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Textiles - An Art Form For the 90's:
Advancing Fiber With New Concepts & Marketing Strategies

by Elizabeth Gaston and Laura Hill

This panel discussion provided a forum for an exploration of the place and meaning of contemporary textile art. It was one of several concurrent panels held on the final afternoon of the Sixth Biennial Textile Society of America Symposium. Textiles - An Art Form For the 90's brought together artists and enthusiasts from many backgrounds and with different perspectives. Four participants presented formal papers accompanied by slides. This was followed by a panel discussion.

The chairperson was **Patricia Malarcher**, editor of *Surface Design Journal*. She shared the viewpoint of the media. Malarcher also presented **Susan Lordi Marker's** paper. Marker was unfortunately unable to attend due to illness. An artist and educator, Marker is very involved in the latest trends in fiber. Her presentation discussed the techniques of devoré and cloqué. She shared her own current work and that of three colleagues, all utilizing these techniques to achieve complexity of structure and symbolism. Next, **Gyongy Laky**, a well-known Bay Area artist, presented a paper on another current trend. Many artists have been looking to the environment as a source of not only inspiration, but also materials. Laky is using tree prunings, fiber, and found materials like wire to create art that she refers to as "textile architecture." Other artists are creating similar pieces or environmental installations, exploring the metaphors of our relationship to nature. The third participant was **Laurel Reuter**, the director and a founder of the North Dakota Museum of Art. She shared stories and visuals from the exhibition *Light and Shadow: Japanese Artists in Space*. She discussed the use of repetition, scale, color and light in the works of several artists who adapt traditional textile techniques in the creation of new forms. The final presenter, **Tom Grotta**, discussed the marketing of fiber art. He is co-owner of the Brown/Grotta Gallery in Wilton, Connecticut, a gallery that solely represents fiber artists. A gifted photographer, Grotta creates lush and enticing images of the art that is then used in the gallery's exhibition catalogs. These quality images are integral to the promotion of fiber art.

The session ended with an informal panel discussion. The audience was very involved and enthusiastic, offering numerous relevant and often humorous anecdotes. The discussion could have continued throughout the afternoon, but unfortunately, time constraints required Malarcher to close the discussion after thirty minutes. Even as the crowd was dispersing, one could still catch snippets of lively debate and charming stories. A similar gathering of artists, collectors, critics and marketers in the future could certainly build on this conversation, and perhaps move closer to defining the many roles and meanings of textile art in today's world.

The first presentation, a discussion of devoré and cloqué, was written by **SUSAN LORDI MARKER**. Marker is recognized for her innovative use of surface design techniques. She received a Master of Fine Arts degree with Honors from the University of Kansas - Lawrence in 1993. Her work received a Best of Show award at *Muse of the Millennium: Emerging Trends in Fiber Art*, a 1998 national juried exhibition. Currently,

she is an instructor at Johnson Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. In addition, she has taught textile workshops across the country.

The works of Susan Lordi Marker, Sondra Dorn, Leslie Richmond, and Pauline Verbeek-Cowart were introduced with a brief explanation of the processes of *devoré* and *cloqué*, as they are being interpreted by these artists. The technique of *devoré* involves the application of a mild acid paste to a fabric substrate of both cellulose and synthetic or protein fibers. When heated, the acid destroys, or burns out, one type of fiber but not the other(s), resulting in patterning of sheer areas or openings. Similarly, *cloqué* results in a manipulation of the structure of a textile, but it is a different process and end-result. In *cloqué*, a fabric of two or more fibers is submerged in a lye bath. The cellulose threads will shrink, resulting in a puckered fabric with intriguing dimensionality. In both *devoré* and *cloqué*, resists can be applied to achieve additional layers and patterns.

These four artists use *devoré* and *cloqué*, either alone or in combination, to create abstract, impressionistic works. The works are fascinating in the complexity of layers and techniques. For example, in her *Pelts* series, Leslie Richmond combined felt, *devoré* velvet, stitching, appliqué and beads.

The complexity of the pieces extends beyond technique into the realm of meaning and symbolism. In her art, Sondra Dorn explores human perception... Dorn says, "I see time and the events of my life as an accumulation... I layer one action or layer on top of another so that the previous layer becomes obscure. The *devoré* process is crucial to me both conceptually and as a means to create pattern on top of pattern." She uses *devoré* to selectively burn away and reveal different parts of the underlying structure.

