



Quilts larger than life

Heidelberg's Marilyn Farquhar is a modern and contemporary quilter with 'rock star' status

STORY BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND



Farquhar's husband and adult son once jokingly challenged her to design an ostrich quilt, instead of her usual floral theme. The result was 'Ophelia.'

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARILYN FARQUHAR

It's a winding road to a quilt show when "rock star" quilter Marilyn Farquhar leads the charge. "For a trip that takes six hours, with Marilyn it takes you two days and you make 14 or 15 stops at quilting shops," says fellow quilter Audrey Vrooman with a laugh.

"She's got her quilting shops researched before a trip. In addition we go to museums and interesting exhibits. It's all about knowing what's out there in the wide world."

Farquhar lives large – in her life, in her friendships and in her passion, quilting.

She's known for her thoroughly original, large-scale, modern quilts that are a blaze of colourful fabrics, creative stitching and designs, as well as for her infectious laughter and those fun-filled road trips.

She's known for her focus on stitching; for hiding a "surprise" in a design; and for her creative use of technology, particularly her Handi Quilter Fusion longarm machine, likened to a "sewing machine on steroids."

"She herself is in a lot of ways larger than life. She has a robust laugh and a lot of zest for life," Vrooman says. "I think she brings her personal style to her quilting – 'Go big or go home.'"

"She does entirely original designs and she's always pushing the envelope," says another quilting friend, Marsha Clarke, who travels to shops and shows with Farquhar and Vrooman.

"I don't think her mind stops churning. You want to grow and expand your skills. Marilyn goes beyond what most people do. She's always trying to grow and be different."

Now, Farquhar's reputation as an imaginative, adventurous and gifted artist is spreading nationally and internationally. She has recent awards behind her name and an opportunity to encourage other quilters as the sole Canadian in a 12-member "in-

spiration squad" for Handi Quilter, a leader in the high-tech machine quilting market. Early this year, she attended an expenses-paid educational retreat at the company's headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, to learn more about the company's high-tech, longarm machine.

Still, Farquhar is humble, down-to-earth and joyful, and those who know quilting are in awe of her creativity and skills.

"In the context of the quilting world, she is a rock star," Vrooman says.

Farquhar calls herself a combination of a modern and contemporary quilter. She loves fabrics in bold colours and uses both traditional techniques and technology to give her the freedom she likes to create original pieces, most of which hang on walls as art.

Technique is important to her. She uses no patterns. Each design is hers. Big, bold flowers – her favourite subject – are featured in many of her quilts; so many that her husband, Doug, and adult son, Mitchell, once jokingly challenged her to forget about flowers and design an ostrich quilt instead. Doug left pictures of ostriches all over the house.

Farquhar did indeed create a quilt with an almost-life-size ostrich on it, but she had the last laugh. She incorporated bright, floral fabrics in the funky ostrich design, using traditional techniques with collage and edges that she turned under and hand stitched. She called the ostrich "Ophelia."

Ideas flow out of that "overactive imagination," says Vrooman, who does modern and traditional quilting.

"I begin with a pattern and I sort of tweak it to suit myself," Vrooman says. "But she begins in her mind with an idea and then the idea percolates."

Farquhar's ranch-style bungalow in Heidelberg is where those ideas come to life.

The living and dining rooms have been

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'Five Roses' is a swirl of large, mostly pink blooms interspersed with orange, red, yellow and burgundy colours.

For commissions, Marilyn Farquhar can be reached at marilynfarquhar@gmail.com.

swallowed up by a quilting studio with shelves full of bright fabrics and the large, futuristic-looking longarm machine in front of the picture window.

On this day, there's a gorgeous quilt on the frame called "Five Roses," a swirl of large, mostly pink blooms interspersed with orange, red, yellow and burgundy colours.

Underneath Farquhar's sunny personality is a serious artist – meticulous, demanding of her skills and always pushing herself to do something new.

Farquhar moved her studio from the basement in order to spend more time near her husband after she came home from a day's work. She took a section out of the Fusion model's 3.5-metre frame to make it fit in the room.

A touchscreen computer, the "Pro-Stitcher," is mounted on the quilting machine that runs on a track system. It allows her, among other things, to switch between computer-guided and hand-guided quilting.

