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The Past is Prologue

Lia Cook, Berkeley, California

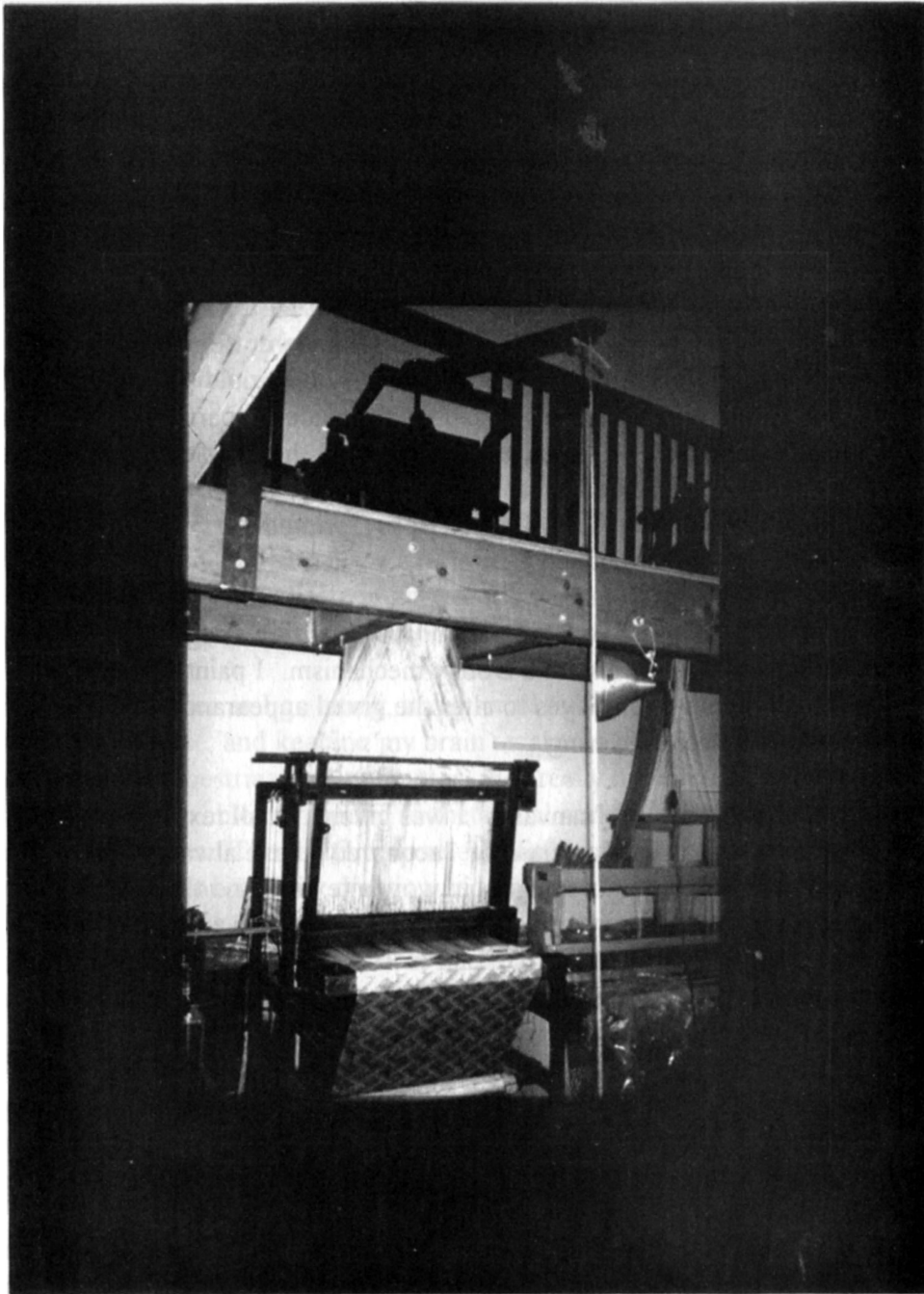
Since the early 1970s I have been interested in the construction of imagery in textiles and how the imagery that is an essential part of the structure can be altered through painting, dyeing, and finishing processes. My early pieces used a simple distortion of the vertical horizontal threads to create undulating parallel lines that defined what I called the "fabric landscape", a piece of fabric laid over a relief surface. In 1974-5 I applied photographs directly to the surface of my woven structures, sensitizing the cotton cords with photo-sensitive chemicals and processing the whole weaving as one would a photograph. There is a similarity between the way a photographic image is made of particles or dots and the way a woven image can be built up of particles created by the intersection of the warp and weft. The breakdown of the image caused by the interaction of the two techniques is what I found fascinating in these pieces. The color in a printed image or in a pointillist painting is also built of particles much like color in a woven fabric.

