

ART YOU WANT TO TOUCH

Fergus artist
Maggie Vanderweit
explores the world of fibre

By Francis Baker

Sewing and working with fabric has been part of Maggie Vanderweit's life since she was a child.

Now a full-time fibre artist, she creates vibrant, textured fabric wall art that abounds with rhythm, colour, shape and form, working from a bright, walk-out studio at the back of a new house she and husband Fred Meredith designed and built in Fergus.

(Vanderweit is her professional name, one that's she's known by through her art and business, Stone Threads Fibre Art, but she uses Meredith in her personal life.)

"Little Dutch girls learn how to sew in Kindergarten," she says. As a child she learned stitching, crocheting, and knitting, and grew up in a house where her mother sewed everything and her father made things from

wood and worked in the garden.

She started making traditional quilts in 1980, taught herself techniques of quilting, picked up classes and workshops from the mid-1990s, and now gives workshops and lectures to others on the textile art techniques she uses in her own artwork: machine quilting, fabric painting, silk fusion, beading, fabric collage, and more.

With a degree in French and Canadian literature and a teaching diploma, Vanderweit taught English as a second language in northern Quebec and core French and French Immersion for the Upper Grand District School Board for years before spending more and more time doing art.

"When the kids were little and I was a stay-at-home mom, I could sew in small increments of time and they could play in my studio while I sewed," she says.

But teaching is still a big part of her life as an artist, she says. She teaches to give people the skills to create their own works, rather than getting them to copy her style and designs.

"I've taught hundreds and hundreds of ladies techniques that I hope empower them," she says. "I'll show them, that's how you paint fabric, then say, do what you want, and I'm here to hold your hand."

She says she's constantly delighted by the gorgeous work that comes from her workshop students. "It is very rewarding to see students excited about a new technique, stretching their own creativity."

"The freedom you have when you're not using other people's patterns and working to a specific end is really exciting," she says.

Bored by the idea of drawing and designing a detailed sewing pattern and then working to it, she uses a more fluid style. Her pieces develop out of a basic idea

or theme, or build up from a piece of fabric or a basic square. But there's rarely a detailed overall plan — she seldom knows how a piece will end up, and keeps a large stack of works "in progress" around the studio.

Some stay in progress for months. "I had something on the design wall for seven months ... because I really really didn't know what to do with it," she says.

Others sit in piles waiting to be painted, stitched, or to have an edge finished ... or left deliberately rough.

"It really really helps me that I've given myself permission not to take something from start to finish," she says. It's a liberating way of working:





when she feels like painting fabric, for example, she'll return to the pile of pieces still to be painted, and work on several.

"I just keep playing until I get what I like," she says. "Sometimes when you have something started it's less intimidating."

The process has created a large body of work — and a large inventory of finished pieces stacked, rolled, and draped around the studio's spaces. There are equally large stacks of works to be completed, too.

Vanderweit's studio is an ideal working space with big windows for natural light, accented by artificial lighting. A room like a walk-in closet holds shelves full of bright coloured fabric of all kinds, material that's ready to use in whatever she wants to construct, and assorted supplies ready to hand. A nearby cupboard holds neatly shelved paints and dyes.

There's a counter for painting fabric, two large work tables — one with a sewing machine — and the "design wall" that Vanderweit says is a necessary part of working with fabric.

She assembles pieces on the wall, tacking squares and smaller swatches to see how they'll look together, working out how the assembled pieces will look before starting to sew the pieces together. It's vital to her creative process to be able to stand back and see the piece being created on a wall, as it's intended to be displayed.

As a textile artist who doesn't do wearables — that is, clothing — she's had to do a lot of education about her art to potential buyers.

People have looked at her small pieces as if they're sections for a quilt, and asked if she has similar squares in a different colour — people didn't understand each piece was a separate artwork. She's had people go through her display and ask, "Do you make real

quilts too?"

In the past few years, things have changed, and the non-wearable side of textile art has gained more acceptance. Classes in the mid-1990s included information on modern tools and techniques that made cutting and piecing fabric easier and more accurate. New books and beautiful high quality cotton fabrics started to become available.

