

For a Moment the Fog Shifts Blue...

THOUGHTS AND METAPHORS
AT MID-CAREER

By **Bhakti Ziek**

In response to requests for publication of Bhakti Ziek's keynote address from the New Tools/No Limits conference, we reproduce it in its entirety here, with a few of the photographs from the slide presentation that accompanied it. —Ed.



For a moment the fog shifts blue. Why do we ask more than that? Why do we insist on steady blue skies, when from the moment of birth we are embroiled in a world of constant change? We seem to seek permanence, stability, and security in a world that defies these concepts. Change is the underlying condition of our lives but instead of embracing it we struggle to create the false impression of stasis.

Hand in hand with the struggle for stability goes the rehearsing of the future. Expectations can be helpful. I am sure that anticipation of this weekend brought many of you here. Were you encouraged by the fantasy that someone will hand you the key to your unmined creativity? I know I was thrilled by the prospect of combing the vendors' booths, convinced that in one of them I will discover the magical gadget that will remove all my creative blocks forever.

Did excitement give way to fear? Anticipating that you will be the slowest in the class, everyone else a genius, awed by the thought of studying with one of your heroes, you probably researched every esoteric citation published on the subject. Now you can give the

seminar. Some of you have even borrowed previous class handouts from former students of the teachers. You may have asked so many questions about who they are and what they expect that you can't remember why you chose to be here in the first place.

I had my own struggle with expectations. How about a title for the talk before it has been written? Or opening the Spring newsletter to read Jason Pollen's astonishing, complimentary words. I quote, "She fearlessly probes delicate issues, human, political, aesthetic, poetic, peeling back layers of her own and our own reluctance to see more of the nature of the structures that lie below the surface." I read that, and wondered, what was she going to say. I really wanted to hear that talk. But give it? I don't know—it felt like a set-up. It took months of procrastination before I could face the reality that I can only talk from my heart, from known experience, and to stop worrying about relevance or making a good impression.

So anticipation, expectations, and rehearsal got many of us here. Now is the time to leave them behind. They served their function. They got you to make enormous efforts to settle your daily commitments so home life could function without you. They got you to save money and vacation time so you could participate in these events. They enabled those of you, new to the field, to have the courage to walk into a room full of strangers. But now is the time to leave them behind. Because if you don't leave them behind, you won't be able to hear and see what is actually happening. If you stay stuck on the way a recipe was written by someone in the past, you might miss out on all the learning they have done in between that handout and the current one. Remember, when we listen to someone else's interpretation of a personality or an event, we

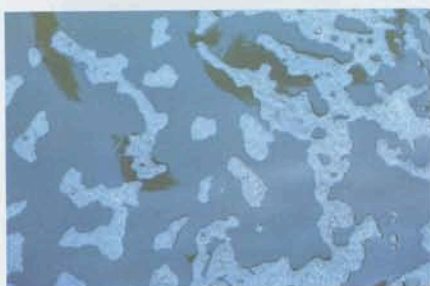
are hearing about that experience filtered through the psychology of that person. So stay tuned to the present moment, to your own senses and your own experiences of life unfolding, moment to moment, and you will indeed experience new tools and no limits.

I am intrigued with the title of this conference. New Tools: No Limits. For months I have mulled over what that means. What does it mean? I immediately take exception to the word new, because I don't believe in it. I just believe in something being unknown, something yet to be discovered. If you go to India, you'll discover new in practices are ordinary experiences to the citizen of Varanasi. Perhaps you were weaned on batik in the '60s. Did it become so familiar that it is still hard for you to look at it with any interest? Yet, you might be sitting next to someone who didn't live through those times. For them, the whole process of wax resist dyeing is new and holds worlds of possibilities. New is an adjective. It is not embodied in



things. It is another constantly changing concept. When you have been focused on a topic for years, as many of us have been, new is hard to come by. I am openly envious of beginners, and love teaching them. Everything is news, and slightly miraculous. Contact with their fresh energy reminds me of an activity that has become so familiar that I often tune out of the moment. When you

are starting something unfamiliar, you can't tune out. You are hungry to hear and get every nuance of information. "Oh, this is the way to hold the brush." "Oh," the rush of excitement as threads are removed and a pattern has actually resisted the blue dye. The beauty of conferences such as this is that they bring people at different levels together. Experienced practitioners,



like tour guides, can help the novice move along the path, and the novice can remind the experienced about the awe and mystery found there.

