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The Never-Ending Possibility of Textile Art Education

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Ripple of Resonance. Jan Ru Wan.

Textiles have an intimate relationship in everyone's life - whether one is aware of it or not. Textiles reveal so many stories and memories from every culture and society. My mother was an educator in a home economic school and I was trained by her hands; I was constantly busy helping her with quilting, embroidering, stitching, and making clothing. I grew up appreciating the dedication and skill in textile works. But it is the passion for story telling and the conceptual part of textile more than the desire to creating beautiful textile alone drove me toward the path of textile art. I simply use fiber media and textile techniques to express my feeling through my works.

In this panel, I will address my way of working with my own art first and how everyday life, my upbringing, and my experience with different cultures, have inspired my works. Second, I will address how I approach my teaching in textile and offer some examples of assignments in my classroom.

My textile art is the result of a labor of love, involving the meditative processes of weaving, stitching and printing, incorporating different techniques and unusual materials and evoking deep emotional responses. Scale, repetitive details and transformed materials are a key aspect of my works. From constructing garment forms to creating body sculptures, and then creating the installation work embracing the body, I have always dealt with the human body and its perceptions in my work. Working on a large scale and suspending work from the ceiling allows me to create a dynamic setting that combines the beautiful and uncontainable. It helps me to reach the state of the sublime. Such as "we are in the same boat" which is 16 foot long, viewers become part of the work. It looks very still and quiet when you stand far away, but as you walk close to the space, the lightness of the piece will move ever so slightly even by your breathing.

As one boat moves, the rest of them move, just as we are all interconnected somewhere, in some way.

Materials play a major role in my works as well. By manipulating common objects I intend to recontextualize and embed them in different kinds of senses and create a new avenue. The profusion of materials questions the physical and psychological relationships between the mechanical and the organic, the gigantic and the miniature. A lot of time, transforming materials becomes a major part of my work. For example, “the ripple of resonance” started from two boxes of pink plastic that was abandoned outside a surplus building. I printed images on this five by seven inch pink plastic sheet, and then folded, stitched and assembled it into this giant sculpture form. In each house, I inserted a rusted bell that had been encased in wax and is forever trapped in motionless silence, exemplifying the intention of my work to provoke a query and explore its implications. This both simple and complex notion intrigues me, allowing me to instinctively express the overwhelming sensation of the hidden voices, which have been forced into silence but still retain a pure, untouched inner presence that echoes throughout the silent bells. Besides the aesthetic aspect of repetition, the layer upon layer of time-consuming labor also becomes a personal ritual. Through this repetition of form and notion, the discrepancy between materials is wedded alchemically to produce a new harmony-- the balance of the chaotic, the sublime and the beautiful.

I use my work to question, reflect, and respond to the environment around me intuitively. Surely, my upbringing and travels have influence in my works as well. In “Everyone looking for a good life”, I used the images from the common sign of fortune-teller stands in Taiwan. I simply present this work with a simple question I had since I was little. If everyone is praying for a good life, then who has a bad life, and why?

Furthermore, the experience from my travel and residency has become part of my works lately. Last summer, I was awarded a fellowship in Burapa University in Thailand. During the two months, I created the following two works. I found Buddhism in Thailand is a very different one than the one in Taiwan. It focuses on superstitions more than teaching meditation. In response to this experience, I created this work “Contemplation in a vigorous world”. I hope while your eyes and mind are wondering and searching for those prayers and wishes; you could find a quiet spot in the reflection of mirrors to have a moment of contemplation. As a fiber artist, I am always interested in how people use cloth in life. And surprisingly, I have learned that in order for monks in Thailand to receive money from females without touching them, they will bring out a piece of orange cloth in front of you for you to make an offering of money to them. So here cloth becomes the divider for physical touch.

During my traveling in Thailand, I also found a white string oddly connected inside and outside those beautiful and highly decorated temples. Then, I found out by touching this white string, you will receive the power from all Buddha who are grouped with one white string. So here we have, the string become a powerful communication tool. With those interesting ideas and Buddha relic in the market, I create this work called “Sacred Connection”. At the space, I want to create a special sacred space for my viewers to enjoy the power of thread.

I feel that textile art is filled with endless possibilities in its wide range of technique, in its historical resources, in the selection of materials, in the format you are presenting and in its idea and concept. I feel the same way toward my teaching in textile art.



Solo. Jan Ru Wan.



Kunlin (left). Jan Ru Wan.

The Journey of Bibo Leave (right). Jan Ru Wan.

