

# READER

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**JAPANESE INSPIRATIONS: FRANK CONNET AND JIRO YONEZAWA**  
at the Chicago Cultural Center,  
through February 10

By Fred Camper

## THE TRUTH IN WHISPERS

Where so much recent art employs startling shapes or unusual content, mimicking the "look at me" quality of advertising, Frank Connet's eight fiber works and Jiro Yonezawa's eight bamboo sculptures are self-abnegating and contemplative, the colors muted, the forms organic. These finely wrought objects depend not on the assertion of style or a one-liner "concept" but on the subtle details of surface and form. While the two artists have never met (it was curator Sofia Zutaute's idea to pair them), they share an interest in traditional crafts and nature. Connet is a gardener, and Yonezawa was a farmer for many years.

Connet says his grandmother—"an incredible quilter" who saved fabric scraps for decades before using them—has been an important influence. His works consist of pieces of dyed wool stitched to a linen backing and hung. Rectangular shapes are usually blue, black, or some other dark shade while curved shapes a bit like seedpods, feathers, or leaves are filled with curvy lines of red or orange resembling the contours of the brain's surface. Solid colors are often interrupted by irregular lighter areas; the irregularly arranged rectangles recall patchwork quilts.

Key to the beauty of Connet's work is the extraordinary suppleness of his colors. Defying the anticraft bias of much conceptual art and eschewing the assertive pure reds and blues of geometrical abstraction, Connet adopts a seemingly limited palette whose colors nevertheless have a pecu-

liar resonance and depth. Even in areas that at first appear solid, the blacks include blue, and the reds vibrate into orange. With such inner complexity, "solid" colors seem living worlds.

Connet uses only natural dyes, most of which he says are polychromatic, unlike synthetic dyes. "You can see a beautifully woven rug in garish synthetic colors, but it's not the same. The forms are important in my works, but the color is probably the most important." One of the five dyes he uses is taken from the madder root and "contains six or seven different constituents. Depending in part on the pH of the dye bath and temperature and the nature of the individual root, you can draw out different qualities." Connet's other dyes are cochineal (made from the bodies of insects), indigo, and one each from the bark of the black oak and from black walnut husks (materials for which he collects himself). He dyes his fabric as often as 20 times, creating the curved shapes and lines by pleating it, which protects strips from being dyed dark, then unpleating it and applying lighter colors.

Born in Houston in 1959, Connet moved to Birmingham, Alabama, as a child. Spending much time in nearby woods, he discovered he was an artist, he says, when he "drew a big, black wood ant anatomically correctly in elementary school." A job with a rug dealer while working toward a BFA at the Kansas City Art Institute led him to found a company in Chicago in 1989, Textile Restoration, which has enabled him to work with a variety of "amazing" textiles. "As part of conservation, you have to understand how a piece was made," he says; he's studied the techniques of a variety of cultures, from pre-Columbian and African to Japanese and Middle Eastern.

Two untitled pieces on the gallery's north wall consist mostly of the usual rectangles punctuated by pod shapes. But despite a superficial resemblance to geometrical abstraction, Connet's stitched-together works have a homemade quality that distances them from the oracular pronouncements common to minimalist art. And though some of the rectangles are solid, in many the color grows lighter, as if streaked by

clouds; each rectangle seems a window onto mysterious depths. This effect combined with the free-flowing, almost improvisational compositions invites the eye to roam. And looking

for details rather than grand meanings leads one back to sensory experience. Among the "thousands" of influences on his work, Connet mentions Sean Scully and John McLaughlin, who painted hard-edged rectangles but to very different ends than Mondrian; McLaughlin's works are gentle, modest, meditative.

*Four Lenticular Shapes IV* includes several large orange red pods. But like the bright colors in other pieces here, these are not self-assertive: they're interrupted, as if covered over, by blue black bands. Ultimately each color seems to contain hints of all the others, making these works seem even truer to nature, where all things—organic and inorganic, including the rock that supports lichen, which ultimately produces new soil—are part of the same seamless fabric.

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BY JI