

Pat Cairns

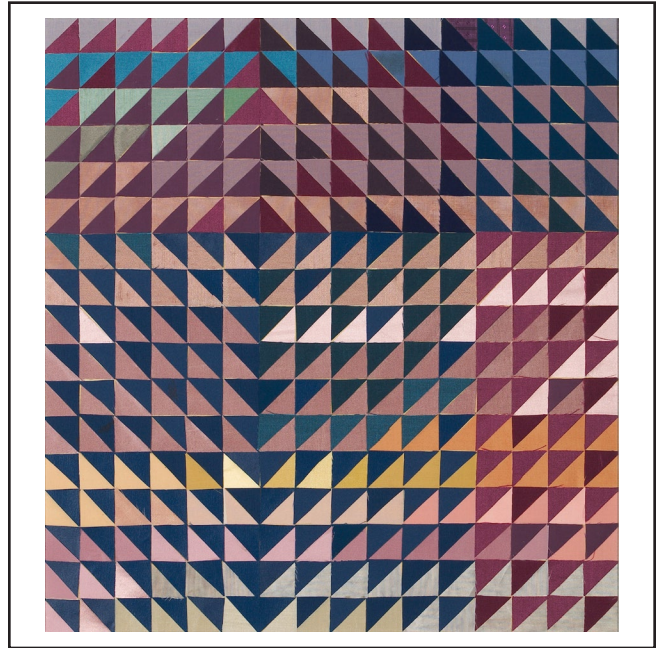
EQUINOX & MOVING CENTRE (MAQUETTE)

Pat Cairns: *Equinox and Moving Centre*
(maquette)

BY BETTINA MATZKUHN

Artist's Statement (1991)

PAT CAIRN



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By Bettina Matzkuhn, 2008

The textile arts community of Vancouver lost a significant artist, mentor, teacher and writer when Pat Cairns passed away in 1996. Born in Vancouver 1929, Cairns had trained and worked as a pharmacist in the 1950s but always kept an interest in visual art. Moving to many different cities across Canada, Scotland and the U.S. for her husband's university teaching, she took courses in a variety of textile techniques. Over four years during the 1970s she attended Handcraft House in North Vancouver.

Pat Cairns
Moving Centre (maquette), n.d.,

collage: fabric on board (43.5 x 40.5 cm) SAG
1989.22.01 © Licensed by CARCC.
Gift of the Artist.

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Pat Cairns, *Equinox*, 1986c., quilt: fabric, thread and batting (163.5 x 163.5 cm) SAG 2003.11.01 © Licensed by CARCC. Gift of Ann Rosenberg. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

Focusing on ceramics and textiles, the school was “a place that inspired people.”¹ Craft technique was taught, but always in service to creativity. Here Cairns learned weaving, surface design (dyeing and printing fabrics), embroidery, quilting, and elements of design.

Cairns’ quilts were exhibited across North America and were represented in international collections, one purchased by the Canadian Department of External Affairs to be presented in Russia. Her book, *Contemporary Quilting Techniques: A Modular Approach* (co-authored with Jean Affleck), was published in 1987 and a second, revised edition followed in 1991. This was before the enormous proliferation of quilting books with candy-coloured patterns; in it, Cairns sought to clarify and streamline basic techniques for her readers. In 1988-89, she exhibited her work in the Cartwright Gallery’s exhibit *Transforming Tradition* with three other Vancouver based quiltmakers and went on to organize a Canada-wide tour for the show.

In the early 1980s, Cairns had a studio and bookstore in Vancouver’s Gastown district. By her own admission, she had an abiding love for both quilting and books. In 1986, she moved to a studio on Granville Island. On the high walls, the public could see her works finished or in progress, and they could purchase or leaf through books on textiles. In a storeroom, she kept her astonishing collection of fabrics in numbered, lidded boxes. A swatch was cut from each length, tucked into a plastic slide pocket with notes on quantity and box number. The swatches were organized by colour in a series of binders.

Cairns’ palette of fabrics was crucial to her artistic vision. The subtle range of colours reflected her deep attachment to the Northwest Coast landscape and enhanced the sense of movement and flickering

light that characterizes her quilts. Cairns’ mature work included strong, simple geometric shapes - most often a variation of a triangle. Her delight in geometry was part of her observant, inquisitive nature: “Geometric repeats appear in many media and in places you might not have considered, such as diamond bracelets in Sotheby’s auction catalog or the Victorian tiled floors of the Royal Museum of Scotland” she writes in the introduction to her book.² For Cairns, geometry could evoke the landscape and sky without the distraction of detail.