I see the development of student's artistic talent and finding their own voice through techniques and materials as my main objective. In East Carolina University, textile art is offered as both B.F.A. and M.F.A. under the school of art, which offers fourteen different concentrations for more than seven hundred undergraduate students and fifty graduate students. Students can take any classes from different areas and decide their areas of concentration during their Junior and Senior year. The result of that, I may have quite a mixture level of students with different motivations and goals in one class. How to introduce beginning students to those complicated techniques and at the same time emphasize the important nature of labor intense quality of textile works are the challenges I love.

In general, I encourage students to integrate their own vision, and gain a relationship to the materials and different techniques through each project. For beginning textile survey class, I have to introduce a wide range of techniques, such as paper weaving, tapestry, surface design,

basket making, silk painting and dye exercise in one semester. I design each project with some technical requirement and combine it with the concept for each project. I make sure to leave enough room for them to explore and search for their own identity. By introducing a concept or direction along with every new technique, it helps to connect techniques to each individual's needs and interests. For example, in the basic tapestry project, I appoint students a series of sketch assignments from their own environment. Then we combine them into the design for first tapestry project called "the corner of my world". I feel this is a great way to show their personality and a sincere way to understand who they are. I hope by doing this assignment, any difficult or time consuming task would connect back to them instead of doing an assignment for the class. I also strongly encourage them to use any techniques they know to expand and enrich their final product. Because I know the first tapestry work may not work perfectly for every student, I also introduce different embroidery techniques so they can still express their ideas through stitches or combining different materials. The results are diverse and interesting. I am always amazed to see how different the outcomes are from the same projects. That is why I find excitement and uniqueness in the textile field. Its dynamic doctrine allows for so many different voices, mediums, directions and styles, which no other area of the fine arts can afford.

At the same time, my constant challenge in the university is to break away from the stereotype and misconception others have for textile. When I introduced the silk painting and surface design in my class, I want to break away the label of making pretty scarves. I will start the project with creating one's own spiritual banner. Or make it more fun for the project, I require student to create a small installation project. For example, create a entire table setting for a special someone or special event, with the cloth they dyed, printed and constructed as well as cook a dish to share with rest of class. The focus will be how to use the labor of love and attendingness for this project to make it "special enough." Students will need to build up color, detail and think harder to show the "love" This way, they start to see the relationship among the cloth, food, family and the story behind them in everyday life in their own creation.

Making clothing and becoming a fashion designer is a common dream for some students who join our textile program. Even though the program is not set up for such training, I encourage students to show their best creative and unique "fashion works" instead of professional design work. In my upper level weaving class, one of the projects is called "reconstruction Jacket". Before they learn how to construct the clothing, they need to learn to take it apart first. Students pick up a tailored suit and I make him or her take apart every seam and then see what kind of inspiration comes out from them. At the end, they will need to create an art work from those pieces, and replace certain section of cloth with their own weaving or fabric which they design through weave maker program. The results are very interesting. First, students learn how the tailor suit was put together and find many interesting shapes and colors in the suit and in the end the process makes them think of the relationship between the cloth and the body more than just a pretty dress or jacket. Another similar project is called "extension of the body", "nostalgia of the body" or "rebirth of an object". Students have to work with many sketches of their own body. At the end they need to exaggerate part of the body or eliminate part of the body in their final work. They can also work with found functional objects that just represent the evidence of the body. This project produces some unusual and interesting presentations to break away from the rectangle format that is so prevalent in textile work.

In the upper level class, research project and formal proposals are requirements. I want them to search their own voice in various techniques and be really sensitive to how they use them as

well as the material they choose. One of the projects I have designed is called “inspired by the process”, I introduce a kozo paper making process, and talk about how the relationship between a tree, a sun, a world and a piece of paper. Students will have to come up with a project related to the concept. In my teaching, I earnestly discover student’s individual needs and what are the strengths and weaknesses to make them different and unique. From time to time I will set up assignment according to their areas of interest. Raymond Henderson has been my student for many semesters. My first impression was that a very quiet and hard working student and did ordinary beginner works. I found out another his passion besides weaving is those rough sketches/painting he creates on his own time. After many conversations, I can gladly say that he has finally found the direction he is passionate about, which is combining and creating a series of interesting works through his own paintings from old photographs he has and the weaving he designs.

To me, there is so much potential in different techniques, materials, ideas, and formats in the field of textile art. If a single thread can create such powerful force, like the one in the temples of Thailand, can you image when this thread become a piece of cloth? The possibilities are endless. I think it’s worth my lifetime to explore both in creating and teaching. Thank you for your attention, and feel free to ask any questions.