




INSPIRING READS

QUILTING OUTSIDE THE LINES



Go your own way:
Becca Parker
speaks to three
experts about
improv piecing
and how to
harness its power
for disruption
and delight



All images on this spread: For Annabel, improv quilting is a way for her to play around with shape and colour in her designs

Right: Annabel plans out the composition of her improv pieces by gathering colours and bringing together panels on her design wall



Part of the beauty of quilting lies in precision. Isn't there a wonder to the neat geometry of a finished quilt and the way the fabrics, shapes and colours come together in harmony? This creative destination can be reached by one of two paths. Makers can follow a pattern, or throw out the map and operate on instinct. The latter is known as improvisational quilting, or 'improv quilting': a go-with-the-flow approach to the craft we know and love.

Make it your own

Improv is essentially patternless piecing – generally referring to any patchwork done without instructions or a specific pattern. Beyond that, like any art form, it's very much up for debate. "I think defining something that is open to interpretation can be tricky," says Nicholas Ball, author of quilting book *Inspiring Improv* who shares his improv quilts on his Instagram, @quiltsfromtheattic. "With many quilters working in an improvised style, I would say that sewing in a more liberated, organic way is what the technique means to me," he explains. "There is often a misconception that improv quilting is all wonky and utilises scraps. Whilst this can be an excellent way to make a quilt, my approach is to use a little forethought before I begin sewing, yet also be open to ideas of change and spontaneity along the way."

"It is hard to get any two quilters who improv to agree on a definition of improv," admits US artist and mathematician Chawne Kimber (@cauchycomplete on Instagram). She likens the practice to jazz. "A jazz musician spends a lot of time learning traditional music genres so that they may artfully riff on tradition. That is, they start with a set of rules that they follow while pushing the boundaries of those rules using skilful and aesthetically pleasing variations on the rules."

This paints a picture of improv quilting as an intersection where technical skill meets creative freedom. The exact definition may remain hazy,

and ultimately subjective, but the results speak for themselves. Improvised quilts stand apart as one-of-a-kind compositions, imbued with meaning and emotion entirely unique to their quilter.

Pursuing the personal

Piecing without a pattern amplifies a quilter's individual voice. Every choice, from fabric and colour to the composition itself, is down to the maker. For author, quilter and fabric designer Annabel Wrigley (annabelwrigley.com), improv quilting is a free pass to lean into her creative passions. "I have always enjoyed working without patterns," she says. "Improv quilting is a way for me to play with colour and shape, with a goal to create something beautiful and emotional. Playing with colour really does that for me! From when I was little, I always tended to find my own way of doing things, the need to be a little bit different."

A freedom of expression is opened up when patterns are abandoned, giving much more space for emotion. For Chawne Kimber, this makes improv quilting a great vehicle for the powerful messages in her work.



All images: Chawne takes inspiration from her family history and the quilts of her ancestors to create works which address racism and social justice issues

Above and right: Cotton Sophisticate is Chawne's favourite of her own quilts. This variation on postage stamp and Log Cabin quilts features the powerful quotation from Eartha Kitt: "In essence, I am a sophisticated cotton picker"

"I am an artist who tries to create novel designs, although each design often arises from traditional quilts of the past... My quilt ancestors made improvisational quilts". She notes that though her family is not from Gee's Bend, the quilts of this collective are very similar to her great-grandmother's quilts that resided on her bed growing up. "My messages arise from my identity as a Black woman in the 21st century, which is very much still tied to the lives lived by my family in the highly untidy history of [the US]. This is a dialogue in cotton, a thread through time."

Informed by quilt traditions and the textile history in her own family, Chawne's work often addresses racism and social justice issues. Cotton Sophisticate is a favourite among her quilts. "It is a fantastic variation on postage stamp quilts and Log Cabins that required colour theory and precision piecing. It also included improvisational lettering to form a quotation from Eartha Kitt that contains a multitude of meanings."

Sewists may be drawn to improv quilting for different reasons, depending on their own creative motivations, but the common thread is a desire for producing something unique. This unfettered freehand process has unlimited scope for creativity and exploring the deeply personal. What fires up Nicholas about improv piecing is the creative freedom and the idea of the unknown. "With improv, nothing is set in stone – things evolve, fabric gets added or taken away, and the whole process is very much a twisting, turning journey of creative exploration. The appeal of this method came from the mundane feelings I had about traditional quilts I was making at the start of my quilting career. Whilst I enjoyed the process of making, the resulting work was a little uninspiring. I turned to improv as a way of making quilts that were truly unique."



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Order from chaos

So how does it work? Annabel starts by gathering colours and putting together panels in different designs. "I then pull from them, laying things out on my design board until I feel like it is singing to me. Sometimes I can be looking at it for days before I settle on the composition. I love working this way – when I put too much planning into it I can really second guess myself too much!"

"My favourite piece was a wall hanging in my first solo show. It was my first time really playing with some different techniques. I was inspired by a vintage Pucci scarf that I had seen, and I wanted to try and recreate that feeling. I am also a big fan of playing with a wonky checkerboard design; I feel like that little bit of wonkiness adds great movement to a piece."

While there may be joyous abandon in the freedom of improv quilting, it always needs an anchor. Nicholas and Chawne agree that skill and consideration are key.



