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FELTING: A MEDIUM OF VISUAL EXPRESSION

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A Statement Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

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D. E. MC.

STATEMENT APPROVED:

6-25-79
Date

Chairperson, Advisory Committee

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Date

Second member, Advisory Committee

FELTING: A MEDIUM OF VISUAL EXPRESSION

The purpose of the weaver and the place of the craftsperson through history has developed from being purely utilitarian to a medium of personal visual expression. Early man used weaving as a functional craft building structures and making cloth to protect himself from his environment. Medieval weaving was artistic and utilitarian, it was used as decoration and insulation in housing. With the advent of new architectural advances of the Renaissance weaving was no longer required to function as housing insulation. During this time, with the growing emphasis on painting and the development of chemical dyes, weavers turned to new colors which resulted in textural imitation of painting. It was not until this century that weaving has risen from the shadow of painting to reassert and establish its own identity as an art form.

The Merriam Webster New Collegiate Dictionary traditionally defines weaving as "to form cloth by interlacing strands; to make on a loom by interlacing warp and filling threads."¹ Anni Albers, a Bauhaus weaver, revolutionized weaving by defining it as the making of a pliable plane."²

¹Wolf, Henry Bosley, Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: U.S.A. 2976), p. 1327.

²Albers, Anni, On Designing (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan, 1971), p. 18.

This definition broadened the boundaries of weaving to include interlacing, knotting, plaiting, twining, looping and felting.

Little is known of the early history of felt since this fabric can only survive under special conditions such as permanent frost or dry desert sand. It is often closely linked with wool growing peoples and has been existent since Neolithic times. Several examples of ancient felt were discovered in the barrows of Iron Age horsemen at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains dating back to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. An early rug was found in Northern Mongolia dating back to the first century B.C.

In 1253-1255 William of Rubruck of the order of the Minor Friars, described tents of the Mongolian nomad in the eastern part of the world:

They set up the dwelling in which they sleep on a circular frame of interlaced sticks converging into a little round hoop on the top, from which projects above a collar as a chimney, and this (framework) they cover with white felt. Frequently they coat the felt with chalk, or white clay, or powdered bone, to make it appear whiter, and sometimes also (they make the felt) black ... Before the entry they also suspend felt ornamented with various embroidered design in colour. For they embroider the felt, coloured or otherwise, making vines and trees, birds and beasts.³

In Yörük: The Nomadic Weaving Tradition of the Middle East, edited by Anthony N. Landreau, an excerpt from a Chinese document mentions "the land of felt,"⁴ describing

³Landreau, Anthony, ed., Yörük: The Nomadic Weaving Tradition of the Middle East (Pittsburgh, 1978), p. 18.

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

the importance of the felted material to the nomads of the northern steppes. Genghis Khan in his official acts refers to the Turko-Mongolian tribes as "the generation who live in felt tents."⁵ Prince of Transylvania, George Rakoczi is documented to have used felt in seventeenth century Turkey. These pieces were somewhat special, since the prince acquired them to hang on the walls of his house. The custom of hanging felt was often seen in seventeenth century Transylvanian castles and country mansions. Felt wall hangings were used in ceremonial tents in the Emirate of Bokhara as late as the turn of the nineteenth century.

The antiquity of felt is also seen in the customs and traditions of nomadic societies. The Mongolian culture recognizes white felt as a symbol which possesses great spiritual and mystical qualities. For example, the purest sacrificial animals were slaughtered on white felt, and brides during marriage ceremonies were seated on white felt. The same custom applied to nomadic chieftains when they were elected to office. In 1206 when Temuchin assumed the title of Genghis Khan and was crowned emperor, he sat upon a white felt and was told:

Direct thy eyes on the felt on which thou sitteth.
If thou wilt well govern thy kingdom, thou wilt
rule gloriously, and the whole world will submit
to thy sway; but if thou wilt do the reverse, thou
wilt be unhappy and be outcast and become so
indigent that thou wilt not even have a piece of
felt on which to sit.⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

⁶Ibid., p. 19.

