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DEVELOPMENT OF A PERSONAL AND NON-PICTORIAL STYLE IN CONTEMPORARY TAPESTRY

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When many people hear the word Tapestry, the image that comes to mind are monumental weavings produced by workshops by many weavers, from designs created by non-weavers. However, the contemporary tapestry movement embraces tapestries that are designed and woven by the same artist. This direction often means the works are no longer monumental in size.

In the late 1970's, as I was finding my way as a weaver, the Houston/New York gallery owner Warren Hadler pointed out to me, the loom operates on a manmade grid; why force it to represent curves? This was the spark I'd been looking for, and away with it I went. No more flowers, faces or folderols for me. In addition, admittedly, much of the push in this direction came from art school training that had strong Bauhaus roots in the teachings of Joseph Albers and Johannes Itten.

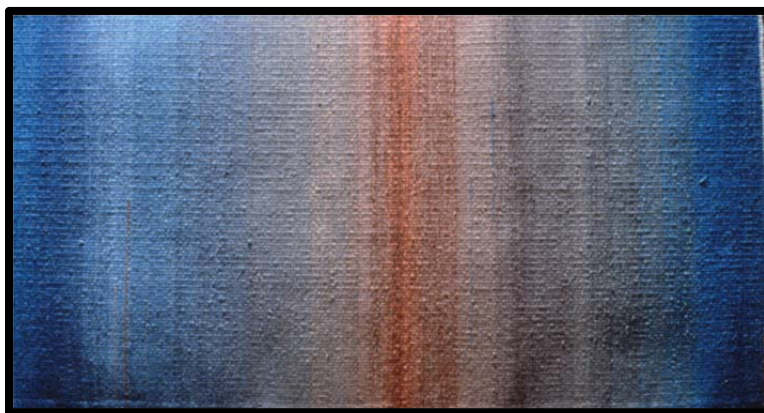


Figure 1. Bavarian Desert Sunset, 1984, hand dyed wool rug, twill based weave, 26" x 48"

Diane Itter was a mentor to many and who encouraged me to look at the use of stripes in Andean textiles. This led to many explorations of this format, with color and some loom controlled pattern included. For many years I wove rugs (Fig.1 & 2), exploring the pattern and color possibilities, especially augmented by a strong interest in obtaining colors by mixing my own dyes, for each project, as the starting point.

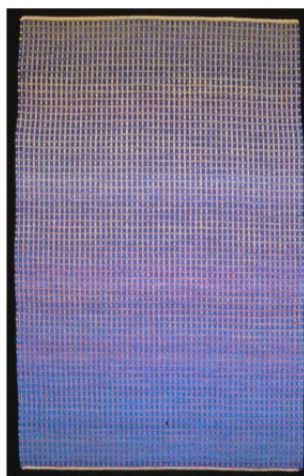


Figure 2. Electric Blue Grid, 1986, hand dyed wool rug, twill based weave, 66" x 39"

When I felt I needed to break away from stripes and patterns, I opened up to block weaves, still, often making reference to other textiles. First larger scale patterns (Fig. 3), then, looking for ways to break away from selvedge to selvedge color (in blocks), inlay techniques were added (Fig. 4). By the time I was weaving abstracted kimono, in wool, mind you (Fig. 5), it was apparent I was no longer a rug weaver, but should be considering these to be tapestries, especially as they never were used on the floor.

