



Hostaholic

by Elaine Quehl

I suppose I could be described as a hostaholic. Unlike most hostaholics, however, I do not collect rare hosta plants, nor am I an avid gardener. My addiction is one of photographing hosta leaves and turning my photographic inspiration into quilted art. CONTINUED ON PAGE 78



At home in the suburbs of Canada's Capital, Ottawa, I seldom gave the ubiquitous hosta plant a second glance. In 2006, however, a chance encounter with hosta leaves unfurling after a spring rain during a visit to Prince Edward Island, changed the course of my life. When we are away from our usual environment and routine, we notice things in ways we may not have previously. With a new DSLR in hand, I took many photographs that day. One was interpreted into my very first hosta quilt, *Opening Act*.

I began my quilting journey in 1996, making traditional and contemporary quilts. The process of constructing a quilt provided a peaceful and meditative diversion and a connection to my mother, while she suffered from early-onset dementia. Not easily satisfied with following directions and patterns, I moved into designing my own original quilted art, just before I became besotted with hosta leaves.

I confess that I know little about the names and varieties of hosta leaves, nor am I knowledgeable about the best growing conditions, but I have found over the last eight years that I am drawn to the hosta leaf, in order to study light and shadow, movement, curve and line. I adore artworks that feature value contrasts,

depth and drama. Hosta leaves provide all of these. I might be attracted to a leaf that is dramatically backlit, one that has a sensuous curve, the direction that the veins run through the leaf, or the way a group of leaves form an interesting flow and feeling of movement. I am not overly concerned about depicting the particular variety with utmost accuracy.

Creating one of these works is a long process that begins with a photograph. I have a library of thousands of hosta photographs. I use only my own photos, so I am working within my own experience and vision, and I never need to worry about copyright issues. A very small percentage of my photos demand to be interpreted in fabric. I spend substantial time at the planning stage, considering the composition and usually cropping my photos before settling on a design. During the planning process I make decisions about what features to emphasize and what to eliminate. I am always looking for impact and drama and often try to create a feeling of movement in the work. I move on to the process of creating

a simple line drawing or an outline of my subject on a transparency film. It is placed over the image, upon which I trace key aspects that I want to include. I indicate where the highlights and shadows are and I often emphasize the veins. The line drawing or tracing is then enlarged to become my pattern. I am not rigid about following my pattern exactly and sometimes make changes as I go. When I decide to combine several images, I play with the scale of the each photo to ensure it is similar in all of the images I am combining. I use good-old-fashioned scissors and tape to rearrange them. My pattern is traced to a base of muslin or light-weight interfacing. The quilt is built on this base using a raw-edged fusible appliqué method. Building the quilt is like painting with pieces of fabric. Decisions about colour and value need to be made for each part of the design. The work is then layered with batting and backing fabric and is free-motion stitched

ABOVE *Curtain Call 2*, the work that resulted from a late season hosta photo.

RIGHT Photo of late season hosta leaves, outside my father's retirement residence.



through all three layers to give it texture. For this step, the feed dogs of the sewing machine are lowered and the control of the stitch length is all in the artist's hands. It is essentially like doodling or drawing on the quilt.

Early on I came to realize how vital hand-dyed fabrics are to the kind of work I want to make. The mottled look that results from low-water immersion dyeing is, to me, perfect for rendering nature. It has the look of dappled light. Nothing in nature is flat or solid and hand-dyes give the work a painterly look. Dyeing my own fabric allows me access to a wide range of values. In the last couple of years I have become particularly enamoured by the colours and curves of late-season hosta leaves. It was a true pleasure dyeing a new palette in golds, yellows, coppers and browns. While we have a few hosta species in our garden here in Ottawa, I find myself very short on time for gardening these days. After working in a variety of administrative positions in universities and colleges for more than 25 years, I escaped to be a full-time artist and teacher in 2008. I am on the road lecturing and teaching, primarily across Canada, but also internationally, at least three months of the year. I manage to find and photograph hosta leaves wherever I go, and I enjoy visiting public and private gardens I encounter in my travels. ♦

www.elainequehl.com

Elaine has been privileged to visit several fine hosta gardens here in Ontario:

Budd Gardens

www.buddgardens.com, here in Ottawa.

Rideau Woodland Ramble

www.rideauwoodlandramble.com,
outside Merrickville.

Giboshihill Hostas

www.simplyhostas.ca. outside Cobourg.

This article first appeared in the spring 2015 issue of *The Hosta Journal* (Vol. 46, No. 1). Reprinted with permission.



LEFT *In the Act*. RIGHT Photo that inspired *In the Act*, taken in my garden.