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New Tools in the Box: Traditional Methods, Contemporary Materials and New Techniques on the Atlantic Coast A Round Table Discussion

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Memory Holloway, moderator

Recently, the Wall Street Journal reported on the new interest in fiber arts, with the claim that this interest has seen a revival in the hands of contemporary artists exploring bold new forms. “The emergence of fiber art,” states Glenn Adamson, director of New York’s Museum of Art and Design, “is not just the reappraisal of an historic textile movement, rather a much more broad-based interest.”¹

The fiber artists on this roundtable addressed two topics related to this broad-based interest, one on formal experimentation, the other on their geographic placement as artists on the Atlantic coast, particularly in and around New Bedford and the links to the slave trade with Savannah. New Bedford received fugitives as part of the Underground Railroad, namely on whaling vessels run by northern abolitionists arriving from the South, as well as by overland routes.

Port and sea have left traces on the works of these artists: in their observations of light on water, in the adaptation of West African weaving methods, in the form of waves in the weave itself, and in the risks taken in pushing new techniques to the limit as aspects of contact culture with the environment and populations around them.

Questions for discussion included the ways in which artists use new materials matched with traditional methods and how rethinking fiber arts enables them to solve issues that they face when working with new media. Technical discussions included, references to the historic impact of the Spinning Jenny and Cotton Gin, as well as innovative equipment modification techniques for weaving structures of double weave, ondolé, gauzy structures and graphic images.

Each artist spoke on the following questions:

1. How and whether they use technology in new ways? (materials or equipment)
2. The textile traditions or techniques that brought them to the springboard of invention?
3. Whether living on or near the Atlantic Coast that has had a bearing on their work?
4. Whether the development of new technologies has inspired them to make their current work?

¹ Michael Slenske, “The Art Worlds New Material Obsession, Fiber,” *Wall Street Journal Magazine*, August 14, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-art-worlds-new-obsession-fiber1439565675>

Laurie Carlson Steger: *The Abolition Quilt*

The Abolition Quilt is a story quilt which is a new approach for me as a fiber artist. Inspired by the work of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, currently on view at the Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, I chose this genre because each square became a building block that expanded the quilt size as the research deepened. Using a new focus on the role of cotton and the relationship between the north and the south, I read stories with a new understanding of the people of the time, the driving economics and proximity to historic landmarks in New England.

The first square (bottom right corner #16) that was made in this story quilt depicts the story of Jonathan Walker, a former whaler from Cape Cod Massachusetts, who helped seven slaves to escape by sailing them from Pensacola, Florida to Bermuda. The journey failed. He was caught in Biscaye Bay, put to trial and punished by branding his hand with “SS” to identify him as a slave stealer. The slaves were returned to their owners. Later, Walker joined Frederick Douglass on the lecture circuit as part of the abolitionist movement.



Laurie Carlson Steger. *The Branded Hand*

Materials include cotton damask napkins, cotton fabric, lace trimmed cotton napkins and doilies, machine lace trim, cotton batting, seashells. Techniques: The fabric squares were prepared by dyeing with tea, coffee and indigo. The storyboard images were hand drawn onto cotton napkins with direct dye markers, including Tulip, Marvy, Fabrico, Fabricmate, and Sharpie. The tips varied from pointed to brush and varied by size and width of tip. Fabrics were both plain weave base and woven damask satin. Each marker application reacted differently to the fabric construction, sometimes bleeding slightly along the satin floats.

I wanted the images to simulate the graphic styles of the 1800s and look like etched prints or scrimshaw. Most of all, I wanted to create the drawings by hand, not by photo-copy techniques. The squares were finished by hand stitching and hand-stitched quilting.



Laurie Carlson Steger. *The Abolition Quilt*, 2016, 120"h x 100"w.

