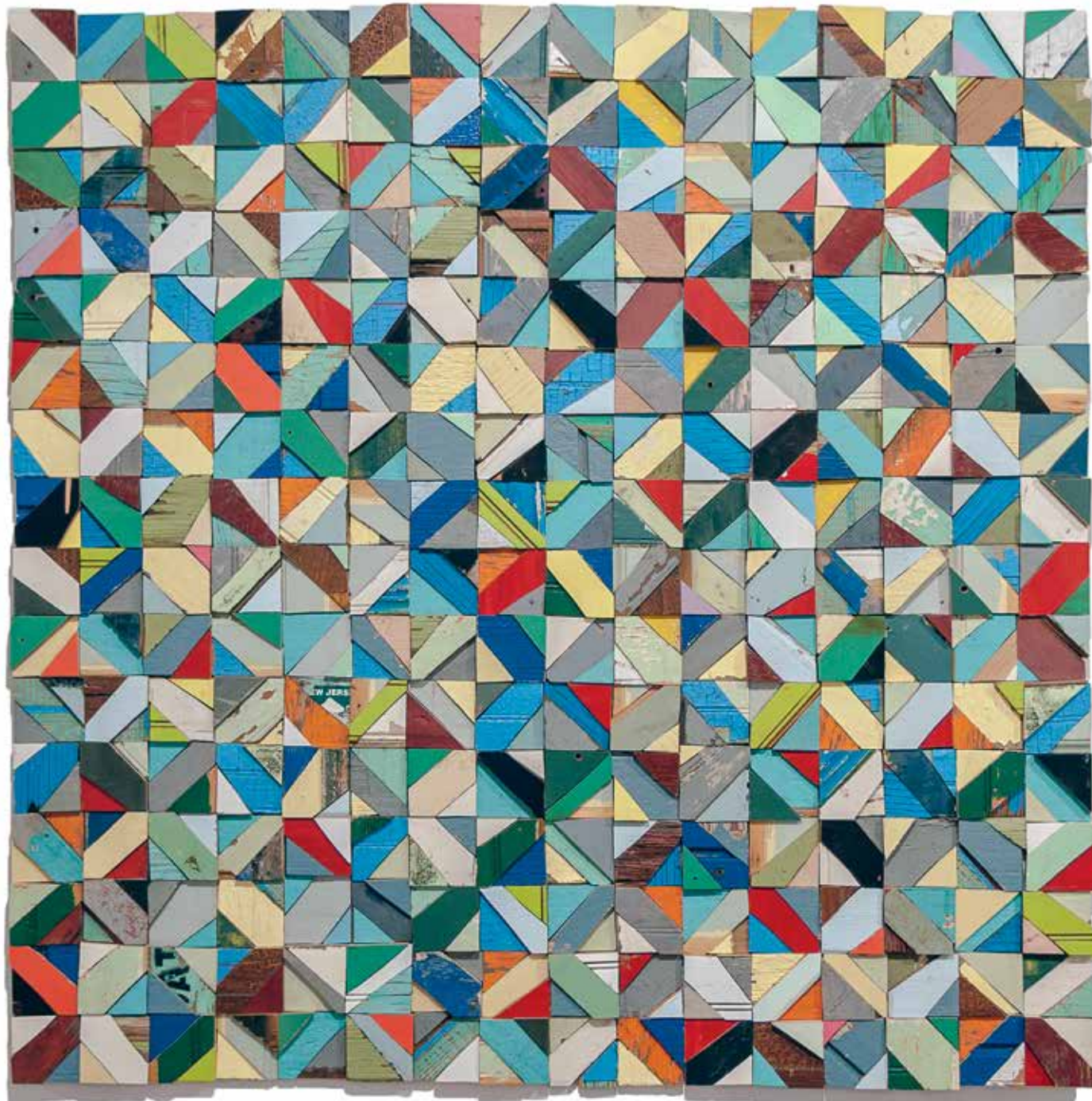


LAURA PETROVICH-CHENEY

# SCRAP QUILTS



**T**rolling neighbourhoods after a disaster is typically an activity of looters, and something forbidden by law. But there were few complaints when Laura Petrovich-Cheney cruised the streets of New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy. Rather than gleaning items of value for resale, Laura sought remnants of homes destroyed by the storm—colourful segments of wooden siding, porch railings, rocking chairs and dresser drawers, fragments of lives in the region where she grew up and where she still lives. These bits gathered from dumpsters and rubble piles became the raw material for her sculptures—grids patterned with wooden fragments, resembling quilts. Though her materials are quite different from those used in traditional quilts, what she seeks to create is ultimately the same—an object of beauty and comfort, a pieced-together whole from scraps that remain.

