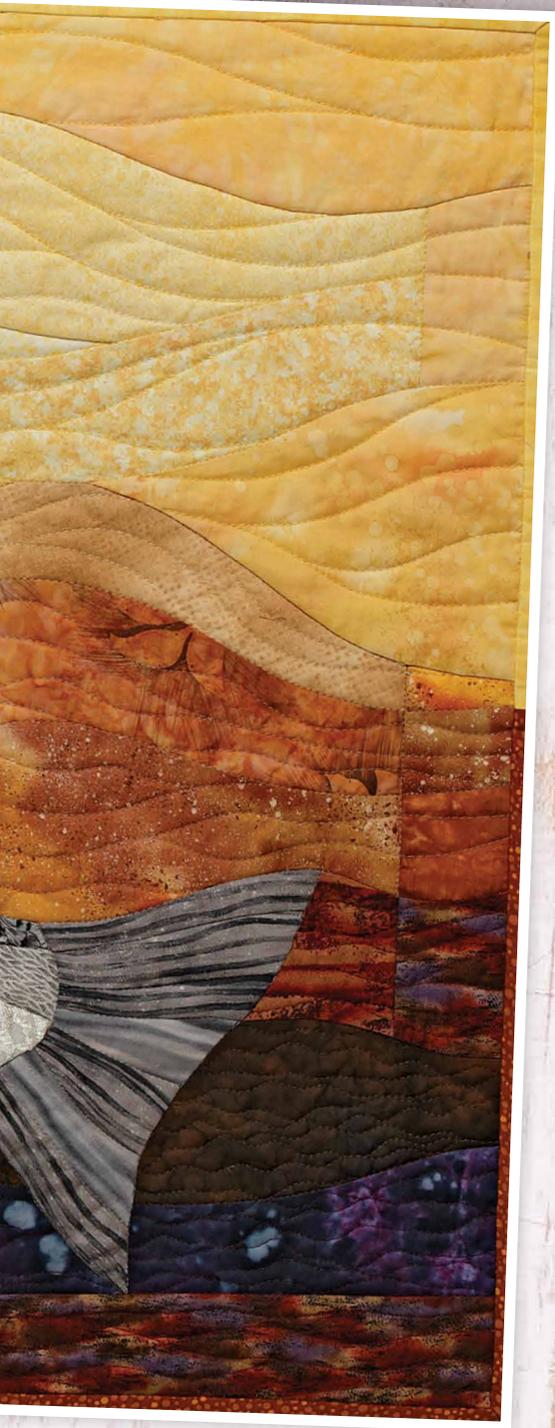




Rising to a Fly. Photo by John Polak.



Susan Damone Balch on her home river. Photo by Bill Cairns.



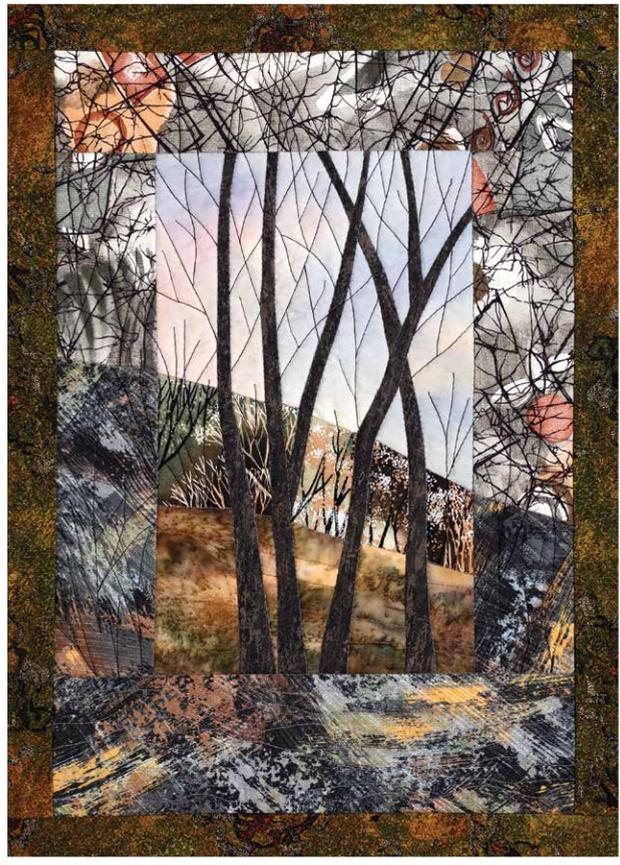
A Thread Runs Through It

Last summer, Reading's Susan Damone Balch was awarded a Juror's Choice Award at the annual Billing's Farm Quilt Exhibition for her entry *In the Direction of Life*. The art quilt depicts the movement of water downstream, an effect Susan created with a fabric shape of her own design that draws the viewer's eye in one direction. Imposed atop are the forms of salmon made of black organza swimming against the current. The fish are moving in the direction of life to the place they were hatched so they can spawn and begin the process anew.

