

The Organic Landscape

By Sue Reno

The SAQA Seasonal Palette Exhibit



I was delighted to be selected to create work for the Seasonal Palette Exhibit. Much of my work is botanically based and portrays the changes that plants undergo at different stages in their life cycles, so seasonal variety always plays a big role in my inspiration and subject matter.

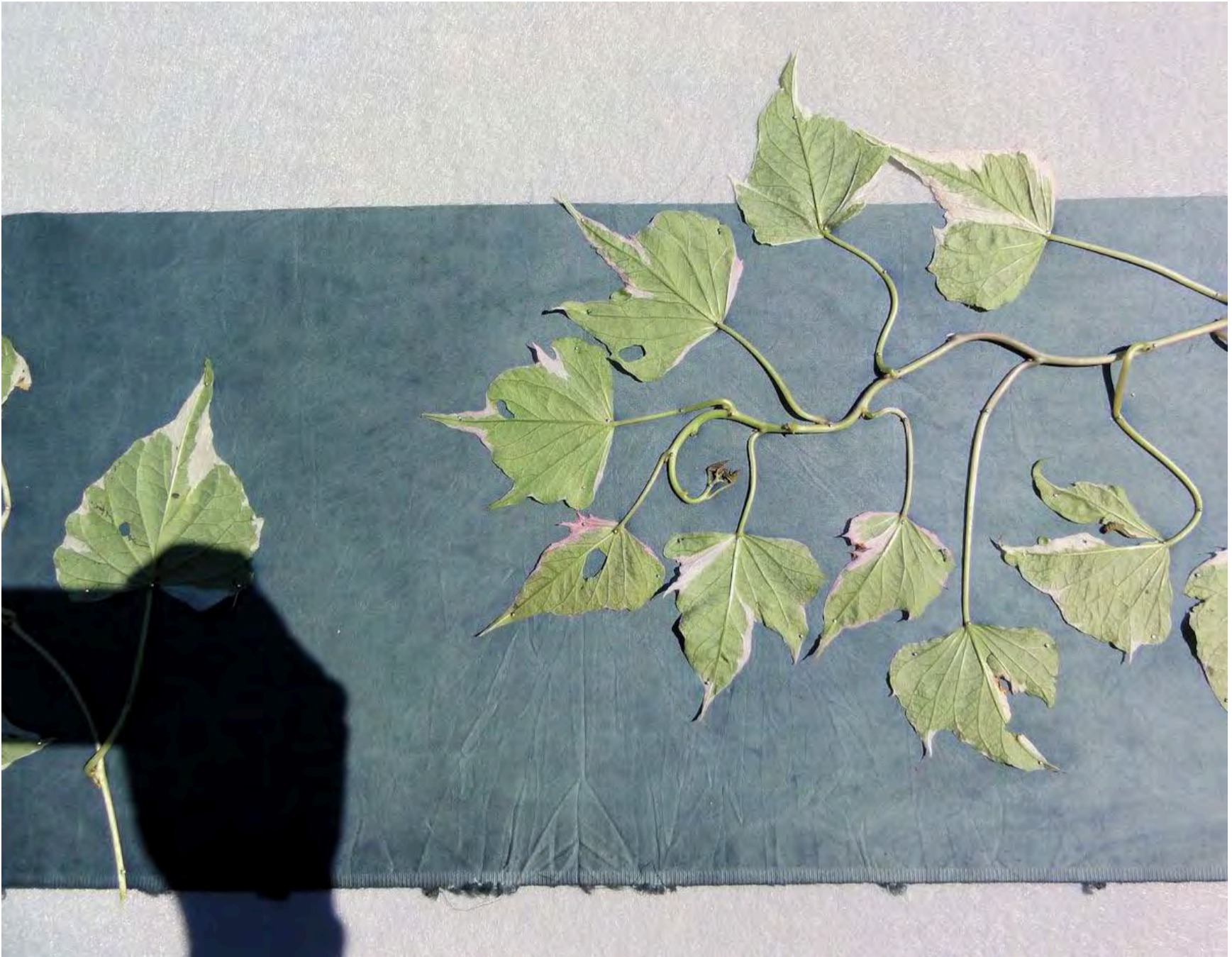
The criteria for the exhibit included this documentation of the creative process. It's not my practice to engage in sketching and formal preplanning of my work, but I do love documentation. I always take pictures of the work as I go, save fabric samples, and often do work-in-progress blog posts, so I was excited at the opportunity to share this aspect of my creative process.

I invite you to join me as I illustrate the steps involved in the production of "The Organic Landscape".

Of the works in my resume I submitted to the curators, they particularly liked “The Organic Garden”, and requested that my new work for the exhibit represent **Summer** in a similar style. It’s a good choice, and one I was eager to expand on. I was not looking to duplicate it, but to capture the same kind of botanical exuberance and abundance, while using the saturated colors of high-to-late summer.



