



Textiles: A Contemplative Language: Thoughts Behind an Exhibition

by Laura Strand

During my first semester of teaching, I was describing the art discipline I teach to an academic colleague when she recoiled in horror. "Doesn't that produce artwork that is nostalgic?" she asked. Like nostalgia, beauty also is linked to sentimentality and, in the intellectual worlds of art and literature, is considered frivolous. In my own artwork, in teaching and in curating, I am looking for the ideal of beauty with serious purpose.

The impulse to organize exhibitions and write about textile art originates in my role as a teacher. Last year, I curated *Textiles: Contemplative Language* for the University Center Gallery at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville*. For my audience of students and colleagues, I wanted to show both the beauty and the emotional power of textile art. I came to realize that this might be stated more specifically as "power through beauty."

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FEYOKO MATSUBARA *The Dew I* Woven, unwoven, rewoven, painted with dye, 18" x 24", 1997 and detail.

The exhibition title reflects my view that the textile medium offers a language with a strong aptitude to express the personal. Textile artists realize this through meditations on material, creative engagement with technique, and an inextricable connection of textile objects to the body through references to clothing and the fabrics of daily use. To exemplify the medium's breadth of form and expression, I chose six artists for the exhibition: surface designers Clare Verstegen and Susan Lordi-Marker; weavers Fuyuko Matsubara and Marjorie Durko Puryear, and sculptors Jo Stealey and Charlotte Hamlin.

My selection process began with Matsubara, who had come to the university as a visiting artist. She shared not only her process but also the philosophical content of work that verges on a personal mission to articulate the presence of spirit in and through the natural world. The intricacy of her

unique weaving process lures one into the beauty of her imagery, composition and color. Spiritual balance and harmony, within which active and passive elements form an integrated whole, are imaged in a work such as *The Dew I*. While the patterning evokes animal skins, cells under a microscope, digital circuitry and a host of other configurations in the natural and constructed world, the title refers to a natural process of accumulation.

The formation of dew is a wonderful metaphor for the artist's elaborate, time-intensive process. First she weaves two fabrics and then paints both of them, front and back, using the same cartoon but different colors for each. After that, she unweaves the fabrics and returns the warps to the loom but switches the wefts to produce two similar but not identical images. This results in surfaces of glowing, pixelated color that make the carefully composed images pulsate with life. Every



MARJORIE DURKO PURYEAR *Hands and Diaries Series: Between the Lines*
Jacquard woven, hand embroidered, cotton and silk fibers, glass beads, 21" x 22", 1999.

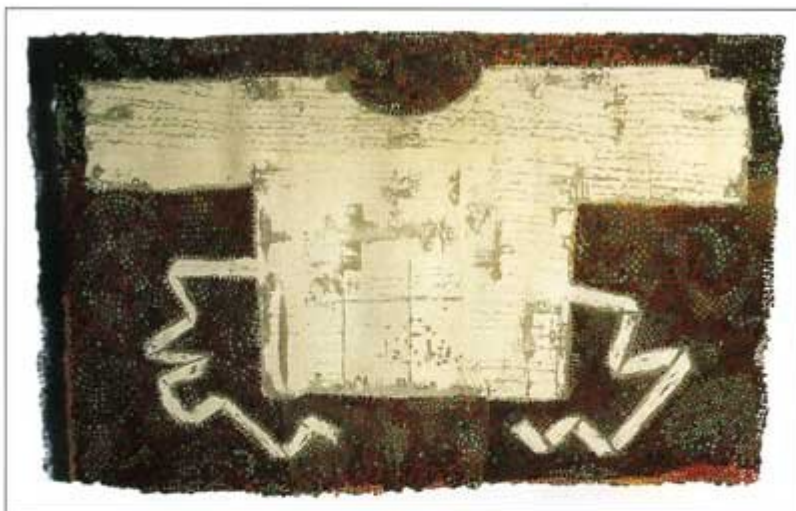
thread gleams with color and dances with pattern; image, meaning and making are fully harmonious. The power of the repetitive gesture of weaving and the artist's meditative engagement profoundly add to the meaning of the piece, even for a viewer who does not readily understand the process.

Since I teach a variety of textile disciplines, I set out to build an exhibition that would reflect weaving, surface design and sculptural approaches. I hoped to show the use of traditional skills as well as new technology, linking together disparate methods through the language of fabrics.