From quilting to fly-fishing and back, Susan Damone Balch has turned her passions into art

By Stephen D'Agostino

Photos courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted



Above: *Trees*.

Right: *Fins and Feathers*.

Below right: *Apache Trout*.
Photo by John Polak.

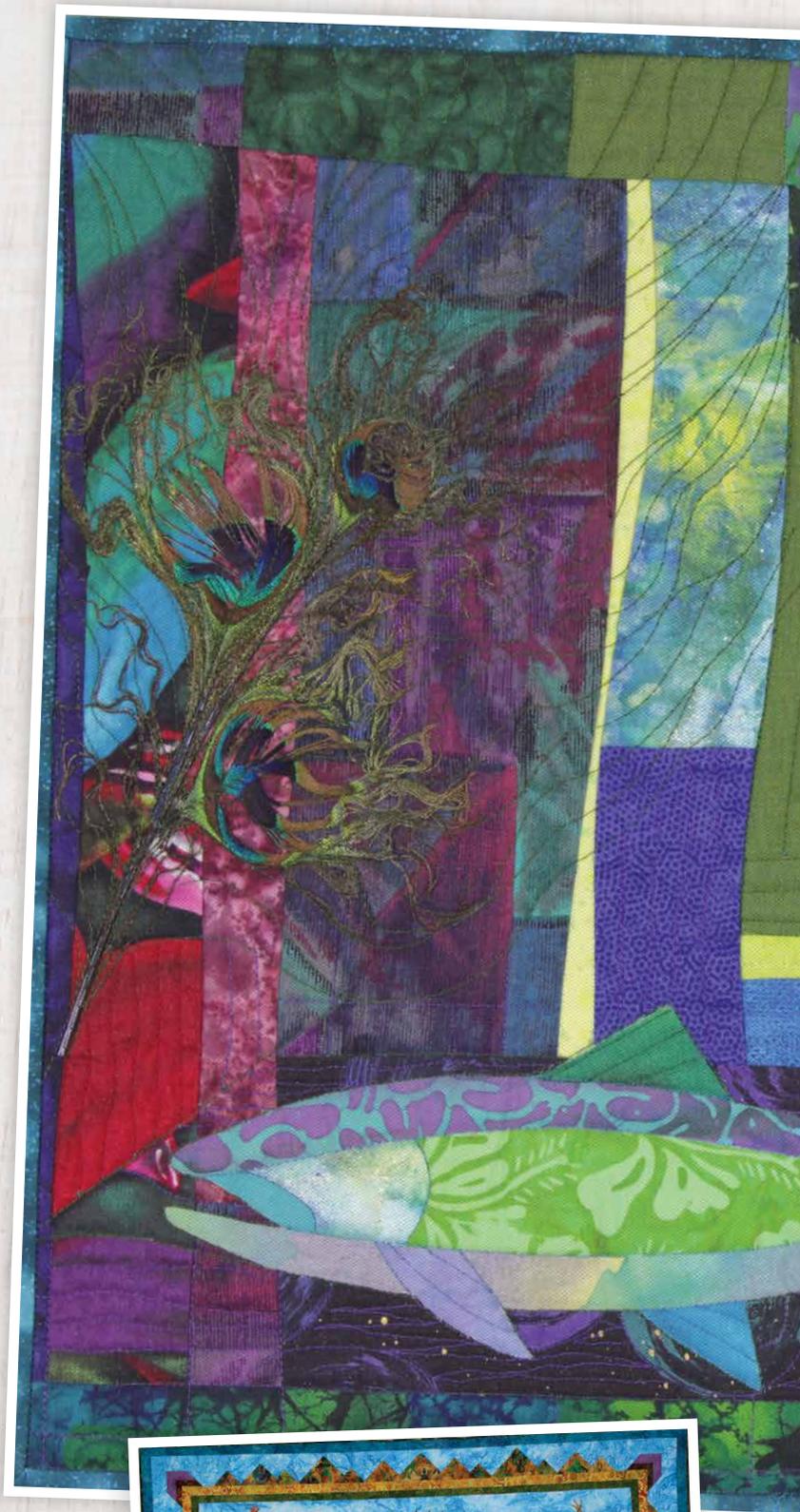
Life has offered Susan many different directions. While she experienced them, they may have seemed like distributaries in a river. But they were actually more like detours, giving her the rare opportunity to meld two subjects she was passionate about into life-affirming works of art.

