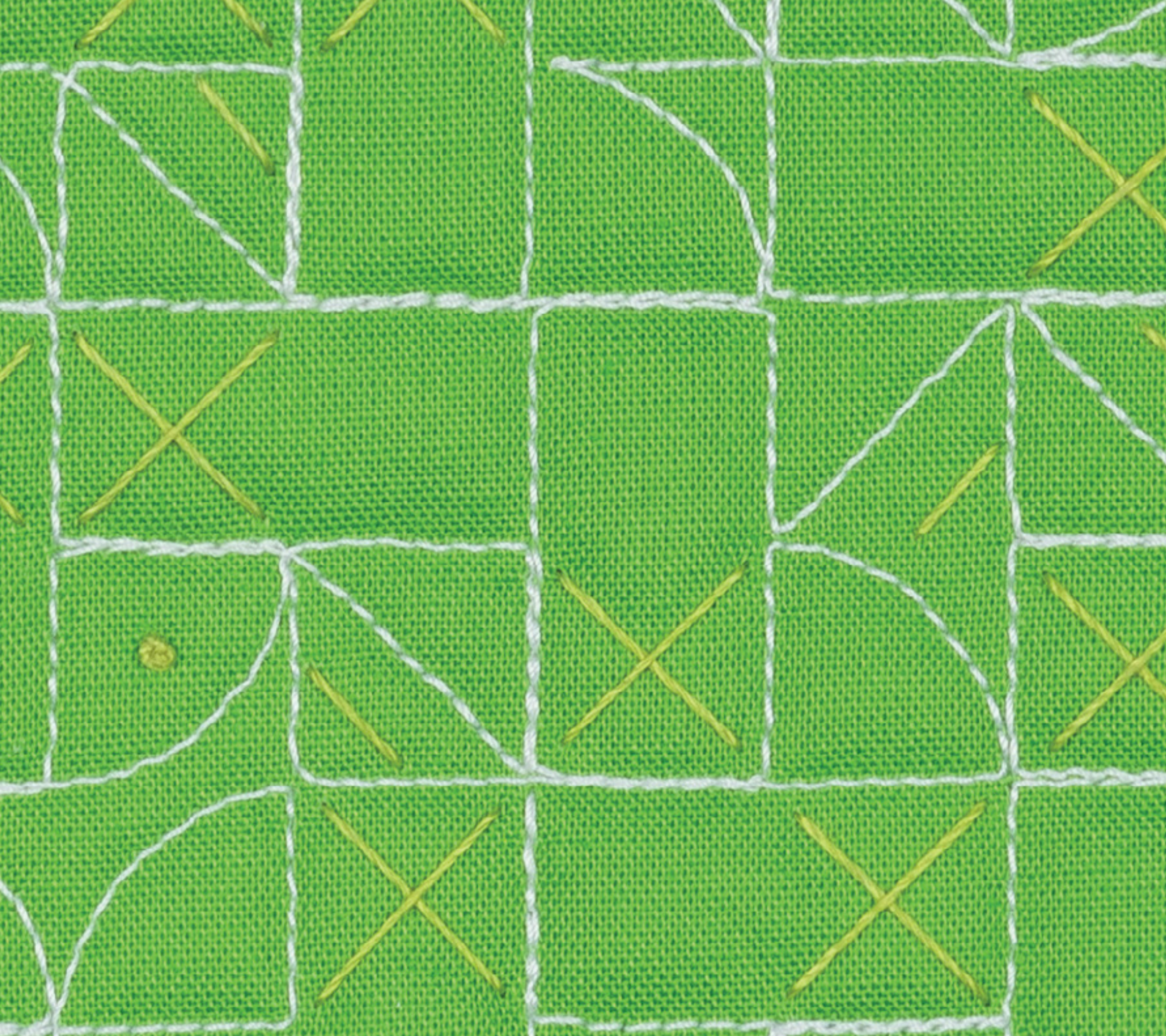


IOWA ARTISTS 2025

BEN MILLETT

JULY 26 – NOVEMBER 2, 2025 | DES MOINES ART CENTER





**THIS IS THE FIRST
EXHIBITION DEDICATED SOLELY
TO QUILTS TO BE HELD AT
THE DES MOINES ART CENTER.**

There are likely moments in the past where such a thing might not be considered possible, as barriers between what is “craft” and what is “art” have been slow to erode. However, in the last decade, the Des Moines Art Center has hosted exhibitions based around fiber arts, glass, and ceramics. We have added large numbers of these types of objects to our permanent collections, including a renowned Gee’s Bend quilt by Helen McCloud, made in rural Alabama from discarded hospital bedding. This object was first used as a household blanket but is now admired in a museum for its innovative use of color and abstraction. In an interview done in researching this exhibition, Ben stated, “It’s not a quilt if there aren’t stitches running through three layers, thus breaking the top surface.”¹ A quilt is indeed defined by its layers, but they are symbolic as well as literal – an object made of fibers, often created for utilitarian reason, but capable of demonstrating the technical expertise of human hands, carrying the weight of history and tradition, and expressing wonder and meaning in color and pattern. If we have simple definitions of what a quilt is or where it should be displayed, Ben Millett’s vivid, thoughtful, and thematically rich textiles break through such surface assumptions.

**“IT’S NOT A QUILT IF THERE
AREN’T STITCHES RUNNING
THROUGH THREE LAYERS.”**

Upon first impression, what likely strikes new viewers of Millett's work is color. Bold pinks, bright yellows, and greens ranging from chartreuse to emerald. Green is the artist's signature color, and "helps reinforce my presence in the quilt," as he puts it. Most of us might think of quilts as amalgamations of pattern as many are composed of various recycled garments and linens or built from the massive array of pre-selected, coordinating designs available to contemporary hobbyist quilters. Millett's mostly unadulterated hues, often set against each other or a stark white, rarely contain patterning, and his transitions between colors are created by connecting separate cut shapes rather than dyed into the cotton fabric. The patterns he composes are analogous to both collage and the defined shapes of geometric abstract painting. The influence of this type of art is most evident in the four *Ode to Ellsworth* mini quilts (PAGE 5). In replicating Ellsworth Kelly's mid-20th century paintings in this manner, Millett transforms the starkly delineated planes of color that make up Kelly's style, known as "Hard Edge", into something small and soft. The strong solid colors are true to Kelly's proto-Minimalist legacy, but they are now dappled with the texture of quilted thread. If one walks up the flight of stairs in the Art Center's Meier building to see Kelly's *Yellow Blue* (1963), small imperfections reveal the artist's hand, just



