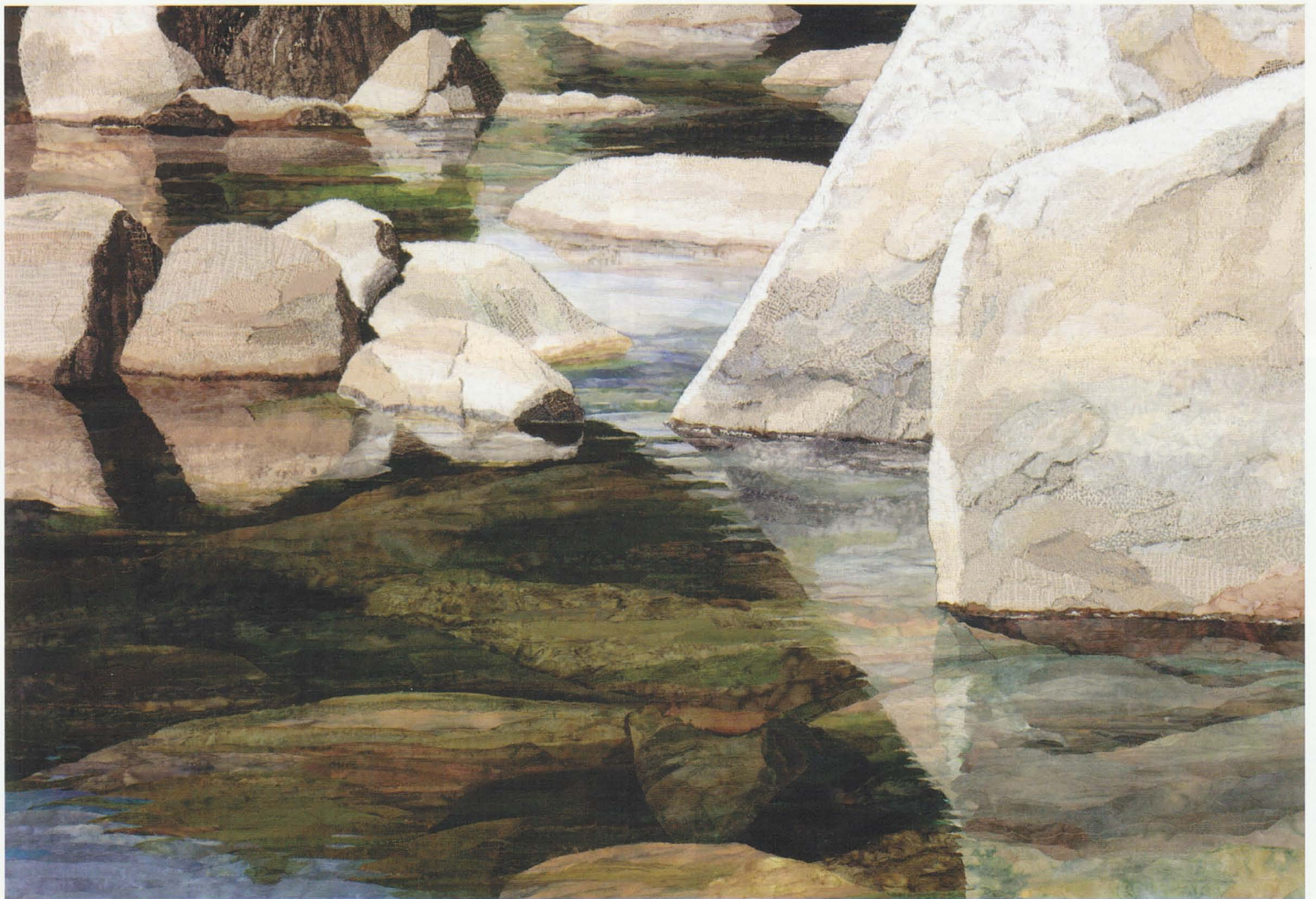


No, Really, Look Again.

Written by **JAMES CAMERON**



MERLE AXELRAD SERLIN

"A Stitch in Time Saves Nine" is an old English proverb most semanticists insist means that a timely effort will prevent more work later on. For a certain Sacramento artist the phrase takes on new meaning since a timely stitch may well lead to thousands more.

Merle Axelrad Serlin, a smiling, attractive, vivacious architect turned artist, works with fabric to produce landscapes of stunning color and texture, many of them employing thousands of tiny bits of cloth no larger than a quarter of an inch in size. Working from composite photographs and sketches, she spends hundreds of hours on each individual image, transforming what has been re-

garded as a traditional craft into a serious art form through the application of a technique she's perfected over many years. In a cluttered studio piled high with swaths of fabric, many of them remnants and the discarded clothes of friends, the images slowly take shape as the bits of cloth merge and blend to form towering trees, craggy rocks and rippling, lustrous waterways of exquisite detail and beauty.

