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Exploring Textiles and Text

Pages flutter and words murmur in Laura Strand's fiber works.

By Carol Ferring Shepley





Above right: *Fable: Trique Language*, 1998; photo silk screen devoré over cotton canvas and copper screen, silk organza book; 26 by 28 by 4 inches.

Left: *Be Ahead of All Parting* (with detail, top), 2002; indigo shibori and devoré photo silk screen on cotton damask (ground), vat dye-discharge and thiox discharge on silk organza (books).

Ideas have always driven my art," says Laura Strand. In her most recent work, ideas inspire complex images that express feminist concepts as well as events from her life. She combines many media to create the most appropriate form for her content.

Although Strand has been exhibiting since 1984, she waxes as naively enthusiastic about her works as any emerging artist. She has been a professor at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, since 1995.

Two recent works show how she carefully selects a variety of sophisticated media to make her ideas visible. In *Be Ahead of All Parting*, books of silk organza flutter forth from a ground rendered in indigo shibori with images printed in devoré on cotton damask. Six books and six figures are blocked off as regularly as on a quilt.

A poem by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke lends its title to this piece:

*Be ahead of all parting as though it already
were behind you,
Like the winter that has just gone by.
For among these winters is one so endlessly
winter
That only by wintering through it will your
heart survive.*

These verses are printed on the dyed silk organza books using a discharge process (which removes dye). The books are sewn so that their pages turn. The background is dyed blue for the indigo that Strand learned to pick wild in India in 1996. The images that alternate with these books represent an eye, a lotus (associated with Buddha), as well as hands reaching out to each other. When Strand traveled in India, she visited a convent by walking four or five days on roads impassable by car. She says that her poignant rendering of poem and images represents that time in her life and "the distance and impossibility of going back."

In contrast to the forthright alternation of book and figure in *Be Ahead of All Parting* are the merging images of another recent piece, *SubTierra*. This work, whose title means "under earth," culls its images from another land that Strand has loved and known, Mexico. Here reds and golds call to mind the baked earth of this land. As a background on cotton damask, she photo-silk-screened a repeat pattern of rock walls from Mitla ruins. Next, she fixed silk to the damask and then printed images of eyes, plants, Mitla patterns, and temple carvings in devoré paste to reveal the color beneath. Strand explains, "The images are submerged

by the landscape as the women I work with are submerged by responsibilities."

The richness and variety of these works well up from layers of meaning and media. "The way in which the ideas come across matches the physicality" of the piece, Strand says. The art's physical form "makes the ideas present. It's a good object lesson as to the importance of choice of media, texture, and scale. These are critical to meaning and to beauty." Strand intends that beauty be an integral part of her work, a priority she attributes to being female. "Men find beauty less necessary," Strand says. "Women's work needs ideas of beauty."

Looking at her earliest work reveals a stop-and-start formalistic development. Even today, she works in many styles simultaneously. Textiles provide the only constant, whether printed with photographs, painted, dyed, or woven.

The choice of dedicating her art to textiles stemmed from her own life as well as from her feminist beliefs. At six, she was given her first sewing machine, a hand-me-down from her mother. She made doll clothes and quilts, never suspecting that this was art—perhaps because it was women's work. And for this very reason, the fact that fiber art was undervalued as "women's work," Strand chose tex-