Doug made the large cutting table in the room to try to contain Farquhar's big ideas. He also made the fabric shelves and thread racks.

"This is the fun part, pulling fabric from the shelves," Farquhar says, moving around the room where fabrics, vivid quilts on the walls and the large machine vie for a visitor's attention. "This is a future quilt," she says, pointing to a collection of fabrics on the shelves. "And over here, it's sorted by colour. Busy fabrics are down here."

The house is like an art gallery. Large, eye-catching quilts are on the wall of the piano room, stacked on top of a music cabinet, piled on an old television stand.

In the guest bedroom, there's a quilt that she made when her husband was battling cancer six years ago. She took the work with her to the hospital while he was getting treatment. Now cancer-free, Doug is a big fan and a big help. He helps solve any computer problems.

"I like having the quilts all over the house," Doug says. "It has an artsy touch."



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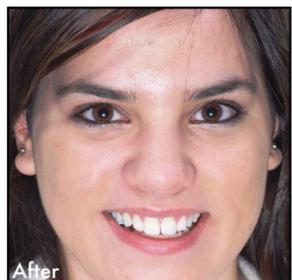
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TOP: Farquhar works on her Handi Quilter Fusion longarm machine, likened to a “sewing machine on steroids.”

BOTTOM: Farquhar and the Handi Quilter ‘inspiration squad’ have their photo on the side of a truck.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARILYN FARQUHAR

Though the longarm machine can make the process speedy, Farquhar is not in it for speed. “One of my quilts will take me months and months.” Her husband teases her about the number of quilts she has on the go at the same time.

“The real fun is designing, selecting fabric, getting started,” she says. “Finishing is always harder because there are more patterns on the brain.

“I started a new quilt a couple of days ago and I was drawing another last night. It’s kind of embarrassing,” she says, laughing.

Farquhar uses a drawing app on her iPad to help her draw her own designs – a practice that is not the norm. The tool increases the smoothness of the lines that she draws. She then imports the design into “Art and Stitch” software to modify and digitize it (create the stitching line). Then, using a flash drive, she transfers the design to the “Pro-Stitcher” that instructs the

longarm machine where to move.

She might take a picture of the quilt after she has applied five roses, for example, which she takes to the drawing app so she can experiment with how she might quilt.

“Most quilters with a computerized system would purchase computerized designs, where I draw and digitize my own,” she says. “This makes my whole quilt original and all my own.”

She prefers not to have the quilting conform to the size of a block. One quilt, which she is entering in an international show, features a full-length tree with a fractured look. It includes fabric with a tree motif and other branch fabrics. Birds in red thread add colour. She designed 12 different, stylized leaves, digitized them and then used the “Art and Stitch” software.

Some people think that using a computer is “cheating,” but that same criticism was heard years ago when machines were introduced to quilting, Farquhar says. Now, the machine has taken quilting “to a whole new level.

“It’s a totally different skill set. . . . There are a whole bunch of steps, but they’re all yours.”

In an interview from Utah, Brenda Groelz, Handi Quilter’s director of marketing and education, noted: “There aren’t as many artists who work with a longarm machine.”

“She is very different. In Marilyn’s case, she shows original work, original drawings that she translates in fabric and thread. . . . Her sense of colour and fabric selection is phenomenal,” says Groelz, a quilting books author and former editor-in-chief of Quilt-maker magazine.

“You look at Marilyn’s quilts and you smile.”

Through Handi Quilter, Farquhar and the rest of the “inspiration squad” are becoming familiar faces to more quilters. They’re making videos at home describing their techniques and passion for quilting that are posted on Handi Quilter’s website. They’re featured in an ad campaign in quilting publications.

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a photo on a truck,” Farquhar says with a laugh. “A family friend said: ‘You know you’re at the pinnacle of your career when you’re on the side of a truck.’”

Farquhar has received major awards for her original quilts. She has earned more than a dozen ribbons since she started quilting 35 years ago.

At QuiltCon 2017, an international modern quilting show in Savannah, Georgia, in February, she won first place in the piecing category for her work, “Ode de Yoshiko.” She made the intricate quilt, minimalist in colour, after a friend purchased some of designer Yoshiko Jinzenji’s signed, hand-stamped fabric that Farquhar admired. The quilt is now part of an exhibit travelling to countries around the world.

