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## Challenging the Politics of Creating Art in the 21st Century: An Artist/Educator's Perspective

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**Challenging the Politics of Creating Art in the 21st Century:  
An Artist/Educator's Perspective**

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The politics of creating art pertains to assumptions relating to a given cultural sphere or theory that are concerned with power and status in society. I have lectured, taught and researched on five continents and where ever I go, I have noticed a tendency to actively promote a very limited perspective of art, which is a relatively recent construct of Western European culture - predominantly psychoanalytic and confrontational. As an artist and educator, I question prevalent assumptions and find inspiration in alternative approaches inspired by textile artists from diverse cultures. The questions I will briefly address in this paper are; What makes art “strong” - must we assume attitudes and mediums traditionally in the male domain? Are art students encouraged to “fit in” to the current scene, as opposed to developing their own creative integrity? Does “pushing the envelope” necessarily mean “beyond sacred?” What are the pressures to create art quickly? Is craftsmanship of any significance in contemporary art? Is there an expectation to create for and market to elites only? What can we do to challenge the current politics of making art? It is my hope that these questions will open up the way we think about art, free us from the current politics, and encourage art of greater diversity and integrity.

***What makes art “strong” - must we assume attitudes and mediums traditionally in the male domain?***

The answer is of course is no, but we must know this and say it with confidence. A prominent collector and fiber art activist recently said to me, “We would be so much better off, if so many of our great women artists weren’t so darn self-effacing.” A much respected friend and internationally recognized fiber artist advised me when viewing a work from a series where I had pieced woven borders together,<sup>1</sup> “The work is strong, but reminiscent of quilting. Are you sure you don't want to distance yourself from that?” I was stunned, but it is a constant struggle.

Once in the Arizona legislature, when they were discussing funding for my college, a legislator brought up derisively on the floor, that basketry and weaving classes were taught - the ultimate chop - my classes. However, the value of our knife-making class was not questioned. The two major contemporary art dealers in town have both told me at various times, just when I walk in the door, without me even asking, that they will not show fiber. One said it is “too delicate” to show next to painting. And yet numerous times my work has been successfully shown next to paintings and gradually they are exhibiting fiber art.

Ability and content make art strong, but integrity makes it stronger. I say, “Yes, I am sure I want to give respectful homage to women artists who have gone before me. And yes, I will reference quilts.” I will also choose to weave art and vigorously defend our looms at my college. I have watched looms and the

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<sup>1</sup> Related images *Celebration* series: [www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/](http://www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/)

weaving medium slip away at institutions I care about. Their defense was partially thwarted by an unwarranted shame of association with other weavers past and present. Instead of succumbing to the current politics, I encourage us to bring what is valuable in our textile heritage to the contemporary art world, with confidence and strength, changing the politics.

***Are art students encouraged to “fit in” to the current scene, as opposed to developing their own creative integrity?***

At an art school rated as one of the best in the country, I was giving a three hour seminar to a fourth year class, in which I ask questions, have students break into small groups and discuss, and then come together as a whole to review their thoughts. About an hour into this process, a young man interjected in an astonished and excited voice, “We have never been asked what we think about art. We are told what to think!” I was giving a similar seminar in Australia, when a student said to me in a hushed voice, “I believe in so many of the ideas we are talking about today, but I didn't know it was OK.”

One of my artist friends told me that when she was in graduate school, she and the other graduates were encouraged to pull out from themselves their most “gut-wrenching experiences” and use those as the focus of their work. For her MFA exhibit, my friend depicted death through a completely emaciated figure made of transparent pig-gut hanging from the ceiling in a room with a single glaring lightbulb. And yet she tells me this is not who she was at all. Why the encouragement towards despair? There are other ways to experience death. How much better to encourage students to ask themselves difficult questions early in their careers, that help them to discover and strengthen what is true to them. Why guide art students toward fitting into art history, rather than give them an opportunity to create art history, by developing and exercising their own integrity; in the way artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe have (Park 2010:53)?

