

# VANISHING ACT

## HOW IT'S DONE: THE DETAILED RECIPE

What follows is more or less what I wrote for my previous two exhibitions, “Stranded” and “Migration” so for any of you who asked for a copy then, you’ll find it irritatingly similar but not quite the same; I’ve updated some things – goodness knows I hope I’ve learnt a bit over what are mounting up to a few years now, and I’ve discovered other products and suppliers that have been added, and new techniques and books that have inspired me.

I’ve taken to describing what I do as thread ‘drawing’ rather than ‘painting’; pretty much all books on the subject refer to it as ‘painting’, but mine isn’t, really; it’s more accurately described as ‘drawing’, perhaps because I am not ‘painting’ backgrounds – these are just the animals drawn in thread and applique-d or incorporated in other ways onto fabric backgrounds. Just me being pedantic, probably, and if you are looking for books to help you, look for ‘thread-painting’. And actually, don’t look further than Nancy Prince’s “Thread Painting with Style”, gettable from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) It’s the best, simplest, clearest ‘how to’ book on the subject that I’ve ever come across, and I’ve come across a lot...

### Ingredients

- **A photograph**, or something to work from in the way of inspiration, or a drawing of your own.
- **Fabric** – wonderful velvet from [www.stef-francis.co.uk](http://www.stef-francis.co.uk) ; Japanese kimono silk and cotton from [www.eurojapanlinks.com](http://www.eurojapanlinks.com) ; felt from Stef Francis (see above) or [www.21stcenturyyarns.com](http://www.21stcenturyyarns.com) or [www.buttoncompany.co.uk](http://www.buttoncompany.co.uk) ; all kinds of silk from [www.thesilkroute.co.uk](http://www.thesilkroute.co.uk) , and from [www.mulberrysilks-patriciawood.com](http://www.mulberrysilks-patriciawood.com) ; all sorts of fabric from

[www.villagefabrics.co.uk](http://www.villagefabrics.co.uk) ; all sorts of everything from [www.rainbowsilks.co.uk](http://www.rainbowsilks.co.uk) and from [www.barnyarns.co.uk](http://www.barnyarns.co.uk) websites that stock just about everything to do with needlework (and at Rainbow Silks all sorts of other crafts, too, plus they do excellent training days) that you could possibly imagine. And there are so many more - these, and the ones that follow as we go along, are just my favourites to whom I return again and again. I go to quilt fairs and the annual Festival of Quilts at the NEC in Birmingham, and discover new things, new work by other people, new everything, along with the old favourites; a couple of years ago I found, alongside all my usual suppliers, Sally Chang at [www.changtextiles.co.uk](http://www.changtextiles.co.uk) and fabulous, really fine cotton, dyed in a fantastic range of gorgeous colours from a Hungarian supplier at [www.foltvilag.hu](http://www.foltvilag.hu) and very thin pre-felt called "Flimsie" that comes in exquisite hand-dyed colours from "The Thread Studio" in Perth, Western Australia, but you can order it on-line at [www.thethreadstudio.com](http://www.thethreadstudio.com) All of these, and pretty much all of the suppliers mentioned here are to be found at the annual Festival of Quilts at the Birmingham NEC – go!!! I implore you to find time and go, to that and other quilt fairs. You will find everything you need and more, and see amazing work and talk to fascinating people. Go!!! Make a day of it; make two. Don't take a friend if, like me, you want to prowl like a tiger after its prey, staking out your territory, filling up an absolutely-necessary trolley-on-wheels that will annoy everyone else in the throng but without which you will stagger back to your car or train and cause yourself long-term damage. This is retail therapy on a major scale and you don't want to have to resort to a physiotherapist after lugging from your shoulders all that you will acquire.

I've taken my reticence and thrown it to the wind and been persuaded, by the very nice people who run it, that the Quilters' Guild is a good thing to join – I just don't really feel like a quilter, so felt like a bit of a fraud, but they convinced me otherwise, and I do think it's a very good organisation.

