



# HERD

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**August-September 2022**  
**Austin Peay State University New Gallery**  
**Clarksville, Tennessee**

**Curated by Michael Dickins**

Stitching is my second language. It reveals inner thoughts and outer barriers. The thread incises the fabric with dimension and direction. I strive to follow its path without preconceived notions on where it is taking me. My aim is to react and reconsider as a piece evolves.

I look for the uncanny in life. My art has an undercurrent of things that don't make sense. Each stitch adds detail, texture and line to the whole. I am ready for surprises. I use the quilted form for its approachable and tactile quality. I like the contrast: soft and textured, a strong line against a giving surface.

I read for inspiration, travel for insights, and experiment to satisfy my curiosity. I believe that artists have an important role in society. We make the invisible visible and the unsaid revealed.



Moving from two-dimensional surfaces to three-dimensional forms, I built a herd this year. The members have no heads. They stay together, they move as one, letting someone or something else dictate their actions.







## Taking a Walk Stitch by Stitch with Paula Kovarik

By Dr. Dixie Webb

Orbs floating in space, cloth undulating against the wall, a herd of quadrupeds marching forward: these things are not what come to mind at the mention of quilts, but quilts and quilting are the tradition and technique from which Paula Kovarik's engaging art springs. By stitching through a layering of fabrics, as well as piecing together sections of old quilts, Kovarik takes a long tradition of women's work on a new journey. Historically most quilts were made by women and served a utilitarian yet decorative purpose: to provide warmth. Kovarik's textiles explore alternatives to the practical uses of quilting by emphasizing the line of the quilting thread. Kovarik creates drawings by sewing thread on textiles. Her use of the quilt language pulls from the 1970s Pattern

and Decoration Movement but stopping with the decorative and formal elements in her work would be inadequate. A careful exploration of these surfaces reveals ideas that fluctuate between playful and solemn.

The wide variety of shapes and objects in *Paula Kovarik: Herd* reveals the playful spirit in Kovarik's work. You are invited into the gallery by a series of what seem to be stuffed animals. These unidentifiable quadrupeds, made of vintage quilts, march into a space ringed by two-dimensional works. The walls in turn surround dangling volumes, some with orifices, others with buttons and embroidery, and one that even hints at a functional lamp shade. In some works, fabric protrudes outside the expected rectangle of a quilt



***I watch too much tv news*** • a 14.5 foot quilted scroll housed in a motorized cabinet.  
The scroll moves in a continuous loop for approximately 10 minutes. Cotton thread and fabric, cotton batting • 33" x 31" x 12" • 2018

or traditional painting. Mask-like shapes sprout out of flat quilts, and globules breed. As menacing as this description feels the objects are not threatening but accessible; they encourage curiosity and close viewing. What is inside that opening? Why do some objects heave off the wall? Where is does this drawing taking us?

As one comes close to any one of the works, it is possible for the surface design to consume your interest. Bits of existing quilts are pieced together, and a few works reveal traditional quilt patterns. The origins of these quilted fragments are not identified but one senses the history of what was possibly someone's cherished possession. Thread creates surface designs,

with tangled ends escaping from the surface. Frayed edges of the batting of the reused quilts offer a softer experience than the taut thread holding the layers of fabric together. While textures abound, the focus of the work is the surface of sewn lines. These are essentially non-objective drawings which undermine our attempt to read a narrative. Instead, the meandering line seems to take us on an unknown journey as the artist moves the sewing machine needle across the work.

Compared to traditional practice, Kovarik's quilting is unexpectedly dense. Traditional quilting—the puncturing of the needle and thread through two layers of fabric sandwiching a layer of batting—is seldom so complex. Described as a meditation by critics Kovarik's rambling line is not arbitrary. Any artist knows the feeling of being 'lost' in their medium; Kovarik takes the viewer along on that excursion through landscapes and urban skylines, passing cell towers and concentrated circuitry diagrams. Think of Kovarik's drawing as a map, a trail she forges through the world allowing us to tag along es-

pecially in the over 14-foot-long drawing unfurled over time in *I watch too much tv news*.

Kovarik's practice delves into and contradicts the history of women's work. Textiles have not been considered high art in the European/American tradition until recently. Depression-era patchwork quilts from the 1930s, for example, were often created by women making do with what was at hand—the scraps of cloth left over from other sewing projects or the unworn parts of everyday clothing. Those quilts spring from necessity rather than privilege, are made from refuse rather than luxury materials, and are driven by intuition and domestic example rather than academic instruction. Although quilting's history can be documented back to the late 17th century through Medieval gambesons (the quilted cloth that cushioned mail or plate armor), and as far back as 3400 BCE in Egypt, these textiles have always been considered functional craft, the work of women.

Painting and sculpture have unquestionable status as fine art; they are also disciplines few women

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could learn or practice until the 20th century. Kovarik forcefully asserts traditional women's work as art, advocating with her life's work for the plurality of viable materials and techniques we are familiar with today. She intentionally employs materials that were not valued by Modernism. In this she allies herself with the Pattern and Decoration artists of the 1970s, among others.

