

# BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## *Pamela Gustavson Johnson*

### Artist

Conducted by Linnea Johnson on October 13, 2014 at Pamela Gustavson Johnson's home, Kansas City, Missouri

Pamela Gustavson Johnson (b. 1955, New Haven, Connecticut) graduated with a B.A. in psychology from Yale University in 1977, and worked as a fine quilter from 1977 to 1987.

Living in New Haven, Connecticut, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then Kansas City, Missouri, Pamela was a pioneer in the field of fine art quilting. Her interest in cognitive psychology, mathematics, and modern art informed Pamela's hand-quilted works.

Experimenting with traditional quilt patterns, Pamela explored visual perception and color theory. Her work has graced the cover of *Fiberarts Magazine* and was selected for five consecutive Quilt National exhibitions. Pamela chose to put her art career on hold in 1987 to raise her two daughters. She has pursued jewelry making and knitting since her hiatus from the quilting world. Now an empty nester, she is planning her return in the coming years.

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This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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**Linnea Johnson [LJ]:** My name is Linnea Johnson, and I am here with my mother, Pamela Gustavson Johnson, on October 13, 2014, at Pamela's home in Kansas City, Missouri, and my childhood home. Pamela, when were you born and where?

**Pamela Gustavson Johnson [PGJ]:** I was born in New Haven, Connecticut on the fifth of July in 1955.

**LJ:** When did you start making things?

**PGJ:** I've been making things my whole life. As a child, that was my obsession. I was always making things out of something: folding paper, origami, stringing beads, and by about the age of eight my mother who always made my clothes decided—actually it was I who decided to make a garment during spring break one year. Your grandma, June Gustavson, was my teacher. We made an A-line skirt out of some blue fabric. I was so proud to wear it to fourth

grade when spring break was over, and everyone was shocked that I had actually made this garment myself. My whole life I have been profoundly interested in collecting small things and making things out of whatever was available.

**LJ:** What was your childhood like?

**PGJ:** That's an interesting question that I thought about more recently given the difference between how you grew up, and how I grew up because in this day and age with so much technology, I realized that when I was a child, I was in charge of my own entertainment. If I wanted something interesting to do, I had to generate that project myself, as opposed to turning on my iPhone or playing a computer game. Because we didn't have a huge amount of money, I was constantly scrounging for materials and wishing I had more materials. When I was a little girl we had a public school program that took place during the summers called Playground. My local grammar school would have the playground open, and they would have counselors there, and kids could go engage in different activities. We would have sports, and arts and crafts. My favorite, favorite, favorite thing to do there was to make lanyards out of that plastic material—I think you call in gimp. For ten cents you would get a couple of yards of two different colors, and I remember this nice older girl taught me how to do the braiding and I could just do that all day long. We had a system where we would hook it to the chain link fence that surrounded the school and we would just stand there against the fence and braid and step back as our braids got longer and longer. I remember that one of my childhood dreams was—I would watch the counselor pull a couple of yards off of a spool of this beautiful material, and I thought if I were the luckiest person in the world I would have whole spools of that myself. I was always enamored of having materials. At the same time I was also doing a lot of beading. It would be the kind of beading you do on a Native American style loom. I could never just sit still and watch *Leave it to Beaver*. I always had to be doing something with my hands. I would have on the table next to where I sat to watch television a box of craft materials whether it was origami paper, beads to string, or a sewing project, I was constantly making something.

**LJ:** How did you find your way to quilting?

**PGJ:** As I said earlier, I had a very strong background in sewing techniques because my mother had a wonderful old Singer sewing machine and she was quite adept at making my school clothes. As I said, I decided I wanted to make a skirt in the fourth grade. She walked me through it, and I wore the skirt. Then in junior high school it was still the days when the girls would go to cooking and sewing and the boys would go to shop class, whatever they did there. So I learned some more techniques in sewing class. But now that I say that I really realize that once I got started—one of your grandmother's favorite quotes was "I didn't feel like I had to teach you whatever because I imagined you were smart enough to pick up a book and figure it out yourself." And that was my primary mode of operation for most of my life. If I wanted something, I would get a book, read the directions, practice with some materials and just do it. So although I had careful instruction from my mother on how to use a sewing machine, I could pick up a pattern and dive in and do it.

**LJ:** When do you think you made your first quilt?

**PGJ:** Ok, I do know that. It was I think 1975 in the summer between sophomore and junior year of college. I decided I wanted to make a patchwork skirt.

**LJ:** Sounds very trendy.

**PGJ:** Yes, I think in the seventies it was the thing to do. I had one book that had quilt block designs in it and I used traditional sewing techniques to make the blocks. For example I

made the patterns out of tissue paper and pinned them down to the fabric and cut out around them, which is not what quilters would do, but that's what I was familiar with. I sewed a number of blocks together and then when I looked at them, I thought, if I make this skirt I don't think I'm actually going to wear it, so why don't I just make a quilt. So I sewed the blocks into a rectangular form and decided to go ahead and just do the quilt. It started out as a skirt and ended up as my first quilt. As I recall the title of the quilt is *New Years Eve 1976* because I remember sitting up on New Years Eve and finishing the quilting and the binding. It is a bit anomalous in that it doesn't follow any traditional aspects of making quilts because it came from really no understanding of what the quilt tradition was other than I think I'll make some blocks and stitch them together, and I moved on from there.

