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Katherine Westphal and Wearable Art

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- Heady:** 1) Willful, rash; hence violent; impetuous.
2) Apt to affect the head; intoxicating.
3) Colloq. Showing good judgement; as a 'heady' player.
From: *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*.

There is something magical about Katherine Westphal Rossbach and her textile work: her unique vision, her irreverent imagination, her prodigious output, and her complete dedication and commitment to individual creative expression.

These qualities have infused her entire life – and they have influenced a generation of textile artists. While the range of her output includes paintings, art textiles for the wall, textiles designed for industry, three dimensional basket forms, artists books, and clothing, what I want to somewhat focus on today is her process and some of her work in wearable textiles.

In the creative climate of the Hippy revolution and upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, the San Francisco Bay Area became *the* center for hand-made textiles – for both on and off the body. Eventually those intended for the body became known as “Wearable Art.” Katherine Westphal was one of the leaders of this movement.

Coming from a painting background, Katherine’s work emphasizes surface design – printing, dyeing and direct painting – but the core of her approach is collage.

As Katherine has stated: “My constant concern is a mixture of time and space, of scrambled images, a bit of this and that to achieve what is reality for me. I save everything, it is always useful.” (From *Flower Arrangement*, UC-Davis Design and Landscape Architecture Faculty Exhibition catalog, May 1981, page 31)

The series of heat-transfer printed garments and wall quilts that she created after traveling to EGYPT in the mid-1970s: The “New Treasures for Tutankhamun” function almost like a scrapbook that combines photographs of her tour group with drawings adapted from her trip sketchbook; while the composition is appropriated from the traditional broad Egyptian collar necklace. She says was inspired by the tacky tourist pillows she saw in the airports and started to work with synthetic panne velvet – the perfect medium for heat transfer printing.

For many years during the 1950s both she and Ed created prints for the commercial textile market and had an agent in New York. These were generally samples on cloth – using batik and direct painting - rather than the typical ‘boards’ with designs painted in gouache. They were lively patterns designed to be put into repeat. She and Ed produced one small textile sample each day...ONE – EACH DAY – for EIGHT YEARS! She moved away from this work when her New York agent retired and she began to produce and exhibit one-of-a-kind wall pieces. She remembers that this work developed when her Agent returned all the unsold sample textiles from over eight years of work and she decided to cut them up and create patchwork quilts. These new large art pieces

incorporated dyeing, painting, piecing, quilting, and sometimes tapestry weaving... her rebellion against the “Tyranny of the Repeat” – as she called it - of industrially-produced yardage.

After those many years of being a “free lance” textile designer for industry along with Ed - as well as a painter, ceramic artist and a faculty wife - Katherine began teaching textile design at the University of California, Davis campus, in 1966. The first time I met her was at a faculty retreat in 1967 where we began revising the Design curriculum as it emerged out of the Home Economics Department and into the Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences. She was wearing clothing made from textiles that she had printed, cut up, and re-constructed into patchwork garments like those beginning to appear on the hippies. She was fascinated with the colorful street scene of the hippy culture on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley and in San Francisco - and often referred to herself as “the oldest living hippy.” I immediately liked her and we embarked on a warm collegial and personal relationship that lasts to this day.

My own area of the curriculum was clothing/costume/fashion/wearables. Coming from UCLA, my orientation was experimental and theatrical as well as streetwear fashion. The synergy between Katherine’s textile area and mine is captured in examples of the earliest student work from this renewed program at UC Davis – Senior projects that required blending two areas of the curriculum: textiles and clothing; or textiles and interior design; or costume and interiors, etc. Two of our first students - Sandra Shannonhouse – later Mrs. Robert Arneson - and Luana Yates - are seen here wearing their Senior projects in 1969. Both created ensembles using tie-dyed fabrics. They could almost be from the pages of this month’s *Vogue* magazine. This was the birth of wearable art on the University of California Davis campus!

Katherine went on to create many, many garments inspired by ethnic clothing - primarily Japanese and Chinese prototypes. Her participation in the Wearable Art movement validated this activity and brought it recognition. In particular, at the invitation of the American Crafts Council headquarters in New York, she led a four-person contingent who presented several lectures and workshops on “Wearable Art from North America” at the World Crafts Council international symposium in Vienna, Austria, in 1980. Our presentations featured the pioneering work of many individual artists – some of whom continue to work in this field today. As one of the members of this entourage – along with Dolph Gotelli and Debra Rapoport also on the faculty of UC Davis - I remember that this event felt like the “official launch” of the Wearable Art Movement - that has now become so widely accepted in both the Craft and increasingly in the Fine Arts worlds and has greatly influenced contemporary FASHION.

