

WRITING IS PART OF A QUILTING CAREER - AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE CUNNINGHAM

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Clara Nartey Interviews Joe Cunningham

CN: Hi Joe, welcome to the blog and to this edition of Textile Art Business Interview.
JC: Thanks! I am happy to be here.

How Joe Cunningham Got Started in Quilting and Writing

CN: I've heard your story about how you played guitar at gigs to make a living. And how one of your gigs got you started with quilting. Can you tell the story for the benefit of those who haven't heard it?
JC: In 1979 I had returned to my hometown, Flint, after a year at college studying English. I had made my living as a guitar player for ten years and I wanted to become a writer. I was 26.

One night a woman named Gwen Marston introduced herself to me when I was on a break between sets and said she wanted to hire me to play guitar with her on some folk gigs.

Over at her house for rehearsals, I saw some boxes full of quilts and asked to see them. They turned out to have been made and collected by Mary Schafer, a great (if unknown) quilt maker from a town nearby.

Gwen had received a grant to document Mary's collection and to write a short biography of Mary for the catalogue. She told me she was enjoying the project but dreading the writing, so I offered to write the catalogue for her.



Joe Cunningham Speaking at DeYoung Museum, San Francisco

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Writing is Part of A Career in Quilt A Business

CN: That's very interesting. It explains not only how you got started in quilting but in writing as well. Mary Schafer may not have been well-known, but that book about Mary Schafer's quilts will make sure she's never forgotten.

You've authored many books, 11 in total. I want you to speak to your motivation for writing so many books. What are you trying to achieve with your writing?

JC: To me writing has always seemed like a single part of a career in the quilt business. (*Writing is point #3 in my free ebook "Win @ Work & Play"*)

> *To get serious work you have to become known in the business.*
> *To make serious work you have to be able to articulate what you are doing and why.*

And to study the history of quilts is to discover a beautiful realm you want to share with others.

So, writing is just something that accomplishes all that. You just have to do everything you can think of. This interview is part of staying visible in the world. Teaching, talking, writing, making-everything you can do helps everything else.

> Get your free copy of my ebook "Win @ Work & Play" and learn the winning mindsets and 7 business systems, thriving textile artists use.
> Grab your copy now!!

CN: I love your answer, Joe. I really do. *"You've got to do everything to stay visible in the quilt world."* What does it take to write a book and on average, how long did it take for you to write your books?
JC: For a Dover book of patterns it is like a glorified magazine article, a week of hard work. *For a scholarly work, it is more like a year-long project.*

What it Takes to Write a Book

JC: What does it take? Well, you need to be able to write reasonable prose. You need to be writing about something that you know a lot about.

Also, you need to have the time and space, or you need to figure out how to make the time and space. You need to be realistic about it. *So that when you finish the most important project of your career, you are not disappointed when the rest of the world barely notices*.

Maintain Realistic Expectations from Becoming an Author

CN: When you say, "you need to be realistic. You don't want to be disappointed when the rest of the world barely notices your newly published book". What do you mean by that?
JC: I mean that the most important thing you will have done, or at least among the most important things in your life, will be this book that you are getting published.

The exhilarating feeling of seeing your name in print is bound to be one of the high points in your whole career. And naturally, you will work as hard as you can to make it a complete success.

But the majority of books that are ever published are like the majority of movies or music albums ever made: the world barely notices.

When I say to "be realistic" I mean to watch out for the temptation to feel you have been treated unfairly by the world if your book is not a bestseller. In my opinion,

> *you should write books to contribute to the store of knowledge in the world,*
> *and you should not feel let down if the world barely notices.*

How to Make Time for Things Other Than Making/Creating

CN: You just talked about making time and space. You're not just a prolific writer, but a talented quilt artist too. In addition, you're teaching and giving talks and lectures. How do you make time for it all?
JC: I always try to remember that I am not in the business of production, I am trying to make something true. So sometimes, when I am on the road a lot, or during the years when my two sons were small and needed a lot of my time, I had to really focus on that idea, to remember that each quilt was going to take as long as it took.