Pat Cairns’ preoccupation with colour finds perhaps its closest ties to the small, luminous watercolours of Paul Klee. His paintings of Tunisia from 1914, “in which the landscape is simplified into transparent coloured planes,” search for a way to express the sense of place.³ This distinguishes her work from the almost hallucinogenic patterning of op art which was concerned with visual perception rather than the ambience of a specific place.

Cairns entered quilting at a time in art history that saw the meeting of two significant streams. The rise of feminist art and the blossoming of abstraction were key in launching the contemporary art quilt. Quilts had always gone in and out of fashion; sometimes they were featured in the parlour, and at other times used as horse blankets. Crazy quilts, pictorial album quilts, and myriad traditional variations kept pace with necessity, developments in new materials, and a desire for expression. In the 1960s, quilts enjoyed a revival as the counterculture of the time latched on to all manner of handmade expression. Lucy Lippard writes: “The shared or published pattern forms the same kind of armature for painstaking handiwork and for freedom of expression within a framework as the underlying grid does in contemporary painting.”⁴ Looking at a traditional pattern such as the “log cabin”

(a small square centre surrounded by lengthening strips to form a larger square), one encounters optical variations such as the "Pineapple," "Courthouse Steps" or "Chimney and Cornerstone," all achieved by the same construction but varying the placement of light and dark colours. Contemporary quiltmakers took these variations on a theme and pushed them yet farther by fracturing, expanding or skewing patterns, changing dimensions, and incorporating other media and iconography.

In the quilt, feminist artists saw an emblem for female labour, resourcefulness and aesthetics. In 1971 the exhibit *Abstract Design in American Quilts* opened at the Whitney Museum in New York. Where quilts had "heretofore been seen by most as humble domestic icons, as the logical and bold precursors to the modernist visual statements of abstract painters, they were now presented as art in themselves."⁵ In the early '70s, artist Miriam Schapiro used swatches of fabric and quilt blocks in her paintings, acknowledging the anonymous work of many quilters. Schapiro was one of the founders of the Pattern and Decoration Movement in the late 1970s. The group sought a way to go beyond gender, to acknowledge non-western art traditions (which often make no distinction between art and craft), and longed for an antidote to Minimalism.⁶ Like Cairns' quilts, Joyce Kozloff's patterned paintings or installations using glazed tiles celebrated simple forms with a stunning range of colour. Pattern and decoration was reclaimed as a significant and meaningful aspect of visual art.

In the 1970s and '80s, Faith Ringgold created narrative story-paintings by using the quilt form as both a conceptual underpinning and metaphor for women's creativity. It was in a spirit markedly different from American Modernist Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955). In this work he used a handmade quilt as an

everyday found object to be lumped in with mass-produced sheets and pillowcases as a canvas to receive paint. Ringgold's paintings use the quilt form literally, in padded and pieced surfaces, for its associations as "a collaborative art form and a key site of memory, especially among women."⁷ In the 1970s, Canadian artist Joyce Wieland used textile and quilt techniques extensively to make large, flamboyant works. Some, like *I Love Canada-J'aime Canada* (1970) and *The Water Quilt* (1970-71) were statements of patriotism - others were more personal. In the next decade, Barbara Todd's *Security Blankets* series featured missiles and stealth bombers as quilted elements that carried a powerful political punch. Both Todd's and Wieland's work represented the feminist stance that quilts could be vehicles for a broad range of expression.

In the late 1980s, the titles Pat Cairns' gave to her quilts indicate her surroundings: *Albion Ferry*, *Dawson City Stars*, *Bridge Shadows*. The works *Island in Winter*, *Mayne Island Sky* and *View to the West* all feature a mountain/island shape of dark, richly coloured pieced fabrics and ethereal gradations above, giving the impression of refracted light as the sun rises or sinks. While not overtly political, Cairns was a critical observer. Her piece *Beyond the Bridge: Is that the Future?* shows new skyscrapers forming behind the arches of the Granville Street Bridge. Today she would see the answer is 'yes,' as Vancouver's Yaletown bristles with tall buildings.