The timing of the acceptance was such that I had a limited window of opportunity to make summery prints, so even before I was sure of the ultimate direction and composition of the work, I ordered some treated cyanotype fabric and got busy. Here is a length from an ornamental sweet potato vine that was laid out on treated fabric and exposed to bright sunlight.



Making cyanotypes is a fascinating blend of science and art. Because I am dependent on the angle of the sun and the meteorological conditions on any given day, as well as the freshness of the treated fabric and other variables, the exposure time for a print is reckoned both by counting the minutes and by guesswork based on experience. The cyanotype gods were with me on this occasion, and I got some wonderfully crisp and vivid prints to work with.

Depending on the type of plant, and the size of the print desired, I pinned the specimens to a board, or flattened them under glass.



Here are some Big Root Geranium leaves as a print-in-progress, along with the shadow of the photographer.



Along with the cyanotype prints, I used the power of the sun to make heliographic prints. Here are some Big Root Geranium leaves drying on a field of orange and gold mica textile paint.

I blended the colors of the paints to find just the right shade for the summer theme of the work.



The inspiration for this quilt came from perennial favorites in my organically landscaped yard, such as these Japanese anemones. I love their sturdy, shapely foliage and their delicate flowers.

The cyanotype process was particularly effective at capturing the delicate details of these Japanese Anemone flowers.





I also used the heliographic process to make prints of the anemone leaves.

The leaves worked as a mask on the freshly painted fabric as it dried. The paint wicked out from under them and their images remained.

This fabric was cut up and used in the patchwork for the quilt.



I never tire of making cyanotype prints. It is exciting and almost magical each and every time. It encompasses so many of my happy obsessions including plants, photography, fabric, and working outdoors at the (hopefully tender) mercies of the elements. I could set up UV lights and expose the prints safely indoors, but I think that would take some of the pleasure out of the experience. Of course the viewer can't tell where and how I made the print, they simply see the result, but my joy in making it is an integral part of the process.



Here is the resultant print of the painted fern specimen. The fabric that was masked by the plant remained white, and the exposed fabric turned this lovely Prussian Blue color. The lighter blue lines at the top and bottom were from the edges of the sheet of glass used to hold the fern in place, and they were cut away for the finished work in this instance.

Here is the print from the length of sweet potato vine. You can see lovely variations in shading along the edges of the leaves where the breeze lifted them a bit.





I made five prints for this work, and pinned them up on a design board to think about them for a bit.

One of the criteria for this exhibit was that the work must be a specific size, 78" tall by 32" wide. I wanted the design to be engaging all along its length, so it took some rumination and experimentation with placement to work all that out. My usual working method is to start with the prints and add patchwork elements around them, working outward until the proportions and flow seem correct. At the end I square everything up and then measure it. It's a nice advantage ordinarily to working with fiber and/or mixed media; the imagery can grow organically.

For this piece, I needed to think more like a painter who starts with a specific size of canvas, where everything needs to be contained and constrained proportionally within that space. I've had to think IN the box, as it were. Not necessarily a bad thing; just different.

I love picking out fabrics for a new project. It's one of my favorite parts of the process. It is exciting and stimulating to the little grey cells. It involves choosing the color scheme, but since I am working with textiles, there are also the secondary factors of texture, fiber content, and patterning.



I have a collection of textiles going back decades, including dressmaking scraps from the clothes I wore as a child. I am not sentimental about them, but I relate to them in terms of their context in time and space. With fabrics that I've purchased I remember the general time frame and location of where I obtained them. With fabric that has been generously gifted to me, or that I've acquired from other craftswomen, again it is linked in my mind with the person and the circumstance. The fabrics have meanings and histories; some have been used in multiple projects, and all of that comes into play when I am auditioning them for something new. None of these factors will necessarily be evident to the viewer of the finished work, but it's highly relevant to what happens in my conscious and subconscious mind as I am working.

For this project I wanted mostly the clear, bright, somewhat saturated colors that signify mid-to-late summer to me. I used a few commercial fabrics, silks I brought back from my trip to India, and cottons I hand painted and printed. Here you see them cut into strips and sewn into sets as a preliminary step to being cut up for Seminole patchwork. I was quite pleased about the one on the right with the leaf prints.





I'm a big fan of the plume poppy, which has spread itself in a welcome way here and there in my gardens, and have used its intricately shaped leaves in numerous small projects as well as a huge art quilt.



And while I love the massive leaves as seen here in my "Plume Poppy", the scale of this project wouldn't accommodate them, so I focused instead on the tiny leaves that sprout up in the intersections and tops of the stalks.

