

[Note: For the past twenty years, Deb Cashatt and Kris Sazaki have collaborated as the Pixeladies. They are retiring the brand in October 2023, and many friends and colleagues have been asking what's next for them. Sazaki is returning to her first love of writing, including articles in the *SAQA Journal* and an article to be published shortly in the final issue of *Art Quilt Quarterly*.]



Deb Cashatt

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Charting her own course

by Kris Sazaki

Deb Cashatt has embarked on a solo career, with work that is distinctive from her work under the Pixeladies name. Yet, she brings the same passion and commitment to the art as she did as a Pixelady. Having experimented with many art media over the years, Cashatt lets her interests guide her art. She remains fascinated with block printing, but her artistic course has not been so straightforward.

In 2019, Cashatt joined the Cloth in Common art group organized by fellow SAQA member Karol Kusmaul. Cashatt initially saw this group as an avenue to

work abstractly. Her 7" *from the Midday Sun* is an example of this type of work. Hand-quilted, it is the result of drawing while listening to live music as well as the song *Smooth* by Santana. Cashatt was hoping to continue this mode of creation in Cloth in Common. Unfortunately, she found that she could not work abstractly within the time constraints of the group. Working in this style has shown Cashatt that her strongest asset is color.

The Covid-19 pandemic actually helped Cashatt develop her own style. During those many months of isolation, she pieced to keep herself occupied in her studio since collaborating was not possible. Piecing brought Cashatt back to sewing, and, having come of age sewing clothes, she reveled in that activity. Around the same time, she discovered the *100 Days Project*, a SAQA Special Interest Group. She began her participation by making her favorite pattern, the Greek key meander. Once the keys went on the design wall, they started to take on the shape of everyday—and not so everyday—things. Tricia Wyard-Scott, a member of the group, once commented that some of Cashatt's pieces looked like aliens. That set her off on a new creative path: random piecing could become something tangible.



7" from the Midday Sun
40 x 40 inches | 102 x 102 cm | 2018

Cashatt’s main focus is now piecing. She still tells stories in cloth as she did as a Pixelady, but in a more stylized way, intentionally avoiding the use of text. By combining the words “symbol” and “graphic” Cashatt created her own word to describe these artworks: “ymbographic.” The seemingly casual placement of symbols actually provides the viewer with a language to “read” the quilt or to make up a story. For Cashatt, the use of text that features so heavily in the Pixeladies’ work was more an aesthetic element than actual writing. These symbographic quilts build on that notion.

Working improvisationally until objects begin to appear, Cashatt then purposefully creates new objects that thematically go with the improvised pieces. She filled her earlier pieces with solids and prints (commercial or of her own design), but the allure of pure solids to enhance her symbographs soon took hold.

Working with only two colors, the iconic blue and yellow of the Ikea furniture store (and Swedish flag), Cashatt realized with *Pre-Kāya* that she could flip background and foreground colors to great effect. *Pre-Kāya* sends viewers through a maze similar to that of an actual Ikea store—the title is a play on pre-writing iconography and the Swedish

pronunciation of the store—where shoppers get lost among the available wares. The viewers are even rewarded with Ikea’s famous meatballs, if they let their gaze wander long enough along the maze.

Putting on My Face developed Cashatt’s concept of symbography further. Responding to the prompt *Faces* in her Cloth in Common group, Cashatt conjured up memories of her grandmother and how she would say she was putting on her face. Symbographs abound in a limited color palette: a hairspray can, false eyelashes, a compact, lipstick, comb, brush, mascara, and nail polish. Cashatt’s grandmother was not known for wearing makeup, but that’s how prompts work for Cashatt. An innocent word or thing takes on new meaning. Many of the items include her favorite shape, the Greek key. They even create the different powders of the eye shadow palette. Avoiding curved lines in her symbographs, Cashatt is still able to evoke movement in the placement of line, with the viewer’s eye moving easily from beauty item to beauty item.

Cashatt’s work using prompts can definitely yield quirky results. For the prompt *Cell*, Cashatt’s immediate thought was cell, as in prison cell, and *Folsom Prison Blues* was born.

Folsom Prison Blues

40 x 43 inches | 102 x 109 cm | 2022



Pre-Kāya

48 x 48 inches | 122 x 122 cm | 2021



Putting on My Face

40 x 35 inches | 102 x 89 cm | 2021





Deb's Building

40 x 30 inches | 102 x 76 cm | 2022



The Center #2

40 x 35 inches | 102 x 89 cm | 2022

It's perhaps the best example of how Cashatt creates graphic elements, intuitively combining them into rectangular containers suggestive of comic books and Chinese curio boxes. In *Folsom Prison Blues*, her jail cells are connected by mysterious pathways, stairs, and ladders. Folsom's recognizable tower keeps the jail in its sights. Although Cashatt avoids the use of text, it hasn't stopped her from adding the title to this piece: think Morse code.