As one of the art movements that rebelled against Modernism's dead end, the Pattern and Decoration movement allows us to place Kovarik's art historically and to understand it as part of a decades-old upheaval. She participates in and expands on the ideas and works of artists like Miriam Shapiro, Joyce Kozloff, and Faith Ringgold, artists who rejected the impasse created by Modernism.

As the Abstract Expressionist movement of Pollock and Rothko evolved into the hard-edged Color Field painting of Ellsworth Kelly, the viable possibilities of what was considered 'serious' art narrowed and narrowed. Beginning in the mid-1940s the Abstract Expressionist premise of eliminating subject matter to explore the limits of painting as a distinct practice, continuing with the reduction of the visible hand of the artist in Minimalism, to Conceptualism's death of the object, avant-garde artists (and especially art critics) had confined art to the cerebral; they vanquished the lush visual aspects of art to the basement labeled Decoration.

Enter the Pattern and Decoration Movement, described by Artforum as the "last of the strategically organized art movements of the 20th century." Driven primarily by female artists, the movement "prioritized surface over subject matter ... primarily as a vehicle for sensuous effects." Rather than the cold intellectualism of Conceptualism and Minimalism, these works, too, are at odds with the austerity and reductionism of male-driven Conceptualism and Minimalism. In a



One of ten **Yesmen** • 2020

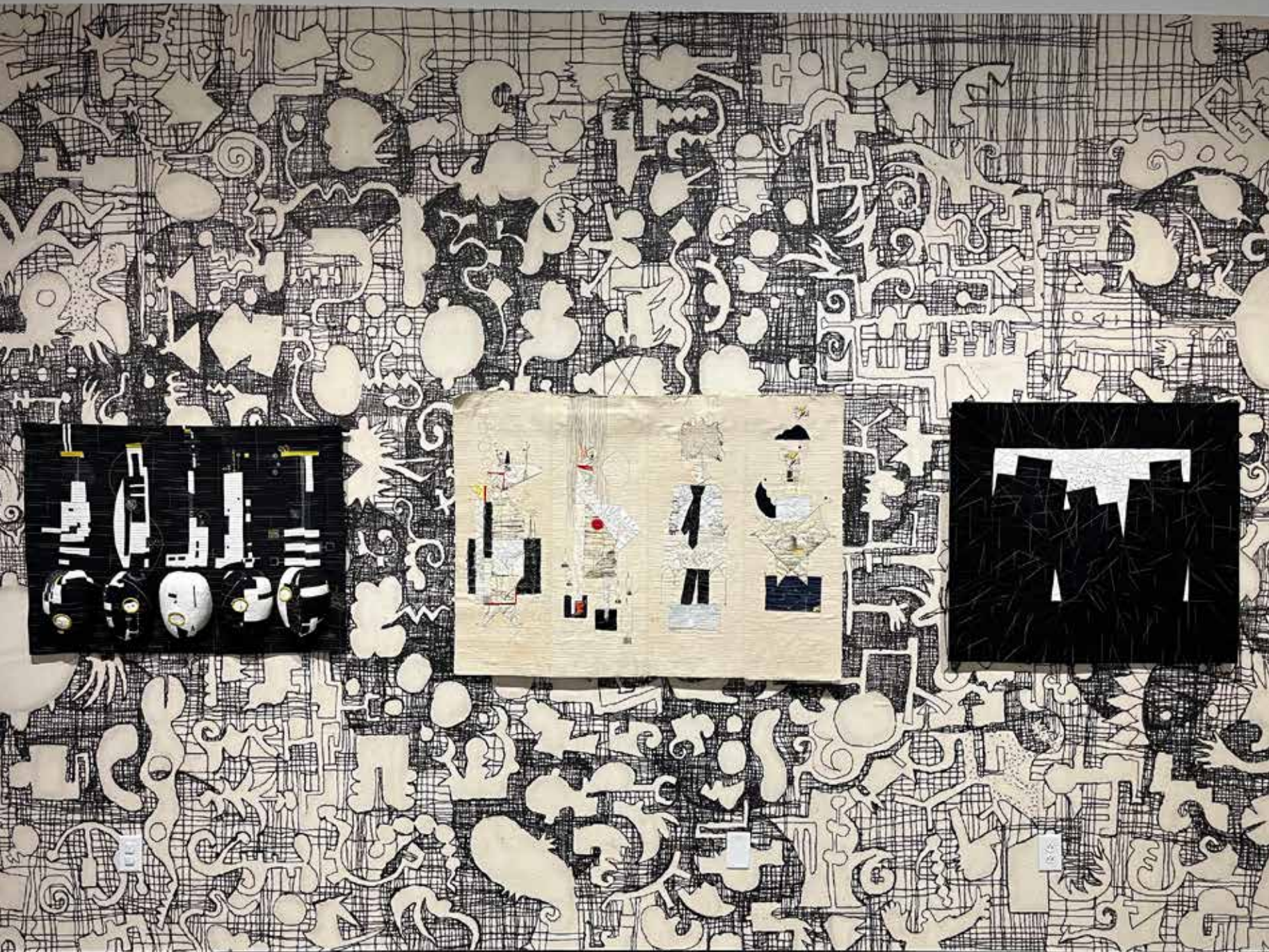
spectacular rejection of Modernism, her drawings are neither severe nor rigid. Additionally, the Pattern and Design movement granted permission for artists to weave and sew without a second thought to a hierarchy of materials. In doing so, the New York Times critic Roberta Smith asserts the movement broke with Minimalism's bereft starkness and the visual hostility of Conceptualism and freed visual art from Modernism.