I picked dozens and dozens of the little leaves, and laid them out in rows on white cotton to make heliographic prints with them, using green textile paint and the wicking power of the sun on a dry day. Here is the print in progress:



I then cut the printed fabric into strips and used it in the piecing. It was very fiddly and time consuming work, like a lot of what I do, but well worth it for the story it tells in the cloth.



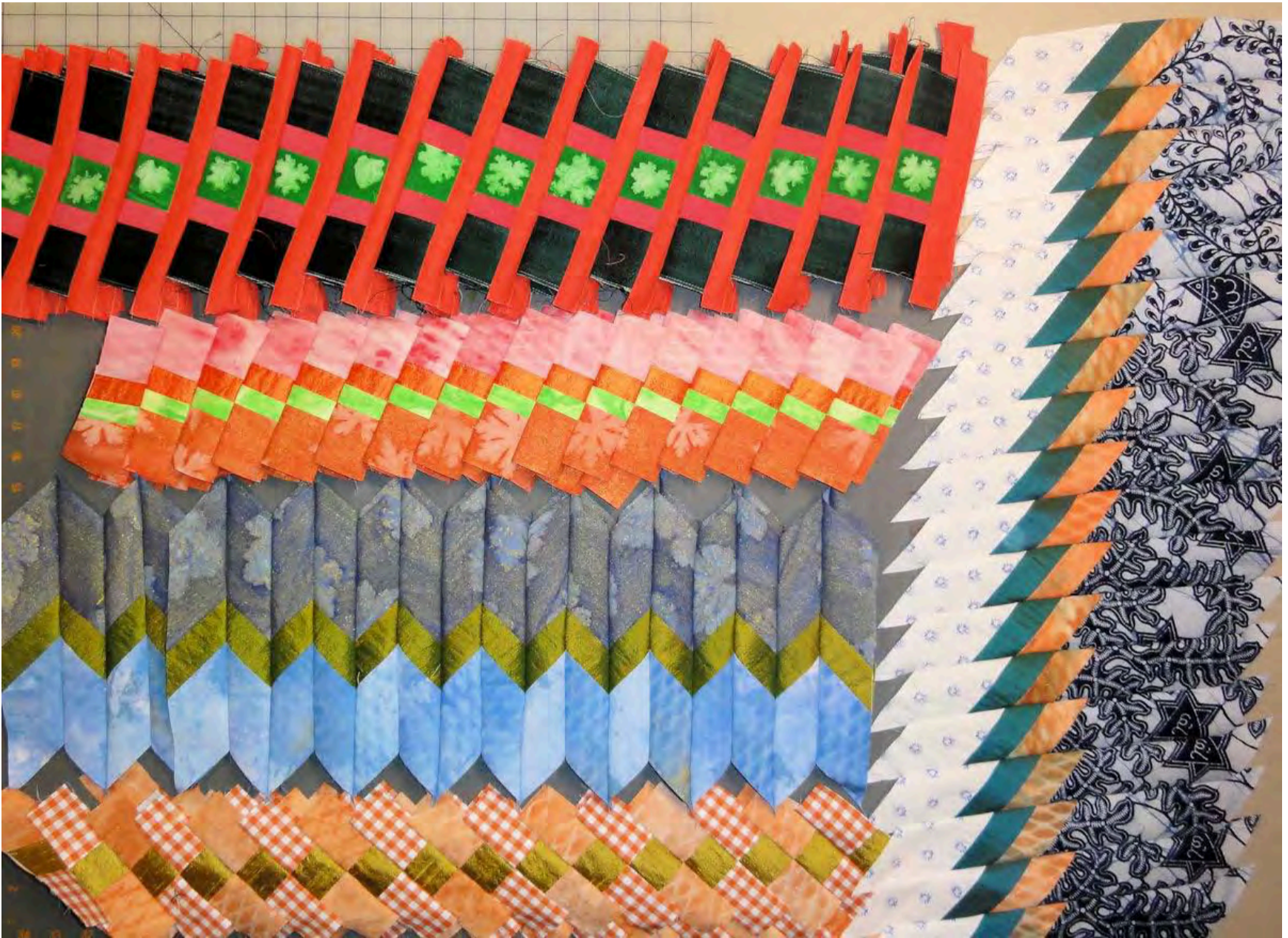
Making Seminole patchwork strips to use in the “The Organic Landscape” was a methodical process. After picking the fabrics, cutting strips, and sewing sets of strips together, the next step was to slice up the strips into short lengths. The cuts were made at either a 45 or a 60 degree angle, depending on the type of patchwork desired. There are dozens and dozens of ways to combine and assemble these, but over the years I’ve developed my favorite sets and can proceed with relative confidence as I assemble them. The short strips were pinned together precisely, two by two, with an offset that created the pattern, and sewn together. These pairs were then offset, pinned and precisely stitched, and so on, as I built long strips.



