

From Crazy Quilt to Smart Quilt

By Amanda Carlson

Carol Padberg may be the first textile programmer. She encodes quilts that magically function as barcodes creating a new artform: a textile-digital hybrid. When viewed from the human eye, the artist's quilts offer no clue that a barcode is embedded within the study of color, composition, and form. But with the help of an electronic device, we are able to access another layer of information, illustrating how technology opens the world to new ways of seeing and experiencing.

With the look and feel of quaint patchwork quilts, Padberg's Crazy Quilts actually operate as "Tags" (Microsoft's version of a high capacity color barcode or HCCB) that can be photographed with a mobile device (such as a smartphone), instantly taking the viewer down Padberg's "rabbit hole," which is like falling into the artist's sketchbook or virtual studio. Incorporating the process into the artistic product, this work clearly reveals how artistic practice is a form of research and inquiry, contributing to broader discourses that are central to human thought and behavior.

The *Ada Lovelace* quilt takes us to a biography of Ada Byron (1815–1852), Countess of Lovelace, who is often described as the first computer programmer due to her role in designing an algorithm for an early form of the computer. Much like Ada, Carol Padberg is breaking new ground with her vision of how the inventive application of technology can transform society. Fittingly, the artist describes "Ada" as the patron saint of the exhibit. Others who honor Ada include the US Department of Defense who named a standardized computer language in her honor in the 1970s. Padberg's other quilts direct us to blogs that the artist maintains, which explore a wide variety of issues—creativity, play, technology, vision, advertising, food, and climate change. Her blogging is ongoing and at times collaborative, evolving as the artistic process churns. What ensues is a fascinating dialogue between the visual/tactile textile and the virtual world and the relationship between these seemingly diverse aesthetics.

Padberg's recent work is inspired by Victorian crazy quilts, such as the examples in the collection of the New Britain Museum of American Art, which represent a style of patchwork in vogue in the United States from 1880s–1920s that invokes an aesthetic of "wildness" in highly imaginative asymmetrical designs. The term "Crazy Quilt" is believed to come from the description of the "crazed" surfaces on Japanese ceramics, which appear haphazardly broken or cracked. Exhibited at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition along with other forms of Asian art, this aesthetic struck a chord within artistic communities that were increasingly drawn to abstraction, asymmetrical design, and a desire to bring art and life closer together.

Padberg's Crazy Quilts embody the same contradiction as Victorian Crazy Quilts, they are not actually "quilted" and have no batting. Unlike traditional quilts, Victorian Crazy Quilts were designed not as utilitarian objects but rather as decorative items. These symbols of domesticity represented a Victorian woman's excessive leisure time, which was necessary for the intricate embroidery and piecing. However, Padberg's portrayal of "decorative excess" is distinctly different and layered with symbolism that subtly invokes contemporary issues rooted in the most critical social and political debates of our time. As an apt response to the critiques of overtly political art in the later part of the twentieth century, Padberg's approach gently embeds her subject within a textile tradition that is seemingly neutral. A restrained use of text embroidered on the decorative surface provides a hint of narrative before it launches us into today's increasingly connected world where technology is embedded in all aspects of daily life.

Like Crazy Quilts, which have numerous international influences, Padberg's textiles reach across cultural boundaries in that they were inspired by African textiles and the work of Ghanaian artists El Anatsui and Atta Kwami (Padberg has conducted professional projects in Ghana in recent years) in addition to numerous European and American artists for whom textiles have impacted the development of modernist painting and conversations about abstraction. Carol Padberg assembles fabrics that come from both personal and global sources, which speak to the complex global networks that contemporary artists and individuals are implicated in whether or not they physically travel.

As museums are increasingly turning to technology to provide context for art in the form of audio tours or supplementary websites, which are a mandatory part of most exhibitions today, Padberg's crazy quilts raise the issue of how technology has transformed the ways in which we encounter, understand, and experience art. When artworks exist in both the physical object and the virtual realm, Carol Padberg suggests a way for us to move between the two via an interactive forum that allows the artist and the audience to share ideas and experiences.