Kovarik's surfaces amplify the idea that "more is more" advanced by the Pattern and Design movement. Not only are the surfaces filled with decorations of dots, ovals, parallels, and flourishes but she also satisfies the age-old human hunger to find representational forms in

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**Porthole** • paper globe struts wrapped in a repurposed quilt, separate mask inside • 25" x 25" x 7" • 2021



*Dark Matter* wallpaper design by Paula Kovarik, supplied by Area Environments.

non-objective imagery. It requires little effort (and considerable enjoyment) to find human figures and faces that have been exaggerated and abstracted, plants that seem to have evolved from Venus flytraps with quirky mouths, simplified trees, playful birds, gesturing hands, inventive landscapes, globes with button ears, and...are those planets? These images fill the surface of Kovarik's quilted objects. The creation of the delicate and eccentric figures in *The Usual Suspects* alternate between pieces of fabric and stitched lines. Legs that begin at the hip as a swatch of fabric end in a stitched outline of tiny feet. Choosing between an outline of thread or a collage of fabric shapes to create a figure would not follow the notion of "more is more". A recognizable necktie of dark cloth placed on a differently patterned cloth, all topped with a drawing of a disproportional head. The thoughtful interchanging modes creating the figures involves a careful balance of abundance.

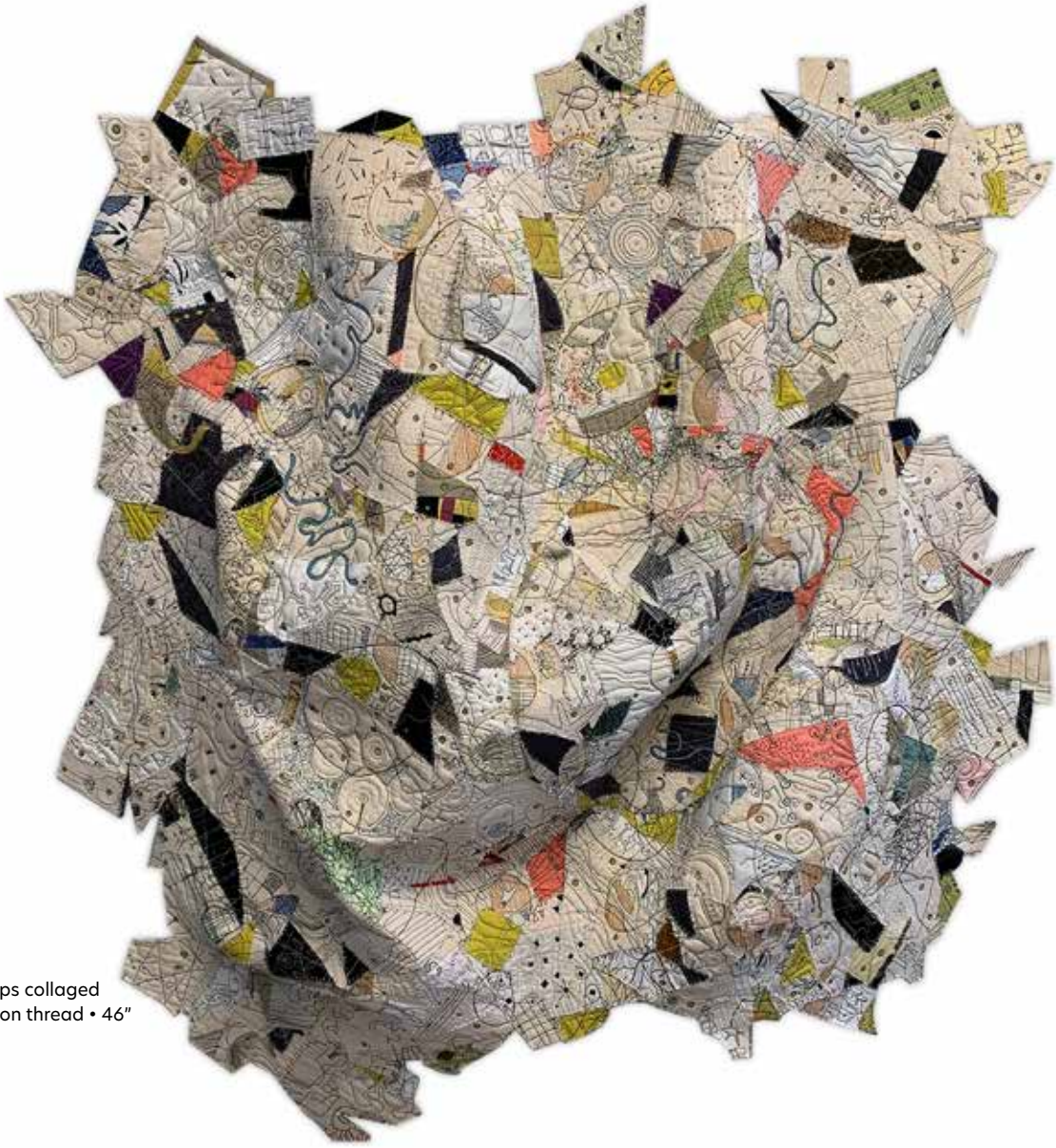
Societal and environmental issues peek through in many of Kovarik's works. Traveling past cell towers and being stopped in our tracks by