**LJ:** Can you tell me about what you studied in college?

**PGJ:** I was a psychology major at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. It is an interesting question, Linnea, because when I was reviewing a lecture I used to give to quilters about the work that I had done— I had forgotten this, but the lecture reminded me that I started my discussion about where my ideas came from with a quote that I had overheard at one of my quilt shows. I heard a woman say, "I heard this girl was a psychology major; I don't know what that has to do with quilt making." And I thought oh, wow. I was studying cognitive psychology and I was interested in perception, looking at patterns, and understanding perceptual processes. The quilts that I made had everything to do with cognitive psychology. After I did my first quilt project that summer I realized that I wanted to spend some time studying art history and studio art, so I added those classes to my curriculum. I wanted to switch to being an art major, but my father said, "you have four years to finish college," and there wasn't time to do that. At the end I just packed in as much studio art and art history as I could. As a senior I decided to combine my interest in quilts, studio art, and art history in my senior essay, which is what they call a senior thesis at Yale. I decided to engage in my interest in quilts, art, and cognitive psychology. This paper which was called "The American Tradition in Patchwork Quilting: A Cognitive Psychological Approach to Experimental Aesthetics." That gave me the freedom to read all of the history books I could find about the tradition of quilt making and I spent a lot of time looking at how quilt patterns changed over time in the United States. I did a study where I gave drawings of quilts for people to sort according to how they saw those images relating to each other, and then I tried to relate them to the historical progression of patterns over time and across a couple of cultures, Amish quilting for one. That was the thing that brought my interest in craft, my interest in art history, and my interest in quilts together.

**LJ:** Can you tell me more about how your study of psychology influenced your work, or any other field for that matter?

**PGJ:** The lecture that I used to give to quilters was called "Ten Years of Quilt Making: Sources, Structure, and Color." The reason I chose those three elements was because people would always say, "Oh wow, how did you choose those colors and how do you come up with your patterns and designs?" The sources of those elements of my work were profoundly related to my study of psychology, my study of art history, and my study of studio art, particularly the color theories of Josef Albers. When I was at Yale I was lucky enough to study color with Robert Reed who had been a student of Josef Albers. When we look at individual quilts of mine I can point out specific aspects of cognitive psych and whether it has to do with aspects of perception. For example, I use the Necker cube, which is a line drawing of a three dimensional cube that reverses in space when you stare at it, and different perceptual and cognitive phenomenon that interested me. In the patterns that I devised for the quilts that I made, I was able to address Albers teachings about the relativity of color

effects. He constantly said there is a difference between physical fact and psychic effect. In other words, what is on the page or on the painting, or on the quilt is different than what our eyes actually see, and that, of course, his other famous statement being, "Color is the most relative medium in art," is one aspect of color theory that I take very seriously. I tried to play with that in most of my quilts and in the color selections I made. To move on from there, another Bauhaus theorist that interested me was Johannes Itten, and his book about color theory in which he describes at great length seven color contrast. When you talk to quilters about color they think in terms of fewer contrasts. They think light and dark, red and blue. They are thinking about value and hue primarily, but Itten expands this to a much broader way of looking at color and color effects by thinking of contrasts in more ways such as contrast of extension, complimentary contrast, contrast of temperature, simultaneous contrast. It expands your experience of the color by giving you more complicated notions about how you are seeing and what you are seeing.

**LJ:** You talked a lot about how Josef Albers and Johannes Itten influenced you. Were there any other artists or makers that influenced what you were making in the 1970s and 1980s?

**PGJ:** Yes because another thing I talked about in my sources lecture is that anything can be a source of inspiration for quilting designs. I actually very seldom looked to quilt makers for ideas for quilt designs. At the time, this is thirty-five to forty years ago, I looked to certain optical artists like Victor Vasarely because so many of the paintings they were making structures which were very related visually to the kinds of structures that quilt makers were doing. It was simple geometric structures. My other interest from studying art history had to do with Constructivism. I have always been a very rational, scientific thinker as apposed to—I always eschewed the idea of reading novels. I always thought you read for information, you don't read for story time. I was always very interested in biology, mathematics, and the intersection of science and art because I saw the kind of art I was doing as an inquiry rather than some gut wrenching, emotional expression of some nebulous something. It was more a scientific approach. I thought, "If I do this, then what will happen?" I was very enamored of the Constructivists because they had a much more rational and experimental approach to their design and also it was non-representational, it was non-objective art, which is another aspect of the work that I do. I don't do appliqué. I don't make pictures of things. What I do is about relationships among forms and colors. It's not narrative in any particular sense. And many quilt makers today are interested in pictorial representation and narrative content and that is something that doesn't particularly interest me. So I was always interested in things like fractals and other mathematical systems that would generate patterns of interest.

**LJ:** How did you make the decision to become an artist, or quilt maker? What do you call yourself?

**PGJ:** That's another very good question because when I thought about it—people started calling me an artist and for a long period of time I found that fairly uncomfortable or a little bit pompous because I thought I make quilts, I have these ideas I feel compelled to exercise. As time went on I was more accepting of that idea because it was something that I was entirely consumed by—I mean, I just worked constantly, and it pervaded all aspects of my thinking. This led me to think of myself as an artist, and as far as the rift between artists and craftsmen is concerned, I think that is a dialogue that will go on for a very long time, and I don't think I might be the person to bring that conversation to an end.

**LJ:** You mentioned having to do other things to support yourself while being an artist. What jobs did you do?

**PGJ:** At first I worked for a Yale trained architect in New Haven who had a company called Fiber Works. Her name was Joy Wulke. I was her production assistant. She would draw designs for things, and I would execute them. Many different projects from quilted comforters all the way to a line of canvas luggage for Dansk Designs. I learned a lot of different construction techniques, and it was a big help to me as far as learning about an artist way of life as well as working for someone who was a practicing artist. Then I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to be with my fiancé, Mark Johnson, who was studying law at Harvard. When I first got there I was making cloth purses for a French company called Pierre Deux, and working piece rate, which was a really sad way of life. I lived in a very nice attic of a very nice house in Cambridge, and I would go on the subway to Newberry Street, pick up my materials, bring them home, and sew them together, and sew in a label that said, "made in France." But I would tuck the made in France under the binding so it just said Pierre Deux. At \$7 a bag and only being able to make three of those a day, I realized that this was not going to suffice, so I took a job at a quilt store in Harvard Square which bolstered my connections to other quilt makers and the quilt making community in general. It gave me an opportunity to acquire more materials. I would work there during the day and I would go home and put in another days work in my attic studio.