For her presentation before hundreds of crafts-makers from around the world, Katherine wore her shibori-dyed hippari that she made after taking a course from Yoshiko Wada at Fiberworks. It was entitled: “A Phantasmagoric Meeting between Santa Claus and (her dogs) Julie and Tyrone in front of MacDonald’s in Tokyo.” Since we had already eaten lunch at MacDonald’s in downtown Vienna just after we had arrived, she had some small paper flags with the golden arches LOGO printed on them – which she installed on the podium before she began her lecture. Needless to say, this was quite a controversial moment, as MacDonald’s already had a “mixed reputation” internationally.

But she managed to charm the audience who simultaneously understood the power of that logo and the North American imprint on this “new” movement called wearable art.

Katherine has continued her work in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional textiles - - panels and quilts for the wall, sculptural basketry forms, embroideries, needlepoint tapestries, drawings, collages and artist’s books. She never draws a line between “fine art” and “applied art” -although that debate seems never to subside. And she doesn’t like “boxes” – as in “thinking in boxes.” She is always thinking “outside – the-box!” Anything, any image is a possibility for the next textile! It can be from a photograph she has taken on a trip (as in her wall-hanging based on the Belvedere Palace sphinxes that she photographed in Vienna);

From WCC trip to Vienna: Katherine photographed Debra and I getting ready for the World Crafts Council presentations; and also an ornate “chinoiserie” wall in the Schonbrunn Palace outside Vienna; She then returned home and produced a “commemorative piece:” This one called “Viennese Decadence.”

Her inspiration can come from photographs cut out of the newspaper (as in the hula dancers in the quilt called “Hawaiian Kitsch”) combined with a photograph of her beside the glass brick pyramid on the roof of the Opera House in Basel, Switzerland;

Or they were based on an interpretation of an ethnic garment – as in her series entitled “Chinese Disco Tee’s” - that she then animated and incorporated into these small, photo-copied ARTISTS BOOKS; or it can be an original drawing done at a museum or in her travel journals – which she then puts into the photo-copy machine and distorts, blurs, and stretches as seen here in her ARTIST’S BOOK on BALI... I have never met *anyone* with a more original VISION than Katherine!

When Katherine retired from U. C. Davis, she kept a promise to herself to learn something new. She took a paper-making class from Nance O’Banion at Fiberworks and set up her blender, screens and trays on her washing machine in the back laundry room off the kitchen of her home. Here she recycled some of the paper generated during her years at the University and started making paper hats! What a brilliant solution to the question of ‘what to do with’ the overload of paper generated by this massive institution of higher education – before recycling became so commonplace!

And everyday, she also made small sheets of paper approximately 3”x4” – and stacked them up when they were dry. She began to stamp print, color, dip-dye, and stitch these small paper modules into patchwork panels with cloth backing – which eventually found their way into a series of kimonos – some of her most exciting garments, I believe - which she called “Wearable Paper.”

She also became a pioneer in pursuing new avenues of textile printing and image generation – including using the office Xerox copy machine and heat transfer on both cloth and handmade paper – always appropriating new technologies for surface design and adapting them for use in textile and clothing forms while combining them with low tech rubber stamping, stenciling and tie-dye – These were her “toys” as she called them. While her faculty colleagues were using the office copier to reproduce class assignments and memos, Katherine was producing ART!

Some of her cloth and paper kimonos using hand-made paper made from recycled University memos document her travels to Monet's garden in Giverny and the Shoso-Inn in Japan. – from 1983. There are more garment forms from 1989.

Meanwhile, Ed Rossbach looked on with bemused interest. While he never produced wearable garments, he did occasionally produce paper facsimiles of garment artifacts inspired by his research in the (now) Phoebe Hearst Anthropology Museum Collection. One could say that Katherine and Ed were the perfect “textile couple” complementing each other and stimulating each other on many levels: Ed's emphasis was on structure and Katherine's emphasis is on surface, yet both of them were constantly crossing over back and forth. They also shared a fine disregard for the existing textile establishment – those makers of 3-yard lengths and repeat prototypes for industry. They were artists creating one-of-a-kind pieces from fiber.