dense intricate rectilinear diagrams Kovarik reminds one that not all in the world is amusement. Quilts have been used as statements of protest from the 19th century to the present. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt conceived in 1985 may be the most well-known example of the use of quilts to address controversy. Temperance quilts of the 1870s gave voice to women concerned with disorder, abuse, and good health in their fight for the prohibition of alcohol. The defiantly raised hand in *Pundit* demands our attention but Kovarik leaves the specifics of that problem for the viewer to decide. Never overly strident in her message Kovarik encourages the viewer to think.

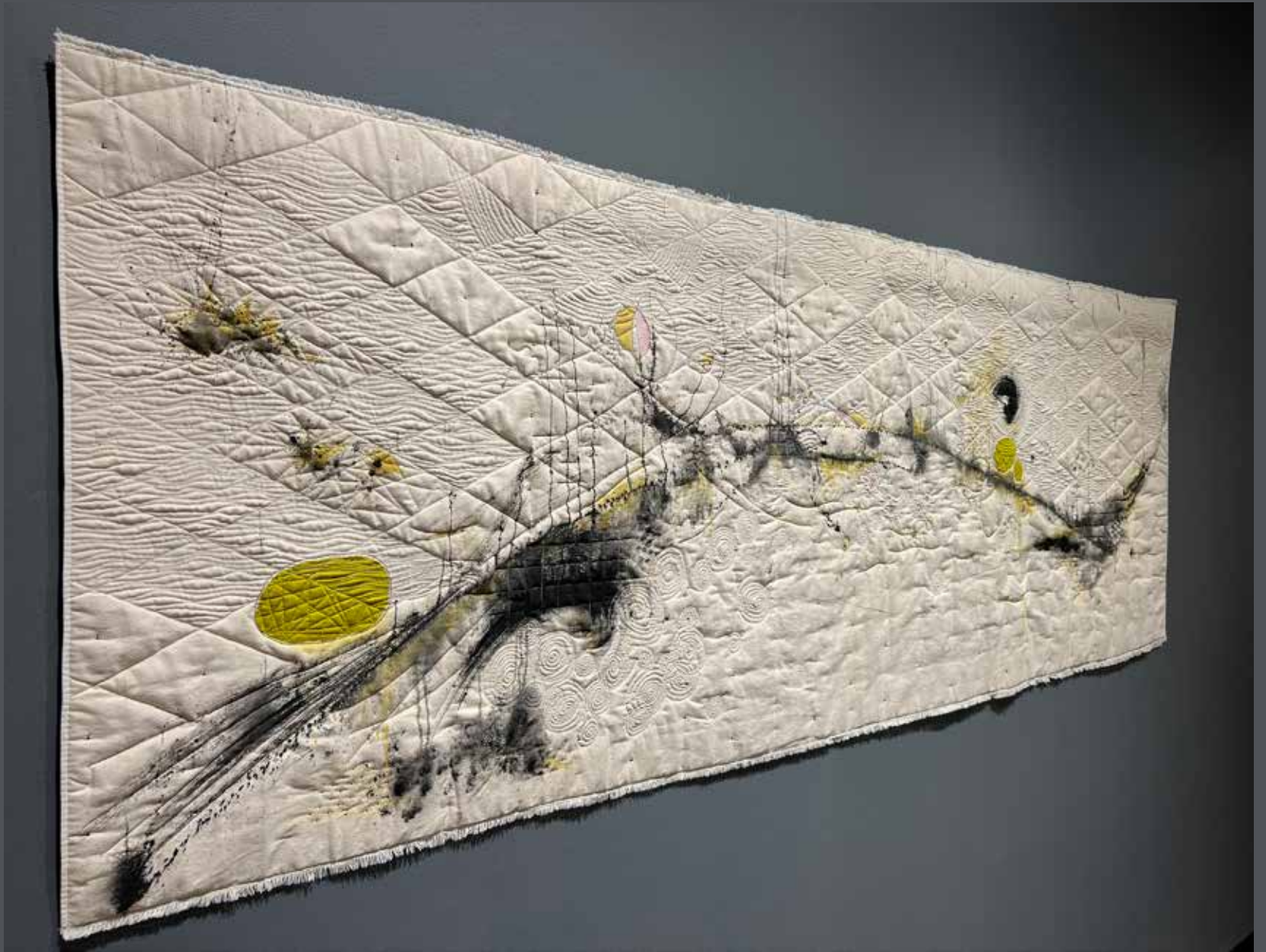
Credited with describing drawing as "taking a line for a walk" early-20th-century Swiss artist Paul Klee's statement easily describes Kovarik's quilted artwork. Like the delight in Paul Klee's statement, it is a visual and tactile joy to take a walk in Paula Kovarik's world.

