



Quick look: Erick Wolfmeyer

Where he lives: Oxford, Iowa

First quilt: A baby quilt made for friends

Where to find him: Driving a school bus or working in his quilting studio in Iowa City. See his quilts at his website, www.ewolfmeyerquilts.com, and in the new book *Men and the Art of Quilting* by Joe Cunningham (AQS, 2010).

Quilting icons: Denyse Schmidt and “Anonymous,” especially Amish hand quilters

Quilting since: 1998

Quilting quote: “Quilting is the perfect metaphor for life. There are infinite possibilities with quilts, and they are so forgiving. There is always one fabric where I think: ‘I don’t really like this. Why did I buy it?’ and it often turns out to be the thing that makes the quilt.”

Unexpected **Erick** quilters **Wolfmeyer** among us



Erick holds Kirichigae, 87 x 87 inches.

In a sense, many quilters operate like “outsider artists,” working without formal training or knowledge of the historic conventions of their craft. They stumble into quilting by accident, happily inventing techniques and designs without awareness of the wider quilt world.

Such was the case for Erick Wolfmeyer, who has worked quietly and in near-isolation for more than a decade, but whose crisp, geometric, beautifully made quilts are beginning to attract attention. His quilts have appeared in such major magazines as *Architectural Digest*



Chromatopia, 81 x 93 inches

and he is one of the quilters profiled in Joe Cunningham's new book, *Men and the Art of Quilting*.

Erick Wolfmeyer, who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in photography from Washington University in St. Louis, is far from the first person with formal art training to take up quilting. But his approach to quilting and life are definitely outside the mainstream: he lives a simple, solitary life in Iowa, without a computer or high-tech sewing machine, and he doesn't belong to any local quilting groups. His stash is tiny by most quilters' standards: it

fits inside two green plastic bins in his spartan studio.

It isn't that Wolfmeyer shuns technology or the world, but that his decision to make quilting the centerpiece of his life has required him to live very frugally. He does have a website and a Facebook page, but he keeps up with them, and his email, by daily visits to the local public library. Weekdays, he gets up at 5 a.m. to drive a school bus and is settled into his small studio to make quilts by 9 a.m., leaving around 2 p.m. to drive the schoolchildren home. Most weekends, he earns extra money by cutting

fabric and helping customers at two local fabric shops.

“My immediate goal is selling quilts as a means to continue making them,” says Erick. “I cherish doing whatever I want creatively without the pressure of a high-maintenance quilt career. That is why I work part-time, making just enough to survive. It ain’t pretty, but it’s what works for now. Quilting is my art form, my passion, the reason that I’m here.”

What got him started

Erick Wolfmeyer’s beginnings are best described as Dickensian: he was born in St. Louis in 1967 to a mother who gave him up for adoption because she couldn’t afford the medical care he needed. He was born with a cleft lip and palate, a condition that later required 20 surgeries to repair after he was adopted by a local family with two other adopted children.

“I had a ‘Leave It To Beaver’ childhood in Quincy, Illinois,” he says now. “I loved Lincoln Logs and Legos and aspired to be an architect.”

Eventually, Erick did pursue that dream, getting accepted into a graduate program in architecture. At about that time, he was on vacation with his then-partner in Oregon and wandered into the famed Stitchin’ Post quilt shop in Sisters. He had decided to make a quilt for friends having their first baby, even though he had never made a quilt before.

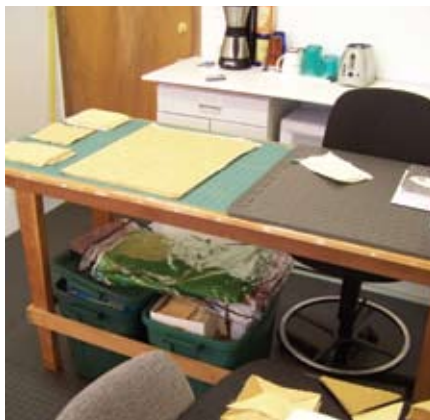
“My partner had a sewing machine, so he taught me how to use it. The quilt was paper pieced, which helped me see the possibilities beyond strips and squares.”



Segue, 92 x 100 inches



Ellsworth, 110 x 100 inches



Two green plastic bins hold all of Erick's stash.

Slowly, quilts became the most important thing in Erick’s life. He left graduate school to quilt full-time.

“Because of being adopted, and having this cleft palate, and kids making fun of me, and being gay, I’ve always felt like an outsider. I have a shattered sense of identity, and quilts are like trying to put together pieces of my life into something that makes sense,” Erick explains. “I just feel compelled to make quilts. This is one thing that consistently works in my life.”

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How he works

So far, Erick has produced more than 60 quilts and has sold most of them, generally through Iowa quilt shows and shops.

He designs his meticulous quilts and then pieces them using an old Kenmore sewing machine that once belonged to his mother. Originally Erick hand quilted because that looks best for his quilts with their traditional roots. As he attempted to increase his output, he began sending his quilts away to a group of Amish ladies in Elkhart, Indiana, who do hand quilting for hire (and prefer to be anonymous).

Quilts are dictated by what fabric Erick has on hand, since he limits himself to what he’s got in the two green bins in his studio. “I always buy nine yards of backing fabric because I mostly make queen-sized quilts. Making one quilt will generate another because of leftover fabric.” Certainly, he could buy more fabric, Erick points out, however, “I think it’s important for an artist to have limits in some way, so I try to use what I have.”

Erick used to make quilts in his cramped, drafty apartment in a storefront on Main Street in Oxford, Iowa, but eventually he rented a small walk-up studio above a bar in Iowa City, very close to the bus barn. The studio has 12-foot ceilings and an 8-foot-square design wall he made. “The studio felt like a luxury when I signed the \$150 a month lease, but it’s a necessity now,” he says.

Here, working methodically while listening to the local NPR station, Erick whiles away his days. He worries about money, but the process makes him happy. “I’m a purist,” he says. “I think quilting is about slowing down. It’s about being present. I’m more interested in going beyond the quilt world and bringing quilts to the rest of the world.”

Erick’s quilt dreams

You can see a good selection of Erick Wolfmeyer’s quilts on his website, ewolfmeyerquilts.com. He sells quilts directly from his site and through one of

the area shops where he works part time, Fern Hill Gifts and Quilts in South Amana. Many sell in the \$2,000 range.

It will be interesting to see how Erick’s quilting future evolves, and whether the higher profile that’s surely coming will suit this quiet, solitary man. “That isn’t my goal. People ask me all the time to design fabric and that isn’t a chord I’ve plugged in yet; not sure I want to.”

One request to which he did accede was to join the board of the Quilters Hall of Fame. Otherwise, he’s mostly turned down requests that would take him out of his studio.

“Operating exclusively in the quilt world would limit me,” he says. “I want to show the people who know very little about them how beautiful quilts are and what amazing metaphors for life they are. Quilts have so much to teach us.”



Meg Cox’s latest book is The Quilter’s Catalog: A Comprehensive Resource Guide. The former staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal lives in Princeton, New Jersey, and is president of the non-profit Alliance for American Quilts. If you know an unexpected quilter with a colorful story to tell, drop Meg a line at meg@megcox.com.