I am also intrigued with discovery and insight possible in the familiar. When you start something, you are usually following a well-trodden path. Perhaps you don't know that, and you think you have discovered something new. But experience usually brings you to community and a place of conversation with others. There you find that others have been this way too. That might be the place where you discover the relativity of the word news. You might decide that new, meaning first, is not important, anyway. When you discover that you are not the first person to sew a bead to a fabric, that fact does not detract from your interest in doing it. Your experience becomes your knowledge. We are in a field of activity. We are makers. We do things. Our senses are part of that experience. We hold the needle, we smell the indigo vat, we listen to the hum of the heddles rattling, we bathe in the visual impact of blue, and, if you are like me, we taste our paper. These are first hand experiences. No amount of reading, no amount of listening, no amount of thinking can replace these sensual experi-

ences. Each breath is new. Each dip into the dye vat is unique. New is an integral part of our lives, since each moment is new. I challenge you to live that newness. To accept the hard work of staying present and being aware of the moment and its birth and its death. Moment to moment.

So if the first part of the journey is well known, what is beyond that? I laugh at my conceit of subtling this talk "thoughts and metaphors at mid-career." How do I know if I am at mid-career? Have I become so insightful that I know that date of my death? What I do know is that I am no longer at the beginning of my career. Mid-career is really optimism, hope, perhaps a prayer. So many questions are still unresolved. Mid-career is stepping off the mountain because it must be done. It is continuing on a path that gets harder because fewer people have gone before. A well-marked road gives way to dead ends. Asphalt to dirt. Superhighway becomes uncharted terrain; unknown. Who said this was fun? It is damn scary. Corny sayings, like "the more you know, the less you know" begin to sound profound.

Mid-career is also about renewal; returning to well-established practices to discover what was left out. It is not a crowded room. It isn't really a place for many people. But it isn't empty either. It is like discovering the beauty in Kansas. It is a place of subtlety. It calls for endurance, patience, and most of all, perseverance. It is one of those stages where lots of people bail out. And why not? I think it is a time to expand. A conference like this gives many of us who are known as professionals, experts and teachers the opportunity to become students again. What a gift to openly ask questions and leave the expertise to others. Forays into different arenas can produce surprising results. I have discovered that no matter what I do, all roads lead to weaving. I might be studying permaculture, but everything I read on this topic sounds like weaving to me. Another mystery about learning

seems to be that if you pursue something with intensity you come out the other end with broad knowledge and awareness.

This society is into speed. New is often another word for faster. Lately I wonder where we are all rushing off to. I am lucky. I have achieved some of the landmarks that I thought would bring me happiness. I have seen their satisfaction quickly disappear, leaving me hungry, still looking for the meaning of my life. Now I am putting on the brakes, reexamining, and reevaluating. One of my particular quandaries has always been the balancing of self and others. I suspect that many of you share this problem. Besides our socialization to consider others, there is a natural friendliness and curiosity toward others. For me it is both genuine friendliness as well as a means of finding out about myself—perhaps you have some of the answers for me. This thought,



however, brings me back to the fact that we are makers and our truths derive from the individual feedback of our actions. As much as we want to give to others, and to learn from others, in this field, you must return to yourself and your own processes for knowledge.

Keeping the balance between self and others is often lost to the other. At times I have gone so far with my generosity that there was nothing left to give. Not to others, not to myself. Soil needs rest; it needs replenishment. If you don't give yourself these things, you will be depleted. You will no longer be a sustainable resource. Many of you, my colleagues and friends, have spent years learning and giving to others. Your own questioning and probing has been slowed down because you

are always reaching out to others, helping them achieve your level of expertise. The need to help others can get in the way of your own growth. At some point, you might ask for help. Giving, like farming, should be a rotated activity. You can ask someone else to take over the nurturing, while you step aside, and return to your studio.

"Selfish" and "ambitious" are two good adjectives for a maker. Not everyone wants them, but if they are appropriate to you, you should honor them. Making something involves time and space. It is a selfish undertaking because you have to say no to other things in



order to make room for this work. You have to say no when an unhappy friend wants you to go for a cup of coffee during your studio time. You have to say no when your daughter's Girl Scout club needs a chaperone for a trip. You have to say no when your partner wants you to watch TV with them. You have to say no to any number of things that might include cleaning the house, cooking meals, and other necessities of life. And you have to say no so you can go into the studio and work. Other people might call you selfish, especially if your activities are not generating money, but you know you are doing something necessary, and difficult.

Ambition can drive your work. Ambition means you dream dreams that are too large for reality and then you systematically make them happen. If you are ambitious, and you don't go after it, you will always feel that you let yourself down. You will know that you let fear take over, and you never put yourself to the test. Ambition opens up lots of avenues. Down the road, you might

decide you went the wrong way. If you feel that way, you can always turn around, or adjust your pace. However, if you don't face your ambition and give it rein, you will probably suffer internal disappointment, and maybe external jealousy of others.