Find out about them at [www.quiltersguild.org.uk](http://www.quiltersguild.org.uk) Actually, since talking to them and teaching myself some more techniques, I've become really keen on quilting – you'll see from some of the exhibits that I am beginning to use it more and more, to give body and interest to the surface. I can easily see how it could become the latest obsession...

- **Threads** – there are millions out there. My favourites by far are Superior Threads, who make all sorts of wonderful things – the most delicious colours for thread-drawing are in their 'Nature Colours' range – just beautiful. Their metallics are gorgeous, though I don't use metallic threads much, as is the 'Living Colours' range. 'So Fine' is just that, and extremely useful for detail, as is the 'Masterpiece' range, and their blissful Kimono Silk Thread, for very detailed work – blissful but expensive, wonderful for animals' eyes or any tiny thing if you use a fine needle (I use a 60/8 or a 70/10 with So Fine and Kimono.) And their MonoPoly invisible thread is really worth getting, for appliquéing your thread-painting on to its background later – it's nowhere like the horrible invisible thread you might remember from the olden days, it's soft and easy to work with. Superior Threads are available from Martha Milne at [www.machinequilter.co.uk](http://www.machinequilter.co.uk) where you will also find a link to the Superior Threads website, and tutorials both by them and by Martha herself – incredibly helpful and useful! Others stock Superior Threads, but Martha is so helpful. You should check out, too, her New England Quilter if you do a lot of large-scale quilting – it is a very different and compelling way of working and the website will tell you all about it. I'm fond, too, of KingTut quilting thread, Libby Lehman's The Bottom Line - I use her pre-wound Super Bobs that come in loads of colours (back to Barnyarns for supplies)– there are many who say you shouldn't use pre-wound bobbins but I can't for the life of me see why not, they are time-savingly wonderful; I love threads by Oliver Twists, and by Victory Rayon of Australia – those are both gettable at Rainbow Silks (see above for website) – they come in amazing colour mixtures, and are just beautiful.

- **Scissors** – my favourite small snipping scissors of all time are a pair given to me by Mary at EuroJapan Links (see above); they sell them on their website, and at quilt fairs – they are Japanese and beautiful and I love the look of them on my worktable and they snip viciously. You need some good cutting-out sort of scissors, too, and don't use them for anything but fabric or they will soon be blunt and useless. Keep a separate pair for cutting anything else. I'm keen at the moment on titanium scissors by Mundial, again available at Barnyarns (see above), that are incredibly light and sharp.
- **Needles** – lots of places sell them, I usually get mine from Barnyarns (see above for website) – if you get their catalogue it is full of incredibly helpful advice on which kind to use, along with all sorts of tips on threads and everything else. I almost always use a Superior topstich 90/14 or a Schmetz Quilting needle Size 90 (14); Superior's Titanium needles are really good – they come in a 90 (14) quilting, too. For fine thread like kimono silk, a Schmetz Microtex 60/8 or 70/10 is good, or Superior's 70/10 topstitch. I'm only just beginning to get to grips, thanks to Nancy Prince, with using different weights of thread, and it makes such a difference – really fine silk for really tiny detail just makes life possible instead of a snarled up hole because you've gone over and over with a fat needle and too thick thread. And you really do need to change needles often and keep a sharp point on the go.
- **Stabiliser** – for the thread painting bit of it I usually use the heaviest water soluble; Barnyarns sells one called Romeo; [www.artvango.co.uk](http://www.artvango.co.uk) have a nice heavy duty soluble, too, just called 'heavy duty' – it's probably Romeo, too – what's in a name? There's a lovely soluble film made from a vegetable base that you can get from [www.solublefilm.co.uk](http://www.solublefilm.co.uk) that is quite a lot softer and thinner, but works well and washes out beautifully. I've taken to using a hoop called an Octi Hoop (see below), and for that I need a stabiliser that is sticky and water-soluble. The only one I've found so far is Madeira's Avalon Fix. And for using when I'm appliquéing

the thread-drawing bit onto its background I use a tear-away stabiliser under the whole picture – Stitch & Tear white standard (Barnyarns, and many others stock it) is good and there are lots of other versions.

