

# Dancing into design

by Beth Carney

**A**s I sat down to create an artist's statement about my artwork, it became clear to me how much dance has influenced my fiber art compositions. My journey as a dancer began with studying the classic technical forms of dance and then branching out into improvisation and dance composition. Around the time I received a BFA in fine arts at Ohio University in 1973, I also began quilting, using traditional styles and techniques. The traditional study of both art forms gave me the tools of the craft necessary for discovery, allowing my art to grow in whichever media I chose. Many painters followed a similar path, beginning their careers by studying and copying the masters, thus learning the basic art form before branching out on their own. My frustration with conventional quilting grew out of the need to go beyond the orderly repetition of the traditional forms. I began to realize it was time to start viewing my quilt art from a different perspective.

In the summer of 2001, I signed up for Nancy Crow's improvisation class. As I struggled to master the different techniques, keep up with the workload and understand what makes a composition strong, a lightbulb went off in my brain. I was doing exactly what I have done as a dancer and choreographer: improvisation. This involves working to such exhaustion that the body takes over from the mind in order to explore a given idea and move beyond the comfort zone of your natural movement. I saw the need to stop thinking and just do! Thus began my journey to join the concept of orderly repetition with freedom of movement, and I began to work on a series entitled *Structured Chaos*.

I see my design wall as an empty stage waiting for the dancers to begin, creating a new exciting piece that draws the audience in. It is a stage in

## Beth Carney – Artist's statement

I take my life experiences as a dancer, choreographer, and director, melding them together in my art, constantly looking at the world with an openness to see different perspectives with focus and discipline. Each piece of me creates an essential element in my artwork. The dancer explores the movement, flow, and paths that your eyes follow as they dance around the artwork. The choreographer uses the line, spatial relationships between the parts and the play of color to create an image for the audience. The director creates the structure and controls the chaos.

which the relationship between the dancers is an important element. How and when they move help create a work of art.

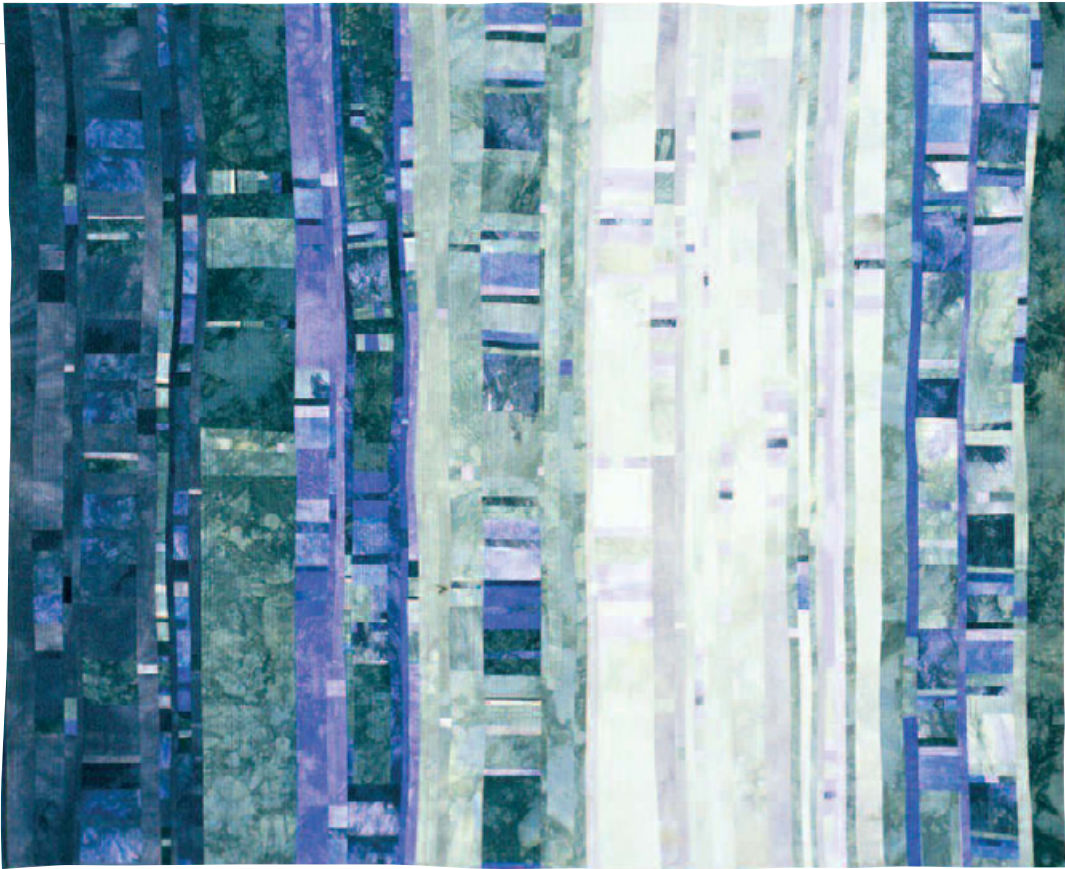
Once I have improvised on the wall with line, shape, and color, just as a dancer explores the possibilities of the human body and what it can