The other major element that they shared was a sense of humor and a playfulness in their work and in their approach to life. Stimulated by their dogs and their toys, they conducted a lively discourse on human endeavors and institutions played out in their textiles that became their hallmark. Who can forget Ed's Mickey Mouse series created to defy those University types who referred to classes in weaving and basketmaking as “Mickey Mouse”?

And remember the Samurai costume that Katherine concocted for their dog Sam? We all gained a profound respect for whimsy and caprice as their work poured forth. As Katherine has said, “Art is irresponsible. That is its function.”

However, in 1988 they were invited to participate in the “Jacquard Project” at the Rhode Island School of Design and create a design on the huge industrial loom at the school. Katherine had been working on a series of collages that she entitled “wearable furniture” – images of fashion models combined with home furnishings (almost like the Senior projects we used to do at Davis). These were both humorous and thought provoking. She used one of these as the basis for creating her “point paper” for this Jacquard woven textile that the RISD technicians were going to help them produce in repeat. And again, working from an imaginative art piece, she was able to create this industrially produced textile.

She approaches basketry and three-dimensional forms in the same way – as collages with imagery and patterning. Here are some pieces done during the 1990s when she was crocheting raffia to look like Greek pots - as well as doing collage prints of “Fractured Greek pots.” This gourd also provides a surface for pattern and color as she covers it with rice paper and heat-transfer prints; and the photocopy and drawings entitled “Thirteen Baskets” – that look suspiciously like lizards.

And finally her most recent Easter card – a drawing over collaged paper entitled ‘Easter in a Dry Land’ that reflects her concern and sympathy for the World situation today.

Katherine also had a knack for bringing creative people together. During this period, another product of the UC Berkeley Design Program emerged from the graphic design/visual communication area: Frances Butler. With Katherine's encouragement, Frances also came to teach at the UC Davis campus in 1970, as her interest in graphic

imagery spilled off the page and onto cloth – enabling her to create larger and larger wall panels that would not rip and tear as paper tends to do. This urge also spread to designing garments that she thought were appropriate for a teacher of graphic design to wear. Inspired by the White Duck Workshop on College Avenue in Berkeley, she created her graphically bold dresses using the technique of applique. At first she was investing more money in the thread to zig-zag stitch images together than in the actual cloth. Eventually this led her to screen-printing on cloth for garments and wall pieces and establishing her business in Berkeley called “Goodstuffs.” There, along with textiles for home furnishings, she created kits of printed cloth designed for assembly into garments. Here is a photograph of Katherine at Butler’s Goodstuff’s “factory” taken by Ed Rossbach.

Frances, Katherine and I shared many students and many exhibitions, projects and interests – all of which intersected in hand-printed textiles for one-of-a-kind garments.

Katherine at the UC Davis “Sister Campus” provided many initial teaching opportunities for Ed’s graduate students and alumni from Berkeley, as they fanned out from his mentorship. KATHERINE acted as a BRIDGE. These people, in one aspect of the field or another, had – and continue to have - enormous impact on the fiber scene.

To mention a few – beyond the illustrious Lia Cook – with digital weaving - and Pat Hickman, whose GUT Parka explored this exotic material using clothing forms;

Gyongy Laky – who founded *Fiberworks* – and oversaw the classes, workshops and exhibitions that fueled and inspired the Berkeley fiber scene, expanding textile knowledge through the introduction of people such as Yoshiko Wada – whose expertise in Japanese textiles, costume and shibori dyeing shaped the entire direction of this field;

Susan Druding Jones – who in (about) 1971 opened that wonderful resource “Straw Into Gold” which provided books, supplies, classes and workshops that supported the “habits” of the Bay Area textile junkies. You might call her the Chairperson of the “Ways and Means Committee;” And she continues at e-quilter.com

And many others from that golden era, including:

The TRIO - Baker/Rapoport/Wick: which included artists Mary Winder Baker/Debra Rapoport/ and Susan Wick who came together to create remarkable textile-oriented performance/installations that inspired and expanded the definition of creativity in textiles; Susan Wick continues to create paintings in Denver; and Debra Rapoport has pursued endeavors in food catering, floral arrangements and creating found-object body adornments in New York City;

Nance O’Banion whose classic bamboo grid piece from 1981 I see every time I fly out of the United Airlines terminal at the San Francisco International Airport; and Marla Weinhoff – textile designer – now a New York photo (stylist) who worked with Richard Avedon and *Vogue* Magazine – to create rich photo situ’s that are informed by an unmistakable textile quality and presence;

Chere Mah – who variously works on installations and tilework murals and also shares her personal family heritage through her collection of Chinese costumes and textiles enabling others to understand and appreciate them;

And several former students of the Rossbachs who entered the museum field:

Inez Brooks-Myers – who became Curator of Costume in the History Department of the Oakland Museum and continues to create numerous exhibitions, symposia, lecture and competition opportunities that expand our knowledge of textiles and costume; Also in the museum world, Ann Pollard Rowe at the Textile Museum in Washington D.C., Merrilee Peebles at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. And several others...