Likewise, Leslie Richmond uses *devoré*, she says, [because the] "sensuous qualities of the etched velvets [are suggestive of] patterns that occur in nature: sky, earth, water, and the markings of animals and plants." In particular, her *Pelts* series explores the significance of patterns that evoke the markings of rare and beautiful creatures.

In her own work, Susan Lordi Marker uses *devoré* and *cloqué* to suggest what she calls the "fragility and permanence" of our existence. She explores the concepts of care and preservation in her *Excavation* series. About this work she says, "[I am trying to] elevate the value of cloth as personal evidence of a life."

Finally, Pauline Verbeek-Cowart is also fascinated by the technique of *cloqué* as a means of communicating a concept. In her *Cycles* series, Verbeek-Cowart was inspired by natural cycles such as night and day. About her work, she states, "The patterns in my weavings reflect my interest in structure, order, and logic. Principles of organization in nature, as well as those evident in man-made structures and human logic, continuously influence my work..."

In utilizing innovative techniques, like *devoré* and *cloqué*, these artists are able to obtain unique and wonderful effects that have both a visual and symbolic significance. As a result, their art communicates to the viewer ideas, according to Susan Lordi Marker, about "basic human experience as well as nature."

The next presenter, **GYONGY LAKY**, shared the work of many artists who are literally using nature in their work. The founder of Fiberworks, Center for Textile Arts in Berkeley in 1973, Laky is a well-known artist from the Bay Area. Her work has been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe, including the Fourteenth International

Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne. Her work is in collections such as the American Craft Museum in New York, New York, and the Oakland Museum in Oakland, California. She is currently a Professor at the University of California - Davis.

Laky discussed and showed her recent work, as well as that of others such as Jackie Winsor, Kathryn Lipke, Dorothy Gill Barnes, Lissa Hunter, John McQueen, and Andy Goldsworthy. These artists are all working with nature; they are drawn to it as a means of communicating ideas about the interrelationship of people and environment. They use similar materials, like trees, branches, and leaves, to create baskets, sculptures, and environments. For example, Lissa Hunter incorporates traditional basketry techniques into minimalist wall hangings of stones, fiber, wood, and beads. Sculptures, such as Dorothy Gill Barnes' dendroglyphs, are made by cutting into the tree [several years before] harvesting. This leaves the memory of the mark in the tree. Temporary environments, like the Willow Project, in Northwest England, feature the transformation of trees into tunnels, walls, and even figures, with which the viewer could interact. Many artists are literally moving outdoors into nature to work, where eventually the pieces are reclaimed by the earth.

Because of the context and materials, this type of art is very different from other work. It retains a sense of what Laky calls the "mess and chaos of nature." Laky noted that the "natural branch resists man-made order..." What was endearing about the work shown by Laky was this sense of imperfection, intrinsic to the raw, just-harvested or still growing, materials being manipulated by the artists. In her own work, Laky feels herself "moving towards [this] elegance of nature... towards the characteristics [of subtle variations in color or irregular nodes] found in the wood [she] gathers."

By using living natural entities, such as trees, these artists force the viewer to consider nature in a different way. For example, Laky feels that the:

"Artworks reveal... ecological conditions, situations in nature, and the need to consider resources as precious... They cause us to question the character of human intervention... Artists are searching for new metaphors to re-envision our place in the environment... The present exploration of expressive possibilities is leading to... [an] unprecedented conversation [between us and nature]."

This current consciousness of nature, and our interaction with it, is a connection with our beginnings, but also a look forward to our future. Laky wonders: "Are we as artists preparing a fresh attitude toward nature for the twenty-first century? Are we breaking down the distinctions and barriers that have allowed us to think of nature primarily as our resource?"

LAUREL REUTER, the Director of the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks, makes the presentation of fiber art an integral part of her museum program. With Mildred Constantine, she curated *Frontiers in Fiber*, a show that toured for three years in Asia. This year Monticello Press published their book *Whole Cloth* on twentieth century fiber art.

Reuter's slide and lecture presentation focused on the work of Japanese fiber artists which she included in the 1993 exhibition *Light and Shadow: Japanese Artists in*

Space. "Over the last twenty years, I've watched as the Japanese artists reclaimed their [heritage] and their art has become more Japanese... What interested me in all of this work, was how shadows and light are... a part of the concept of the work. They are integral to its very being..."