"It can be some of the more skilful piecing one may encounter," Chawne asserts. "Almost all edges are cut on the bias, and you can find yourself in blind alleys with partial seams. Most of all, it can sometimes take the boldest acts of destruction to lead to the most profound design outcomes. It takes study and practice and courage to get good at it."

Inspiration is the anchor for Nicholas' improv quilts. "More often than not my ideas come from something I have seen. I love flora and fauna and have made quilts inspired by vegetables, fish, leaves, and trees. There's something about the organic which sits so well with a less rigid and precise way of piecing. I will sometimes start with a basic sketch to plan out the piecing. Such a sketch isn't a blueprint, but rather a rough guide to what will go where."

"With improv, there are no specific sizes or cutting lists, so the next step is curating a fabric pull with a healthy amount to work with. It's never quite known if I will use it all or need more! Next, the piecing begins quite spontaneously. I have an idea about which techniques are best suited to which parts of the quilt before I start, but this part of the process is where there is the most back and forth – adding, trimming, introducing subtle lines and shapes, all with only a vague idea of where it is heading. There are both lightbulb moments and headaches along the way."

Trust the process

The concept of piecing without a pattern can be intimidating. Nicholas finds that most new improvisers struggle with the lack of specificity. "There are no written instructions which tell you to piece A to B, and then C to D. You are very much navigating the improv path alone," he says. "As we work more in this way, we build up skills and techniques onto which we can fall back, but at the start, everything is new. There's a hesitancy to cut in that curve or to pull that fabric to

Right: Some of the quilters in Gee's Bend with American painter Amy Sherald. Photo by Alex Ronan 2018

Below right: Rail Fence quilt by Gee's Bend quilters on display



THE QUILTERS OF GEE'S BEND

Improvisational quilting isn't a new concept. As artist Chawne Kimber alluded to, the celebrated quilters of Gee's Bend have been working in this way for decades. They are a community of African American makers based in rural Alabama who are best known for their tradition of abstract and fiercely individual quilts. Quilting in that remote location began with enslaved women in the 19th century. Many residents of Gee's Bend are direct descendants of those who worked there in the Pettway cotton plantation. What was born out of frugal necessity and resourcefulness became a means of self-expression that continues to this day. The freeform pattern and piecing techniques, sometimes termed 'my way' quilting, were passed down through generations. Experimentation remains one of the defining qualities of the quilts from Gee's Bend, with hand stitching and the use of found materials still prevalent to this day. They are beautiful examples of the power and emotion of improv work. The striking quilts produced in Gee's Bend, then and now, are an important part of contemporary art history. Many of them are in permanent collections in galleries worldwide.



Right: Marlene Bennett Jones, *Triangles*, 2021. Denim, corduroy, and cotton, 205.7 x 157.5 cm. Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta. © 2023 Marlene Bennett Jones / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London. Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio



Left: Martha Jane Pettway, "House Top"—nine-block "Half-Log Cabin" variation, c. 1945. Corduroy, 182.9 x 182.9 cm. Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta. © Estate of Martha Jane Pettway / ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022. Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio



All images: Nicholas often takes inspiration from nature, finding that the organic forms pair well with the improv style of piecing

Nicholas' approach to improv quilting involves a little bit of forethought, whilst also allowing for spontaneity along the way!



fit. This confidence will come with time, so to avoid roadblocks early on, my advice is to trust the process."

Practically, there are also one or two hints to keep in mind when embarking on an improv journey. "Start small," advises Nicholas. "Make a placemat or small wall hanging to practice piecing organically before beginning a full-size quilt." Annabel likes to embrace traditional piecing methods where she can, "adding hand appliqué when the curves are super curvy. Sometimes when I am sewing a curve onto a stripe or a check, I choose to appliqué so that the background design doesn't get distorted in any way".

Fundamentally, it's about learning to let go. "Give yourself time to play creatively," Nicholas suggests. "Allow fifteen minutes to sew aimlessly, scrap to scrap, without worrying about what they will become. This freedom to piece in a liberated way will help the traditional part of your quilter's brain learn to embrace improv more easily."

Annabel's best advice for beginners? "Just go for it! Throw the rules out the window and experiment with scraps in colours that make you feel warm and fuzzy. If your points don't match up, that's ok! If you create something that you don't love, just cut it up and keep playing! Sometimes those mistakes turn into beautiful little accents in your next piece."

"Just try it," urges Chawne. "Then study quilts: new ones, antiques, and all genres. Learn about quilts. Listen to your jazz predecessors so you may hear the traditions in order to have the skills to create variations that sing true."



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WINNING WITH IMPROV

Improv reigned supreme at QuiltCon 2023, storming the categories with a range of stunning and striking quilt designs...



BEST IN SHOW

BULLSEYE BY
BARBARA STRICK
(BARBSTRICKQUILTS.COM)

EXCELLENCE IN DESIGN

SAWTOOTH NO 3:
BETELGUESE BY
SIMONE SYMONDS
(@SALTY.PLUM)



IMPROVISATION

TURNIP BY
SUSAN J. LAPHAM
(@SUSANJLAPHAM,
SUSANJLAPHAM.NET)

