Meet Joe Cunningham

Joe Cunningham began making quilts professionally in 1979, after a 10-year career as a musician in Michigan. His early mentors were steeped in the history and traditions of quilts, leading Cunningham to a life of study in quilt history and a love of traditional technique. Over the years his quilts have evolved into a unique, personal style. His quilts are in the permanent collections of museums, as well as in numerous private collections. He has written 11 books on quilts include the 2010 “Men and the Art of Quiltmaking,” the first book on the subject. His column for “The Quilt Life” is called “Biased and Edgy,” and he has appeared on the PBS series “Craft in America,” the HGTV series “Simply Quilts with Alex Anderson,” and on “The Quilt Show” with Alex Anderson and Ricky Tims.” He gives talks about quilts and teaches workshops nationwide.

Q. What or who got you started in quilting?
A. Two women, Gwen Marston and Mary Schafer, got me started in quilting in 1979.

Gwen and I met when she hired me to play guitar with her on some folk music gigs in Flint, Michigan, in summer 1979. At the time, she had received a grant to document Mary’s collection of 300 quilts and archival material. When I noticed the quilts Gwen had at her house — ready to be picked up by the photographer — I asked to see them and was immediately taken with how different they were from any quilts I had ever seen and how much they resembled art.

Gwen was enjoying the documentation of the collection, but dreading writing the catalogue. I had just completed my only year of college, and I had studied pretty much all English classes in hopes of someday becoming a writer. So I offered to write the catalogue for her. This meant learning about the history of quilts and interviewing Mary so as to write a biography of her for the catalogue.
Eventually, Gwen decided that, if I was going to write about quilts I should know how to quilt. So she gave me a crib quilt in a hoop and showed me the rocking stitch she had learned from Mennonite women. Within a week, my stitches were good enough to sit at her frame and quilt with her.

Soon I wanted to make my own quilts. Gwen and Mary helped me learn how to copy old quilts and study quilting through a classical eye. After a few months, I realized that to get Mary’s collection the notice it would need to find an institutional home—Mary’s aim—I would have to dedicate my life to it. So I suggested that Gwen and I should become professional quiltmakers. That way we could use Mary’s quilts as well as our own in lectures, magazine articles, and books, and eventually gain enough credibility in the quilt world that we could get something done with Mary’s collection.

In a few years, Gwen and I built a house on Beaver Island in northern Lake Michigan, founded the Beaver Island Quilt Retreat, and started writing books, making videos, and writing a magazine column about quilts. We lived and worked together all through the 1980s, traveling around the country to teach and making about 150 quilts. Eventually, Mary’s collection was acquired by Michigan State University Museum and Mary herself was inducted into the Quilters Hall of Fame.

Q. What do you like about quilting?
A. I like the fact that 19th century American women created a realm of complete artistic freedom for us to enjoy any way we wished, and that I get to make art by sewing.

Q. Are there any historical quilts, quilters, or artists that you draw inspiration from?
A. I draw inspiration from most all historical quilts, especially early 19th century glazed wool quilts, especially cotton crazies and the quilts by women in Gee’s Bend, Alabama. I draw inspiration from cave paintings, from Russian Orthodox icons, from Flemish masters and African Kuba cloth, from AbEx artists like Helen Frankenthaler and Diebenkorn, to Ai WeiWei and Banksy.

Q. What is the most important step for you in the design process?
A. The most important step is to make the first cut on a piece of fabric. Everything that follows is creative problem solving, my favorite part.

Q. Do you sketch, draw, plan, or map out a quilt before you begin?
A. I do not make sketches or drawings. I know what I want to do, and I make the quilt to find out what it looks like.

Q. How many sewing machines do you own and what brand and type are they?
A. I own a Bernina 130, a 1962 Kenmore and a Handi Quilter Fusion with a ProStitcher.

Q. How many yards of fabric do you estimate that you own?
A. I own about 250 yards of fabric.

Q. How many rooms in your home are devoted to storing fabric?
A. I have a three-room studio in downtown San Francisco, one room of which has my fabric and quilts.

Q. How many unfinished projects do you have right now?
A. I only have one unfinished piece, the one in my long-arm frame. I always start at the beginning of a project and work on it until it is finished. Then I straighten up my studio, clean and sweep, and start on a new project.

Q. What can you do with quilting that you can’t do with other media (like painting)?
A. Quilting is the opposite of other art forms in several ways. For one thing, the very idea of a quilt is comforting, whereas to many people the idea of a painting is forbidding – something to be interpreted by experts. So I start out with something no one is intimidated by. Then, because we can sew anything together any way we want, I can have a kind of freedom that I never acquired in other art forms—never having gone to art school or studied drawing or painting. Quilting lets me make a work of art that I can use to keep warm against the coldness of the universe.

Q. If you have taught at QBL before, what do you like about teaching here?
A. I taught at QBL about 33 or 34 years ago, I think. I like the freedom to teach a long form class, to be on site, and to have us be able to work without distractions.

Q. For your class Origins, you mention that the students will explore techniques for how to begin a quilt- what are the “origins” of some of your favorite quilts?
A. Sometimes I use the name of a traditional pattern as a starting point, such as New York Beauty, Lone Star, and Job’s Tears. Sometimes I build a series on a theme, such as my current series on the end of the last Ice Age. Here is my latest from that: Spear Points Won’t Help You When Your Hut Is Burning Down.

Q. What is your favorite thing about teaching the Origins workshop?
A. My favorite thing about teaching Origins is the complete unpredictability of the students’ work. I love fostering creativity.

Q. Do you dabble in other artistic media? If so, what?
A. My other creative outlet is music. I made my living as a guitar player for 10 years before I became a quilter, and I still play gigs and write songs. I always bring my guitar to the quilt class and play music while people are sewing.

Q. Sum up quilting in three words:
A. Complete Artistic Freedom