

THE ROAD TO BOROBUDUR

A MASTER'S THESIS

By Bhakti Ziek



When I first began to study fine art, “fiber art” seemed overwhelmingly monumental, hairy, abstract and sculptural. Material was the key work; an artist could weave video tape and claim the use of “new” material as the work’s significance. I found very little in common with the supple ethnic textiles that had brought me back to school. I was searching for the meaning of cloth woven with fine thread, heavily embellished with figurative elements that carried identifiable information for the user in his society. I wanted to know if such a sensibility was significant in contemporary America, and, if so, how I could get it into my work.

About this time, Jack Lenor Larsen’s book, *The Dyer’s Art*, was published. It brought a resurgence of interest in dye processes that seemed hopeful to me—perhaps I would find my community in the fiber world—but the resultant blurry, mottled, undefined imagery (“American ikat”) was disappointing. It wasn’t until the mid-1980’s that I began to notice the emergence of contemporary work that held my attention. Here were weavings that contained the craftsmanship of ethnic textiles layered with significance for Western culture. Artists such as Sandra Ramsdale, Laura Nicholson, and Emily DuBois were manipulating their materials to create narrative and pictorial work that inspired and gave me hope. They joined Cynthia Schira as my role models.

During a history of fabrics course at Cranbrook, I became aware of the historical precedents for the type of weaving that inspired me. I found a life in the past, and validity for my concerns. Now I could cite textiles to support an argument or narrative in art, and not use just painters as references. When I had questions about my own studies, I

could research such textiles as Coptic tapestries, Indonesian ceremonial cloths, Safavid figured silks, or the Apocalyptic tapestries of Angers.

Basically I am attracted to labor-intensive weaving. Whether you understand the technique or not, you look at such work, recognize that process is essential to the finished product, and marvel over such commitment. However, the weavings I like do not remain at the level of craftsmanship. They express the maker’s thoughts. It is the merging of concept and technology that I find so powerful. A complexity of imagery also interests me. I enjoy reading the work, puzzling over motifs, grouping and regrouping figures, analyzing the messages they carry.

I have been questioned as to why there is this emergence of pictorial weavers at this time in history. Speaking for myself, I think it reflects a stand against the “commodification” of our society. These weavings reaffirm values that have slipped in importance. Their blatant use of time (in a society where “time is money”) is another way of saying that money isn’t everything. They applaud beauty and sensuality, and refute plastic and throwaways. Also, the work is very private. It affords the maker many legitimate hours to be alone with his thoughts; weavers such as I do not have the leisure hours available to office workers. Finally, this work expresses a belief in the power of creativity. It reminds us that through art man can soar to great heights.

This narration is told through visual information that is expressed by the forms of the imagery, the placement of these forms, and the structure which creates the forms. Although abstracted, the dynamics of the life process are clearly expressed.



(Left to right) *Wheel of Life: Washer Woman Revelation* Cotton, woven on computer loom. 70" x 118", 1988. *Wheel of Life: Washer Woman Revelation (Detail)* *Wheel of Life: Three Generations* Wool, cotton, rayon. Painted warp, lampas. 61" x 105", 1988. *Wheel of Life: Three Generations (Detail)*.



The Wheel of Life The Wheel of Life is a schematic depiction of the universe—a cosmic view of the rules of life. It takes into account the individual with his unique personality and life experiences, but also places him in the context of all mankind through rules that apply to the human species. Furthermore, the Wheel of Life considers principles that govern the whole earth; ultimately it encompasses the laws of the universe. My work places man in such a cosmological perspective.

Within this larger framework, my study has focused on the process of learning and the transmission of knowledge from one person to another. Joseph Campbell states that man's knowledge of his own death is what separates him from animals. Out of this awareness of death spring the mythologies and religions that explain life's mysteries and give man the guidelines in which to act. Campbell also states that along with the awareness of our personal death comes the awareness that we are part of a society that has existed before us and will continue to exist after we die. It is through an identification with society that man can transcend death. In other words, the knowledge that one attains and then teaches to another is the key to immortality.

At Cranbrook I have concentrated on the problem of bringing my life experiences and beliefs together with my work at the loom. Sifting through layers of ideas, I had to identify the ones I wanted to translate into a visual language appropriate to cloth. The image of the Wheel of Life became a centering device for me. Here was a diagram that became a metaphor for every possibility in the universe. It was a motif that allowed for the general as well as the specific.