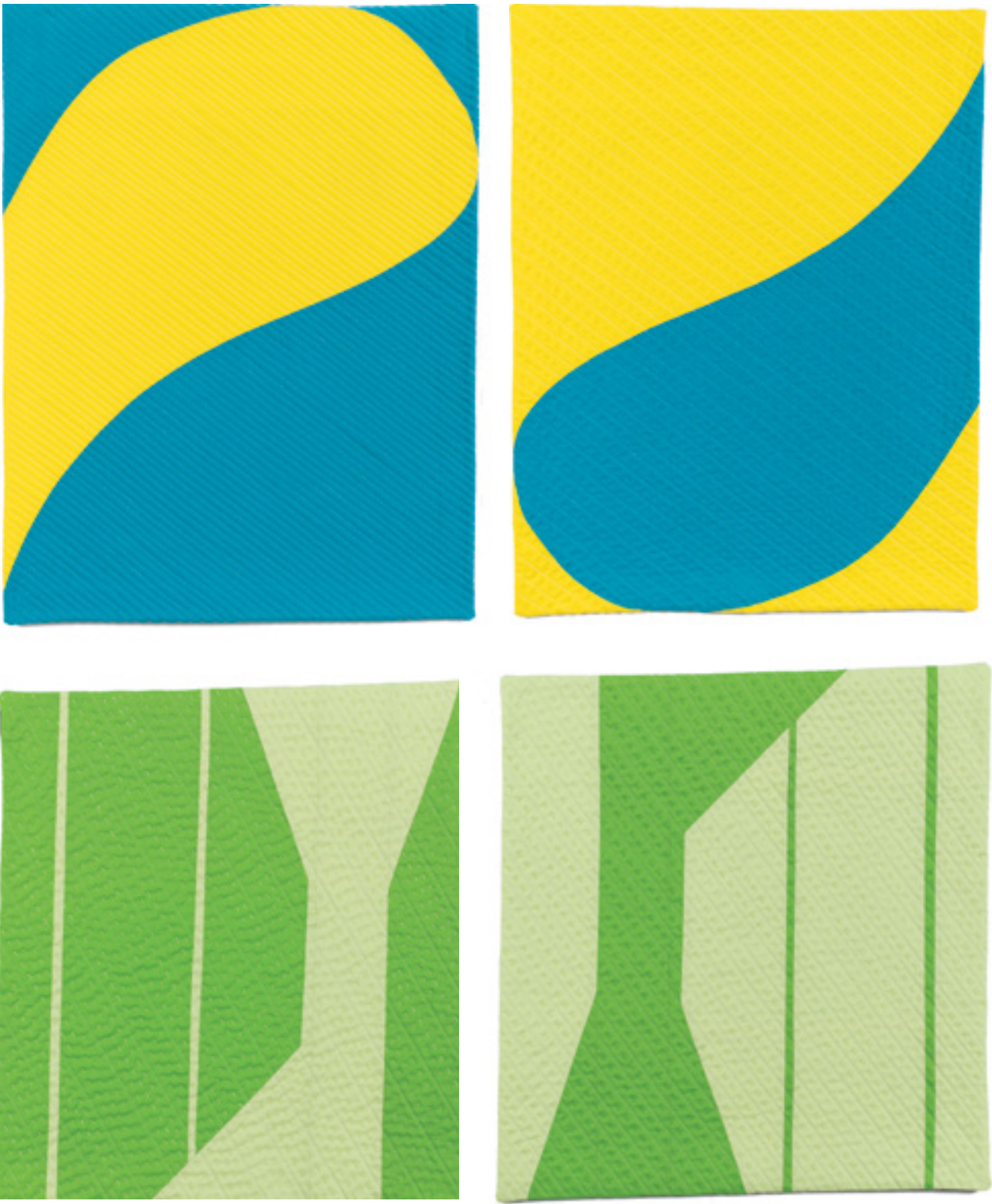
Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923 – 2015)
Yellow Blue 1963
Oil on canvas
Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center, 1971.17
Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines

“GREEN HAS BEEN A FAVORITE COLOR SINCE CHILDHOOD AND ITS USAGE HELPS REINFORCE MY PRESENCE IN THE QUILT.”

as the uneven borders of these small quilts reveal Millett's handcraft. In each *Ode*, Millett makes one replica and one color-reversed version, as if to illustrate his consideration of Kelly's deliberate choice of primary and secondary shades. The result is a charming dialogue between two gay, abstract artists across time, showing the power of color to convey so much more than itself.

The symbolism of color is an important tenet of Millett's work, and many of the quilts and garments in this exhibition are connected to his research and interpretations of color motifs related to Queer history and community. *Progress Pride Stars* (PAGE 6) celebrates the colors of the rainbow pride flag, which were each assigned a meaning by its creator Gilbert Baker in 1978 at the urging of civil rights icon Harvey Milk. Millett places the colors in a star pattern, a popular motif of traditional quilting. The work is both "progressive" as noted by the title, but sewn into tradition, suggesting the constant presence of Queer people whether celebrated or not. *Hanky Code* (PAGE 7), another textile of rainbow shades across white, is a reference to a time when communication among Queer men had to be kept much more secret, particularly in regard to sexual activity. A secret language of bandanas in various colors allowed the community to express desire without words. Millett's quilt commemorates these coded shades in a pattern of squares and lines that subtly suggest a bandana, with small blocks that connect by hue. A poignant reminder that rainbows are not welcome everywhere, and some folks are not comfortable or safe expressing their full selves, Millett also created *Not Everyone Wears a Rainbow* (PAGE 8), in which the names of various identities are stitched in white onto white fabric. The work shares a poetic visual elegance with Minimalist painting, such as that by Robert Ryman or Agnes Martin, saying much with a sparseness of form.

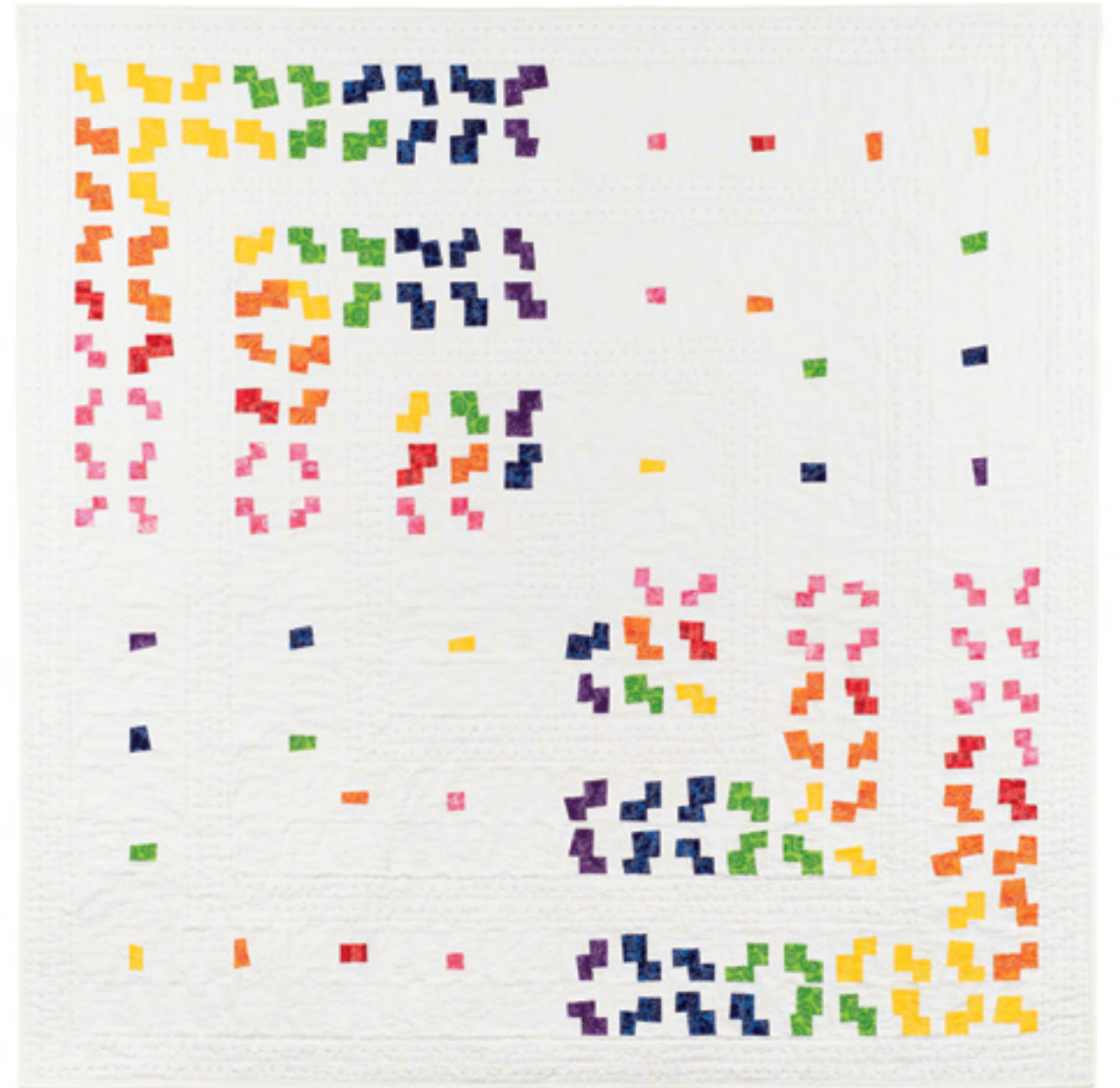
Identity, a word so often used to define one's ties to larger groups and communities, is also a deeply



