

INTERVIEW WITH

Bonnie Peterson

HOUGHTON, MICHIGAN



Road to art quilts

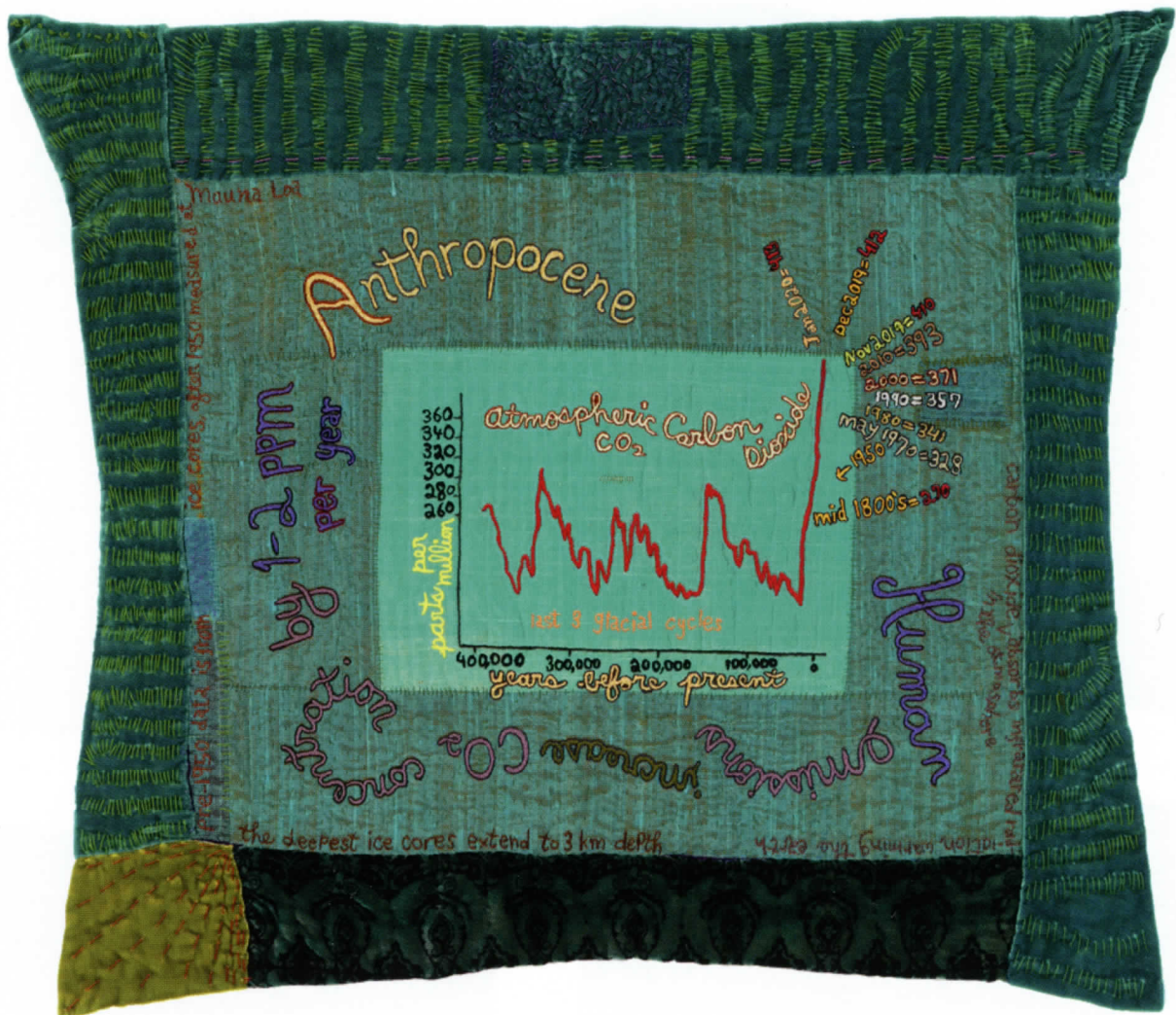
My work follows the trajectory of my life experiences, including family, human rights, outdoor adventures, and environmental science. When I was in my 30s and home with young children, I lost a close friend to breast cancer. I stitched bras, her poetry, and related news items into a wall hanging. Breast cancer was a taboo conversation topic in the early 1990s, but at an exhibition I observed people laugh at the bras and share their own experiences. It was a source of satisfaction for me to encourage this discussion. Grants from the Illinois Arts Council Agency encouraged me to create art quilts concerned with personal, social, and political themes.