I next wove a series of "canvases" of white rayon with a pattern image in the structure. I began to work on a loom equipped with a Dobby mechanism. I painted individual threads of each "canvas" with pigments and dyes to alter the visual appearance of the woven pattern and to create a sense of layering.

While I was creating this series of "canvases" I was given a small textile portrait of Joseph-Marie Jacquard -- it was a Jacquard of Jacquard. I have always been curious about the use of a Jacquard to create imagery in woven textiles and thought that the Jacquard could be used in creating my contemporary work. With an NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) Special Projects Grant in 1979, I travelled to Europe to look at Jacquard textile sample books in the Victoria & Albert Museum and in Lyon, France. I brought an original antique Jacquard from Lyon to my California studio. I liked the idea of going back to the time when technology and the hand process were more closely allied and of finding out how I could use this "old" technology in a new way. I have always felt that my experimentation with the Jacquard was the research part of my art practice while I continued to make my contemporary work combining hand processes of dyeing, painting, and weaving with the use of the computerized dobby.

The subject matter of my work was fabric and drapery and their connection to the human body. I went from creating an abstract but graphically changeable surface to creating textile objects such as "curtains" and "Crazy Quilts", and to the depiction of drapery with

reference to the history of art. I explored the historical relationship of the textile to the painting. As always, I emphasized the sensuality of cloth, using art historical references by drawing on details from well-known paintings that represented the moment of touch between the hand and cloth. During this time I continued my interest in the Jacquard and set up in my studio a Jacquard loom I brought from England. I participated in several Jacquard projects, including those at the Rhode Island School of Design, the Mueller Zell Company in Germany, and the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science.

