

Stitching Freedom:

On Preserving African Nova Scotian
Heritage Through Quilting



A Research Project with Anja Clyke

Through a collaboration between Dalhousie Art Gallery (DAG) and NSCAD University, supported by Dr. Julie Hollenbach and Canada Council for the Arts, Anja Clyke's powerful quilt was acquired and installed in the atrium of Dalhousie's Weldon Law Building in Halifax 2024. The commissioned quilt is a replica of one that was featured in the exhibition, *The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts*, presented at DAG in the spring of 2023. The display carried forward the African Nova Scotian tradition of using quilts as tools of subversive communications, with coded patterns historically guiding escaped slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad. Anja's work speaks to the legacy of this practice, preserving and celebrating Nova Scotia's unique craft heritage and cultural resilience.

Dalhousie Art Gallery curatorial intern Fabiyino Germain-Bajowa conducted an insightful interview with Anja Clyke and DAG Director and Curator Pamela Edmonds in 2024, while NSCAD student Geoffrey Webster authored the introductory text and photographed the studio visit, capturing the depth and meaning behind Clyke's artistry.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

Cover Photo Credit: Geoffrey Webster



Visitors to Dalhousie Art Gallery's exhibition *The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts* looking at Laurel Francis's "Preston Quilt", 2023. Photo: Steve Farmer

Rallying Community: The Secret Codes at the Dalhousie Art Gallery By Geoffrey Webster

David Woods is no stranger to placing African Nova Scotian culture on a gleaming pedestal. With his tireless ability to rally creatives within his organizations (such as the African Nova Scotian Quilters Association and Vale Quilters Association), Woods pushes curatorial boundaries with every new exhibition and develops refreshing narratives in each respective instalment of them.

Woods' exhibition, *The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts*, is one of his biggest triumphs as a curator and cultural storyteller. A collaboration between the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia and the Vale Quilters Association, this exhibition focuses on quilt-making carried out by Nova Scotia's numerous Black communities. Most notably, David Woods explores how quilts of this nature have been used as a medium of covert communication that enabled freedom for the enslaved. Also, through the careful placement of geometric shapes and the use of colour and imagery, quilters in *The Secret Codes* and many more played a crucial role in not only the genesis of freedom but in the fostering of community as one of the many subsequent aspects amongst the quilts' legacies.

This communal quality is further explored in the more contemporary quilts made by the people of the Vale Quilters Association. Commissioned by Woods, these artists were encouraged to make quilts that were based on Woods' drawings from his travels around Nova Scotia.

These illustrations resulted from Woods' time experiencing, learning and reflecting on stories from the various African Nova Scotian communities he visited and, in turn, provided the quilters the opportunity to continue sharing these stories in a new, transformative fashion.

A third effort in communal storytelling was affected when David Woods' curated paintings for this textile-oriented exhibition. The inclusion of his work as well as paintings from Ibe Ananaba, Justin Augustine, Letitia Fraser and Shawn Skeir provided an alternative yet unifying element to the exhibition: each of these paintings channeled the already-present communal narratives yet provided additional globalizing and intersectional perspectives.

By showcasing quilts and paintings rich in cultural and communal narrative, Woods paid homage to his surrounding communities and succeeded in forging new ones. Whether viewers had ties to the artists on display or to the histories presented, *The Secret Codes* was a unifying and relatable exhibition that examined broader themes such as Black resilience and care. It is also worth mentioning that a wider range of audiences could either (or simultaneously) be thoughtfully reminded or compassionately struck by the exhibition's emotive and informal qualities.

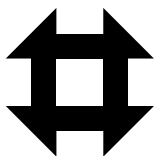
Most memorably, the exhibition's reception at the Dalhousie Art Gallery was an experiential testimony. This basement level of the larger Dalhousie Arts Centre, with its stark and brutalist architecture, became a vibrantly energetic underground haven of collective reflection and gathered viewers from all backgrounds to partake in the celebration of the cultural significance of African Nova Scotians and African Canadians.

The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts. Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2023, artgallery.dal.ca/secret-codes-african-nova-scotian-quilts



Artist Anja Clyke hand stitching the binding of one of the sample quilts. February 2024.
Photo: Geoffrey Webster

Secret Codes Underground Railroad Legend



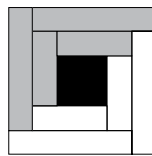
Monkey Wrench

Gather the tools you'll need to build shelters, navigate the journey, or defend yourself along the way.