**LJ:** What did you do to support yourself when you moved to Kansas City?

**PGJ:** Oh, I married your father [laughs.]

**LJ:** When did you move to Kansas City?

**PGJ:** We were married in 1980, and a couple days later we drove out to Kansas City where your dad had taken a job with a law firm here. I went to a quilt store on the [Country Club] Plaza called Quilt Country and asked if they needed any help, and of course, they thought I was marvelous. I worked for Terry Thompson for a number of years part time in that quilt store, and it also helped me connect with the Quilters Guild of Kansas City and a lot of local quilters in the community here.

**LJ:** One interesting thing about being a crafts person is that you often have to be a maker and also a businessperson and a champion of your own work. How did you deal with the business side of being a craftsperson? Did you sell your work?

**PGJ:** I did sell my work. I was very lucky to have been introduced to a gallery owner in Kansas City named Virginia Hillix, a very smart lady who taught art history, history of architecture and painting at a variety of institutions in Missouri including the University of Missouri in Maryville, I think. She was the director of a gallery in Kansas City that was owned by another person, but she was in charge of finding artists. She became my mentor. She encouraged the work I was doing and gave me two one-person shows at the gallery called Bedyk Gallery on Westport Road, which was the hot spot for galleries in the eighties. That was my launch into the art world and to finding my way to being exposed in a variety of publications and being asked to do lectures about the work that I do, and workshops on color theory, which I did for a while for a variety of quilter's guilds.

**LJ:** What was the art and craft scene like at the time? Was there one?

**PGJ:** The art scene in Kansas City was very different from what it is now because it has just exploded now. At the time there were several highly regarded gallerists: Myra Morgan, Dorie Gates, Douglas Drake—a variety of people who were selling very good work and then there were some other small galleries that dealt primarily with local artists, and of course the Kansas City Artists Coalition, which has been a local arts organization for many years and continues to have gallery and studio. I do admit to have been in a space in between the art

community and the craft community. I continued to go to monthly meetings of the Kansas City Quilters Guild, just for the experience of being around people who quilted, but at that time in the 80s it was a fairly old crowd, and I was very young and very young looking. Much of the work that was being done was extremely traditional and extremely conservative. The work I was doing was not very well understood and also my thoughts about my purpose and my rights as an artist and craftsperson were not well understood or well received. For example, people would ask me for patterns and because the tradition of quilt making is a tradition of sharing—that quilt patterns went from one end of the country to another, from one community to another through a tradition of sharing—“Oh great pattern, can you give me a copy of that?” And it was always “yes.” And my case it was always “no.” Because I was registering copyrights for the innovative patterns that I labored over, and this was an issue that was regarded in a very negative way here. After I started having quilts published in quilting magazine like *Quilters Newsletter* or whatever, I would get letters in the mail saying, “That is such an amazing quilt, would you please send me the pattern.” I would write back saying, “I’m sorry, I don’t sell my patterns. When I sell a piece of my work it is sold with the expectation that it is a unique piece of work and you won’t see it anywhere else.” This was a very difficult time for me because this was not the tradition. It was not acceptable. It was also very difficult seeing my work copied without permission and published under other people’s names and also being copied by Amish quilters and sold through catalogues. The good news is that there is a much different attitude toward copyright ownership now especially with the Artists Rights Society, which was started by a number of fine artists—I think Frank Stella was highly involved with that, trying to make sure that artists retained the rights to their innovative works. This is something that in craft was even further from peoples’ minds.

**LJ:** What publications and shows did you have work in?

**PGJ:** After my first show, which I think was in 1982, at Bedyk Gallery, I received an awful lot of attention through to local newspaper, and I also advertised the show through *American Craft Magazine* and *Quilter’s Newsletter* magazine. I started to get quite a bit of attention outside of Kansas City asking me to display quilts that they had seen through images of my show in quilt shows in many different places. I was also entering something called Quilt National, which was the first show dedicated to fine art quilts, studio art quilts—whatever the term is today. Since Quilt National published catalogues of the works involved, I also would be getting calls from other artists who wanted to use images of my quilts in their lectures and workshops or from quilters’ guilds asking me to come talk to them.

**LJ:** I remember that you had some images published with Hallmark. Can you tell me about that?

**PGJ:** Yes, that was another one of those artsy craftsy sorts of situations that I found fairly offensive. One day a Hallmark representative came to Quilters Guild and said, “We are doing a calendar of quilt images and we were wondering if anyone in the guild would like to submit quilts for possible publication.” And of course ever hand went up, and I included myself. I brought some work down to Hallmark to be photographed, and I was also given a contract that said we will take the photographs and then the copy write of the image will be ours to use freely. We can use it for this calendar and then we will have the right to use it for any purpose whatsoever afterwards. Since I was married to a lawyer, I said to Mark, “I don’t think I like this story, and I don’t know why they aren’t willing to pay us for the use of our work.” And he said, “Yeah, lets re-write this contract.” So we did. I asked for \$250 and I said in the contract if they wanted to use these images again I would have to be contacted again to renegotiate the use and the fee, which of course, did happen later on. Several of my quilts appeared in a calendar, and one of them was on the cover. A friend of mine who worked at

Hallmark said that their in-house newsletter said it was the best-selling calendar they ever had up until that time. It was a powerful image, and I will share that with you.

