

# Diamond Divas + Drama Queens

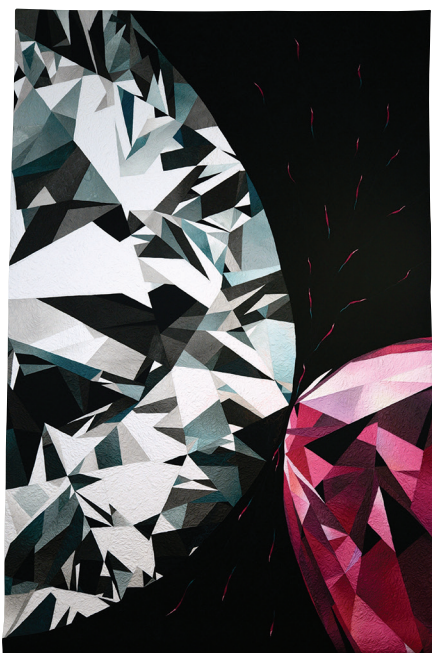
by MJ Kinman

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Host Susan Brubaker Knapp with MJ Kinman

My grandmother, Martha, gave me three special gifts: her name, her grand piano, and her handbag filled with costume jewelry. I never met my grandmother. She exited this world a month before I made my entrance, very poor timing on my part. Based on descriptions from friends and family, I know I would have adored her: Martha was a gem of a soul—strong, brilliant, and beautiful.



“Blush” • 55" x 85"

Perhaps the hours I spent as a little girl playing with Martha’s rhinestones instilled in me a love of light and color. But there’s no doubt that my fascination with sparkling color prompted me to ask why the image of a gemstone that randomly arrived in my mailbox in 1991 couldn’t be made into a quilt.

At the time, I didn’t know much about quilting and even less about gemstones. Yet the challenges of the task were clear. Not only would I have to master quilting techniques far beyond my current skill set, I would have to learn the basics of gemstones, a subject entirely foreign to me.

Figuring out the logistics of how to create the quilt was my first challenge.

This project would require me to make a pattern in which every single piece was its own template. The pattern would then have to be sliced into hundreds of pieces, affixed to fabric, cut out, and carefully pieced back together.

I had so many questions:

- What kind of material would allow me to draw out a giant pattern, cut it

up, and use the individual pieces as unique templates?

- How would I track the hundreds of template pieces so I could piece them back together?
- How would I know what color fabric I needed to use with each template?
- Where would I find a printer large enough to create a copy of the giant pattern before it was cut up?
- What kind of fabric would best convey the flow of light across the surface to create a realistic looking gemstone?

As if this first challenge wasn’t daunting enough, I had to contend with another. I wanted to create realistic representations of the most beautiful objects on earth. I had real doubts about my ability to successfully portray the subject matter. More questions filled my mind:

- Do cut gemstones have a basic structure that governs how light is reflected back to our eyes?
- Is there an underlying pattern of light and color in all gemstones that could be used to chart a coherent design?

- What factors give gemstones their sparkle?
- Where could I find more images of beautiful gems to study? (Remember that my research was being done back in the Dark Ages of the Internet and was further complicated by the fact that I lived in a log cabin in the woods with only dial-up connectivity. Loading a single image took an exasperating amount of time.)

Over the next few years, I researched these questions by reading as many books and taking as many classes about quilting and gemstones as I could. I sought the guidance of expert quilters like Dixie Haywood, Jane Hall, Ruth McDowell, Paula Nadelstern, and Cynthia England. I read articles published by the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) and the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Finally, the answers began to emerge. I made my first diamond in 1997.

During the subsequent 20 years I spent developing the techniques to make my gem quilts, I also managed a career as first, an administrator and fundraiser for non-profit organizations and second, a technical project manager for a Fortune 100 company in Louisville, Kentucky. I thought I was happy leading software implementation projects and M&A teams. After all, I had reached my career goals, was being given the most challenging projects, and had earned the respect of my co-workers. So imagine my shock when I realized that I was absolutely, thoroughly miserable.

The call to the creative life had become so deafening that I knew without a doubt that I had to get out of corporate America as fast as I could. In early 2014, I left the lucrative corporate gig

to pursue my art full-time. While it has been the scariest thing I have ever done in my life, it has also been the truest thing I have ever done.

Since completing that first diamond in 1997, my work has been exhibited in juried shows and galleries. I am delighted that a number of my pieces are also in private collections around the country.

This year, I was honored to be invited to exhibit my diamond quilts at the Women's Jewelry Association's annual Awards for Excellence gala in New York, New York.

I prefer to work in a series, which gives me the opportunity to experiment with color and composition. My first series is entitled 'Angle of Repose,' a mechanical and geological term that describes the point at which an object comes to rest on an incline. A fraction of a degree more and the fall would continue. But at the angle of repose, the object finds a moment of respite—a perfect analogy for the time I spend in my quilt studio.

The second series underway is titled 'Bourbon Diamonds.' This collection—featuring amber-colored gemstones—celebrates Kentucky's iconic spirit. Each piece in this series is inspired by one of Kentucky's bourbon distilleries. I definitely enjoyed the research for these quilts!

My husband likes to tell people that I make 'the biggest diamonds in the world.' My gem quilts typically have a surface area of 30 to 45 square feet. The larger format allows me to explore contrasts of light, color, and relationship between gems.

The most common question I'm asked is, 'How many pieces are in this quilt?' A single quilt can include up to 1,500 pieces. The second most common question I'm asked is the one all quilters are asked, 'How long did it take you to make this quilt?' While my gem quilts may take up to 200 hours to complete, the number of hours isn't the real answer. The real answer—and the one that is true for all of us, is—all my life.

I'd like to think that Grandmother Martha, wherever she may be, enjoys my work. Although I have long since exchanged her name for a shorter one, gifted her piano to a new family, and sadly possess only a few remaining pieces of her jewelry, I hope my grandmother's sparkling personality and love of color shine through in my gem quilts. 🍷

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"Angels' Share" • 58" x 58"