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COUNTRY VIEWS

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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December, 2005

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Artist Statement

Over the years I have created many different images and explored a variety of media along my artistic journey. Similar images continue to occur in my work—images from my life as a child and as an adult in rural settings. I lived on a poultry farm and was involved in working with my parents there. When I married, my husband was a cattle farmer so I continued to live on a farm and use rural images in my work.

Living in the country makes me constantly aware of the relationship between God, nature and man. I believe that we can find beauty in the most ordinary objects or places. My artwork is intended to help others find this beauty.

-- COUNTRY VIEWS

Introduction

Upon graduating from Longwood College in 1973, I began teaching art at Louisa County High School. I was the only art teacher at the high school for a number of years and there was a second art teacher at the middle school. We realized the need to band together for moral support. Since isolation is not healthy for teachers, we began to meet intermittently. The exchange of ideas we generated kept our teaching and us fresh.

Over the years the art program began to grow in Louisa County as more art teachers were hired. We continued to meet and it was this growing band of art teachers that discovered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The first class I took was actually taught in my classroom. I viewed it as a way to make art for myself, as well as a way to renew my teaching certificate. At this time, I had three young sons and no plans for pursuing a master's degree. I continued to take classes offered in surrounding areas as they fit in with my family life. Eventually, I realized that I had accumulated quite a number of graduate credits. The thought of using those credits to obtain a MIS degree finally was possible and I applied to the program.

Inspiration: Looking back into my childhood

When I'm faced with a new opportunity to create art or to learn a new technique I am often at a loss for subject matter. Usually, I end up thinking of images from my

childhood. I grew up on a farm and was very involved with my family in taking daily care of the animals. As I began to take graduate courses, I realized that familiar subjects were best for me. It was at this time that I rediscovered a series of photographs that I had taken on the family farm during my college days. I also began to look into the family photo album for inspiration. All of these black and white images became a repository for subject matter. As I continued to take classes, I continued to look around me. Objects from my childhood began to emerge; for instance, my dad's lantern and rusting farm machinery found their way into my sketchbook. Today, the rural countryside where I live continues to inspire my work. I believe in order to make good art one has to be familiar with the subject matter.

Beginning as an Artist

In my first MIS painting course, I floundered for subject matter and struggled to use the acrylic paints I already owned. This was an extremely frustrating experience. At the class critique, the instructor suggested that I turn my canvas upside down and work some more. This drastic turn made me realize that I had to be confident in my choice of subject matter, as well as medium. Oil painting was a medium I had previously tried, but didn't feel completely comfortable with. I realized that this was a golden opportunity to learn about oil painting. Fortunately, the MIS program allowed me to experience oil painting in a more satisfactory way. I began to work from still life arrangements and family photographs with some success. I experimented with the use of exaggerated color

to draw attention to the subject matter. In the painting *Queen of the Barrel* (Figure 1), I used reds and purples for the background. A variety of blues were used in the foreground, as modeling on the chicken and on the barrel.

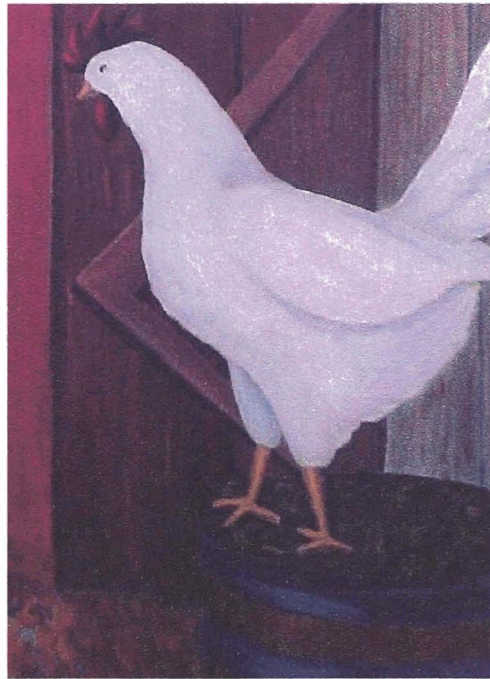


Figure 1. *Queen of the Barrel*, oil on canvas, 36" x 24". 2005.