FIRST DIRECTION: QUILTING

When Susan was five, she learned to sew. By the time she was 19, she realized she wasn't excited about making clothes. She bought a sewing machine anyway and a book about quilting. Over the years, she taught herself this intricate art form. As she became more experienced, Susan strayed from patterns she had found and began to make quilts from designs she had created.

In 1983, five years into her quilting adventure, Susan had developed the courage to present her work to the Maple Leaf Quilters, a guild in Rutland. "I didn't know how my quilts would compare to other people's," she says.

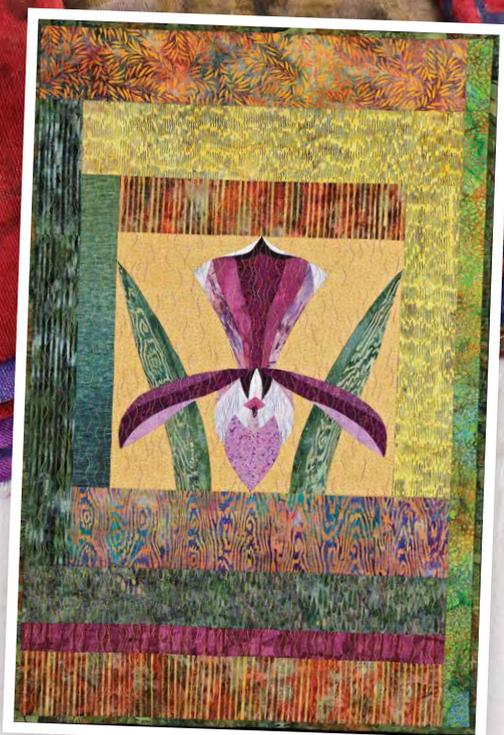
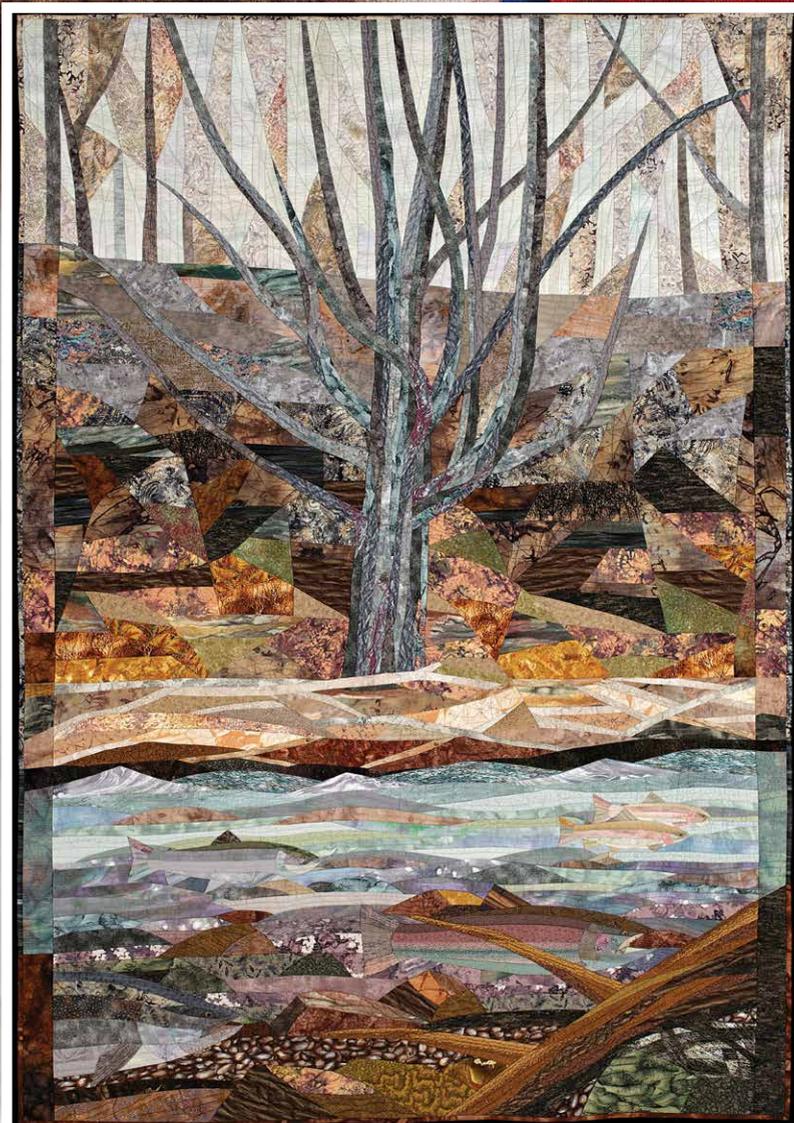
The answer, to her surprise, was quite well. Shortly after, she started showing quilts at the Vermont Quilt Festival. Over the years, she has twice won the Governor's Award for the best quilt made by a Vermonter. A few years ago, she presented a retrospective of her work featuring 20 of her quilts, which hung in the lobby of the Champlain Exposition Center during the show.