The white patches you see in these photos are the backs of the silk fabrics I used. I love working with silks, but some of them are lightweight, and all of them are slippery. One strategy is to fuse them to non-woven stabilizers, but I dislike using fusibles, partly because of concerns about their long term stability, but mostly because they give a flat visual effect to the silk.

So I took the extra step of machine basting the strips of silk onto cotton muslin beforehand. It's picky and time consuming work, but in the end, after the piece was quilted, the silk rippled just a bit and gained wonderful dimension and texture, so it was worthwhile.

Once the strips were sewn together, they were pressed and ready to be used in piecing. The edges were trimmed and evened up as I went along.



I enjoy making and using Seminole patchwork and revisit the technique from time to time. The concept was originated by the Seminole Indians, who used it for stunningly graphic and wonderful garments, as they made the best of their bad situation. Here I've used it as a bold graphic counterpoint to the leaf print in "White Mulberry".



I used Seminole strips, a cyanotype print, a heliographic print, and a summery color palette in “Tall Blue Lettuce”.



Tall blue lettuce is a wild plant, found on the edges of cultivated lands and occasionally as a weed in garden beds, which can grow to 5 or 6 feet tall. The Seminole strips were used to evoke its energy and rapid growth.

“Margarita” also used ornamental sweet potato vines along with the Seminole work.



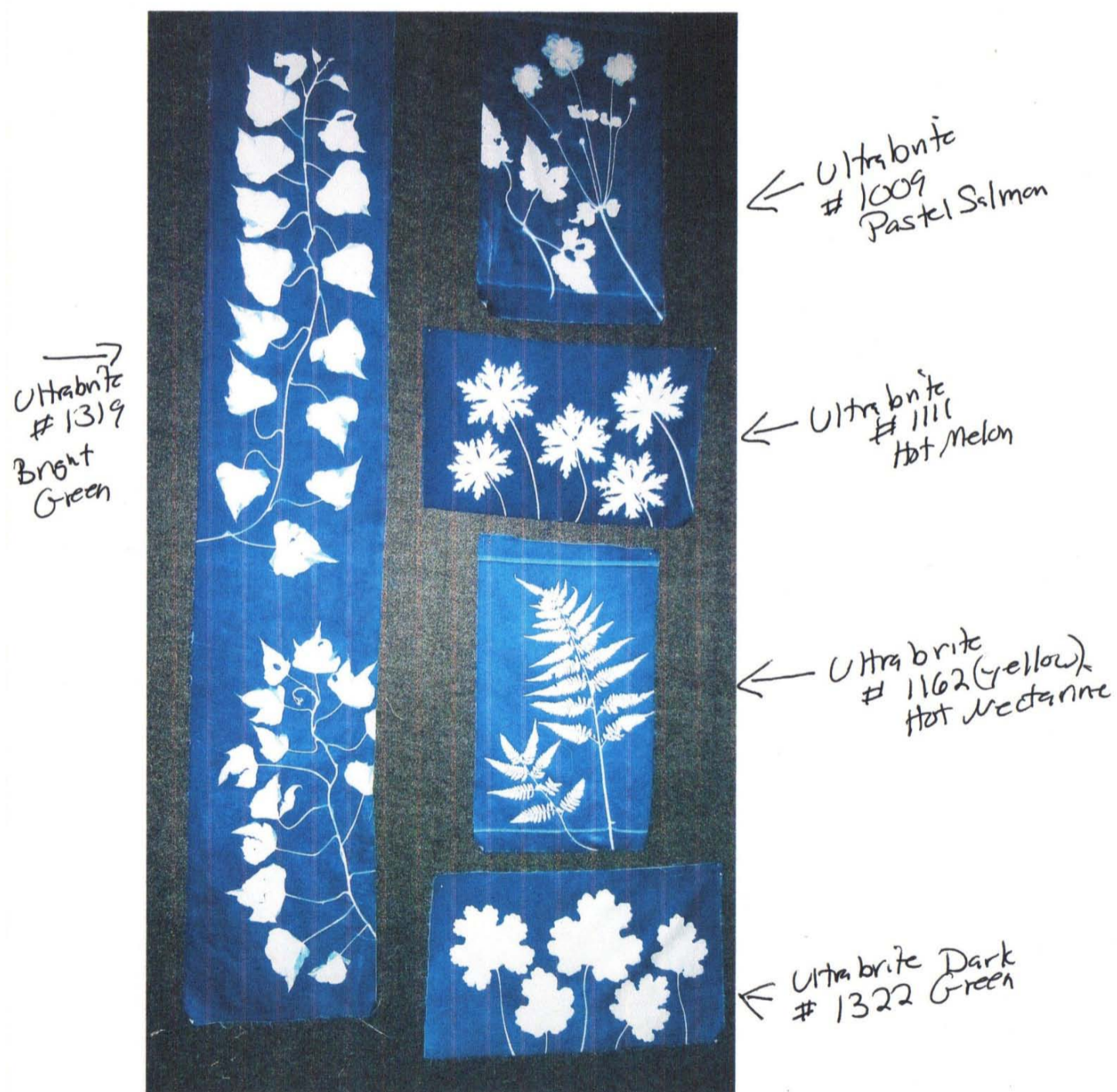


“Five Days Last Fall” featured painted ferns, plume poppy leaves, and Japanese anemones delineated with bands of Seminole strips. These are recurring themes in my work, but so adaptable that they can always be revisited with fresh iterations.