Felt was also important in funeral customs. In 324 B.C., a friend of Alexander the Great, Hephaestion died and was buried at Babylon; his casket was draped with purple or scarlet felt. Felt was also an important part of funeral services in the Gingshisad dynasty. In 1316, all of the pulpits of Tabriz were covered with blue felt to symbolize the mourning of Oljaitu, the Genhisid ruler of Iran. One custom of the Mongolian nomads is that "when everyone of them sickens onto death, a spear is put at his tent and around it they wrap a black felt; and thence forth no one who is a stranger dare enter the bounds of his dwelling."⁷ These ritual customs incorporating the important use of felt, provide further proof of the ancient origin of the material.

CONTROLLED FELTED SHRINKAGE

The non-woven textile technique, felting, results in a dense fabric that is built up by the hydrogen bonding of fibers through heat, cold, moisture, and pressure. It is based on the ability of wool fiber to bond to other wool fibers.

The technique of felting has just recently been rediscovered by fiber artists in the Western world as a medium of visual expression. In the last twenty years fiber artists from all over the world have been studying ancient customs, rediscovering and developing lost techniques. Felting is

⁷Ibid., p. 20.

the technique with which I have worked and developed. My technical development is known as "Controlled Felted Shrinkage."

"Controlled Felted Shrinkage" has evolved during the last two years and combines various studio experiences including drawing, surface design and weaving. This process requires two pieces of material, dye, a needle, thread, boiling water, ice and containers. The design is applied to the top layer of the material with a permanent textile dye. The second piece of material acts as a backing on which the wool rolags are placed. This non-woven structure is built up by the layering of material and carded fleece. Spread the first layer of muslin, the backing, flat on a working surface. On top of the backing place one layer of rolags in a horizontal direction and the second layer on top of the first in a vertical or opposite direction. Repeat this layering until the desired thickness is achieved. The piece of material with the printed design is the last and the top layer. Stitch the entire design securely to the back. Trim the excess fleece which is beyond the stitching. Begin the shocking step, which is the hydrogen bonding of fibers through heat, cold, moisture and pressure, by placing the layered structure in a container of boiling water. Quickly remove it from the boiling water and place it in ice. Remove the shocked material from the ice bucket, and agitate it for a few minutes by stomping on it with your feet or applying pressure to it with a rolling pin. Repeat this until the felt hardens:

the longer you shock and stomp the materials the harder will be the piece of felt. During this stage of the felting process, a thin layer of wool felt will push its way through the material and appear on the surface of the material. The finished fabric will have shrunk about one-third from the original size. Beyond these basic steps the use of this approach is limited only by the imagination.

Technical advancement is a development of the craft of felting, not an art form. It is not until the skill of felting is combined with concepts, creativity, intuition and design elements that an aesthetic experience is formed. It is the challenge of combining these entities to achieve a more transcendental effect that I find most satisfying.

The art work is a construction of physical clarity conceived by the designer through his mind and actions. The artist when working on a piece of art deals with the problem of construction. More importantly, he deals with the creative process.

The artist acts as a director selecting design elements and techniques which will best express individual concepts. Upon choosing these structural components, the artist develops a relationship with materials and techniques. Without this technical and aesthetic spirit of cooperation, the art of weaving loses its identity to the craft.

The artist, being sensitive to the nature of the materials and techniques deals with the immediate. While developing, the artist learns to trust his or her own

intuition and to become more responsible for decisions. When involved in the creative process the artist is his own boss, having to be an independent thinker, since there are no set rules. He or she must go where others have not been.

THE CONTEMPORARY FIBER MOVEMENT

The contemporary fiber movement is one of the most vital visual arts of our time. Within this movement we see diverse approaches and techniques which range from structured loom controlled work to off-loom pieces. Although different they all have in common the exploration and use of fiber techniques for the purpose of visual expression. Through visual expression, the artist comprehends, interprets and expresses his or her perception of events to the viewer.

