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Bhakti Ziek

by Carol D. Westfall
and Trish Fowler

Bhakti Ziek is one of those rare, gifted artists or educators whose words are a source of deep inspiration to those who have had the pleasure of sharing her company. “Bare bones” is how one audience member described a Ziek lecture. Real, absolutely real, is how I would define the experience—not an ounce of pretense or bombast. One comes away from these lectures with a newfound feeling of membership in a select community of people who rejoice in a common love of cloth. Each time, I learn a great deal about how she thinks, and I feel as though I have been personally invited to join her on her life’s path. Wise, articulate, knowledgeable, and deeply human describe this artist and the body of work she has created during a richly productive lifetime.

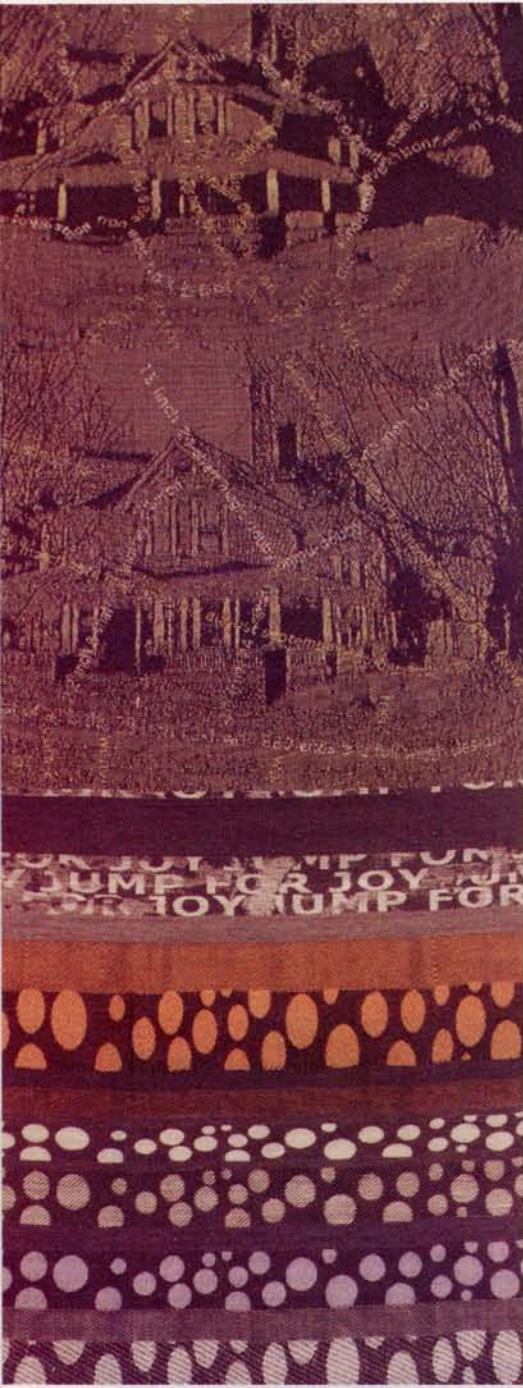
Ziek began weaving in the late 1960s with the intention of going to a commune. “I needed the knowledge of how to do everything,” Ziek says, “so when this theoretical commune asked me to [weave] something specific (bedding, dish towels, rugs, whatever), I could do it. I wasn’t thinking of creative output or my own desires for an end product—it was about acquiring knowledge. Today, forty years later, I see that acquiring knowledge is often my inspiration for work.”

At the time, she was living in New York City, and she also took ceramics classes with the same idea of having skills that would be useful at a commune. “I loved pottery,” she says, “I loved that my jeans would be covered with dried mud, and I loved the physicality of working at the wheel. I liked weaving, but I don’t think I embraced it mentally in the way I did ceramics.”