- **Netting.** In the past I used a sort of tu-tu tulle netting that I got in a little shop round the corner, which is pretty good, but have since graduated to something called Organza Snow Sheer which I get at [www.hobbycraft.co.uk](http://www.hobbycraft.co.uk) it's finer than netting, comes in a dozen colours, and probably doesn't snaggle stitches so much – they say it's for making flower ties and chair bows (what are they?!) and Table Dressing...well, it's brilliant for thread-drawing, too. Sometimes I even like to leave a bit of it showing between stitches – a tiny bit of glittery-ness, usually, the bronze coloured one, can actually be useful sometimes.
- **A sewing machine.** Not a fancy embroidery all-singing-all-dancing sewing machine. I have a sewing machine that I love with all my heart that only does straight stitch. I used to think that I couldn't exist without zigzag stitch, but you know what, I can. Really well. Because of my Juki TL-98 P. My war-horse. My non-singing, non-dancing precision-perfect equivalent of the finest Rapidograph graphic pen. My non-snagging, tension-perfect, non-computerised instant start-up kind, strong support through adversity; my saviour. And no, I don't work for the company! This semi-industrial machine costs more than one that does 350 different stitches, and has all sorts of computerised everything and I wouldn't swap it for the world. It does one thing and it does it to perfection and that's what has changed my life. Again, if you go to Martha Milne's website (see above, under 'Threads') you can hear the praises sung that sent me off in a direction that has transformed my work and my sanity.
- **Precision Oiler:** I use one that I got on amazon.co.uk called a Laser 3401 Precision Oiler, but there are lots out there; it looks like a fountain pen and you fill it with sewing machine oil and then find the whole business of oiling your sewing machine transformed into a clean, neat, positively enjoyable

experience; I was told about them on a course of Martha Milne's (see above) and they have made a huge difference to what used to be a messy chore. Highly recommended.

- **Hoops:** my loathing of hoops has had to be re-thought; prejudice has had to be ditched (pride went a long time ago). I am now happy to jump through them. If you want to make an image entirely of thread and you think you can do it without a hoop, think again even if you are as antagonistic to the horrible things as I have always been. Sometimes you just have to give in over something, and I've given in over hoops – they help. It hurts me to admit it after railing against them for so long, but they do. A lot. The good news for me, and potentially for you, is that I have discovered an alternative to the ordinary hoop....which, actually, I really do like and certainly makes my life hugely easier and the end result hugely better. It's called an Octi-Hoop. You can get them at Barnyarns again (and I daresay lots of other places). It seems ridiculously expensive (to me) for what you are getting but it is worth it, honestly, if you end up doing a lot of thread-drawing. You have far larger a working area than with a traditional hoop, and you don't squash and distort your drawing as you go along because there is no top-hoop to squash it – you stick your drawing onto an adhesive backing. You can use a non-soluble backing if it doesn't matter that the papery-ness is left as on the back of the end result, but because you are using a soluble stabiliser for your top layer of the sandwich, I find it's better to use something soluble for the back. It has to be sticky because that's how the hoop works. And because you are putting on top of the sticky layer two layers of netting and a soluble stabiliser on top of all of that, you need to pin here and there to keep in place the layers that are obviously not going to stick. But it works. The drawing stays put, the distortion is minimal, and the ibuprofen consumption (due to the headaches of not using a frame) is zero. Have a look online for a more detailed explanation.