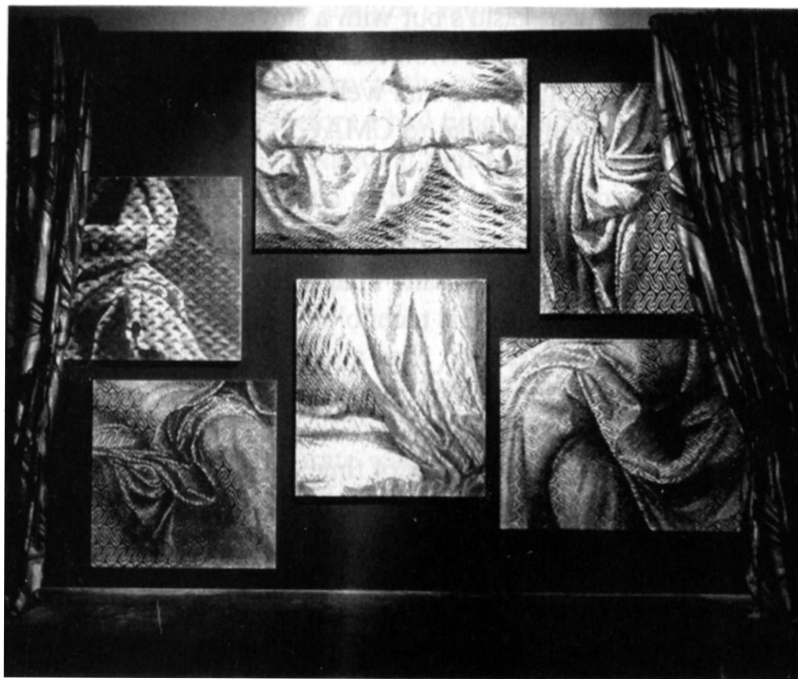


English Jacquard loom in Lia Cook's studio

In 1990 I was invited by Roberta Landini, director and textile historian of the Fondazione Arte della Seta Lisio (Lisio's) in Florence, Italy, to be an artist-in-residence and to participate in a summer course organized to teach weavers and designers how to use 19th-century hand-Jacquards that were used for silk weaving. Lisio's is a foundation created to support the preservation of the traditional art of silk weaving, in particular the production of damask, brocade, lampas, and figured velvet. Every summer a small class of six artists and designers learns these old silk techniques through lectures in textile history, analysis of textiles samples, and the creation of original work using these techniques. The school has six looms set up to weave the various structures. Lisio's is also a workshop where several highly skilled hand weavers (technicians) reproduce historic fabric patterns by hand. A modern factory on the premises is available so that fabric designed on the hand-Jacquard loom and on the computer can be sampled on the power looms.

Our instructor Thierry was trained by M. Viel in Lyon. Thierry held class in a mixture of Italian, French, and English. We received lessons on the history of textiles, tie-up of the Jacquard harness, sample analysis, and structure analysis. We executed point paper design by hand, punched and laced cards for our designs, and then wove the designs we created. I continued my interest in drapery images with a small piece of *lampas*. I also designed and wove a *piqué* textile of ribbon images.

With this rich experience I returned to my studio and worked more intensely on my own work using a Jacquard and a dobby loom. I created imagery using variations of *damask*,



Installation of "Material Pleasures", 1993 by Lia Cook

combining hand processes with both old and new technologies. In one series, for example, I painted on a linen canvas with oil paints, cut the canvas into strips to use as weft. Then I wove the strips into a painted warp using my computerized dobby loom. After removal from the loom, the work was immersed in water and passed through a high pressure etching press to further transform the piece. I was interested in using multiple processes to achieve a single textile which would have many visual layers and a continuous visual movement between these layers.

I explored the image of hands created both on a dobby and on a Jacquard loom. The image of hands produced in a dobby structure appeared as if the hands were touching the cloth. I used Jacquard images of hands in a small installation. In this case, by draping the fabric with images of hands, I achieved a sense of animation and immediacy which the flattened work did not have.

I was fortunate finally to be able to work with an industry-level Jacquard computer program called JacqCAD which was generously given to my school and to me by the owner/creator. With this system I am able to design my projects with the aid of the computer thus saving me months of laborious work on a single point paper.

My newest body of work has been woven by hand on the TIS loom (for a description of this loom, see the following paper "Drawing on Tradition") at the Centre des Métier d'Art en Construction Textile (CMACT) in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I am grateful to Louise Lemieux-Bérubé, director of the school, for her generous sharing of the loom and facilities. I first designed a fabric there which used the multiple color blending technique I learned from my *lampas* fabric at Lisio's but with a single warp and shaded twill damask structure. These first textiles woven in Montreal were a satisfying technical challenge but I find the weave structure of single warp and weft shaded twill more suitable for my current image ideas. After my initial visit to CMACT, I have returned often to use the TIS loom.

Some of the early images in my current series come from an engraved book plate I found in a Paris flea market. The more recent hand images are self-studies made with the new technology of "video capture". With this technology video images are fed frame by frame into the computer using Adobe Premiere, then altered in Photoshop to produce a grainy texture and imported into a weaving program using JacqCAD. Several pieces made possible by video capture use sequential image frames like a strip of movie film to indicate motion or the passage of discreet moments of time. Weaving the first portrait of myself using this technique, watching my face appear thread by thread in a slow but linear process and confronting myself larger than life, was a very moving and strange experience. Like the Jacquard series of hands, much of my current work is draped for installation. Draping exaggerates the tactile and sensual aspects of fabric. The resulting distortion of the image animates the textile and gives it a feeling of being alive.

The aim of my work is to create tactile and sensuous art that addresses the value of the textile both in history and in contemporary life. I use any processes and equipment I need

to express what I want to say in my textiles. Through research and experimentation I leave avenues open in my work to explore old and new techniques and technologies. I trust that this experimentation and research will eventually find their way into my work.