**LJ:** Did Hallmark ever end up contacting you again?

**PGJ:** Yes, they did. I got a phone call one day that they wanted to make one of the images in the calendar into a puzzle. I said, "Ok." And I gave it some thought, and I said that I wanted X number of dollars for the use of the image. I was fairly offended that the woman on the other side pretty much did a spit-take and said, "Well, we don't have that in our budget." And I said, "Fine. No thank you."

**LJ:** Do you think they were intending you pay you at all?

**PGJ:** I think they weren't intending to pay me, but I think I only asked for \$1500 for the use to make hundreds of thousands of puzzles.

**LJ:** That would be sold all around the world.

**PGJ:** Yes. I felt very offended that this woman said, "We don't have the funds in the budget for that." I thought that was ridiculous. You can go somewhere else to get free work, and I am not willing to give my work for free. I feel that in a craft context, that is a situation that you have to struggle against.

**LJ:** Do you remember any institutions or exhibitions your quilts were shown in?

**PGJ:** Quilt National would probably be the biggest.

**LJ:** Was that a travelling show?

**PGJ:** It originates in Athens, Ohio at a cultural arts center called the Dairy Barn, which I guess is a renovated dairy barn. They also did a catalogue and a travelling portion of the show.

**LJ:** Was this an annual competition?

**PGJ:** This was every two years, as I recall. I was in the second one, which would have been I think 1978—was the first one I was in. I was in every one that I entered up until the time I stopped making new work. That was another way I got a lot more attention. My work was sent to various venues including an outpost of the Museum of American Craft in New York City, which was—I don't know where it was. It was in some location. Your dad and I went on the train from New Haven to see it. I also had requests to put work in a show that was in Japan—

**LJ:** Did you do it?

**PGJ:** I did. I have a lovely catalogue of it. A lot of different shows in a lot of different places.

**LJ:** Do you have work in any collections?

**PGJ:** Yes. Ironically Hallmark has more of my quilts than any other single person or organization. They have a half-dozen or so in their curatorial collection, which is an amazing collection of fine art and craft. I also have work in a collection of a law firm in town, DST Corporation, the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, and a variety of private collections.

**LJ:** How did you price your quilts?

**PGJ:** Pricing quilts was a pretty pathetic enterprise. I felt as though it should reflect the amount of time I spent on the work, so given that this was pre-computer days, I was very big

on index cards. I had an index card for every quilt and when I started a project, I would put the time and the date and what aspect of the quilt I was working on, such as cutting out the shapes, piecing the shapes together, quilting and so forth. So I have an extensive collection of notecards describing every aspect of the construction and how long it took. I would add up those hours in the end, and at the time—a long time ago, I think the minimum wage was I think \$3 and change. I would multiply the number of hours times five and that would be my wholesale price. Usually the gallerist would double that price. I might note that that did not include materials because material cost seemed inconsequential to the value of the quilt, and also that time did not include design time because that was very difficult for me to quantify. It just included actual construction time.

**LJ:** Do you remember what some of your quilts sold for?

**PGJ:** For as little as \$300 for something that was probably 36 by 36 inches and as much as \$2500 that would have been 72 by 72 inches. That seemed like a huge amount of money in those days. That particular piece was bought by a law firm.

**LJ:** Did you even encounter any pushback to your prices?

**PGJ:** That's a very good question. Thank you for asking. Because my quilts were exposed nationally and internationally through Quilt National and other shows, I did get a call once from Judith and Ardith James who are—I did not know at the time—they have funded a quilt museum, I think in Nebraska, called the [International Quilt Study Center & Museum]. I got a call from them—they had seen one of my pieces through Quilt National. The price was I think \$1500, and they said, "Would you take \$1000?" And I said, "No thank you. The price is the price." I rejected their offer and interestingly enough a friend of mine who is a well-known quilt maker named Michael James said to me, "Oh, you may have made a mistake there because they have one of the best quilt collections in the world, and you might have wanted to be in their collection." And I said to him, "I'm really sorry but if they really have that much regard for quilt makers, they can pay the price that is asked."

**LJ:** That they should pay you at least \$5 an hour.

**PGJ:** Right. Making a living at this was really not—the only way I really think at that time and perhaps even now to make a living in studio art quilt making had to do with lots of travel and giving lectures and workshops. That was where the actual money was.

**LJ:** You said that you did give some lectures and workshops. Where did you do that, how much did you do it, and did you enjoy it?

**PGJ:** That's another good question because I did it fairly kicking and screaming. The interesting thing is that when your work gets out and people see it, then they want to know you. Quilt guilds would call and say, "Oh, please come and give a lecture, and do you have workshops?" I thought, "No, I don't have either one of those things." I spent countless hours putting together a lecture and endless amounts of time putting together a workshop on color for quilters because I provided extensive packets of colored paper squares to illustrate specific color theories for people to investigate during the class time. It took hours and hours with a paper cutter to get these kits together, which meant that I really wasn't making any money doing it. It was an interesting process. I was a bit disillusioned with the process because I felt that many of the students were more interested in being you than being themselves. That they were really interested in copying what you did rather than learning new techniques or ideas so they could generate their own fresh ideas. I found that kind of discouraging. It's very different now—this was of course, a very long time ago. It is probably a very different group of women now.

