

Bhakti Ziek

Universal Knowledge

Using cloth as a form of narrative, artist Bhakti Ziek weaves a complex layering of images and metaphors into her Wheel of Life series.

by Gerry Craig

In the midst of our fin-de-millennium environment, where information is chopped into micro-second fragments and whipped into a frenzy of images, Bhakti Ziek creates weavings more in keeping with a 16th-century monk's attention span. Her weavings utilize state-of-the-art technology in the form of a computerized loom, yet the values she brings to her work are not typically embraced by a post-modern society.

Bhakti Ziek chooses to investigate the significance of cloth in ancient societies and draw insight from those images, rather than use the media or even painting as a reference. Says the artist, "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."

Immersing herself in a process which is so exceedingly time-consuming, she challenges the idea of whether time really can be money. Her flagrant disregard for this axiom, that time is money, places value on the process of weaving rather than the commodifiable worth the work has achieved. Most importantly, these weavings formulate perceptions about the necessity of passing on knowledge from one generation to the next. Using a computer, the tool which has greatly contributed to the world shift into hyper-speed information bytes, she affirms value in a process which must be taught one thread at a time.

The Wheel of Life series of weavings began with the motif of the Buddhist Wheel of Life diagram, which places the individual within a cosmological perspective. It allows for the specificity of the individual while encompassing the general rules which guide the human specie within the universe. To embrace this philosophy one must accept the absolutes it lays out for the believer. But whether one believes it is possible for there to be unchanging laws of the universe, the diagram is open-ended enough for Ziek to choose it as a metaphor for every possibility in the universe.

The Wheel of Life: Washer Woman Revelation is the first of this series of weavings. The division of the weaving into three horizontal bands is a conscious attempt to have several narratives going at once. The lower band describes an individual story, the

upper band a completely abstracted view of the rise and fall of nature, and the large center section is an abstract view of the life cycle of man. The multiplicity of images is akin to the simultaneous events which are occurring at any given point in an individual's life.

In the center section, the pregnant form on the left portends inevitable death, while the crawling figure moving out of the field of vision seems to describe life changes which are so rapid they almost disappear before one is able to assimilate them. The middle panel appears to have an angry housewife blowing her top, while the child forms and man reading the newspaper are meant to be archetypes.

The third panel is designed to bring us full circle. A bent over old man, the embryo or newborn, and the quintessential symbol for death, the skeleton, are contrary in their forms to what they are a symbol of: is this to provide an intended ambiguity? No macabre image of death, the skeleton is quite animated and full of life as he dances across the field. And is this an embryo with umbilical cord or baby falling on its head with life support tubes?

The abstracted proportions of the figures may allow for multiple interpretations or may make the meaning more difficult to read. The awkwardness of the drawing style accentuates the folksiness of the story line, yet it seems technique and philosophy are most successfully married in the lower right panel where the weave structure assimilates the modern woman and child into a harmonious ground.

The limited somber color range is somewhat problematic. The artist says she was striving for colors evoked by the sound of a cello, yet the lightness of a flute would be welcome in the midst of such weighty issues. Life has tremendous range and even Shakespearean tragedies give us points of comic relief. A sense of release is needed to exemplify that the polarities of birth and death, tragedy and comedy, cello and flute are most fully realized when they are juxtaposed with their opposite.

The Wheel of Life: Three Generations is the second in the series. The work is divided into three bands again, with the top band illustrating modes of transportation and technology, the bottom band the life cycle of a man, and this time the story of an individual is



Right
Detail from Wheel of Life: Three Generations.