UPPER LEFT *Ode to Ellsworth 1* 2024 UPPER RIGHT *Ode to Ellsworth -1* 2024
LOWER LEFT *Ode to Ellsworth 2* 2024 LOWER RIGHT *Ode to Ellsworth -2* 2024



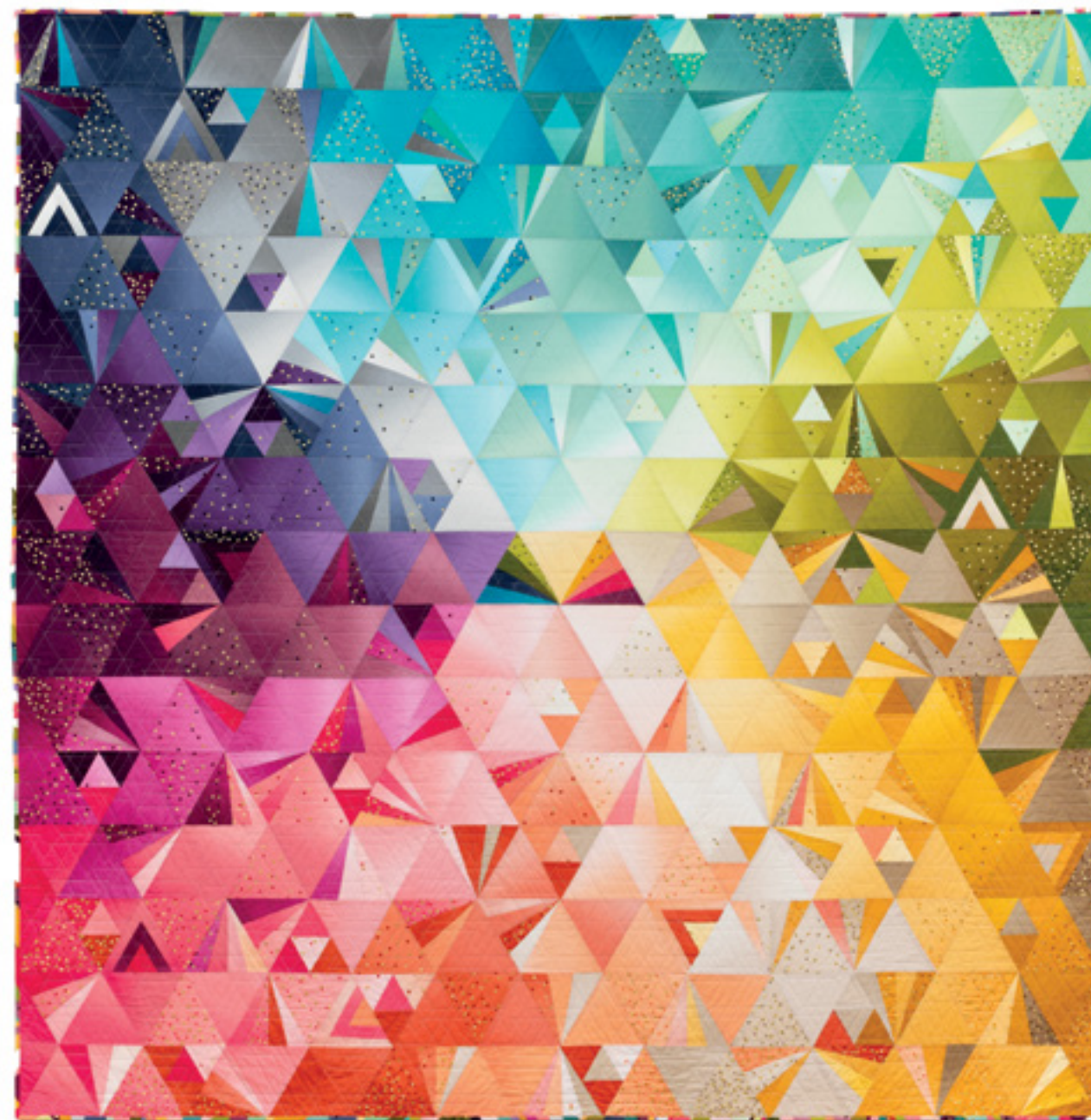
Progress Pride Stars 2023



Hanky Code 2023

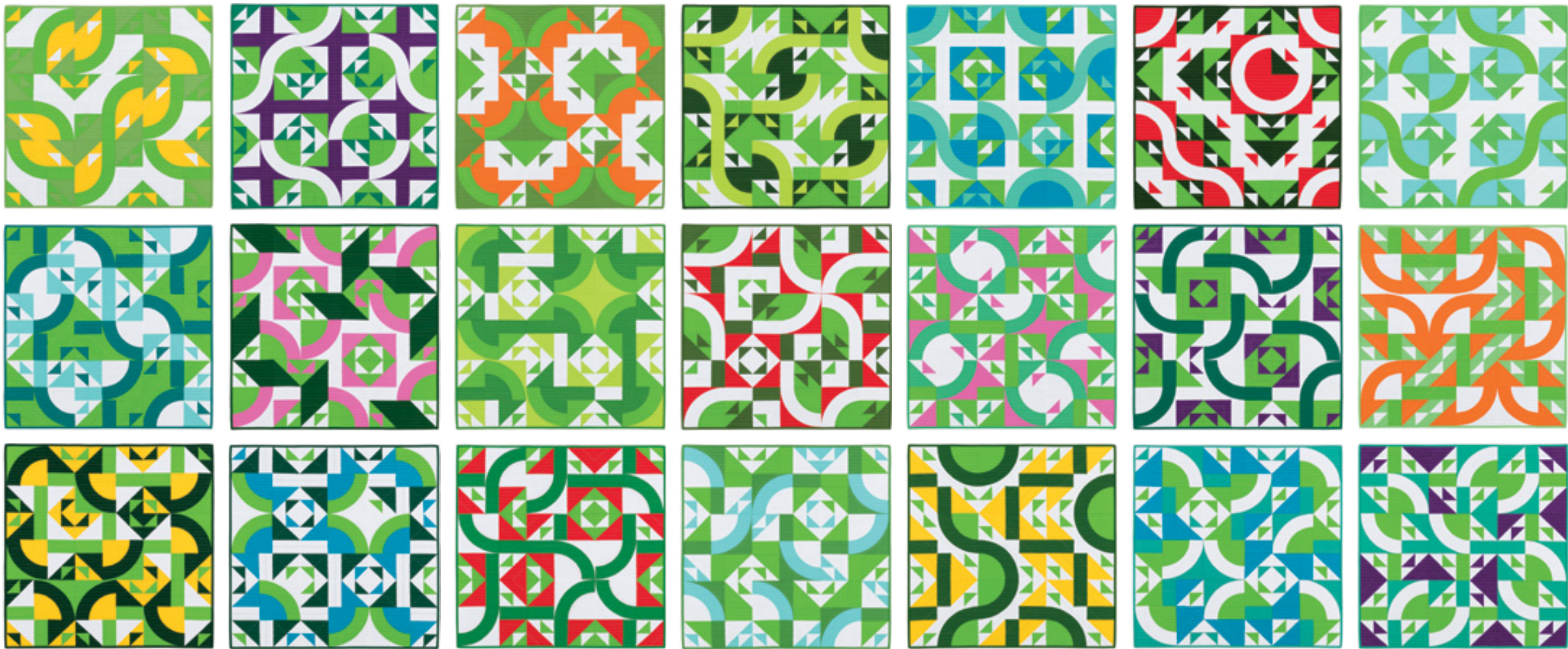


Not Everyone Wears a Rainbow 2023



Spinning Into Control 2019

“I’M GOING TO PUT MY QUILTS AT THE TINY OVERLAP IN A
VENN DIAGRAM OF COLOR FIELD, GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION,
HARD EDGE, AND QUEER ABSTRACTION.”



“GREEN HAS BEEN A FAVORITE COLOR SINCE CHILDHOOD AND ITS USAGE HELPS REINFORCE MY PRESENCE IN THE QUILT.”

personal construct. Our genders, sexualities, and other identifiers are tied up in our biographies and vice versa. This interweaving is approached with introspection and speculation by Millett in multiple works in this exhibition. In a monumental work made of multiple small quilts, *If I Had Said Yes* (PAGES 10–11) makes visible several different patterned universes, inspired by the artist’s consideration of what might have happened if he had made different decisions at various points in the past. *The Book of Benjamin* (PAGES 12–16), inspired by the medieval illuminated manuscript the *Book of Kells* (written in 800 CE), binds together quilts as pages, embroidered with song lyrics important to the artist.²