Having assembled my components - the cyanotype prints and the Seminole patchwork strips - it was time to work on the overall design and assembly of the quilt top. I didn't dither a lot at this stage of the process. I had a general idea in my head all along of how I wanted things to go, and putting it up on the wall mainly served to validate my internal vision. I did take some time with the process though, studying it over the course of several days, walking into the room and glancing at it like I was discovering it for the first time. In this instance, I ended up switching the position of the fern and the Japanese anemone prints from the first trial, putting the fern on the top right. I liked the way it curved, and directed the eye, in that position.



While I was thinking about the positioning, I took each print down and did the first round of stitching on it. Since I was planning to use a large variety of thread colors for the stitching, I printed a layout and made some quick notations on the first set of threads, to avoid future confusion.



Each print was layered with batting and a thin backing, and then intensively free motion quilted while it was still small enough to be easily maneuverable under the needle. Another round of quilting, not quite as detailed, was done after the entire quilt was assembled. I do all of my work, piecing and quilting, on a domestic sewing machine (as opposed to a long arm quilting machine, where the entire quilt sandwich is mounted on rollers and quilted by a movable machine head). Over the years I have developed methods for adding a lot of detailed stitching work without threatening my sanity.





At last I was ready for the final mock up of the entire quilt top, pinning up the stitched panels and the patchwork strips in their desired locales. At this point the vision started to become manifest, which was very gratifying!

I sometimes tweak things a bit at this juncture, to be sure the colors and values are balanced across the work, and that the eye travels as you view it, but for the most part the mockup is a close approximation of the final composition.

This is the mystical part, where if I am wise I will turn off any internal dialogue and let my unconscious take the wheel. I don't do sketches, or diagrams, or plan things out quantitatively ahead of time. It all takes shape in my mind, I think about it intently as I work to assemble the components, and I've learned to trust myself. Amazingly, I usually end up with exactly the right amounts of patchwork.

