



Two Community Mennonite artists describe their creativity as “Floral Fantasy,” which is the title of their Parrot Gallery exhibit, opening on First Friday, September 6, 2024, from 5-8 p.m.

Several months ago, **Carmalena Stoltzfus Iyengar** and **Kelli King** discovered the synchronicous similarity of their two modes of design—watercolor and embroidery. Voila! A collaborative show to delight the senses becomes reality.

Stoltzfus Iyengar notes: “I love to create. Whether pottery or painting, repurposing old clothes or scrap wood, or cooking, It all fills a deep desire for my hands to produce something beautiful or interesting or useful.

I picked up watercolors a few years ago as I was starting to find more time for myself in the cracks of the day. I wanted something that wouldn’t take up a lot of space, something I could pick up and put down easily without needing much time to set up or tear down. I wanted something that my children could easily join me with in their own way. I found that and much more in my “lines and dots,” as my husband calls my work; I found a process that is meditative and calming.”

Stoltzfus Iyengar, who lives with her husband, two children, one dog, and eight fish, loves reading fantasy and sci-fi books, animals, making things, gardening, learning languages and traveling. A property manager, she also co-owns Dutch Country Concessions, a mobile soft pretzel vendor, along with her sister.

King’s foray into handiwork, which began around age five, became her salvation during the pandemic.

She writes: “My connection to fabric and thread began when my grandmother taught me to knit and cross stitch; and my mother taught me to sew a few years later. I think of these early activities as laying the foundation for my appreciation of handwork and textiles. I've been interested in everything related to textiles ever since.

My experience as a partner in a knitting, yarn, and gift shop, Reverie, in downtown Goshen, Indiana, provided unexpected exposure to knitting, weaving, and spinning, helping to ignite a deeper interest in these activities over the last decade.

But it wasn’t until 2020 that I began to nurture embroidery as a hobby. In 2020, my husband and I found ourselves retiring from our jobs and moving to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to be closer to our children and grandchildren. This dramatic move - in the middle of COVID lockdown, left me lonelier than I ever expected. That winter, a friend in Lancaster who is a talented folk artist introduced me to "feather stitching", embroidery traditionally used in crazy quilts.

I was immediately taken with the feeling of working by hand with needle and thread, creating stitches that made beautiful patterns. She confesses that this activity “saved my lonely soul” during that lonely time of isolation!

Lancaster countian **Stoltzfus Iyengar** says she rarely plans a piece much ahead of time. She chooses colors that interest her on a given day, shapes that look like they will fit well on the paper, and then she markers lines and dots on top. Her inspiration originates with mid-century prints and textiles as well as henna, or “mehendi,” which she heard it called while living in India.

King found in her 60s that working by hand also wasn't about perfection but about expression and creation. She confesses her penchant for nature-related themes is likely due to her grandmother’s early influence-- explorations in the woodlands of Pennsylvania and Indiana. There is a term, “biophilia,” a theory that postulates humans have an innate attraction to nature.

“Perhaps that’s why we incorporate natural elements into our environments - we repeat patterns from nature that help us connect to it. If anything, I think of myself as a folk artist. I don’t create art to make a statement, and I don’t always set out with a final vision in mind. My efforts have been about developing a skill, the enjoyment of experimenting with thread on fabric, and what that simple combination can create. It’s this process and outcome that has her “hooked.”

And **Stoltzfus Iyengar**, too, hopes that viewers see the mark of her hand on what she has made, the imperfections, the joy of creation. “I hope that you, also, have a chance to connect with the inner artist or maker in you, no matter your age!”

To that end, she is offering supplies and the opportunity for viewers to create bookmarks at the First Friday event.

“Floral Fantasy” runs from September 6-October 27, 2024. The Parrot Gallery is open on First Fridays, Sundays, and during the week by appointment. Call 717-392-7567.