

CARL LITTLE



## Alice Spencer

For nearly 40 years, Alice Spencer has been involved in public art in Portland, ME, and that's what she wants to talk about first on a Friday afternoon in early September. Seated in her sunlit space in the Bakery Studios on Pleasant Street, surrounded by the marvelous patterns of her textile-inspired art, Spencer offers a few highlights of her commitment to the life of the city she has called home for decades.

Spencer served on the Portland Public Art Committee for 15 years, chairing it for five, and helped write the guidelines for the city's public art program. More recently, as the demand for space for temporary installations has grown, she played a role in developing the protocol for short-term displays.

Three years ago, Spencer launched the nonprofit TEMPOart Portland to encourage the use of diverse city venues for art projects. So far, the group has helped organize a half dozen

installations, including Judith Hoffman's provocative *The American Dream*, a tipsy, totem-like stack of small single-family homes made from steel erected in Lincoln Park in the summer of 2016.

Spencer has further contributed to the cultural depth of the city through the founding, with fellow artist Alison Hildreth, of the Peregrine Press. Now in its 27th year, the renowned printmaking cooperative boasts 30 members. While not active with the press these days, Spencer points out with pride that the organization is thriving, hosting workshops, lectures and shows. The press recently welcomed New York printmaker Christopher Shore, who gave a talk at the Maine College of Art on innovative approaches to monotypes and monoprints.

Focused on civic activities, Spencer has not shown her own work that much in recent years, but she continues to be fully engaged in her creative enterprise, spending an average of six

hours at a time in her studio—and more in the summer when she's at her second home on Kennebago Lake in northwestern Maine.

Born in Colorado and raised on the East Coast, Spencer has been involved in art-making since childhood. At Sarah Lawrence in the early 1960s, she took studio art, visited museums and galleries and studied art history, "never doubting," she has written, that she would be an artist. She continued her studies at the San Francisco Art Institute before returning east.

Spencer and her husband, Richard, moved to Maine in 1969 after he finished law school at Columbia. She has lifelong connections to the state, having spent summers as a child in the Rangeley Lakes and Downeast regions. The couple taught at Thornton Academy in Saco while raising their three children. Spencer recently shared her experiences teaching with her daughter, Jane, a journalist, who was working c

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n article for *The Guardian* on teachers and what they do for second jobs.

For the past 15 years or so, Spencer's work has been intimately related to textiles from diverse cultures. She traces her inspiration to a trip to Guatemala in the late 1980s with her husband, who provides legal assistance to nonprofits around the world. She acquired a first piece of clothing on that trip, a very special blouse called a *huipil*, and began her immersion into the beauty and resonance of clothing. She has since acquired nearly 80 textiles from about 20 countries, including Bhutan, India, China, Ecuador, South Korea and Cambodia.

Spencer's work with textiles and public art came together in a noteworthy way in her 2006 zoning map series inspired by visits to the Planning Office at City Hall while she was serving on the Portland Public Art Committee. She was fascinated by how the zones were delineated in straight lines or by following geographic features like brooks. She incorporated patterns inspired by her textile collection, melding the local and the global in beguiling abstractions.

Spencer began to use stencils to produce fabric-like hand-printed paper collages mounted on board. The work gained notice: In 2008 the University of New England Gallery, under Anne Zill's direction, mounted *Alice Spencer: Fabricating Time*, featuring her work alongside



Left: Alice Spencer, *Altar Scarf*, acrylic, gesso, and sand on board, 40 x 50". Photo: Bernard C. Meyers.

Below: Henna artists working in their studio, Stone Town, Zanzibar, Tanzania, where Spencer also renovated the gallery and taught them printmaking.

Opposite: Spencer in her Portland, Maine studio with collages made with hand-stenciled papers from two shows: *Patchwork* and *Kasaya*. Photo: Carl Little.

pieces from her textile collection. She was also included in the same gallery's ground-breaking *Maine Women Pioneers III* exhibition in 2013. Writing about Spencer's "dialogue" with artisans of other countries, novelist Agnes Bushell noted how her textile pieces "perfectly illustrate Wittgenstein's idea that when the eye sees beauty, the hand wants to reproduce it."

On further trips abroad with her husband, Spencer organized workshops and collaborative projects with artists in Mongolia and Zanzibar. Her Mongolia visit led to a joint book production featuring work by Mongolian artists and Maine College of Art students based on *One Day of Mongolia*, the East Asian country's most famous painting created by Balduu Sharav in 1911–1912.

In Zanzibar, Spencer taught printmaking to a group of henna body art practitioners. She helped the women expand their artistic repertoire while assisting them in setting up

a gallery and business to promote their work. She has also taught monotype at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and Maine College of Art's Continuing Education program.

Over time, Spencer moved through different ideas for the patterning effects in her textile-based pieces, often prompted by a particular format. Her most recent series explores patchwork concepts, drawn to the combination of craftsmanship and thrift. She has studied quilts from the American South, Japanese fishermen's coats, and the *kasayas* of Tibetan monks, who make their mantels out of patches they sew themselves in order to demonstrate their humility.

Spencer likes to quote Matisse who called his textile collection his "working library." For her, the cloth pieces offer a "lexicon, not just of formal structures, but of conceptual associations that provide the content and language for my work." Each pattern she creates, says Spencer, "holds within itself a small sample of the sweep of history and time."

Her art and her public service have earned Spencer special recognition. In 2009, she received a statewide Award for Leadership in the Arts and, this year, an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the Maine College of Art. She doesn't mention these honors during our visit; she is more interested in heading out into Portland to enjoy the First Friday Art Walk.

Carl Little lives and writes on Mount Desert Island. Among his recent books is *Paintings of Portland*, co-authored with his brother, David Little.

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