




"CANOPY"

A Journal of My Creative Process for

Seasonal Palette

By Barbara Confer

December, 2011 - March, 2012



Barbara Confer

A Brief Bio

Barbara Confer was born in Philadelphia to a military family. She spent her childhood moving every two or three years and attended nine schools. She later married her husband Don, a Navy pilot and continued moving! The Confers have two daughters and four grandchildren.

One of the consistent factors in Barbara's life was her mother's love of anything creative (She was an accomplished landscape artist). She encouraged her children to pursue creative activities. Barbara later combined her love of fabric and painting when she began to design and sew art quilts.

Barbara attended San Jose State University where she majored in Interior Design, and she later earned an early childhood teaching credential and a Masters Degree from Sonoma State University.

Barbara loves to show her quilts and she has entered and won awards in several exhibits. She belongs to the Petaluma Quilt Guild and Studio Art Quilts Associates. She presents a trunk show called "Life on the Move," a quilt presentation about her experience growing up in a military family.

The following is a journal of

my creative process while working on "Canopy" my entry into the Seasonal Palette exhibit.

December 27: Today, after thinking about my project for about a month, I began to work out the process of creating the quilt. I wanted to choose a scene that would fulfill the requirements of the project relating to size and theme. I was asked to create a scene portraying a summer scene with a vertical orientation: 78" long by 32" wide.

Summer in Northern California is decidedly different than summer, in say, the East or North. Here in the summer the grasses are golden and the trees are so dark they appear almost black. I hope to find a scene that has what others might think of as summer colors.

December 29: Today I drove out toward the coast to take some photos of redwoods, cypress trees and small town buildings. A few days ago a friend suggested that I use a photo of a small café with people sitting at tables outside, enjoying the air and each other's company, a lovely summer pastime. I didn't find any such scene, but I did photograph some other areas.

While driving I took pictures of an olive farm, some charming old buildings, and some redwood trees.

December 30: Today I reexamined some of my new photographs along with some of my old favorites. I spread the photos out to have a good look, went through an elimination process and came up with 4 finalists.

I decided to "let them mellow" overnight and think about it tomorrow.

January 1, 2021: I made sketches of four nice scenes and hung them on the door to compare them and decide which ones warranted further consideration.

I eliminated any scenes which would not lend themselves to a vertical orientation. That left me with three possibilities: A redwood grove, a riverside forest and the olive farm. I decided to draw them out to size (78"x32").

I cut freezer paper to the appropriate length and taped it to the wall along with the photo and the first sketch. I had drawn a grid across the sketch and I transferred it to the freezer paper. Then I drew a large version of the small sketch using the grid as a guide.

I repeated this with the 2 other sketches.



McEvoy Olive farm - a
beautiful scene with
possibilities.

This is the same
scene with a better
orientation. It is a
very "busy" scene and
would need to be simplified
before it could be used.





Some photos of scenes[↑]
I considered for the
quilt.

Sketches of some
scenes I am thinking
about using →

Vertical orientation
is important.





I love these quaint buildings
in Olma but they didn't seem
quite right for the project - for
one thing they read horizontally.
Maybe another time?