Another thing to remember is that this has been my job since 1979, and *you can get a lot done if you get to go to your studio every day.*

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CN: Many creative people feel that if you spend time on other ventures like writing, teaching, and selling, you'll sacrifice the quality of the work you create. I don't see any indication of that in your work. What do you have to say to that?
JC: I think it all goes together, that every little thing you do helps everything else in your career. (By the way, Mickey Lawler literally says the same thing in my interview with her). There are many ways to go about making a living in quilts, and everyone has to find a way



Joe Cunningham quilting with friends in Gees Bend, from left: Lucy Mingo, Rita Mae Pettway, Florine Smith, Betty Setzer. 2009

The Question of Gender in The Quilt World

CN: Good point!!! Let's talk about your book on men in quilting. What impact do you think it's had on the few men quilters and the mostly women quilters who probably didn't know about the existence of their male friends?

JC: I don't think it has had much impact on women who make quilts. For men, I hoped it would let them know they were not alone out there, but the Internet has probably had more impact than my book. I hear from time to time that people have enjoyed the book, but almost never do they say they like it for the subject matter-they just like the quilts and patterns.



Joe Cunningham's Handiquilter Computerized quilting machine

for themselves. I don't think we can make general statements about what will work for us all. All I know is that this is the path that has made sense to me.

CN: In your book "Men and the Art of Quiltmaking", this is what you wrote about being a man in the quilting world, " I just assumed I was in a vanguard for what would eventually become a vast movement. Oh, how wrong I was. Men still occupy only a tiny corner of quiltland". How do you feel about being only one of a few men quilters and do you see the trend ever changing in the future? Like women becoming doctors and engineers? Or will quiltland always be a woman's world?
JC: The thing about American quilt making is this: it is a realm constructed by women to make gifts for people. So, the fact that it was and is a woman's world is built into the very DNA of the definition of it.

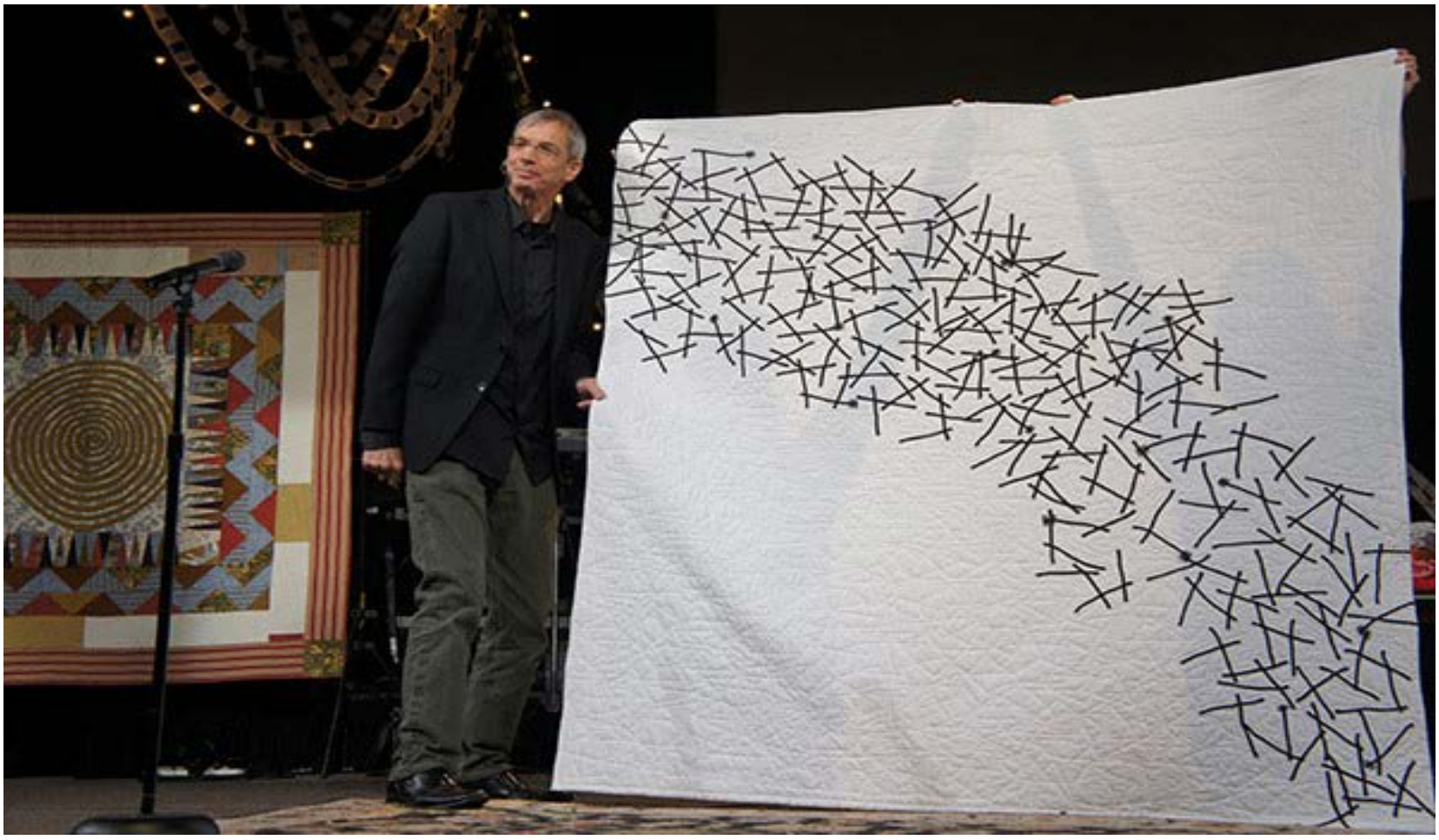
Yes, gender roles have loosened up considerably since I was a boy, but we have a long way to go before we have any kind of gender blindness in our culture.