***Does “pushing the envelope” necessarily mean “beyond sacred?”***

In another country I listened to an instructor tell her students that art is all about “pushing the envelope.” I have heard this many times in the United States as well. At that same school, I talked to a graduate student who showed me her work of layered rice paper with dribbles of paint and tangled threads between the layers. I asked her what it was about and she told me she was exploring schizophrenia, sexual abuse and despair. I asked if this was true to her experience. She said no, but she felt they were important issues.

Many of my students have been victims of sexual abuse. One told me she was encouraged to make this the focus of her art work, but what she really wanted to do was move away from victimhood and focus on beauty. Some of my best weaving students have had diagnosed schizophrenia. The tangle of threads is there and they definitely “push the envelope,” yet their work is also redemptive and full of hope - it is about holding on to the light in life. Of course there is a place for expressing the dark side of experience, but for many it is *pushed* down their throats.

I was given a beautiful book on the art of Australians of Aboriginal heritage. The book is stunning, but I think the assumption of the title *Beyond Sacred* is amazingly presumptive. I personally find the most powerful work goes beyond the psychological and formal qualities of the composition, and is deeply

rooted in an understanding of the sacred, such as the work of both Gloria and Kathleen Petyarre.<sup>2</sup> A favorite quote of mine is by Mark Rothko; “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them and if you, as you say, are moved only by the color relationships, then you miss the point!” (Barnes 1989: 22).

The current politics of art frequently promote a hyper-analytic approach, intended to investigate a plurality of perspectives, yet in many cases resulting in a tendency to render life devoid of meaning. I was recently asked to give a guest lecture on Spirituality and Art, for a University course - a Survey of Contemporary Art. In the text they were using, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, there is an image of Maureen Connor’s “Thinner Than You” - a tightly stretched transparent dress form, intended to comment on the pressures on women to be thin.<sup>3</sup> The accompanying text reads, “Connor’s empty dress also could be interpreted as an instance of the postmodern ‘empty vessel,’ a body drained of the illusion of a soul” (Robertson & McDaniel 2010:76).

A psychologist friend of mine told me she feels people are treating psychology as the new religion. She abhors the reductive tendencies of her field and notes that when given the chance more people are choosing to embrace the mystery of life - a sense of the sacred. This is also my experience.

In my classes I lead discussions on the beliefs and values of artists from many cultures and we reflect on the myriad ways these inform their work. This has resulted in extremely varied students, including those from Buddhist, Native American, Mormon, Jewish and Christian backgrounds thanking me for validating that their beliefs are a justifiable inspiration for their art. This shouldn’t be a revelation - it should be a given.

The textile traditions abound with diverse examples of the relation of faith to the process of creating. One example is that of the weavers from a number of Moroccan Berber tribes, who create extremely intricate designs without seeing them, using the saha technique. The designs are on the front of the weaving, yet are woven from the reverse side, and are completely obscured by floats and ends during the weaving process. The designs are known so well by the weavers that they are completely integrated into their beings and done rapidly by feel, so that most of the time the process requires focus but not thought. A weaver named Aisha Sibwi once explained that she is aware of the threads “like a man who never counts his sheep but would know immediately if one were missing.” She also said that once her fingers “lost the patterns.” She went to her familial home and slept at the tomb of the local Muslim saint. The patterns were restored (Forelli & Harries 1977:54). For Aisha Sibwi, and millions of others in diverse cultures around the world, the creative process, daily life, and faith are one (Park 2010:58).