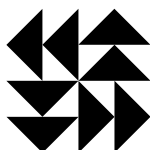
Crossroads

You have arrived at the main crossroads with several routes to freedom and must choose a path.



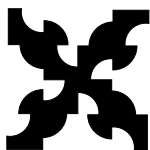
Log Cabin

A safe house along the Underground Railroad route.



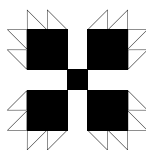
Flying Geese

A signal to follow the direction of the flying geese as they migrate north in the spring.



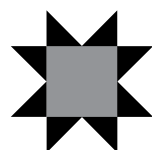
Drunkard's Path

Use a zig-zag route as you go along to confuse pursuing dogs, slave catchers.



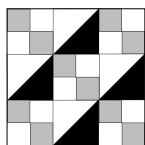
Bear's Paw

Follow the path made by bear tracks - they can lead you to water and food.



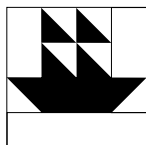
North Star Underground

Follow the North Star to Canada and freedom.



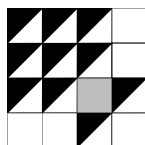
Jacob's Ladder

The stepping stones to freedom.



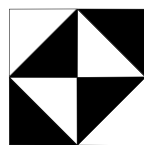
Sailing Boats

Waterway nearby or boat available to help with your escape.



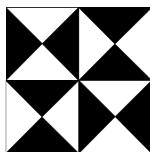
Basket

Pack provisions necessary for survival.



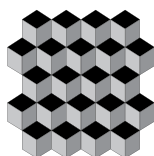
Broken Dishes

A signal that involves placing broken crockery at a landmark.



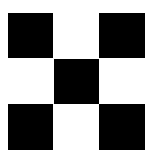
Bow Ties

Travel in disguise or change from the clothing of a slave to that of a person of higher status.



Tumbling Blocks

A symbol indicating it is time to pack up and go, as a conductor was in the area.



Shoo Fly

Identifies a well trusted person who will assist with food, shelter or guidance as you make your way north.



Artist Anja Clyde is pictured here sitting at a sewing machine, working on a quilt in her home studio. Brightly coloured quilt squares hang on the wall behind her. February 2024. Photo: Geoffrey Webster

An Interview with Anja Clyde: A Modern Quilter's Journey

By Fabyino Germain-Bajowa

Anja Clyde is an African Nova Scotian quiltmaker and founding member of the Maritime Modern Quilt Guild. Based in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Anja identifies as a modern quilter whose practice stems from an interest in quilting as a hobby and method of stress relief. Her aesthetic is often comprised of bold geometric forms and solid, bright colours, recontextualizing traditional quilt blocks and histories in new, exciting ways. Anja exhibited a series of quilts for David Woods' travelling exhibition *The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts* which was on view at the Dalhousie Art Gallery from May 11 – August 6, 2023.

Her display included a series of 24" x 24" quilts which together made up an Underground Railroad Sampler comprised of patterns featuring the "secret codes" said to guide enslaved individuals to escape in their quest to freedom. Part of a rich oral history these quilts communicated messages or offered guidance for safe passage. Some of the most recognized patterns and their meanings within this context include the Monkey Wrench – this pattern supposedly instructed individuals to gather tools needed for the journey and prepare themselves for the path ahead. It signaled a readiness for departure and Bear's Paw – this pattern is said to have encouraged people to follow the tracks of bear paws in the wilderness, which could lead to food and water sources and a path through the mountains where they might find protection.

These patterns are deeply symbolic and have become part of African diasporic folklore. While their historical use as secret codes is debated, they continue to be powerful symbols of resistance, survival, and the resilience of Black communities. Pamela Edmonds, Fabyino Germain-Bajowa, and Geoffrey Webster visited Anja Clyde's home studio in Dartmouth in February of 2024 to learn more about her process, her history, and her thoughts on the contemporary quilt community.

Fabiyino Germain-Bajowa - So how long have you been quilting for?