Color is integral to Cashatt's work, as can be seen in her two versions of *The Center*, the fifth tallest skyscraper in Hong Kong. Situated across Victoria Harbor from the hotel Cashatt has stayed in during several visits to Hong Kong, she has often commented on the mesmerizing lights on the building, which rotate through the color spectrum every evening. Focusing on pinks and purples in *Deb's Building* and greens and blues in *The Center #2*, Cashatt shows how the same color palette can occupy the background as well as the foreground. It's in the critical placement of shape with color that one can differentiate building from background. Quilted with metallic thread, the buildings take on the sparkle the actual building provides in the Hong Kong skyline. The Center's triangular protrusions accent horizontal lines that also change color at night. Cashatt somehow manages to reference these iconic shapes without recreating them exactly. And it's her new shapes within each building—the symbographs—that inspire the viewer to ascribe a different mood to each differently colored building.

Would not another version of *The Center* tell yet another story?

Cashatt's use of color hits new heights in *Wall of Polish*. She often finds inspiration in everyday objects, but here she makes nail polish bottles extraordinary. Working with more than forty colors of red and changing the bottle shapes and necks, it seems as if Cashatt is able to make each of the 111 bottles of polish take on their own personality, almost like a visual anthropomorphism. One could, for example, read the bottles as dressed up revelers after a night of celebrating, with one very tipsy partygoer at the bottom. When asked if she dyes her own fabric, Cashatt gives an emphatic no! She has discovered 100 percent cotton solids at Art Gallery Fabrics. They remind her of a good broadcloth, unlike Kona cottons, which she finds stretch too much for the small pieces that she constructs.

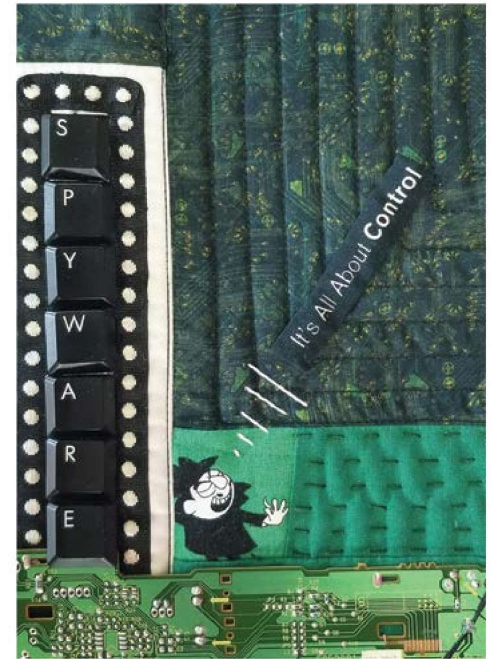
Another way in which Cashatt has developed her own voice is in the thirteen approximately 5 x 7-inch computer quilts she has been making. For her, these small pieces are a fun way to play with the parts she's rescued from old computers and other found items to tell a story. Many of these computer quilts explore issues that are inherent in technology: identity theft, software security, and spyware. *Spyware* stands out because it combines not only different computer parts but also shows off Cashatt's love of hand stitching, especially her favored running stitch. *Spyware* also includes Cashatt's homage to one of her favorite cartoon characters, Boris Badenov, making this one of her more personal computer quilts.

Cashatt's most recent piece, *Faded Glory*, also combines a board from a CD player in an old computer with an image of a couple, a brooch, and a brand name clothing tag. All the elements emphasize a grand era now gone. The couple is even looking back, as if viewing their own faded glory. One might be inclined to see this piece as Cashatt's farewell to the Pixeladies. The "Jetzt ist's vorbei," (German for "it's over now") might point to how she and Sazaki met at their university German Club. They are known to have often included German text to their collaged pieces, so adding German to this piece creates a hidden message.

see "Deb Cashatt" on page 33



Wall of Polish
40 x 32 inches | 102 x 81 cm | 2023



Spyware
8 x 6 inches | 20 x 15 cm | 2022



Faded Glory
6 x 8 inches | 15 x 20 cm | 2022

Deb Cashatt

from page 13

When asked what Cashatt will take away from her years as a Pixelady, she said it is the “hyperorganization” of the studio, from accounting and inventory tracking to draft layouts of artwork. As proof of this, Cashatt’s website (www.debcashatt.com) and Instagram page are already up and running.

And what will Cashatt miss now that she’s on her own? The collaboration. Being able to count on the other person to complete the task you find odious was comforting. Cashatt hated embroidering French knots and writing. But she’s charting her own course now. Writing will not be a hindrance, for Cashatt has developed her own type of writing: symbographic quilts. ■

Kris Sazaki is a freelance writer and one half of the Pixeladies. View the Pixeladies’ work at www.pixeladies.com.



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