Just as Millett aligns his quilts with other art forms, pushing their meaning towards activism and personal expression, he also plays with shape, form, and scale. His scale ranges from the size of a book to a baby blanket and up to the dimensions of a large bedcover. The *Ombre Improv* series (PAGES 18–21) and *If I Had Said Yes* (PAGES 10–11) are ambitiously scaled works made of multiple, carefully arranged individual but related components (which, appropriately, is what all quilts themselves are). This exhibition also contains two quilts draped like capes or robes over hangers standing in for the human body, and several garments designed and quilted by Millett. They feature the bright colors and intricate patterning of his blanket-style works with one exception, *Say Gay!* (PAGE 23), rendered in black with the word “gay” in a somewhat abstracted text quilted in yellow thread. The shirt’s interior is boldly striped. From title to the unseen inside, this garment makes a statement like other works in the exhibition about what we say, what we show, and what we disguise — as well as what remains clear to those who speak our language and notice the details.

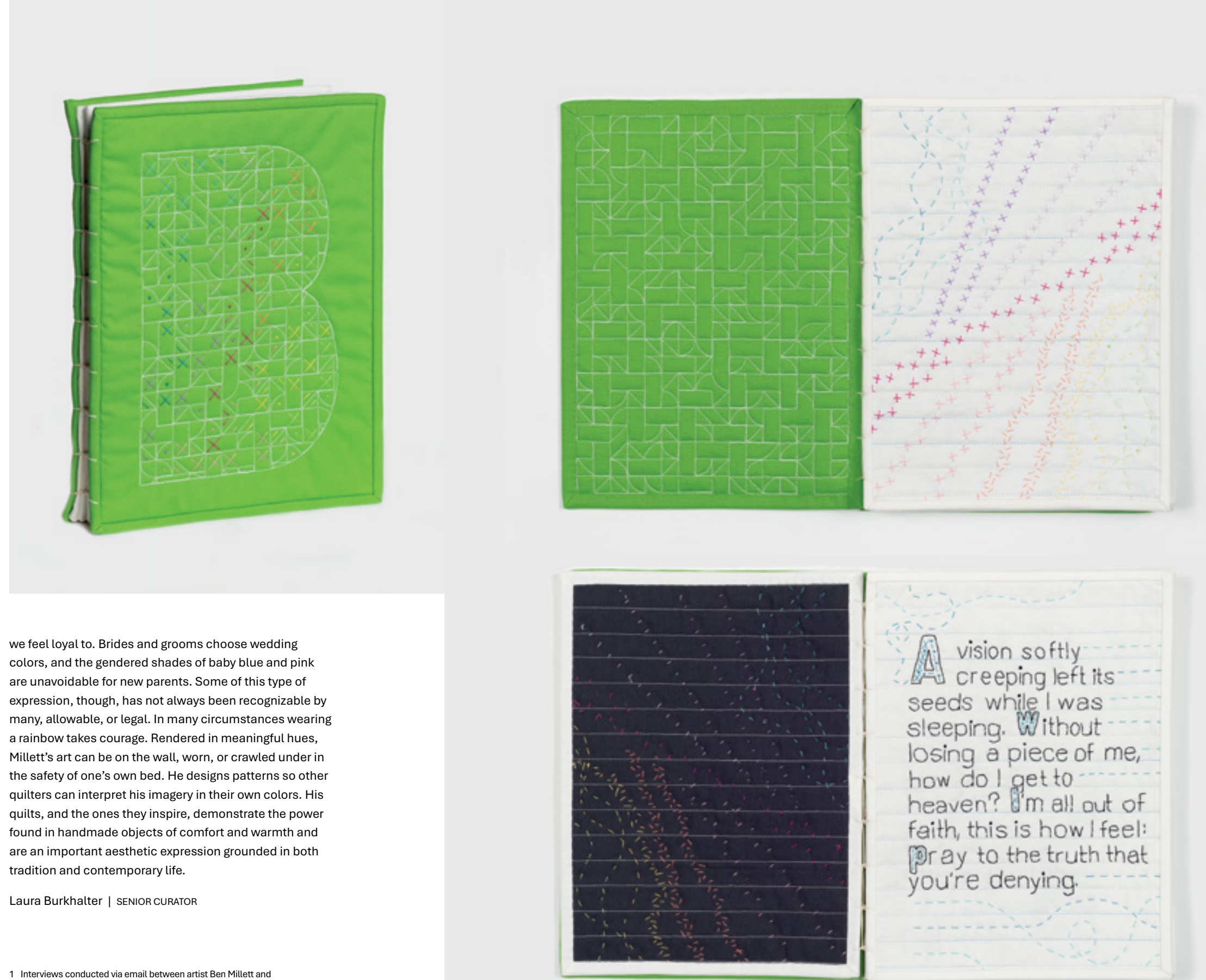
The colors we wear play a stronger role in how we define ourselves and our communities than many of us regularly consider — we own jerseys and t-shirts that represent schools, sports teams, and even countries