Anja Clyde - I've been quilting since 2003. My nephew was about to turn four. And for some reason I had in my mind I needed to make him a quilt! And I had never made a quilt before in my life (laughs). So I took a class at Atlantic Fabrics. I just enjoyed it. And I haven't stopped since!

FGB - Amazing, so that class was your very first experience with quilting?

AC - Yes, I had sewn very, very little. That was my first quilting experience.

FGB - Did anyone in your family ever quilt or sew?

AC - Maybe an aunt because I have a quilt from childhood. But it was never discussed, and I really don't know anybody who quilts in the family. They were mostly knitters.

FGB - Have you made a community for yourself? I'm wondering how you connected to other local quilters?

AC - After the class I realized I enjoyed it and I needed to learn more. I didn't know anybody who quilted so I joined a local quilt guild, but it was mostly older ladies who felt if you sewed on a machine, you really weren't quilting. You know, I'm involved in Girl Guides and I was at an event with four friends, and we just got talking about stuff and discovered the four of us quilted but didn't even know! So we got together and started quilting, and had fun. 10 years ago, in November, we created the Maritime Modern Quilt Guild. That's when I found my passion of working with solids and negative space, not so much the traditional quilting of our grandmothers. I learned a lot from them, and in the modern world there's a lot of blogs, online information from YouTube and whatnot, so that's where I've learned most of everything else that I do. It's a great community. We're all like-minded and supportive of each other.

FGB - Your designs are not traditional in the quilting sense. Do you come up with them from inspiration online? Or do they just sort of flow naturally?

AC - I don't design a lot myself. I mostly follow patterns or just simple nine patch blocks. But you can take a traditional block and make it modern by your choice of fabrics.

FGB - How do you select fabrics and what are your favourite fabrics to work with?

AC - Well, I like the Kona solid line from Robert Kaufman. It's just one that I started to use, and I stick with it. There's 365 colors. But there's a lot of fabric lines that have solids, that's just one that I started with.

FGB - And how do you source these?

AC - I purchase locally, and when I go away I order a little bit online. I basically buy what interests me, hence the reason why I have so many fabrics (laughs). Some of it people would think is more traditional than modern, but I just make what I like. And if it's traditional, it's traditional.

FGB - I'd like to ask about how you came to be involved in *The Secret Codes* exhibition in particular. Was it David Woods who reached out to you originally to get involved with the quilt-making for that?

AC - I've known David Woods for a long time, I went to school with his sister. And so he reached out to me to make the quilts for the show. I've made a few other quilts for him for other displays, and I thought it was a good project to be involved with, so I did it.

FGB - How did you enjoy the experience of making these quilts from very historical stories? Did you feel connected with the actual making of the quilts?

AC - I like bright colors, bold and bright, not what I called 'the ugly browns.' It was a challenge to make these traditional blocks, to make them modern, so I tried to keep with the spirit of the colours, but using brighter colours. And I did tell David that I can only participate if I could do it my way! And so that's how it started. I enjoy piecing more than I do the actual quilting. Just because it takes so much time and it's like, how do I quilt this? So it did take me a while. I wanted to make sure I quilt them in a manner that reflected the purpose of the quilt.

FGB - Can you tell us a little bit about the Underground Railroad Sampler quilt and how you're going about making these sampler quilts?

AC - So there is a movement that these blocks meant something. But there are some people who don't believe they mean anything. And you know what, I don't know, I wasn't there! I believe they have a meaning whether they actually do or not. And so I just enjoy them, the story is important. And I like to try to create a quilting plan. So the one that's on my machine downstairs, it's called "bow tie," or "hourglass block." And so the meaning was that when the slaves were escaping, you had to dress yourself in a manner so that you looked 'more.' So the quilting I chose was loops and flowers, because you know, you might have a flower in your lapel or something like that. The other one, The North Star, I quilted with stars, because you look to the stars and follow the North star to Canada.

FGB - And so for most of these designs, the pattern itself, do you find through the internet and research?

AC - Yes, there's anything you want to know about quilting on the internet. All blocks started out as a traditional block because someone however many years ago, created it. But as you can see on this one, I think it's a Saw Tooth Star, I made it modern by adding another star instead of having a solid center. With modern quilting, it's also a negative space. Traditional quilts would have a border and a sashing, and is very flowery, but we don't do a lot of borders. And we may tweak a block like this. And so instead of doing say a three by four quilt with four of these, I might put two and then add more negative space to get the same size quilt. It's not that traditional setting, but it's the same traditional block that someone created, however many years ago.