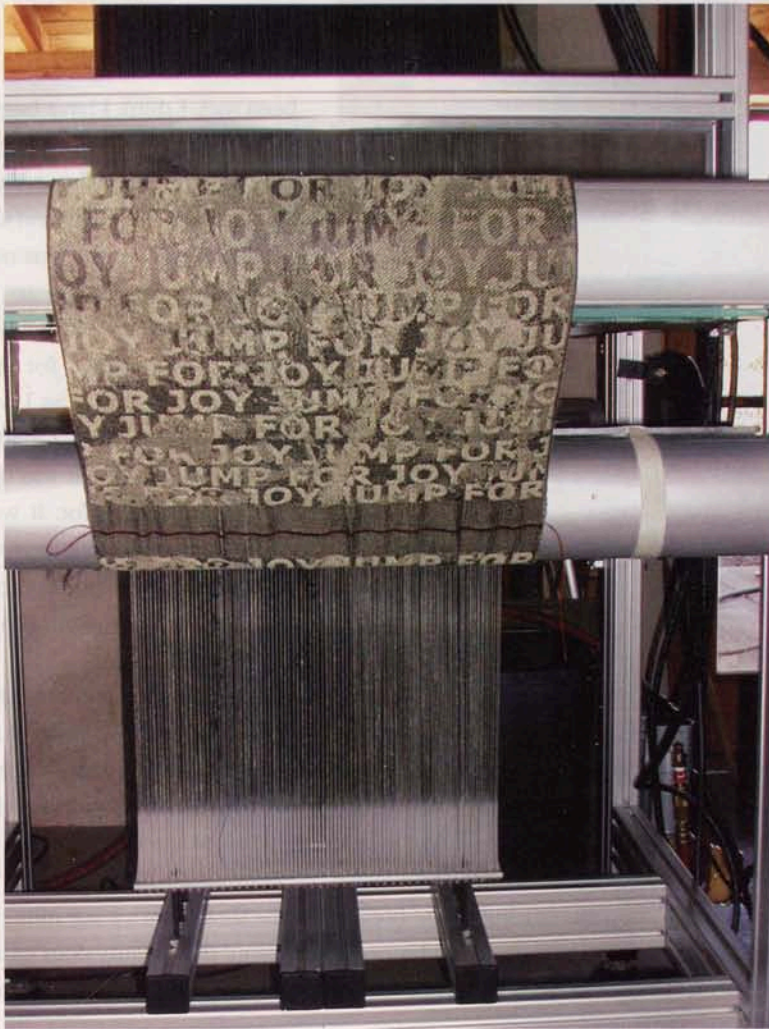
When none of her friends seemed interested in going to a commune with her, Ziek eventually moved to Guatemala to a town where friends lived—one known for weaving. A Mayan woman taught her backstrap weaving. When she returned to the United States in 1976, she co-authored a book on Guatemalan weaving with her mother, Nona Ziek. Then in 1978 she began her B.F.A. at the University of Kansas, because it was a criteria to get into the graduate program in Conservation at Winterthur in Delaware.

She thought she had skills for making art, but she did not think of herself as a creative person. “Working on other people’s textiles and repairing them,” Ziek says, “along with traveling to other parts of the world, was attractive and motivating. However, almost as soon as I began my studies, especially in my basic design and photography classes, I saw how much fun it was to be given a problem with no fixed solution and have to come up with my own answers. I loved it, and immediately changed my plans—deciding I would pursue my own work...and I abandoned the idea of conservation.”

“At first I thought I would resume ceramics,” she continues, “but then I realized I was already far along the path as a weaver, and if I took up ceramics again I would



House, detail, 2008. Damask liserie hand-woven jacquard, woven on a TC-1 loom; Tencel®, cotton, rayon, rayon boucle; 36 by 13.5. Photograph by Michael Sacca.



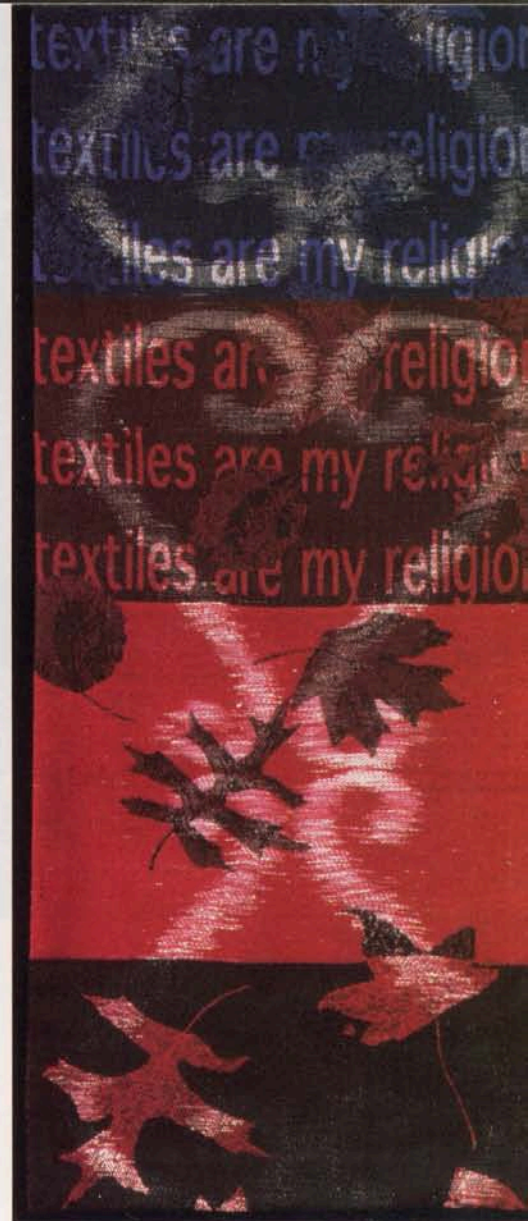
Jump for Joy, detail, 2007. shaded satins jacquard being woven on Bhakti Ziek's TC-1 loom; cotton, rayon; 19 by 13.5 inches. Photograph by the artist.

