

Merle Axelrad Serlin: Landscapes in Fabric Collage



TWO YEARS AGO, Merle Axelrad Serlin, an artist best known for her realist landscapes rendered in what she calls fabric collage, found that her experimentation in creating more abstract work simply “wasn’t cutting it.”

“The joy I’d found in fashioning nature scenes wasn’t being replicated [in the abstract imagery],” she says, “so I turned back to nature.” Happily so for her fans and newcomers to her work alike. Since then, she’s created several stunning large-scale landscapes; *California Ricelands* (2009) depicts an aerial view of the wetlands just south of Sacramento. Commissioned by the California Rice Commission, it has become the organization’s branded image for 2010.

Serlin, who was once a vice president of a prestigious San Francisco architecture firm, now works with fabric to produce landscapes of brilliant color and texture, many of them having two or three thousand bits of cloth no larger than a quarter of an inch. Working from composite photographs and sketches, she spends hundreds of hours on each piece, transforming what has been regarded as a traditional craft into a serious art form through a unique technique

of layered raw-edge appliqué. In a cluttered studio piled high with swaths of fabric, remnants, and discarded clothes, 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 finished piece is then backed with canvas.

The process is unique. “I don’t trust adhesives so I machine sew everything,” she explains. “Each fabric has its own texture, weave, and thickness that create secondary patterns. I get different results and appearances depending on how I cut the fabrics. 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.”

Serlin’s big break came in 2000 with an award from the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission to make eight pieces depicting nature scenes for the California Environmental Protection Agency building in downtown Sacramento. Several public commissions have followed, including a five-piece series for the new Sacramento City Hall in 2005. *California Ricelands* will be shown at the California Capitol building throughout 2010 and is the subject of a video produced by its sponsor. Serlin’s favorite image, *Sierra Water* (2009), is prominently

displayed in the Ritz-Carlton Highlands Hotel at Lake Tahoe. And most recently, *Madison Range* (2009), one of her largest pieces to date, was installed in a private collection in Montana.

“While pure abstract imagery wasn’t working for me, there is an element of abstraction in my nature scenes,” says Serlin. “In my most recent pieces, I approached them as though they were abstract images, layering shapes one after another, foreground to background, revealing patterns as natural abstractions. It’s most apparent in *Sierra Water*, where eighty percent of the scene is displayed as a reflection on the water’s surface, creating almost a surreal image.”

So maybe abstract art is “cutting it” after all. Whatever you call it, Serlin’s work is original and stunning in its impact. 📷

The artist’s website is www.axelradart.com. To learn more about Serlin’s fabric collage technique, turn to page 23.

LEFT: Sierra Water (with detail, BELOW), 2009, painted, dyed, and repurposed fabrics, backed with cotton canvas; machine stitched, collaged; 58" x 34". Photos: Maizie Gilbert and Jessica Skloven.




To see a video about the making of Merle Axelrad Serlin’s piece *California Riceland* (2009), visit fiberarts.com.



A View from Above in Fabric Collage

BY MERLE AXELRAD SERLIN

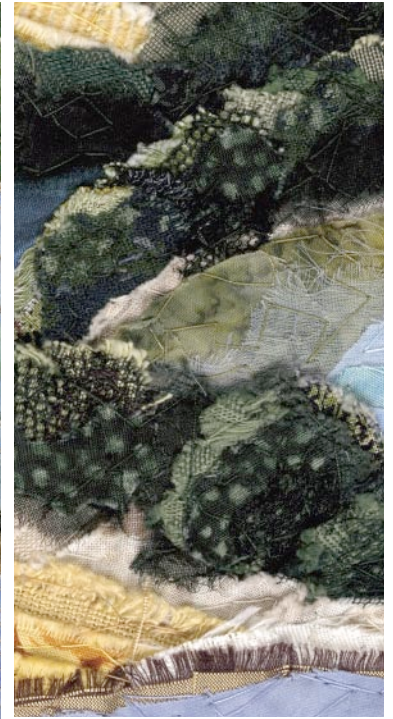
HOW MANY TIMES have you looked out of an airplane and thought to yourself, “It looks like a quilt?” After saying that to myself hundreds of times, it hit me—I make quilts! So began my odyssey into “landscape quilts” and the development of my current collage technique. At first I tried using normal quilting techniques to depict the winding waterways and glorious fields of the Sacramento Valley, California. But I wanted to get the subtle variations into the fields, the way the colors change in a single crop row and the way the water glints off of the surface of the flooded rice fields. It just wasn’t working with all of those seams. Everything was too lumpy and bumpy. Finally, largely in frustration, I just started picking out fabrics I wanted to use and laying them on top of one another. Then I sewed all over them, roughed up the edges, sewed some more . . . and it began to look right. That aerial view was my very first landscape.

That was about twelve years ago. Since then I have worked full-time as an artist, honing my fabric collage technique. I have done several more aerial views, adding depth and complexity with each one. Being commissioned by the California Rice Commission in 2009 to create *California Ricelands* was very much a “full circle” experience for me. I was returning to the subject matter that got me started in this direction. It felt like a homecoming. Just as when I look out of the plane when flying into Sacramento, California—I see the fields, and I know I’m home. 

The artist’s website is www.axelradart.com. To read more about Serlin’s work, turn to page 30.



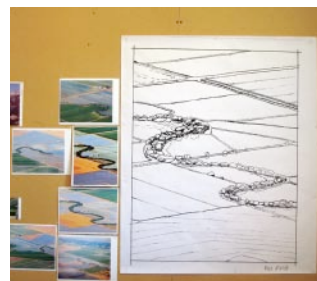
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ABOVE: California Ricelands, 2009; painted, dyed, and repurposed fabrics, backed with cotton canvas; machine-sewn, collaged; 38" x 30". ABOVE, RIGHT: In this detail, you can see the variety of fabrics used in a single collage including wool blends, cottons, silk gauze, and silk. The sources for these fabrics include: used clothing, handpainted and hand-dyed fabrics, store bought and donated. Photos: Maizie Gilbert and Jessica Skloven. All photos by the artist, unless otherwise noted.



California Ricelands (2009) is based on photos I took while flying over the farmland of the Sacramento Valley, California.



From those photos, I created a full-size cartoon that acts as a pattern for the collage.



In my studio, fabrics are arranged on cardboard “palettes” separated by color and value. Each piece of fabric is carefully pinned to its fabric background.



I work one area at a time, pinning small swatches of fabric to the paper cartoon. A collage can take several months to construct.



I often handpaint silk gauzes to use in my collages, especially when I create a water image.



Everything is machine-sewn on my fifteen-year-old Bernina. No adhesives are used.