**Dr. Dixie Webb**  
**Professor - Art History**  
**Austin Peay State University**  
**PhD University of Kansas**





**Morph** • quilted fabric scraps collaged  
and over-stitched with cotton thread • 46"  
x 45" • 2021

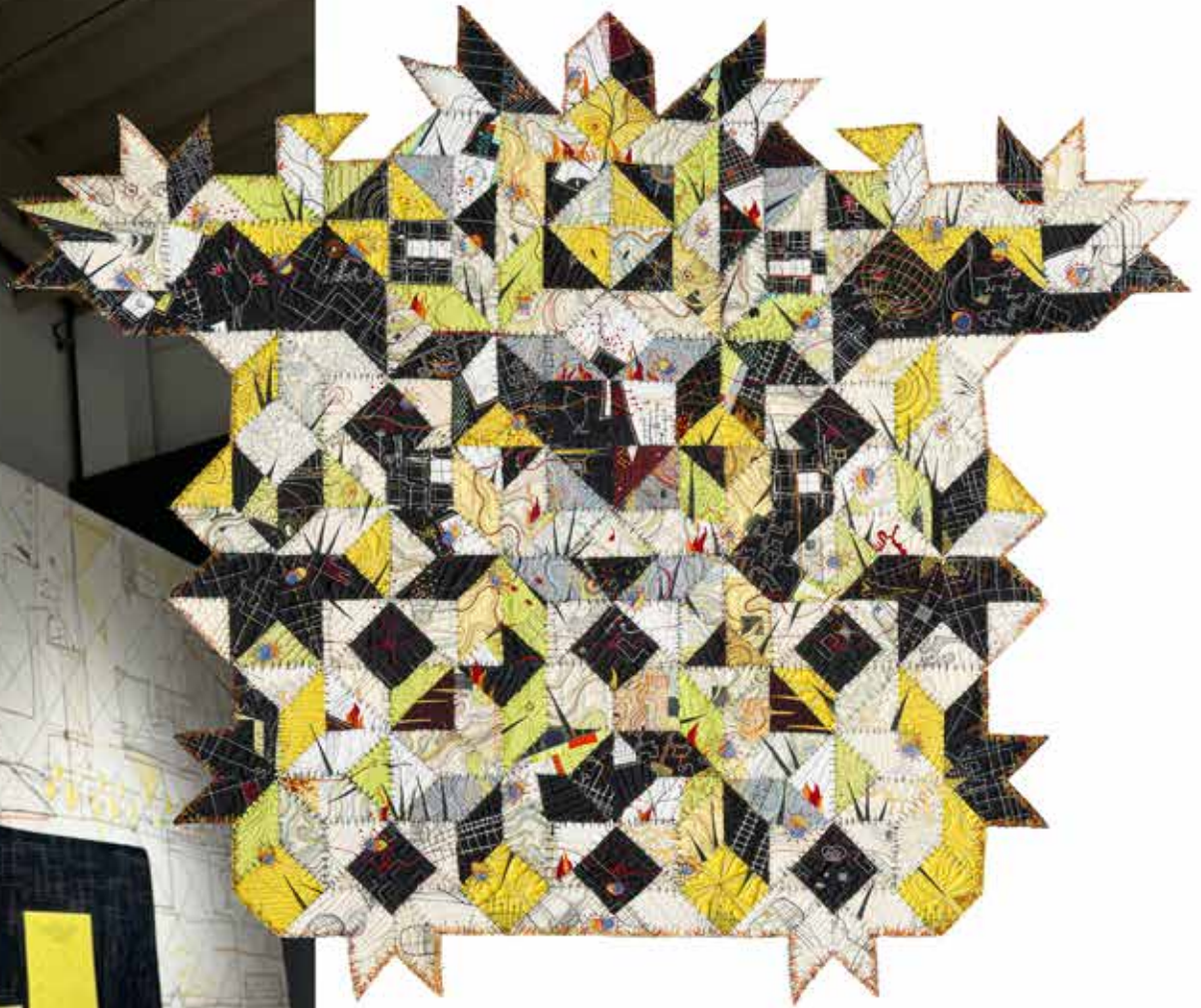


*You Are Here* • cotton canvas, india ink, fabric dye, cotton thread, wool batting • 35" x 99" • 2022