STORY BY  
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**J**UXTAPOSING THE TRADITIONS OF WOOD and cloth seems a fitting activity for an artist who started her career as a fashion designer. After earning a degree from Drexel University, Laura designed maternity clothes for five years. “I enjoyed it, but it was very commercial,” she says. “We were always trying to create a bestseller, so it was not very creative or soul-fulfilling.” She then spent 15 years as an art teacher, at both the elementary school and community college level, eventually shuttling between a teaching job in New Jersey and Philadelphia, where she was earning an MFA in sculpture at Moore College of Art and Design. At Moore, Laura learned to operate chainsaws and band saws—power tools that allowed her to set new goals of self-expression. “I nearly peed myself the first time I used a band saw, but it really is set up so much like a sewing machine,” she says. Laura sews fabric quilts as well

and loves the inspiration of modern quilting, but working with wood hits a sweet spot. “I like the physicality of cutting wood,” she says. “My sewing skills aren’t the best and I get frustrated when my seam allowances don’t line up. That doesn’t bother me with wood. I like its wonkiness, that I can use pieces that are torn or waterlogged. I take pleasure in its imperfections.” After her initial fear of the band saw, Laura made her methods part of her message. “I decided I never wanted to be afraid of anything like this, so I forced myself to learn to use a chain saw as a carving tool.” In subsequent projects she shaped decaying tree stumps and insect-eaten, weather-beaten branches with power tools, touching on issues of nature, perception and memory.

The idea of creating quilt-like sculptures came to Laura during grad school. Then one day during a walk on the beach with her dogs she came across two wrecked,



#### IRONING A WOODEN QUILT

*You might be wondering about all of Laura’s antique irons. “Since I use glue to attach my salvaged wood to a backing, I need to use a weight to hold the shapes in place. Clamps can’t do into the center of my pieces—so I use these old irons which can weigh up to 10 pounds each.”*



orange-and-turquoise crabbing boats. The colour combination reminded her of a quilt she had seen in a magazine, and she used the wreckage to piece her first wooden quilt sculpture. Then she used wood from a Pennsylvania barn that was demolished to make way for condominiums. This work got a favourable reception, but Laura was concerned about running out of wood. Then, in October 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit.

Nonresidents could not visit storm-ravaged areas without permission, so Laura accompanied a contractor friend into quarantined neighbourhoods and began collecting wood. As she poked through dumpsters, gathering pieces of flooring and furniture, homeowners would come out to talk. “They’d let me know when they were doing more demolition and I’d come back to get specific colours and kinds of wood,” Laura says. “One guy was so helpful, he loaded his grey oak flooring into my car. People were thrilled that the wood from their homes was going somewhere useful and not to the landfill.”

Laura likens collecting wood for her sculptures from some neighbourhoods to shopping at a fabric store. “They couldn’t haul the trash away fast enough, and there were two-storey-high piles in parking lots that I could cherry pick—a purple dresser, green kitchen cabinets, trim painted turquoise,” she says. “As months went by and whole houses were demolished I’d have a truck full of yellow or grey. My sculptures then became a different conversation, because they were about the loss of whole neighbourhoods and not just one house.”

That conversation occurs in part because Laura remembers where she has picked up most of her wood. “It was so emotionally charged and visually impactful to see houses turned over like this, to speak with people and learn their history. I have the wood categorized by area in storage and it reminds me of what I’m connecting



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to, of people’s stories, how their grandmother had that house, how it’s gone, how we tie our memory and identity to place. When I piece someone’s kitchen cabinet to someone else’s floorboards, I feel like I’m piecing back a life. Making tidy, neat squares is one way to make order out of the chaos.”

