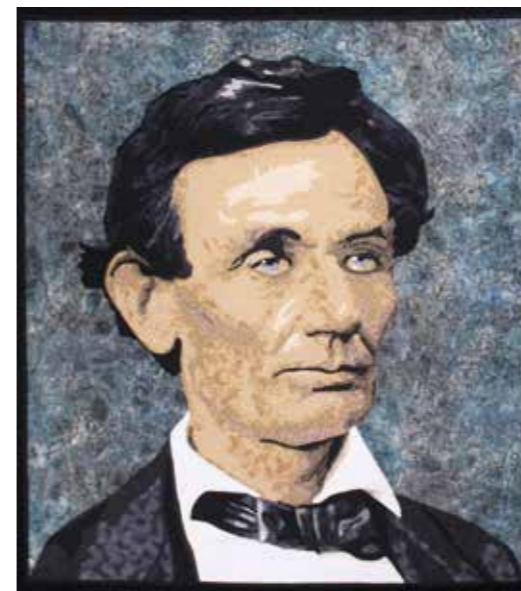
There’s always a point at which you should step back from your piece and be objective and ask yourself what isn’t working. One way that I honed my skill at creating eyes was that they were always failing the all important ‘gut check’. Now,

I don’t start with the photograph for the eyes at all. They must be done from scratch, but even then, they sometimes require several iterations before they’re correct. Often, the hard part is the glimmer in the eye. A couple of times, I have painted the white in the eye, but for the most part, every eye is made of all appliquéd pieces. That way, I can rip it off and start over if it isn’t working. There are subtleties in painted eyes though that I can’t replicate in appliquéd eyes, but using printed fabrics to create images gives a different level of

meaning to the piece that I enjoy.

Over time, my biggest struggle hasn’t been construction. My methods develop constantly and change according to what is needed. My biggest hurdle is models. There are only so many times you can use family members or friends in your pieces. For a time, I used historical figures from copyright free, public domain images. I have even partnered with a wildlife photographer to use one of his photographs as inspiration. But in the end, I resort to my own photographs. When I’m

looking for inspiration for my next piece, if I don’t already have one in mind, I go through my catalogue of photographs. I am getting to the point however, where I have an idea of the image in my mind and then I create a perspective from scratch. I then photograph that image and add a new reality to it. I’ve found that adding symbology to the piece creates an avenue for the viewer to enter the piece. A straight portrait of a person will appeal to anyone that knows that person, but to create a portrait that invites the interest >>



Main image: *The Canary*
 Top to bottom: *Irish Eyes*; *Yvonne In The Garden*, (inspired by a selfie by Yvonne Porcella); *Lincoln*, (inspired by a photo by Alexander Hesler).

of viewers that don't know that person is another thing entirely. It's a subtle distinction but an important one.

Once the piece is done, it's not really done. Textiles require the backbone of quilting, but they also offer another layer of dimension that isn't available in a flat photograph or painting. I have been free motion quilting for years, and even though I've done it for hundreds of hours, this is always the point at which I freeze up. There is a fear at this point that must be overcome. I've never been interested in having someone else quilt my work, so I've had to work on my skills. For me, that involves taking pencil to paper and doodling, practicing patterns, until I find something that works.

My primary figures are generally contour quilted along the planes of their faces, their clothes, et cetera. At one point, I considered following muscles, but I quickly realised that that didn't give me the realistic feel that I was looking for. I wanted to create illusion with stitch, and following the actual planes of the object helps create that illusion. There are points in a piece at which the appliquéd fabric pieces aren't enough to show movement, but quilting stitches properly placed can give the eye the impression of the turn of the collar, the roundness of the cheek, the V in the neck down to the collarbone.

Then, my backgrounds are my playground. I have evolved over time from one primary stitch to sometimes incorporating several that seem to play together. These are a counterpoint to the parallel, echoing lines of the primary figure and add a surprise to the viewer that can see the piece close enough to appreciate the quilting stitches.

In the end, as I push myself farther and farther along the edge of what is possible, to create order from chaos, I bring forth images that are bigger than myself. It is through these pieces that I have a voice, and although people see different things in my work, they see something that speaks to each one of them individually and that is when I know that I have been successful. **W**

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