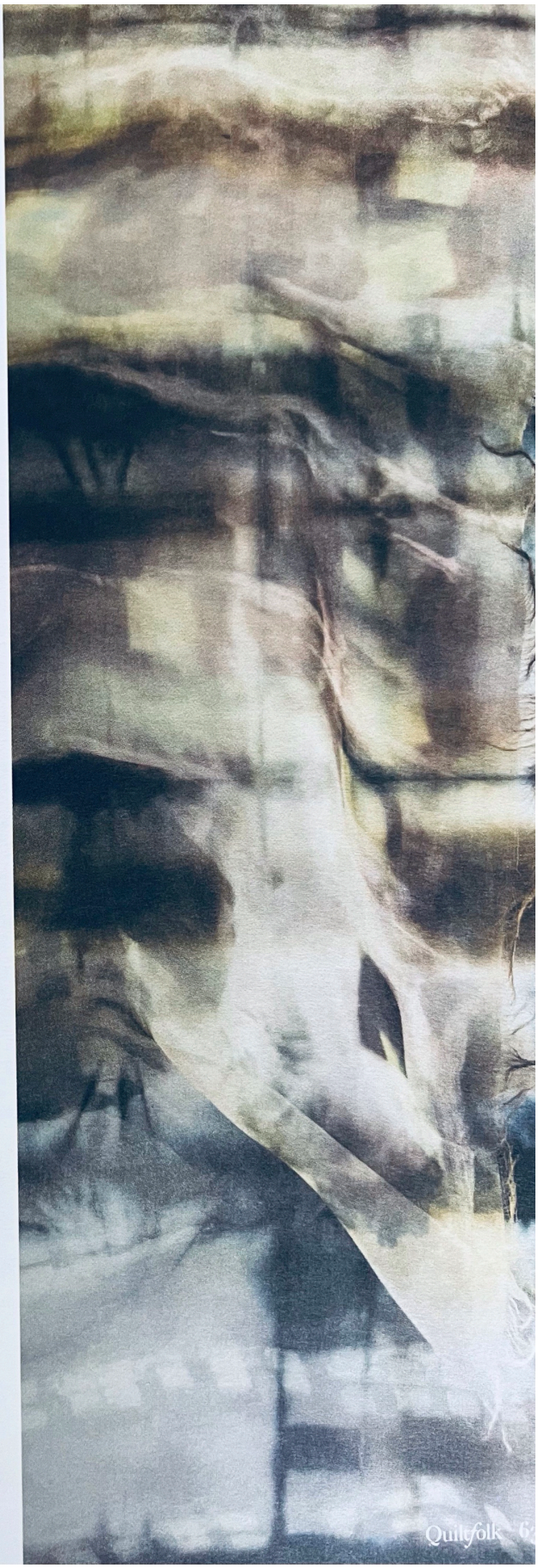
BY **Victoria Slind-Flor**

A SAQA Story IN THREE ACTS

The roughly 3,700 members of the worldwide organization Studio Art Quilt Associates (SAQA) hail from as far away as New Zealand and Japan; about 100 of them currently reside in Connecticut. On these pages, three of those members, Clara Nartey, Kate Themel, and Kate Stiassni tell the story of their experience with the seminal organization and share with us a bit about their work.



On these pages, details of works by three SAQA members exhibit their distinctive, boundary-pushing approach to quiltmaking. From left, works by Clara Nartey, Kate Themel, and Kate Stiassni, all of Connecticut.



Entrepreneur and prolific quilt artist Clara Nartey in her sunny studio holding *Papa*, a commission piece she created in 2020.

Clara Nartey

When Clara Nartey began showing work in SAQA exhibitions, she was so new to quilting that she called up a member to ask what a hanging sleeve was — and why one was needed. "I didn't have a foundation of 'quiltness' because I thought of [quilts] as art," the West Haven, Connecticut, resident said. "So I put my work in wooden frames."

SAQA, founded in 1989, was established to promote art quilts. In an early letter to the organization's nascent membership, founder and legendary art quiltmaker Yvonne Porcella wrote, "Although we follow the historical tradition in that we embellish, piece, stuff, tie, and layer in creating our art, [...] we studio artists are creating art quilts instead of functional quilts."

Clara did not come to art quilts with a background in textiles; when she began her first piece, she didn't even possess a sewing machine. She did have experience with a heat press, however, embellishing things such as t-shirts and baby items. When she received an order for more than 100 handkerchiefs to be given as wedding favors, she bought an embroidery machine.

"I started to look into what I could do with a machine that wasn't for making clothes," Clara said. "I found art quilting online; people making beautiful things with lots of colors just drew me in."

Clara has embraced more digital technology since then, creating images on a tablet that are then printed on fabric. This allows her to put her emphasis on the free-motion quilting that adds detail and depth to the images. As she sketches her designs, she never lifts her pen from her tablet. This way, she develops muscle memory that stays with her when she goes to quilt.

"It's seamless," she said. "You become good on paper, and then you become good on the sewing machine."

Clara has come a long way from not knowing about hanging sleeves. For the past five of six years, she's served on the Connecticut SAQA exhibition committee, setting up various shows and helping to create the exhibit catalogues and websites.

"[The committee] taught me how the art world works," she said, standing proudly at her sewing machine.



ABOVE: A close up of *Catching God's Eye* (2020) shows Clara's meticulous color placement. **OPPOSITE:** A man strolling on the beach carrying his flip flops inspired Clara's thread painting *Beach Buddy* (2019). **NEXT PAGE:** Detail. Just as a painter signs a canvas, Clara makes her mark in thread.