Laura also had her own personal reasons to make sense of the shambles: the hurricane destroyed the entire first floor of her parents’ summer home. The simple Pelican Island beach bungalow, where Laura and her family had

lived in the summers since she was 12, held countless memories—it was where Laura was when she got her first job and had her first boyfriend. And though it was not fancy, it meant a lot to her dad. “Having a second home was such a middle class dream and meant the world to him,” she says. “He was so proud of that house.” Ironically, Laura was only able to salvage a small amount of wood from her family’s home, as her parents neglected to let her know about the demolition. “My dad was obsessed with getting the house done and was under a lot of stress,” she says. “All I got is what fell off the dumpster.”







“The wooden quilts recall a heritage of craftsmanship and labour... the American ideal of a pioneer woman’s can-do spirit and instinct for survival.”

Creating quilts with collected wood is both a challenge and a pleasure. Sculptures based on traditional quilt blocks are typically planned out ahead. Using quarter-inch oak substrate as a backing, Laura draws out the arrangement, then selects wood for placement and glues it down. She does not alter the wood, aside from removing nails when possible, and cutting and shaping it to fit the patterns. “The wood is the colour I found it, and I leave the nail holes and the way the wood is torn, because that tells a story of the devastation,” she says. “Some pieces have sand on them, and I leave the sand.” One of Laura’s favourite pieces of wood came from a hot pink and purple dresser. “A little girl probably owned it and she wrote all over it in glitter nail polish and stuck stickers on it—there’s a Hannah Montana sticker and I left it as is. On another favourite piece, someone wrote ‘Bob Marley’ and drew a blunt next to it. You can imagine someone doing that in an attic. The history of the wood is so fantastic, so precious to me.”

It is also significant to Laura that the wood comes largely from houses, the traditional domain of women. This connection to feminism is important to her: “They reference domestic spaces, where women have traditionally found themselves and been identified over history,” she says. “I like that reminder—the idea of the comfort of the home, and of homes as part of the community. These

references are important and intentional.” Also intentional is the many levels on which the sculptures can be viewed. “If you know the backstory of art history and the idea of feminism and references to women’s work, you can connect with it on that level,” she says. “Quilt guilds may come to see it and it will resonate with them, as it does with men who work with wood. I love that, and it’s one of the appeals of my work.”

Laura’s work sells to a range of clients. Some are people who were affected by Hurricane Sandy. “My loss connects to their loss,” she says. One of her sculptures is also in the collection of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. “While some people enjoy the colours and patterns, there’s also a feeling of resurrection and healing. My wooden quilts recall a heritage of craftsmanship and labour, as well as recalling the American ideal of a pioneer woman’s can-do spirit and instinct for survival.”

Today, nearly four years after Hurricane Sandy, many of the people whose wood remnants Laura has sampled are just now moving back into their homes. Collecting their leftovers and shaping them into a cohesive whole was a way for Laura to bring order to the chaos that Sandy wrought, but it also took on a personal poignancy. Laura’s father, who spent months rebuilding their beach bungalow, passed away just a week before the home was to be approved for habitation, and Laura’s mother passed away seven months later. Surprisingly, considering the circumstances, she says parting with a sculpture that contained the tiny piece of wood she scavenged from her family’s beach home was not hard.

“It felt good to let the piece of my parents’ house go. It felt good that it was out in the world, and that my story of the hurricane was out,” she says. “We’ve all gone through really challenging times in our lives. No one person escapes this life without disappointments, without loss. How we come back from that devastation is a marker of who we are. The great stories are about second chances and new beginnings and identifying yourself after tragedy, and my work offers a story of hope after great loss. Not just the material loss, of losing your house, but of all the things that happened for me around the time of the hurricane and of starting again. I hope we learn and grow from it. It is not only about being changed by these experiences, but about who are we after them. It’s one of the ongoing stories of humanity. Working with this material and the way I’m putting it together is so rewarding and provides a great platform to tell so many stories that I have this need to tell.” ❶

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