



## Creating Layers of Pattern and Color

**MY WORK IS ABOUT PATTERN** and rhythm. For me, one bird in flight is interesting, but birds flying in formation are mesmerizing. The same is true for other patterns that I see around me—ocean waves, trees, blades of grass, and so on. Pattern and rhythm are integral to life and its cycles and to our environment.

While each part of a pattern is unique, the parts are similar. Images in nature are unique and, at the same time, similar. My goal is to simplify such images into an abstract work that captures what I feel at the moment of inspiration.

Early in my art career, I decided to work in the abstract. Traditional methods didn't excite me. After experimenting with various paints and techniques, I developed my own style, which I call "layered painting." By applying layers of painted transparent silk over a background image, I can create abstracts that have depth and complexity; the viewer sees through the surface to the colors underneath.

I paint the silk three to five times with liquid acrylic paint or pigment thinned with water. After each application, I dry the silk to maintain the transparent nature of the surface and to allow me to

apply color on top of color. Behind the silk are pieces of cotton, linen, and canvas, which I may also paint or dye.

A specific color or image is created by all the layers. For example, if the silk surface is blue, and there's red behind it, the viewer will see a purple image. What the viewer sees is also affected by the lightness or darkness of the silk surface. If that surface is a light color, the background layers are less visible because the surface reflects light. I work much like a painter—adding layers on top of existing layers, building up the design.

Each work is composed of sections that I construct and machine-quilt before I sew the sections together. By working in small units, I have increased freedom of movement when I do the machine quilting, and I can create interesting patterns. I also like the way the straight seam lines that result when I sew the sections together contrast with the curvy wave and arc imagery that I often employ.

Because I want my work to hang straight, my layered paintings have a canvas backing. The seams that join the sections add rigidity that helps ensure the layered painting stays flat against the wall.

*ABOVE: These images illustrate how Nelda Warkentin made *Palmaceae* (2004; 40" x 50"). 1 Warkentin did an initial sketch from a photograph taken in Puerto Vallarta. 2 She fused arcs of cotton fabric onto canvas that she had dyed aqua. 3 To give the background added interest, she fused and machine-stitched light-colored cotton "palm fronds" to the canvas. 4 Covering each square with the painted silk she intended to use on the surface, she confirmed that the background image could be seen through the surface. 5 Based on her sketch, she fused cotton fronds to the canvas, ensuring that each frond just touched an arc. 6 Covering each square with the silk layer that would become the surface, she added pieces of dark and light silk, cut in the shape of fronds, between the surface and background (canvas) layers. Photos by the artist.*

Life in Alaska and travels throughout North America, Europe, and the Caribbean provide me with a wide range of visual influences. The patterns created by the sunlight, colors, and environment unique to each locale are the basis for my work. I take photographs and sketch. However, many of my works are constructed solely from memory and thought. 🌿

Nelda Warkentin became interested in fiber art in 1995 and has taken art classes at the University of Alaska Anchorage and workshops around the country. In 2003, after thirty-one years in the field of community planning and development, she started a second career in art. Her website is [www.neldawarkentin.com](http://www.neldawarkentin.com).

*Palmaceae* was included in Quilt National '05; it can be seen December 2, 2005–January 15, 2006, at Turchin Center for the Visual Arts in Boone, North Carolina, and will then travel to Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Bloomington, Illinois; and Paducah, Kentucky (visit [www.quiltnational.com](http://www.quiltnational.com) for details).



*The finished Palmaceae captures the patterns that inspired the work. Photo: John Tuckey.*