



*Homage to Gee's Bend, Housetop Variation*

72 x 96 inches | 2009

Photo by D. James Dee, NYC

# Michael Cummings

## Artist finds 'endless possibilities' in fiber art

by Cindy Grisdela

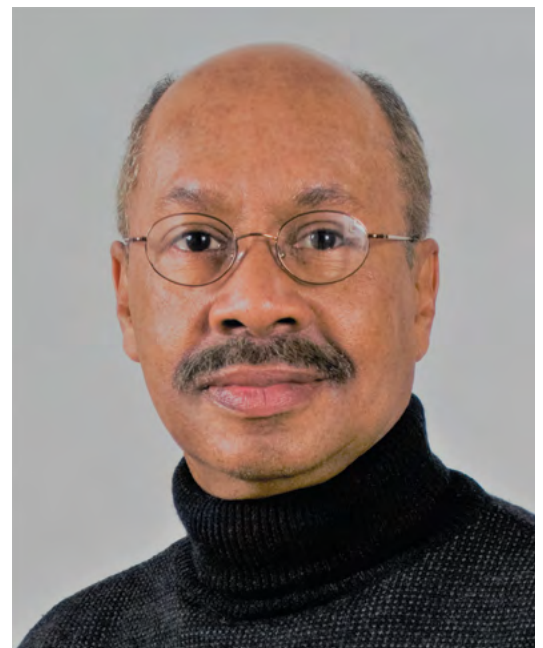
Michael Cummings stumbled into making art quilts in 1973 when he created a banner as part of his job with the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City. At the time, he was primarily a painter and had no sewing experience.

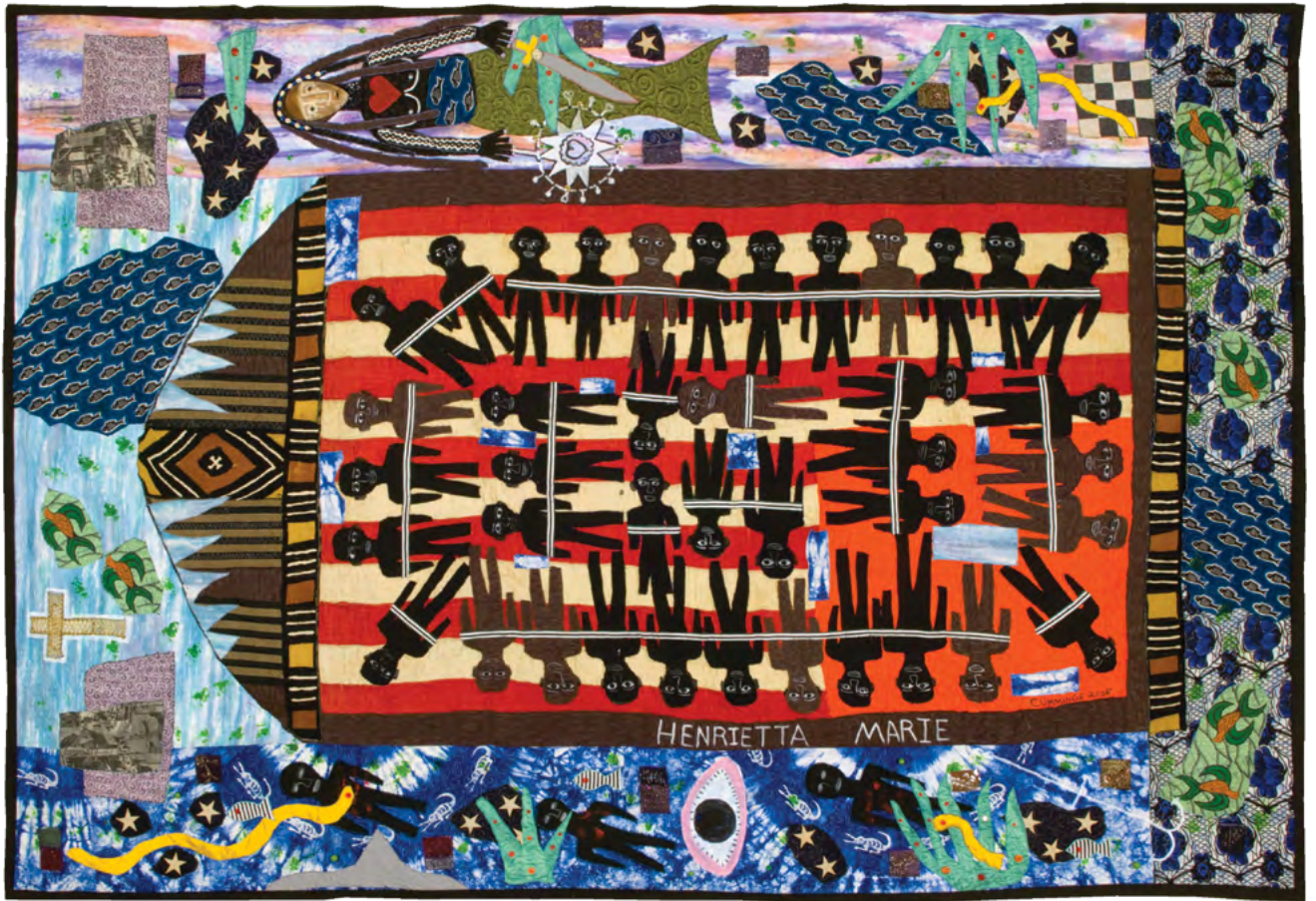
"As soon as I completed my banner, I saw the endless possibilities of working with fabric." Cummings notes the many benefits to fiber: it is easy to handle and cut into shapes; it is available in all kinds of colors; it's easier than canvas to store away; and there are no brushes to clean.

