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Susan Taber Avila

University of California - Davis, stavila@ucdavis.edu

Myra Block Kaiser

FiberScene.com, MyraK@kfoc.net

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PROMOTING THE TACTILE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD: AN OVERVIEW OF FIBERSCENE.COM

SUSAN TABER AVILA AND MYRA BLOCK KAISER

stavila@ucdavis.edu

After ten years of public service, FiberScene.com, a website for promoting fine art with a textile sensibility, went off line in Spring 2010. This website, co-founded by Susan Taber Avila and Myra Block Kaiser, played a significant role in shaping and defining the field of fiber art in the early 21st century. Prior to creating this site, there was nothing in cyberspace devoted to Fiber Art.

FiberScene's initial goal was to enhance visibility for fiber artists, especially those who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, once a Mecca for fiber art. The website contained individual pages of local artists, a resource page, an event calendar, and a virtual gallery. The gallery provided a comprehensive overview of new work by international artists through rotating exhibitions.

Susan first met Myra in 1997 when Myra was curating the exhibition, *Defining Fiber* for Braunstein/Quay Gallery in San Francisco and invited Susan to show her work. By that time many of the local venues for exhibiting fiber art, such as the Allrich Gallery or Banaker Gallery, had closed and there had not been a major fiber art exhibition in many years. Additionally, several of the Bay Area educational programs in fiber art no longer existed. The opening reception for *Defining Fiber* brought out large numbers of artists and proved to be extremely popular—Myra and Susan both recognized the need to build on this momentum.

Susan set up her personal website, www.suta.com, in 1996. At that time there were not many artists on the web, and one needed to know basic html code in order to publish a web site. Her initial site was a bit primitive by today's standards but included links to an artist statement, C.V., and examples of artwork. Susan had the idea to include other artists' work on her website to develop a virtual community. Her thought was to model it after Fiberworks, the fiber art education and exhibition space in Berkeley, founded in 1973 by Gyöngy Laky, which had closed its doors in 1987.

Susan approached Myra with the idea of partnering on this venture and Myra immediately saw a bigger picture. Myra's thought was to develop a stand-alone site with an ecommerce component in addition to the educational aspect. Hence, www.fiberscene.com was born in the spring of 1999.

Developing the initial structure of the site was challenging. First there was the job of inviting artists to participate and some artists were skeptical about having their work online. In 1999 very few artists had websites. It wasn't until 2003 that the Textile Society of America posted their website. The Surface Design Association posted their first site in 2001. Fortunately there are many wonderful artists who live in the nine Bay Area counties and many were excited to participate, including well established leaders of the field such as Virginia Davis, Lia Cook, and Gyöngy Laky. Every artist was given a full page that would include examples of work, an artist statement and biography or brief CV, as well as a comment about the fiber field. In addition to artists, initially the idea was to include local researchers of textile culture however those pages proved to be more difficult to populate. Eventually the research pages were converted into a resource page that included a few researchers as well as links to educational resources in the Bay Area.

Once the artists committed to the project, the challenge was to figure out how to drive viewers to the site. It was clear that there needed to be some sort of evolving content so that visitors would feel compelled to return. A calendar was an obvious solution; the FiberScene calendar was regularly updated with fiber art events in the Bay Area as well as events around the world that included FiberScene artists. As the artist

pages were relatively static (occasionally artists would update their work), a gallery space for rotating exhibitions was included.

Charlie Stabb (son of the artist and textile researcher JoAnn Stabb) was hired to design the site. He came up with an elegant logo based on a simple weave structure and friendly typeface. Consultations with an ecommerce software engineer provided ideas about driving traffic and accessibility. The goal was to present the artwork in an easy to read format, in a way that would download quickly and be simple to navigate. Because the focus was images, it was important to give download speed a higher priority in design decisions. The result was a simple, clean look with minimal text to read and thumbnail images that could be clicked through to see details or larger images. The golden yellow background color was a consistent element throughout the site.

For the technical nuts and bolts, Paul Hoy, a local computer contractor was hired as webmaster and posted most of the data. Initially the calendar was updated by rewriting the html code each month but later, new developments in software gave easier access to site updates. User friendly interfaces and student interns were able to help keep things up to date. In 1999 digital photography was still a rare occurrence and most of the images received were in the form of slides which were then scanned into the computer; it's not surprising to note that the quality of images on FiberScene greatly improved as the years went by and digital documentation became the norm for artists.

