

Surface Design

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photographic



Arlé Sklar-Weinstein was among

the early innovators in the use of Photoshop® to create art works with computer-manipulated photographs. Since her retirement from teaching art in public and independent schools, she has been a full-time studio artist. Patricia Malarcher, SDJ editor, recently visited Sklar-Weinstein's studio in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, and then presented her with questions that prompted the following "e-conversation."

Had you worked with photography before you found Photoshop®?

Yes, but usually as a resource or component of the final work. A self-proposed theme often directs my vision and I become a collector of images—like Paris street signs, Lions of the Veneto, shrines on Mount Koya San.

When you took a Photoshop® course in 1994, what did you expect to do with it?

I didn't know. I simply did not want to be "left behind," even though I wasn't impressed with the pixilated and simplistic digital imaging I had seen up to then. Four months later, it shocked me to recognize this as my new medium, even though I still didn't know how to make images as big as my five-foot paintings. It had taken a year of staring at my paintings to understand the "underground" themes; that took only moments when I was watching ideas appear on the monitor as quickly as I could think of them.

You use the computer for unexpected juxtapositions, like enlarging a stone so that it looks like a huge rock in relation to what is around it. What other kinds of visual effects does the computer make possible?

Part of the magic is playing with scale to create surreal and symbolic imagery. For example, I have used a small figure shadow next to a sunflower to make the flower seem monumental. I have used Photoshop® to infuse gray rocks with brilliant colors. Variables such as transparency to opaque, shifting colors, scales, and values among five or so photo layers give me wide parameters, as does isolating an object from its background.

What equipment are you working with?

When I began digital printing in 1994, I was using an inkjet printer on slick photographic

paper. I noticed over time that the prints were getting darker as they absorbed moisture from the air. In search of a waterproof ink, I came upon the Alps Electric Microdry Printer (no longer being manufactured, alas!). It uses four ribbon cartridges, CMYB, and sends the paper back and forth four times to lay each color on separately. The initial transfer paper I used came from Alps Electric, and had a stiff hand. There are now other suppliers whose transfer paper is thinner and the results are softer on the fabric. I'm composing my imagery on a Macintosh G4 using Photoshop® CS. I have an old Nikon 35mm slide scanner (LS-1000) and a UMAX flat bed scanner to get images into the hard drive. I also use a 15-inch square bed heat transfer press and a Bernina 1030 (the last of the non-computerized sewing machines).

What are the advantages of color laser, rather than inkjet printing?

