



A stitch in time

Childhood memories of a sweet yet solitary life are vividly expressed in the quilted works of an artist who found peace on a rugged island.

Text Carol Bucknell Photographs Marcel Tromp

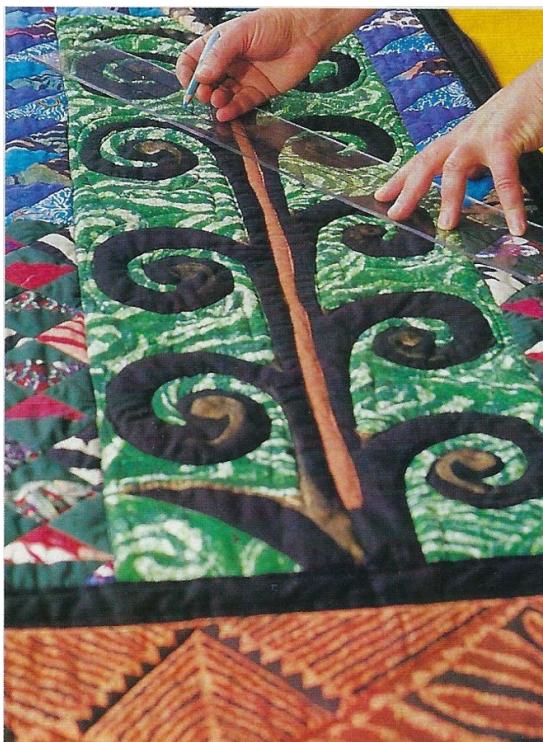
Fabric artist Gina Blanshard lives alone in the remote Wairahi Valley on Great Barrier Island and although she has no electricity, nor any appliances apart from a radio, she wouldn't have it any other way. Her valley is home to a number of brown teal ducks, a threatened native species. During the day they doze on the banks of the winding creek, occasionally lifting their heads to the sound of a passing boat, but they are secure in their peaceful refuge - and the islanders are determined to keep them that way.

Gina is equally bent on safeguarding her own unique lifestyle on 'Aotea', as the locals prefer to call it. It's hard work chopping wood for heating, hot water and cooking, she concedes. Carrying supplies from the nearest jetty to her house is not much fun, particularly in bad weather and the boat trip to Fitzroy township, little more than a wharf and shop, is 20 minutes on a good day, longer in rough weather. But for Gina, the peace and freedom far outweigh the practical difficulties.

"Isolation is not a problem - I embrace it," she says. "While I need time alone to work, plan and recharge. I'm also fortunate to have good friendships on the island and elsewhere."

Top: Gina with her quilt 'Lost on the Island' sewn during a great storm when local resident Nancy Frey went missing.

Clockwise from top left: Gina sketches images to explore the 'feelings' of a quilt before piecing it together; Gina draws a chalk line over the unfolding koru pattern of a ponga, in preparation for quilting; Ground ferns grow around the house.





Gina spent her childhood living in isolated places. Her father was a lighthouse keeper and the family moved from one remote location to another including Cape Campbell, Stephen's Island, and Cape Egmont. In 1958 he became a ranger on Little Barrier Island, a bird sanctuary where the ranger and his family were the only human inhabitants. They spent 11 years on the island which Gina calls by its Maori name 'Hauturu'.

"I still have a powerful connection with the stones, trees and spirit of Hauturu, and also with Aotea. I knew then, as I do now, how incredibly special it is to be allowed to live in such a place. This feeling intensifies, it does not lessen."

Above: This work in progress depicts the mystery of looking at an island from afar - and wondering just what it contains.

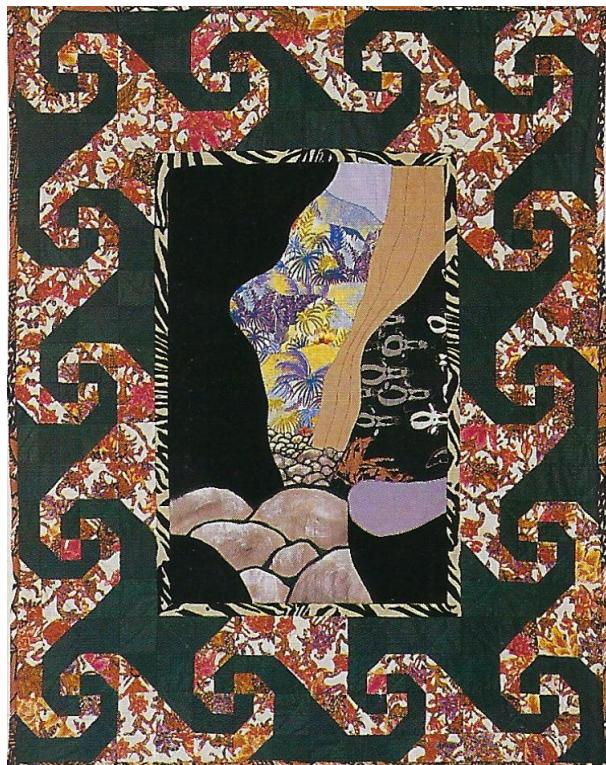
Left and below: Inspiration is found in the shadows on a rock, the reflections in a pool.



Aotea, as many locals prefer to call it, is described as the last refuge of the individual.

The decision to buy land on Great Barrier was made, Gina says, because she felt it was the closest she would ever get to a place like Hauturu. Gina and her former husband Steve bought the Wairahi property sight unseen in the early Seventies. Later the couple built their own house in the bush using only hand tools - chainsaws are no good without power.

The island has remained her base ever since, although she has left it for long periods when it became imperative to earn some money. Her skills as a graphic artist were always useful, so too her ability to make and sell clothes. Fifteen years ago her interest in sewing turned to quilting and she formed a quilting group with other Barrier women. It wasn't long before she found that many of her ideas, particularly her love of "colours and patterns that scream at each other" did not fit into the conventional notions of quilting.



*Top: From the Hauturu series, this quilt shows a childhood memory - the spirit of the cliffs at night.
Left: A bush view from inside a canyon.*

"I push and kick the boundaries - everything goes, the more outrageous the better. I'm a sort of 'anti-quilter', a long way from traditional folk or craft quilting,

"My design choices produce visual shock and disturbance, but they're not as random as they might at first appear. In fact I choose carefully and I believe my graphic's background has served me well. I can manipulate and balance layers of colour and form in the way I used to consider and juggle diverse elements of text, captions and illustration."

Her house is often a "blizzard" of scraps of fabric with pieces pinned to walls. While a work is taking shape she likes to, "live with it, sneak up on it, change it, study it from the couch. The most carefully chosen fabrics still do wonderfully surprising things."

She often works non-stop on several pieces at once yet this hectic pace does not conflict with the serenity of her lifestyle. "The pieced structure of quilting invites introspection," says Gina. "You are led in an unconsciously mathematical way, from one level to another, ending up in entirely unexpected places and states of mind."

With a mixture of applique, hand painting and dyeing, machine and hand quilting, Gina uses fabric to express her love of Hauturu and Aotea, with many of her larger pieces based on themes of distant islands and reflections. "My art has been influenced by the isolation I experienced as a child and then chose again later in life. I enjoy the idea that we are all islands, but the sea connects us."

This theme was the basis of Gina's first solo fabric art exhibition 'Islands: Reflections' which was held at Auckland's Maritime Museum 1st to 22nd August 1999.

Great Barrier Island Quilting Group - date unknown



Photographer:
Kay Stowell