Since Cummings had been a collage artist, his transition to fiber was

smooth. His art quilts are primarily appliqué; he was just cutting his shapes from fabric instead of paper. Learning to use a sewing machine sped up the process of construction. "I call my sewing machine my 'dance partner' because it understands all my moves when working with large pieces of fabric."

*African Jazz #10* from 1990 (page 12) is an excellent example of Cummings's art. In this large piece—108 x 72 inches—Cummings combined graphic black-and-white print and solid fabrics on a gray background to convey the image of musicians playing instruments.





**Slave Ship Henrietta Marie**

120 x 156 inches | 2007

Photo by D. James Dee, NYC



**Zebra Butterfly**

72 x 72 inches | 2001

Photo by Karen Bell, NYC

Red accents draw the eye into the scene while the black-and-white sawtooth border contains the design. Animal images reminiscent of folk-art tradition add a touch of whimsy. The work is part of a series of twelve pieces that explore African jazz. The image of this quilt was selected for a Hallmark card.

Another piece with a similar aesthetic but a different theme is *Coral Reef* from 1997 (page 11). It was commissioned through New York City's Percent for Art program. This program sets aside 1 percent of the budget of eligible city-funded construction projects for public art. New York City has acquired, commissioned, or restored public artwork through this program since its inception in 1982.

Cummings thinks of his work as narrative compositions that

use quiltmaking techniques to create “stories related to history, mythology, current events, other ethnic groups, or just fun images like my butterfly series.”

He constructs his quilts on the floor of his studio. Cutout shapes are pinned to a foundation layer. When the base composition is completed, he takes the entire piece to the sewing machine and appliqués the shapes with a zigzag stitch. Then he returns to the floor to add additional shapes and details to the final composition before it is finished on the machine. He uses a variety of materials in his work, including cotton, silk, linen, and African prints. Bright colors are a favorite. The thread usually matches the fabric, unless he wants to provide more contrast. Surface embellishments might include plastic, wood, beads, clothing, African art, leather, and textile paint.

“I sometimes think my creative process is unorthodox because I don’t have a neat work area and I work on the floor,” he says.

