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# Appropriation, Transformation and Contemporary Fiber Art: An Artist's Perspective

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Note (October 2012)

**Claire Campbell Park** has a new website which includes images that support the content of this article.

The new website is: [www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/](http://www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/)

[Home Page: Claire Campbell Park | Claire Campbell Park](#)

[Amazon.com: Creating with Reverence: Art, Diversity, Culture and Soul \(9781439262047\): Claire Campbell Park: Books](#)

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## **Appropriation, Transformation and Contemporary Fiber Art:**

### **An Artist's Perspective**

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*Note: This paper is written from an artist's perspective. The research I do goes directly into my creative work and my way of living.*

Although founded on European assumptions of fine art, fiber art is equally grounded in textile traditions from around the globe. Issues of appropriation in relation to fiber art have evolved since fiber's critical formative years in the 1960s and 70s. At this time there was an explosion in awareness of diverse cultures. This was reflected in the curriculum of California colleges and universities and invigorated the parturition of fiber art. The desire to mainstream into the fine art establishment gave rise to a trend in the 1980s and 90s, which continues to the present, for some fiber artists to distance themselves from these textile traditions that are based on community values, heritage, and faith. It is this artist's contention that the most appropriate of appropriations is a renewed appreciation of the cultural values evident in global textile traditions, once again reinvigorating our understanding of fine art.

I feel fortunate that my own critical formative years coincided with those of fiber art and were spent in California at a time increasingly open to extremely varied cultural influences. In 1968 I was in the first African History course offered in a high school. In 1971, I was in one of the first African Art classes offered at the college level. It was taught by the pioneering scholar Samella Lewis. I also took many classes on Asian Art and philosophy and like many California artists often look across the ocean to the western horizon and the Pacific Rim for inspiration. In graduate school at UCLA in 1973, I took a ground breaking class from Arnold Rubin on Native American Art and a few years later did a report on spatial concepts and their religious significance in Northwest Coast Native American long houses for an innovative architecture course on indigenous dwellings around the world. At UCLA I was Bernard Kester's teaching assistant when he was developing a course on world textile traditions. I would take slides one week and we would see them in class the next. I also TAed for a wonderful and unique thinker named Judith Miller who taught a lecture class called the History of Design in which we looked at all sorts of objects and reflected on their cultural/sociological significance and how this related to their design. A similar blend of art, anthropology, multi-cultural awareness, and unique thinkers, such as Ed Rossbach, was occurring simultaneously at Berkeley. Also at this time we were ferociously re-examining women's roles and with it women's art which significantly opened the door to fiber art.

In the mid seventies, this climate informed my decision to explore sculptural form, other than the traditional container forms created in many cultures for centuries, through the basketry technique known as coiling. I created a series of spirals I called “Cycles,” intended to give a sense of the infinite; an awareness of patience and perseverance. I feel African, Native American and Asian influences are as apparent in my work as the European art tradition and that I am indebted to a global basketry heritage. I was thrilled when the sculpture titled “Cycle”<sup>1</sup> from this series was exhibited in the 1970’s and 80’s section of the centennial exhibit “Made in California 1900-2000: Art, Image and Identity” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This section also included work by Lia Cook and her teacher Ed Rossbach, and my first highly influential instructor Neda Alhilali. It was wonderful to be in an exhibit that placed Native American basket artists, such as Datsolali, right next to painters of the same era. My art work, like California, is a meeting place of many cultures, but bound by none. Consistent with the 60’s and 70’s, I and many other artists working in fiber felt exhilarated by a new awareness of culture and gender and readily embraced this in our work.

The sixties and seventies were a heady time for fiber art, every new twist was exciting. Being a pioneer was enough. But with increased sophistication and ambition, by the eighties, a fine art vs. textile heritage awareness became more of an issue. Many in art attempt to define an art hierarchy through medium and technique, and find comfort in the predominantly Eurocentric, psychoanalytic, and linear perception of contemporary art, so often championed by critics and art historians, which tends to glorify the individual and the “new.” Because of this, the once unqualified embrace of textile traditions and women’s work in fiber, became increasingly tentative for numerous artists.

A much respected friend and very successful fiber artist brought forward this issue, when viewing a series I was working on in the late eighties and early nineties. A strong unbroken band of color, I think of as the still point as defined in the traditions of prayer and meditation, is surrounded by broken color and abstracted imagery inspired by koi ponds. This core is surrounded by three sets of woven strips, carefully pieced and stitched together, that interacted with the core in color and pattern. My friend felt the work was “strong,” but cautioned that the pieced borders were reminiscent of quilting and I may want to distance myself from that. Distancing ourselves from women’s art and textile traditions in order to participate in the world of mainstream contemporary art is considered by many to be our “reality.” At the time I was stunned, but I am thankful for this colleague’s candor. She asked me if I was sure I wanted to make such a specific reference to quilts and with increasing commitment I can answer, “Yes, I am sure!”