Glorious inspiration

I grew up near Chicago and was introduced to the Sierra Nevada mountains in my early 20s by a coworker who took me to Mount Whitney. We took the mountaineer's route, and I have backpacked in this region ever since. The works I created for my exhibition *Another Glorious Sierra Day* [at the Fresno Art Museum] relate to my wilderness experiences, Sierra history, science, and culture. An artist residency at Yosemite National Park motivated several works that incorporate melting data from Yosemite's Lyell Glacier.

In addition to Yosemite, National Park Service artist residencies led me to investigate the history and trails of Rocky Mountain, Crater Lake, and Isle Royale National Parks. The residencies are a time for research and design, supported by knowledgeable park rangers.

Photos: Tom Van Eynde



Anthropocene
23 × 27 inches, 2021

The messages

My recent projects examine geophysical climate issues. I started making climate graphs during an artist-scientist project sponsored by University of Wisconsin. Another project, *Fires of Change*, was an artist-scientist project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and initiated by the Flagstaff Arts Council. It explores how fire as an ecosystem process is affected by climate change and encroaching development. This project involved a week of training with fire scientists and land managers on the impacts of wildfires at the Grand Canyon. My work for this project illustrated environmental factors in fire ecology through an embroidered relationship map.

Days of Lead sprang from an invitation to create a 12-inch square for a Lansing, Michigan, community quilt. Lead had been discovered in the Flint, Michigan, water supply. I researched the issue and grew so alarmed by the situation that I composed a large work that told about obfuscation by public servants and the citizen science that brought the lead poisoning to light.

I am interested in atmospheric science and the instruments that measure ocean temperatures, currents, Arctic sea ice, and other environmental properties. I combine this contemporary data with text from the rich history of 19th- and 20th-century exploration. I hope my work encourages critical thinking through the use of unusual textures, design, and narrative.