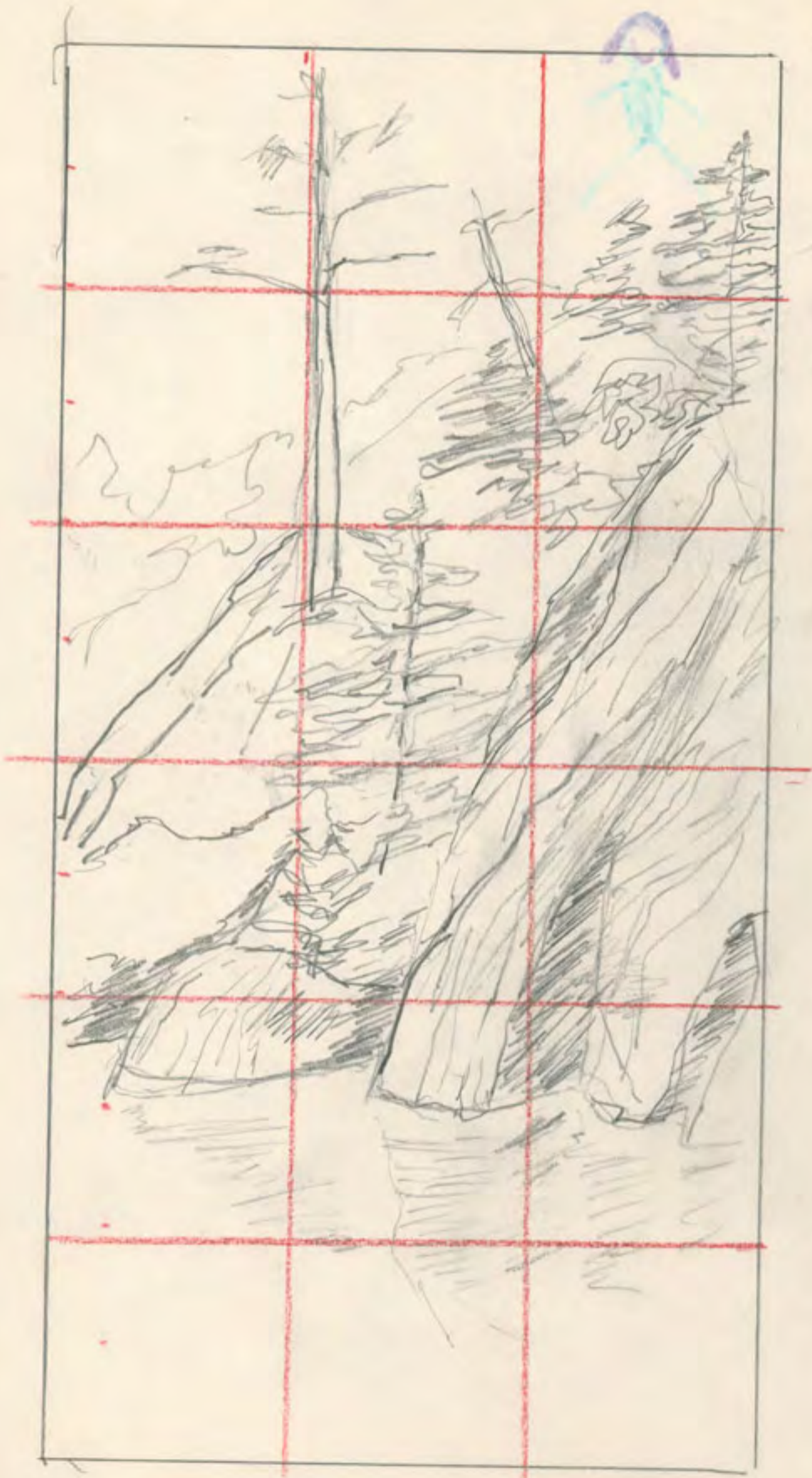




diffused light
source

distant trees
pale - closer - dark

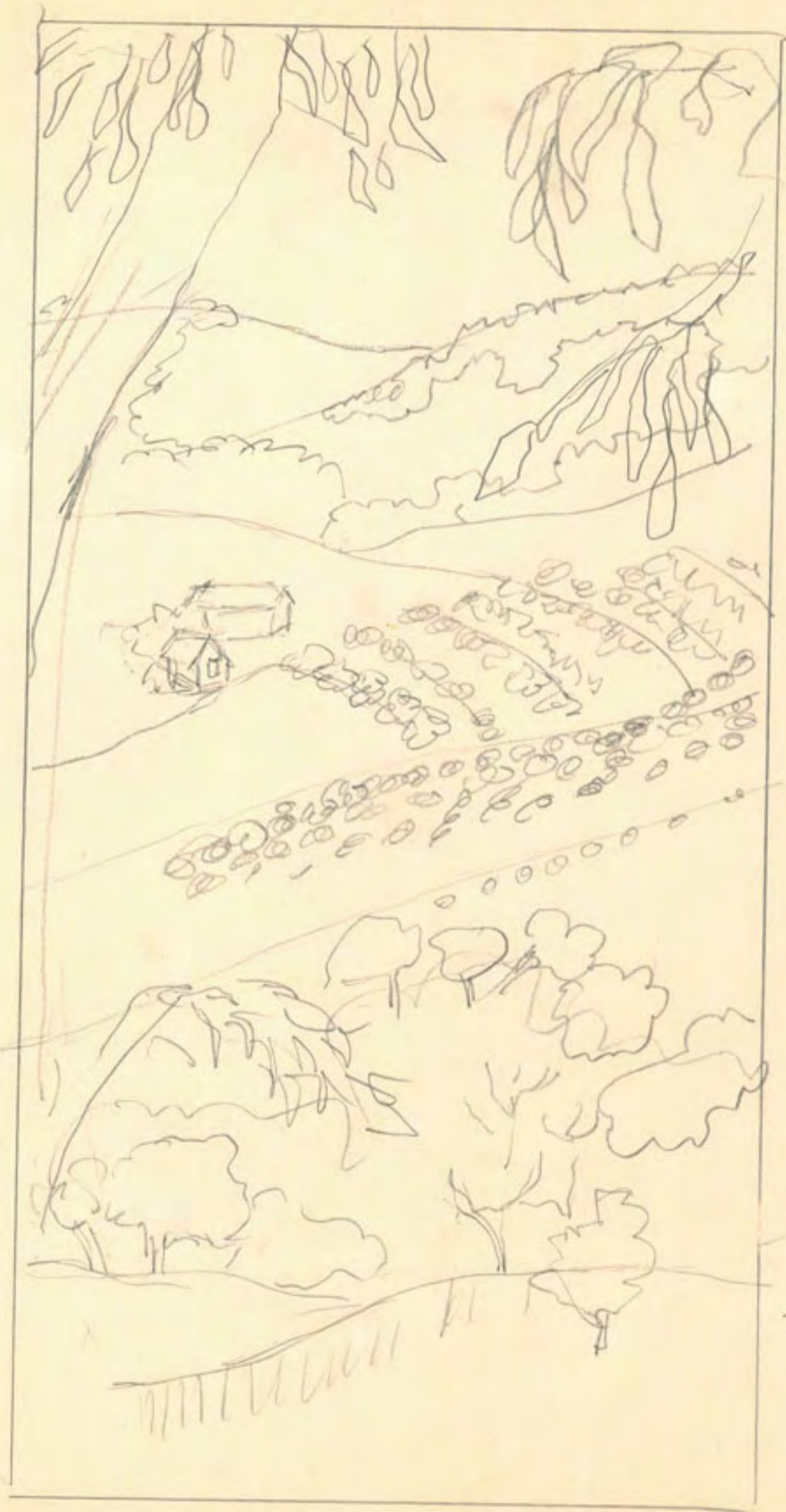
length
 $2 \frac{39}{78} = \frac{1}{2}$
 $4 \frac{19}{78} = \frac{1}{4}$