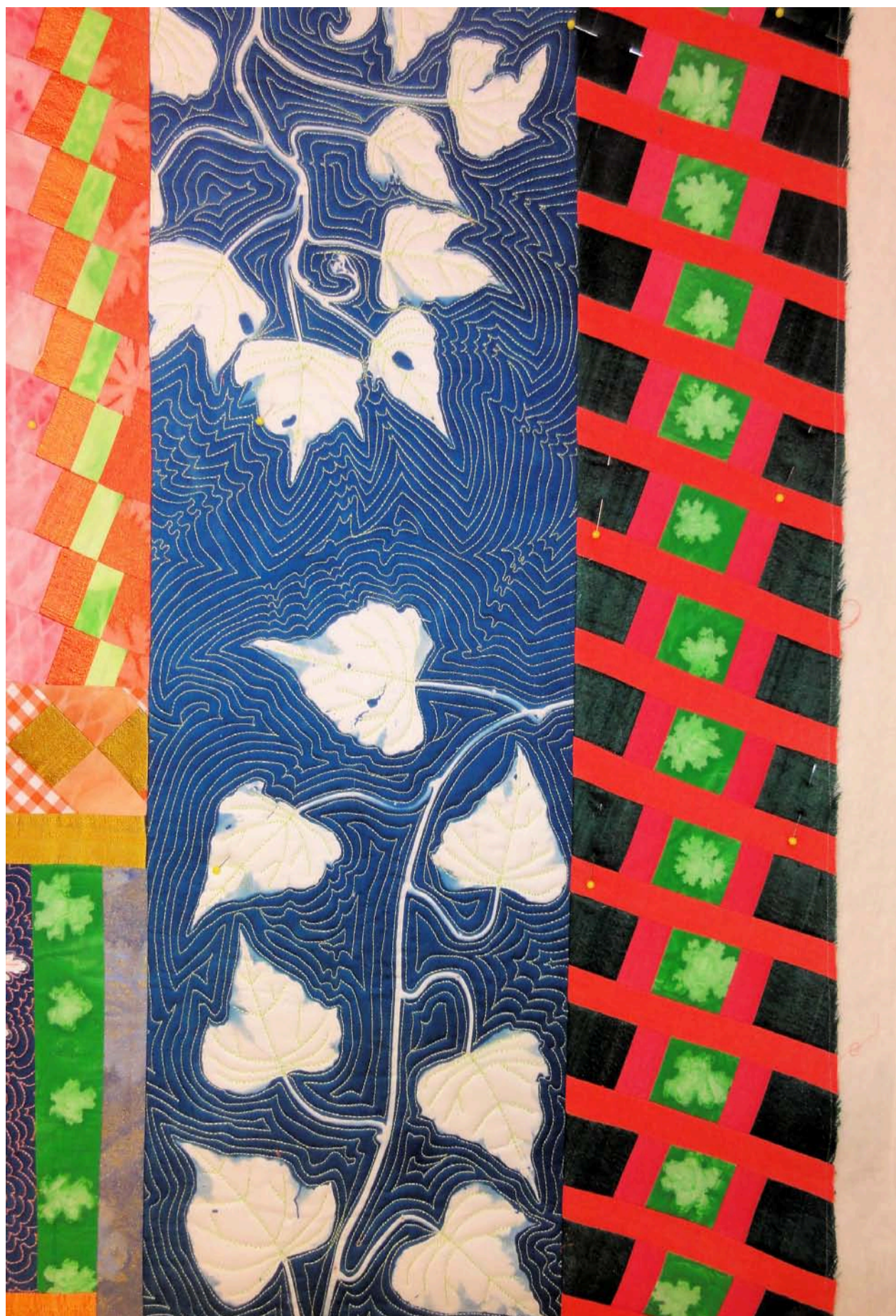


This is about as messy as I ever get in the studio, but it's a good kind of disorder, a happy fiber frenzy that leads to good results. With the components readied, and the layout organized on the design wall, it was time to assemble everything, to make it all work together and fit together. It's a trial and error process, but with less error as I've gained experience. Bit by bit I cut pieces to fit, seamed things together, pressed, trimmed, and repeated.

I like to set aside an otherwise unencumbered day for this, as it works best when I can get into an uninterrupted state of flow. For this project, I was slightly constrained by needing it to all work out to a predetermined size--not a simple equation, as the quilting, and then the rinsing, shrinks it down a bit. But it all worked out well and the top came together quite nicely.



With the top assembled, it was time to layer it with batting and a backing fabric. I use a type of “fusible” batting; it doesn’t have a permanent bond, but pressing activates a sticky resin coating that holds things together temporarily.



Because of the length of this piece I also did some pinning to help keep things unified. Any shifting that occurred while handling and quilting was corrected by re-aligning and re-pressing, and the resin rinsed out after quilting and left the hand of the fabrics unaffected.

Then it was time to put the assemblage under the needle. First I used a walking foot to quilt along major seam lines and anchor everything together.