The fiber medium should not be mistaken for a painting or sculpture since its qualities are unique. The fiber construction can be anything from a flat two-dimensional plane to a freestanding three-dimensional structure. Many fiber artists have chosen to challenge the boundaries of the loom. For example, Sherri Smith's interpretation of waffle weave allows her to weave flatly, but with a third dimension present in the structure. When the artwork is removed from the loom the warp tension relaxes allowing gravity's pull to create a parachute form. Ritzi and Peter Jacobi combine on-loom and off-loom techniques. In their "Environment, Variable II" we see loom woven walls and vertical monoliths connect with varying sizes of off-loom coiling. Claire

Zeisler's work represents the artist who is totally removed from the loom, and depends on off-loom and wrapped constructions to express her ideas.

Marguerite Carau-ischi and Sheila Hick's controlled geometric compositions intrigue me. Carau-ischi's rectangular format consists of a geometric woven frame which defines the content and space around it. Sheila Hick's "White Letter" represents an imagery whose composition depends on variations in the size and placement of large and small embroidered stitches. As an artist her scale development is similar to mine. Her early works were miniatures. With the "White Letter Series" the work begins to grow in scale until we see her artwork "Wall" which is 11' x 25'.

My miniature series consists of five felted pieces encased in plexiglas boxes. The miniature scale allows the viewer to develop a more intimate relationship with the artwork. These weavings highlight the woven structure. This is a common concept being used by fiber artists today. Charlotte Funk used this idea in her development of the twill-tapestry. With Karen Rutherford's "Pages of a Weavers Notebook" we see another interpretation. My series is based on a weaver's pun involving the technical use of felting which is a non-woven weaving technique in combination with the weaver's draft which is a notation for woven interlacement. With this series the viewer sees for the first time the felting innovation I have developed called "Controlled Felted Shrinkage."

"Obliquely Ribbed I and II" (Slides 1 and 2) were the first artworks to be executed in this series. Felt is embossed in a off-white and gray muslin surface design draft. The result is a simple, subtle piece which incorporates the idea of structure versus non-structure. "Undulated to my Fancy I and II" (Slides 3 and 4) and "Entwined to my Fancy's" (Slide 5) technique and idea is similar to the Ribbed pieces, but with these pieces there is a development in color. Purple and yellow, complimentary colors, are used to create a garish Victorian effect. A very thin layer of yellow felt lies on top of the surface design draft softening the contrast of these colors. Purple threads and yellow fleece have been added in each piece acting as accents to the harmonious geometric designs. The purple and yellow color combination achieves a greater visual depth than is seen in the earlier white and gray pieces.

The Series "Weather Span" (Slides 6-10) consists of five pieces whose image is based on the changes of the seasons. The four seasons, Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall are characterized by differences in the length of daylight and in average temperature.

This concept of change expresses the notion that the only thing which is constant in the world is change and man's continual adaptation to it. I chose to represent this idea through the seasons because it represents man's attempt to understand and come to terms with his environment.

The presentation of imagery is not literal, allowing the individual art work to be open to different interpretation by the viewer. The viewer is further involved in the creative process by the presence of the power of suggestion. I believe these artworks gain great strength due to this ambiguity.

Color familiarity from nature landscape scenes sets the mood of different season's artworks. With "Winter Solstice I and II" the blue gray and silver sparkles suggest ice, chilled fingers and a winter sky. "Vernal Equinox's" color combination depicts the colors and fragrances of spring blossoms. In "Summer Solstice" the colors of red, orange and yellow hues are referred to as warm colors because of their association with hot situations. Red is often associated with glowing hot coals and yellow with sunlight. Purple is not connected with either warmth or coldness. "Autumnal Equinox" is orange which is a warm color and is often associated with the hot burning of leaves. The subtle color gradations in this series incorporates the idea of the slow pace of change within nature's cycles.

"Search for One" (Slide 11) and "Re-search for One" (Slide 12) were done as architectural wall hangings. My first intention with these structures was to create a presence and impact and secondly to invite the viewer to form a more personal involvement with the piece. Both of these artworks incorporate the concept of the mystery of nature's constants. The idea of structure versus non-structure is present.