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2 Related images for Gloria and Kathleen Petyarre: <http://www.boomerangart.com.au>

3 Related images for Maureen Connor: [http://www.maureenconnor.net/80\\_thebody1.htm](http://www.maureenconnor.net/80_thebody1.htm)



*Figure 1. Detail of Beni Ouarain cape - saha technique. Left: back of weaving. Right: front of weaving.  
Photo: Claire Campbell Park*

### *What are the pressures to create art quickly?*

Years ago a school administrator said to me, “The pace of life is getting faster. Our students’ attention spans are getting shorter. We must find ways to use the new technology to speed things up.” Since then the addiction to speed has increased and the ability to focus seems to be more and more of a challenge for everyone I know, not only our students. All day long we are used to bits and bytes - the blinks and pings of our technology. There is scientific research that has found that the brains of internet addicts look like those of drug and alcohol addicts. There is also evidence that the more time we spend online, the greater the brain atrophy in the area that is responsible for memory, speech, sensory and motor control (Dokoupil 2012:4). Students admit that they have time for Facebook and Twitter, but have difficulties focusing on their art projects. And yet still I ask, why is the answer to speed up? For me the answers come when I slow down.

I make a point of giving a long involved project in each of my classes; a project that is at least a month in duration, that can not be solved all at once, and requires reflection, evolution, growth. There is often resistance, but in the end most students are grateful. By slowing down, they are able to pull out of themselves an excellence and a peace of mind they did not know was there.

We are all aware of the juried exhibition rule – “Artwork must have been completed in the past two years.” As a fiber artist, who realizes my creative process is equivalent to a time black hole, I have always felt that this rule is encouraging art without depth. In my classes I like to share the story of the kimono artist Itchiku Kubota.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Related images for Itchiku Kubota: <http://www.itchiku-tsujigahana.co.jp/>



In his words, “ I was only 20 years old when I first encountered the tsujigahana dye. It was at the Tokyo National Museum. There was a piece of clothing - probably a remnant of apparel dating back several centuries - that displayed, before my dazzled eyes, a bed of small flowers printed on nerinuki cloth. And while only a ghost of its former splendor remained, through the faded colors I could imagine how it looked from the nuance of the coloring. I ‘saw’ it as it must have appeared several centuries ago” (Kubota 1995:17). He remained transfixed before this fragment of cloth for over three hours. Shortly thereafter he was drafted into the Japanese army and spent six years as a prisoner of war in a Siberian gulag. During this time he sustained himself by dreaming of a series of inter-related kimonos inspired by nature and his sense of the infinite.

Once he was released, he relates, “For twenty years I allowed no one to see any of my creations. For twenty years I experienced setbacks, had disappointments, and made new attempts. I was never discouraged.”

The result was the “Symphony of Light,” an exhibit of 30 kimonos - each kimono took approximately a year to complete. His dream was to create 80 and he was 78. He completed ten more kimonos before his death in 2003 at the age of 86. He wrote, “...finding the infinite splendors of nature securely in place within the vastness of space and time, is to me almost unbearably exhilarating” (Kubota 1995:18).

What is the rush? In the end a significant body of work was created.

***Is craftsmanship of any significance in contemporary art?***

I have seen many artists attempt to express their discontent with the policies of the United States through a manipulation of the image of the American flag. One such attempt was the flag tossed into a toilet, that caused a knee-jerk reaction at the Phoenix Art Museum.



***Figure 2. Old Glory/Shroud #1. James Bassler. Photo courtesy of: James Bassler.***

I believe a very different message is given through James Bassler's "Old Glory," a 71"x 125" masterfully wedge-woven flag, on which he blotched dark dye creating the word "soiled" and emphasizing the word "oil." To defile a flag that was lovingly made through hundreds of hours of work, careful decisions and reflection, speaks to us of a deep and honest commitment, gives power to the pain and a sense of underlying hope and empathy, where there might otherwise only be anger and despair. Bassler's "Old Glory" is now in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, however I first saw it in an exhibit in a rural town. The curator told me the museum's patrons tended to be conservative and was surprised that she did not receive complaints about this piece. Perhaps the craftsmanship in "Old Glory" invites reflection, rather than knee-jerk reaction. And reflection is more likely to lead to a true conversion of ideas.