The turning around, changing paths, stopping mid-stream, that is another valuable tool. Some of us feel guilty when we diversify or change. Time has given me more understanding of friends who have abandoned one art form for another. Creativity has no rules. If you have to go through one or maybe dozens of mediums to find your answers, then you should. What works for you today might be wrong tomorrow. Again, change is the underlying rule. Guilt seems to grow from shoulds and shouldn'ts that are about myths of life. To quote a very insightful teacher, you should practice "life as it is, not as you want it to be."

I want to talk about Jaymus Leahy. I was very happy to open the recent issue of *Fiberarts* and see his work there. I was friends with Jaymus. Not best friends, but friends. I was privileged to know about his illness long before it became public news. I didn't hear about it from him, in fact, we never directly discussed his illness; but a wonderful friend allowed me the position of illuminated compassion. I was a witness from the sidelines and, unknown to the players, I could watch hidden motives in action. I listened to others complain about Jaymus' ambition, silent with the knowledge that he only had now. He finished at Cranbrook and then went to Yale. When my husband and I visited him there, we were stunned by the beauty of his obsessive and obstinate collecting. While everyone else in the program painted their rooms, emptied their spaces, and prepared for the perfect creative act, Jaymus was creativity. He embodied action and grace. Ceiling to floor, in both studio and home, he was building monuments to the fleeting nature of life. At the end of his first year, Jaymus left Yale. No one leaves Yale.

But his ambition, the public one that Yale could enhance, had died. It had been replaced by a quiet but urgent ambition for inner balance and peace. Always positive, he pursued a different creative path. Jaymus' legacy to me is the reminder to be truthful to what is important today, as needs change.

I play a lot of computer games. Actually, I only play one game. Over and over again, obsessively winning simulated fortune cookies with really dumb sayings. I know this is stupidity on my part, yet, so far, I am losing. And I am truly losing. I could say, "Oh, you need to relax. Go easy on yourself." But I know there is a difference between reading a good book, or going for a walk, or having a conversation with a friend, and this activity. Even while I am doing it, I regret all those wasted hours. But the choices are ours. Some days we make regrettable ones, some days we don't. Isn't it lucky that each day we get another chance to make these choices. Do we need to wait for the call of death before we choose wisely?

The new tools being offered at this convention are not new to many of you, and won't be new just minutes after you learn them. But they can



be pathways to increased understanding of your life and your creative needs. Mixed with old methods, pared down or embellished, they become a vocabulary that extends your ability to communicate with yourself and with others. Communication brings recognition that you are not alone. That the inner experiences of one are indeed the inner experiences of all. These processes are tools, vehicles, not the truth itself. The answer is not inherent in potato dextrin, it is the way you use

it that is interesting. After this conference, we will all have the same words, yet our work will still be distinct. Make this time about community—sharing, helping yourself and others experience life as a surface designer with renewed vigor. Although groups can bring out comparisons and judgments,



you can work against that. Encourage, and be encouraged by experimentation. Instead of making what you already know, instead of driving your work into well-defined parameters, let your initial uncertainty guide you through the work. If you leave behind some of your preconceptions about what your work should look like, you might be able to find something unusual, different, and intriguing. It might be awkward; even ugly. It might be sublime. No limits is like the divine. Unbound exploration, undefined territory. You are the map maker. You must keep your eyes open so you can discover what is there.

In recent years most of my travels have been by plane. I board in a dense urban environment and walk out into a dry expanse of desert. The experience is of dramatic change. It is another example of how our fast lives foster the need for gross sensation. Earlier this summer I had the opportunity to drive across the country. Driving in a car without air conditioning, change happens slowly. There are those glorious moments when the mountains meet the plains. But mostly it's subtle movements as one family of grasses gives way to another.

Change happens almost without perception, like a flower unfolding. You recognize that high mesa is different from irrigated farm land, but the transition, gentle, occurs almost unnoticed. This is what creativity is like. Occasionally there is the burst of insight. Mostly there is perseverance. One work leads to the next, and small changes build the development that moves one body of work into another. As you know more about your specialty, there is less to surprise you. At times it may seem like you have tried it all, thought it all, seen it all. But, of course, you haven't. Stick with it long enough and a delicate perception becomes your joy. It is like learning to get a sauce just right. You can follow a recipe and come within reasonable taste, but it takes attention and adjusting each time to get the exact flavor. You have to be subtle to recognize that one tomato is more acidic than another. You have to be subtle to recognize when to leave a work alone.