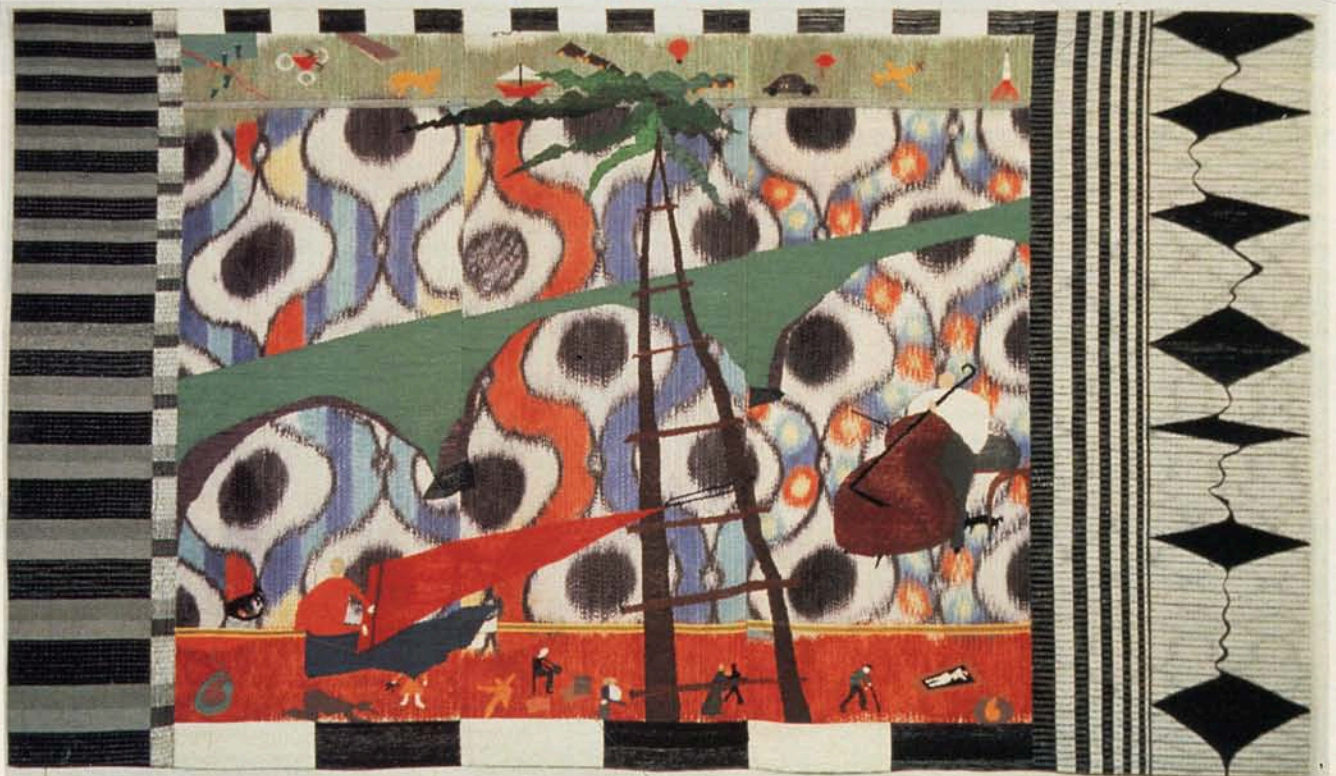
Below
Wheel of Life: Three Generations, 1988; cotton, rayon, wool, metallic thread, dye painted warp, lampas weave with weft brocade; 105 by 61 inches. All photos: courtesy the artist.

told front and center (no doubt the way most humans see their lives amplified on a stage of their own making).

The black and white borders seem more easily readable, with the right-hand border the most succinctly told part of the work. The image looks like a computer-generated graphic and implies a much more rigid geometry and sequential motion akin to present day perceptions of "real time." The use of the computer loom to create these signifiers for "real time," with the image rising up out of the process of weaving, seems to be a very poetic possibility.

The Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge is the third weaving and most daunting in ambition. Six panels form a semi-circle which is meant to be viewed front and back. On the interior is a tale about cloth in cloth. The knowledge of silk production was stolen from China by monks to bring back to the Western world. (Those who know the history of sericulture will possibly be able to read this narrative.) The passing on of knowledge is generally seen as a gratuitous act, yet here we have a purposeful conflict between good and evil. Moral dilemma is often an element in myth, and here it seems appropriate to allow the viewer multiple interpretations of the symbols.

Ziek has chosen technique very aptly in these panels to convey the message of the work. The weft painted shadowy animals on the panels between the narrative "represent





mysterious unconscious aspects of man." Beautiful and elusive, they seem to convey that nebulous space in the human psyche which still responds instinctually and remembers its evolution. They indicate knowledge which is passed on in the genetic code.

Another innovation in technique is the outline effect she has created on the back of the weaving from images woven on the front. This sketch of the image is akin to the residual consequences of knowledge lost. For example, the technology of embalming Egyptian mummies is lost to us yet has continued to affect the imagination of humans for centuries.

Bhakti Ziek's work has the greatest intellectual excitement and integrity when it refers to its own technology. Loom technology has not progressed through the ages at a speed incom-

prehensible to man. In fact, the process has changed very little. The use of weaving to describe a narrative is an ancient practice, but it has generally been narration in a storybook sense.

The artist has devised an interesting twist by incorporating the Age of Information computer-generated images with humanistic maxims. In a time when political power is exerted by control of information channels, she offers a chance to pause and question what has inherent worth in the barrage of nanosecond blips cluttering our field of vision daily.

Gerry Craig is a 1989 graduate of the Cranbrook Fiber Department and currently is the director of the Detroit Artists Market.

Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge, 1989; cotton, silk, rayon, metallic thread, textile pigment, dye braided dye warp, braided discharged warp, painted weft lampas weave with weft brocade. (Each panel is two-sided; it is not two cloths sewn together, but the two different sides/images are woven at the same time on the loom.) 100 by 44 by 80 inches.

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NOV/DEC, 1990

ISSN NO. 0164-324X



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(Photo: Siegfried Halus.)

Below: Helga Berry's tapestry, Merrill Pass Encounter, shown at the ITNET Exhibition this year. See the review on page 54.
(Photo: Chris Arend.)

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