Barn Lantern (Figure 2) is an example of an oil painting inspired from a photograph. This painting shows a close cropped image with very little background. I have adopted this style of cropping, which is found in photographic snapshots.

At this time, I began to realize how tactile oil painting is and how it appeals to all my senses. This has been difficult to explain to others, but my students agree with me after painting in oil. This tactile quality plus the vivid colors have kept me interested in oil painting.

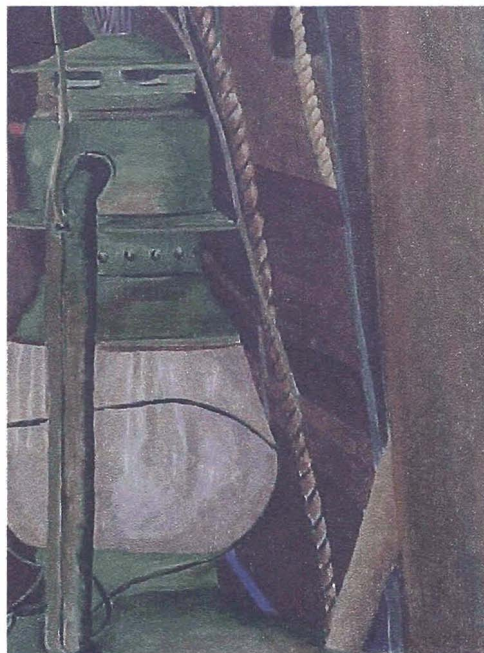


Figure 2. *Barn Lantern*, oil on canvas, 36" x 24". 2005.

In printmaking class, I was introduced to zinc etching. With this process, I could get good linear images and the texture could be emphasized as well. My subject matter showed items from around the house or farm. *Summer Bounty #1* (Figure 3) illustrates that my subjects are good sources for black and white images. This etching shows light and dark contrast. The smooth texture of the glass jars contrast with the rough wood of the shelves. Later, I would learn how to add color to this plate. Other zinc plates were developed at this

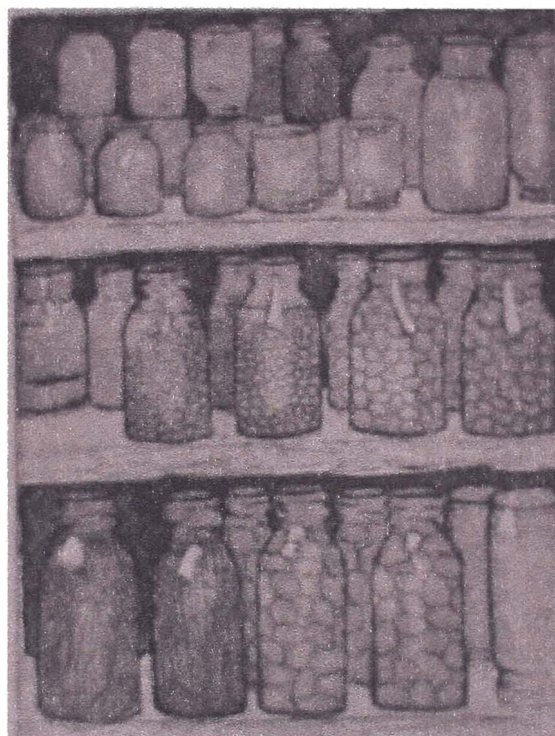


Figure 3. *Summer Bounty I*, zinc etching, 7" x 4.75", 1998.

time using a similar drawing style.

With the introduction of monotype printing to my toolbox of techniques, I continued to use both old photographs and subjects at hand. *Laying Hens #2* (Figure 4) and *Pear Tree Shadows* (Figure 5) employed this process. *Laying Hens* used a single layer of color painted on a plate and transferred to paper. This image looks childlike with the use of pure blue, white and yellow painted in single layers. Minimal use of blue on the chickens produces shadows that imply rounded bodies. The only textural area is the yellow of the wood shavings on the floor.



Figure 4. *Laying Hens #2*, monotype, 11.5" x 16.25", 2004.