For each virtual exhibition Myra and Susan wrote a brief commentary to introduce the work of every artist in the show. This meant distilling the essence of an artist's statement/intent into one or two sentences. Brevity was always the goal for easy accessibility and navigation of the site. This also carried through to cute/snappy titles that could entice someone to follow the link and look at the show. The curatorial choices included a variety of artists who were significant to the field. The exhibitions were usually created around a specific theme that could be conceptual, geographical, or by technique. FiberScene made an effort to find artists who weren't overexposed in other venues and to include emerging artists.

An extremely important quality of the virtual exhibition was the ability to archive past presentations. All of the shows remained on the site which meant that everything was accessible in a chronological format. Every six to eight weeks there was a new show but previous exhibitions were always available in the archive section. The site was and continues to be in its archived form, a resource for students, collectors, and anyone else interested in fiber art. (www.fiberscene.com or its direct link at: <http://www.mbkfinearts.com/#/fiberscene>). Visitors could also view past exhibitions in the Archive section of the site which presented a visual timeline of developments in the field.

In ten years FiberScene posted forty two shows that included 276 artists. As the years progressed the shows included more artists as well as invited guest curators. An MFA show was posted every summer. Many of the artists introduced through the MFA shows have gone on to successful careers. Anna Von Mertens was featured in the MFA 2000 show with images of her quilt installations draped over bed sized pedestals. The MFA shows often included surprising and innovative work such as Adam Ellyson's fabric covered Hummer (2004) and Lacey Jane Roberts (MFA 2007) guerrilla action & *Crafts*—a knitted addition to the California College of the Arts exterior sign, as a response to the 2003 decision by the College to remove "Crafts" from their name.

Guest curators gave the opportunity to include a wider range of work selected by experts in the field. For example, J.R. Campbell, who was on the cutting edge of digital printing before it became mainstream, was invited to curate *Digital Wanderers* (2003); he introduced many artists who were exploring the newly developing area of digital textile printing. Chunghie Lee, who lives in Korea, organized a group of artists highlighting fiber work in her region, *Korean Fiber Arts: In & Out* (2006). She provided documentation

of an outside installation project at Heyri Artists Village, north of Seoul, from 2004 and then included other work by the same artists as a contextual reference point.

FiberScene continued to define fiber art under the broadest possible umbrella. Work was chosen for each show based on how it fit the theme, many of the artists invited to exhibit their work had never heard of “fiber art” and were delighted to participate. This helped introduce a range of artists with similar sensibilities. For example, the show *Hair/Cuts* (2001) featured the work of Wenda Gu who creates monumental size installations from human hair. In *Natural Elements* (2003), environmental artist, Patrick Dougherty’s giant structures made from tree saplings were included alongside the jacquard woven work of Ruth Tabancay.

As a virtual site FiberScene had the advantage of showing images from several different installations without the normal gallery limitations of size, space, and exhibition costs. Digital images were some of the biggest challenges for the virtual gallery--high quality photographs and detail shots were crucial to visually describe the tactile work. Sometimes this worked better than others; it was often helpful to have contextual images from the artist when the scale was exceptionally large or small.

Myra and Susan brainstormed on themes; these could be inspired by events, the work of a particular artist, or trends noticed while traveling. For example, after Myra kept noticing artwork that looked like textiles, the *Faux Fiber* (2006) show was conceived. None of the artists included in that exhibition use fiber as a medium. The *Global Traditions: Argentina* show (2010) was developed after Susan met many artists in Buenos Aires and recognized parallels to the fiber art movement in the U.S. Other shows spontaneously came together--*Latvian Roots* (2008) was an idea based on Myra's heritage and became possible after Susan met several Latvian artists at the 2004 China Fiber Art biennial in Shanghai.

Despite the obvious challenge of conveying the tactile nature of textiles through low resolution digital images, FiberScene.com evolved into a valuable resource for academic institutions, museums, curators, and designers while at the same time modeling the way for other websites. The 21st century brought many innovations in digital communication, including advancements in photography, greater internet accessibility, social network sites and easy to use blogs. Now that more artists, galleries, and museums have their own websites it is time for the founders to move on to other activities. Myra continues to work as an independent curator and consultant, and she has founded the Brady Craft Alliance, based in Tulsa Oklahoma (<http://www.bradycraftorganization.org>). Susan continues as a Design Professor at the University of California, Davis, and her artwork can be seen at <http://www.suta.com>.

FiberScene was a great experience and a really fun project to work on; the founders are very proud of what they created and pleased that unlike a gallery shuttering its doors, a visual presence remains with the archived exhibitions.