Reading left to right from the top left corner, the topics of squares depict the following:

1. Wamsutta Mills, New Bedford and the Quaker Meeting House, South Dartmouth, MA.
2. William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*, an abolitionist publication.
3. Follow the Drinking Gourd, depicts the north star that guided the route to freedom.
4. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, based on Lewis Hayden, who escaped slavery and made his home on Beacon Hill, Boston.
5. Josephine St. Pierre, Ruffin, Lucretia Mott, Lydia Maria Child and Maria Westin Chapman organized women to speak out against slavery, and identified the need for women's equality.
6. Women's Abolition Society.
7. Frederick Douglass began his free life in 1838 in New Bedford, MA where he published *The North Star* and lectured on abolition.
8. African Andinka symbol for freedom.
9. 1850, Freedom Trail, American map of free states and slave states with undecided territories. Fugitive Slave Laws made it dangerous to help the enslaved escape. Free men are captured and sold back to slavery.
10. "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" Designed by J. Wedgewood in England, 1787 and a diagram for packing Africans for shipping to America.
11. Bound for Middle Passage. Thousands died while crossing the Atlantic Ocean.
12. Slave Triangle trade routes. Of the nearly eleven million Africans who entered the slave markets, only 388,000 were shipped directly to the United States. Most of the captured Africans were shipped to the Caribbean.
13. African Andinka symbol for cosmogram.

14. Pick a Bale of Cotton: a new tool. The Spinning Jenny increased production of cotton thread and yarn, increasing the demand for cotton fiber in England. The cotton gin was invented to remove the seeds from upland cotton bolls more quickly. The South ships more cotton bales to England. The cotton crop depletes the land in approximately 4 seasons. The US appropriated land to expand the production of cotton, expanding to California, displacing the indigenous people.

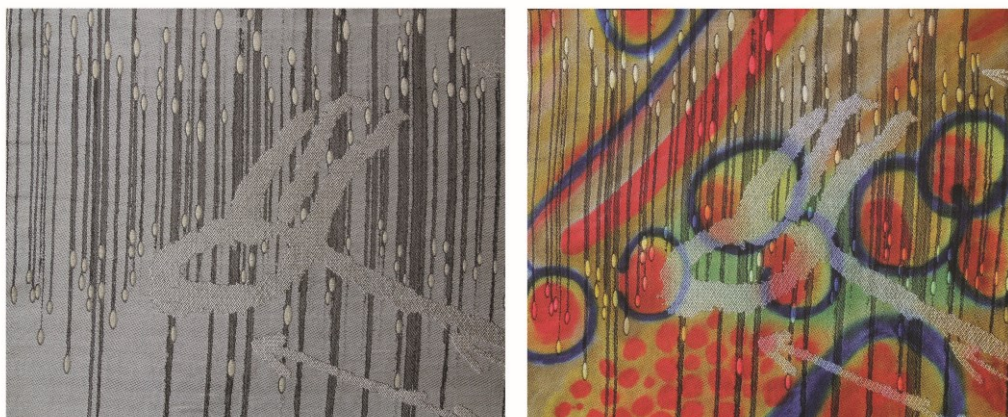
15. Cosmogram in the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, GA. of air holes in the floor boards where fugitive slaves hid until it was safe to make their way to the river boats.

16. Captain Jonathan Walker, *The Branded Hand of Captain Jonathan Walker*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

As this quilt becomes part of my exhibition portfolio, I hope that the messages filled with history, guided by the stars, will bring a new understanding about the fabric of our American life.

Chrztine Foltz: Jacquard Weaving as a Painter's Substrate

Textile design incorporates multiple layers of imaging, formed from knowledge obtained from teachers. Studying as a surface designer, my first opportunities for employment surfaced in the realm of woven furniture fabrics. The freedom of dyes and chemistry were exchanged with harnesses on a loom as an expression of art and survival. Over time, I have used a series of learned motions and traditions that my body memory has stored, twisted, tied, extracted, cajoled, sewn, embroidered, woven, and manipulated in my own visual voice into tapestries and decorated fabrics. Recently, my artistic practice has evolved from pure texture into abstract imagery obtained from a daily practice of 'photographing common things in a different light'. These images are then used as design for my base cloth. This black and white woven sub-straight, created on a jacquard loom, is painted with fiber reactive water color dyes, creating another visual layer. Abstractly painting these tapestries as if the woven design did not exist, the resulting image allows the viewer's eye to dance between color and texture in the intermingling of woven and surface design. In these artistic textile endeavors, I felt myself grow and travel in directions that were not expected. I started to take chances where I had not dared before. It has been a journey that has opened my eyes and taken me to exotic places – even if they are only in my own mind. This practice has changed the way I work, not the traditional techniques needed to hold a cloth together, but in my mental outlook and the way I 'study' what I work on.