Kiss a Rainbow.



Above: *Orchid*.

Left: *Salmon River Maple*. Photo by John Polak.

Below left: Susan in her studio.



SECOND DIRECTION: FLY-FISHING

Meanwhile, Susan's husband John had a passion of his own, fly-fishing. In 1984, they vacationed on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. There she watched John catch an Atlantic salmon, and the sight inspired her. "I decided I wanted to learn how to fly-fish," she says, "so I could catch an Atlantic salmon."

Fly-fishing, like quilting, is not easy to master. "It takes a lot of patience and practice," Susan says. Like experimenting with different shapes and colors at the sewing machine, fly-fishing offers challenges and opportunities. "Every time you step into a river," she says, "it's different. The conditions are different, the water levels are different, the fish are different."

Susan also notes another similarity between these two passions. For both, she says, "I knew I could do them for the rest of my life and not get sick of them." At some point, her two passions merged as salmon, steelhead, and trout found their ways into her quilts.

Salmon River Maple exemplifies the painterly quality of her creations. It depicts a scene with fabric and thread the way an artist does with paint and a canvas. The top two-thirds of the quilt show the titular tree at the water's edge. The bottom third shows the river with elusive fish blending

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In the Direction of Life.

into the background. Susan laughed when she explained that the quilt was an inside joke she shared with her husband. Often when they fished, he could see the trout in the water, and she could not. Viewing this quilt, their roles were reversed.

Susan's reputation as a fly-fisher caught the attention of the folks at the Orvis shop in Manchester. *A River Runs Through It*, the beautiful film in which fly-fishing takes center stage, had recently been released, Susan explains, and the interest in the sport had skyrocketed. Wanting to capitalize on this newfound popularity, Orvis expanded their lessons to include a class specifically for women, and they hired Susan to be an instructor.

Incidentally, the trips to Cape Breton Island turned into annual experiences. In her fourth year of trying to meet her original goal, Susan caught her first Atlantic salmon.

THIRD DIRECTION: CASTING FOR RECOVERY

In 1996, Susan began volunteering at a nonprofit called Casting for Recovery, founded by Gwenn Perkins, a woman Susan knew from Orvis, and surgeon and breast cancer survivor Dr. Benita

Walton. The organization, according to its website, provides "healing outdoor retreats for women with breast cancer." Not only is the physical activity good for women who have had surgery, but connecting with nature provides emotional benefits. Susan also notes, "When you are fly-fishing, you don't think of anything else. It's a good way to forget about all your problems." These retreats became therapy for her as she fished with these women who were facing their mortality.

Casting for Recovery caught on, and in 2001, Susan took the full-time position of program director as well as continuing to lead tours in Vermont, other parts of the United States, and Canada. Not surprisingly, she notes, she had much less time to devote to quilting.

FOURTH DIRECTION: ILLNESS

Seven years into the job, Susan began to reconsider her role at Casting for Recovery. "I thought it was time for someone else to take the organization to the next level." Something else was also playing into her decision. Around the same time, she began to feel ill. She also experienced an increase in anxiety, a feeling with which she was

not familiar. Her health over the next year and a half did not improve, and in 2009, she was diagnosed with Lyme disease. For the first time in 25 years, she and John did not return to Cape Breton Island.