we feel loyal to. Brides and grooms choose wedding colors, and the gendered shades of baby blue and pink are unavoidable for new parents. Some of this type of expression, though, has not always been recognizable by many, allowable, or legal. In many circumstances wearing a rainbow takes courage. Rendered in meaningful hues, Millett’s art can be on the wall, worn, or crawled under in the safety of one’s own bed. He designs patterns so other quilters can interpret his imagery in their own colors. His quilts, and the ones they inspire, demonstrate the power found in handmade objects of comfort and warmth and are an important aesthetic expression grounded in both tradition and contemporary life.

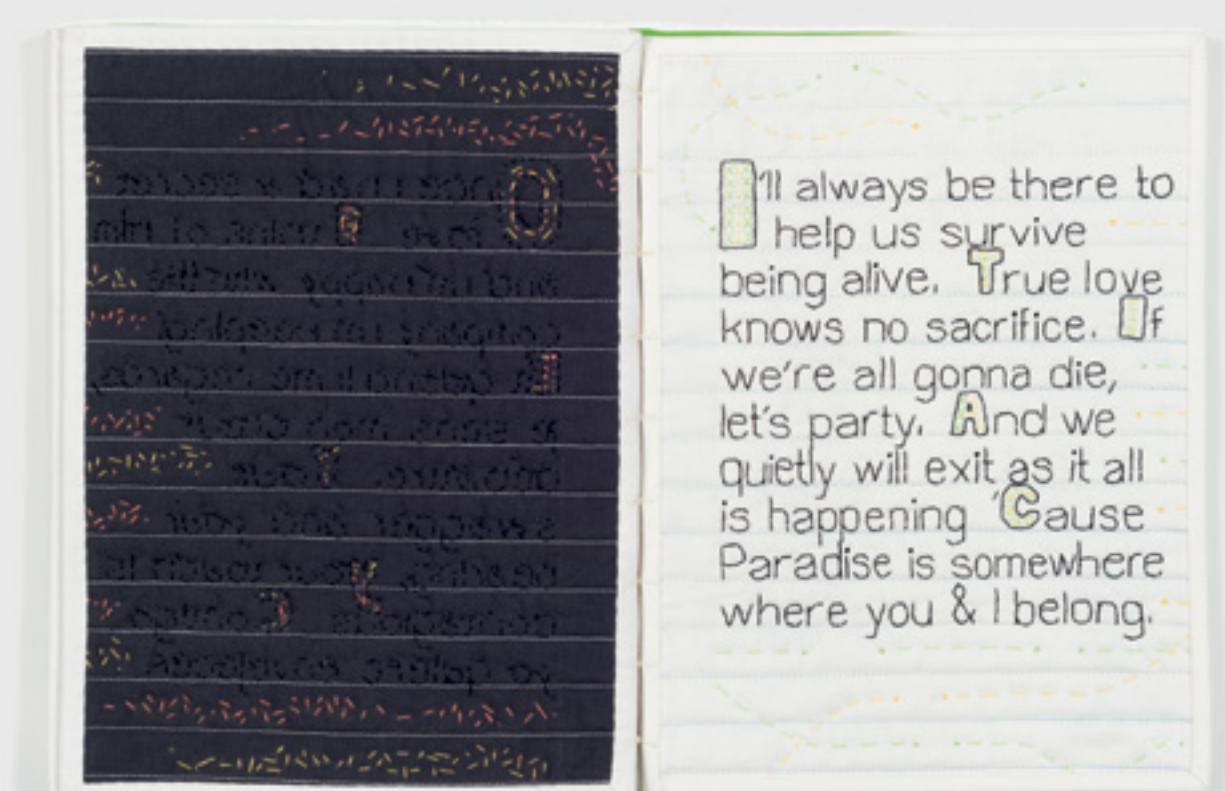
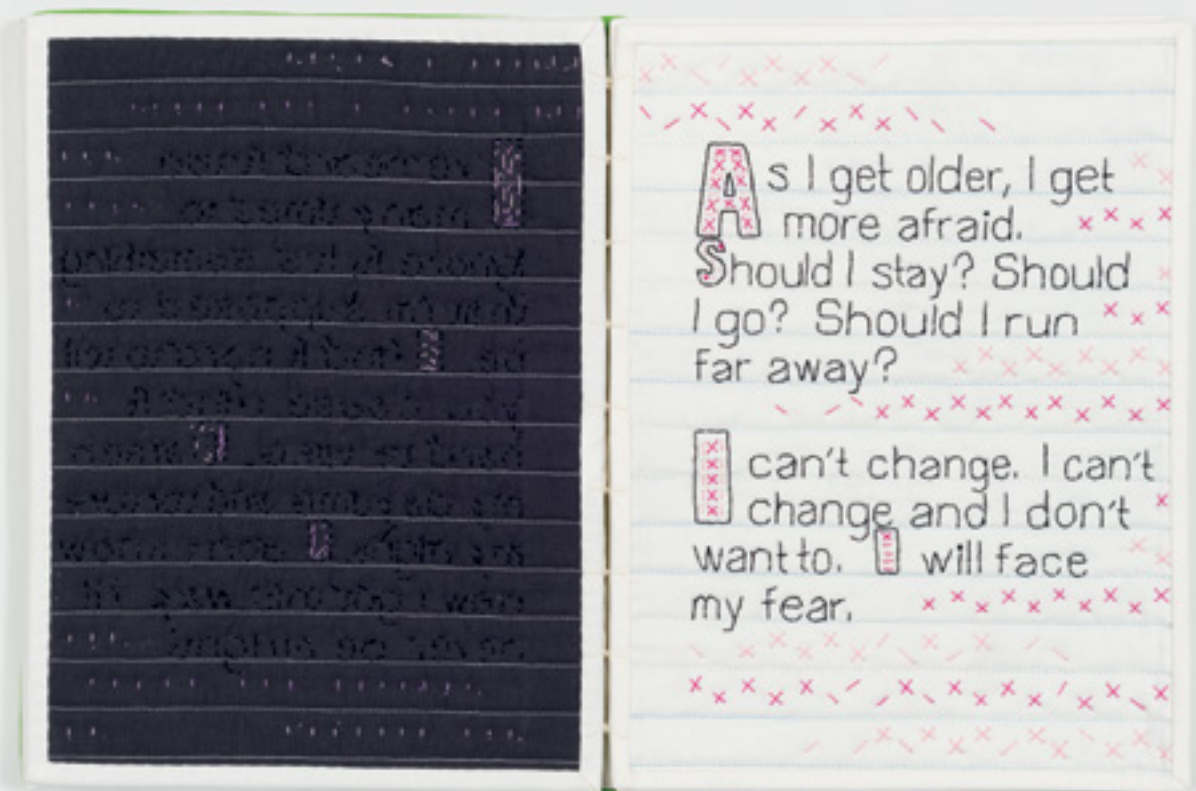
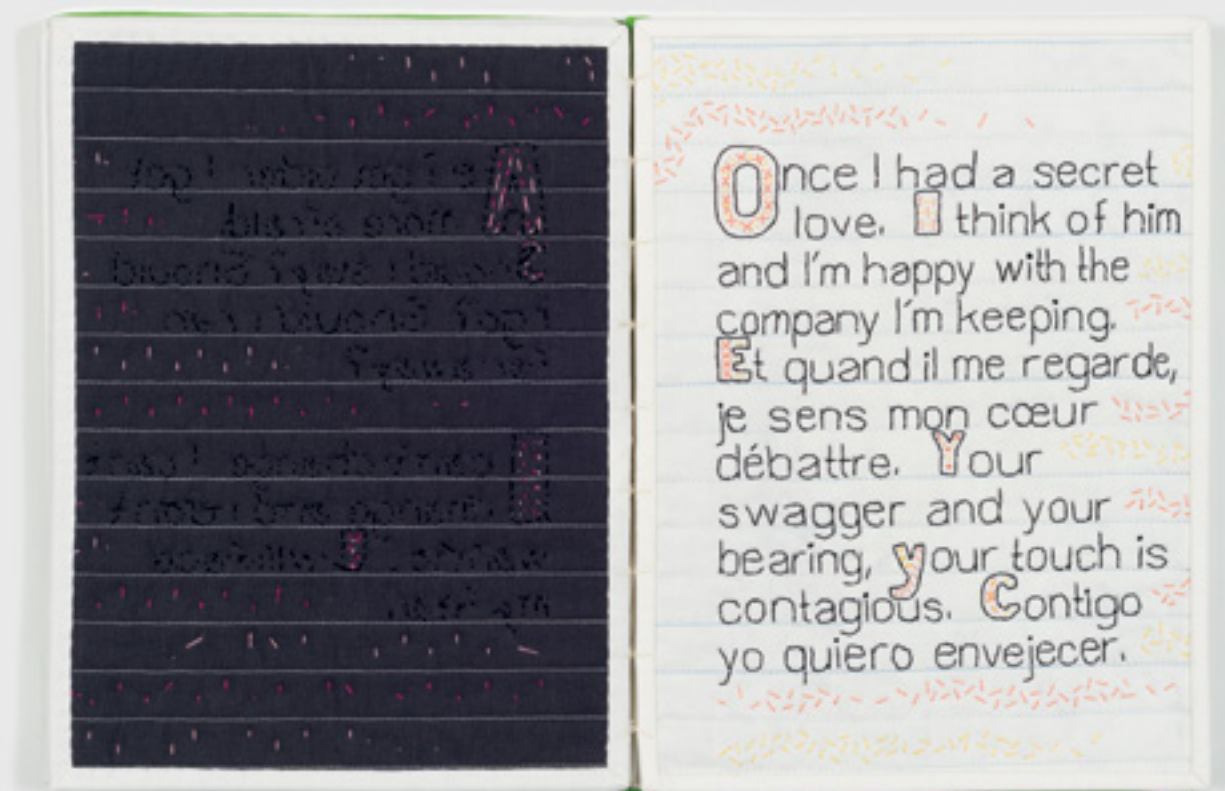
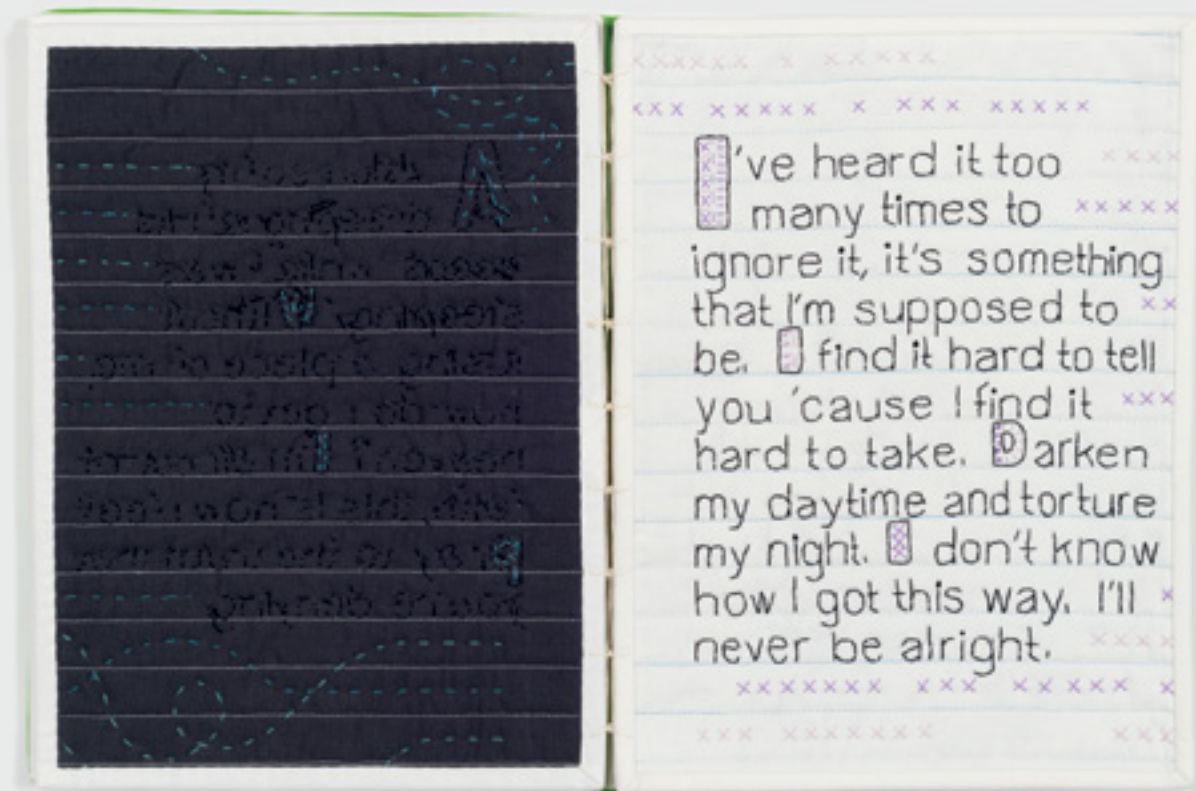
Laura Burkhalter | SENIOR CURATOR