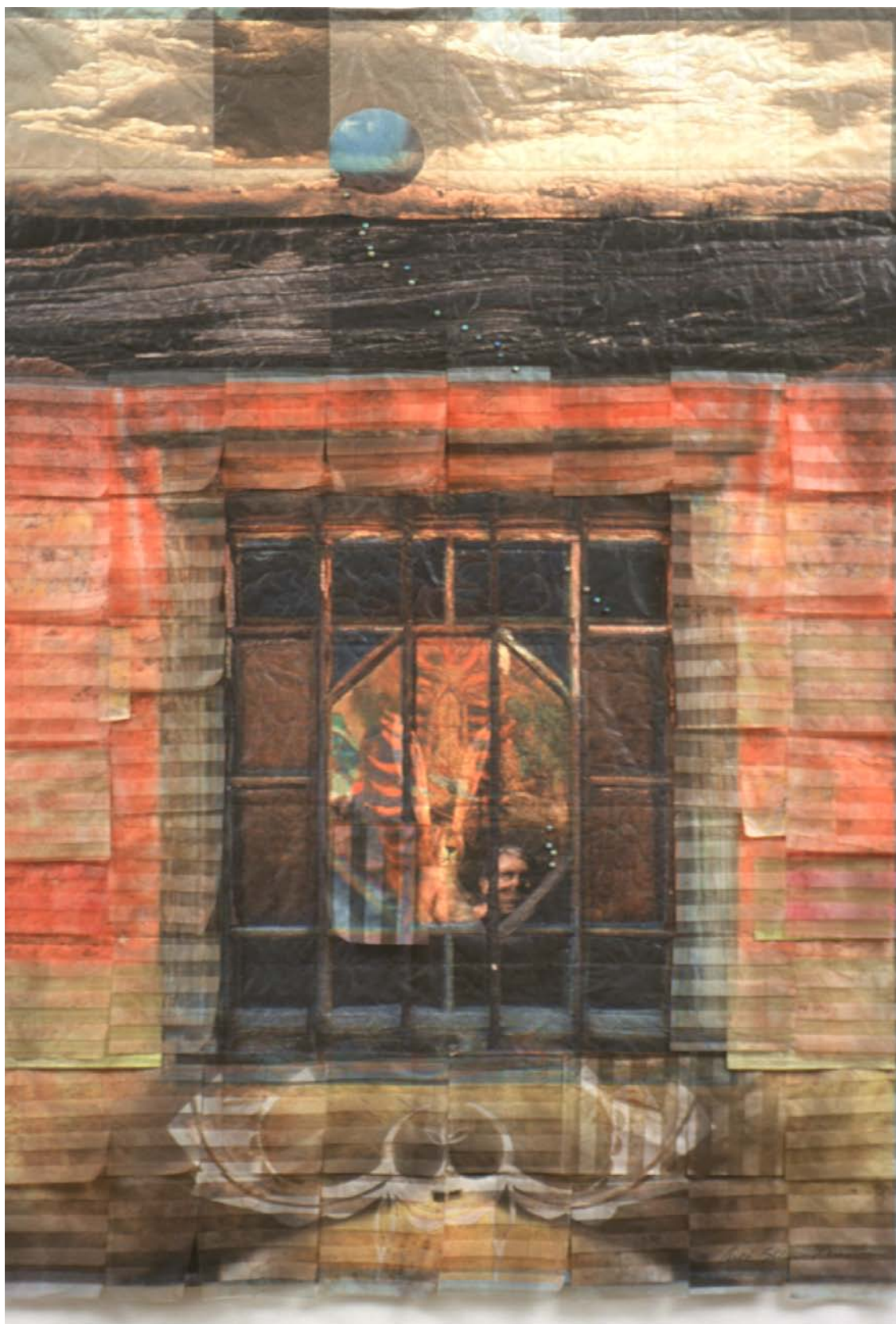
It is so satisfying to get the same depth of color and detail that I see on the monitor onto cloth with the slightly waxy ink on the thin plastic sheet of transfer paper.

Why do you use transfer paper rather than printing directly onto cloth from your computer?

I can heat-set printed transfer paper onto any kind of fabric without having to iron carefully cut freezer paper onto it, or having to use the white cotton material pre-backed with paper.

What kinds of problems did you confront before your technical skills became second nature?

I wish I could use past tense! There is no such thing as "trouble-free" with a computer and its peripheral equipment. Aside from the technology itself, it took me a while to figure out how to enlarge the finished image and print it out on



ARLE SKLAR-WEINSTEIN *Finding Myself in Santa Fe* Multiple layers of cottons and organza, moon beads, digital image transfer, appliqué, quilting, 78" x 55". Photo: D. James Dee.

letter-size papers. Using the heat transfer machine without burning, tearing, melting, or distorting the images took trial and error. Distortion in any of the transferred panels made perfect registration difficult when assembling and sewing them back to becoming the enlarged original image. I'm more forgiving now, allowing for unavoidable distortion when I heat-transfer onto organza and other sheer fabrics.

What are your sources of imagery?

Travel time always includes roaming with cameras. Scanning real or previously made art work on the flat bed scanner also creates part of my mix of images. When looking for cultural symbols, I turn to illustrations in resource books.

While gathering images, what are you looking for?

I gravitate to close-ups of the play of light on textural objects, natural or human-made. Thinking of possible backgrounds, I'll take multiple photographs of clouds, water reflections, mountains, puddles, bare trees, brick or stone patterns, ancient wood siding—anything that can hold some visual interest on its own without being intrusive.

Shadows always interest me as signs of someone or something that does not appear in the composition, but is present as witness. I resonate with objects that carry emotional weight—they're harder to define because memory and unconscious



ARLÉ SKLAR-WEINSTEIN *St. Martin: Hide and Seek* Multiple layers of cottons and organza, digital image transfer, appliqué, quilting, 38" x 27". Photo: The artist.

energy infuse them. You've said that your present work is "all about layering," both illusionary and actual. Besides adding visual richness to the surfaces, does layering have any other significance?