This is an impressive legacy and one that can be traced back to the synergy and shared passions of Ed and Katherine Rossbach. They were able to bring out the unique abilities and visions of each student that now widely transcend the geographical site and state of mind known as UC Berkeley. Katherine is a master at collage and montage or “cut and paste” as she calls it – of bridging and joining images - as well as people. And she is most proud of this accomplishment – extending a textile sensibility into other realms through other people.

If the measure of one’s success is the endurance of one’s influence, then both Katherine and Ed have been enormously successful. As Katherine recently said, “We tried to open up a door – and look out a window – for our students – to release their own imaginations. NO CLONING! We didn’t want to reproduce ourselves. It wasn’t education for a particular field or point of view – it was training for *their* LIFE.”

Their far-reaching influence continues to endure and expand even as we speak.

My Favorite Recollection of Ed Rossbach was the way he confronted the “phasing out” of the Textile/Fiber Program at UC Berkeley. As Architecture tried to dominate the entire educational curriculum of Wurster Hall, Ed was quietly absorbed into the Dept. of Architecture. Ultimately, he declared, “Now I’m an Architect.” At one point, Katherine arranged for him to give a lecture at UC Davis on his views about architecture and how he fit into that definition.

He started his lecture by holding up a ball of twine with one end that had been knotted and dipped into indigo dye. He said “Remember this. It is a linear element – and it is used to connect things – and people - together. And it has a KNOT at the end – or a termination – that can join to other linear elements - but also so it won’t unravel.”

He pointed out examples of other linear elements such as telephone lines that connect people together by carrying messages. And he related how he was a Signal Corpsman who deciphered messages when he was in the Army stationed in Alaska.

Then he showed a slide of a time-lapse photograph of the freeways of Los Angeles taken at night. The white headlights coming one direction and the red tail lights going the opposite direction had all blurred together due to the time lapse - creating the illusion of parallel linear elements...except for those cars that were changing lanes – whose drivers, he pointed out, were called “weavers.”

He then stated that “In the beginning - before it was called architecture - people lived in shelters that were BASKETS, BOWLS or BOXES” - and he showed a series of slides of indigenous architecture from around the world – that used twigs and sticks to build walls and roofs of structures; the elegant basketry structures of African peoples.

Ultimately architecture evolved into creating walls - or planes - from stacking larger units together to create solid panels – like the structure of a box.

As he pointed out, when these boxes were made by stacking stones and rocks in the Middle Ages, TAPESTRY WOVEN TEXTILES were hung on the walls to create warmth – insulation – and to depict and create illusions of SPACE – to break up the solidity of stone walls that had few if any windows – so that buildings were less like prisons.

Also he mentioned TENTS made from TEXTILES used by nomadic peoples throughout the world that were valued for their portability and temporary nature.

From there he showed a series of architectural blue-print drawings that he had executed – of his ideas and projections of ARCHITECTURE of the FUTURE – in which the houses, buildings, and entire communities in SPACE were made from LINEAR ELEMENTS that were HOLLOW – essentially TUBES – that connected people and places – much like the subway systems of today. His drawings portrayed people living and working WITHIN these tubes and that KNOTS of different sizes and complexities defined the homes, offices and communal spaces – essentially communities. Seen in detail, these were wonderful, scale drawings in the tradition of professional architectural blue prints! Seen as a whole – they were also wonderful drawings of textile structures!

THUS, his entire argument was that TEXTILES are the essence of ARCHITECTURE – and that he had been AN ARCHITECT all along! This – with his typical sense of irony and humor – was his triumphant response to the erosion and inevitable demise of the textile program engineered by the administrators of the University of California at Berkeley. He had made his peace with the situation and turned it upside down – in the tradition of one of his most admired writers, Marcel Proust!

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