**LJ:** Around 1987 you decided to put your quilt making on hold. Can you tell me a bit about that?

**PGJ:** I remember one day sitting in the living room reading a book called *Silences* by Tilly Olsen. I read and read and cried and cried. Your dad came home from work and saw me sitting there and said, "What is wrong with you?" And I said, "Oh nothing, I'm just reading this book about women artists and why there aren't any. And he was like, "Ok." What I learned from that book was that in order to be a woman artist you really had to eschew child bearing. That most women who became successful as artists were childless for one reason or another, or they were independently wealthy, which I was not, or they had spouses or partners who were extraordinarily supportive and helpful. This was not my circumstance. I had decided that I wanted to have children, and I put my quilt making aside because I am the kind of a person who dives headlong into something and when I was quilting, I was quilting 100% and if I were going to be a mother, I was going to be a mother 100%. I realized that I did not think I had the capacity to divide my time between the needs of a child and my needs as an artist and be able to not feel angry with one or the other.

**LJ:** Have you continued to make things since you decided to stop quilting?

**PGJ:** I have done a small handful of quilts since my children were born. Most of them had to do with school projects. As a parent you are frequently called upon to do a variety of mindless tasks for schools, and I decided that I don't need to go there and stuff envelopes. I should spend my time volunteering by doing something that no one else can do. The first project I did at the Pembroke Hill School was for preschool where I gave the children—

**LJ:** I know. You did this project with my sister's preschool class, and she is two years older than me so that would have been something like 1991. You gave us each an envelope that had the cut fabric squares for the quilt and we did something with that.

**PGJ:** That's right. I gave you each a piece of paper with a grid drawn on it that was four by four squares, and then I gave you an envelope that had squares that were made out of two different colored right triangles. You had either 9 or 16 squares that were made up of two triangles, and it was your job to arrange them on the paper grid in any design that you liked. And then we pinned them down, and I sewed them together, and then I sewed them into lattice strips, backed it, quilted it, and hung it in your classroom. The interesting thing was that when my children finished with that very nice preschool teacher she said, "Well, we continue to do that project except we do it with paper and don't end up with a quilt." So I guess I started something. And when your sister was in fourth grade, we did another hand sewing quilt project that ended up with a quilt for the classroom.

**LJ:** I remember you being very helpful with all of my art projects throughout school.

For instance I remember in third grade when we did a unit on American Indians. Looking back on it, it seems a little politically incorrect, and I cringe thinking about what they asked us to do. They asked us to make a costume. We were to dress up as American Indians for our choral concert. We were supposed to dress up as Indians, which I feel so uncomfortable thinking about it now.

**PGJ:** I felt uncomfortable with it too, so we went to the powwow at the Native American college in Lawrence, Kansas called Haskell Indian Nation. We had made an elk's tooth dress for your sister, and I asked you what kind of regalia you would like to make. And you saw some children dancing in jingle dresses and you said, "Mommy, I want one of those." And I said, "Oh, no." So we bought some curled up tin can lids from a booth. Tobacco can lids. And we went home and Linnea wore out her little fingers crimping the lids on strips of fabric so I

could sew them down to the dress. I was very adamant that you had something that was traditional and understood and accurate and that you weren't hopping around in a polo shirt with a feather hanging off your belt because I found that really offensive. Or you were not wearing a Disney Pocahontas Halloween costume. So we started at the beginning and we carried it through the end.

**LJ:** I remember that you made me some accessories as well.

**PGJ:** I did find a deer skin at an estate sale, and I made you hand stitched, hand beaded moccasins to go with your dress.

**LJ:** There was also a beaded fan.

**PGJ:** Yes, there was a feather fan with a beaded handle and deerskin fringe.

**LJ:** I remember that you did a lot of research for this project.

**PGJ:** We did it together. I took you to the powwow, you saw the Native Americans in their regalia, and we made some choices. We talked to a lot of people.

**LJ:** What are some of the other things you have been making over the past thirty years other than helping my sister and me with our school projects?

**PGJ:** I think that the drive to make things is fairly profound and fairly ingrained in myself, and my family history having come from your grandfather who was a fine carpenter and his wife who was a fine craftsperson as well. She quilted, embroidered, and crotched. And being Swedish all of those handcrafts were very important to their cultural history. I felt the need to engage with some kind of product making. I turned back to beading and I started a small business making beaded necklaces, and the reason I chose that was because it wasn't messy, it didn't take up a lot of space, and I could do it a little bit at a time. It suited the time frame that I would have available and still be able to bring you back and forth to school and take you to soccer practice and do all those things that moms had to do. It was basically portable and confinable. I did that for a number of years and then I turned to knitting. I used to knit as a child quite a bit.

**LJ:** What brought you back to knitting?

**PGJ:** It was that broken leg that brought me back to knitting. I was forced to sit on the couch for weeks and weeks and I thought, I can't just sit here, so I need to figure out something. I started knitting again. Given my interest in pattern and color theory, I devised a double knitting technique that works for me in terms of knitting parallel stripes. I started first with horizontal stripes and became tired of that—I thought I needed another method that I can make vertical stripes. I only make scarves because it is a receptacle for color investigation and playing with the yarn. So I devised a double knitting system where I could make vertical lines and play with yarns, color and texture and make some interesting patterns across the span of a few inches. Again this was something that was portable and something I could pick up and put down and was not as time consuming or took as much space.

**LJ:** Does quilt making require a lot of space?

**PGJ:** That is an interesting question because as I studied the history of quilt making—if you look at English prototypes from 1700s and so forth their quilts are fundamentally central medallion quilts, which would be big pieces of cloth, but when the tradition was practiced in the United States in the early times, there was a new tradition of repeated blocks. This made it easier to do in a small space. You would cut out your shapes, sew them together in blocks,

which would take up only the space of your lap, and when you collected enough of those blocks you could sew them together and then do the quilting, which was sometimes done as a communal activity because setting up a quilt—nobody had the space to set up a quilt frame and occupy an entire room for how ever many weeks or months to do the quilting. So if you had a group of women come and help you, you could get it done in a day or two. The block tradition of quilt making made it a portable and confinable activity, but for me having a studio space where I could have my fabrics, sewing machine, ironing board, cutting table, did take up a lot of space and a lot of time, which I did not have to give.