Layering seems to be an attempt to see beyond, or under, the obvious surfaces of things as they are presented. I'm sure it reflects my search for my hidden selves. Additionally, I love mystery. I don't want to be "understood" too easily, nor to have the viewer see it all at a glance.

Beneath the transparent patches you've attached like flaps to some of your work, there are surprises such as a piece of a yel-

low handkerchief. Why did you choose that piece for that place?

The vintage handkerchief in *Finding Myself in Santa Fe* was just the color note I needed between the layers to carry the yellowish tone up from the lower portion of the composition. And I think that yellow hanky had its own emotionally charged message that amplified the double meaning of the title.

Do you collect fabrics or textile objects as potential art materials?

When I was just beginning to make quilts, I became a fabric junky like every quilter. As I began creating my own "cloth" with images transferred onto white cotton, I tried matching fabric that

would serve as bindings or borders. I soon began to make up the border or binding colors/designs along with the image and incorporated them into the tiling and transferring process. Now my gorgeous fabrics are backing for quilted pieces. For scans or appliques, I began collecting old linens with lace, handkerchiefs, bandannas, folk embroidery, and crochet as well as African, Japanese and other ethnic fabrics like bark paintings, molas, and batiks. For textures on which to transfer, I collect colored and patterned cloth including old sheets from Good Will with stripes and polka dots.

You've mentioned the intuitive, or unconscious, experience of combining images. Please say something about that.

I recently had to create a piece for a summer show, *Hot Hot Hot*, at my gallery, [Art/Place, Southport, Connecticut]. With house renovations and everything out of place, I grabbed some slides from a hot weather trip in 1977. I found an image of my late husband, Bill, hanging onto the sheets of a sloop, his arm intentionally hiding his face as I aimed my camera at him. Other slides included images of a boat with its bright watery reflection, a silhouetted wrought iron artisan's sign, Chinese chrysanthemums, a textural image that could serve as a sky.

In the first quickly worked version, the scale was off, the main parts too small. I began to resonate to the choices I had made based on compositional considerations. This piece was about Bill—his need to be hidden while devoting himself to others' needs—and his artistic talents; the wrought iron man related to Bill's hobby of carving "urban folk figures" in his retirement from being an Executive Director of a social work agency. In reworking this piece, I combined a smaller scale wrought iron sign with a larger version, giving more depth to the layering. Layering Bill's face and arm with organza reinforced his hidden self. The watery reflections are about the unconscious and our emotional navigations as a long-married couple. The blossom, isolated and enlarged, was like exploding fireworks—it holds the composition together, but most likely symbolizes my charged feelings of not having been able to "see" Bill.

Could you discuss the imagery in *Liberty Voided*?

I came across an old New York license plate—the last of those with the Statue of Liberty

image. (The "Lady" now belongs to NJ.) The DMV clerk had scribbled "Voided" across it. My mind flashed to the political state our country is mired in now.

Needing a background foil for the scanned plate, I used a previously built glass wall design. ("Previously built" means that when I'm playing, I'll work on this kind of digital doodle and "park" it until I think it might fit.) Graphically, the glass bricks made an interesting surface, subtly carrying the message of mangled clarity. Searching for an image to represent our population, I found a chick, newly hatched, with fragments of its shell. Reproduced in multiple colors, and arranged like a parade across the bottom, this became a visual anchor. I was associating with the notion that the unhatched chick had two choices: to remain "safe" in its shell and die, or to face the uncertainties outside and break through—to what? I then decided to use my shadow as witness and created a giant X across the glass field with two shadow forms. Another sheer layer of the Statue of Liberty, in a slightly different scale, is stitched across its top edge.

How do you know when a mix of images is "right"?

If it works compositionally, I'm happy. When I can finally understand what symbolic value the objects create together, I'm amazed. When others resonate to it for their own reasons, I'm reassured.

You've said that membership in the Manhattan Quilters Guild has inspired you. Aren't you making a piece for one of their traveling group exhibitions?