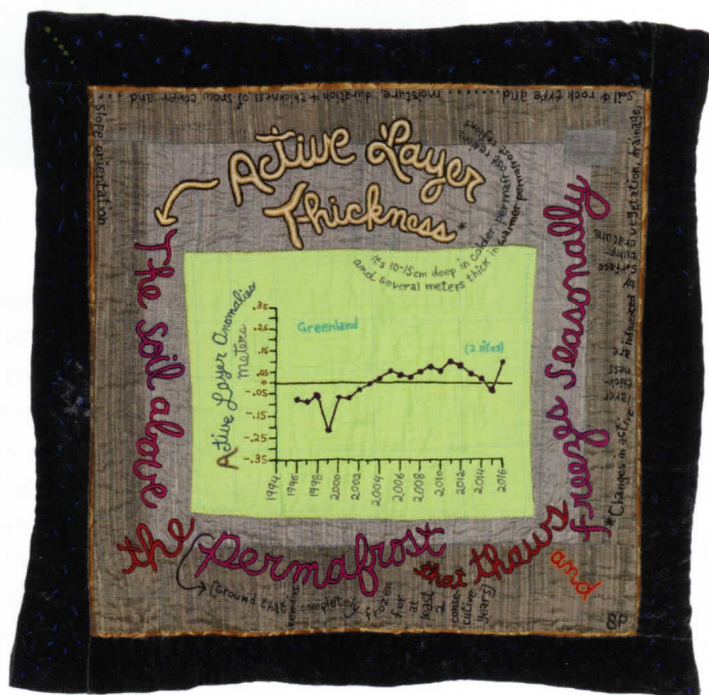
Insect Apocalypse
25 × 23 inches, 2021



Permafrost Distribution
16 × 16 inches, 2021

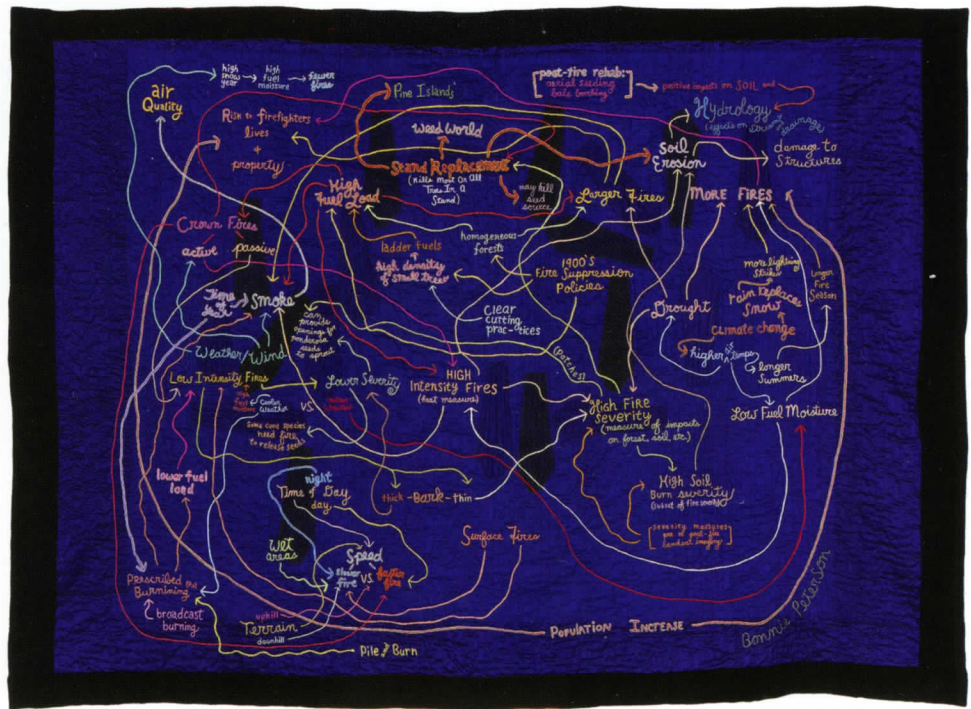


Days of Lead
50 × 50 inches, 2017



Permafrost Active Layer
25 × 25 inches, 2021

On the Nature of Fire
65 × 85 inches, 2015



The process

Silk and velvet fabrics are the base materials for my work, and text is the most important element. In early work, I added text through dye or heat transfer. Now, I use free-motion or hand embroidery to add words and graphs. By hand, I add crazy-quilt stitches and other distinctive marks with wool, silk, rayon, cotton, and polyester threads. Much of my basic assembly is also done by hand.

My work requires a lengthy research phase. Over a period of literally years, I collect and organize concepts and materials for a number of topics. For example, I continue to read current research in fire ecology, and I enjoy a weekly fire science seminar series with professors and fire ecologists from around the country.

Routine and exercise are important to me. I work in the studio before and after a couple of hours of cross-country skiing or road cycling. Up here near Lake Superior, that's right out the door! My work in the studio then continues the rest of the day and into the evening.

What's next?

I am always looking for opportunities that bring together artists and scientists. Currently, I am working on a series of permafrost works for a show at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago. Permafrost is a broad topic. As the climate warms, it's an increasingly important aspect of climate science. Two of my new works on permafrost are *Permafrost Active Layer* and *Permafrost Distribution*.