- **VERY good music** for company, lots of it, mostly rock and roll for preference, in my case. (If you like blues rock you simply HAVE to have a listen to Joe Bonamassa, and to Kenny Wayne Shepherd and to Derek Trucks if you don't already know them, and to Eric Clapton and to JJ Cale and to Bruce Springsteen. Forgive me if you prefer Mozart!) But don't use headphones if you are at your sewing machine – you need to hear strange noises (not those on the disc), clunking and snarling and other horrible clues that something nasty is going on that you need to sort out (change the disc if it isn't your sewing machine...).
- **A small dog** at your feet, though not too close to the machine peddle, for even better company – my Coton de Tulear, Tycho, knows more about how to deal with the artistic temperament than anyone. And going for a walk when the sewing-going gets rough keeps me sane. In the year and a half since my last exhibition he's got that bit older and less stand-off-ish, and now even likes to sit on my lap on occasion – it's quite difficult thread-drawing with a dog on one's lap....but we manage. But don't go and get the new puppy you are planning to get (I am – I want Tycho to have a companion) until you've got enough time to concentrate on puppies and not sewing machines – the two won't mix easily.

## Method

I can't begin to do more than give you the barest outline of a 'how to' method here, but if you just want to know roughly how I do things (and believe me there are people who know FAR more and are FAR better qualified to tell you) here is a quick resume of where I've got to.

I learned a particular method of thread-painting from a book by Nancy Prince called "Simple Thread Painting (Quilt Savvy)"; [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) has it. Get it, if you want to do thread-painting, or even better is her new-ish book,

“Thread Painting with Style” – I only acquired it at the Festival of Quilts 2011, nearing the end of work on my last exhibition, and wish I’d had time to read and take on board all the invaluable advice rather sooner than I did. It’s the BEST thread-painting book I’ve ever owned (and I collect them in embarrassing quantity), my thread bible, endlessly helpful, and full to the brim with seriously useful tips and explanations. Honestly, don’t bother with anything much that I tell you, it’s a poor digest of some of the things I’ve learned from Nancy Prince’s books, and can’t begin to be as good as she is. She’s a technical wizard, which I am not, and knows much, much more than I shall ever know about technique. It’s a pretty good idea to learn rules before you break them, and I seem to break an awful lot of them. Nancy’s got a website, too (see below) where you will learn SO much more than I can possibly tell you. Get the latest book! Get both! Amazon has both (and I’m not her agent or her mother, just an extremely grateful reader) There are lots of other ways, and lots of other books to explain them (have a search on [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) ) but for me, for thread-painting/drawing, Nancy Prince’s books were the ones that stopped me tearing my hair out and threatening my sewing machine, taking to drink and giving up altogether. Lately I have struck up a sort of e-friendship with Nancy, and she has been wonderfully supportive and helpful, and I can’t thank her enough for all of that. She told me about a website, [www.thequiltshow.com](http://www.thequiltshow.com) that is really worth looking at – there are lots of little video tutorials, including some from Nancy herself, and a mass of information, plus blogs and forums and everything any quilter could want in the way of information and support.

You can go on the bare bones notes I’ll add here, though honestly, Nancy Prince can tell you things that I shan’t remember, or haven’t got space for. However, in the smallest of nutshells, and if you just want to have a go: Get a sheet of soluble stabiliser and cut it to whatever size you need. It’s transparent, so trace or draw whatever you



want to embroider onto it; take two layers of organza or netting, and cut them the same size. Cut another bit of soluble stabilizer the same size. Now make what Nancy Prince calls a 'sandwich' of them: drawing layer on top, then two layers of organza or net, then another layer of stabilizer. Put the whole lot in an embroidery hoop if you are good and do as you are told by Nancy, or sometimes not, if you are bad and break all the rules like me. I hate hoops. See above, in the 'Ingredients' list under 'Hoops'. Or have a look, as suggested under the 'Hoops' section, at the Octi Hoop.

