

by Polly Ullrich

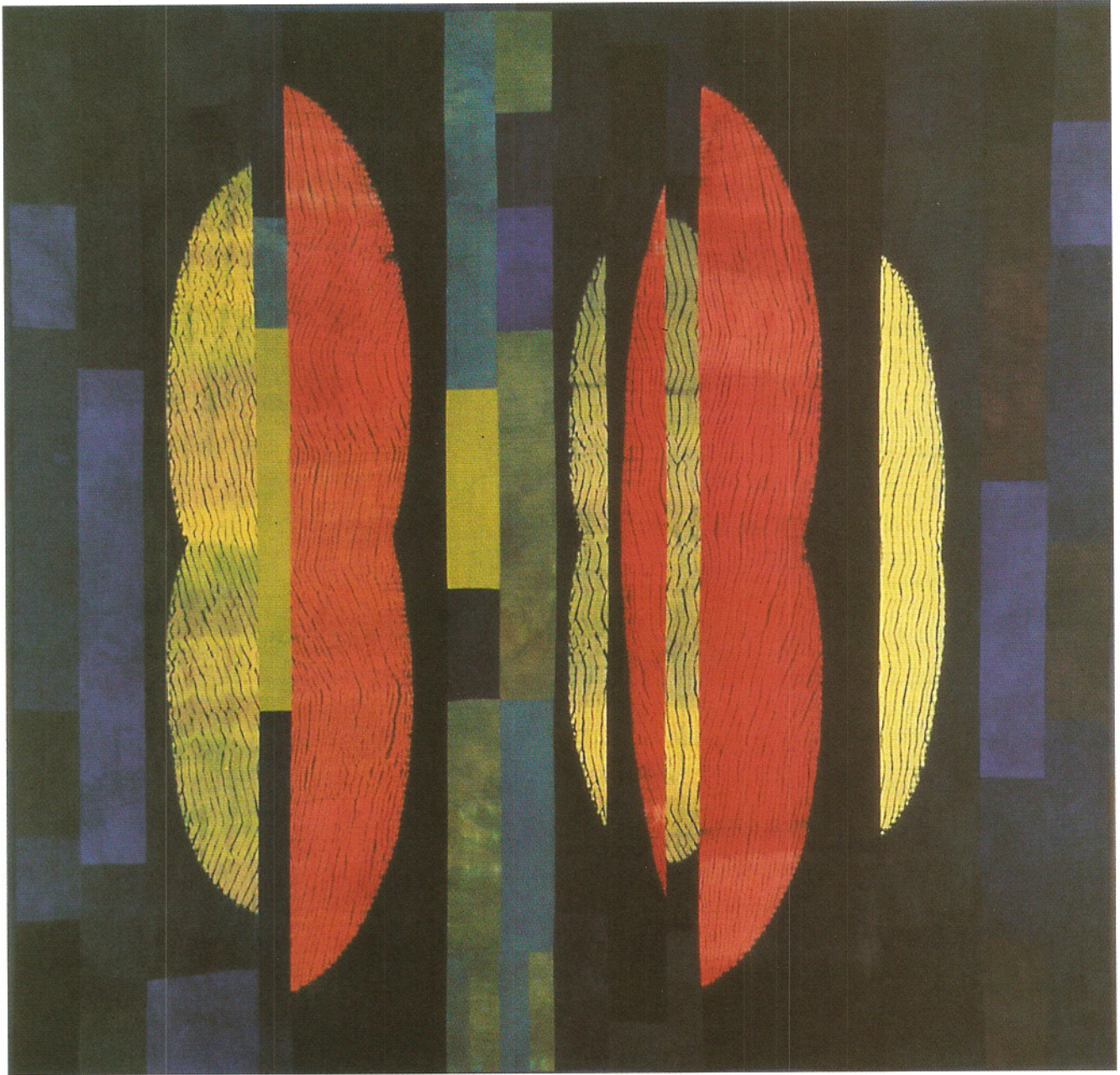
FRANK CONNET Master of Indigo

*"In former times every dye-works of any size had a special room for dyeing with indigo...a so-called "blueing room." This was regarded as the holy of holies of the dye-house and as a rule only the dye-master himself and his immediate assistants might enter it."*¹