Beautiful rocky
Slope -
Too many dead
trees



Vineyard with
Eucalyptus
maybe???



→ Eucalyptus in foreground

olive trees and farm house

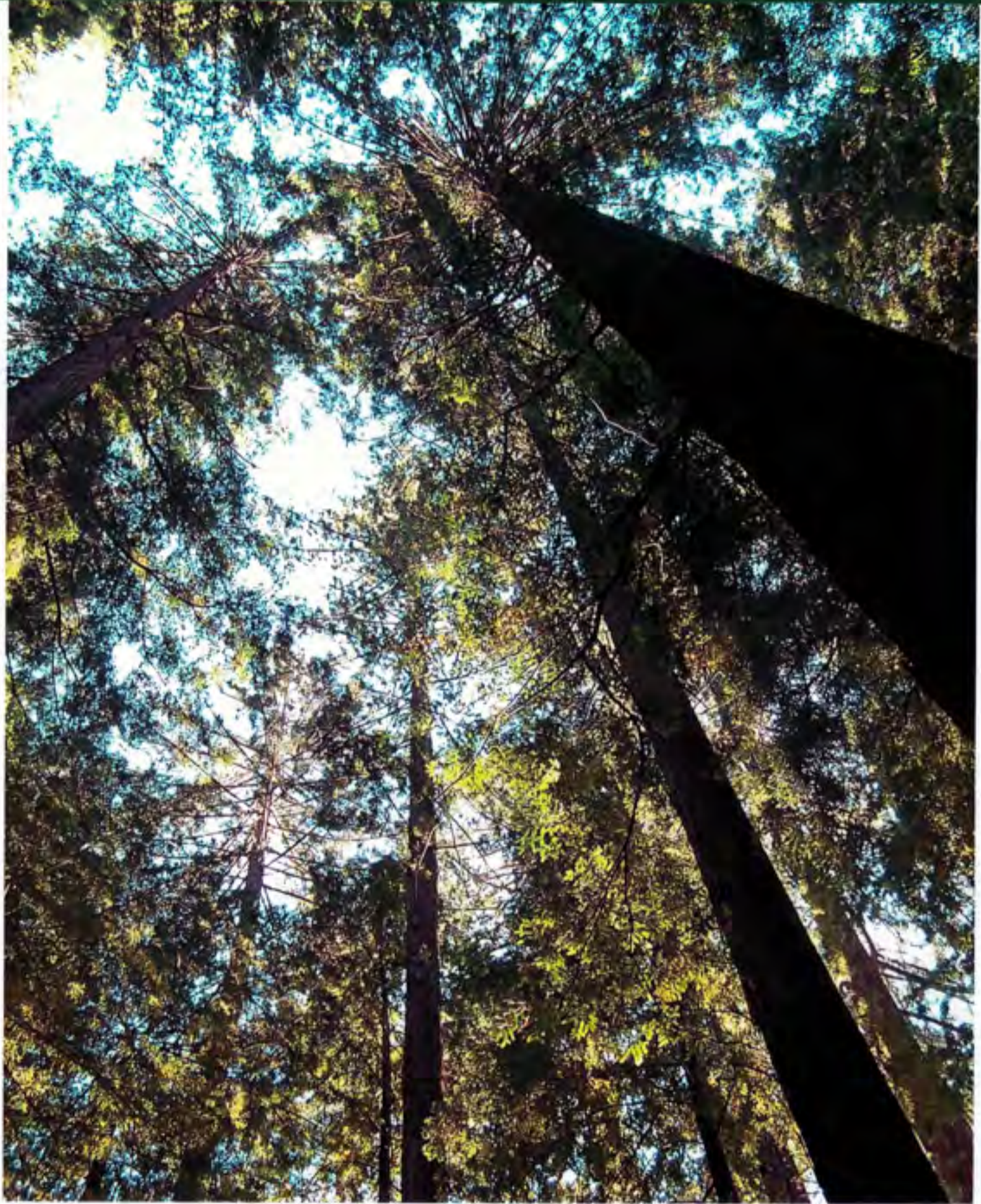
This scene would be very difficult - too much depth



