

MEET THE ARTIST – MICHELE LEAVITT

by Paula Martesian, Curator, Bank Rhode Island

Her mother was the daughter of a dirt farmer. Growing up in rural Indiana, the farmer's daughter and her three sisters shared a bed, tossing and turning as one. She married and had a daughter of her own. Long before blue and green bins cluttered the landscape, the family practiced an essential form of recycling, reusing and repurposing anything that came their way. From bits and scraps of cloth, the farmer's daughter taught her daughter how to quilt. She showed her not only how to make nice even stitches, but how to balance the colors and patterns to fit the overall design of the quilt.

"I don't even know if she knew she was talking about design," Saunderstown artist Michele Leavitt muses. "They made quilts and rugs because they needed to. My mom had grown up so poor, she used to give me cardboard from inside my father's shirts to draw on." Leavitt's father was a third generation printer and worked with letter forms – bold serifs, sweeping italics and block Roman letters. Design was everywhere.

The family settled in Long Island and on occasion the twelve-year-old Leavitt made the trip to Manhattan to take in the museums. "I saw Louise Nevelson and Jasper Johns and Marisol," Leavitt says. In their work, she recognized kindred spirits. "My people," she thought.

From there, Leavitt went on to college at the Rochester Institute of Technology, studying painting. She took classes in drawing, painting, photography, illustration and design. A teacher, Frederick Lipp, was a particular inspiration. "He taught me the idea is of the utmost importance," Leavitt explains. "And everything you use, the kinds of lines, shapes, size format, media – all that you do must be in support of that idea."

Leavitt took his teaching to heart and armed with her mother's quilting lessons, she developed a body of work based on the combination of practical piecework and conceptual ideas. Leavitt had married by then, she and her husband living on a farm with little money. He was on his way towards becoming a successful antique dealer; she was waitressing on the road to becoming an artist.

A series of big, bold quilts garnered recognition and awards. A collection of denim jeans found inside the odd antique suitcase or armoire became fodder for a new series of quilts. Instead of cutting up the jeans for the fabric, Leavitt incorporated the zippers, pockets, pant legs and worn patches into quilts that conveyed her ideas about life.

Leavitt enrolled at Cornell as a full time graduate student working towards her master's degree. She and her husband separated. She met, fell in love with and married Tom Leavitt, Cornell's museum director. When Tom retired, the couple searched for a place to live and raise their two sons. They settled on Saunderstown – a place "with a

neighborhood, a water view and a front porch.” Tom came out of retirement to serve as the interim director of the RISD Museum of Art and then the director of the Newport Art Museum. He passed away in October of 2011.

Leavitt now lives in a cottage on her property in Saunderstown, renting out the main house. She teaches at the Community College of Rhode Island and in the RISD pre-college program. Leavitt is building a scholarship fund in Tom’s name for promising art and art history students at CCRI. She has collected \$5900 towards the \$10,000 she needs to name the fund and direct it to art students.

“Fabric is the thread to my whole life,” Leavitt says. “I never knew there was a distinction between quilting and art.” In fact, Leavitt “quilts” most of her artwork. Her paper collages are reminiscent of quilts, incorporating both formal pattern making and crazy, unpatterned pieces. “Cogent statements about current political and social events” are often built into the collages. Sometimes a sweet, quiet landscape peeks in. Leavitt’s large fabric quilts are more like soft paintings, large, bold contemporary statements made from other people’s pasts.