

in the spotlight Mary Pal

OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA

Right: "Solace"
44" × 33½" • Inspired
by a photograph by
Clint Colbert.

Opposite: "Waiting"
28" × 22" • Inspired
by the photograph
"Elderly Woman" by
Chalmers Butterfield.
Photos by Ray Pilon



“It is the tactile quality of fabric that draws me—the coarse texture of burlap, the smooth weave of linen, the rough fluidity of cheesecloth. These textiles might seem unlikely candidates for work in portraiture, but my portrait pieces depict mature faces. And while our contemporary culture reveres youth and celebrates a flawless complexion, I see far greater beauty in the lines and creases that develop in a face over time. To me, they signify the wisdom gained during the course of a life well lived.

I am frequently asked how I came up with the idea of cheesecloth portraits. Like many inventions, it was complete serendipity. About two years ago, I learned of a call for entry from my regional group of SAQA (Studio Art Quilt Associates) that requested 16"-square quilts. Never having worked in that particular size before, I thought I

would take advantage of the opportunity to try something completely different. Instead of my usual representational style, I decided to create a couple of abstract pieces, and to use a range of fabrics from my stash.

I pulled out silks, burlap, cheesecloth, and a photo of a metal door printed

on fabric. I began to play with cutout pieces, arranging them collage-style on a burlap quilt background I'd made. Working intuitively was so calming and enjoyable that I named the works 'Composure I and II.' When I began to machine stitch the pieces in place on the background, I pulled the cheesecloth as I stitched it down in rows, alternating



the direction of each row so the strands would have interesting movement in them.

Pleased with my foray into abstract art, I was displaying the pieces for my various family members when my teenage son, Mike, glanced at 'Composure II' and commented that I was holding it sideways. I smiled and explained that it was an abstract piece and this was the way I liked the composition best. He asked, 'But what about the old man?' I turned the piece sideways to look at it and sure enough, the cheesecloth resembled the figure of an old man, facing away and slightly to the left. He was headless, of course, but I

could make out his left hand and the toe of his left shoe. I had to laugh—so much for my attempt at abstraction.

But what an intriguing challenge this discovery presented. How could I repeat this technique, and intentionally create a figure? The cheesecloth was not very cooperative, as it would shift while I tried to stitch it in place, so I hit upon the idea of stiffening it with a mix of PVA glue and water. I dipped a piece of cheesecloth into the mix and squeezed out the excess glue. Then I used toothpicks to spread the cheesecloth fibers apart on an acetate sheet. When it was dry, I found I could stitch through it. Eureka!



"Composure II" • 16" × 16"

My next step was to find a photo that I could replicate in cheesecloth. An online search for the figure of an old man turned up a beautiful public domain photo called 'Elderly Woman,' by Chalmers Butterfield. However, this photograph posed the obstacle of lighting: half of the figure was in darkness, and half was bathed in the light from the window she was looking out of, so I split the background into two pieces, using white cheesecloth on black linen, and black cheesecloth on white.

I sketched a large outline of the woman's figure on newsprint, which I placed under a roll of acetate, and began to move the wet cheesecloth into position. When it was dry, I peeled it off and stitched it with monofilament thread to the linen background, which I'd backed with stabilizer. I found the white linen was too intense, so to soften it, I took an old lace tablecloth and sprayed it with diluted black Setacolor paint to give the effect of curtains placed over the linen.

Around that time, SAQA had a call for entry out for 1'-squares for their first benefit auction. I decided to use the same photo for my entry, but just the face. I was able to print out a letter-sized photo and placed that under the acetate; this made it so much easier to place the cheesecloth wherever light struck her face. I stitched the cheesecloth to a piece of navy buckram and then put it on a 12"-square burlap quilt I had made. I liked the combination of the rough texture of the burlap, which accentuated the fibers of the cheesecloth.

