

artist Q&A

A conversation with Priscilla Bianchi

with Vivika Hansen DeNegre

guatemalan artist Priscilla Bianchi's work is a study in vibrant colors, challenging patterns, and pure joy. As a quilt artist, designer, and international teacher, Priscilla creates one-of-a-kind quilts that meld the richness and ethnic appeal of her homeland with the tradition of American quilt making. In her work, brightly colored textiles and Mayan symbolism are intertwined with contemporary quilt designs and high contrast. Once known for using primarily handmade Guatemalan ikats, Priscilla's newer work combines rich colors, bold contrasts, and a variety of commercial fabrics along with traditional textiles. This evolution in artistic style makes for a fascinating story.

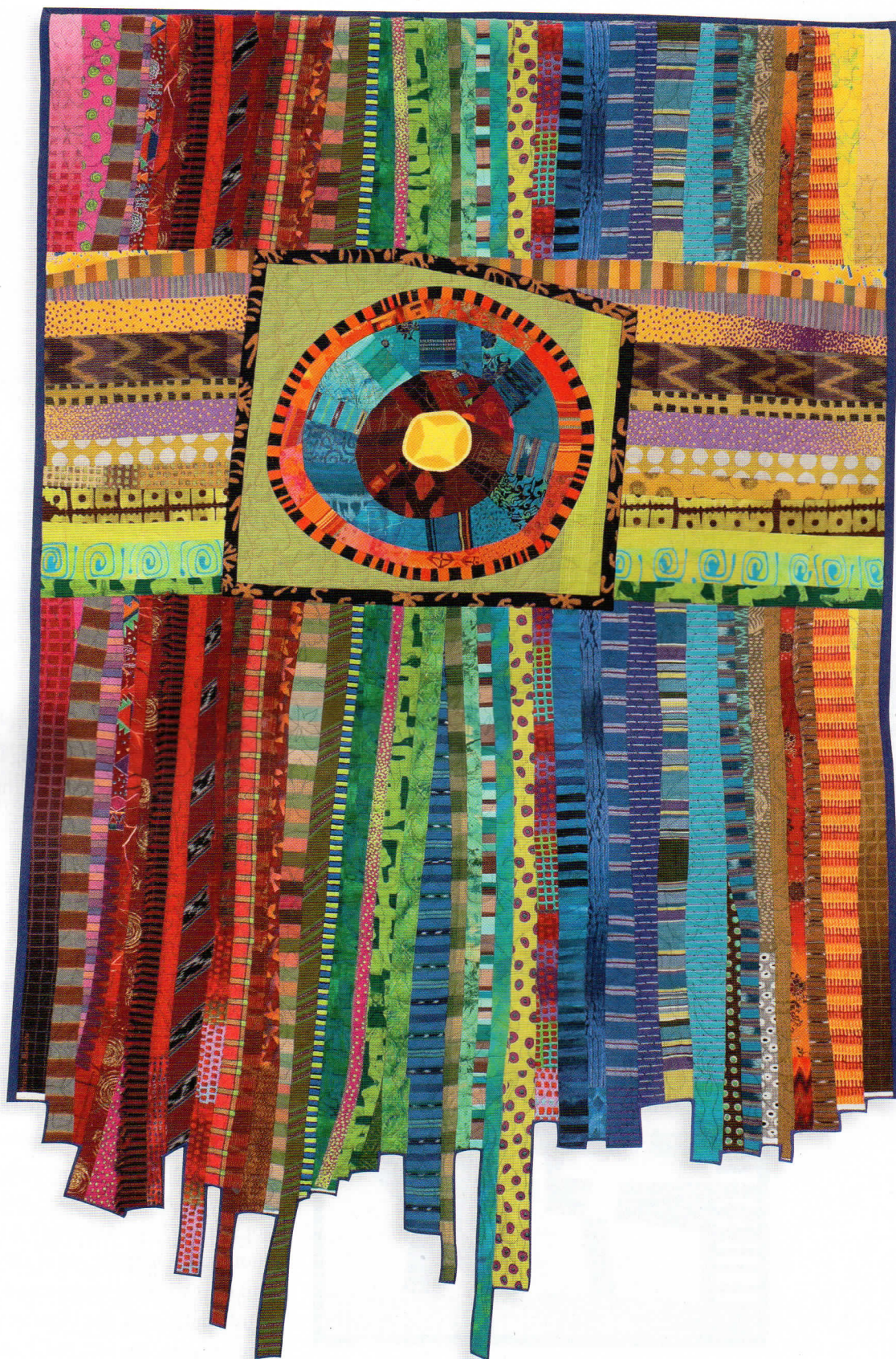


Photo courtesy of Priscilla Bianchi

Vivika: You come from a country with a rich textile tradition, but not a history of quilting, per se. I think of Guatemalan textiles as being mostly woven, with saturated colors and bold texture. Tell me about how you came to embrace quilting as an art with these influences.