Chrztine Foltz. *The Street Tapestry*

Marcia L. Weiss: Sea, Port and the Underground Railroad: Traditional Methods, Contemporary Techniques

Fergus M. Bordewich, in *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* states, “The Underground Railroad occupies a romantic place in the American imagination.” It began in the early 1800s in the Philadelphia region; developing into a “diverse, flexible, and interlocking system with thousands of activists reaching from the upper South to Canada”.²

One of the symbols thought to reference abolitionist safe havens on the Underground Railroad was the nine-patch quilt pattern. In *Nine Patch*, a natural-dyed warp ikat, a series of eleven squares illustrate varying degrees of safe haven, from subtle to overt. The indigo, cutch and walnut dyes reflect the water’s edge and the connection of water to land.



Marcia Weiss. *Nine Patch*

This work is firmly rooted in Pennsylvania German pacifist heritage, West African narrow strip weaving and Central Asian ikats. In the Pennsylvania German tradition, there exists a great history of artisanal craftsmanship. The quilt form was a means to create beautiful, utilitarian products; patching images together, creating repetition and variation.

With the perilous nature of escape by land, sea routes presented a favorable option. The “saltwater underground”³ is referenced in *Water Lily*, a warp ikat inspired by water journeys and West African textiles. *Water Lily* documents the intersection of time and place; abstracting

² Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), <http://www.fergusbordewich.com/canaan/canaanintro.html> (accessed 18 Feb. 2017).

³ Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 274.

contemporary imagery through adaptation of traditional narrow strip weaving. The sense of movement, of light on water, informs the weave structure for *Water Lily*.



Marcia Weiss. *Water Lily*

These explorations of sea and port, of light and water, of slavery and abolitionists, are evidenced through varied approaches to creating warp ikats. These include using the warping board as a tying frame, employing the loom to stretch and wrap the warp, and constructing a pair of reels for tying and dyeing. All methods are process variations abstracting the traditional warp ikat technique into a contemporary fluid expression of color and line.

Suzi Ballenger: New Tools in the Box

As a long time weaver, I have always found the mechanics and physical movements of looms fascinating. I took three years of mechanical drawing and engineering in high school, but my BA was in liberal arts. Studying the drawings of textile equipment, both domestic and abroad, is as important as studying the cultures that treasure clothing and costumes exhibiting evidence of the hand.

The Mizugumo robes from the Honolulu Museum of Art are made of bast fiber with three strands of weft and a weft knot near the top. It is made of Japanese yore fabric used to make robes for the Noh Theater, shown to me by curator Sara Oka when I was there in January. It is an

open weave structure with intentionally displaced weft undulations that are not perpendicular to the warp, traditionally woven with fine bast warp. The weft threads are moved into place with a fingernail or brush. This is a weaving style that creates the appearance of distressed cloth. Highlighting the subtle beauty of impermanence and utility, this type of cloth displays great skill in understanding fiber and structure and how far we can really push an aesthetic choice, while still maintaining a usable, utilitarian cloth. The woven grid becomes fluid and completely changes the way we typically see pattern and woven fabric.

My obsession became how to recreate that type of weft movement without using my fingernail. I created a weft template tool called a supplementary beater to mimic this effect. Weft undulations are controlled by the weaver through both the forward pull and the left/right movement of the tool between a series of picks. It has a flat edge held parallel to the reed and batten which does not move, and an asymmetrical undulating beveled edge that faces the weaver that is used to place the weft at the fell of the cloth. The control of the pattern is at the hand weaver's discretion and shifts the formal overlapping network of threads into a fluid lattice of visual movement. This tool has created a new hand weaving technology of a type because it transforms a complex or labor intensive process into a simple way of changing and moving warp and weft threads across the loom instead of within it.

