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DESIGNING TO BRING THE OUTSIDE IN
ROGER W. STOLLER'S TOWERING SCULPTURES

ART
meditations in silk

words by MARY MCEVOY CARROLL



“I used to think I didn’t have a single creative bone in my body,” says Ellen Brook. “I never imagined that I would become an artist.”

That’s a difficult statement to believe. Ellen’s dreamy designs on silk, meditative hangings and edgy fashion collections have carried her from a Silicon Valley marketing ca-

reer to recognition as one of the Bay Area’s rising artistic stars. Her work regularly features at art shows in the Bay Area and beyond, and her designs are retailed at Britex Fabrics in San Francisco and on the design site Vida. Her shimmering hangings have been installed at public spaces like the Congregational Church of San Mateo and the Woodside Spirit

House. And she’s just celebrating a studio move to the Peninsula Museum and Art Studios in Burlingame.

But, as Ellen explains, it wasn’t until the early 2000s, when she was in her mid-thirties, that she began to explore her creative side.

“I started to take meditation and self-knowledge classes,” she recalls. “This encouraged me to try what I thought was the easiest form of art—collage. I thought that even the least creative person could cut pictures out of magazines and stick them on a board.”

Encouraged by positive feedback from a collage workshop and subsequent courses, Ellen continued her voyage into art. When she tried painting on silk, her creative sparks really began to fly. She started experimenting with the colors and dynamics created by this unpredictable and messy process. Moving to her current home in San Mateo gave her an ideal workspace to evolve the style and technique that’s now her trademark.

Each artwork starts as a piece of white silk stretched tightly between two sawhorses. It’s only then that Ellen chooses a subject, an intention or a color direction. She deliberately avoids traditional techniques like wax resist to create forms and outlines. Instead, she lets the movement of dye and the speed of her brush shape her work, bringing in acrylics, salt, alcohol, water and



using different types of silk to add drama, texture and focus.

The humble hair dryer is a key tool, as it helps to slow down the spread of the dye, but Ellen is not in search of complete control. “I like colors, organic shapes and lines to emerge naturally,” she says. “My approach is playful, experimental. I like to explore possibilities of each artwork as it evolves. I have to make spontaneous decisions as I work.”

After the design is set, the silks are steamed for hours, then rinsed, ironed and transformed into their final form. This could be artwork, home décor, apparel, accessories or

printed onto final silk fabrics for her limited-edition collections.

Initially, Ellen showcased her approach with scarves, shawls, hangings and mixed media on canvas, playing with drifting forms and unexpected color combinations that—like her Lemon, Burgundy and Chocolate wrap—surprise and delight, but never clash. Next, she moved into fashion design.

“I love clothes; I’ve been told that clothes are my canvas, and I see creating fabrics and clothing as a form of art,” says Ellen. Her apparel collection reflects this sensibility: ponchos, dresses, wraps, shrugs

and skirts highlight the colors and forms on her sheer, flowing silks, while the addition of structured textures, varied fabric combinations and leather embellishments add a fashion-forward element.

For her catwalk-ready clothes, Ellen collaborates with seamstresses to develop finished prototypes. Some designs are available as one-of-a-kind, some as limited-edition prints, while others are custom-created for individual customers. Popular styles such as her wraps or ponchos (available through her website and independent designer shows) are sent to partner manufacturers for digitizing and printing onto luxurious silks.

Ellen doesn’t have a favorite color, saying she likes color too much to discriminate. Instead, she searches for a meditative energy as she paints. Whether it’s a pink grommet tunic, a lipstick red top, her muted yet vibrant Urban Zen mixed media canvases or her bright but subtle table runners, “I want my work to evoke the inner sanctuary where individuals can retreat from today’s urban environments,” she says.

This sensibility is winning Ellen a growing audience. She has already achieved some impressive milestones: multiple exhibitions, catwalk shows and installations in galleries, offices and public spaces. In 2018, she was featured as the cover artist for the de Young Museum’s Artwear event. And this year, she unveils a stunning new collaboration with photographer Jamie Nease, combining their mutual passion for fashion art, color and dance.

The photo series “When Forces Align: Taking Flight” features profes-

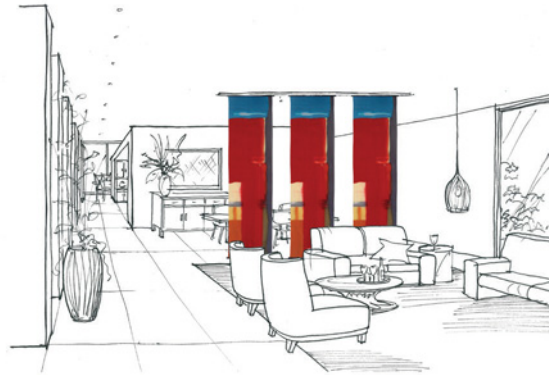


sional ballet dancers (including members of the San Francisco Ballet) wearing Ellen's beautiful fabrics and clothes as they dance. These and other works will be on permanent display at her new studio space. Fellow artists are already exchanging ideas about new interpretations of this dance theme. "This is making me so excited about experimenting with other media, about blending different art forms," Ellen says.

The move to Burlingame has

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also propelled Ellen back to the corporate world. But this time her focus is helping people uncover their own creativity. Mindful of her personal transformation through art classes, she now provides corporate workshops to cultivate creativity, curiosity and collaboration. The short courses leverage the lovable rogue nature of dye on silk to demonstrate how creativity can be applied to everyday business. "Not only do people have to listen to each other, but there is no controlling exactly what happens," she adds. "Each painter has to embrace a level of uncertainty and no one is an expert. Painting on silk is the ultimate democratic medium."

The workshops are just one illustration of Ellen's belief in the importance of personal realization through art, which benefits not only the individual, but society at large.

She is on the advisory board of Cañada College's Department of Fashion and Design and the Artist Advisory Board for Kids & Art. Through Kids & Art, Ellen also hosts workshops for young people with cancer. "The experience of working on silk provides lots of incredible metaphors for living and leads itself to deeper conversations," she explains. "It's a privilege to provide healing moments through art."

As for the future, Ellen remains dedicated to her mission to bring more color into people's lives. "What I am most propelled by is the ability to bring beauty into the world. Beauty is life-changing. Why not light up the world?" **P**