**Many Moons** • quilted fabric scraps collaged  
to drapery blackout fabric with cotton thread  
• double sided • 73" x 34" • 2018





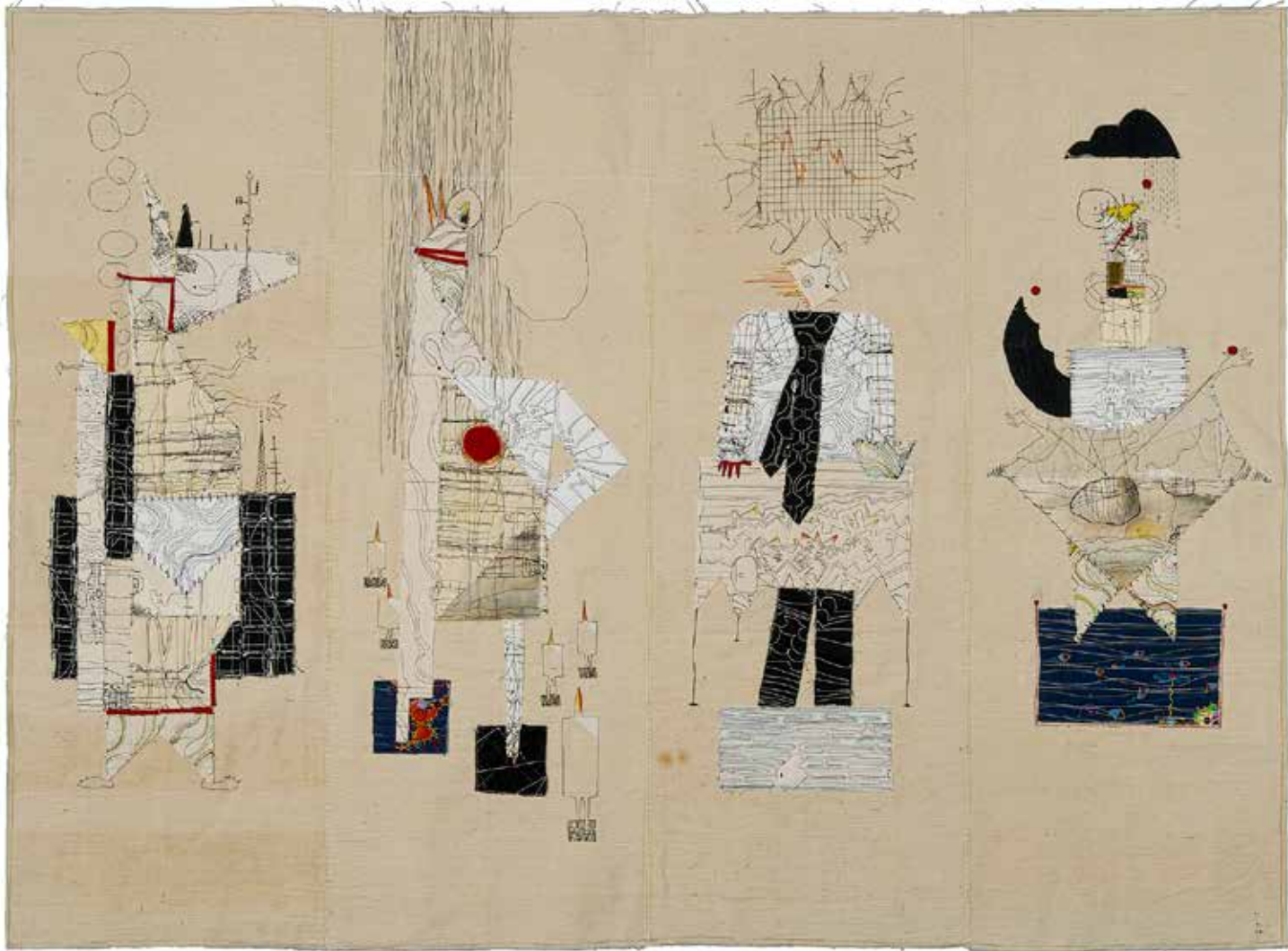
**Dark Heart** • cotton fabric, thread and batting, buckrum interfacing • 46" x 55" • 2019

At left: **Pundit** mounted on **Many Moons** wallpaper designed by Paula Kovarik.