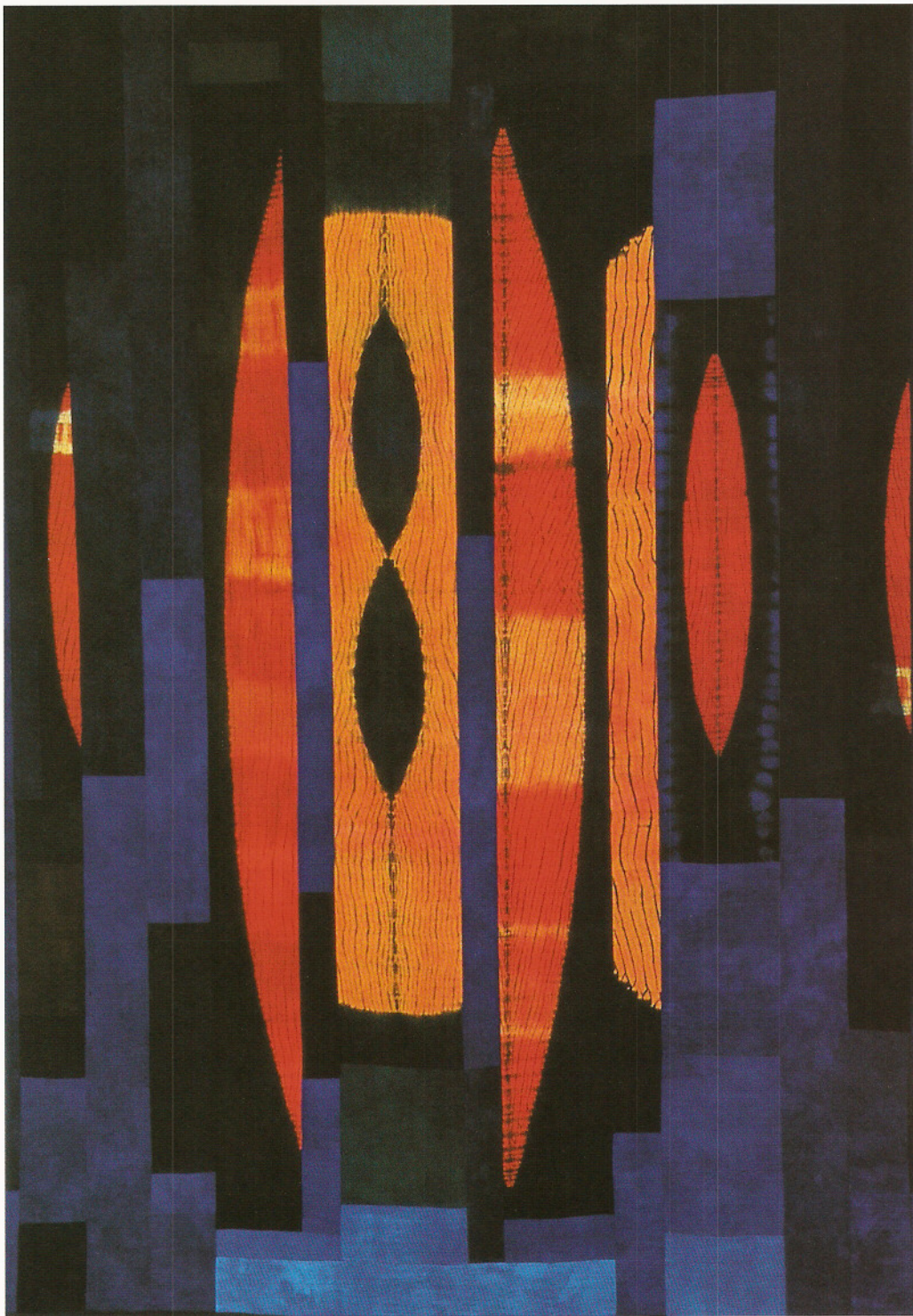
Frank Connet, his hands encased to the elbows in big black rubber gloves, tenderly lowers a piece of white wool into a steaming vat of clear, yellow-green liquid and delicately prods it with a wooden dowel. A piquant, sour smell rises gently from the hot bath. "Now, do you see?" he asks intently. "We want to move it around a little bit, but be careful not to agitate the bath. We just want a real gentle sitting in there." Connet—an artist and an expert in the restoration of ancient textiles—is the contemporary American art world's equivalent of an indigo dye-master, a profession with origins in Asia many thousands of years before the birth of Christ.

Indigo dyeing is notoriously fickle—one expert has compared an indigo dye bath to a living creature that "reacts swiftly and implacably" to any disruption in the balance of chemicals or temperature that might occur during the dyeing process. An old German aphorism describes a particularly skillful person as "clever as a blue-dyer" because of the knowledge, experience, and sensitivity needed to manage the brew; most old-time dyers relied on their touch, smell and taste to preside over the equilibrium of the bath.²

As he stirs, measures and tends his vats, Connet's movements are deft and sure while the process advances. "As the bath goes on," he is saying, "it will become opaque and less yellow. It will become more green."