Priscilla: I've been surrounded by bright colors since birth: from fruits and flowers to textiles. My mom taught me to sew on a machine when I was four years old, and I haven't stopped since. I come from a very artistic family, so learning about art, enjoying and appreciating beauty, experimenting with different mediums, creating original things and ideas, and working with my hands have all been an important part of my life.

Vivika: Tradition plays a huge role in quilting—even contemporary quilting. Whether it is a recognizable repeating pattern in a bed quilt or a specific type of appliqué, the legacy of quilters from the past lives on in the



"The Big Huipil" • 77" x 50" • 2011



"Mayan Kente" • 56" × 50" • 2013



"Typography with Green" • 26" × 22" • 2014

work we create today. How has this influenced your work? Are you more influenced by the tradition of quilting or by other traditional textiles from your native country?

Priscilla: When just starting out, I fell madly in love with the medium. I realized that quilting had absolutely everything I loved—colors, fabrics, sewing, art, and design—in one package.

From the start I knew I would become a quilt artist, but I had to be honest: I never lived the (American) quilting tradition so I couldn't become a traditional quilter. Instead, I used the same materials and techniques, and added different elements and principles of design. This became my new preferred medium, my new way of expressing myself artistically, and my spirit had a new voice. My color sense is definitely influenced by living in Guatemala with all those bright, beautiful colors. From the very beginning, I used Guatemalan textiles in my work. That in itself made my quilts look very different from traditional quilts.

Vivika: Did you learn from books or from classes?

Priscilla: One day I found a book on charm quilts by Beth Donaldson. I hurriedly started pulling fabrics from my cupboard to make my first quilt—which was finished in about a week—and got started. I couldn't finish it fast enough just to get it out of the way and start working on a second, third, and fourth. Six months later I quit my day job so I could quilt full time. Each quilt I made was

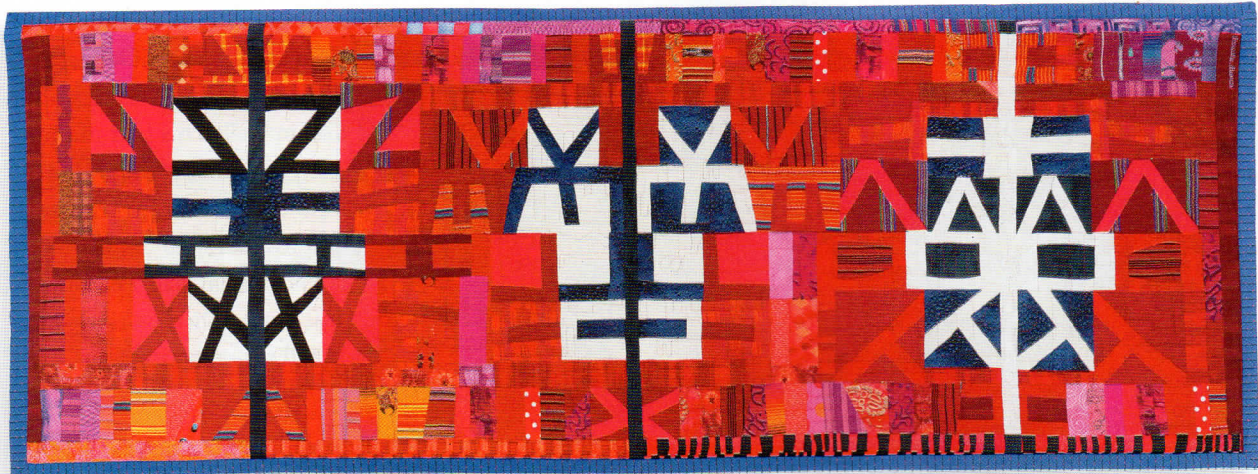


Photo by Andrés Asturias

"Spelling A-R-T in Symbols" • 28" × 74" • 2011

an 'excuse' to learn something new, and each new quilt was better because of the one preceding it. As a result, the more I learned new techniques, the more I departed from tradition. Nowadays I only create original artwork which is vibrant and contemporary.

Vivika: Your professional background includes a degree in Industrial Psychology, and you spent much of your professional career working in Human Resources. How did those skills influence the work you do artistically?