*A Young Obama*, 2009 (page 10) includes many surface design elements, including wood and textile paint, plus found objects like safety pins, silk flowers, and keys. This piece is in the collection of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum (IQSCM) in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Another large figurative work is *Slave Ship Henrietta Marie*, 2007. It measures 120 x 156 inches and depicts slaves crammed into the hold of a ship; the ship is surrounded by folk-art inspired ocean creatures. Cotton, wood, metal, textile paint, and African prints are part of this work’s construction, which is also part of the IQSCM collection.

A native of Los Angeles, Cummings lives and works in New York City in an old brownstone built in 1886. His studio has two large seven-foot high windows that face east, flooding the room with morning sunlight. He works on a domestic sewing machine set into a portable table, surrounded by his collection of African art and shelves



**Sister Gertrude Morgan**

144 x 180 inches | 2009

Photo by D. James Dee, NYC



**A Young Obama**

72 x 60 inches | 2009

Photo by D. James Dee, NYC

of books and fabrics. Despite the size of his quilts, they are appliquéd on his domestic sewing machine.

Commissions are a large part of Cummings’s success as an artist. His corporate clients have included Absolut Vodka; Hallmark; the City of Knoxville, Tennessee; HBO; and New York City’s Percent for Art program.

*Springtime in Knoxville, Tennessee*, 2002, was a commission created for that city’s convention center. It measures 48 x 120 inches. Commission work follows a different process from that employed to create work for himself. It requires submitting a concept based on the proposal written by the commissioning organization. “In working with commission projects, I found that I cannot improvise. There are rules that have to be followed [that are] written into the contract that I signed.”



**Springtime in Knoxville, Tennessee**

48 x 120 inches | 2002

Photo by Karen Bell, NYC



Michael Cummings's home studio in New York City.



**Coral Reef**

48 x 48 inches | 1997

Photo by Karen Bell, NYC

As a male quilter, Cummings has to contend with gender stereotypes surrounding his work, he says. Women create most of the quilts in the United States, but his research on the topic found that in other cultures, particularly in Asia and Africa, it is more common for men to participate in textile arts, such as weaving and tailoring. In the art quilt world, male quilters are becoming more accepted now, he notes.

Cummings holds an outside 9-to-5 job in addition to his work as an artist. Since his time is therefore at a premium, early on he began to set a timer to 60 minutes. The timer “keeps me aware of how slow or fast I am working. It also brings me back to reality every 60 minutes.” He listens to an eclectic selection of music while he works. Working in this manner, each of his large art quilts takes roughly two months to complete.



**African Jazz #10**

108 x 72 inches | 1990

Photo by Karen Bell, NYC

Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Robert Rauschenberg. He also mentions folk artists such as Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell as influences, as well as the “Asian, Latin, African American, and hippie cultures” of his youth in Los Angeles.

For new art quilters, he advises to not expect a quick success. “Try to be original in your themes and try not to follow popular trends,” he says. Other recommendations include investing in professional images of your work, marketing materials such as business cards, and submitting to exhibitions to build your resumé.

For himself, Cummings wants to be more experimental with surface design. He also plans to work on larger quilts and possibly introduce more abstract elements into his work, he says. He might experiment with printing and etching, processes he discovered through a commission from Emory University.

To find out more about Cummings’s work, visit his website, [michaelcummings.com](http://michaelcummings.com) ■

*Cindy Grisdela is a SAQA JAM who resides in Reston, Virginia. You can view her work at [cindygrisdela.com](http://cindygrisdela.com).*

Since his outside job pays the bills, he doesn’t have to worry about supporting himself with his art. “Selling my quilts is a rewarding acknowledgement that my work is appreciated. However, if it does not sell I will continue making my art.” His work is represented in many public and private collections, including the U.S. Embassy in Rwanda,

Whoopi Goldberg, and the Arco Corporation. *Josephine Baker’s Farewell*, Farewell, 2000 (not pictured), was purchased by the U.S. Department of State for the U.S. Embassy in Mali.

Cummings credits several diverse artists as influences in his work, including Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, Georgia O’Keeffe, Romare