Last year, a quilt called “Slices of Market Life” won the “Excellence for a Group Quilt” award at the Canadian Quilters’ Association’s National Juried Show. It was also a finalist at the American Quilter’s Society

spring show and the International Quilt Festival in Texas.

Farquhar co-ordinated a quilting group made up of Vrooman, Clarke, Natalie Dudycha, Nancy McCracken, Margaret Notar, Elizabeth Schneider and herself in order to create a tribute to the St. Jacobs Farmers’ Market after the structure burnt down.

Using original designs, photos and multiple techniques, the group made panels showing a Mennonite wagon, vendor stalls and other market features, with a “ghost layer” that gave a glimpse of burnt timbers and downed hydro wires.

It’s not easy organizing a group of quilters to do a project. “That’s like herding cats,” Vrooman says. “Everyone has a different idea of how long 44-and-one-half inches is.”

But Farquhar encouraged each quilter to express herself freely in her work.

In addition to challenging her creatively, quilting has been Farquhar’s stress-reliever. She is president of Provident

Property Management Inc., which she owns with her husband. By day, and sometimes at odd hours, she leased units, collected rent, managed tenant issues, did accounting and met on-site contractors for her clients.

When a furnace broke down on a cold winter’s night, it was Farquhar’s job to make sure it was fixed.

“You’re trying to make so many people happy,” Farquhar says. “They’re important when they’re calling.”

The drive from her Waterloo office to her home in Heidelberg helped her relax. Stress washed away as soon as she stepped inside the front door and saw her quilting room.

“I find the entire process of quilting has a calming effect. Quilting is a different realm. I determine my own rules,” she says.

Recently, the 57-year-old decided to become semi-retired, reducing the business as of September 2017 to a couple of clients.

Now she’ll have more time to explore the directions that quilting might take her – whether it’s creating more show

quilts, teaching, doing pattern design, being available to contribute more to Handi Quilter, producing more YouTube videos, or possibly doing commissioned work.

“I want to be able to participate in the aspects of quilting that give me joy.”

Farquhar’s passion for quilting resembles her carpenter father’s keen interest in lumber.

“Whatever he does, he throws himself into it. Whatever we do, we’re in 100 per cent. That’s who we are.”

After graduating from Conestoga College’s legal secretary program, Farquhar worked locally before moving to Toronto at 22. There, she was administrative assistant to Sharon, Lois and Bram, a flamboyant musical trio who became well-known performers on CBC’s “The Elephant Show.”

Farquhar stayed a couple of years with the group before entering the property management field where she excelled. She moved up to become a senior maintenance supervisor for the Metro Toronto Housing

Authority, overseeing 12 large, subsidized apartment buildings. She was the youngest female manager leading a male-dominated, unionized staff who often faced risky tenant situations.

She and Doug, who had worked as a systems analyst for the Ministry of Natural Resources, moved to Kitchener after their son was born.

Farquhar was largely self-taught when she started quilting in her early 20s. “I didn’t even know there were quilt stores. I quilted for years not knowing there was a quilting community.”

Now, aided by social media, she has quilting friends all over the world. She’s a member of several quilt guilds and organizations, including Grand River Modern Quilt Guild and the American Quilter’s Society, where members share their knowledge and inspiration.

“We share our work on Instagram and receive support or suggestions, or help us

search for the fabric we may be missing from our stash,” she says. “I’m drawn to people who are really passionate about it. You share that passion.”

She loves the quilting trips with friends and travels to two major quilt shows a year in Kentucky and Texas.

“When I go, my first priority is fabric. I look for a special fabric, something that will evolve into a quilt.” When she finds it, “my friends make fun of me and they say, ‘I have no idea what she’ll do with that.’”

Sometimes, she’s even able to persuade someone to sell her something from their “secret stash” of hand-dyed fabric.

Farquhar likes that people expect the unexpected in her quilting.

“I don’t want to do what everybody is doing,” she says. “I want to keep pushing to do something different from everybody else. If there’s a technique or colour or style I haven’t worked with, I want to play with it and achieve it.”

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