be split, and then I would get nowhere with both media. So I stayed in fiber. I say it this way: 'a tenuous thread grew into my life line.' What would have happened if I had landed in a pottery town in Guatemala?"

Ziek credits Eleanor DeQuoin, who taught basic design classes at University of Kansas, for teaching her how to be creative. "She had the ability to ask a simple question," says Ziek, "that once you started answering, you realized there was no end to the answer. So a problem offered by her could still be rolling around in my head today, offering yet another potential solution. She brought the most ordinary situation (like the colors of the walls in the local McDonalds) into the classroom and showed us that art and creative solutions were part of our lives already—that we were already involved with decision making that was creative—just that we hadn't realized it. I will never reach the end of my gratitude to her and her teaching."

Her years of studying under Gerhardt Knodel as a graduate student at Cranbrook Academy of Art were extremely influential in her life and her way of working. "I did learn that I could work beyond my comfort zone or normal way of working," she says. "Knodel also exposed me to the history of textiles and its vast possibilities."

Ziek believes that time has proven her creativity. "In the book *Art and Fear*," she notes, "the authors discuss the fall-out rate of people from creative ventures. A great number drop out right after school, when faced with financial realities. I don't remember all the details, but of the few that continue, there is often a fall-out after mid-



Creed-1, 2003. Painted weft, damask jacquard, woven on Nina Jacob's TC-1 in Berkeley, California; textile pigment, cotton, 30.5 by 13 inches. Photograph by Margo Geist.



Crabapple, 2004. Warp ikat, lampas jacquard woven on the TC-1 loom of the Fiber Department of Kent State University in Ohio; natural dyes, wool, cotton, chenille, boucle; 33.75 by 51 inches. Photograph by Margo Geist.

career, when many of the goals have been met. I think I have been there and faced that and questioned continuing or not." In 2002 when she and her husband moved to New Mexico and she had a lot of time to weave, she was not drawn to her looms. She began to do pottery again—throwing one cylinder after another—searching for something. "One day," she says, "as I was painting dots on the surface, I realized I was totally engaged, and it was this moment that I was looking for. It was as if my engine had started again. Knowing this focus was still a possibility for me, I returned to the loom, with new hope and energy."

"I used to be a great reader, all my life," she says. "Books still are the symbol of culture for me....When I began to study weaving in earnest, my books changed from literature to 'how to', to inspiration. All these wonderful big books laden with color images—they are my best friends....I have found that it always works to lift my spirits if I open up a book on historical textiles and stare at the images. What hope I find in fine silk weaving with narrative images of men riding with falcons on their hands or rows of poppies blowing in the breeze. To me these fabrics are mini-miracles—a testimony to the creativity of the human spirit, proof that beauty does exist. They get me back to my own work with renewed hope that my work will join this great lineage of woven textiles."

When she is asked about contemporary artists that may affect her and her work, Ziek says, "I am not sure any artist, per se, affects my work, The fact that there are people out there who are doing work that I consider successful is encouraging me to go on. It is the sense that if someone has succeeded, then I can, too. Also, in these times of super commercialization, it is good to be reminded that there are people who have followed their work to whatever ends in disregard of success and selling."

"More than contemporary artists, I look at works by unknown artists who wove cloth for wealthy clients in many regions," she continues, "but particularly the Safavid and Ottomon weavers of the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, and Italian weavers of the fourteenth century. My husband and I visited Lucca once just to walk the same streets that these weavers walked...When I am depressed, I can open up a book with an image of a Safavid lampas and suddenly I am overwhelmed with hope. The beauty of their achievements keeps me going."