In her time of illness, like the women with breast cancer she had met through Casting for Recovery, she needed something to take her mind off it. "Quilting was therapeutic to me," she says. "I got back to my art."

It was during her illness that she started working on a series of quilts she dubbed the "shadow fish series," which led to *In the Direction of Life*. "With Lyme disease, I wasn't able to fish as much. I wasn't able to quilt as much. For 25 years, we had gone up to Canada. I couldn't do that anymore." This descriptor for her art seemed apt in her time of despair.

Though the journey has been long, after 10 years, she is finally beginning to feel like herself. She also started considering what to do next.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Susan joined the board of directors at the Fletcher Farm School for the Arts & Crafts in Ludlow in 2016 and became its chair in 2018. She recently left a part-time job and is now devoting all her time to the school and quilting. Susan is dabbling with the idea of putting her quilts in a gallery or selling them online, but she hasn't found the right fit or figured out the technology. Maybe it's something she can ponder when she's up to her elbows in fabrics or knee-deep in a river. That is, if she can let her mind go in a different direction. 

For More Information

To see more of Susan's quilts, visit fishnquilt.com.

Susan teaches quilting at the Fletcher Farm School. To learn more or enroll in a class, visit fletcherfarm.org.

To learn more about Casting for Recovery, visit castingforrecovery.org.



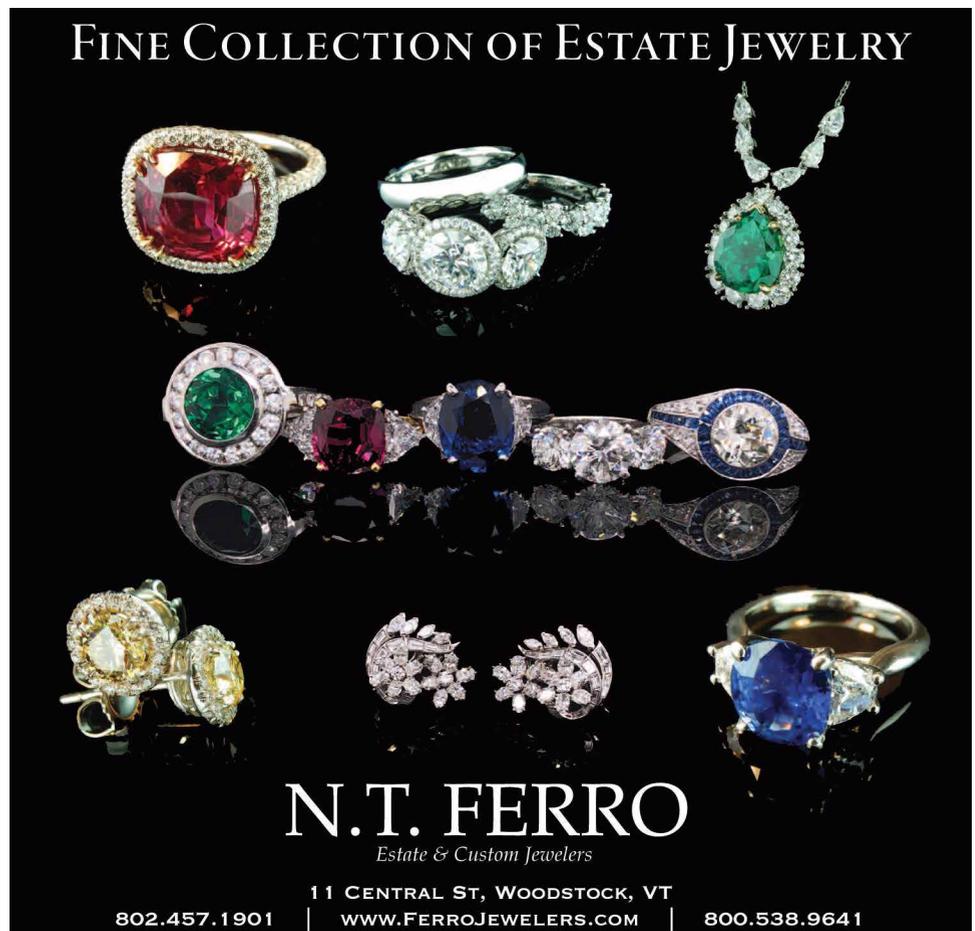
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