Facing page: detail shot of **Silos** • a cut up quilt recomposed to include 3D masks • 30" x 41" • 2020

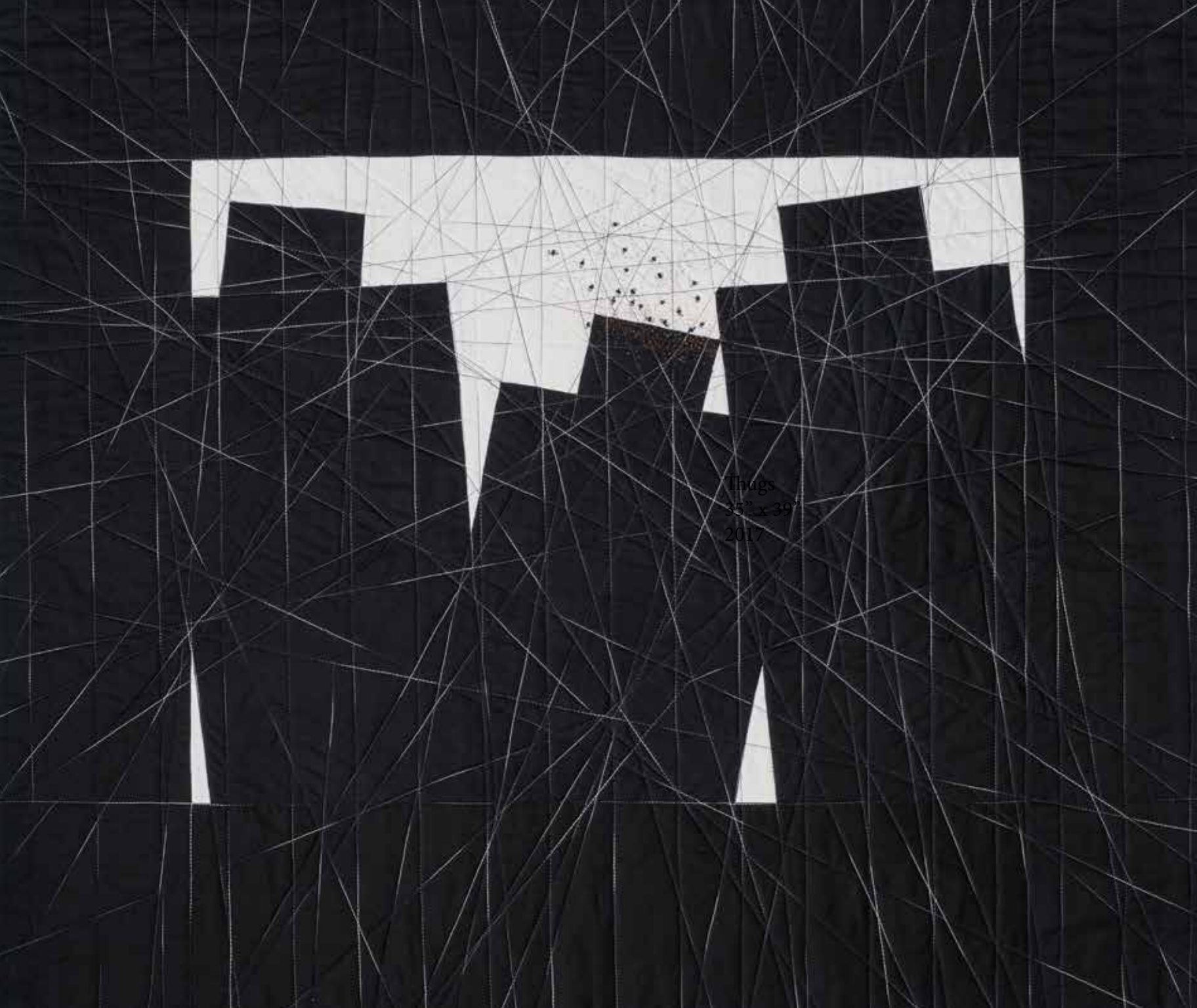






*The Usual Suspects: Presto-Chango, Empty Rhetoric, Caught Red-Handed, and Sideshow* • collaged quilted fabrics on a linen surface • 40" x 54" • 2019

Opposite page: *Thugs* • wool and cotton fabrics, cotton thread and batting • 35" x 39" • 2017



Thugs  
35" x 39"  
2017



**Assemble** • collaged quilted scraps from previous work, cotton thread, wool batting • 50" x 50" • 2021



*Melee* • reassembled quilted pieces overstitched with cotton thread. 45" x 59" x 9" • 2021



*Jabberwock* • reassembled quilted pieces from previous work, collaged and overstitched with cotton thread • 40" x 46" • 2022