**LJ:** Have you thought about resuming your quilt making?

**PGJ:** Yes, I am very happy and sad at the same time to be an empty nester. I am looking forward to putting my knitting on the back burner and moving back into the quilt making process because I have a lot of design ideas that have been percolating for many years that I would like to execute. Part of my glee in returning to this idea has to do with a book I read a number of years ago about women mathematicians. I was grateful to read that although males in the mathematical field do their best work in their thirties, women mathematicians do their best work in their sixties. So year, next year I'll be sixty, and I'm ready to start over.

**LJ:** I am hoping that you can show me some of the work that you still have in a trundle bed under the bed in the master bedroom to learn a little more about your process. And you can tell me about your work as we look at it.

[Interview breaks]

[Interview resumes]

**LJ:** My name is Linnea Johnson and I am here with Pamela Gustavson Johnson, and we are continuing our interview from earlier today on October 13, 2014. Now we are looking at some of Pamela's quilts and she will talk us through some of the ideas behind the quilts and give us an insight into her process.

**PGJ:** Most of my quilts start with a traditional quilt pattern, and then I try to take that pattern and move in a direction away from the traditional use of that pattern either in terms of scale, color, or pattern. In this particular case, it is a log cabin pattern but instead of just using strips of equal width, I varied the strips from one inch to half an inch and alternated them so when you have the shuffling of colors, the interactions vary a bit with the quantity of the color. In some cases you have twice as much of one color as you do of the other so the effect of one color on the other is magnified because of that contrast in quantity. This particular quilt is kind of the beginning of a long series of mine called *Log Cabin Four Corners* because I have taken this one pattern and instead of using it in the traditional sense of cutting the block in half in terms of light and dark, or in other words, dividing the block in half according to value or hue. I am filtering the colors through the entire quilt from four different vantage points and having them come together and meet in the center. We have many different interactions going on within the same piece rather than just a binary contrast of light and dark, or black and white or whatever. The subject of this quilt really has to do with color interaction. Taking four different colors and having them meet in different quadrants of the quilt with a different partner, so to speak. Each color gets to interact with a different color on each side so that you get to see how they appear when they are in combination with a different color.

**LJ:** I see that you have some labeling on your quilts. How do you mark them?

**PGJ:** I attach hand written muslin labels to the back of each quilt that include my name, the name of the quilt, the date of its completion, its size, my signature, and the materials used,

as well as the techniques used. For example, this one says hand quilted, machined pieced, cotton with polyester batting. It is fairly well documented in terms of date and the materials. On the front of the quilt I have embroidered my name in full with copyright notice and date so that it is visible to an attentive viewer since it is fairly small, but still visible in front of the quilt.

**LJ:** You also include the copyright notation on the back of the quilt.

**PGJ:** I guess so!

**PGJ:** This is another set of log cabin quilts where I used not just the filtering color system but I also tried to look at another color technique of transparency. These seem to have layers of transparent color, one on top of the other. A lot of people are interested in dying fabrics and making color gradations through a technical dying process that will result in an effect like this but I've never been interested in producing my own fabrics whether painted, printed, or dyed. My interest is in using found objects and responding to the materials that I find. Many times I will see a printed fabric and say, "What does this print tell me to do. Or how can I use this print to maximize its qualities, and how would I combine it with something else to make it work?" Unlike other quilters, I have never been interested in producing my own materials to work with. I have been interested in scavenging for goods and responding to those objects themselves.

This is one of the series of three where I used tints, tones, and shades of the same color in order to produce an effect of transparent layering.

**LJ:** How do you hang your pieces?

**PGJ:** I am very particular about how the work is hung, of course, because it can either attract or detract from the presentation tremendously. I always have invisible, hand-sewn sleeves on the back of each piece, which will accommodate a thin wood rod that is attached directly to the wall. No attachments are ever seen. I really can't stand when I see quilts hanging from poles because it always interferes with the experience of the piece itself. I don't want to see any means of attachment.

**LJ:** Are all of your quilts made with the intention of being hung, or are some of them made to be used?

**PGJ:** The quilt that is on the bed right now is a quilt that I made to use. It was an antique quilt top that I found at an estate sale, and thought it worthy of being rescued. I brought it home and after some time I decided it would be a good fit, but it wasn't large enough. I investigated some reproduction fabrics that matched the era that the original top was made in, and I added to that quilt and then backed it and quilted the entire damn thing to fit my needs today.

**LJ:** I remember helping with this quilt. This was the only one you made when I was older. I helped you iron the fabric.

**PGJ:** I don't remember that. I'm sorry.

**LJ:** Helping you with that project showed me just how much ironing is involved in the quilt making process. Could you elaborate on that?

**PGJ:** The process of making a quilt from start to finish, there are several disparate tasks. First is coming up with the design, second is finding the fabric. Usually I wash and put the fabric in the drier so that it gets as much shrinkage out of it, because if you try to wash the finished object later you don't want the different fabrics shrinking at different rates. It will destroy the surface. So I usually wash and try the materials before I use them. Then of

course after washing and drying of that yardage, it needs to be ironed as a whole. I would spend hours and hours ironing yard goods and actually wore through the handle of my first iron. And then the individual patchwork pieces have to be cut, and after they are sewed to each other, you have to iron between every seam to keep the patchwork top flat and square. I am very keen on making sure that the work is extremely precise, extremely flat and in the end, a perfect square if that was my intention, or a perfect rectangle. Either way, there are many ways of approaching quilt making. Some less rigorous than others. I tend to be as rigorous as possible.