### ***Is there an expectation to create for and market to elites only?***

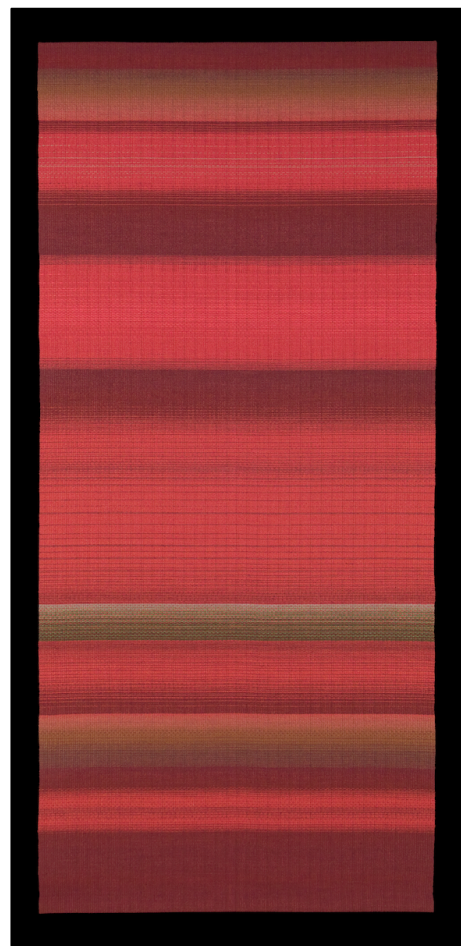
Representatives from some of our country's best art schools have told me, "We only do 'conceptual art' " without thinking how euro-centric the current understanding of "conceptual" is - based on the precepts of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, and critics such as Rosalind Krauss, who is credited with giving the language and theories of psychology considerably greater prominence in art criticism. Whereas the concepts inherent in the core values of a cultural tradition, the beliefs of a faith tradition, or the ideas embodied in craftsmanship tend to be dismissed as irrelevant to "serious" art. For thirty four years I have taught students from extremely diverse backgrounds and experience at Pima Community College - students from eighteen to eighty five, some straight from the homeless shelters, others of extreme wealth. Students from all over the United States and every continent, with immensely varied cultural heritages and spiritual beliefs - students overcoming illness, abuse, tragedy - prisoners on parole, veterans from multiple wars, single mothers - all come to art. We send our students to continue at many of the highest ranked art schools in the country. Some have returned feeling crushed. One related to me, "If your artwork is not about identity issues, you don't exist!" I have heard variations on this complaint over the years. Although the targeted focus shifts a bit, it is always embedded in a Western European psychological approach to art. Students who do not come from elitist backgrounds can feel their voices strangled, instead of strengthened to form art in new and enriching ways. My students have taught me that the greatest gift of art is the gift of life and have made it exponentially clearer that art should not be only for the self-congratulatory "entitled."

I once was showing a very distinguished Fiber artist and educator an exhibit I had curated on Moroccan textiles. It was in a large beautiful museum located in a local shopping center, sponsored by an enlightened mall administration and run by a director who was the daughter of first generation immigrants. My visitor said quite huffily, "Well I don't know how I feel about people eating their hot dogs and then going to see art!" We bemoan how few take an interest in art, yet I have visited a number of galleries which make visitors feel on edge, or that sell art through intimidation. Such a view is too narrow.

### ***What can we do to challenge the current politics of making art?***

One of my favorite quotes is from Joan Chittister, "How many snowflakes does it take to break a branch?" Each of us will find a piece of the answer in our own hearts, our own experience. Here is a piece of my answer.

During a sabbatical, I developed an exhibit which took place, January through March 2008, in the Bernal Gallery. It was titled *Land, Art and the Sacred: Three Perspectives* and included the work of D.Y. Begay,<sup>5</sup> a fourth generation Dine or Navajo weaver who also trained as a painter, Gabriella Possum Nungurrayi, a second generation painter of Australian Aboriginal heritage and myself.<sup>6</sup> The intent was to break down many barriers raised by the contemporary creative politics - assumptions about, gender, culture, medium, and content. Although from very different, yet overlapping, cultural backgrounds, all three of us express our community and spiritual values through the abstraction of land. Together we value a sense of dignity, reverence and an appreciation of the significance of beauty.