FRANK CONNET *T-93* Natural dyes on wool, 82.5" x 86", 2001. Photo: Larry Fritz.



FRANK CONNET *T-94* Natural dyes on wool, 82" x 58", 2002. Photo: Larry Fritz.

Connet performs his dyeing in a Chicago studio with a wall of open, sunny windows looking onto train tracks overgrown with greenery; the room contains an atmosphere of still timelessness punctuated only by the rattle of an occasional passing train. Pots of water for dye baths percolate on electric burners; the studio walls are stacked to the ceiling with shelves containing neatly-folded batches and piles of fabric and rugs. One wall is banked with rows of containers: bleach, ammonia, vinegar, cleaners, cream of tartar, lye, and paste. Glass bottles twinkle with natural dye substances, many of which Connet has collected himself: walnut husks from Wisconsin to produce colors from camel to black; black oak bark from a windfall in Illinois to make yellows; madder root, one of his favorites, which produces a range from cool reds to oranges and browns; cochineal from Mexico for cool reds, and osage orange for another shade of yellow. Slippery elm peeks out between the bottles, but it is used not for dyeing but as tea for sore throats. Like an alchemist's den, the studio is a working room—orderly, spacious, devoted to the pursuit of intuition through the investigation of tactile, historical processes.

It is the resonant, metallic purplish blue-black which emerges from Connet's indigo dyeing, however, that has become a signature for his art—wall-hung collages of wool fabric, which have been subjected to the stitched and tied resist process of shibori before they are dyed and then pieced together with quilting stitches on a linen backing. While it is not uncommon for Connet to spend seven or eight hours tying and stitching up a single fabric to create a complicated shibori pattern before the wool is lowered into a dye bath, it is the layers of dyeing itself that produce the profound sense of dark bottomlessness engendered by looking at, or rather into, the surface of his textiles.

"In order to get color, deep color, you build layer upon layer of dye," says Connet, as he continues to delicately poke at and submerge his fabric, making sure that any air bubbles are eased out from under it. "The quality of color on fabric is different from the quality of color in ceramics and painting. It is a matt, which I think is interesting. And indigo has a color that starts out as a blue-green. As you keep applying, as you go deeper, there's a point at about 12 to 13 depths, where the color stops leaning to the green and shifts over to the purple, a metallic purple, which is really beautiful."

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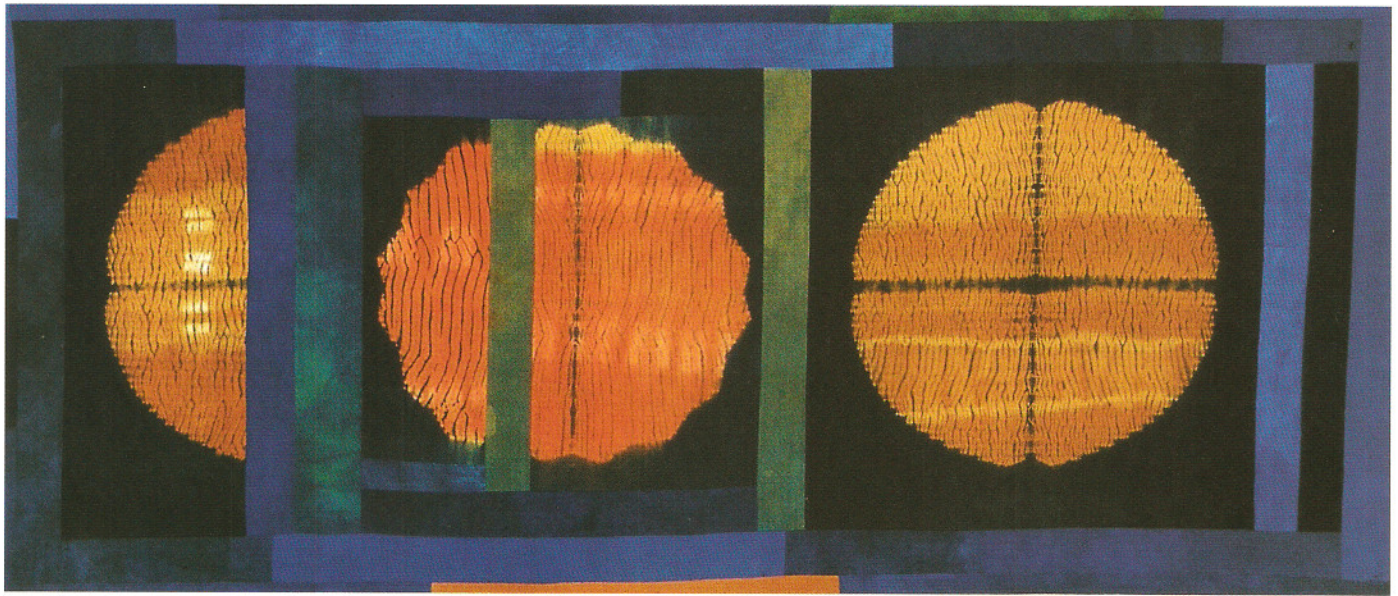
Connet's vaporous, pungent, yellow-green dye bath contains a medley of chemicals, primarily lye and thio urea oxide, which force the indigo, a powdered plant substance, into a solution that will coat the fibers in fabric. It is called a "reduction" process because it eliminates oxygen from the solution, and is necessary for the indigo to attach to the fibers. Historically, dye baths for indigo were "reduced" with urine, a process that probably was discovered when leaves from an *Indigofera* plant turned blue as they accidentally fell into a batch of urine. (In ancient times, urine was collected and fermented into ammonia for cleaning. These fermentation dye baths are still used in

