Joe Cunningham started making quilts after spending 10 years as a musician. His work suggests a free, improvisational spirit.


Crazy Quilts

Joe Cunningham adds a dose of anarchy to age-old quilting traditions.

StoRy By Liz Logan
PORTRAIT BY Mark Tuschman
when Joe Cunningham saw Robert Rauschenberg’s 1955 Bed at the Museum of Modern Art last year, the piece irked him. Rauschenberg had taken an old pillow, sheet, and log cabin quilt, affixed them to wood as if they were a canvas, and splashed paint on them. The accompanying label explained that Rauschenberg was combining abstract painting with everyday found objects. “The quilt being treated as just a humble domestic object bothered me,” Cunningham recalls. “The quilt is a work of art. It burns my ass that something useful can’t be ‘art.’”

In response, Cunningham began cutting up paintings and sewing them into a quilt. His second in the series placed the painted pieces in an arch formation, which frames an intricately quilted portrait of Harriet Powers, a 19th-century slave and quiltmaker. Titled The Imperial Arch of Harriet Powers, the piece is dedicated to her. “I decided to take some humble, domestic paintings and elevate them by making them into a work of quilt,” he says with a smile, adding, “There’s an electric thrill that comes with running a rotary...
cutter across a canvas, because it’s so taboo.”

It’s just one example of Cunningham’s simultaneously reverent and iconoclastic approach to quilting. Even when he’s deconstructing and reinterpreting traditional quilt patterns, his fierce respect for the history of American quilts, a subject on which he’s written or co-written about a dozen books, often comes through in his work.

“The American quiltmakers of the 19th century created many glorious works that we can view as art,” says the San Francisco artist, 62. “I’m trying to do that today. I make blankets that can be used to wrap yourself up against the coldness of the universe. I hope they can also live on the wall of a museum or an art gallery and not look out of place.”

Though he learned quilting by copying historical patterns, Cunningham’s quilts look more like abstract expressionist paintings. In Winter Twister (2010), overlapping lines of black bias tape are top-stitched onto a densely quilted white background in a pattern that suggests they’re being carried by the wind. “If you’re far enough away, even destruction can be beautiful,” says Cunningham, who is often inspired by natural disasters, scientific discoveries, and political upheaval, among other events.

In The Sleeping Protesters of Kiev (2014), vibrant, patterned fabric pieces of all sizes meet at various angles, evoking the unpredictable nature of life behind the barricades during the 2014 uprising in Ukraine. Areas of white fabric interspersed throughout bear the elaborately quilted faces of the sleeping protesters. “These were rough dudes, building the barricades and throwing rocks and stones,” he says. “But when they slept, they looked like angels that had been drawn by Raphael.”

Cunningham’s work often deals with chaos and randomness, so it makes sense that his process is improvisational. He starts with a concept and a vague idea of how the quilt will look, and then starts cutting fabric and arranging it on the design wall in his studio in the Mission District. He uses inexpensive and upcycled fabric, as well as colorful textiles from Africa, which he buys from a fair-trade shop in Fort Bragg, California. “All I need is contrast,” he says. He often uses bias tape to create wandering, organic lines. “When I see a perfectly symmetrical quilt, I think, ‘Where is the craziness?’” he says. “I’m trying to be the craziness.”

Cunningham spent many years hand-quilting, which he continues to do, but now he is enthralled by the possibilities of machine quilting. In 2012 he was an artist-in-residence at quilting machine supply company Handi Quilter, where he used a computerized long-arm quilting machine. A fan of the equipment, he uses software to convert drawings into designs that the machine then stitches; sometimes he quilts freehand.

With the machine, he has created some whole-cloth quilts, on which dense, complex illustrations are drawn with thread: 1871 (2012), which shows a house with a tree in front of it; and Reception of the Quilter (2012), an ironic commentary showing a crowd gathered behind metal barricades to greet a famous quilter. His motivation was to bring a fresh, contemporary approach to whole-cloth quilting. “I don’t like when quilt genres go extinct, or when they go functionally defunct by getting stuck in the
The Sleeping Protesters of Kiev, 2014, cotton, batting, 6.75 x 7 ft.

Cunningham used a computerized quilting machine to stitch portraits of sleeping protesters based on photos showing them swaddled in blankets. The quilt is a response to the 2014 uprising in Ukraine.

Before he started quilting in his mid-20s, he was a rock musician and his goal was to become a writer. He studied for a year at a community college before meeting Gwen Marston, who introduced him to quilting and became his creative partner for 12 years. Marston was writing a book on the prolific American quilter Mary Schafer, and Cunningham collaborated on the project, learning at Schafer’s knee.

“Once he learned the form, he quickly began experimenting and started showing his work in the ’80s; the quilt revival of the ’70s had led to more recognition for quilting as an art form, he says, and that attention helped his career. Since then, he’s made a living by teaching, lecturing, writing books, and, lastly, selling his quilts. The latter remains a challenge, he says, because historically quilts have been seen as products of a woman’s hobby, to be given as gifts, and are not considered art objects.

After more than 30 years of quiltmaking, he still turns to historical quilts for inspiration. Lately he’s been working on a New York beauty, a pattern characterized by quarter-circles with spiky triangles inside them. In his version, yellow triangles form a kind of sun on one side of the quilt, set against pieces of striped red and white fabric that are sewn together at all different angles.

“Like many quiltmakers today, I’m using traditional quilts as a jumping-off point,” he says. “I just try to jump farther, perhaps. I try to jump as far as I possibly can.”