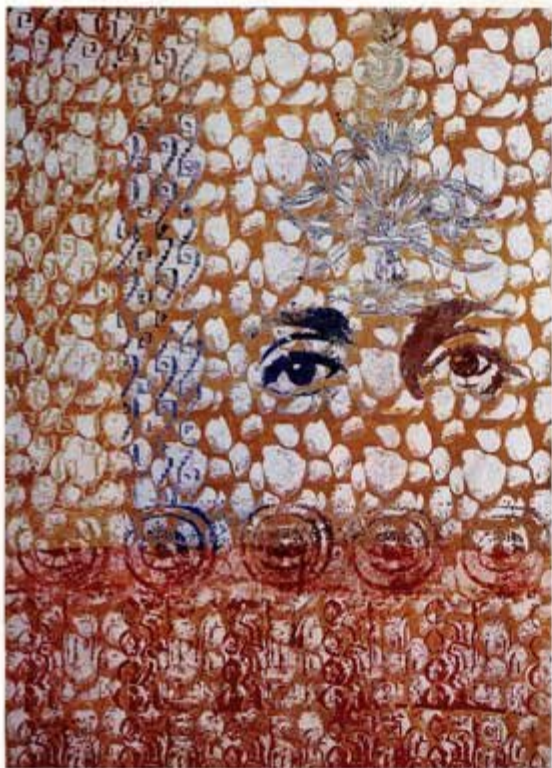
tiles rather than painting as a major in college. She says, "The painting faculty was stunned and angry. They said, 'To make that choice is to marginalize yourself.' I made the choice as much as a political statement as anything else. It made the most sense to talk about women in a women's medium."

In the 1980s, she made woven tapestries that were shaped and painted so that they look like nothing so much as dresses, slit and flattened and spread out on the wall. She struggled with these images, thinking, "Dresses are real objects,

Below: *Remembrance of Loss* (with detail, top), 1998; photo silk screen, machine-stitched story, silk organza, linen napkins; 36 by 60 inches.

Unless noted otherwise, photos are by Tony Deck.





Above: *Subtierra*, 2002; repeat pattern photo silk screen printing on cotton damask tablecloth over a pieced silk ground, *devoré*; 55.5 by 41 inches.

I can't make dresses. Then in my feminist readings, I found that what I was working on were dresses about myself and the position of women in society."

Later, in graduate school, she created a body of work that she terms "didactic." She earned her M.F.A. from the University of Kansas, Lawrence, a large university that allowed her to take courses in many disciplines. She took "a ton of art history, women's studies, and women's history." She immersed herself in the concept of the goddess and how the Christian religion that originated in the male-dominated, hierarchical, militaristic Near East merged with the goddess-centered faiths of ancient Europe. *Flight into Egypt* (1992) represents in weaving a merging of a myth of Brigid, an early European agricultur-

al goddess, with the Christian story of Mary and Joseph fleeing into Egypt to save the infant Jesus from the massacre of Jewish children. Brigid was fleeing from an enemy when she passed a farmer sowing his field. As she ran the length of the field, the seed miraculously sprouted, matured, and grew ready for harvest. Thus, shortly after she disappeared, the farmer, now harvesting the field, was able to tell her enemies that she passed while he was sowing. Though truthful, his tale threw the enemies off her track. This same miracle was appropriated to Mary to enable her to get away from Herod's men. The three shaped weavings of Strand's *Flight into Egypt* [see next page] represent the womb as Jesus, the vessel of Mary, and an iconic Joseph (the drape); the colors reflect the transformation of the field.

Today, her work is more subtly layered with meaning, nearly always incorporating text, either from her journals or other significant sources. Sometimes the words are printed or dyed across the main sheet of the work; often they appear in silk organza books sewn onto the background. Ironically, they are seldom legible. "People know it says something but they can't read it," she says. "I don't want them to read it rather than see it. ... If I totally focused on readability, I would end up losing the feeling." Yet she wrestles with this problem, for the meaning of her words is important, too.

Text first entered her work the spring after her grandmother died in the winter of 1996. Her grandmother wrote Laura Strand a letter every week. After she had gone blind, she just wrote the whole letter in one sitting. Strand relates: "One day, her pen had no ink and the whole letter was embossed. ... Yet, I could read it. ... It was an empty/full experience." Thus, both the look of words, whether they could be read or not, and the idea of words as content entered her art. Incorporating text became a way of grieving for her grandmother as well as expressing what she needed to say in *Remembrance of Loss* (1996). Here she printed one of her grandmother's letters on a white damask border embroidered with an M for "Murna," her grandmother's name.