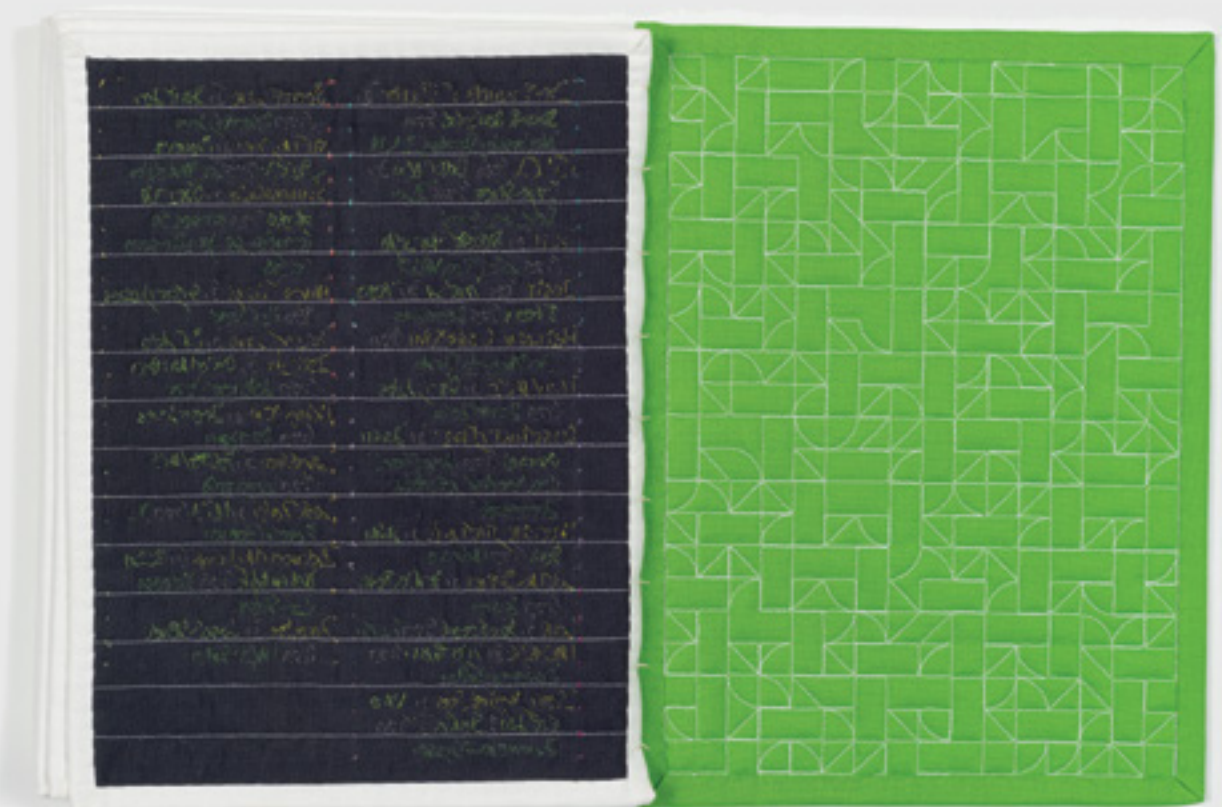
¹ Interviews conducted via email between artist Ben Millett and curator Laura Burkhalter between March and June, 2025.

² A playlist of the songs referenced in *The Book of Benjamin* can be found by scanning the QR code at the end of this gallery guide.



The Book of Benjamin 2025 (THROUGH PAGE 16)





That's a Peel Breaker! 2020



Ombre Improv 1 (Teal Peach) 2024



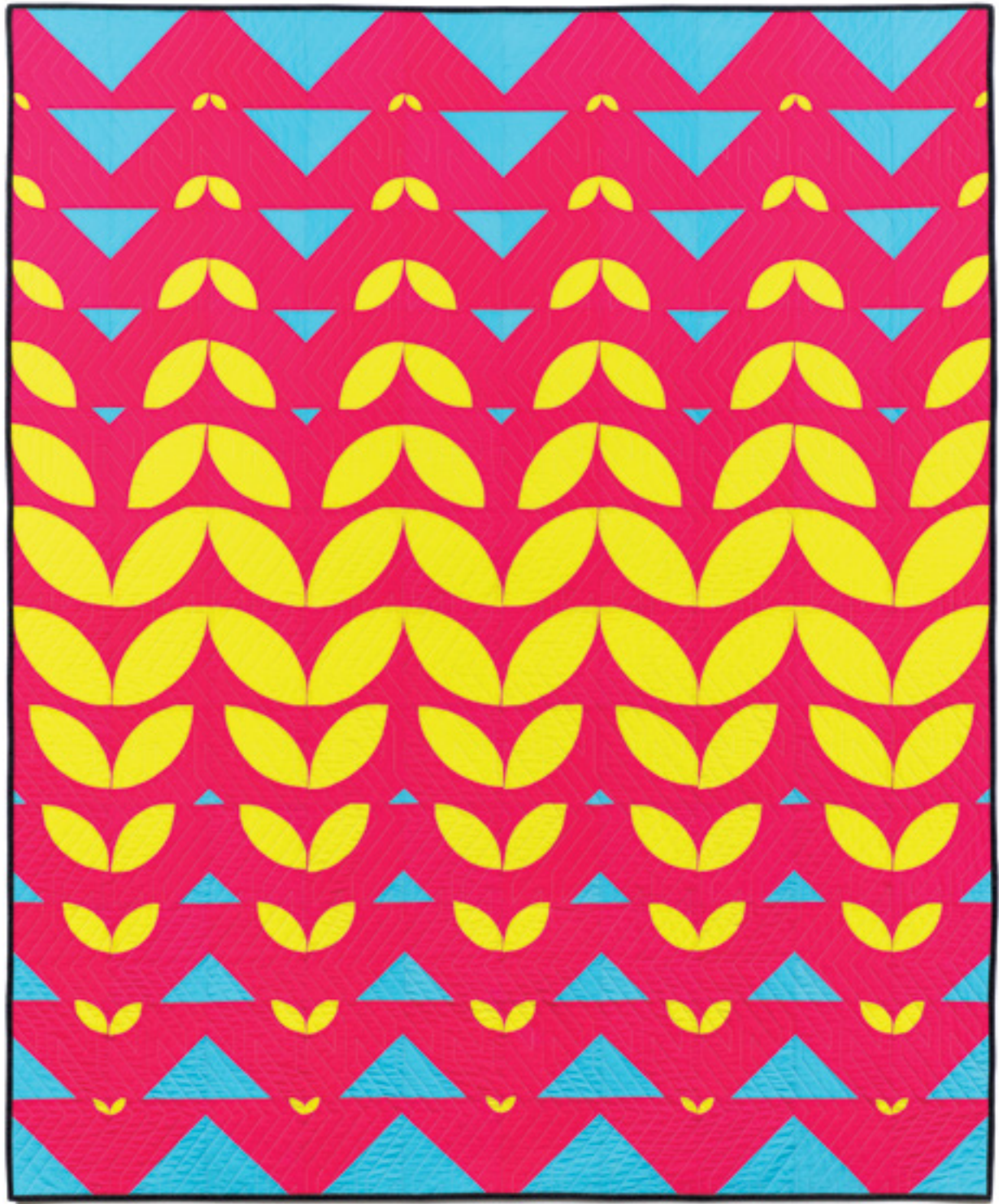
UPPER Ombre Improv 2 (Plum Teal) 2024 LOWER Ombre Improv 3 (Olive Plum Nectarine) 2024



UPPER Ombre Improv 5 (Peach Olive) 2024 LOWER Ombre Improv 6 (Mini Fruit Salad) 2024



Ombre Improv 4 (Nectarine Olive) 2024



Phosphorific (Tri-Color) 2020



LEFT Say GAY! 2023 RIGHT Loud When Needed 2021



LEFT **It's Electric!** 2024 RIGHT **Coat of 365 Colors** 2020

LEFT **Midsommar (Christian)** 2023 RIGHT **Midsommar (Dani)** 2023

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All artworks by Ben Millett (American, born 1979)
All images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Spinning Into Control 2019