Cairns' work followed the same progression as many other international quilt artists: from learning a basic repertoire of traditional patterns to adapting them to a particular vision. The American quilt artist Nancy Crow, "went from reconfiguring historical patterns to redefining what a quilt pattern can be and how it can be constructed."⁸ Cairns' adaptation of triangles and

pieced rectangles to explore structure and light are the evolution of her own expressive language.

Equinox (circa 1986) evokes the time of year between the extremes of winter and summer. The quilt's surface explores many binaries: positive and negative, dark and light, and even perhaps, masculine and feminine. Some of the fabrics are matte and dark like business suits and work shirts. Others are pale and shiny, like bridesmaid's dresses. The quilt contains both motion as the pattern ripples outward and in, and stillness in the soft glow of colour.

Producing a maquette such as *Moving Centre* (n.d.), a scaled miniature, was useful for Cairns' own envisioning process as well as for showing to prospective clients. Any pieced quilt is a construction, each element affecting the other. Her quilts were carefully planned out: which colour sat next to another was crucial. Cairns not only chose her colours very carefully, but paid close attention to the direction of pattern, weave and grain in each individual piece. Within the repetition of triangles are patterns within the fabric itself: faint checks, moiré like wood grain, and stripes, all adding to the activity and tactile richness. Some move across, others up and down. In passing by the quilt, the different fabrics reflect or absorb light, animating it further. The maquette is too small to show the texture of the various fabrics, but it gives the sense of motion and transition that the finished piece will convey. The tiny hairs fraying from the fibre's edges seem more intimate and playful than the larger pieces. Here, one can imagine her with a table full of tiny triangles putting them together slowly, like a puzzle.

Cairns often described a condition of too many ideas and too little time "Pat used to say that she wouldn't live long enough to make all the quilts she wanted to."⁹ Her work was precise, but not fussy,

made almost entirely with a sewing machine. Cairns embraced the machine as a versatile tool and chided women who saw it as somehow sully the tradition of quiltmaking.¹⁰ She was quite aware of where she stood in the broad visual arts continuum: "Pat insisted that she wanted her works to reflect that they were made at the end of the 20th century, not the 19th."¹¹

Notes:

- 1 Personal communication with Diana Sanderson, July 7, 2008.
- 2 Cairns, Pat and Jean Affleck. *Contemporary Quilting Techniques: A Modular Approach*, Vancouver: Alexander Nicolls Press, 1991, page 2.
- 3 www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/319932/Paul-Klee/3939/Artistic-maturity Accessed August 28, 2008.
- 4 Lippard, Lucy. *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*, New York: The New Press, 1995, page 134.
- 5 Broude, Norma and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994, page 6.
- 6 Broude, Norma. "The Pattern and Decoration Movement" in Broude, Norma and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994, pages 208-210.
- 7 Hill, Patrick. "The Castration of Memphis Cooley: Race, Gender and Nationalist Iconography in the Flag Art of Faith Ringgold" in Cameron, Dan et al, eds. *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts*, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art/University of California Press, 1998, page 35.
- 8 Robertson, Jean. "Introduction" in Crow, Nancy. *Nancy Crow*. Elmhurst, Ill: Breckling Press, 2006, page 1.
- 9 Kares, Jean. "Remembering Pat Cairns" in *Vancouver Guild of Fabric Arts Newsletter*, October, 1996, page 11.

10 Cairns, Pat and Jean Affleck. *Contemporary Quilting Techniques: A Modular Approach*, Vancouver: Alexander Nicolls Press, 1991, page 6.

11 Kares, Jean. "Remembering Pat Cairns" in *Vancouver Guild of Fabric Arts Newsletter*, October, 1996, page 11.

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Artist's Statement (1991)

The whole process of designing is a great learning experience and may reveal to you elements of your environment you would not otherwise notice. Geometric repeats appear in many media and in places you might not have considered, such as diamond bracelets in Sotheby's auction catalogues or the Victorian tiled floors of the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. They also appear in such everyday places as your game boards and your kitchen floor. The regularity and flow of geometric designs seem to satisfy some need for order in the human soul.

Source:

Cairns, Cairns, Pat and Jean Affleck. *Contemporary Quilting Techniques: A Modular Approach*, Vancouver: Alexander Nicolls Press, 1991, p.2

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