**Figure 3, left. *Red Earth*. D.Y. Begay. 19" x 37 ½", tapestry/wool. Permanent collection of Augustana College Art Museum. Photo courtesy of: D.Y. Begay.**

**Figure 4, right. *Red Center*. Claire Campbell Park. 66.25" x 30.25", plain weave/linen. Photo: J. Keith Schrieber.**

I developed many questions for essays and discussions and involved students from the Writing, Reading, Anthropology, and Humanities areas, as well as the Native American Student association, and students from local high schools and the University. These materials included reflections on concepts of time, community, and relationship to the land, for all three cultures.

<sup>5</sup> Related images for D.Y. Begay: <http://navajo-indian.com>

<sup>6</sup> Related images *Reflections* series: [www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/](http://www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/)



Here are two examples:

“Tjukurpa is the foundation of our culture.”

Tjukurpa tells of all relationships between people, plants, animals and the physical features of the land. Tjukurpa refers to the past, present and the future at the same time. It refers to the time Tyukuriitja (ancestral beings), created the world as we know it. Tjukurpa also refers to Anangu religion, law, relationships and moral systems.” Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park visitor guide, 2006).

How do you think about time? Do you think of time as money, as dollars per hour? How does your sense of time affect your creative process? How does it affect your connectedness or lack thereof to other aspects of your life?

D.Y. Begay begins her statement about her artwork with: “D.Y. Begay is a Navajo born to Totsohnii, the Big Water people, and born for Tachii’nii, the Red Streak Earth people.” She says, “My weaving reflects who I am. It incorporates my beliefs, my family, my community, and my relationship to the land.”

Who comprises your community? How does your creative work reflect your community? What is your relationship to the land? How is this reflected in your creative work?

In the winter of 2012 another exhibit I developed took place, *East/Pacific/West: Confluence*, showing the work of Mary Babcock,<sup>7</sup> head of the Fiber Department at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, the painter Nancy Tokar Miller and myself.<sup>8</sup> This time the accompanying set of questions were related to the inspiration the three of us receive from Eastern philosophy and Hawaii.

Two examples:

“Engaged Buddhists understand service as a practice of mindfulness that leads to an awareness of unity, which in turn regenerates the desire to serve. This longing to serve is akin experientially to the yearning to create. We act, and the effects ripple out in time and space, each act affecting all the others in Indra’s Net. We make the art and the art makes us.” - Suzanne, Lacy (Bass & Jacobs 2004:111)

How does the creative process “make” you? Who do you become through your creative work?

“To ‘see’ is to go direct to the core; to know the facts about an object of beauty is to go around the periphery” (Yanagi 1972:110). Describe an object of beauty you saw in this way. What did you “see?” Why was it meaningful to you?

I have also written a book, *Creating with Reverence: Art, Diversity, Culture and Soul*, in which I ask many more questions to open up the way we see art - questions intended to lead to the wisdom that is already there, to connect art to all that is life-giving, to challenge the current politics and free ourselves/our students to discover, to temper, and create with, our own personal integrity - reinvigorating the dialog that is contemporary art.

Do we perpetuate the myth of the totally self-realized individual or do we acknowledge our debt to others, express our gratitude and provide for future generations? Do we slow down enough to allow

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7 Related images for Mary Babcock: <http://marybabcock.com/620124/Hydrophilia-I>

8 Related images *Reflections* series: [www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/](http://www.sotolbooks.com/clairecpark/)

ourselves to experience an act of total attention? When facing difficult issues in our art, do we perpetuate despair or enlighten? Do we limit ourselves through categories or seek beauty without limitations? Do we live and create with reverence?



*Figure 5, left: Pacific Exchange. Mary Babcock. 58"x 56", tapestry/salvaged fishing net.  
Photo courtesy of: Mary Babcock.*



*Figure 6, right: Lava/Sea/Sky. Claire Campbell Park. 70"x 33", plain weave/linen. Photo: C. Park*

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