Now:

Lower the feed dogs on your machine – the manual will tell you how to, or just fiddle around with it till you find a button that seems as if it might be the right one and fiddle with that and see if the little teeth things under the needle go down – you don't want them doing what they normally do, which is drag the fabric through tidily in a straight line. However, all that said, I have now discovered that some machines actually function rather better with their feed dogs left up, and it doesn't matter a bit – if you look up on YouTube about feed dogs you'll find plenty of people (once you've got past the distraction of what people feed their dogs) who don't bother with lowering them; so I tried it and, counter-intuitively to me, it works fine. Whichever you choose to do, now take whatever foot you've got on the machine, and remove it. Attach whatever foot your machine might have for doing what is usually called 'free motion' embroidery; if there isn't one, just leave the needle bare, but for goodness sake take care of your fingers if there is no foot, it's pretty lethally easy to stab yourself. On a pre-Juki sewing machine that I had I customised (well, actually, Rand Russell, who is my husband's PA and without whom I would have floundered on so many fronts with the mounting of this and my last two exhibitions that they probably would none of them ever have happened, did the customising for me) a free motion foot,

and cut out the front of it (it has to be a plastic one to do this easily) so that I could see better. It's seeing clearly where you are going that's important. Not ending up in casualty with stabbed fingers is important, too, so if you do have a proper free motion or embroidery foot please use it even though you might not be able to see quite as well as with an unguarded needle.

Now set both the tension and the stitch length to 0. Fiddle around with the tension – depending on thread and fabric it might need to go up a bit or down a bit (it's worth doing this on some spare bit of your sandwich so you don't mess up your design) till you stop getting either horrible tangles underneath (the tension is probably too loose, or you've threaded your top thread badly, or you haven't pulled the bobbin thread up at the beginning – totally worth the effort!) or bobbin thread coming up on the top (the tension is probably too tight); generally speaking, you want more or less zero tension for free motion. This whole tension thing is at the root of most evil – too tight and your thread breaks or tangles on top; too loose and it tangles underneath; too tight and it tangles somewhere else; badly threaded, and something else goes wrong, errgggg – you just need to know that in most cases the people who tell you about it in books never tell you that they, too, have bad times. They **MUST** do, they just leave that bit out because writing about getting it right is the thing you do. But it goes wrong, and I know it probably goes wrong for me more often because a) I'm still learning, and b) I break too many rules, and c) I'm honest – but I am totally sure that it goes wrong for experts, too – there are just so many variables with sewing machines that it is really hard to know, when it goes right, what it is you did to get there. I have spent agonised hours on the verge of tears of rage trying to work out which of various things could be the one that needs changing: is the needle blunt? Is the thread twisted? Or worn? Is it the wrong needle? Have I threaded the thread sloppily? Is it a particularly unforgiving fabric? Do

I just need to switch my machine off and on again (I have this theory that if there is anything at all computerised about your sewing machine it will, like a computer, simply need rebooting from time to time – could be nonsense, but anyway...) Is the tension too loose or too tight? Is the bobbin running out and getting loose? Am I just in a bad mood and dragging at my sandwich? This is no picnic.... And by the time you've tried half a dozen things you've no idea which it was that actually solved the problem.

The other day I kept having to stop and start, threads broke, things tangled, everything seemed to be conspiring against me, and I finally decided that there was something wrong with the bobbin thread, took the whole bobbin case thing apart and found a nasty little bit of fluff where you take the bobbin thread around its little case, picked the fluff out with a pin, and everything worked again. How are you supposed to KNOW these things???! How can one miserable bit of FLUFF, for goodness sake, cause such misery??? And I know perfectly well that next time the same set of problems arises and I look in the bobbin case there won't be any fluff, and it'll be some other thing that has to be run to ground. Oh well, all I can say is that you do get better, sort of, and you do learn when to quit and go away and do something else and come back to it and find that maybe just the restarting up of your sewing machine, or indeed the restarting up of your own brain and levels of patience is all that's needed. And when it all goes well it is just SO wonderful that it's worth getting through the totally utterly infuriatingly mind-numbingly dreadful times. I promise.