Appalachia and Africa.)

In the dyeing procedure, any contact with the oxygen in air will stall the reduction and re-oxidize the indigo, bringing on an unsatisfactory, uneven and premature blue color in the fabric. Air bubbles and a blue scum, called "bloom," which sometimes pops to the surface as air mixes with the bath, must be carefully scooped from the vat. After ten minutes (or so), when the fabric is finally lifted, dripping, out of the bath, hung up and dried, the textile—whose fibers are now suffused with the reduced indigo—re-oxidizes, or turns blue, in seconds. It is a metamorphosis that zips quickly throughout the cloth, like the fast-motion film of a flower blooming from a bud. And it is intensely unique to indigo. Connet repeats this dyeing process over and over—each dipping, hanging, and drying adds one



FRANK CONNET T-90 Natural dyes on wool, 69.5" x 48", 2001. Photo: Larry Fritz.

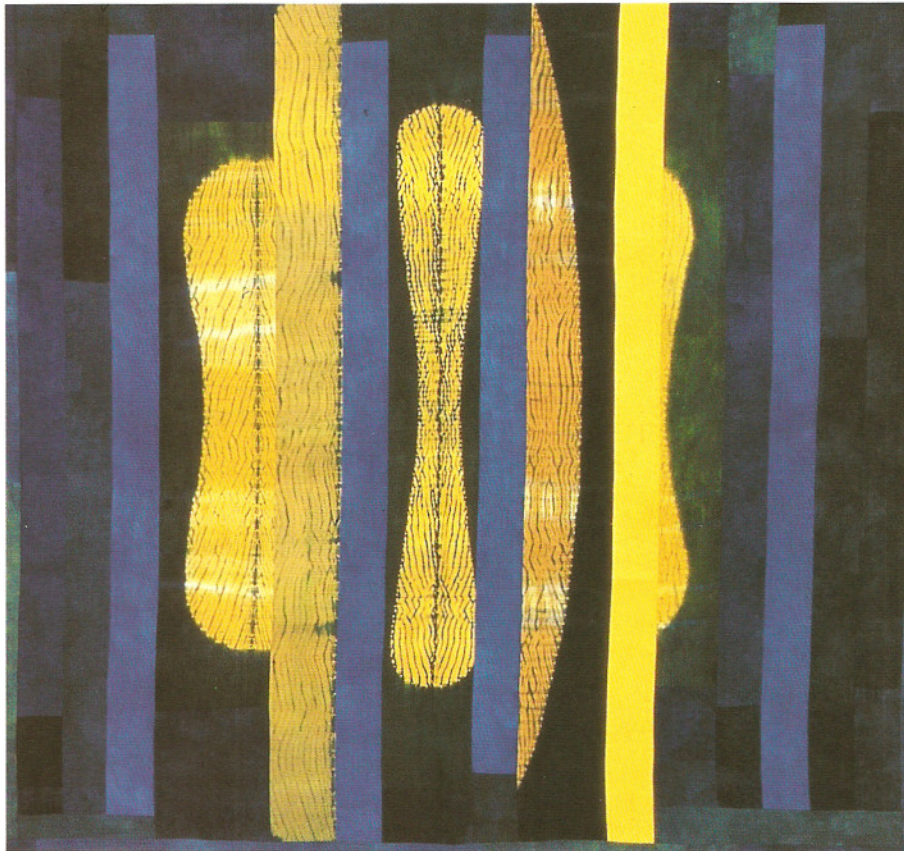


FRANK CONNET **T-86** Natural dyes on wool, 32.5" x 77", 2001. Photo: Larry Fritz.

more wash of color. Frequently he overdyes with madder or other dye solutions as well, subjecting his textile fragments to as many as 30 dippings, or "depths," as he says.