express, I become aware of what's working and what's not. That's when I truly begin to work with intent and focus. As a dancer, I am thinking in terms of space, timing, and energy; as a textile artist, I begin to focus on unity, repetition, and balance in my quilt composition.



photo by Karen Bell

*Structured Chaos 10*, 36" x 34", © 2007 Beth Carney



### ***Structured Chaos 14***

53" x 64"

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Space is the where the dancer goes. It is about path, direction, height, size, line, shape, and the relationship between these parts. I take one shape that becomes a dominant feature and play with various elements of space. The level and size begin to give the piece depth, motion, and rhythm, as well as a path for the eye to follow. As I add value, I begin to be aware of foreground and background. I then think about the elements of art and design, constantly asking myself "what if?" questions.

Timing is about speed and how it affects motion. Thinking in dance terms, my focus moves to accents, rhythms, and the dynamics of the piece. Color, size, and repetition can be part of the accent making certain shapes pop out, creating motion in the piece. Varying the size and placement creates a rhythm that resembles different notes on a page, forming a melody that is beginning to make my piece dance.

Energy is what gives the artwork life. It is how the movement is performed. Is my movement free-flowing

or bound, heavy or light, filled with emotion or devoid of it? Ordinary gestures or shapes become art by extending the energy beyond the natural boundaries of the human body, or canvas. Color, including black and white, becomes the energy and emotion behind the piece. I also use color as a way to abstract reality, drawing from nature, creating a visual memory of a place or a time.

A performance is viewed and then gone, seen as a fleeting moment. Visual art is something concrete you can revisit; however, both leave the viewer with a visual trigger that evokes something within.

My *Structured Chaos* series reflects my journey with the relationship between the visual and the performing arts. *Structured Chaos 10* evokes a rainy day with the trees surrounded by a foggy mist. Glimpses of spring greens and browns peek through windows. The long thin vertical lines represent rain, making orientation of the composition another important design factor. I am trying to capture that fleeting moment in time when

you feel that winter is beginning to melt away and spring is beginning to emerge.

As *Structured Chaos 14* evolved, I discovered that its textures and colors evoked memories — the light, crisp snow against the blue sky, the muddy melting into spring. I thought of the dark blur of the rain, gloomy yet comforting, contrasting with the clear vivid colors of emerging growth.

Looking at art with a dancer's eye also confirms the importance of good technique and a strong understanding of the elements of art and design. Connecting dance with quilting is more than creating a dancer on the fabric. It goes beyond the movement of the rotary cutter as it glides across the fabric, even if you are dancing in front of the design wall to the pure voice of Andrea Bocelli. It is a joyful dance between the blending of art forms that I love, allowing me to grow and explore as an artist. ▼

*SAQA active member Beth Carney is a quilt artist. She lives in Yonkers, New York, and is a member of The Salon Seven. Their web site is [www.thesalonseven.com](http://www.thesalonseven.com).*