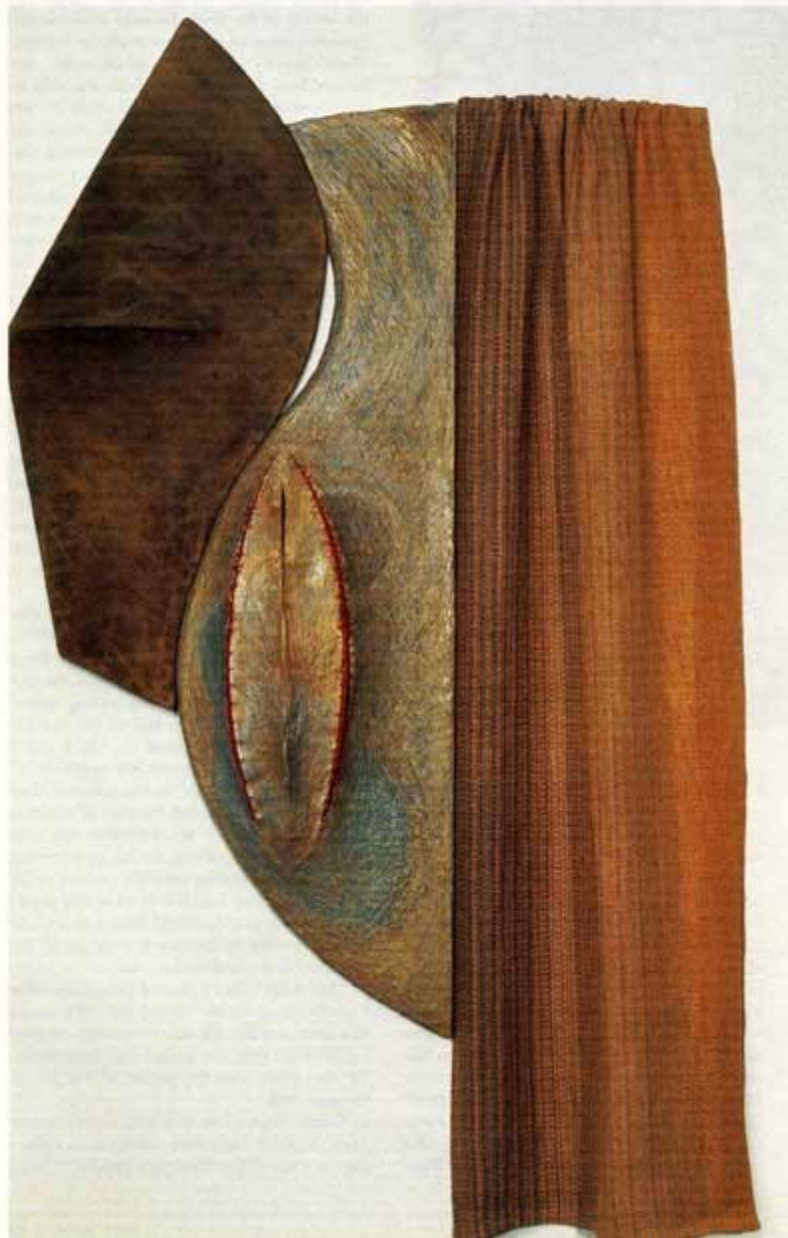
"My work is like a journal presenting what I am thinking about," Strand says. She means this both literally, for she sometimes renders her journals into her images, and figuratively, for she works out the stories of her life in them as well.

Strand finds both text and textiles come from the same Latin root word, *textus*, meaning "to weave." Together, they present treasure

troves to explore. Just as words permeate our consciousness, Strand says, "so much of our common daily experience is bound up with textiles: clothes, towels, sheets, curtains. They are ubiquitous. Textiles are so much a part of every human life that they are a fertile place to talk about human life."

Carol Ferring Shepley is a writer and teaches at Maryville University in St. Louis, Missouri.

Laura Strand will have a solo show at the Center of Contemporary Art in St. Louis June 6-August 10.



Left: Flight into Egypt, 1992; wool, wood, wax, handwoven linen, textile pigment; 60 by 36 by 4 inches. Collection of Rob Linrothe. Photo: Kelly Mills.