"Depth" in art has traditionally referred to Renaissance perspective, or to depth of field in photography. This historical concept of depth in art—the importance of representing three-dimensionality—has been challenged recently by electronic and digital artists who have developed a screen mentality that champions "flatness," with all its associations to fluidity, simultaneity, linearity, and interactivity. But, as is apparent in his flat collage textiles, when Connet talks about "depth," he is not referring to a hierarchy of volume and mass. Rather, the depth in Connet's work emerges from its organic and metaphoric imagery of fecundity and richness. Connet's textile collages—all of which have numbers for titles—do not refer to a world that is in front of us (like a screen), but rather to a diverse and organic environment that leaps into our awareness all around us. Looking into a collage by Connet is like connecting with the depth of a still pond—the blue layers of indigo resonate great distance and a sense of embeddedness in historic processes and time.

Connet, who also owns Textile Restoration, Inc., a nationally-known textile restoration studio in Chicago, is a Missouri native who graduated with a BFA from the Department of Design at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1983. With small museums, collectors and art galleries as clients, Connet has



FRANK CONNET *T-99* Natural dyes on wool, 49.5" x 52.5", 2001. Photo: Larry Fritz.

restored pre-Columbian textiles from the Paracas peninsula in Peru, 1800-year-old Coptic funerary textiles, Native American Navajo textiles, Japanese folk and court textiles, Chinese embroideries and folk costumes, and Indonesian textiles from Sumatra, among others.

While he utilizes a wide spectrum of restoration techniques, including reweaving, Connet's specialty is cleaning and mounting antique textiles, the riskiest aspect of restoration. "A mistake with reweaving can always be fixed," he says. "But washing is irreversible and potentially disastrous."

Connet's restoration expertise has paid off in unusual ways: he recently identified as a fake what was thought to be a rare 19th century Indonesian ceremonial textile—by washing it. "It looked right and the design was woven well, but since it was such a revered object, it was the kind of piece that should have had a certain type of soiling," he says. "I realized when I washed it that it had been artificially soiled."

Connet's own textile collages emerged from the dyeing techniques he developed in his restoration business, and he limited himself to natural dyes

when he became aware, working with historic and antique textiles, that these colors age more beautifully and exhibit subtle complexities over the years that are not always available in synthetic dyes.

Five years ago, frustrated that the success of his business was leaving him little time for his own art, which was painting, Connet began throwing leftover scraps of linen from restoration projects into indigo dye baths and then stitching the scraps together. "Something opened up," Connet remembers as he tarries near the dye bath in his studio. "I saw a world of possibilities." While his first fiber art objects were functional indigo-dyed blue and white linen quilts, he moved quickly on to wool, whose porosity allows it to absorb highly saturated levels of color, and to constructing the wall hangings. He can now work on and think about his own art while he goes about the restoration business—since both involve many of the same processes and materials.

Watching Connet's deft, sure movements at the indigo vat underscores the depth of time that is packed into his art—the thousands of years dye masters have juggled and learned from their sensitive baths in the past, and the six months of shibori stitching, dyeing, and piecing that currently go into each Connet wall hanging. Because of this lengthy time, Connet says that his art is "very much about trust."

"The work reveals itself to me as I am working. It's important to me that it evolves in an intuitive process," Connet says. "Making art is a gestalt, maybe. It involves putting things together and creating something that's bigger than the sum of its parts. You have to trust the process, and that you're going to put these things together and they're going to work." He takes a look into the indigo bath, gently lifts out a fabric, and says with an excitement that he insists never fades, "Now watch it, see it changing?" Indigo blue whizzes through the cloth as Connet shakes it out and airs it, dripping, over a clothes line. "This one went from a blue-green to a blue," he says with satisfaction. "But this, of course, is just the first step."

—Polly Ullrich is an art critic living in Chicago.

1. Gosta Sandberg, *Indigo Textiles: Technique and History* (Asheville, North Carolina: Lark Books, 1989), 36.

2. *Ibid.*, both quotes, p. 113 and 43.