The process is unique. There are other fabric artists of reputation, but none employ the same technique. "I don't trust adhesives, so I sew everything," she explains. "Each fabric has its own texture, weave, and thickness which cre-

ate secondary patterns I could never get with paint. I get different results and appearances depending on how I cut the fabric. I can cut, shred or fuzz them, or layer fabrics over one another, each of the layers changing the one below it. These effects become design elements, making the finished collage rich and full of life."

Over time, her fabric collages have moved from the abstract to landscapes, and for the last several years she's created nature scenes exclusively. "Most of my collages

IMAGE: Above, *Stanislaus River*, 2007, 30 X 45 inches, fabric on canvas. Opposite page, *Tree Part 4*, 2005, 48 X 33 inches. Inset, *Tree Part 4* detail.



take between 200 and 300 hours to fabricate", she explains. This is time spent assembling fabric and does not include initial research, design or drawing. Some go faster than others. The longest time I've spent on fabrication was 425 hours on a 42 by 42 inch piece."

Serlin described her desire to be an artist in an eighth grade paper while taking water color classes with her father, and was pursuing that goal when she says, "I chickened out and decided I should get a 'real job.' With a

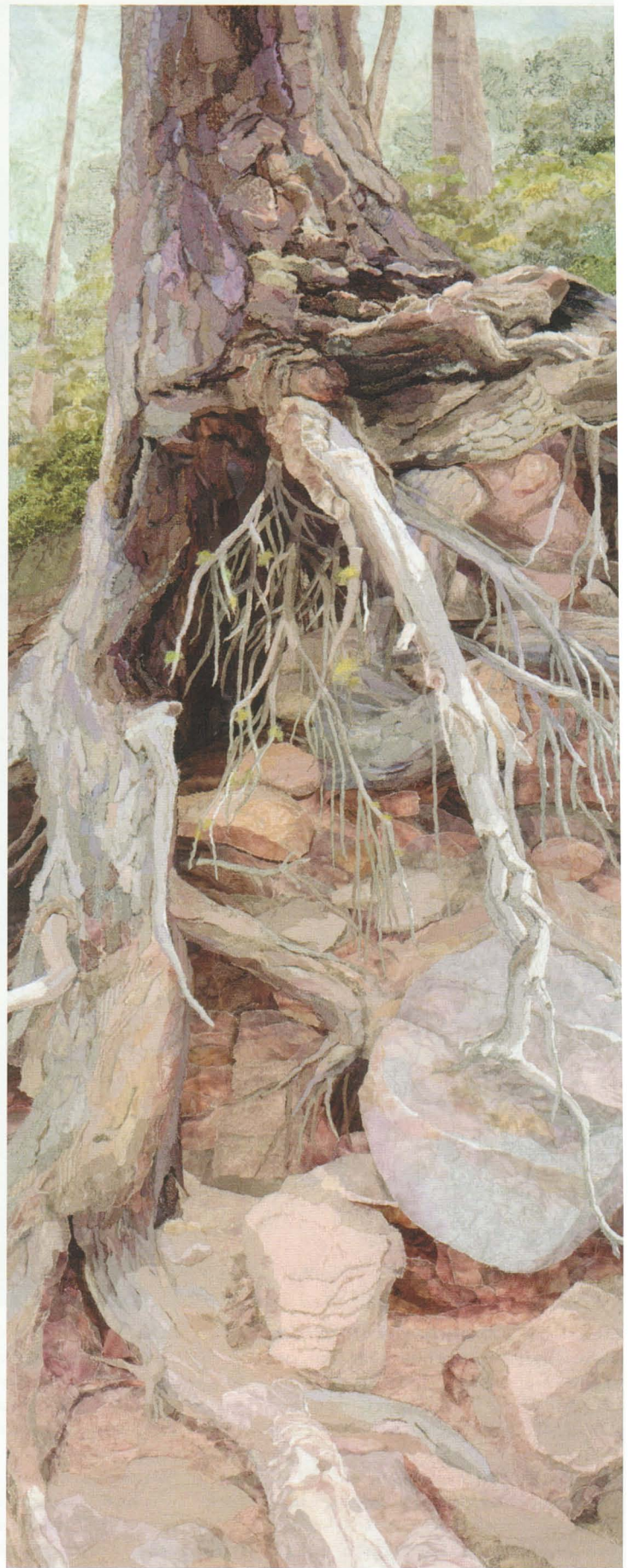
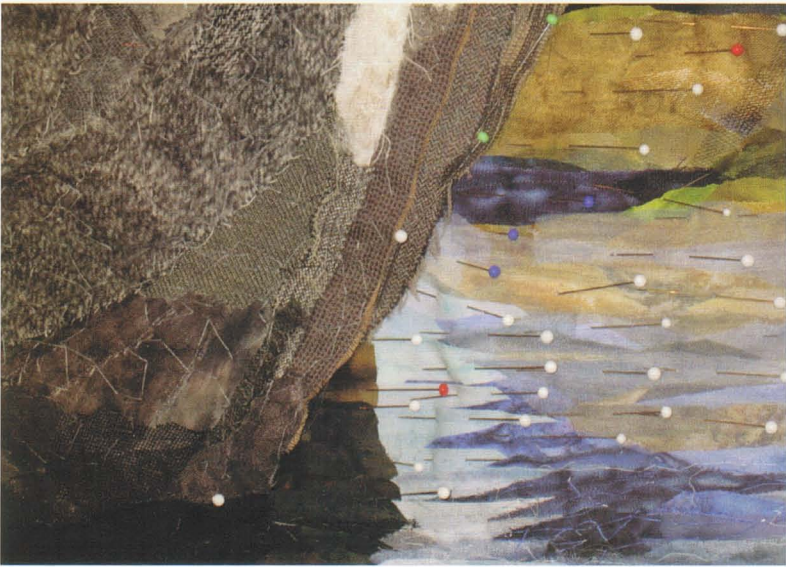
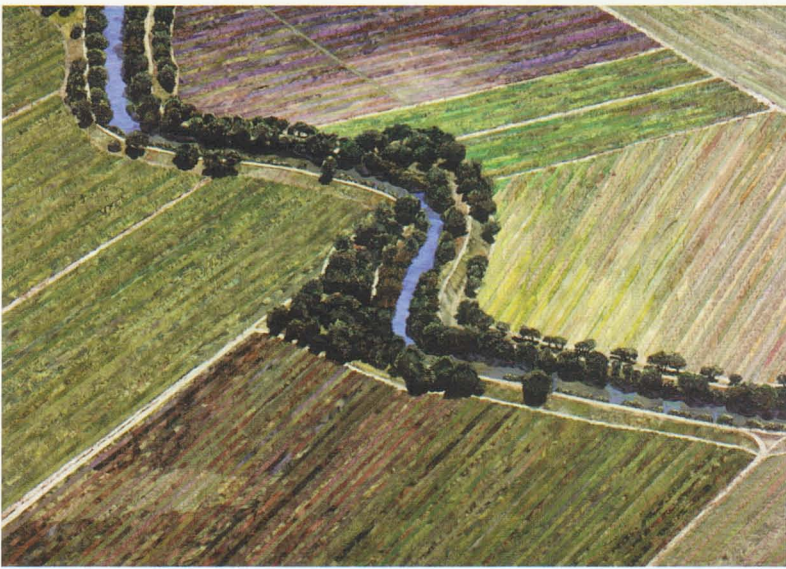
master's degree in architecture, I worked for a San Francisco firm, became a vice president and had some fun accounts, including Disney and Lucasfilm." Then she and husband Mark, a lawyer, moved to Sacramento in her eighth month of pregnancy and everything changed.