Now just doodle. Go in any direction you want. Just try. You'll break threads, and snaggle the wretched thing up and drive yourself nuts, and all the stuff I've outlined above, but practice does help. And get a book, so you can learn all the things that I haven't got the space to go into here, and that anyway I ignore and thus make my life so much more difficult

than it need be. Sorry to bore on for England, but get Nancy Prince's book, do; she troubleshoots brilliantly, explains so well you really don't get into the sort of trouble that needs shooting, and is altogether a Very Good Thing. And stops you shooting yourself, which is useful.

When you've finished your thread-painted bit of the picture – say a salamander, or a chameleon, or a moth, or anything you like– you need to take your courage in your hands and dunk the whole sandwich in warm-ish water (look at the instructions on whatever brand of stabiliser you are using and do as you are told!) and soak out the soluble stabiliser – you'll probably have to change the water a few times, you don't want to be left with any sticky residue, and if the stitches are dense, it'll take a bit of soaking out. Thanks to Nancy, yet again, I now use a bit of soap to get the stabiliser film out quickly, and sometimes add a bit of conditioner at the end to soften the thread-drawing a little.

Now let it dry, and then cut away the excess net or organza as close as you can to the outline of the design. Nancy Prince uses a heated stylus stencil cutter to burn away and seal the edges and she's right, it's brilliant – a bit scary, and I don't recommend experimenting on something you've just spent hours thread-drawing; do a test something or other, then you won't be so frightened of damaging it that you can't even bear to try. It really works, and is hugely easier than scissors, gets into far smaller corners, and just does a far better job. Stencil cutters/soldering irons are made by lots of people. Margaret Beal writes really good books on using burning techniques and makes her own version, or if you look on [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk) you'll find lots of makes. Hobbycraft does one. You can pay anything from about £5 to over £40, so look around. Rest your thread-drawing on an old tile, or something that won't burn as you run around the edge with the stencil cutter. Be careful! The cutter gets lethally hot, don't do this job in the sort of clutter that I accumulate – you

need to be organised with this kind of tool, so you can see what you are doing and don't set fire to something precious like yourself.

You might need to iron your thread-drawing a bit if it's really scrunched up – put a bit of fabric over the actual stitches, ironing can dull the lustre and that would be dreadfully sad. Work out what you want in the way of a background – I fiddle around for hours with different possibilities, and eventually, somehow, I know when I've got what I want; you just need to try things and abandon them if they don't seem right – sometimes just leaving a possibility overnight and coming back to it in the morning is the thing to do; then you know to scrap it all and start again, or to go with it. You just sort of know. If you are doing a 'stand-alone' sort of image, like the moths and geckos on the wooden bowls in this exhibition, then lay your cut-out moth or whatever on a piece of backing – I use very thin pre-felt, or thicker felt if it seems to need more stability – sew around the whole image and then cut away the excess backing felt.

If you are adding your image to a background picture, put your background together, using some tear-away stabiliser underneath to help – it just makes it easier to have a nice stable base for everything; you might use bits of velvet on top of a cotton background, or bits of felt, or lots of different bits of this and that, or just one plain simple 'sheet' of background – whatever you feel will be a good place upon which to set your thread-drawing frog, or bird, or whatever else image you have gone for. And be kind to yourself – use friendly, good-natured fabrics, ones whose creases are easy to get out, or who quilt happily if you are going to quilt your background, ones that are kind to you. Life's too short to wrestle with aggressive, crease-happy, fraying, nasty, bad-tempered cloth.

Hem all the edges if you want to, or leave them raw if that looks better – I like to keep the selvedge sometimes, it can be decorative. Iron it so everything is nice and flat, again covering the thread-drawing itself to protect the stitches.

Now appliqué your image using invisible thread; you could use matching thread for each bit, but honestly it's much easier to use invisible. Take care to keep your background smooth behind the appliqué – a bit fiddly, but not that difficult and anyway, if there is the odd bit of fabric puckering, I don't really mind that (sorry, purists! I LIKE fabric to look like fabric, and I like the movement of a not-entirely taut bit from time to time, but if you are a perfectionist, then, well, work harder than me at perfection.)