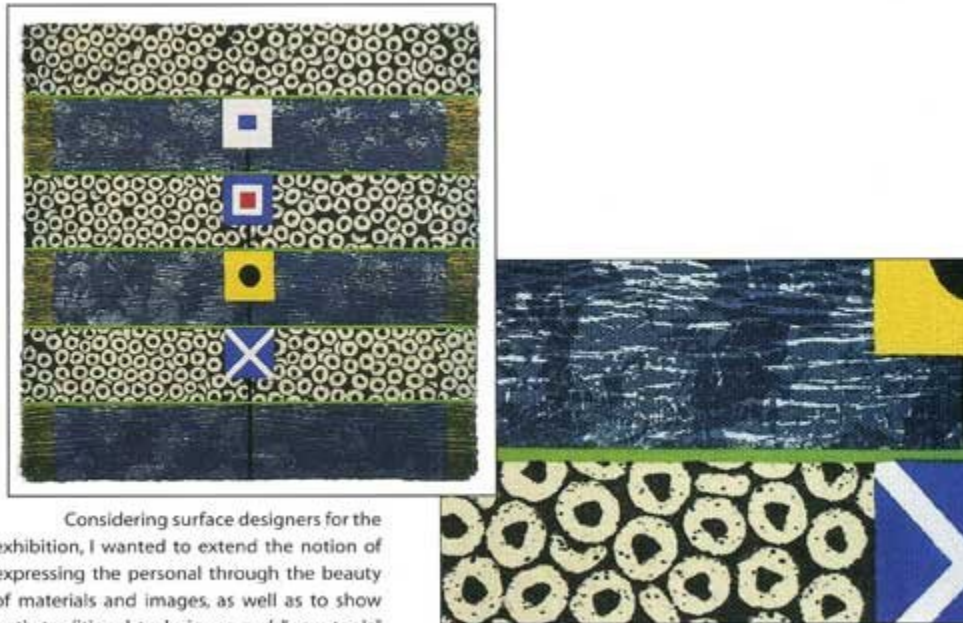
I wanted to include work woven with digital and jacquard technology. I also wanted that work, like Matsubara's handweaving, to speak of personal spirituality. Puryear's *Hands and Diaries* series, portraying images of hands clutching personal

diaries, parallels the diaristic impulse with the process of weaving. Both are accomplished by hand one line at a time, even when the weaving is done on a computer-linked jacquard loom.

The diaristic process becomes a metaphor for all transformations of idea to object. Puryear has depicted white hands that look bloodless and ghostly. They seem to have given up their warmth to the pages and texts, which appear fleshy and more alive. A heavily beaded bookmark in which precious hours of labor are invested emphasizes the placement of the personal in present life. Puryear has used copper wire to underline passages and a frame of lush black corduroy covered lightly with black silk organza. These Victorian details are not decorative, but rather, add essential information to the meaning of the object.



SUSAN LORDI-MARKER *Excavation: Soutskin # 111* Linen blend fabric, dye, pigment, devoré, 1997.



Considering surface designers for the exhibition, I wanted to extend the notion of expressing the personal through the beauty of materials and images, as well as to show both traditional techniques and "new tools" approaches. Since the early '90s, I have admired Susan Lordi-Marker's ability to convey ideas through luscious manipulations of materials and openness to images that are powerful as well as sentimental. In her *Soulskin* series, she uses clothes as metaphoric vessels for the soul. Although these are not her newest works, I selected them because they immediately came to mind when I saw slides of Mutsabara's work.

In *Excavation: Soulskin #10* the pristine but tattered image of a blouse stands in relief—physically as well as visually—against the patterned background. Using the devoré process, Lordi-Marker has "excavated" the garment from the surrounding fabric by burning away linen to reveal transparent silk. In many places, the etching leaves a path of faintly readable handwritten text. Swirling around the garment, and fading toward the edges of the work, a mosaic of densely placed colored squares suggests architectural images from

Roman history. Indeed, much of Lordi-Marker's work recalls her Sicilian heritage and her efforts to retrieve the details of that heritage through art.

The garment in *Excavation* is torn and repaired with stitches meant to be obvious; ends of thread are left as reminders of the mending activity. Light illuminating the work shines right through the fabric where only the web of silk remains; this sends a ghostly, dancing shadow onto the wall. The delicacy of this piece, its movement as fabric and its mended presence are integral to its meaning.

While Lordi-Marker's work refers to the fragile but durable character of fabric as a metaphor for soul qualities, Clare Verstegen's art exposes the structure of fabric as a source of stability and power—even of rescue. Its boldly beautiful organization and directness of pigment on fabric led me to invite Verstegen to exhibit. Until then, I had only

CLARE VERSTEGEN *Untitled* Screenprint, pigment on canvas, wooden box, 18" x 18", 2000 and detail.

seen her elongated compositions of water and rocks, and had envisioned those beside Lordi-Marker's work.

However, when Verstegen spoke of a new series that had not yet been shown, I knew instinctively that this would be perfect for my exhibition. Bringing the dialog of loss and retrieval (redemption) to the surface, these works would provide a counterpoint to the "soulskins."