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It is especially true in quilts. I knew when I started that I was entering a women's world and that I would be a guest there, not a native.

It would never occur to me to think that men would ever be more than a small percentage of the quilt world. That percentage might be growing as the possibilities for making a living at it grow. But I do think the quilt world will always be dominated by the women who created it.

CN: I totally agree with you, Joe. I believe that is true for both men and women. If we could find a clear path to make a living in quilting, there will be more people who will choose that as their careers. Since they already love making quilts. But instead, most people have resigned themselves to making quilts as a hobby.



Joe Cunningham at work - Both of these quilts are in museum collections Handiquilter Computerized quilting machine

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About Joe Cunningham's Art Quilts

CN: Let's talk a little about your own art quilts. I love your work. Your work is large and abstract. While speaking about your work, you once said this … "To me what a quilt looks like is the last thing that I'm interested in. I just find out what it looks like by making it." What did you mean by that statement?
JC: Well, a number of things. I am not interested in seeing things I have seen before, and I find it easier to surprise myself if I am working directly with the cloth, instead of a drawing.

Also, I start with an idea, a subject, and I want to make a quilt on that subject, that will be true to it no matter what I end up doing along the way. I don't worry about what it looks like, only what it is.

CN: Finally Joe, there are two segments I include in every interview because readers really enjoy these segments.

The first is this: "What are your five favorite tools, supplies and resources"? Secondly, What are 6 tips to help someone successfully write books about art quilts?



- My 60" X 60" work table with a cutting mat surface. I have to make a look long cuts in my work and I could not make them without this.
- My Rowenta Precision Pro Steam iron. It has a large water tank that connects to the iron through a hose, so I never run out of steam.
- My Handi Quilter Fusion with a ProStitcher attachment. This system allows me to quilt anything in the universe.

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- "American Quilts: The Democratic Art" by Robert Shaw. My favorite telling of the story of quilts in this country.

- A package of 100 rotary cutter blades I bought on the internet someplace. I get a lot less despondent now when I wear one out.



- Write what you want, so your enthusiasm is real.

- Get to know anyone you possibly can in the publishing business.

- Get the best photographer in town.

- Study art history as well as quilt history, so you know what you are talking about.

- Develop a marketing plan. All publishers will want to know what you are going to do to promote your book.

- Persist.

Interview Highlights and Quotes

- To get serious work you have to become known in the business. To make serious work you have to be able to articulate what you are doing and why.

- I always try to remember that I am not in the business of production, I am trying to make something true.

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- You need to be writing about something that you know a lot about.
- Write books to contribute to the store of knowledge in the world
- You can get a lot done if you get to go to your studio every day.

In conclusion, here's how to find out more about Joe's teaching, lectures, and workshops. And this is where gallerists and curators who want to see his work should visit.

CN: Joe, thanks so much for taking the time to do this interview. It was a wonderful interview. I really appreciate hearing your point of views. Many of them resonated with me.
JC: Clara, the pleasure is all mine.



Clara Nartey is an artist and a writer. She interviews thriving artrepreneurs to help artists learn how to start or grow their creative businesses. To get more of her writings and access to her free resources for textile artists, makers, and creators, sign up here.



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