In *Pear Tree Shadows*, I am depicting a tree but focusing on the shadows rather than the actual tree. This print uses a more complex layering of colors to produce this image. The pale sky and golden yellow of the grass was painted first. The dark violet of the tree line and bright green of the grassy area were added next. In the final layer of color, I extended the branches and roots beyond the original margin to focus the attention



Figure 5. *Pear Tree Shadows*, monotype, 8.5" s 10.75", 1997.

of the viewer on the tree and the shadows below it.

Adding color to etchings produced even more exciting images for me. I produced two images using multiple etched plates to make the final images. To print *Summer Produce* (Figure 6), I first created a plate with the image of the round fruit only. This plate was printed in red ink. A second plate of green ink was created to show the stems and a single pepper. To print *Behind the Chicken Wire* (Figure 7), I used plates of different sizes. The first plate was 5" x 7" and pictured a single chicken whose feet extend off of the picture plane. The second plate was 8" x 9.5 "and included an etched image of the chicken wire which covered the first image. The second plate also included a border of corn and wheat and a rectangle of wood shavings that appears to cover the chicken's feet. The use of color and multiple plates prompted me to rework old plates, adding color to produce varied images.



Figure 6. *Summer Produce*, zinc etching (two plates), 5.75" x 7.25", 1998.

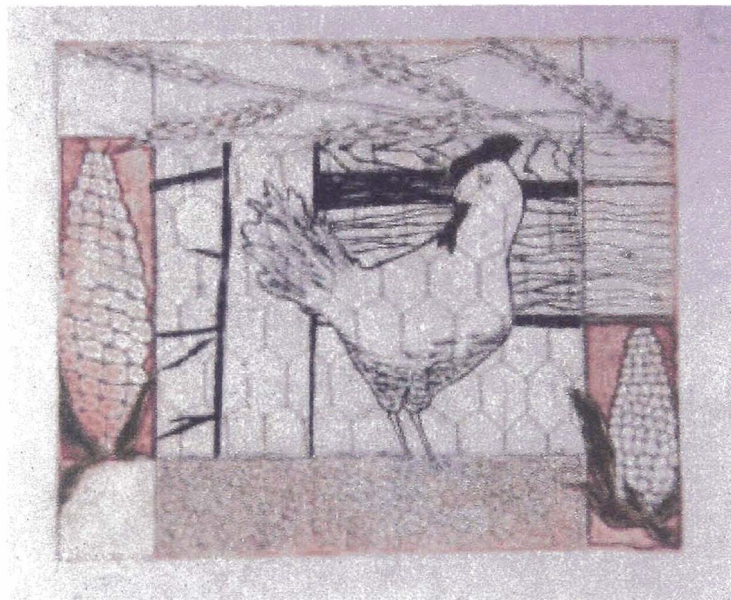


Figure 7. *Behind the Chicken Wire*, zinc etching (two plates—a la poupee), 8" x 9.5", 1998.

In a later printmaking class, I was introduced to Toray plate printing. *Sunflower Gardner* (Figure 8) shows a composition from a plate made by using a family



Figure 8. *Sunflower Gardner*, Toray plate with chine colle', 6" x 7", 2000.

photograph. This process allowed me to add drawn images and color to the original photograph. The same image printed with two different coloring approaches combine to form this composition. All of these tricks of the printing trade increased my ability to express my viewpoints and experiences of country themes.

Gaining Confidence as an Artist

In painting classes, I ultimately learned to stretch my own canvas, a process I have adopted in my own teaching. I find it very empowering to construct my own canvases. I also learned the technique of underpainting which has enabled me to add depth and interest to my painting palette. Both of these new techniques have given me much confidence as an artist.

I continued to look for subject matter around the farm for paintings. I developed similar themes for the paintings of an old truck and rusted tractor. *First Truck* (Figure 9) is a close up of the grill of an old pick up truck sitting abandoned in a field. This painting uses minimal details and color to provide the message. *The Hiter H* (Figure 10) pictures

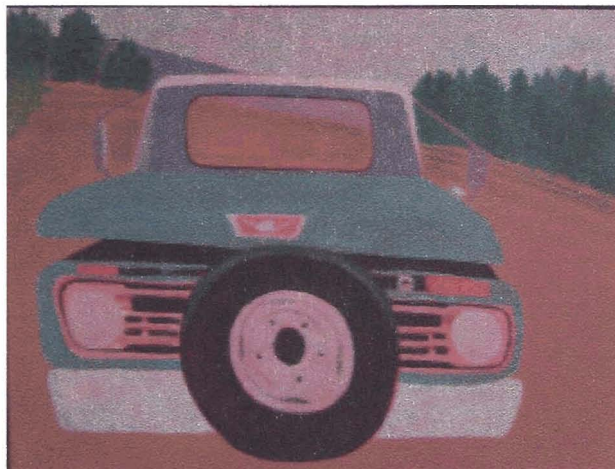


Figure 9. *First Truck*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 1999.