Verstegen's new pieces are complex, flawlessly screenprinted images on canvas that are enclosed in wooden boxes and preserved behind glass. Their short exposed fringes, hovering above a white textured ground, cast shadows that are both heavy and delicate onto the backgrounds. Their presentation and detail draw one to scrutinize their jewel-like qualities, only to see those as false fronts for anxiously whirling images that seem to plead for the overall order of the work. Always geometrically divided—in halves, thirds,

or sixths—the compositions literally wrench order from chaos. Images of Morse code and flags against the floating disorder invite a poignant reading of codified forms that signal distress. The water shimmers, lifesavers float, the flags communicate; order and chaos are blended in a balanced whole.

Because sculptural manifestations of textiles are important in my own work and teaching, I wanted to include some dimensional works. Having seen Jo Stealey's recent

investigations of shrine-like objects in her studio, I felt their sense of reverence would add an important element to the exhibition.

All the works in the show communicate substantial information through the materials used and the way they are crafted. Some communication comes through familiarity with the historical and cultural embodiment of fabrics and also through their own physicality. Stealey's *Reliquary*, a small temple and votive offering, recalls the deprivation of the flesh in search of spirituality that I associate with holy men of India. The flax paper, tightened against the structural cage of its bones, suggests age, desiccation and the withering of the flesh, but also the revelation of the structural integrity beneath.

The dull gray interior cavity holding the vessel suggests a metal strong box designed to protect the object, physically and spiritually, from careless contact. The vessel's construction is intricately detailed; each of the small rocks covering the surface appears to grow a thorn like a hair from a follicle. I flinch at the thought of touching it or examining its contents; my visceral response is due to the character of the materials themselves. The work refers to flesh and the body not only through the metaphor of the living, growing vessel but also through the paper, wood and rock.

Ever since I had heard Charlotte Hamlin describe her installation called *Elegy*, I had wanted to



JO STEALEY *Reliquary* (detail) Flax, wood, reed, quills, rocks, 15" X 10" X 5", 1999.

see—and show—this work in which textiles powerfully communicate a sense of loss. Seventy-two hand-woven linen handkerchiefs hang as flags of surrender, mutely testifying to the passing of a soul. White, crisp and starched, they wait silently to serve. The wall of fabric they form speaks of thousands of tears shed in mourning, the personal response of the body to sadness and the messiness of that experience. Each handkerchief hangs from two three-inch copper rods ending with tips of test tubes beveled into place and holding tiny remnants—bits of bone, shells, sand, a spiral of wire, brightly colored threads, seeds, a thorn. They are not the stuff of celebrated

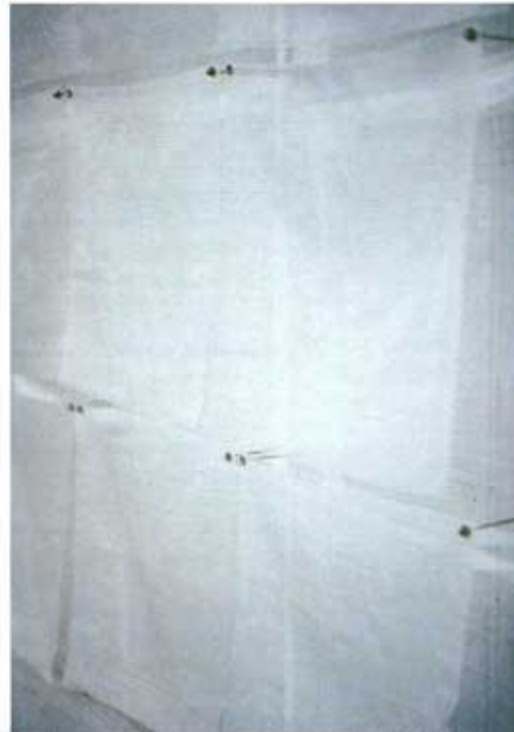
accomplishments, but mundane details of everyday life.

"The wall of fabric they form speaks of thousands of tears shed in mourning, the personal response of the body to sadness and the messiness of that experience." (Elegy)

In sharing the thoughts behind *Textiles: Contemplative Language*, I hope I have suggested that beauty, as manifested through the language of textiles, is far from superfluous to form and content. It is in the beauty of textiles that

we tap their deep relationship to humanity, to generations of artists whose creative gifts were devoted to making objects for the body and the home. Today, artists use that legacy to comment on the world in a language that is deceptively familiar but comprehended in a deep, direct way—the way of the body. Combining the language of textiles with narrative, ironic, and philosophical ideas, the contemporary textile artist uses beauty as a powerful tool.

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CHARLOTTE HAMILIN *Elegy* Installation detail. Handwoven fabric, mixed media, each handkerchief 18" x 18" and detail.