Subject matter was pulled from nature, memory, and the artists' personal experiences. Hiroyuki Shindo's works of hand dyed indigo on hand woven linen were his responses to the flat landscape of North Dakota. Reuter said, "He wanted to make a way for us to get from our very flat landscape into our sky... These are works that reach to the sky." His untitled hangings are a series of large semi-sheer panels with cloud-like forms evoked in blue and white. The approximately ten panels are hung randomly across the center of the gallery. In this work, North Dakota clouds and sky are brought down into the gallery space and the viewer is able to walk among them.

Mitsuo Toyazaki participated in this exhibition with a piece representing the relationship between the British and the Americans. According to Reuter: "He decided that the British and the Americans have spent the last two or three hundred years, one or the other in the light or the shadow of the other. So he made these banners based on our flags. They were hanging outside, and as the sun went over and as the day progressed, they would intertwine with each other..."

Reuter also described the installation work by Harne Takami:

Harne Takami brought with her two hundred pounds of cloth in five colors, cut into one-half inch pieces. She must have spent a year or two years doing nothing but cutting bits and pieces of cloth into confetti. With it, she made a work in homage to her mother, a traditional geisha in Kyoto... The space is about thirty-five feet long and twenty feet [wide] and the cherry blossoms [cloth confetti] are... two inches deep... I thought it was a magnificent work.

[These works are] so Japanese; [they are] Japanese in their use of repetition. When you live in tiny spaces and... you're forced into larger spaces, you just repeat units... These are artists who are deeply knowledgeable about traditional textile techniques. They draw on a Japanese love of delicate, yet sumptuous color. There is also a lightness of being in this work that draws me to it. There's an understatement. The light and shadow are a living elegance with the work.

TOM GROTTA represented the gallery owners' point of view in presenting fiber art to the public. He and his wife, Rhonda Brown, operate the Brown/Grotta Gallery in their home in Wilton, Connecticut. The gallery, one hour drive north of New York City, currently represents the work of forty-four artists. Three times a year, their house becomes a gallery in which to showcase fiber art.

Grotta documents each exhibition with a full color catalog. The catalogs produce nearly seventy-five percent of the gallery's sales. He described the purpose of the catalogs as a way to introduce fiber art. He said, "We were convinced that there was a more elusive audience, uneducated about fiber art, but ready to be engaged. While continuing our efforts to preserve our core collectors, we began to do catalogs for

exhibitions as a way of reaching that larger group. The catalogs gave us something to show to people who had no conception of what fiber art was."

Grotta illustrated his presentation with slides of his photographs of artists' works. His photographs are stunning documentation of the textures, sheen, materials, techniques, colors and dimensionality of these works. Most include both an enlarged detail photo of a work, combined with a photograph of the entire artwork. His close-up slides of Karyl Sisson's *Old Cloth Tape Measures* document the bright yellow coating and black printing on the tape measures. The detail slide shows the yellow tape measures interlaced in a plain weave; the full view shows the overall composition created by this technique. Many works are photographed in his home in order to show size and scale against architectural details such as windows.

Grotta thinks that showing the tactile quality of fiber art is crucial in its presentation. He said,

I am consistently dismayed by the fact that fiber art's texture and dimensionality, not to mention such details as color and scale, are so rarely communicated in media illustrations, slides or promotionals. So often when works are photographed, particularly those on a wall, they are lit and posed like a painting or something with no dimensionality. In my view, a more accurate presentation is essential in creating a greater appreciation for this medium... Our two tenth anniversary catalogs presented a real opportunity for me to illustrate the work of all the artists as captivantly as possible. It was my chance to redress the lack of... [quality] visuals that I believe has been a major obstacle in popularizing fiber art. Unless you have seen the work in real life, you haven't really seen it...

His photographs are used in magazine articles featuring artists' work. The articles present appealing photos and text, leaving the reader with a desire to see the art in person. As a necessary part of profiling artists' work, he said that the magazines need to provide their readers with the information on where to see, and possibly purchase, the work. He cited the success of articles in *American Way*, the magazine of American Airlines, which featured the artists John Garrett and Dorothy Gill Barnes. The articles gave information on three galleries located across the United States that carried their work. Grotta explained, "In the case of John Garrett's article, a fiber art collector came into the gallery the morning after a night of red-eye with the article in her hand and bought a piece. In Dorothy's case, it resulted in calls from around the United States; we nearly sold out of everything she had..." He thinks this additional contact information is critical in order for an article to be successful.

