



Top to bottom: *Patience* (detail), 2005; *Fidelity* (*Toklat Series*), 2005; *Black Wolf* (*Toklat Series*) (detail), 2006; *In the Beginning* (detail), 2007

NANCY ERICKSON

We Have Always Lived Together

Selected Quilted Works, 1998–2007



MONTANAN NANCY ERICKSON has been making her strikingly beautiful and evocative art for nearly forty years. Trained as a zoologist, and with an MFA in painting, she has produced a stream of provocative, sobering, sometimes playful, often unusual juxtapositions of images of animals, women, artists, and their habitats in her Dancing Rabbit Studio in Missoula. Her use of color, line, shapes, light, and varied fabric paints and fabrics has become increasingly complex, sophisticated, and provocative. Her skills as a painter have kept pace with her ever-growing expertise with fibers, so that

her “painted quilts” or “quilteds” have become more painterly over the past two decades, culminating in the masterful *Hall of Memory* series produced in 1996-1999, and the *Sybil* series of the 2000s, which began a new direction for her explorations. In this exhibition of work from 1998 to 2007 we see Erickson at the height of her powers.

Deer, cougars, bears, and other mammals and birds pass through the grounds outside her studio’s grand windows as they and she go about their lives. It is Erickson’s acute sensitivity to the value and dignity of their lives which has shaped the subject-matter of her explorations and found expression in fiber art, painting, and drawing. She has brought her fully mature and complex vision to bear in the work in this exhibition. Her over-arching themes of the past twenty years have challenged the viewer, and by extension all humans, to ponder the consequences of their choices and actions on their fellow creatures, and on the planet. Her concerns with human/animal continuity through space and time are masterfully envisioned and executed in the present work, as is the more intimate concern with the possibility of familiar or even domestic mutuality in relations between humans and other mammals.

Her work shows a restless interest in the confines and limitations of quilting traditions. She has returned to and departed from the quilt’s traditional rectangular shape many times. While fabric paint is used to great effect in these “quilteds,” the art of quilt work stitchery is also celebrated. Her bears, rabbits, cats, dogs and stars are motifs familiar to traditional quilters, yet expanded by Erickson into gigantic proportions. Utterly wild rather than domestic, in Erickson’s work their images are re-infused with their ancient and wild power. The traditional folkart house-shape also appears in Erickson’s fiber art, but not in its predictable role. Domestic furnishings—televisions, chairs, light bulbs, cell phones—are part of Erickson’s iconography. So, too, are the



Top to bottom: *Hall of Memory #8 (The Ecstasy which Occurs upon Discovering the Cave Bear Ancestors)*, 2007; *The Japanese Tiger (after "Tigers and Bamboo" by Kano Tannyu, AD, 1602-1674)*, 2004; *The Miracle of a Spring Shower*, 2007; *Precious (detail)*, 2005

female nude and architectural details such as stairs, windows, and electric sockets. Her works often carry an implicit polemical warning to us to attend to the dangers that human technology and carelessness have wrought for all living creatures, and for the earth. While this locates them in the traditional quilting tradition's personal and political spheres, as well as its narrative tradition, there is no possibility that her work could be mistaken for a nineteenth-century quilter's work.

Nancy Erickson uses stitched and appliqued fabrics, and her creations are three-layered, as are traditional quilts. The machine-quilted lines are used both to stabilize the constructions, and to add visual interest, depth and texture to the work—another quilting convention. However, Erickson's contemporary ecofeminist concerns and her post-modern sensibility have been apparent in her "quilteds" from the beginning. Images are frequently de-contextualized, fragmented, and juxtaposed in unusual, provocative ways. Frequently, Erickson explores images and ideas in a series, working with them over time. This exhibition's *Hall of Memory #8* and *#9* give an idea of how this exploration can proceed over time. The floorboards of the artist's studio remain, but the walls have become the walls of a pre-historic cave depicting ancient cave paintings, which the bears have come to contemplate. Created in 1998, *Hall of Memory #4: Chauvet* (not exhibited) is machine quilted and appliqued, painted, with pearlescent paints. In later pieces in the series charcoal is also used. The elegance and richness of the contemporary fabrics and paints, in contrast to the older charcoal medium used for the "cave art" sections of some pieces are a clever reminder of the bears' ancient place in the grand natural scheme of things, and of humans' fascination with the bear as food, danger, and great wild spirit.

In pieces such as *Black Wolf*, *Fidelity*, *Precious*, and *Watchwolf* Erickson's clear, steady, and wise sensibility requires us to take full responsibility for the consequences of our actions for the planet and its living beings. The ancient menace and companion of humans, the wolf-dog, stands alone, looking out into the eyes of the species which has de-graded, de-listed, domesticated, and in other ways "managed" the essential wildness of a fellow creature. In *Black Wolf* and in the dazzling human figures such as *In the Beginning*, *The Green Woman*, and *Miracle of a Small Shower* the antiquity of our co-habitation on this planet is evoked by the cave-painting-like images on the very hides of wolf and woman. We are imprinted on one-another's psyches and spirits. We humans also pay a price when our bonds with animals and with the earth-mother of us all are severed, and drained of their radiant power and ancient respect or reverence and mutuality. In *Precious* the most precious dog of every viewer's heart returns the gaze, with the evocations of cell-phones, bullets, and blood intersecting with images of the charismatic mammals of our cave-dwelling ancestors' experience and dreams.

Complex, alarmed, sad, hopeful and gorgeously powerful work keeps unfolding in the Dancing Rabbit Studio of Nancy Erickson. We are in the presence of the master-works of one of Montana's great master artists.

— Margaret C. Kingsland, PhD
Former executive director, Humanities Montana
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Nancy Erickson photo by Todd Goodrich