yellow green

January 2: I restudied my drawings and decided that the first drawing, a redwood forest, looking up into the canopy would be the best. I added some details to the sketch. Then I decided that I needed a trip to the local fabric store. Of course I don't have enough fabric!

When I create a landscape I need many shades of green, yellow and brown. I use pale colors to form the distance, medium colors for the middle ground and brighter colors for the foreground.



The Winner! I can see this scene
as a 78" x 32" quilt - A towering forest
with filtered sunlight.



My final drawing along
with my photo and my
small sketch

There is no greenery - only
the tree structure.

Detail of my
final drawing. I love
the upper branches.



January 3: I began my quilt by cutting the back of the fabric to the appropriate size, leaving two inches extra on each side. My next step was to cut the batting and lay it over the back fabric. Since art quilts are constructed from the background forward, I then cut a pale blue cloth to represent the sky. I covered the entire batting with the blue fabric so that it could peek through the treetops. Since the subject of my quilt is the canopy of the redwoods this is an important step.

Using freezer paper I traced over my large sketch to make a pattern for my project. I draw only the major parts of the work and leave the finer details to figure out later. I believe that this method makes the work look more spontaneous, which is important to me. I like a "fresh" approach.

My sewing room is very small so I had to move my sewing materials into my dining room to work. I have completely taken over the dining room and I'm spilling somewhat into the living room. My dining room table is covered with a thick pad so that I won't ruin it. My sewing machine and ironing table are still upstairs in my sewing room, so I anticipate many trips up and down the stairs! I cut my fabric and batting to size, made my quilt sandwich and basted the layers together.

January 4: I began to lay out my pattern pieces on the quilt fabric just to get an idea of placement, composition and artistic value. I rearranged them a few times until I felt good about the design.

I ironed my freezer-paper pattern on to plain dark brown cloth. I will use the plain fabric as an underlayment and a guide as to where background colors would go. Since the fabric I use for the tree trunks will be in shades of brown, the underlayment can show through here and there and it will add depth to the tree trunks. The smaller trees, which should appear farther away, will be cut later out of much lighter fabric.



I am tracing my drawing on to freezer paper. Each tree trunk and branch will be cut separately, and ironed onto foundation fabric.

I will position the trees but not sew them down yet. I may want to move them for better effect.

January 9: I'm not sure how to begin working with the trees. There are so many things to consider: placement of the background trees, foliage, reflections and shadows. I decided to start with a close-up tree on the upper right. I placed the underlayment of the tree trunk where I wanted it. The fabric is backed with fusible web and I was able to tap it lightly with the iron to hold it in place. I call that "iron basting". I began to lay light green lace and tulle in the background to represent redwood needles. These will be behind the tree trunk so that when I sew "bark" over them they will appear to be behind the tree. Later I will layer darker greens over them. I sewed the leaves down in a pattern that represents redwood needles. (Or are they fronds? I will have to look up the parts of a redwood!)