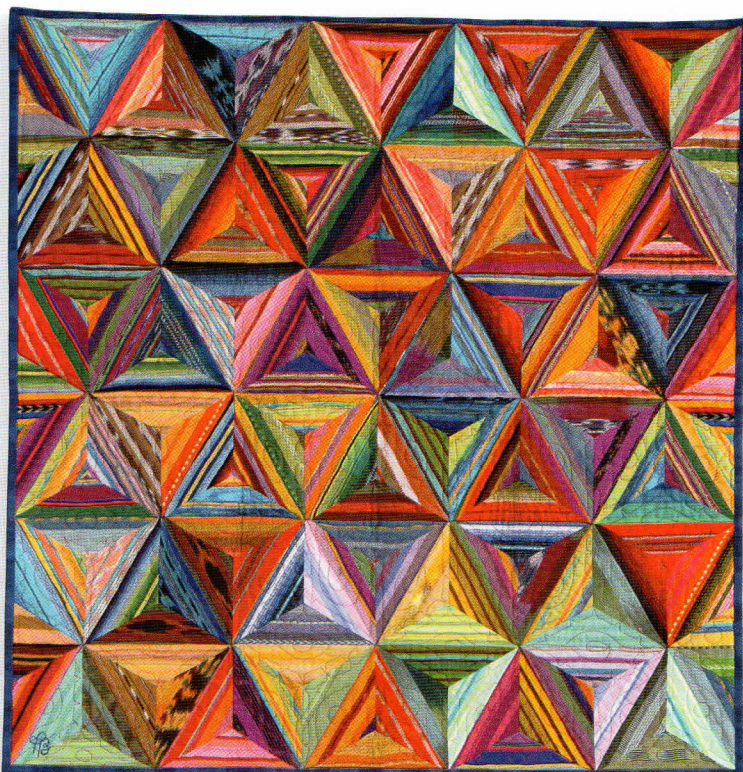
Priscilla: I'm blessed with being a people-person who also enjoys the solitude of my own studio. I find both situations to be comfortable and enjoyable. Not only has quilting been life changing, but it turned out to be very spiritual, and it has helped me grow as a person.

The skills I learned while working in HR were indeed very helpful for my quilting career. When I travel the world to teach and exhibit my work, I enjoy meeting people. While working in HR I also had a lot of experience with marketing,



Photo by Rod Cortés

"Diamonds of Nebaj" • 36½" × 36½" • 2014



"Aguacatan" • 37" x 36" • 2009

and that has been invaluable to promote my career and artwork.

Vivika: The journey of an artist takes many twists and turns. Your earlier work is quite recognizable, not only because of your strong artistic voice, but also because of the textiles you use and your warm color palette. Lately, your work has taken a new turn, with more negative space and an improvisational feel. Tell us about how that transition took place.

Priscilla: I'm a perfectionist and very good at piecing, so at the beginning of my career I truly enjoyed piecing with precision and creating grids in perfect balance. I guess I had a lot of "order" to get out of my system.

The more I quilted and got to know the techniques and materials, the more I started listening to what the fabric was

telling me about where it wanted to go and what it wanted to do. Little by little, my process departed from precision and became more and more spontaneous, more and more intuitive, and more impromptu.

Vivika: Your newer quilts have big impact and are quite different from your precisely planned quilts from a few years ago.

Priscilla: My "Typography" quilts are inspired by the letters found on many native textiles. The letters are not there for their meaning, but for their aesthetic and the negative and positive spaces created unexpectedly when positioned side by side.

I start by cutting freeform shapes that resemble letters to create blocks. Sometimes I make a rough

sketch, but mostly I just start arranging the blocks of letters and pieces of colorful fabrics on the design wall. This part of the process goes quickly, and I don't overthink it. I work spontaneously and improvisationally, and almost never know what size a piece will be until I'm finished working on it. I let it tell me when it's done.

Vivika: Your artistic career has taken you many places. Your artwork has been acquired by numerous collectors and even the Museum of Arts & Design in New York. You've written books, designed fabric, and even been honored with a stamp collection from your native Guatemalan postal service. Now that you've made an artistic leap to this new style of art quilts, tell us where you are going next.

Priscilla: I'm writing a third book about my artwork and artistic career. It will be published locally and distributed internationally. As to my work, I'm creating a new series of quilts based on our native huipiles (wee-PILLS), the Mayan woman's blouse which is the most distinctive and adorned element of the traditional indigenous costume. I'm not sure yet, but this new series may turn out to be a mixture of my previous precise geometric piecing and my new liberated style. 🌟

To learn more about Priscilla Bianchi, visit priscillabianchi.com.