While "barcode art" has flourished over the past decade, most artists (such as Andy Deck and Perry Hoberman) utilize the familiar and ubiquitous UPC symbols, generally used as a reference to consumerism but also to notions of tracking and data collection. More recently, artists (such as Fabrice de Nola and Simone O'Callaghan, and DJ Spooky) have adopted the Quick Response code (QR code), which was developed in Japan. But, Padberg may be the first studio artist to use the latest HCCB code, which is a particularly rich source for artistic exploration because its agility relies upon the use of color. From a technical perspective the use of color allows the barcode to encode more information in a smaller space, but from an artistic perspective it offers a new opportunity to experiment with the color palette in a way that pushes the boundaries of painting. After all, Padberg approaches this multimedia installation through the lens of a painter.

Amongst the many ways that Carol Padberg's new body of work is challenging, its relevance to dialogues about abstraction and encoded meaning is perhaps the most profound. Her technique relies upon the manipulation of the "CMYK" color scheme (based on cyan, magenta, yellow, and black), which is often associated with commercial printing processes. In this new context her subtle manipulation of colors produces dramatic results, triggering a quantum leap into the virtual world.

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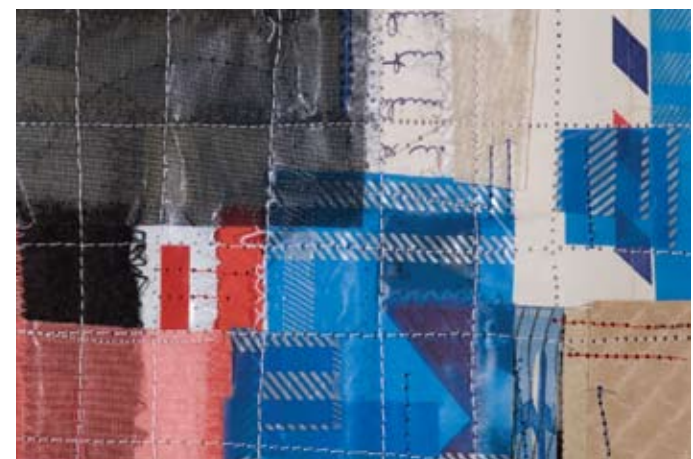
About the Artist

For most of the last decade Carol Padberg has been exploring encoded abstraction through painting, installation, and collage. Two years ago this interest led her to the great textile traditions of West Africa, where fabrics often have elaborate patterns and symbols that refer to proverbs and historical events. Padberg synthesizes the influences of African textiles, American crazy quilts, and European modernism with her own family background of sewing, to produce information age art which stands at the intersection of quilting and computer code.

Carol Padberg is an interdisciplinary artist based in Hartford, Connecticut. Her work has been exhibited in group and solo shows in Europe, Asia, and North America. Recent venues include La Cova (Barcelona, Spain) and Real Art Ways (Hartford, Connecticut). Padberg has received fellowships to attend numerous residencies including Skowhegan. Grants include the Greater Hartford Arts Council and the Minnesota State Arts Board. More information can be found at www.carolpadberg.com and at Jen Bekman's 20x200.com.



Love the Leap, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in. detail below.



Love the Leap, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in. detail below.



This brochure is published in conjunction with the exhibition **NEW/NOW: Interactive Crazy Quilts by Carol Padberg** organized by the New Britain Museum of American Art January 28, 2011 – April 24, 2011

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Love the Earth, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in.
detail below.



Ada Lovelace, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in.
detail below.



Love the Eats, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in.
detail below.



Love the Pics, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in.
detail below.



Love the Ad, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in.
detail below.



Love the Eyes, 2010, Fabric with Mixed Media, 36 x 36 in.
detail below.