Having her pieces picked for shows like the local Insights at the Wellington County Museum, which is open to all kinds of media, is a bonus — and exposes more people to the art form.

Also important is membership in a variety of quilting and textile art groups. "Connections" is a national group of textile artists who exhibit across Canada, get together and talk about the art form, its challenges and techniques.

"Friendships and mentoring and sharing with those who with an interest in textile art has been really really important to me," she says.

Vanderweit's resume includes participation in an extensive list of shows, including many textile, thread, and quilting exhibitions around the province. In 2005, she won two Canadian Quilting Association National Awards, for machine quilting and machine piecing.

Her pieces mix pattern and form, and play on colour and texture. Some are completely abstract patterns, some create rhythmic shapes, and others are stylized pictures created from fabric.

"I'm very very interested in textures and colour," she says.

There are tree-centred landscapes, eggs and nests, and the occasional figure, worked into abstract patterns and styles.

"I take my inspiration from the beauty I see every-



where, and from books, conversations, my interest in ancient images and my spiritual beliefs," she writes in her artist statement. "My work contains original combinations of my own hand-painted fabrics and yarns, intensely quilted surfaces, bones, machine free-motion and hand embroi-

dery, paper collage, quills, feathers, beads, felted wool, silk fusion and found natural objects."

She machine quilts in a free-flowing pattern that accents the images and patterns of the fabric. "Stone Weather," for example, has quilting patterns that mimic stones and stone work. Other patterns are spirals and swirls that add a handcrafted, whimsical look to the pieces.

She prefers the "hand-made" look, that connects to the sewing and quilting traditions of the past — and it's also a little more forgiving of small flaws and mistakes.

Some of her work incorporates tassels and beadwork — another series of works is beadwork-wrapped caribou bones. Pieces use her own hand-made thread, silk paper, and often several types of fabric in collages or sewn together.

"I hope people look at them and think of something that gives them pleasure," she says. "I hope they provide some sort of peace and serenity. I want them to be pleasing in some sort of symmetrical or asymmetrical way."

People seem to have a connection to fabric art, she says. Fabric is an integral part of life, she points out. "We have a long-term, intimate connection with fibre" from the moment newborn babies are first wrapped.

"Most people, they can't help but touch," she says. "It draws people in and they want to touch it, but it also works looking at it from far away."



Studio tour

set to begin Sept. 25



Maggie Vanderweit is one of 36 artists and craftspeople opening their doors to the public this fall for the Elora-Fergus Studio Tour.

The tour gives you the chance to find out what an artist's studio is really like, plus get up close and personal with the people who make art in Centre Wellington.

The studio tour is self-guided and there's no admission charge. Studios are open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 25-26 and Oct. 2-3; all you have to do is drop in.

The studio tour's website at www.elorafergusstudiotour.ca, and the tour brochure available at community information centres and the Elora Centre for the Arts, have extensive information on the artists taking part, as well as maps to guide you to the studios.

The tour is also a great opportunity to take in the heri-

tage streetscapes of historic Elora and Fergus — several of the studios are within walking distance of each other. There's also the prospect of fall colours, and some of the most beautiful and scenic landscapes in this part of southwestern Ontario.

Besides the "behind the scenes" look, the tour is a relaxed and informal way for artists to meet the people who buy their work. You'll find many artists at work on projects or doing displays — and most are very willing to explain just about anything about their artwork or crafts.

Home base for the studio tour is the Elora Centre for the Arts, where visitors will find information on the tour, maps, and brochures.

The arts centre kicks off the tour with a special show in the Minarovich Gallery that features one piece from

every artist on the tour, as well as short biographies and art information on each artist.

The studio tour show opens Sept. 16 with a 7:30 p.m. public reception usually attended by many of the artists taking part in the tour. The show is a great sampling of what's on the tour, and makes the perfect first stop to plan which studios you want to see first.

For more information on the tour go to www.elorafergusstudiotour.ca, or call the Elora Centre for the Arts at 519-846-9698.

Art aficionados may also want to check out the Kissing Bridge Trail Studio Tour in Woolwich Township, which takes place Oct. 23 and 24. This is also a self-guided tour, featuring artists in their own studios. For more information, visit www.kbstudiotour.ca, or pick up brochures available in local stores.