Cotton fabric and batting, poly thread; quilted by
Kristen Lee by machine using a pantograph by Natalia Majors
88 x 88 inches (223.5 x 223.5 cm)

Coat of 365 Colors 2020

Cotton fabric, cotton batting, poly thread; quilted by machine
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

Phosphorific (Tri-Color) 2020

Cotton fabric, cotton-poly batting, poly thread; quilted by
Kristen Lee by machine using a pantograph by Natalie Gorman
72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm)

That’s a Peel Breaker! 2020

Cotton fabric and batting, poly thread; quilted by
Carol Noyes by machine
76 x 56 inches (193 x 142.2 cm)

Loud When Needed 2021

Cotton fabric, wool batting, poly thread; quilted by machine
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

Hanky Code 2023

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by hand
60 x 60 inches (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Midsommar (Christian) 2023

Cotton fabric, silk batting, cotton thread; quilted by machine
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

Midsommar (Dani) 2023

Cotton fabric, silk batting, cotton thread; quilted by machine
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

Not Everyone Wears a Rainbow 2023

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine
36 x 36 inches (91.44 x 91.44 cm)
Courtesy of Jenny Smith

Progress Pride Stars 2023

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine
64 x 64 inches (162.6 x 162.6 cm)

Say GAY! 2023

Cotton fabric, wool batting, poly thread; quilted by machine
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

It’s Electric! 2024

Cotton fabric and thread, wool batting; quilted by machine
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

Ombré Improv 1 (Teal Peach) 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
24 x 22 inches (61 x 55.9 cm)

Ombré Improv 2 (Plum Teal) 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
24 x 27 inches (61 x 68.6 cm)

Ombré Improv 3 (Olive Plum Nectarine) 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
22 x 27 inches (55.9 x 68.6 cm)

Ombré Improv 4 (Nectarine Olive) 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
26 x 25 inches (66 x 63.5 cm)

Ombré Improv 5 (Peach Olive) 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
22 x 29 inches (55.9 x 73.7 cm)

Ombré Improv 6 (Mini Fruit Salad) 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
7 x 8 inches (17.8 x 20.3 cm)
Courtesy of Caleb Hegna

Ode to Ellsworth 1 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Ode to Ellsworth -1 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Ode to Ellsworth 2 2024

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
16 x 14 inches (40.6 x 35.6 cm)

Ode to Ellsworth -2 2024

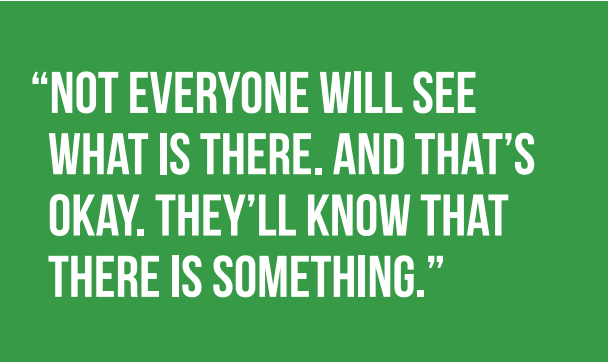
Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
16 x 14 inches (40.6 x 35.6 cm)

The Book of Benjamin 2025

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
13 x 10 x 2 inches (33 x 25.4 x 5.1 cm)

If I Had Said Yes 2025

Cotton fabric, batting, and thread; quilted by machine and hand
Overall: 94 x 222 inches (238.8 x 563.9 cm)
Each: 30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)



This gallery guide accompanies the exhibition

IOWA ARTISTS 2025: BEN MILLETT

on view from July 25 to November 2, 2025.

EXHIBITION CURATORS

Senior Curator Laura Burkhalter and artist Ben Millett

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Laura would like to thank Ben not only for his amazing art but his spectacular organization and insight during the planning process. She would also like to thank the Art Center team, especially Kendra Dacey, exhibitions project manager, Michelle Hill, assistant preparator, and Megan Harrington, registrar. Ben wishes to thank Catlin Curry and Neal Millett, Carla Taylor, members of the Central Iowa Modern Quilt Guild, Marissa Hernandez, Heidi Parkes, and the late Sharon Millett.

A link to Ben Millett’s website and playlist compiled to accompany *The Book of Benjamin* can be found by going to his this website, <http://benmillett.us/book-of-benjamin> or scanning this QR code.



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PHOTOGRAPHY

Brittany Brooke Crow, except page 4 (Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines) and pages 8 and 20, lower image (Photo: Ben Millett)

DESIGN

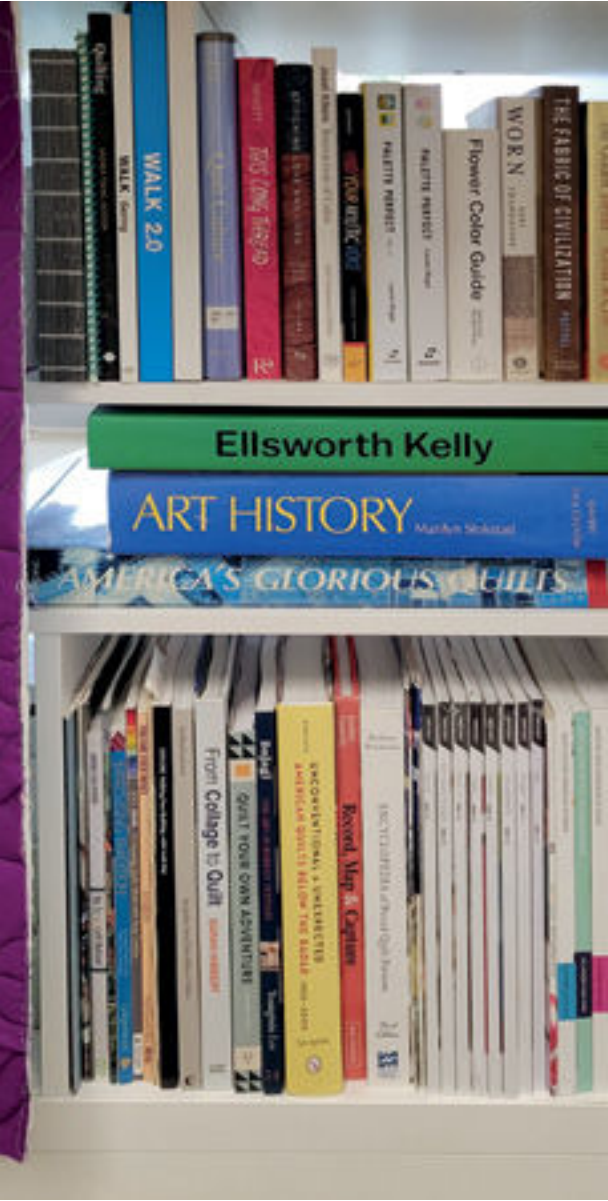
Connie Wilson

SUPPORT FOR THIS EXHIBITION

IS PROVIDED BY
O’BRIEN COURAGE AND HOPE FOUNDATION
MIKE SIMONSON

COVER AND BACK COVER (DETAIL) **Progress Pride Stars**

PAGES 2–3 (DETAIL) **Book of Benjamin**



Ben’s studio bookshelf
Photo: Laura Burkhalter

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