"I also have to say that my husband, Mark Goodwin, is the most interesting artist that I know. I have the privilege of watching him in his studio—it's been almost thirty years now, and I stand in amazement at how these forms evolve on paper from within him. We are quite distinct personalities, but have formed a partnership that encourages each other."

Travel and time spent in other cultures where textiles are a living tradition have also helped her work, as has working with students. "Watching people squander their time at school sends me back to my studio with renewed determination," she says. "[and] the energy of a 'beginner's mind' where 'everything is possible' is like a tonic to me."

"Often it is a struggle to be working at the loom. But if I get into a routine, and force myself to go there each day, then an ease begins, and...I can get quite focused



House, detail, 2008. Weft-backed handwoven jacquard, woven on a TC-1 loom; cotton, linen; 13.5 by 19.5 inches. Photograph by Michael Sacca.

and concentrated. I like this feeling. In my recent jacquard work, where I have had to commit to an image before weaving, I also enjoy the unfolding of the work. Prior to this work, and still when I approach a shaft loom, my way of working is more spontaneous, more of a challenge. Usually the first picks are the hardest, but then everything follows, if I pay attention.”

She just completed a one-year visiting professorship in the art department at Arizona State University where she taught the weaving classes and a special projects digital weaving class. Previously, when Ziek taught full-time, she felt there was not enough time for her own work. “When I had five years of independent time in New Mexico,” she says, “I realized that I embraced things that took up my time—email, cleaning house, and doing suduko....This changed when I got my Thread Controller loom (TC-1) in the spring of 2007. For the first time in years, my heart would lurch when I saw the loom. I could not get up early enough in the morning to get to the loom, to continue working. So far I have only done a series of charts relating to picks per inch and type of yarns in different structures, as well as small studies using the data I collected. Although not exhibition work, I feel it is authentic work—my most important current work—and I am excited to take it further into more ‘considered’ pieces—perhaps exhibition work.”

She hopes she has found a home where she and her husband can live for the rest of their lives. The weaving *House* is the beginning of a series she is doing about place—her lifelong search for home. “I have an inner feeling that...everywhere is home,” Ziek says, “so addresses change, the physical appearance of places change,



Bhakti Ziek weaves on her TC-1 loom in 2007, in Tempe, Arizona. Photograph by Mark Goodwin.

but my presence is the constant....Not that I won't travel, but to have a place I really call home, and feel is home—that has eluded me so far. In this home I want Mark and me each to have adequate studio space—as well as living space—separate, each functioning for its own use. And I would like to start a tutorial-type school where people come to me to learn. I have a variety of looms (backstrap, shaft, dobbie, and hand jacquard), and a lifetime of accumulated knowledge about weaving. I want to share it with others without the forced situation of grading, critiques, and semesters.”

“It does feel like weaving chose me,” she continues. “It wasn't love at first sight, but now it is a deep passion....It has become my metaphor, my way of seeing and understanding the world.”

“Once, an astrologer said that weaving was in my chart,” she says. “Maybe I was a spider in a past life. ...To this day, I find this path, whatever it is called, to be mysterious, challenging, exciting, sometimes rewarding, but never clear. Living with the unknown, trying to unveil it, knowing I never will, is a good life.”

To achieve tranquility and serenity is the ultimate satisfaction of life's quest. It seems a quality innate in Bhakti Ziek that permeates her very presence. Integrity, perseverance, and a quiet joy in accomplishment are hallmarks of this artist-educator persona. Her future and past students are to be envied for they have known the best of mentors.

Carol D. Westfall is an artist and writer who lives in Jersey City, New Jersey. She is a Contributing Special Features Writer for SS&D.

In 2009, Bhakti Ziek will be teaching in Taiwan in the spring and in France in the fall. She offers private tutorials in weaving in her Vermont home and can be reached at bhaktiziek@gmail.com.

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Cover: Bhakti Ziek. *Postcard*, 2005. Painted warp, brocaded lampas jacquard; natural dye extracts, silk, cotton, boucle, rayon chenille; 3.25 by 26 inches. Photograph by Margo Geist. See feature on page 30.



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Inset Photos, Clockwise from Left:

Bhakti Ziek. *House*, 2008. Weft-backed handwoven jacquard, woven on a TC-1 loom; Tencel®, rayon boucle, linen; 13.5 by 19.5 inches. Photograph by the artist.

Pamela Feldman. *Landscape III*, detail, 2008. Handwoven, hand-dyed with natural dyes; wool; 38 by 23 inches. Photograph by Larry Fritz.

Celebration Threads: New Twists by Robert Hillestad exhibition at the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.