**LJ:** What kind of iron do you use?

**PGJ:** Oh, just a traditional steam iron but I never put water in the iron. I put it in a spray bottle because I want to know where the water is going. Nothing special. I think there are expensive special lightweight irons, but I don't have one and don't want one. I like to make sure everything is good and flat, so I iron a lot.

**LJ:** Now that we are on the topic of your tools. Can you tell me about your sewing machine?

**PGJ:** I have a forty-year-old Husqvarna that does a lot of crazy stitching that I have absolutely never used. I only use a strait stitch because the piecing that I do, that is all that is required. I only quilt by hand which apparently is not seen very much anymore because very large quilting machines are what is being used today. You can do some very elaborate and intricate work that mimics hand quilting, but for whatever reason I am still enamored with the hand sewing process and completing the surface with the look of hand sewing. When you piece the geometric shapes together I do that entirely by machine because otherwise it would take much too long. Those stitches are also not visible on the surface although if you are extremely vigilant you can definitely tell the difference between hand stitched seems and machine stitched seems just by looking, but I don't consider that a huge downside to my quilts because the amount of time involved is just too tremendous. I do like to see the hand stitching on the surface, and I like the control, which is possible through handwork. My first experience on a giant quilting machine was like driving a Volkswagen and then driving a Mack truck. I was completely lost. It takes a tremendous amount of practice and skill, and it's just something I'm not interested in pursuing.

**LJ:** Tell me about this quilt.

**PGJ:** This is another log cabin quilt, and it is extremely intricate but as one artist friend of mine said when she saw it, "All of this work and you can't even see it." And I thought, well, that's ok. It has to do with again the log cabin quilt structure and to elaborate on the kinds of contrasts that are generally used in a log cabin quilt. Instead of using a contrast in color or value, I used a contrast in direction. This entire quilt is made from one printed fabric that has little dashes printed in two different directions. I cut them out separately in strips and sewed them together to make what is traditionally called a barn raising log cabin, which means there are concentric diamonds. But instead of it being indicated by color or value, it is indicated by the direction of the dashes. The quilt is called *Tabula Rasa* because at first glance it appears to be kind of empty, and as you scrutinize it further you can see that these elements line up like when you put a magnet under metal shavings they line up according to magnetic fields, and this is kind of the feeling of this piece. It is fairly subtle in some ways and when you consider the amount of piecing that went into it, it is a little bit crazy. I like the subtlety of the idea, and I actually made more than one quilt using this fabric, experimenting with the design. This is another example of saying, "Here's a fabric, and here is what the print on this fabric does. How can I exploit this particular fabric print that couldn't be done

with any other fabric, or in any other way?" That's something I am fond of investigating: different printed fabrics.

Here is another example of a log cabin quilt and making use of a fabric—again this entire quilt, although it appears to be rust and green, it is actually made of one fabric that happens to be woven with orange threads in one direction and green threads in the other, which means it has—when you hold it in different directions, different colors become prominent. I cut the strips vertically and horizontally which left me with the same fabric but with actually different colors. The quilt appears to be made with a variety of fabrics but it is actually just one fabric that has been turned in different directions to enhance the weave and demonstrate different colors you can see when you rotate the fabric.

**LJ:** What is this one called?

**PGJ:** *Rust Green Log Cabin Straight Furrows* because it is a straight furrows pattern, but if you turn the quilt to the side, it turns into alternating squares because you get four different colors from this same fabric woven in contrasting colors.

Once again, a log cabin quilt, but in this case, I used the log cabin structure, which is a central square surrounded by rectangles to make the square bigger and bigger. In this case instead of keeping the rectangles as one strip I divided it in half diagonally to make increasingly long and narrow triangles. In this case, I used gradations of color, once again found fabrics, not dyed fabrics, to give a sense of depth and movement. I contrasted warm and cool colors in the light and dark gradation to make this kind of whirling sensation but still staying within a traditional log cabin format. The quilting on this is called quilting in the ditch, where you quilt along side the pieced elements as to not interrupt the shape, to reinforce the shapes, and not to add a separate graphic element to the design. In some cases my hand quilting can either follow the quilt or sometimes it is in contrast to the pieced work, and adds an additional design element to the quilt. But in this case, it simply reinforces the pieced design, and I thought quilting across these long triangles would cause them to look broken.

**LJ:** These triangles are so long and have such tiny points. I am curious what it was like to cut and piece them.

**PGJ:** It was extremely challenging to make pieces that taper to nothing and to piece them together. I had the concept, I made the drawing and I decided to do it. It's interesting because some of the pattern pieces' seam allowances are several times bigger than the actual piece of fabric that is exposed, so there is a lot of seam allowance under there. To see [the quilt top] from the back is really kind of fun because it is very sculptural and very interesting because there are so many small pieces. There's a lot going on.

**PGJ:** I repeated the same structure with a different color array using a color wheel. It's a gradation of hue, rather than a gradation in value in this quilt. That had the blues and the greens as apposed to the red and orange in here. There is an entire spectrum of color.

**LJ:** How do you store your quilts?

**PGJ:** It is very important to keep the temperature and humidity constant, and to avoid folding them as much as possible. This is why I like to make smaller pieces—because of the storage issue. Usually I take clean terry cloth towels and fold them into a tube and then roll the quilt around it because you don't want creases to become permanent.

