The Subtleties of a Traditional Dye Process

Shibori is like cracking open a melon, the inside revealing something quite different than its wrinkled exterior. Frank Connet is an artist whose organic tapestries echo the natural materials he utilizes in his work: leaves, pods, and seed shapes all come to fruition in his spare works.

A self-proclaimed scavenger, Connet combines shibori with quilting techniques such as layering and using scrap cloth to produce abstract compositions of delicate colors. His subtle hues come from his extensive use of natural dyes, ranging from black walnuts that he collects from his own trees to cochineal to black oak to his favorite, indigo." There is no other dve in the world that makes that color," he marvels. Connet dyes traditionally, setting up baths when he gets enough cloth together to invest the time.

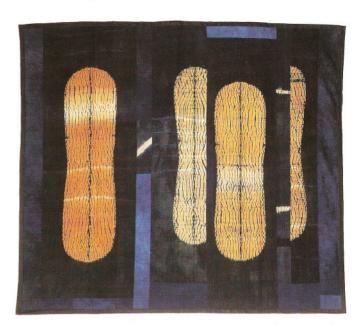
Although dyeing is time-consuming and labor-intensive, he maintains that it allows him to remain part of the textile continuum. In many cultures around the world, particularly among the Kodi people of Indonesia, indigo dyeing is a spiritual practice, involving many rituals.

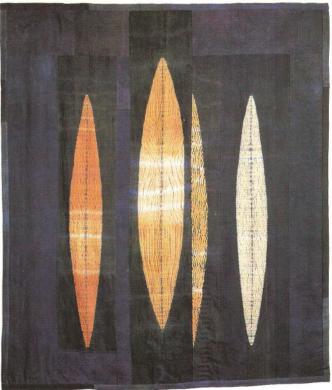
This spirituality surfaces visually as well. As Connet finds himself attracted to the same shapes over and over again, his symmetrical patterning revolves around ovals, and curvaceous leaf and bean shapes. However, he draws in thread only, improvising so that they are surprises even to himself.

There is a distinct harmony in Connet's tapestries. The colors are quietly bright, heightened at times by discordant borders with bold stripes of yellow or purple sewn within more tranquil tans and blues. Almost meditative, his strategy lies in the mantra of their production, through the repetition of stitching and the patience of waiting days for the proper richness to surface from sodium hydrosulfate dye baths.

Connet is a self-taught dyer who began with recipes, amazed, he says, at the amount of misinformation printed in many of them. He maintains he did things unsuccessfully until he figured out the right way on his own. He gravitates toward selected colors, reducing his palette to just a few hues of pink and blue or tan and indigo, rather than employing many colors in one piece. This restraint creates a stark simplicity that is both sophisticated and plain all at the same time.

"I take cues from textiles I really admire, which are often really limited chromatically. For example, Japanese folk textiles are often only blue and white, but they're very complete," he says. Connet has owned and operated Textile Restoration Inc., a textile and conservation studio in Chicago, for the last 12 years, so his knowledge of traditional textiles is vast. He cites graphic textiles as most influential to him, particularly African and Japanese, with their simple stripe relationships and abstract designs. "I have a constant stream of amazing stuff coming through here and that can be intimidating," he confesses. Regardless, he works every day, chasing fugitive shapes





Top: Untitled, T-63, 1999; pieced and quilted; shibori, walnut, cutch on wool; 65 by 73 inches. Bottom: Four Lenticular Shapes, T-67, 2000; pieced and quilted; shibori, indigo, walnut, cochineal on wool; 63 by 56 inches. Collection of Michael Heltzer, Inc. Photos: Larry Fritz.

and colors and celebrating the spontaneity that comes with working with cloth.

-Jenni Sorkin

Jenni Sorkin is a writer living in New York.