← I am starting to place some of the foundation pieces cut from the freezer paper patterns ... I began by placing background - sky and sun.

I have positioned more of the foundation pieces. The upper left tree has been sewn down but needs more greenery.

I have moved from → my tiny sewing room to the dining room.



January 11: I took the day off to drive up the coast with my husband. We drove through the redwoods in one area and I was once again inspired by the beauty of the tall canopy with the filtered light pouring through. The redwood forest is a special and holy place. I felt refreshed as we drove along the coast highway and breathed in the salt air and saw the open endless sea. Although the ocean on the North Coast is rough and wild, looking out toward the horizon the water appears serene.

January 13: I am beginning to feel frustrated with my quilt. Placing all of the elements where they need to be is confusing and I leave my sewing room exhausted and frustrated. I can't seem to capture the beauty and serenity of the redwoods and the process is difficult and worrisome.

January 15: I have decided that I don't like the quilt I have been working on. I like the idea, but I can't seem to get excited about it. I may try working from another sketch and see how that goes.

January 16: Today I began a new quilt using another small sketch that drew, even though I did not make into a large-scale drawing. The scene shows a vineyard in summer with hills in the background. I have a good feeling about it.

I laid out the pieces just looking at the photo but I used exactly the same technique I used for the previous quilt. Using my photo as a guide, I cut out some background hills. I cut them out of the appropriate fabrics and set them in place. The scene is familiar and reflects the local agriculture. It feels right and presents just enough of a challenge to be interesting. I am so glad I made the switch!

January 19: Almost all of the background pieces are in place now. I sewed the hills by hand with an appliqué stitch simply because I like some handwork to be represented in my quilts. Now that I have sewn the large pieces in place I will begin working on the shading to give the hills more depth. I think I will use tulle overlay to give achieve that depth.

January 21: I am getting frustrated with the tulle! It keeps getting stuck on the foot of the sewing machine and I have to continually cut it away and re-sew. After a short time I had to put everything aside and walk away from it.

January 22: I have come up with a new technique for sewing down the tulle and it works much better now. I realized that I can cut the tulle pieces larger than I need them. After they are sewn into place, I just cut away the extra fabric. This keeps the edges from getting caught on the foot. Another thing I discovered is that the tulle stretches while you are sewing it down, so I now I pin the tulle every inch or less. This prevents the fabric from stretching and getting caught. I feel so smart!

January 25: I have injured my eye and it has hampered my progress. I will get back to my project ASAP. My eye has been hurting for a few days so I will go to a doctor tomorrow so see what's going on.



Putting
Many pins
into the
tulle...

I lost my faith in the
redwood tree quilt and
tried a Vineyard scene...
What could be more Sonoma
County?

It became more and more
difficult... Sewing tulle to
make layers, finding enough
greens - etc.

Even the photo turned
out bad!



January 26: Went to the doctor and he said I have an eyelid infection. I have never heard of that. But whatever he did to it, it feels much better now. I'll be on medicine for 2 weeks, but I'm on the mend.

February 4: After about 2 weeks of working with a bad eye I am back in full swing.

My quilt is divided into 4 sections: Sky, Far background, Close-up and Foreground. I have finished the sky which is in several shades of blue and gold and I am working on the far background. I am not sure how to proceed. One difficulty I am having is that I need to use fabrics in the background that give the illusion of distance but they must also blend in with my summer color scheme. In this vineyard scene it is important to show the vines in the background as small and pale, with the vines in the foreground as brighter, larger and more detailed.

February 6: I am a little frustrated with working on the background of my quilt so I have decided to work on the close-up vines. This will be more fun than the background and it will give me a little break. So far I have cut outline shapes of the plants in several sizes. These will serve as foundation pieces for the grape vines. I am not sure how I will show the close-up vines, so I will use these foundation pieces to try out different perspectives.

I am trying to decide whether to depict the near vines in rows in vanishing perspective, or to have several vines in a straight row in the foreground. If I show the vines in "vanishing point" perspective, will the scene look too cluttered? How will I design the leaves so that the vines farther away don't fade into the background? I will have to play around with the foundation pieces to get a better idea of how I want to proceed.

February 10: It is interesting how life gets in the way of art! I have not had much time to work on my quilt for a few days. For one thing, I teach a sewing class to first, second and third graders in River Montessori School, a charter school our school district. I will soon add another grade to the program and it takes an enormous amount of preparation. My first group has made quilt blocks and it is my job to make them into a quilt which will be auctioned off as a fundraiser for the school.