In my current work of 2016 in *Down at the River*, made of linen, bound resist indigo dyed paper (2016) and *Algae Bloom* of linen and silk, and woven, cut, re-stitched and quilted, you can see applications of this tool. I have combined weave structure differences with the weft undulations to create a depth of field.

Living on the coast of southern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, I am aware of the responses that artists can be to political and social questions. Our ocean front beaches and bays are quite often privatized. These areas are filled with hundreds of sailboats, yachts and hobby fishing crafts that release their bilge water. The shore is lined with hundreds of coastal mansions with runoff and septic systems that directly nitrogenize the water. Microscopic images of phytoplankton, diatoms, skeletonema of Atlantic bays and waters provide a rich area for research, visual response, and social awareness.

I wove *Fragments* (2016) to represent our waterways and harbors that are laced with fine green "algal" threads. I then cut, patched together and re-stitched linen, bound resist indigo dyed paper, upcycled sewing pattern tissue, and marbled paper to represent our haphazard solutions to a blooming epidemic of our own personal making. *Down at the River* and the *Fragments* series reveal lives of struggle, soul, community, family, liberty, freedom, social order and culture through the movement and layering of warp direction, and weft direction cloths that have been cut, mended, stacked, and replaced.



Suzi Ballenger. *Fragments* and *Down at the River*

Woven with two types of paper weft, cut, stitched, pieced, layered and invisibly “re-stitched or repaired” with nylon thread, these two works are my poetic response to research conducted for this symposium on *Cross Currents*.

The supplementary beater excites me as a tool because it allows the full personality of the fiber to bloom, while the woven structure itself supports the movement of the bloom. The weaver can make decisions for the outcome of the cloth based on structure, but each work is a response to the materials used. Understanding the limits of equipment as much as the possibilities, permits and encourages lateral thinking.

Participants in roundtable discussions included some of the following texts as readings:

Beckert, Sven. *The Empire of Cotton*. New York: Vintage, 2015.

Bordewich, Fergus. *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Douglass, Frederick and William L. Garrison. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* New York: Dover 1995.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Dover, 2001.

Northrup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Shaw, Madelyn and Lynn Bassett. *Homefront and Battlefield: Quilts and Context*. American Textile History Museum, 2012.

Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York: Dover Publications, 2005.

Ullrich, Polly. "Beyond Touch: The Body as a Perceptual Tool," *Fiberarts 26, No. 1 (Summer 1999)*

Memory Holloway was awarded a PhD from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London University. She teaches contemporary art and theory in the MFA program at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth where she is on the Board of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture.

Suzi Ballenger is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. She has taught weaving at Saunderstown Weaving School and Slater Mill Museum in RI. Her work has appeared in *Handwoven Magazine* and has won Guild awards at New England Weavers Seminar.

Amy Putansu is instructor of Professional Crafts Fiber at Haywood Community College. She is a coastal Maine native and graduate of Rhode Island School of Design. She makes constructed textiles altered with dye work or alternative processes. Permanent collections include the Renwick Gallery and elsewhere.

Marcia Weiss is associate professor and director of the Philadelphia University Fashion & Textiles Futures Center. Her work has been exhibited in solo shows in the U. S. and France, as well as in juried shows. Her double cloth work is inspired by Central Asian ikats, West African narrow strip weaving, and Pennsylvania German quilting.

Christine Foltz earned her MFA at Goddard College in VT, and currently teaches Graphic Arts, Design and Textiles. Her work includes woven fabrics for home furnishings, rainwear and accessories for industry in NYC, for the SWATCH Accessory Design Team, and for engineering firms by weaving proto-type electronic-textiles designed for use by the military and medical fields.

Laurie Carlson Steger earned an MFA in Fibers from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. Her work explores the phenomena of lighted fabric by using fiber optics. She is on the Board of Trustees at American Textile History Museum. Her work has been published in *MAKE: Fiberarts*, and *Laser Focus World* and in texts by M. McQuaid *Extreme Textiles*, and J. Hecht, *Understanding Fiber-Optics*.