Interview with Helena Scheffer for the Textile Art Magazine

Where did you grow up and where do you live now?

I grew up in Montreal, Quebec, and I still live in the west end of the city. I've travelled widely, but Montreal has always been home.

Do you have an artistic education?

No — I've never had any formal art training.

Can you describe your collage technique and how it developed over time?

I began quilting the way many people do, by following patterns, but I quickly realized that strict instructions weren't for me. I started creating my own designs, and after making a series of monochromatic quilts with strips of rectangles and squares, I wondered what would happen if I didn't sew the strips at all. Instead, I began placing them on a background like a collage, arranging them so the colours flowed. Around that time, I opened an art gallery and noticed that while people admired my quilts, the smaller pieces mounted on canvas were perceived more as "art" than "craft." Since then, I've created countless small works—my "colour explosions"—mounted on canvas or round wooden panels.

What attracts you to working with hundreds of small fabric pieces rather than larger elements?

Working with small pieces feels intuitive and alive. As I place them on the background, the fabric seems to tell me where to go. I begin with a loose colour idea and let the process unfold from there.

How does the process of dyeing and painting your own fabrics influence the final outcome of your work?

I love the serendipity of dyeing fabric. I'm not scientific about it at all—aside from basic safety precautions. I mix dyes spontaneously and often end up with wonderful surprises.

You mention loving the unpredictability of fabric dyeing—how do you balance control and chance in your creative process?

Sometimes I need a very specific colour that I don't have, so I dye it myself. If I'm working within a particular palette—say grey and yellow—I'll create the yellow fabric and then stamp or paint it with grey until it matches what I envision.

Why do you enjoy working with vintage and thrifted textiles, and what do they add to your pieces?

Vintage damask has beautiful woven patterns and absorbs dye in a way that adds incredible depth. I've collected many old tablecloths and napkins that people no longer want. Thrifted clothing excites me for two reasons: it helps reduce textile waste, and it's an affordable way to expand my stash of patterned fabrics.

You describe yourself as a colourist who uses fabric as a palette. How do you approach colour choices in a new work?

Before starting something new, I clear everything away so I can see my fabrics with fresh eyes. Then I choose a basic colour direction—say red—and build a supporting palette around it. It's the combination of colours that makes the main colour come alive.

Red is your favourite colour, while brown is the one you avoid. What emotional or symbolic role does colour play in your art?

I could happily create a red piece every day. Red feels like passion, joy, excitement, and energy. I also love green, blue, yellow, purple, and orange—really every colour except brown. I've also made many pieces in black accented with red and blue.

After retiring from your career as a French–English translator, how has this life transition influenced your artistic practice?

Retirement has given me the gift of time. I'm lucky to have a beautiful studio with windows on three sides, wonderful light, and plenty of storage for my fabric. Alongside my art, I practice and teach yoga, volunteer with a Spanish greyhound rescue, and sew coats of my own design for every dog that arrives in Montreal. I've made about 70 so far.

Where do you see yourself and your art in about 10 years time?

It's hard to say, but I hope I'll still be creating, exploring, and enjoying life.