Figure 10. *The Hiter\" H*", oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 1999.

a detailed rusting tractor overgrown with weeds. More details are available [here](#). The use of color is also more complex. I used numerous reds and browns to depict the rusting tractor and a variety of greens for the landscape. Both of these pieces represent the constant struggle of the farm life, man versus nature. Man works with nature to provide a living but nature ultimately overcomes the abandoned man-made objects. *The Hiter H* is my first conscious effort to express a conceptual idea rather than just making images with which I was familiar. The man versus nature theme continues in my work and continues to inspire my confidence.

New Media

As I continued in the MIS program, I took a class in mixed media. In this class, I learned to make rubber molds and to use collaged images. My experimentation with these techniques led to the creation of *The Egg Factory* (Figure 11). This piece combines pieces of rough boards nailed to the back of an unfinished wooden frame with rubber molds attached to the wood. Corncob molds, which I placed at the bottom of the piece, are covered in wood shavings. This represents the floor of a chicken house. Higher on the picture plane is a row of chickens drawn with colored pencils. At the top of the picture plane is a representation of a nest made from a thin wooden strip, straw and eggshells. I drew larger images of chickens with colored pencils and layered over the shavings. The entire piece was covered with poultry wire.

In this class, I also discovered melted wax as a medium. I experimented with the



Figure 11. *The Egg Factory*, mixed media, 24" x 18", 1998.

use of bee's wax and used livestock markers to add color. This became my medium of choice for painting a series of cows. The first in this series was *Pasture Scene* (Figure 12). In this painting, I felt that the use of livestock markers was ironic since it is normally used as temporary identification for farm animals. In this fall scene, I depict the

background in predominately browns and oranges. The cows are painted in purples and blues. All the cows in this series are a mixture of colors rather than the traditional black or brown. I feel that this color choice prompts the viewer to take a closer look.

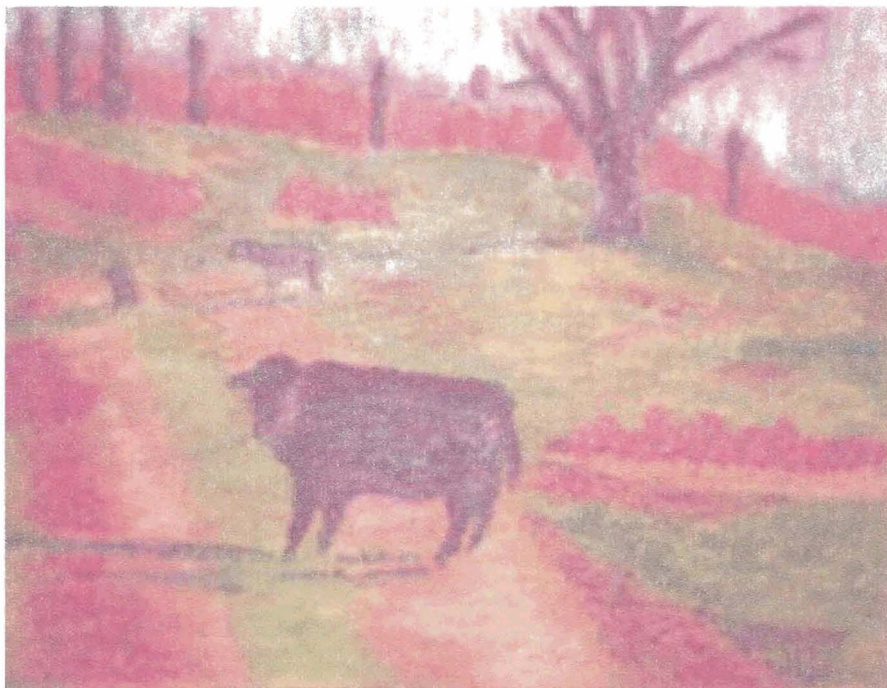


Figure 12. *Pasture Scene*, encaustic, 21" x 25", 1998.