Another excuse I have for not quilting is that I sometimes take care of my twin grandsons after school. They like to do crafts and sewing when they are here, so I focus all my attention on them for a few hours now and then.

But now I am back at sewing everyday for at least a few hours. I regard to the grapevines in the foreground I have decided to show a few larger vines in the foreground of the quilt so that the leaves will be of the same size and will fill the scene nicely.

February 12: I am working on "fleshing out" the vine stems. (There must be a better name for them. I'll have to check with a vintner to find out.) I want to show them as very old twisted vines with colorful leaves

One rule I follow faithfully is that I always make a complete "tree" structure before I add the leaves. The underlying structure gives substance to the tree...the viewer sees the leaves with branches and trunk underneath and it is more believable than a blank top area with leaves floating around! In this case I am constructing the trunk of the vines first.

February 15: I have spent several days designing and sewing the trunks of the grapevines, and now I'm ready to begin working on the leaves. I will cutout and attach some of the leaves with fusible web and add additional leaves as rough-edge appliqué. I am using cotton, lace, tulle and organdy for the leaves. The variety of fabrics will add texture and interest to the area. I will have to cut out dozens of leaves from the various fabrics to get the effect I'm looking for. I want the cotton fabrics to be the base with the organdy, tulle and lace to be the top layers. These fabrics are more transparent and they will allow the darker cotton leaves to show through.

February 17: I have completed the under layer of leaves and I am quilting them to resemble the veins of the grape leaves. I am using a multi-color thread so that the colors blend and harmonize with the

green leaves. Also, grape leaves tend to have other colors besides green in them. Pinks, oranges and yellows are beautiful accents that Mother Nature has painted them with.

February 18: I took the day off to take a trip to the San Jose Museum of Textiles and Quilts. My Studio Art Quilts Association group had their meeting there and among other things we had an opportunity to see many quilts from Quilt National. The quilts were very inspiring and gave me some wonderful ideas for finishing my Seasonal Palette project. I definitely need to loosen up my style! Also I noticed that most of the quilts had much more quilting than I am used to. One of my friends told me about a double needle that can be used to give closer-together rows of quilting. How come I never heard of that before? I will try to find one of those needles at my local store. I don't think it will help me with this project, but I'll keep it in mind for the future.

February 27: I have had several very bad days of sewing. I cannot seem to get the grape leaves to look right. And the composition is not turning out as I thought it would. The colors are not right. One day I decided that the scale of the leaves I had already sewn on was too large, so I un-stitched them, (which took hours), re-cut newer, smaller leaves and sewed them on, adding colors, textures and whatever I could to enhance the work. Sadly nothing I did made my project any better. I have decided to scrap project #2 and return to project #1. In retrospect those redwoods look pretty good.

March 1: Returning to my first project was an excellent decision. I am familiar with redwood trees, so after some thought I am able to figure out the light source and shadows and to make the tree bark and leave (needles?) look the way I want them to look.

I have learned several lessons from working on the vineyard project: When a project isn't working for you, let it go! You will not improve it by overworking it.

You must be inspired from within to create. You cannot force creativity, which by its very nature comes from your heart and expresses itself through your chosen medium...in this case fabric.

March 3: The redwood trees are definitely coming together. I have completed two trees and a beautiful background. In order to create the effect I want, I begin by placing the sunlit foliage and shadows as they must be. This includes the light source, since that will affect the every aspect of the scene.

In order to portray a believable redwood tree, I begin by showing the structure of the tree: how the tree trunk slants, the placement of branches under the foliage. When I finally get to the leaves or needles, I know everything will read properly, even the parts that are covered by other parts.

March 8: I have been working my tush off to complete my quilt. I have very little time left to complete the project and have it photographed before April 1.



Back in my sewing room... Working from background forward, I placed some "distant" greenery, placing tree structure on top of greenery. Once greens are in place I will sew down trunks and branches, then more greens on top.



Detail of the first tree... I will
add more greenery and improve
the overall shape... Work on
highlights!!

My project is very densely quilted and each area takes hours. I spent at least 5 hours on one tree. I have created the tree structure over a base of blue and green background. The background is quilted to give the illusion of redwood needles. There are several layers of transparent fabric in the background. Then I will construct the tree structure comprised of five or eight different fabrics, including yellows for highlights and purples for shadows. I will also embellish the tree trunks with yarn and beads. Next I will add the foliage in many shades of green, blue, yellow and a little bit of orange. I also use purple to show depth.