Structure is represented by the presence of the woven strips and the felt represents non-structure. The design element of color is most important in these pieces. Color acts as a tease, pulling the viewer into the large scale for a more intimate involvement. Both of these pieces evolved from the combination of smaller units of strips. The impermanence of these two structures suggest a state of development.


As an artist it is my involvement with the creative process which motivates me. As a fiber artist I plan to continue developing felt, always striving to combine medium and idea so they meet at a balance point which cannot be separated.

Although I am aware of the History of Art I try to view it in a timeless way, allowing myself to evolve as I was intended. The individual person contains many more ideas and feelings within himself than can possibly be explored. It is difficult to say where a piece of Art begins. It often begins as a thought years before it is executed in an artwork. I believe the important thing is to begin.

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79013
Search for
One



Felted and
woven
4ftx6ft.



Search
for One



Detail



Re-Search for
One



7ft. x $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft.
Felted and
woven



Re-Search
for One

Kodak

NO DUPLICATE



Detail

MADE BY KODAK

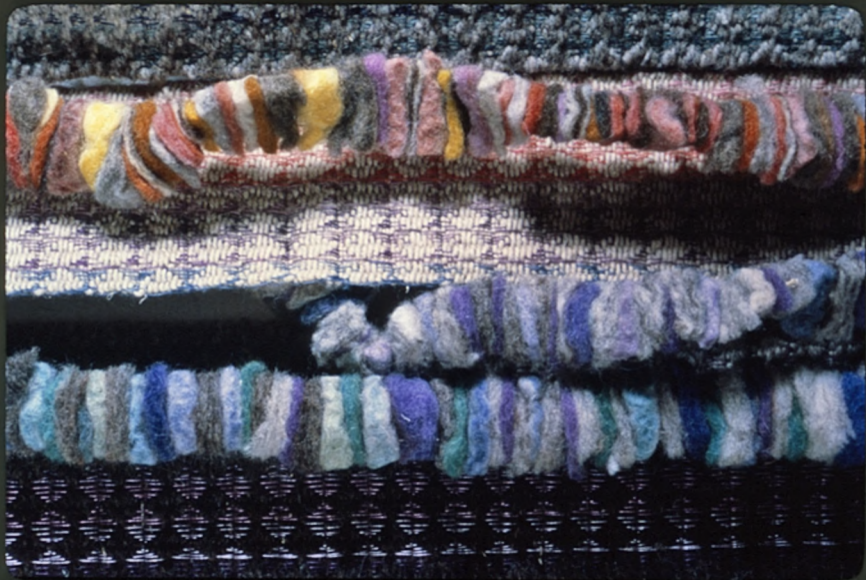


Re-Search
for One

JUL 79C18



Detail



Re-Search
for One

dak

ONE DUPLICATE



Detail

MADE BY KODAK



*60°: Autumnal
Equinox



20in.x27in.
Felting and
stitchery

TE

COL



60°: Autumnal

Equinox

PLICATE



Detail

MADE BY KODAK



85°: Summer
Solstice

Kodak



23in.x18in.
Felting and
Stitchery

TE

COLD



85°: Summer

C Solstice DUPLICATE



Detail

MADE BY KODAK



72: Vermal
Equinox



15in.x16in.
Felting and
Stitchery



72°: Vernal

Equinox

ak

DUPLICATE



Detail

MADE BY KODAK



30°: Winter

CC

Solstice

CATE



15½ in. x 16½ in.

Felting and

Stitchery

DAK



30°: Winter

Solstice

C Llicate



Detail

MADE BY KODAK



Winter

Solstice

DAK

DUPLICATE



28in. x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Felting

DAK



Undulated to

C My Fancy II ATE



Felting

11in.x14in. K



79C18

Entwined to
My Fancy



Felting
11 in. x 14 in.



Obliquely

Ribbed I



11in.x14in.

Felting



Obliquely
CO Ribbed II LICATE



11 in. x 14 in.
Felting



AK