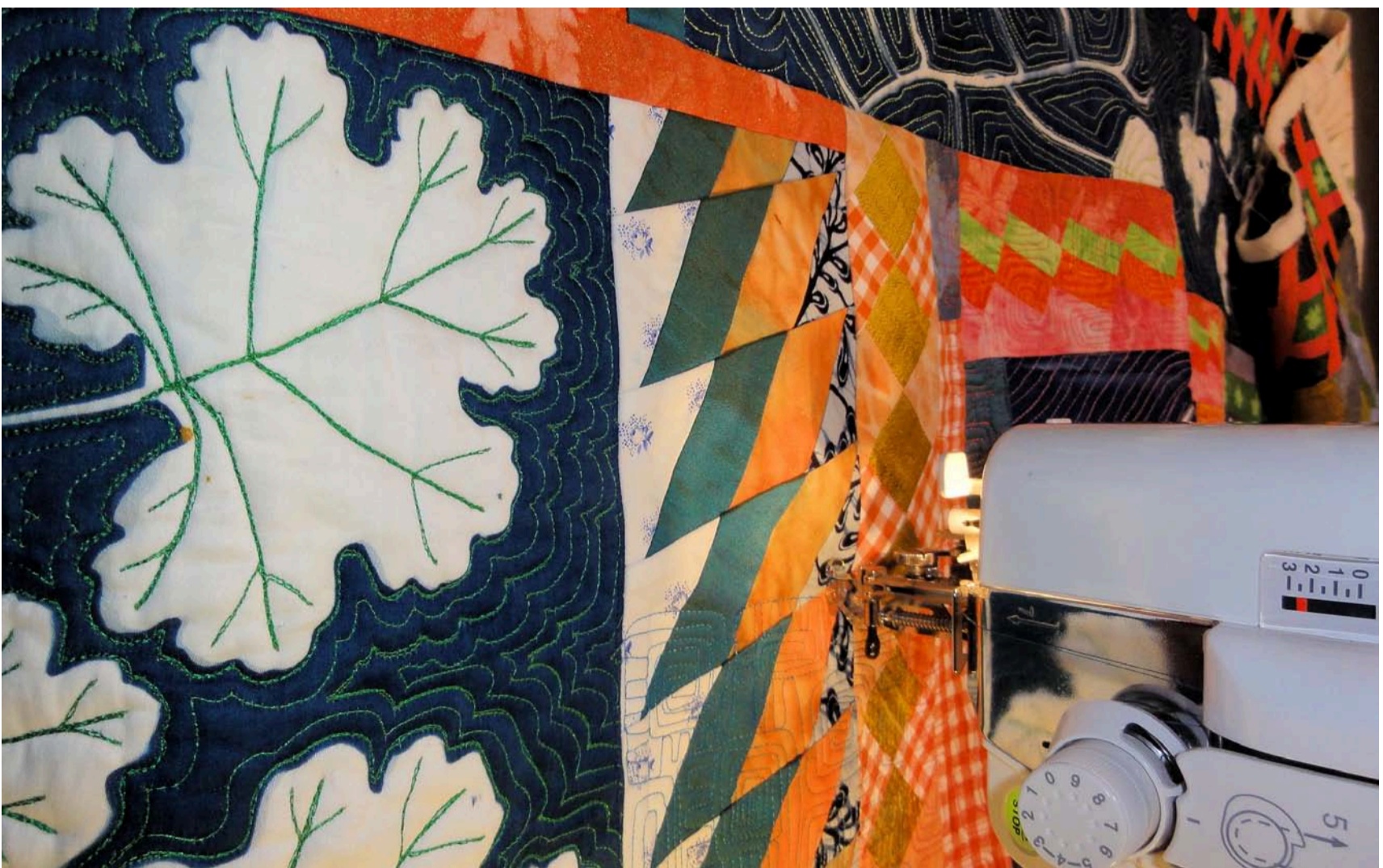


Then I switched to a free motion foot and did the intensive and closely spaced quilting that adds so much dimension and texture. At this point, I disengaged the feed dogs (those little teeth in the bed of the machine that move the fabric along), put on gloves with grippy finger tips, and moved the quilt under the needle by hand. It's analogous to drawing with the pen (the needle) fixed in a stationary position, and the paper (the fabric) being moved to create a line. I worked in a completely free-form fashion, without marking the top in any way, constructing a grid or maze where I moved in and back out again and again. It's a very meditative and Zen-like activity, except that it goes by very quickly at umpteen stitches per minute. It helps to keep an eye on where you are going next, and only half an eye on where you actually are. There's probably a parable in there somewhere....





When the quilting was finished at last, the work was rinsed, laid flat and blocked to dry, trimmed, and bound around the edges. Finally, a hanging sleeve and label were hand sewn on the back. I failed to photo-document these parts, but they are not all that compelling. I do them in a solid craftsman-like way, but by then I'm sort of over it; I'm more of a process person than a product person.



The Organic Landscape
by
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Cyanotypes on cotton,
artist-painted and commercial
silk and cotton fabrics, stitching.
2012



Here's my label for the quilt. I always do them in this fashion, with the date, location, and a bit about the process.

I like to add a picture of some part of the work in progress. Here it's the painted fern used for the cyanotype print.

I've started adding a QR code to my labels. Viewing it with a smart phone will take you to my website.



I truly enjoyed each part of the process of creating this quilt. It was challenging to work within the framework of the size and theme requirements, but I feel the finished work is a very accurate interpretation of what summer is like in my corner of the world. As I write this, summer has arrived in full force here in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., and my gardens are bursting with extravagant bloom. I hope that your environment is as beautiful in its own way as mine is today. Thank you for your interest in my work.

Addendum: The Cyanotype process

English scientist and astronomer Sir John Herschel discovered this procedure in 1842

It was used by Anna Atkins to produce limited editions of the first book illustrated with photographs in 1843, using direct prints of algae. She later published *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns* (1853), which can be seen in the Getty Museum.



Equal volumes of an 8% potassium ferricyanide solution and a 20% solution of ferric ammonium citrate are mixed, applied to cloth and allowed to dry in the dark.

The photo-sensitive cloth is masked with plants or other objects, or with a photo negative, and exposed to ultraviolet light for a timed exposure.

After exposure, the cloth is rinsed to remove the chemicals. The masked areas stay white, and the exposed areas turn Prussian Blue. Images are very stable.

I buy my fabric pre-treated, or have it custom treated, from Blueprintsonfabric.com.

Addendum: Heliographic prints

These are a type of mono print, made with textile paints on PFD (prepared for dyeing) cotton or silk.

Fabric is painted with textile paints, and then masked with leaves or other flat objects.

My preferred paints are from the Setacolor Transparent series, but any acrylic paint is suitable for experimentation with this method. It's best to water the paint down, in a 1:1 or 1:2 ratio so that it wicks freely as it dries. When done properly, it has little effect on the hand of the fabric.