I am being a perfectionist about the project. I want it to be just so, and I am spending five or six hours a day on it to make it happen. The good news is that my creation is truly beautiful. Even though it is not yet finished I can tell that everything is coming together just the way I wanted. The composition, the colors and the mood of the piece are just as I envisioned them. It is so rewarding to see your vision come to fruition.

March 15: I am putting the finishing touches on the redwood trees. Some of the trees are just a little bit off. They may need more leaves branches or something. Overall the quilt looks pretty good. It's just that there are so many details to figure out.

March 18: I have finished the body of the quilt, and now I have to square it up and sew on the binding. I'm hoping my husband can help me with squaring up since the quilt is so long and narrow.

March 19: Don and I made sure the quilt is squared up perfectly. The problem I have is that my quilts tend to buckle around the edges due to the amount of quilting and some unevenness in the quilting. I would like to know how other people deal with that problem. Maybe more basting would help.

March 20: I have taken my quilt to Joe McDonald for photography. Joe is the main photographer for the art museums in San Francisco, so I know he will do a great job. He will have it ready for me in a couple of days.

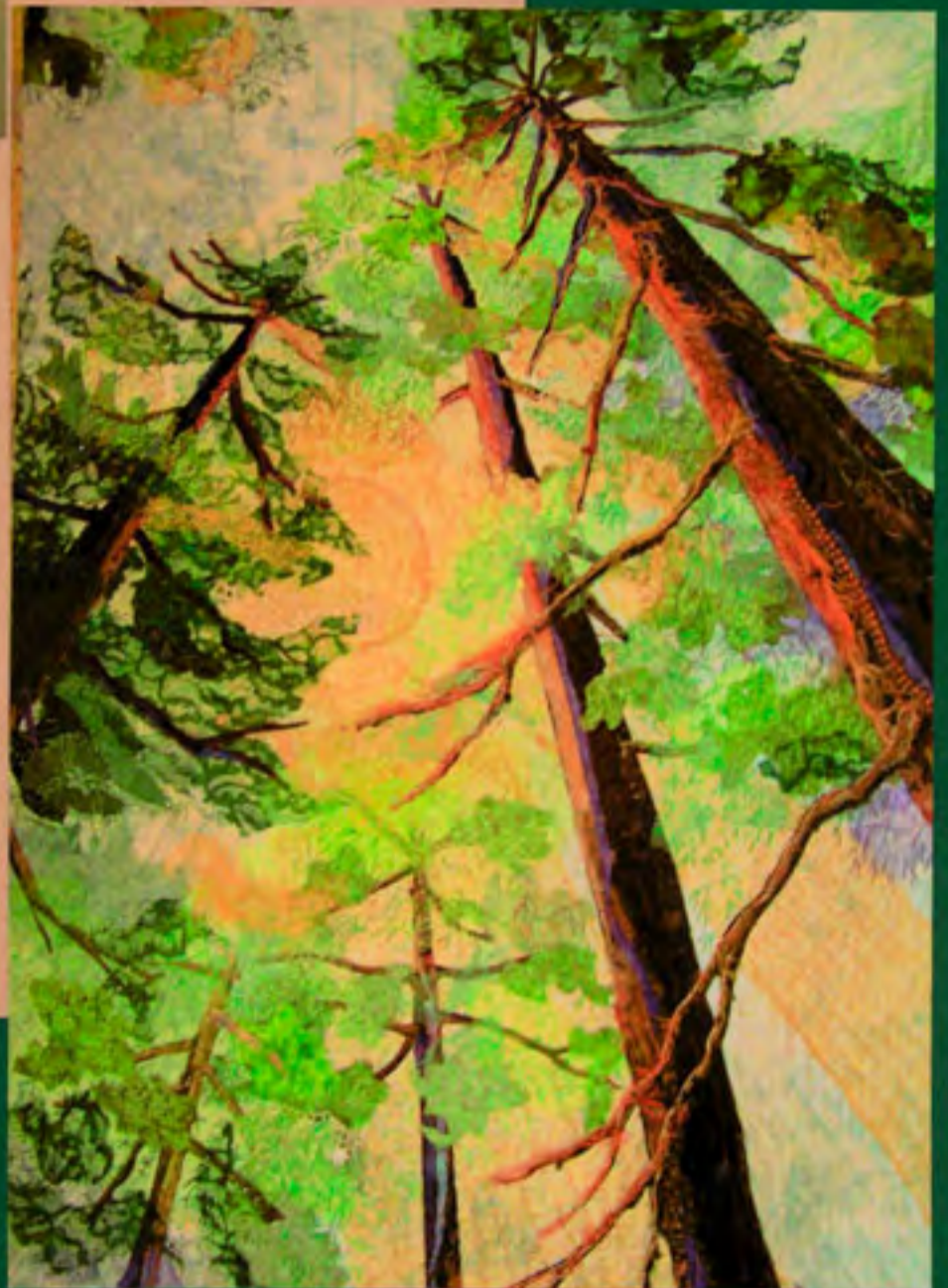


Niko is (not) helping me with my quilt!