Tear away the tear-away stabiliser.

You're done, bar the framing, if it's a picture you are making and you want it framed. If you want a brilliant framer and live in Oxford (I know that's unlikely, but it's an excuse to say thank you to a brilliant framer) get in touch with Lindsay Jones at Oxford Framing Services, Circus Workshops, 38, Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1HZ, (01865 242 225).

If you are making a table runner, or a mat, then there are various ways you can finish it off; I am deeply proud of myself for finally getting to grips with neat (ish) mitred corners, and learned a cunning trick from a YouTube film (YouTube is just wonderful for endless little tutorials on absolutely everything ) Go to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and search for Nancy Zieman + mitered corners (US spelling); there you will find a video about her 'no math mitered corner kit', and a tutorial on how to do it – it's just the BEST way for anyone like me who can't be doing with some of the alternative methods. You can make your own templates pretty easily – there is good template plastic to be found (try Barnyarns, see above), or send for her proper kit. She's got a good book,



too, called “Nancy’s Favorite 101 Notions” which tells you what all those peculiar sewing-y things you see on websites and in books are actually for, and which ones are worth having for which task. Once you crack how to mitre a corner, you can make a ‘frame’ for your picture – you can then infill that frame with a quilted picture, if you want – and there’s another whole subject upon which there are endless books, websites, classes, experts, lore, rules to break....quilting gives the whole thing more substance, and if you are using your ‘picture’ as a table runner or mat, serves, too, to protect your table from anything you might put on the mat or runner. There are alternatives to mitred corners, of course, and any of the loads of quilting books out there will tell you how. Of the many I’ve acquired over time, my favourites at the moment are “Art Quilt Workbook” by Jane Davila and Elin Waterston (really clear instructions and masses of inspiration), Gloria Loughman is a good explainer (“Quilted Symphony”, Amazon again); Jean Wells’ “Intuitive Colour and Design” – back to Amazon, and by the way, most of these are downloadable on an iPad or Kindle; there are many, many books on quilting, and many, many mini-tutorial films to be found on YouTube, or on [www.thequiltshow.com](http://www.thequiltshow.com) and I daresay dozens of other websites that I have yet to discover.

In this exhibition I’ve used a technique called ‘trapunto’ in several of the pictures. Rather than try and explain the technique here (there are different ways to do it, and it would be SO lengthy and tricky), search ‘trapunto’ in Google and you’ll find YouTube films, endless links to this and that, and the obvious one to amazon.co.uk where you will find lots and lots of books on the subject. The one I found most helpful was “Exploring Machine Trapunto: New Dimensions” by Hari Walner. There are lots of others, and you can usually find something on this really interesting technique in encyclopaedias of quilting techniques. Just for a quick summary, it’s where you select areas in the top layer of your

quilt, outline them and then stuff them from the back to make them stand out, then closely quilt the background to emphasise even more the sticky-outy-ness. Have a look at my sea-turtle, the salamanders with red beaded eyes, the various frogs, and the tawny frogmouth. All of these, and one or two others, were done using this technique.

I've also begun to be intrigued by things like pin-tucking and piping, and various methods of manipulating fabric (see the two polar bear pictures and the Arctic wolf). Afghani piecing is fascinating, and I twisted it around to make my Afghani-pieced Gecko, using the central triangles to form the gecko's spine – there are so many things you can do with a technique if you are not frightened to co-opt it in different ways from the original intention. This particular technique I learned from a book called "Fabric Collage" by Rosemary Eichorn.

If you are really keen on the whole subject, the other thing you can do, as I said earlier, is go to embroidery and quilt fairs - the Festival of Quilts at Birmingham, the Knitting and Stitching Show in various places during the year are the BEST places for finding all the suppliers I've listed above, for talking to people, for discovering what others are doing, for finding workshops and ideas and inspiration - check out Twisted Thread at [www.twisteadthread.com](http://www.twisteadthread.com) where you will find all sorts of information on the where and when of a series of shows. Or find local classes – there are lots out there. Rainbow Silks (see above) does them. Village Fabrics (again, see above) does them – they just happen to be local to me, but try Google for somewhere near you, or perhaps ask the Quilters' Guild. There are so many ways these days to find things out.