"My plan was to take a few months off after the baby was born, and then get back to architecture," she explains, "but I made a baby quilt. And I loved being a mom. I made more quilts and they became less and less

traditional pretty quickly. One day I started layering the fabric and sewing over it, creating a fabric collage. What a treat! I felt like I could do anything and the technique kept evolving."

Serlin's big break came with an award from the Sacramento Public Arts Commission to do eight pieces for the California Environmental Protection Agency's 25 story building in downtown Sacramento. The pieces were to depict eight different nature scenes, one for each department and arranged vertically in the building by elevation. As such, *Mt. Shasta* is on the top floor and the *Monterey Bay Canyon* on the lowest. The other six scenes represent the *Central Coast*, *Delta*, *Headwater Redlands*, *Central Coast Foothills*, *Joshua Tree* and *Lake Tahoe* and are displayed in the lobbies of their respective floors.

Serlin entered the competition primarily for the experience, hoping to pick up some constructive criticism from the judges at a public hearing. "I attended the hearings to learn what the artists on the panel thought of my work. I thought I'd get some pointers I could use to improve it. No chance I'd win! But I did!" And she was traveling in some fast company, the other artists selected to display their work being Dale Chihuly, the internationally renowned glass artist; Richard Hunt, the Chicago artist known for his public sculptures in bronze, stainless steel and corten; and Beverly Pepper, distinguished for her powerful outdoor sculptures in hollow, geometric shapes. The EPA work has been successful on several levels. It was



honored at the Americans for the Arts Conference, selected by two-thirds of the building's employees as their favorite of the art on the premises, and responsible for bringing her enough commission work to occupy the next several years. And just last year, four new pieces were selected for a juried show open to fabric artists worldwide. The *12 Voices* show opened in Michigan in the fall of 2008 and will travel for a year, giving viewers a rare, in-depth look at the art of twelve of the finest fabric artists working today. Serlin's work in the show embodies the magnificence of California's coast, field, foothill and river scenes.

Keenly conscious of her place in the community, the artist maintains an open studio policy. "My door is always open," she says. "Visitors come by to watch me work, and school groups come by at least once a month. I always take time to explain the fabric collage process and how I started working with it. I believe it demystifies the art world and brings all of us who are artists closer to the community."

So what's next for this extraordinary architect turned extraordinary artist? "I don't know. What I do now is a joy, a wonderful puzzle. I do this giant cartoon and fill it in. It enriches my life. It's enough I think."



IMAGE: At top, clockwise, *Fields*, 2007, 30 X 45 inches, fabric on canvas. *Tree Part 1*, 2005, 82 X 33 inches. Above, *River*, in process.