When you begin a garden in a wild place, you can take up a machete and safely hack away at years of growth. In minutes you see the results of your efforts. Dramatic, wonderful results. Clearly you see that you are making progress. But what about the fine tuning after that initial weeding and planting? This care takes patience. This care takes perseverance. Beginning work is like the beauty of a rose. It is magnificent, and it is obvious. Mid-career is like the beauty of the desert. I am not talking about dramatic sand dunes shifting under the sun. I am talking dry, cracked, and unrelenting. If you look, beauty is there. Wait long enough and the cactus will bloom. Wait long enough and, even without that bloom, the vastness starts squeezing out your misery. The world shifts, imperceptibly, and beauty takes a new form.

This spring, I shocked a group of students by casually mentioning that I see very little contemporary work that I find interesting. I feel exasperated by the repetition of a limited

range of topics as the subject of art. Last month I sat in a lecture where the speaker would not even use the word beauty. Over and over again, he would say "the 'b' word." Compassion, generosity, beauty, mercy, spirit, gratitude, friendship and community all seem important areas of investigation to me. If one can deal with abuse, why not kindness? If one can deal with pornography, why not companionship? If one can deal with the horrific, then why not beauty? It is my hope that through this conference, through the conversations you have with each other, the friendships that are made and will continue, that some of you will take up the methods taught to express aspects of life suitable to optimism and hope. In



New Mexico I was pleasantly surprised to find so many people openly talking about the spirituality of the place. Just their openness seemed to evoke an energy that acted as a counterpoint to the fear I experience in crowded urban areas. Your work can be a place of refuge for others, if you dare to commit it to compassion and sanctity.

New Tools: No Limits has begun. Throw out your expectations. Throw out the chattering critic. Listen to each other and hear what is being said. Take what you need and leave the rest alone. You made great effort in coming here, don't lose something precious because you thought it was going to look different than it actually looks. The mystery is that life is full. There are no guarantees, no security, no moment that does not shift into another. The choices are yours to make. I encourage you to take up new tools, with courage, and walk into the boundless unknown. ≈

SURFACE DESIGN JOURNAL

VOL 20 NO 3 SPRING 1996

-
- 2 Editorial by *Patricia Malarcher*
-
- 5 Pine Mountain of Sue by *Amanda Mayer Stinchecum*
-
- 7 Quilt as Construct by *Margo Mensing*
-
- 8 Beyond Aesthetics by *Mary Lane*
-
- 9 Redefining Cultural Roots by *Carole Y. Lyles*
-
- 15 Linda MacDonald by *Candace Crockett*
-
- 16 Material Matters by *Patricia Malarcher*
-
- 18 The Museum Picture by *Marcia Johnson*
-
- 26 For a Moment the Fog Shifts Blue by *Bhakti Ziek*
-

Departments

- 22 Informed Sources
24 Exposure 30 In Review
34 In Print

SUBSCRIPTION/ MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

The *Surface Design Journal* is sent to members of the Surface Design Association. Membership includes four issues of the *Journal* + four issues of *SDA News* newsletter.

Annual fee: \$45 Students: \$25 (w/ID).

Outside USA: add \$5.00 (\$12 airmail). US funds only. Write:

SURFACE DESIGN JOURNAL, PO BOX 20799, OAKLAND, CA 94620-0799

On the Cover

Patty Hawkins *Summer Jazz* (Detail)
Pieced fabric
48"x52, 1995.

A Quarterly
Publication of the
Surface Design Association
a non-profit educational
organization

Surface Design:

*"the coloring, patterning
and transformation of fabric,
fiber and other materials,
directed toward art and de-
sign"*

The purposes of the SDA is
to provide leadership in the
field of surface design by:

- stimulating, promoting and improving professional opportunities and education in the field of surface design

- educating the public about surface design

- improving communication and dissemination of information among artists, designers, educators and industry

- acting as a resource in the field of surface design to people seeking access to galleries, studios, workshops, small business and education

- supporting and encouraging exhibition opportunities for surface designers

- providing a forum for exchange and evolution of ideas through conferences

© 1996 Surface Design Association, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited. *Surface Design Journal* (ISSN: 0197-4483) is published quarterly by the Surface Design Association, Inc., a non-profit educational organization. Address all correspondence to Surface Design Association/ *Surface Design Journal*, PO Box 20799, Oakland, CA 94620-0799.

Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by return postage. Postmaster: Please send change of address notices to *Surface Design Journal*, PO Box 20799, Oakland, CA 94620-0799