FGB - It's like re-mixing the traditional blocks in more contemporary ways. This is beautiful.

AC - Exactly! And then because I use solids this takes on a different look. A lot of the terminology now is modern traditionalism. And everybody interprets that differently. People always say, "what's your style?" I just make what I like. Because I do like some traditional things, and I like modern things. I know you have to have some sort of a label to identify yourself, but I just make what I like.

FGB - Can I ask you a bit about the colour choices for the sampler quilt? I'm wondering how you're selecting the colours?

AC - So David chose the blocks that he wanted. Then I just kind of played on the internet to see what normal colours were, and then I picked the brighter version of it. The log cabin block always has a red center, which represents the fire in the home. I made sure I picked a bright red.

Pamela Edmonds - So you had some creative licensing?

AC - Yes, otherwise that would be kind of boring. Like the North Star, I added the one in the middle just to give it some more.

FGB - Is there anything that you want people to know about the sampler quilt? Could you talk about how it feels for you to be making the sampler?

AC - So again, going back to the fact that some people don't believe in the authenticity of the "secret codes", all we have is faith! Faith and hope. And we may all be wrong at the end of the day, I don't know. I like to think that these did exist and have a meaning, so it's nice just to be part of a little bit of history, and maybe telling the story of the blocks. It's just nice to be able to showcase something traditional, in a modern way, and to show that quilting is still a big hobby, and it's fun, it's exciting, you can be creative.

FGB - How often do you meet with your quilt group?

AC - We have a monthly meeting, some business, an education piece, and an opportunity to show what you've been doing. Or if you're struggling, like "how do I quilt this?" you can bring it. And then we get together once a month to sew. You just bring your projects, sew, and be social! And sometimes, my four friends, the four of us will get together at each other's homes occasionally to just sew together.

FGB - Do you feel like it's very much a community-based practice?

AC - You can make quilting a sole practice and never see or meet with someone, or you can totally make it social, and it's more fun. During COVID, we couldn't get out and see people and one thing you can do with quilting is something called a "round robin". A friend of mine out in BC started it, but called it "The Stay At Home Round Robin." So you make your own thing, but we tell each other what each round is. During the pandemic, a lot of people took up sewing as a hobby and to also make masks. And I guess the world was like, "people quilt"? And it's like, yes, we've always been here and we're not all 80 years old! So I think quilting is making a comeback.

PE - Do you consider your quilts art pieces?



Anja Clyke's "Underground Railroad Sampler" (2023) installed alongside a legend of underground railroad patterns that explained each pattern's symbolic meaning, from the exhibition *The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts*, Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2023. Photo: Steve Farmer.

AC - Not really but I'm starting to. I don't make quilts to sell. I have done some commissions, and it always is a dilemma to try to figure out what to charge. - This is my passion and hobby. I don't want it to be a career necessarily. But I am always open to doing a commission if it's something that speaks to me, or you know, a great project.

PE - Do you think there's an African Nova Scotian tradition like how the Gee's Bend quilter have their own kind of abstract style? Do you think there was a style here in Nova Scotia?

AC - My grandmother is from New Glasgow, but I only ever just quilted for fun, it was never a mission to go and learn for heritage and all that. But there probably is because in years gone by that's how people make quilts, with whatever was left from the skirt or whatever you had to recycle. And you know, they used to cut with scissors. Like make a cardboard template for example. I use a rotary cutter and a ruler, and that's how quilting has evolved. Same technique, we're just using better tools. And so I just continue to quilt. The Vale Quilters, they do, like David does, the picture quilts.

PE - Well what I learned with the show was that they're a very passionate group, the quilters. I've met potters who are very similar, they are very passionate about technique, getting together, really dedicated to their practice.

AC - I am passionate and dedicated and want to do a good job, but I'm not counting these stitches (laughs). The running joke in the quilt communities is people say "What do you think? Am I allowed to do this?" And it's like, there's no quilt police, just do what you like, who cares what other people think! As long as it looks nice and turns out, and you're happy. Do what you like! So that's why I gravitate to the modern quilters. You still have to follow some specific guidelines, but there's no rules.

FGB - Well thanks so much.

AC - Thank you!