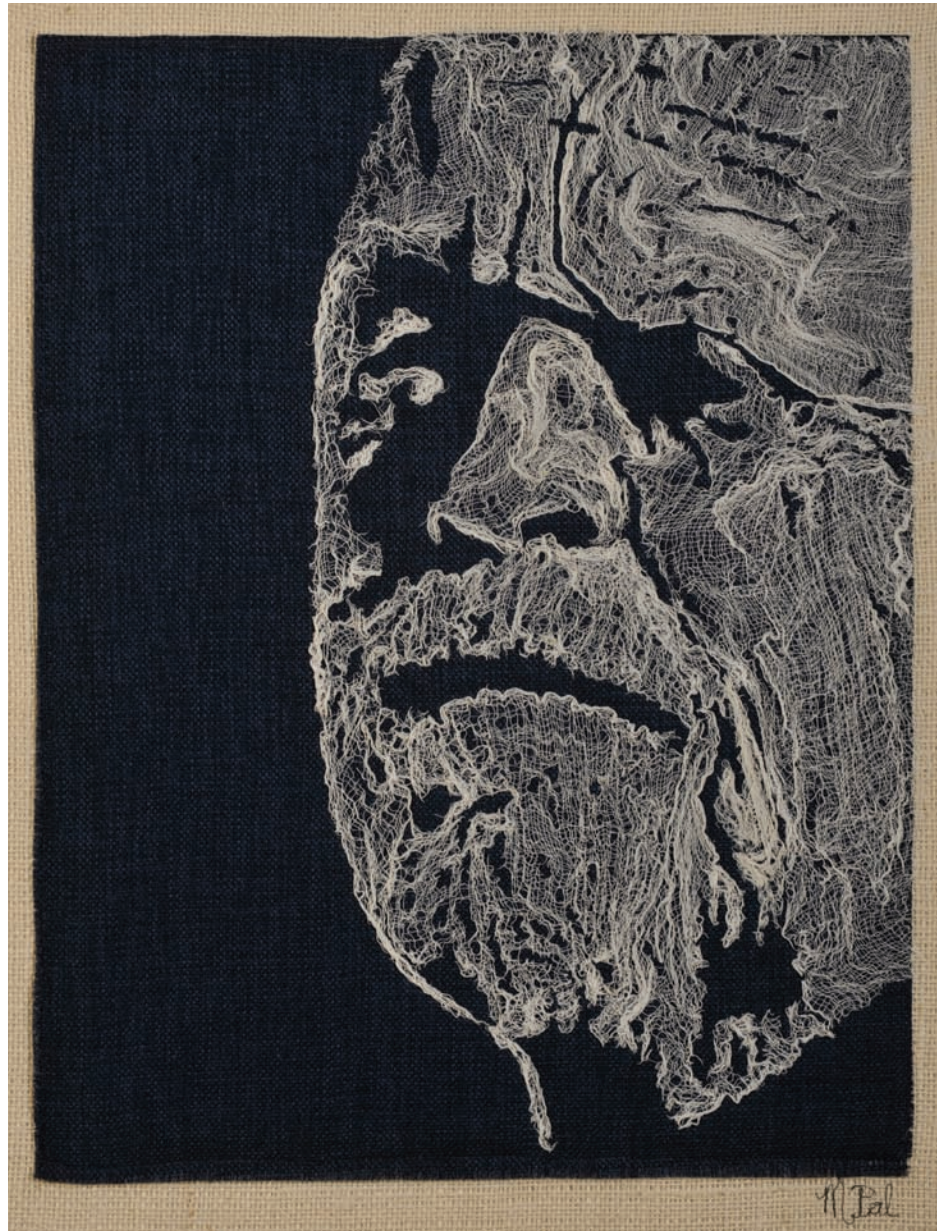
Since then, I have made several pieces using photos I've taken of older friends. In addition, earlier this year I saw a letter to the editor in our

local newspaper accompanied by a photograph, and the image begged to be interpreted in cheesecloth. After receiving permission from the photographer and the paper, I proceeded to make 'Watching,' but instead of putting the cheesecloth piece on a quilt, I mounted and framed it.

My most recent piece, 'Solace,' is the largest I've made using this technique. It was inspired by a photograph I found online by Nashville photographer Clint Colbert, who responded enthusiastically to my query of reproducing his photo of two homeless men in cheesecloth. Because of the subject matter, it seemed appropriate to stitch the figures onto black denim, which I then quilted to a turned burlap quilt.

The technique I use varies slightly with each piece, but I generally begin by studying the positive and negative space created by light and shadow in the photograph. I am always surprised that the smallest pieces of cheesecloth can reveal so much about the mood of the person I am portraying. The final stage, when I step back and see that I've captured the nuances of the personality in the face, is always the most exciting and rewarding for me, especially if I succeed in communicating that magical quality to other viewers. ”

To learn more about Mary and her work, visit marypaldesigns.com.



"Watching" • 22" × 18" • Inspired by a photograph by Julie Oliver for the OTTAWA CITIZEN.

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