The second work in this series shows *Three Little Calves* (Figure 13) who are standing in a pasture. Placing the animals low on the picture plane makes them appear close to the viewer. The background colors of various greens represent spring or summer. Some underpainting has been used in the background areas. Again the cows are a mixture of colors with the predominate one being purple.

After creating two paintings featuring purple cows, I remembered a children's rhyme about cows.



Figure 13. *Three Little Calves*, encaustic, 21" x 25", 1998.

*I never saw a purple cow and never hope to see one.
But if there were a purple cow, I'd rather see than be one.*

This was the inspiration for the final painting in this series, *The Purple Cow* (Figure 14). I intended each of these paintings to bring the viewer progressively closer to the pictured animals. I want to invite a more intimate look at the animals by depicting them in unexpected colors.

Quilting

Quilting was a medium I had not explored as an artist. In this program, I learned a variety of quilting techniques. Hand quilting and embroidery were the first techniques introduced. Later, machine quilting, foundation quilting, piecing and appliqué were incorporated. I created several wall hangings or art quilts in this class. *Canned Goods*

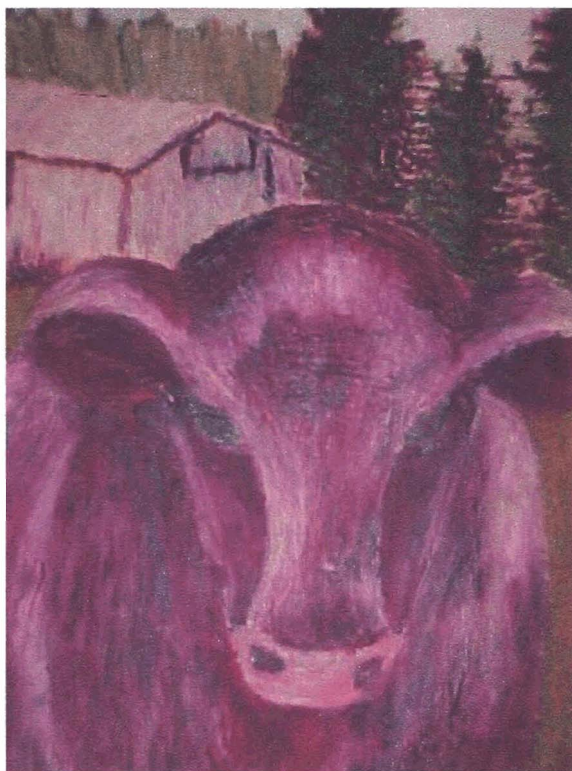


Figure 14. *The Purple Cow*, encaustic, 25" x 21", 1998.

(Figure 15) is an example of appliqué work. Each panel depicts a different fabric pattern in the shape of a canning jar with an embroidered label. Machine quilting was added to the plain muslin background fabric to add a textural interest. The panels were joined together to produce a single art quilt.

Another quilted piece combined many techniques. Ten small panels combined to create *Down on the Farm* (Figure 16). Two zinc plates of a chicken and a tractor were printed on muslin. Both images were combined with piecing and machine quilting to produce a total of four panels. Combining pieced green fabrics with machine-quilted textures created two panels depicting scenes of farmland. Machine quilted wheat images filled two panels and the remaining two panels showed appliquéd ears of corn. Again,



Figure 15. *Canned Goods*, machine quilted with appliqué and embroidery, 17.5" x 15", 2003.

machine quilting added a textural element to the ears of corn. Quilting was another media where I could explore country themes.