Here is my
final project
TA-DRA!
Hanging on my
dining room wall.

Detail of
Canopy
(Love the
light effect)



UNDERLAYMENT:

I BEGIN MY TREES BY CUTTING AN EXACT OUTLINE OF EACH TREE TRUNK AND THE BRANCHES. I FUSE EACH PIECE IN PLACE. I CAN ACTUALLY PLACE BACKGROUND PIECES OVER THE UNDERLAYMENT BECAUSE I KNOW THE TREE TRUNKS WILL BE FLESHED OUT WITH MANY LAYERS OF FABRIC.

LOTS OF MY FABRICS ARE TORN RATHER THAN CUT, ESPECIALLY FOR TREES AND GRASSES.

underlayment

Lace adds interest

upholstery fabric
Heavy texture

Velour

Shows yellow highlights

I like the way this one rolls up!



torn fabrics for upward motion

These fabrics look very different when torn



Same fabric cut Sidewa

Love this texture!

Shred the Sides. Make small cuts so fabrics stop shredding when finished.

looks like bark

MY LIGHT SOURCE FABRICS:

I USE MANY TYPES OF YELLOW FABRICS TO CREATE MY LIGHT SOURCE. IN THIS CASE I WANTED A DIFFUSED LIGHT

I USED MANY SHEERS IN THE SUN-LIT AREAS. WHEN LAYERED THEY GIVE TRANSPARENCY AND THEY REFLECT OFF OF EACH OTHER. PLACING A SHEER OVER ANOTHER SHEER OR A SOLID FABRIC CHANGES BOTH THE UNDERLYING FABRIC AND THE SHEER.

Light source
fabrics -
subtle
overlays



↑
Same fabric
reversed
↙



lace is
a great
blender

PURPLES:

I USE PURPLES TO SHOW SHADOWS AND DEPTH. PURPLE GIVES LIFE AND BEAUTY TO SHADOWS.

THE SHEER VIOLET FABRIC SEEMS ALMOST INVISIBLE AT FIRST, BUT WHEN IS LAYERED OVER OTHER COLORS IT GIVES A BEAUTIFUL CAST TO THE BACKGROUND. LAYERED WITH GREEN IT LOOKS TURQUOISE. LAYERED OVER BROWNS IT LOOKS SHADOWY.



Nylon tulle
makes a subtle
difference.

I use
Purple for
shadows - it gives
more life to trees

GREENS:

THERE ARE SO MANY GREENS! I AM TRYING TO KEEP WITHIN THE GREENS WITH A BLUISH CAST RATHER THAN THE OLIVE TONES. I WILL USE SOME OLIVE, THOUGH, FOR VARIETY.

IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO USE MANY TEXTURES AND VALUES. WITH LOTS OF GREENS YOUR WORK CAN BECOME CONFUSING TO THE VIEWER UNLESS YOU VARY THE TONES.

IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE HOW A SHEER OR A LACE FABRIC AND CHANGE THE APPEARANCE OF THE FABRIC UNDERNEATH.

for
Darker shadowy
areas

lace
blends
lights
and
darks

Reversed
for
added
interest

fabrics
that pick up
sunlight



I USE MANY SHEERS IN CREATING TREES.
SHEERS GIVE DEPTH AND TRANSPARENCY
TO A SCENE. THEY CAN ALSO ADD
SPARKLE AND INTEREST, ALLOWING YOU TO
PEEK THROUGH ONE FABRIC TO ANOTHER.

Nylon
tulle

Sheers
overlap for
texture
depth and
Highlights

organza



EMBELLISHMENTS:

EMBELLISHMENTS GIVE LIFE AND CHARM TO A PIECE. I USE LACE, TRIMS AND YARN FOR SMALL ITEMS AND TO GIVE HIGHLIGHTS TO LARGER AREAS.

I FIND OLD DOILIES TO BE WONDERFUL ADDITIONS TO A QUILT! (THEY ARE SOMETIMES DIFFICULT TO SEW THROUGH, THOUGH.

Thinly torn
fabric

textures
add interest and
texture depth