For our "Metrotextural" theme, I did a piece about Central Park. It had snowed the day before I walked with my camera through the *Gates* installation by Christo and Jean-Claude. The contrasts of dark sculptural trees and bright orange against the whiteness caught my breath. I could hardly contain my pleasure—indeed, there was a strong sense of community as smiling people passed each other under the billowing panels. Volunteers were passing out samples of the woven orange fabric, and I collected as many as I could. I scanned the fabric and replicated it for the binding on the quilt. In this piece I was hoping to capture the magical layering of all the senses of that extraordinary afternoon.

Interview with Arlé Sklar-Weinstein

You've done a series of pieces based on photographs taken by your father, Philip Sklar, a musician, while he was traveling on a ship with Toscanini. Why were those photographs of people on docks so inspiring?

At first, I was knocked out by how well composed they were. Now I understand where my "eye" came from in the midst of all the music we made in our household. On deeper seeing, the poignancy of those people dealing with the poverty in their lives leapt off the surfaces of those small, shiny black and white photos. Most of the photos were taken at their Ports of Call, including Barbados and Trinidad, on their tour of South America.

How did you alter them for your work?

After selecting nine of the photos, I thought: how do I maintain their integrity and also translate them into fiber art? My first step was to alter the black and white to tones of sepia, brown, and cream. I warmed up the images using several Photoshop® filters, especially the watercolor filter, and cropped or eliminated extraneous background busyness. Heat-setting the transfer image panels onto different kinds of fabrics enriched the surface design. Of course, enlarging the images from two to twenty inches made them quite dramatic.

What is "tiling?"

Tiling is a term for dividing a visual document into equal segments. My goal is to approximate the 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper, but my final compositions do not always conform to this ratio. So, I divide the whole image in half, then quarters, eighths, sixteenths, on down to thirty-seconds if I want to finish with a 32-block piece. I save each fractional part of my composition in the computer with a grid chart code to keep track, and when I am ready to print each segment onto the transfer paper (in mirror images) I enlarge it to full letter size. Peeling the transfer paper from the precut blocks of fabric and laying them out in order is breath-holding time—seeing the big image come into being is always a surprise. Of course, then I have to pin and sew the segments together in tight registration. This may be the moment to thank Nancy Crow for the skills I learned from her "Curved Piecing" workshop at Elkins and Davis College [Elkins, West Virginia] in 1991. I had just read her book, *Quilts and Other Influences*, and was so impressed that I had to find her next class, whatever and wherever it was.

You sometimes sew beads and other things like small elements from laser toner cartridges onto your surfaces. When does a piece call for this kind of texture?

When it serves to support the feeling of a piece—for example, when it adds light-catching elements, or structurally anchors a floating layer, or becomes a "punctuation mark" in a visual passage. There is always a concern for not adding embellishment for its own decorative ends,

Have you been influenced by other artists?

I studied with Hale Woodruff, a much admired avant-garde artist (and a member of the Harlem Renaissance group) at New York University for more than ten years through BS and MS degrees. It took another ten years to wean myself from his earth-toned abstract style and find my own voice.

Sharing a birthday with Pablo Picasso, I sense some of that restless energy and need to explore new techniques and try many styles. It's all in the stars?

While in high school, I had a scholarship to study at the Museum of Modern Art. Every Saturday, I had three hours between the All-City Orchestral rehearsals in Brooklyn (I had to play the bass-violin because my dad was my teacher) and the beginning of the painting class in Manhattan. I lived at MoMA then, memorizing every work in their collection. Bernard Fream, the artist/instructor, had us painting in the manner of a different Impressionist or Post-Impressionist each week. That was quite a grounding.

I love to quote Jacques Lipchitz, the cubist sculptor who lived in my village of Hastings-on-Hudson: "We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before. No one falls out of the sky."

You've referred to your works as fabric assemblages, and yet they could also be viewed as collages, prints, or photographic art. Where do you place yourself in the art world?

I see my use of photography as the art-making bridge between my paintings, prints, collages, and fabric constructions. I am not so much a quiltmaker as a "symbolic realist," using the vocabulary of whatever materials and processes choose me at the moment.



ARLÉ SKLAR-WEINSTEIN *Liberty Voided* Assorted cottons, layered organza, digital image transfer, appliqué, quilting, 35" x 35.5". Photo: Karen Bell.