I am sure I want to associate myself with women’s art and the values of textile traditions from varied cultures and my understanding of why I wish to continue to deepen. I find that the lives and work of many of these textile artists represent a more global, inspirational and timeless view of art in keeping with the needs of our shrinking world. Although from diverse cultures, they share common values. Their art is a commitment to community, heritage, and faith. Their position is one of integrity and of service to humanity, and reflects a mature and unselfconscious sense of reverence,

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<sup>1</sup> “Cycle” and all other examples of my creative work referred to in this paper can be found on my website listed on the title page.

humility, dignity, and gratitude. These artists impress me with the depth of their focus, as they consciously integrate all aspects of their lives with the substance of their work. I consider an understanding of these values and a conscious incorporation of them into our art to be the most appropriate of appropriations. Rather than succumbing to the status quo, it is my hope to bring what is valuable in our textile heritage to the contemporary art world; changing our “reality.”

Quilts are one way women of many backgrounds have strengthened life-giving connections, reinforced their heritage, and demonstrated resourcefulness, courage and hope. I wish to honor the textile tradition that connects me with quilters such as Atanacia Hughes, Esther Olds Nichols, and the mothers of my Appalachian students.

In 1884, during the early years of Tucson, Atanacia Hughes, made a Pineapple quilt. Each block in the quilt contains a center square embroidered with religious symbols, flowers, or Spanish words. Within this symbolism is a message to her family. Loosely translated it says “We married at a holy time. We became a faithful family. One key guides us in a straight line” (Frost and Stevenson, 1992:7).

Esther Olds Nichols made a quilt in 1907 that includes blocks with the embroidered outlines of the hands of three generations of family members. She stitched the outlines of the hands of her daughter, son-in-law, and several grandchildren. One block shows two tiny baby hands and the words “Melvin 1907 April 1st.” Her own hands show fingers crippled by arthritis. The quilt was made for a small granddaughter and although many of those represented on the quilt have passed away, it continues to connect generations of the Nichols family (Frost and Stevenson, 1992:188).

One memorable quilt story was told to me by two unrelated students who grew up in the hills of Appalachia and just happened to be in my class at the same time. In their words, they grew up “dirt poor.” Their mothers would save the strip of cloth that is pulled off the top when opening feed bags and when they had enough strips they would painstakingly sew them into a quilt. The rest of the feed bag was used to make clothing. My students told me those quilts were sacred, a symbol of family unity, and “nobody messed with them.”

One of these students came to my weaving class because she had seen one of my weavings from the series that references quilts in a faculty exhibit on campus. It was a work I call “Towards the Light”. The central section is an abstraction of nucleic images in a row from bottom to top, culminating in a meditative light blue rectangle. As these images get closer to the rectangle they also increase in clarity and a sense of benevolent light. My student said she would come and stand before it everyday during her lunch hour because it brought her peace.

Many a student has related to me how a cherished quilt or afghan was taken out of the closet to comfort someone who was sad or sick. To be an artist you embrace a life of constant challenge in order to keep creatively alive. The creative process at its best is not unlike being a mother, a never-ending commitment to nurture life. I am honored to be associated with women who have faced challenges with grace and a sense of service to others through their creativity. Thread by thread, stitch by stitch, hour upon hour, we focus on life giving values, like a prayer.

This quality of prayer and timelessness is exemplified in the work of the Shakers, including their simple, elegant and eloquent baskets. The Shakers were at their height in the late 1700s and in the 1800s as a communal, celibate, Protestant, monastic society in the United States. Their philosophy was consciously integrated into every aspect of their daily lives. Thomas Merton writes of the Shakers, “The believer worked patiently, lovingly, earnestly, until his spirit was satisfied that the work was “just right.” Fidelity to the demands of the workman-like conscience was a fundamental act of worship. Through fidelity, the workman became an instrument of God’s loving care for the community. His work was therefore compounded of faith and love and care. It was an expression and fruit of the Shaker Covenant” (Merton, 2003:77-78). This is reflected in the words of the Shakers’ founder Mother Ann Lee. “Do your work as though you had a thousand years to live, and as if you were to die tomorrow... Put your hands to work and your hearts to God, and a blessing will attend you” (Sprigg: *Mingei International*, 1995:11).

The joy of such an act of total attention is a big reason many of us choose art. Our increasingly complex world provides us with more and more choices; more and more distractions. The technology of the information age has multiplied this disjunction many times over. Nearly everyone I speak to feels increasingly fractured, pulled in too many directions, time crunched. As our choices increase, it is easier and easier to be distracted from what is important to us. A reflective approach to art, as represented by the Shaker philosophy, can help us to reconnect with this.

Recently a student I had many years ago said to me, “When I took your class I was going through a divorce. I was not seeking answers when I sat down to work on my art projects, but when I slowed down and allowed the process to take over, the answers were there.” Time to reflect is absolutely essential to our mental and physical well-being. Time, discipline, hard work, discernment allow our experiences to become fully integrated with our souls. Without reflection, our experiences do not give direction to our lives and merely flit about like the images of an MTV video. Time to reflect seems less and less valued by popular culture. Yet for the most part it is in our hands; it is our choice.