I found that while I was putting my intentions into the

cloth, the work began to teach me about other layers of meaning that it held. This process of exchange continued all through the making of the fabric, and new levels of understanding continue to be revealed. I have enjoyed them because, when they are finished, the weavings are greater than I am.

The Wheel of Life: Washer Woman Revelation Just as the Buddhist Wheel of Life depicts the individual as well as mankind, this weaving depicts a specific incident as well as the general life cycle of man.

The old washer woman appears. Clothes on her head, she approaches the river. She kneels and performs a ritual that must be as old as humanity, the washing of clothes. The scene is serene. In the next panel another washer woman and her son arrive. They carry bundles of clothes and have a radio blasting. They represent the new order of life, the Pepsi generation. Now the scene is agitated and noisy. In the last panel we see the observer kneeling at the feet of the first woman. The old woman, with the wisdom of the aged, assures her that the new always replaces the old. The cosmos is great, it can absorb these changes, there is room for all. Now the second woman and her son are shown at peace with their surroundings. They have become part of the whole rather than dominating the situation.

The Wheel of Life: Three Generations This whole weaving gives the illusion of a stage. One feels the curtains on the sides, the actors in the center, the stage on which they are performing. The ogival pattern in the background becomes scenery and then shifts and becomes an audience. Are you standing behind stage and seeing the audience through the play or are you sitting in the orchestra? (Turn to Page 35)

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The shift in possibilities enlivens the performance. The changing coloring of the pattern also emphasizes the title of the weaving. An historical pattern familiar to many generations is taken through three possible treatments. It reflects the changes of style and taste that occur with each new generation.

The Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge In this work, I also tried to have all the aspects of the piece contribute to an understanding of the meaning. The format, weaving techniques, imagery and materials all address the wheel of life.

Six panels are arranged to form a semi-circle. This structure becomes a descriptive element that emphasized the circle. There are images woven on both the front and back of each section. Animals and animal markings intersperse with a narration in the interior and with pictorial symbols on the outside. Viewers often approach the piece and begin circling. They pause, move, pause, move until they come to their starting point, and then they usually repeat the journey. Physically making the viewer go through these steps subtly underlines the theme of the endless wheel of life.

The weavings discussed here deal with a way to organize our lives. Every man lives out his particular destiny, but if he remembers that he is also part of a species, also part of a world community, then the widening of consciousness can begin. The chance for the future can only lie in a global consciousness where men acknowledge their commonality.

Dye Information For the warp painting I dressed my loom with the warp exactly as if I were going to weave the final cloth. At the beginning and the end of the cloth I wove a dense fabric, but for the rest of the warp I wove a fabric with only one weft every inch. Then I cut the cloth from the loom.

I stretched the warp on a print table, attaching bars at each end so the cloth could be kept under tension. Then I painted the warp with procion dye and soda ash, cold batched it, and repeated the process until I had the colors I wanted. Then the cloth was washed and dried to remove all excess dye and chemicals.

I returned to the loom, sewed the cloth to the back beam and wound it back onto the beam. I had to cut away the first dense cloth and undo some of the loose weft so I could rethread the warp through heddles and reed. The cloth was tensioned and I could weave it at the proper density of weft. As I wove, I had to go to the back beam and remove the initial weft. This method produces very little shifting in imagery.

"Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge" involved two different dye processes. For the backing weft I painted the wefts in the same manner used to create a guide thread for weft ikat. That is, I cut stencils of the images I wanted, stretched the weft between a tensioning device to the exact width needed for the weaving, and stencilled on the image with Eurotex pigment. This pigment needs only to air cure to be permanent. The most important step was to mark the weft while on the tensioner at the ends where it turned, as it would in the cloth at the selvedge. These were the marks I followed to lay in the weft and have the image line up.

The second dye method used in this weaving was the braiding of the warps. In some areas I braided black yarn and discharged the color. In other sections I braided white yarn and dyed it, then unbraided, rebraided, and dyed it again. This braiding technique gives a mock ikat look to the yarn.

Bhakti Ziek received her Master of Fine Arts degree in Fiber from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1989. She is Assistant Professor of Woven Design at Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science.

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Lenore Davis *ArtWork for Health: Teeth & Gums.*
Cotton, textile paint. 18" x 18", 1990.

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