This quilt is called *Still Life*. As I talk about in the lecture I used to give, the sources of my quilt designs are many. I very seldom actually look to quilts as design inspiration. I prefer to

look to just about anything else. In this case I was reading a book about modern art, and it happened to have an image of a sculpture by a Belgian artist named Pol Bury. It was a very disturbing sculpture. It was simply a sphere sitting on a cube, but near the edge of the cube. It was so precarious that I turned the book to the back and started to make a little drawing of circles in various configurations and I ended up thinking—I never make applique quilts because piecing is what I like to do, and applique involves a whole different process. I decided to make what on the surface could be a very traditional format for an applique quilt which would be an open block style with sashing in between and appliqued images within each of the blocks, but in this case some of the blocks are completely empty and others simply have one circle and none of the circles is in the center of the block, which is usually what you would expect—some kind of symmetry. They are four different colors and they group themselves by color and by weight in a way. It is an exercise in balance in the same way Bury's sculpture was an exercise in thinking about balance and form. Then I decided to embellish it with the a feathered wreath border, which is one of the most intricate kind of traditional quilt patterns to kind of throw in the face of this unusual adaptation of an applique concept to say, oh look, here is this extremely traditional quilting border, what do you make of these things in combination. It is one of my more different pieces that I have made, but I enjoyed the concept. This shows how I find ideas for quilts from places that are not quilt related.

This piece is called *Primary DNA*. It is another example of thinking about quilt patterns in a little bit of an unconventional way. In this case I set up a number system that paralleled—I gave numbers to primary colors—actually it was letters. I gave letters to primary colors, A, B, and C, and gave secondary colors combinations of those letters: AB, BC, and AC. I laid them out in a grid by some system that I don't remember right now, and then I had a grid covered with alphabet soup and then I colored it in using the colors that those letters represented. I came out with an interesting aggregation of colors and because yellow is such a high contrast to the other colors it tends to act like background, and then you get these folded ribbons of color that run through. It serves to the pattern as a structured numbered system that it is put into place without any manipulation other than the rules that were established before hand. This was done in the 80s, and since then I have come understand this kind of concept used in work by Sol LeWitt, where he lays out a system, and it gets carried out by either himself or other people, and it becomes the work of art. I like to think about different ways of generating patterns and bringing them to fruition. For the most part I like the structure of this kind of approach because it is doesn't involve—like Chuck Close said, "Inspiration is for amateurs. I just get up everyday and go to work." I have the same attitude toward art in that it is not a matter of searching for inspiration or waiting to be inspired by some cosmic event. For me it has to do with an incredible amount of work and investigation in a more scientific way than emotional.

**LJ:** In your explanation of this quilt, you brought up two artists that I know you have a great admiration for: Chuck Close and Sol LeWitt. One of your outlets since you have stopped quilting has been art collecting. Can you tell me about that?

**PGJ:** Yes, I guess it's not a surprise that the kinds of issues that I investigated in my own work, I notice in other artists' work. I think that is what drew me to the products of someone like Close and LeWitt. First I was drawn to their imagery and then later I learned, with reading about the artist and their work, about their approach to generating the work that they do. I really had no concept that someone like LeWitt was making these rules and having people carry them out. I think I perceived that in the result by looking at the work and had an affinity for it even before I understood how the work was generated. In part because I generate certain works, not all of them, in a similar way. I felt that connection and could see it

in their work, and of course it is work that I like to collect and surround myself with because I am not someone who is interested in figurative work for the most part—narrative work. I am more interested in non-objective work and a very Constructivist, rational, scientific approach to generating imagery, although I am too old to be too involved in computer generation of work. That is something I haven't investigated.

This piece called *Primary DNA*, in part because of the way the colors fell from the number system that I used, it looks like twisted ribbons. Because I am using primary and secondary colors, which are the simplest saturated colors that you can think of, and this twisting of the pattern, it just brought to mind the concept of a double helix. It brought together my thinking of primary colors as being worthwhile colors to investigate where most traditional quilt makers think of primary colors as suitable for a baby's room or an unsophisticated palette. When I first started quilting, I hung out with ladies at the Kansas City Quilter's Guild, they would talk about sophisticated colors, and they mostly had to do with tints and shades of colors that you would expect them to be decorating their living rooms with. And that something like this with primaries would be considered juvenile and unsophisticated but in my way of looking at color, it is some of the most sophisticated color because of the relationships that are clear between and among this grouping. And also later I see a lot of LeWitts that look a lot like this because he was also very enamored with primaries and secondaries as a color palette. But at the time I did this I had never heard of him.

This quilt is a pattern called trip around the world. It starts with a central square and squares are added in concentric positions around and around and around.

**LJ:** Is that a traditional name?

**PGJ:** Trip around the world is the traditional name because of the concentric nature of the array of colors. This quilt is called *Trip Around the World. Red/Blue*. Sometimes when I am thinking about color theory as an important influence in the work that I do, I frequently take traditional quilt patterns and look at them and think, "Okay, we have this simple structure, and they are just using dark colors in opposition to light colors. That is simple a concept of contrast that there is so let me think of other ways of considering how to lay these colors out and experience a different kind of contrast." In this case, I plucked out colors from the color wheel going from blue through purple into red and found colors that made a very step-wise sequence of colors through the warm side of the color wheel and laid them out. What you get is this very glowing background for the warmer blues and not cool blues like we will see in the next quilt. I was thinking about how warm colors work in the format that gave it this kind of dense glowing appearance. I thought, "Okay, well let me think of the other side of the color wheel. How would cool colors look in exactly the same format but thinking about colors from green through turquoise?" So the next quilt is *Trip Around the World. Green/Blue*. It is the same format but with cool colors, and it is very interesting because the cool colors give a much greater sense of transparency. It looks as though there are layers of colors on top of each other and that you can actually see through these layers when, of course, it is just a flat surface. The difference in appearance between warm and cool is substantial. Cool colors have a transparent effect and the warm colors have a more dense glowing effect and promote an entirely different sensation.

[end of interview]