I chose to reflect on the Shakers while creating a series of art works, in which each piece features a rock surrounded by coiling, a traditional basketry process. I pray before I work. I think about what it might mean to work as if I had a thousand years to live and as if I will die tomorrow. The coiling process is very time consuming. I frequently manage only three inches of coiling an hour in a single row. The reward comes from slowing down. I am often awestruck by the unimaginable beauty of the very ordinary rock I found in my front yard; a small piece of creation, a window to the timeless. The peace and wholeness I experience is a wondrous gift.

The kimono artist Fukumi Shimura speaks of her own version of this peace. She gathers natural materials to dye her thread with great sensitivity, patience and humility. She says, “My work happens to involve extracting color from plants to dye and weave fiber. My every motion and all of my materials receive the enormous benefits of Nature... People do not dominate Nature: we are guided by Her. For that reason, when I obtain color from plants, I relinquish - in certain respects- all control... When I ask a plant to transfer its color to me, the color that is born is the color received from the plant”

(Shimura, 2003). Shimura adds, "It all depends on the time of year, whether the winter was cold or dry, whether the shrub grows on mountain or plain. I don't tell the acorn or gardenia seed pod or plum bark what color I want - I listen to the voice of the plants" (*FiberArts*, 30). She notes, "If a color is unsatisfactory, I know that I was somehow sloppy or arrogant toward Nature" (Shimura, 2003). Shimura's sensitive craftsmanship, the voice of the plants, the seasons and elements are evident in each exquisite kimono.

There is a prevailing view in the contemporary art world that craftsmanship is of very little or no importance. What is considered important is the visual expression of ideas. What is being missed by this way of thinking is how many important ideas are expressed through craftsmanship. In the work of Shimura Fukumi we see patience, humility, dignity, integrity and reverence.

Attention to craftsmanship can also give powerful expression to ideas in contemporary art. I have seen artists attempt to express their discontent with the policies of the United States through a manipulation of the image of the American flag that appeared slammed together and ill considered. A common claim of contemporary artists is that any reaction from the viewer justifies their art's existence. Yet slammed together artistic statements can encourage equally ill-considered reactions. In contrast, James Bassler's carefully crafted "Old Glory/Shroud #1" encourages contemplation.

"Old Glory" is a wall-size American flag, 72"x 126", painstakingly hand-woven in wedge-weave and then blotched by the artist with black dye in a way that reveals large stenciled letters spelling "SOILED." Below it lies a beautifully woven body bag titled "Shroud #1." The opening along the shroud's top is also painted with a black dye implying sorrow and defilement. Bassler says this work grew from his outrage at some of our country's foreign policies and his sorrow at the loss of human dignity. To defile a flag that was lovingly made through hundreds of hours of work, careful decisions and reflection, reveals a deep and honest commitment palpable to the viewer.

I first saw "Old Glory/Shroud#1" in an exhibit in a rural town. The curator told me the museum's patrons tended to be conservative and she was surprised when she did not receive complaints about this piece. Perhaps this was because the care taken in making "Old Glory/Shroud #1" invites reflection, rather than knee-jerk reaction. And reflection is more likely to lead to a true conversion of ideas. The beauty of the craftsmanship also express a love of country and an empathy for other people, that give power to the pain and a sense of underlying hope in a work that might otherwise be despairing. Jim writes that he recognizes the contributions of the weavers of the Americas and Africa who remind us of our potential no matter how difficult the circumstances (Loveland Museum: Bassler).

The artists of our textile heritage are also my teachers. They teach me the power of creating with life-giving values, the importance of time to reflect and the significance of craftsmanship. I am thankfully more conscious of their wisdom as I weave my current series of 8' linen color-fields I call the Prayer series. Row by row, thread by thread, color by color I attempt to be aware of the sacred - to see the extraordinary in the ordinary plain weave of our daily lives. I am grateful to the quilters, basket-makers and weavers who have kept and are keeping this foundation alive.

A sense of service to others, an awareness of timelessness and continuity, the deep commitment and humility of craftsmanship - these are just a few of the values inherent in our textile heritage that I feel are the most appropriate of appropriations, with the potential to transform our art and our lives. John Richardson writes in *A Life of Picasso* that in art one must kill the father, that this Oedipal maxim lies at the heart of Picasso's creative process. (Richardson 1991:95) When my colleague warned me to distance myself from quilting and women's art in order to more readily fit into the mainstream of contemporary art it was a less aggressive but nonetheless disheartening suggestion. The idea of the necessity of killing the father is consistent with a bombastic, narcissistic and nihilistic approach often considered as "strength" in the world of contemporary art. How much better to honor our mothers and fathers with integrity and courage, bringing to life timeless values that help us to live, to connect, to reflect; that transcend gender and culture, geography and medium, and nurture us all.

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