

JOHNSTON MAIN TEXT

The Contact is a series of artworks made by Ann Johnston that are inspired by the Sierra Nevada. The artist's strong connection to the rich topography of this region is a major influence on her nuanced and dynamic interpretations of the landscape. She explored many parts of the mountain range with her parents as a child, and later with her husband Jim, from the 1960s to the present. Johnston's family has held a mining claim near Tioga Pass, California, since the 1800s and she considers the area to be a place of extraordinary beauty, power, and fascination.

For Johnston, "contact" has two meanings: one refers to the visually striking and complex formations that result from opposing geologic forces over millions of years; the other refers to the long-term human impact on the natural environment.

Johnston hand-dyes fabrics with one-of-a-kind colors and patterns for her quilts, which become literal, abstract, and sometimes imaginary representations of the landscape and geography of the Sierra. The history and geology of the Sierra, as well as documents and stories passed on by her family, inspire Johnston's work.

Johnston's lifetime of making quilts, dyeing fabric, and exploring the Sierra is clearly visible in *The Contact*, a series she began in 2010. The artist's desire to be up high, in the wild, surrounded by the mountains continues to draw her out on family adventures where she always finds many kinds of challenges, including creative ones.

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From the Sierra to the Studio: Ann Johnston's Process

"An idea is only that; it could become anything. Making challenging choices along the way makes the process exciting and the result often a surprise."

Ann Johnston

Ann Johnston often begins a quilt design by making sketches from photographs taken during hikes. Later, in her studio, she sometimes manipulates her sketches using a scanner and computer to explore various compositions and colors. Then she dyes the fabrics to get the exact colors and values she needs. Alternatively, she sometimes works without a sketch or photo, working directly with the fabrics dyed specifically for the concept.

In addition to hand-manipulated, low-water immersion fabric dyeing, Johnston applies thickened dyes with brushes, sponges, rollers, scrapers, silkscreens, and water-soluble resists to achieve smooth gradations of color as well as layers of visual texture. Each design requires different dyeing and construction techniques: some are whole cloth, and some are many parts, pieced together and appliquéd.

Each finished quilt represents multiple transitions in idea and design. Her quilts often begin as seven-inch drawings that she enlarges into seven-foot drawings. She transforms yards of pure white cloth with complex dyed colors and patterns. The last step of stitching through the layers creates a multi-dimensional surface and a new layer of design.

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The Science of the Sierra

Ann Johnston shares her love of the Sierra with her son, Scott Johnston, a geologist and Associate Professor at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, California. Johnston's son works closely with his mother to explain the processes that have shaped the Sierra. Johnston is able to imagine and express her responses to the geology and geography as she chooses but relies on her son to teach her accurate explanations of the science that are incorporated in her work.

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A Personal Landscape

Ann Johnston is descended from a family that immigrated from Ireland to Jamestown, California, during the Gold Rush. When Johnston began *The Contact* in 2010, she envisioned a series of fifteen quilts focused on general themes of gold mining history and geology, as well as vertical landscapes. She spent a year experimenting with techniques and structuring the pieces. Her predominantly vertical format mirrors the extreme elevations of the Sierra.

Her lifetime of appreciating the Sierra landscape has enabled Johnston to translate the beauty of the mountains to her quilt making. "My creative process has involved both looking at what is there on the land at present, as well as trying to imagine events unseen," she writes.

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