Conclusion

At this point, I am not sure where my work as an artist is headed. But, with my experience and training, I am confident that my direction will be fruitful. Many ideas have come to mind during the years I've been involved with the MIS program. Some are ready to be pursued; others are still incubating. I have taken a variety of classes that have

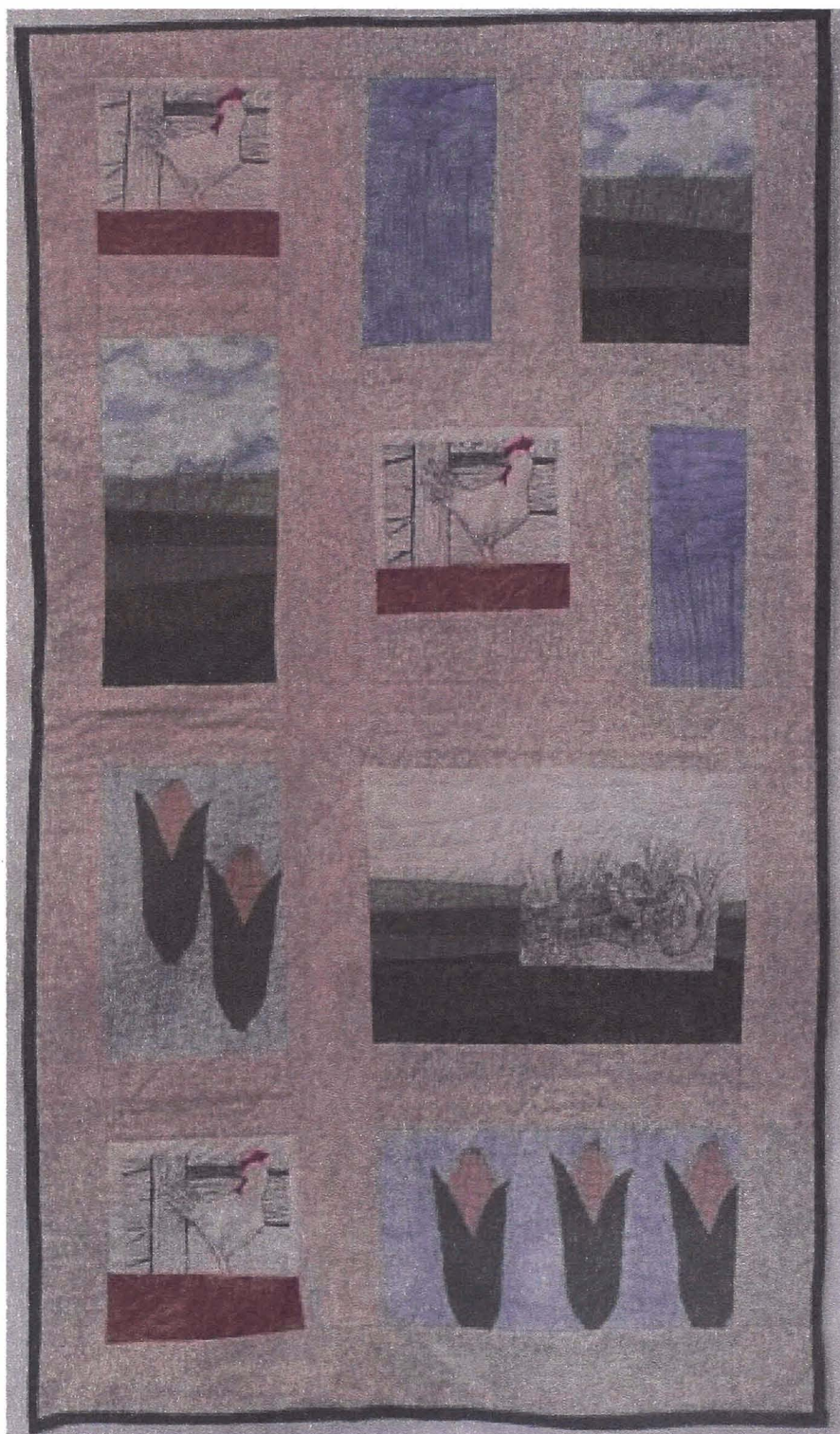


Figure 16. *Down on the Farm*, machine quilted with printed images, appliqué and embroidery, 55" x 31.5", 2003.

expanded the curriculum in my classroom. I have learned from each instructor and each classmate valuable lessons, which have benefited my students. I look forward to continuing to take classes as I continue to teach. I plan to explore each technique learned in more depth and to add to my technical expertise.

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Rebecca Massie



EDUCATION:

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