The fabric is then placed outside on sunny, dry, calm day, or inside near a source of dry heat. As the paint dries, it wicks from underneath the leaves, leaving an image. After heat setting, the images are permanent, although they could be worn away mechanically if subjected to a lot vigorous washing.



Above is a print I made from green bean leaves. As it dries, the leaf sometimes shrivels and shrinks, leaving lovely margins on the print. I like to then go in and add the leaf veining details with stitching.



All handwoven
silks

Purchased in
Bangalore,
India



commercial
silk



commercial
silk



commercial
silk/cotton



Hand painted heliographic prints on cotton



Hand painted on
cotton
+
bamboo/cotton



Mysore silk,
purchased in Mysore,
India



African Indigo print



commercial
cotton-
print

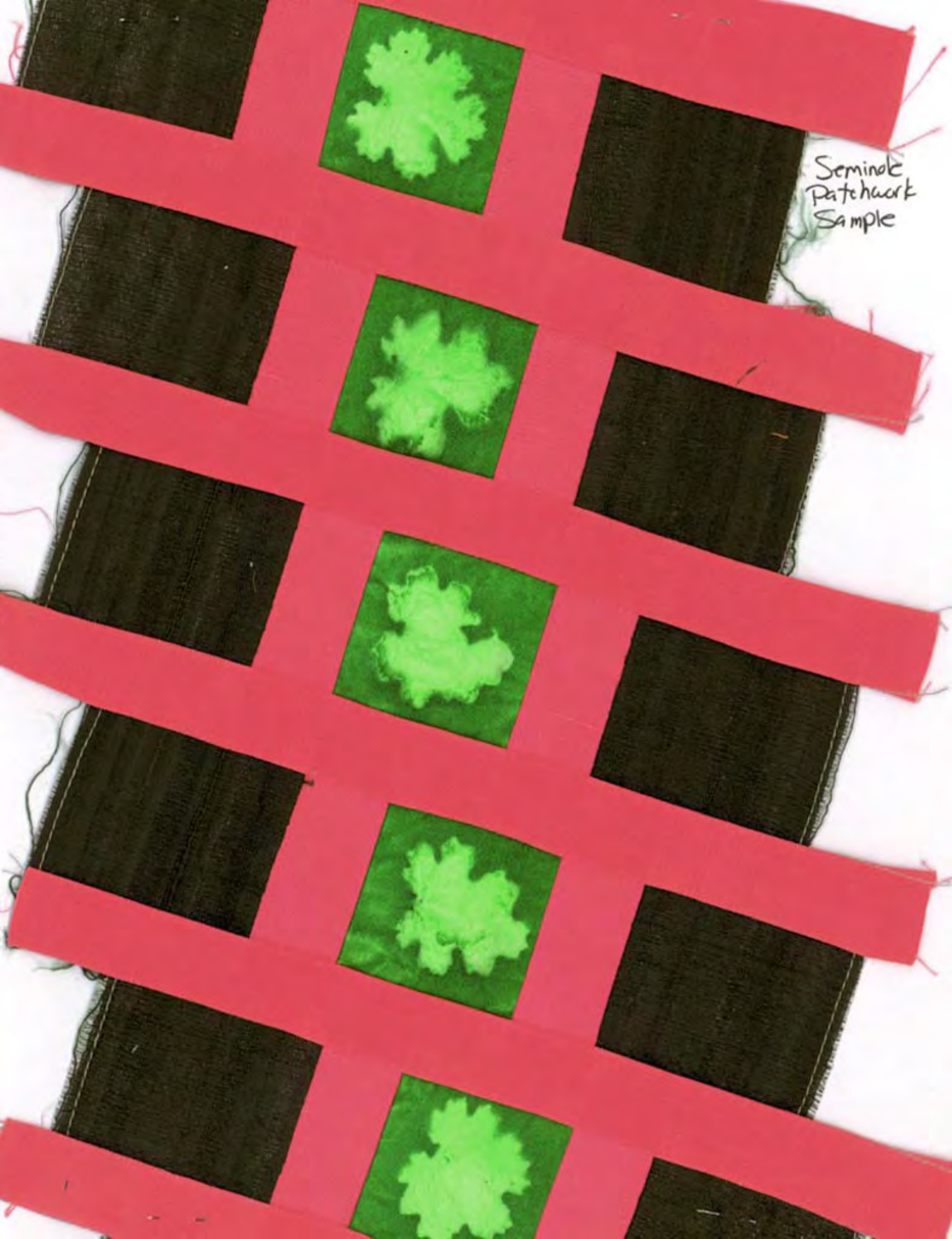


Seminole Patchwork
Samples



Seminole Patchwork
Samples

Seminole
Patchwork
Sample



Sue Reno
The Organic Landscape
Touchable
Heliographic Print
Sample



Sue Reno -
The Organic Landscape

Touchable
Cyanotype Sample