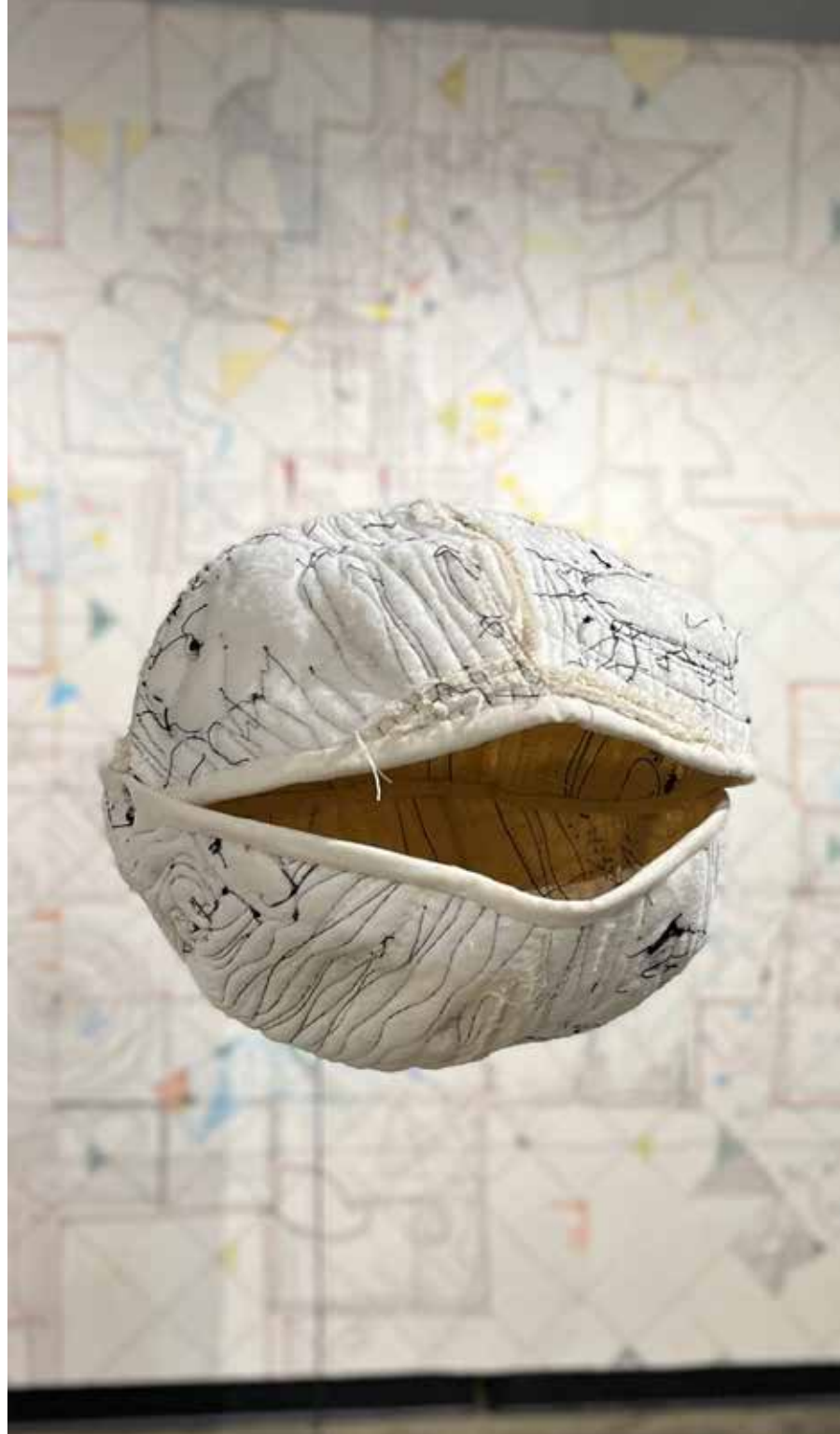
*Layered Chaos* • reassembled quilted pieces collaged and overstitched with cotton thread • 65" x 43" • 2022



*Pundit* • cotton fabric, thread and batting • 39" x 39" • 2015



The **Yesmen** were created in response to political news. Pull their strings and they nod up and down.



Paula Kovarik  
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Paula Kovarik creates art with stitch and fabric in Memphis, Tennessee. As a graphic designer she specialized in communications for others. Now her focus is on her own thoughts. Her intuitive line work travels the surface of her work as if a meditation has become solid. Inward thoughts become outwardly apparent through slow and studied attention to detail.

Kovarik's award-winning fiber art has been recognized by Quilt National, Quilts=Art=Quilts, World of Threads, and FiberArt Now Excellence in Fibers exhibitions. She has been profiled in *American Craft* and *FiberArt Now* magazines. Her work is featured in *Art Quilts Unfolding - 50 Years of Innovation* and *Art Quilts International Abstract & Geometric*. Her book, *At Play in the Garden of Stitch* shares her ideas and techniques. Her work has been collected by the International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska and the International Airport in Memphis, Tennessee as well as several private collections.

**[paulakovarik.com](http://paulakovarik.com)**

Instagram: [@yellowbrickstudio](https://www.instagram.com/yellowbrickstudio)

Memphis, Tennessee





*Isolation Chamber* • quilted scraps, cotton canvas,  
cotton thread, wool batting, embroidery hoop, waxed  
linen thread • 30" x 24" x 24" • 2021

This show would not have been possible without the support of the following individuals and organizations.

# Thank you

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