In contrast, they have experienced few sales resulting from cover articles in art journals that do not list gallery information. He said, "The magazines that cover the [fiber arts] have been consistently supportive of our gallery in covering our shows, publishing our photographs, etc. However, we have found some art magazines are unwilling to include the reader's information about how to find work by the artist and so the exposure is of limited value." He encourages artists to insist that this information be a part of the article.

His future plans include outreach efforts to architects and designers. He hopes to encourage the purchase and commission of large scale fiber works for interiors. He is

convinced that this field will continue to require high quality photographs for the promotion of the work.

The session concluded with an informal discussion between the four presenters and the audience. Areas of concern included the influence of computer technology, the limited art programs in schools, and the promotion of artists in magazines. The future was also a concern: technological developments as well as markets for fiber art.

The topic of marketing fiber art was discussed on many levels. One audience member pointed out that most college students are taking only professional courses. She said, "They're not doing the extra liberal arts courses, the anthropology courses, which tune them into the wider world around them... Are they all so busy working towards an MBA that they won't know how to spend their money?"

Patricia Malarcher asked Laurel Reuter to share her experience in attracting an audience for fiber art. Reuter replied:

My experience is that the American people are an educated and mobile people. These days, they're not very different between North Dakota and California and Kansas. The North Dakota people travel widely and they see a lot. We did the Japanese show in three segments. In the first segment, they weren't quite sure what to think of it. In the second and third, they understood it and liked it a great deal. I think exposure is out there everywhere... When I meet an artist who doesn't want to come to North Dakota, I know they haven't traveled very much because art happens everywhere.

Promotion of artists in magazines was discussed further. An audience member asked why publishers did not include information on where to find artists' work. Tom Grotta suggested that many publications did not want to give the impression that they were promoting their advertisers. He said they are missing an opportunity to increase readership. By not providing information, they are not really advancing the market. He thinks the larger the market, the larger would be the demand for the magazine.

Patricia Malarcher pointed out that most publications have an editorial policy of not giving sources for art in order to protect the artists' privacy. Magazines will forward a letter to an artist if a reader directs a letter to them. She found galleries' purpose to be creating access while magazines have different purposes.

Patricia Malarcher raised the question of the contribution of the tactile effects of fiber art "as a countering force to the non-tactile, digital world that so many of us live in." Gyongy Laky replied, "I think after five hours in front of the screen, people are dying just to go outside and touch something, to feel [they are] human beings again..."

One area of concern was education in the arts. The group discussed fears that children are not going to be interested in art; they are only being encouraged to use a computer. Gyongy Laky shared that some educators find that younger kids are actually becoming better at drawing. They think this is caused by the development of eye-hand coordination. Conversely, Tom Grotta found that many students may have the knowledge to manipulate the software, but their design sense needs development. Laky pointed out that the University of California at Davis has started a graduate level fiber art

program. She said, "I do see some wonderful young people coming into it. I think it's sort of a normal field of art now..."

An audience member ended the session with a positive story about a fiber artist teaching in the schools in New Jersey. Her encouragement of fiber art had unexpected results: "At five o'clock one morning, this little four year old wakes his parents up with the sound of water. When they came downstairs, they said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I'm making dye. And now I need fiber.' They said, 'We don't have fiber.' He said, 'Oh yes you do indeed. Up in the medicine cabinet in every bottle.' "

The session raised issues on both building upon the rich history of fiber art and using supports such as galleries, museums and magazines. The diversity of views within the community became evident. One area just touched on was the integration of fiber art into the mainstream art world. Gyongy Laky feels that it has become an accepted art form, while Tom Grotta feels that he needs to avoid the fiber terms in order to attract a new audience. Tom Grotta and Laurel Reuter raised some interesting points about the audience for fiber art.

The enthusiastic response to the session showed a need for these discussions within the fiber art community. The audience was engaged both by the beautiful visuals presented, and by the issues raised. The major issues of fiber technology, arts education, computer art and promotion of work were just touched on. The session could have easily continued longer; a second gathering of similar participants at another venue in the future could continue these conversations further.

Elizabeth Gaston and Laura Hill are MA candidates in Museum Studies: Costume and Textiles at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Ms. Gaston combines a background in theatrical costuming, ethnomusicology, and grant-writing. She has completed an internship at the Textile Conservation Workshop in South Salem, New York. Ms. Hill has worked with historic costume and textiles as well as fiber arts, primarily in retail contexts. She has recently completed internships at the San Francisco Airport Museums and the Oakland Museum of California, both in the Bay Area.