## Other things

I do hope all this has been useful; I'm pretty much self taught, with the help of those people and books mentioned above, so nothing I say should be taken as the only way to do things; it's probably the only way NOT to do most of them, since it is my own cranky take on the works and methods of far cleverer people – none of them is to blame for any of the variations on their themes wrought by me. Don't be put off – by me, or any book or anyone. I've tried various methods and given up on some of them – I'm just not disciplined enough to cope with intricate measurements and careful piecing, I could never, ever do a proper geometric quilt, and much admire those who have the skill and patience to do so. I sometimes start reading a book and get more and more depressed and baffled and cross with myself for not getting something that other people seem to find easy (actually, do they? Or am I just imagining that I am the only stupid person around here??); and then suddenly I'll alight upon someone who seems to be talking the same language, and things start to fall into place. Sometimes I'll think a technique is exactly what I need, only to find that actually I really hate it, and it joins the embarrassingly long list of things I can't manage. Sometimes reading about a technique is horribly confusing and daunting, but when you go to your work table and slog through each point, it all begins to make sense. When that fails, too, I'm afraid I usually give up and try another way, or turn to another book. I'm sure we all learn differently – I expect if I were braver about going to classes I'd find things much easier, but I'm rather better at making my mistakes on my own. And I do make lots and lots and lots of them, but sometimes it goes well, and those times are worth every bit of the struggle.

Here are a few other books on my bursting shelves that I have found inspiring or particularly good at explaining things

to someone self-taught and mostly not very technically expert:

“Quilt Artistry” by Yoshiko Jinzenji, and anything else by her – magical, minimalist, stylish and elegant, everything to which one might aspire.

“Exploring African Themes in Fabric and Stitch” by Mary Sleight. Africa inspires, and Mary Sleight explains how to take such inspiration and turn it into something else wonderful.

“Stitch Magic” by Alison J Read. Three-dimensional ways with fabric and stitch, really good stuff on pin-tucking and pleating.

“Bojagi and Beyond” by Chunghie Lee. Just the most beautiful and heavenly modern take on traditional Korean Bojagi (also spelled ‘pojagi’) wrapping cloths. Have a look, too, if you are interested, at their inspiration in a book called “Rapt in Colour” on Korean textiles of the Choson dynasty ((1392-1910), edited by Claire Roberts and Huh Dong-hwa.

“Creative Tucks and Textures” by Jennie Rayment, and any others of her several books – she writes the way I aspire to think – outside the box, with wit and irreverence - and is a good explainer of complicated fabric manipulation.

“The Art of Manipulating Fabric” by Colette Wolff. An encyclopedic compendium of all sorts of traditional ways to drive yourself seriously crazy with learning how to gather and ruffle and pleat (flat, partial, wrinkled, double-controlled – or not even single, in my case – accordion, projecting...you name it), tuck, cord, stuff, dart (to the drinks cupboard if you are anything like as bad at this as me), smock, shirr and make godets...don’t ask.

And any number of others. If you go to [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk) and search for 'quilting and patchwork' you will find 75 pages-worth; go for 'thread-painting' and there are another 18 pages to try; "machine embroidery" another 35; "art quilts" another 75. Have fun.

I once had a bit of a run-in at a quilt fair – I was talking to one of my suppliers and she was asking me about my next exhibition; a woman in the queue behind me, who had obviously been listening, said "I do always find that the kind of people who describe their work as 'art' have such terribly poor technique"; I regret (but not much) to say that I replied "You are so right. And I find, too, that people who have the most wonderful technique can quite often have so very little to say with it"...

Please do email me at [lallaward@me.com](mailto:lallaward@me.com) if you think I could be of the slightest help.