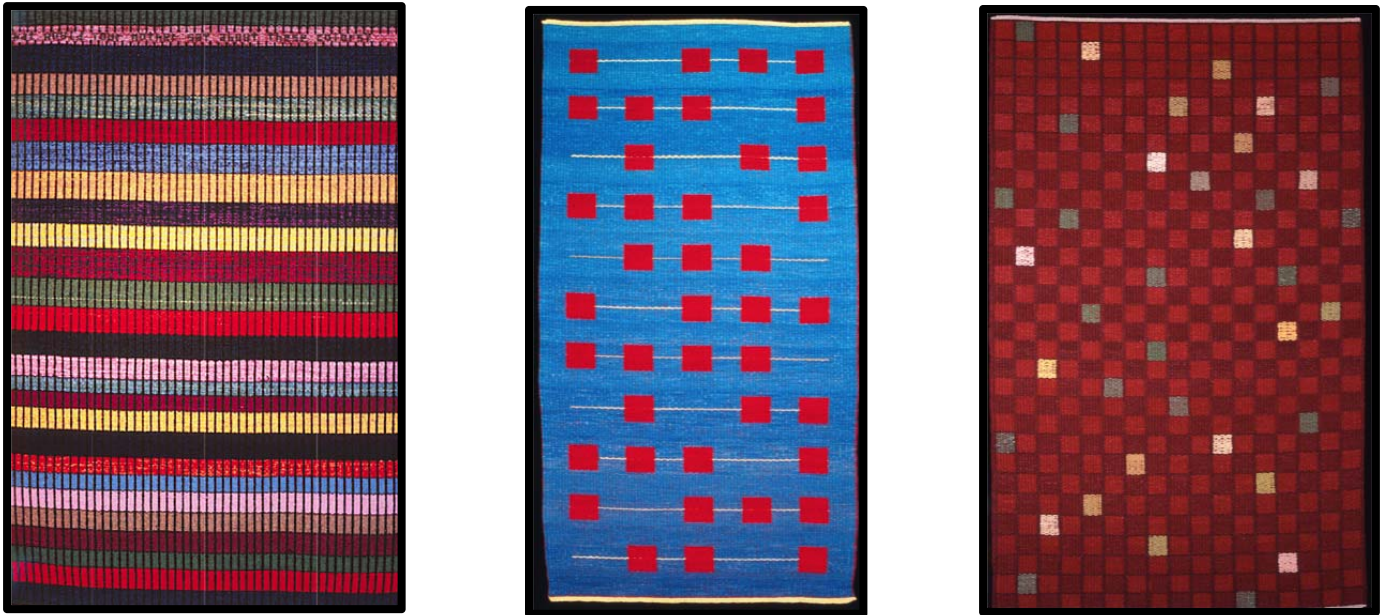


Figure 3, left. *What would Your Mother Say about These Colors*, hand dyed wool rug, twill based weave with discontinuous wefts 57" x 45"

Figure 4, center. *Caribbean Windows*, hand dyed wool rug, block weave with discontinuous wefts 56" x 31" by
Figure 5, right. *Oaxaca Dreams*, 2000. hand dyed wool rug, block weave with discontinuous weft inlay, 58" x 37"

A complete break from rug weave structures can with the invitation in 2003, to send work to the International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz Poland. While considering the work I wanted to send, I had the chance to hear a reading of a poem by June Jordan, "The Bombing of Bagdad, with these very powerful lines: "...the enemy traveled from my house to blast your homeland into pieces of children and pieces of sand...". These lines over ten years earlier, were sadly prophetic for the impending second Gulf War. I needed to make a tapestry that reflected this tragedy (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. left to right: *Summer/Kyoto*, *Winter/Lake Biwa*, *Spring/Ginza*, *Fall/Nara*, 2001, each hand dyed wool, block woven with discontinuous weft inlay, each ca. 59" x 48"



Figure 7. *Left*, Houses for Nomads 2007, installation photos and exhibition announcement by Michael F. Rohde
Right, From My House to Your Homeland, 2003, tapestry, hand dyed wool and silk, 54" x 98", seven pieces.

Also, whereas design had always come first, now the idea or concept often preceded the design process. This shift had a tremendous effect on my own creative process, and I would like to think strengthened the tapestries themselves. From here on, my tapestries were still governed by the grid of the loom, but often influenced by politics and travel with concerns about displaced nomads in Tibet (Fig. 7) and loss of their culture (Fig. 8), failed political leaders (Fig. 9), stresses of overpopulation and uncontrolled growth (Fig. 10), loss of habitat (Fig. 11), global water issues (Fig. 12), the US health care debate (Fig. 13), and even a hope for domestic political concord (Fig. 14). Still, while I recall better times, I maintain hope they will return (Fig. 15).

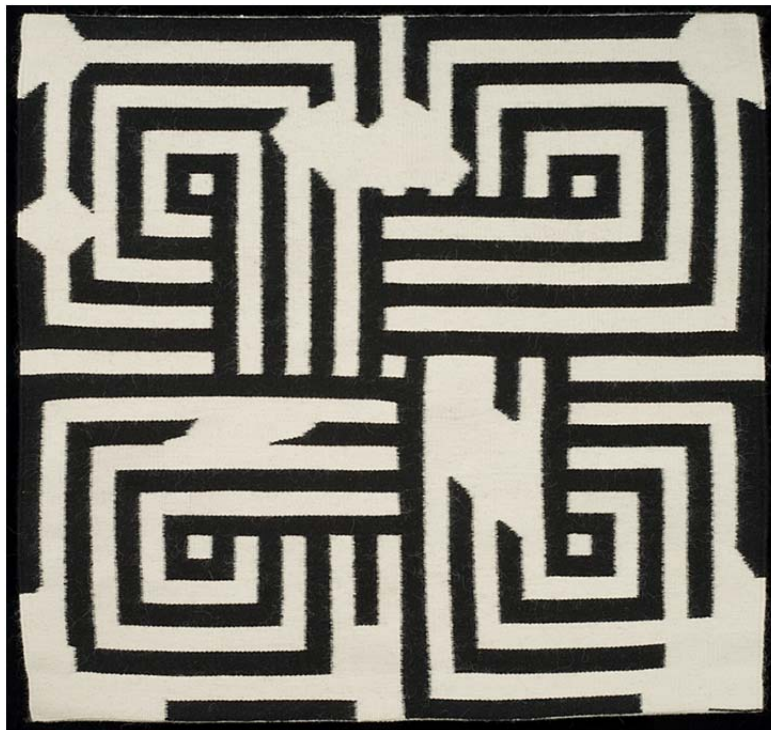


Figure 8. Erosion 2008, tapestry with hand dyed wool, 36" x 38"

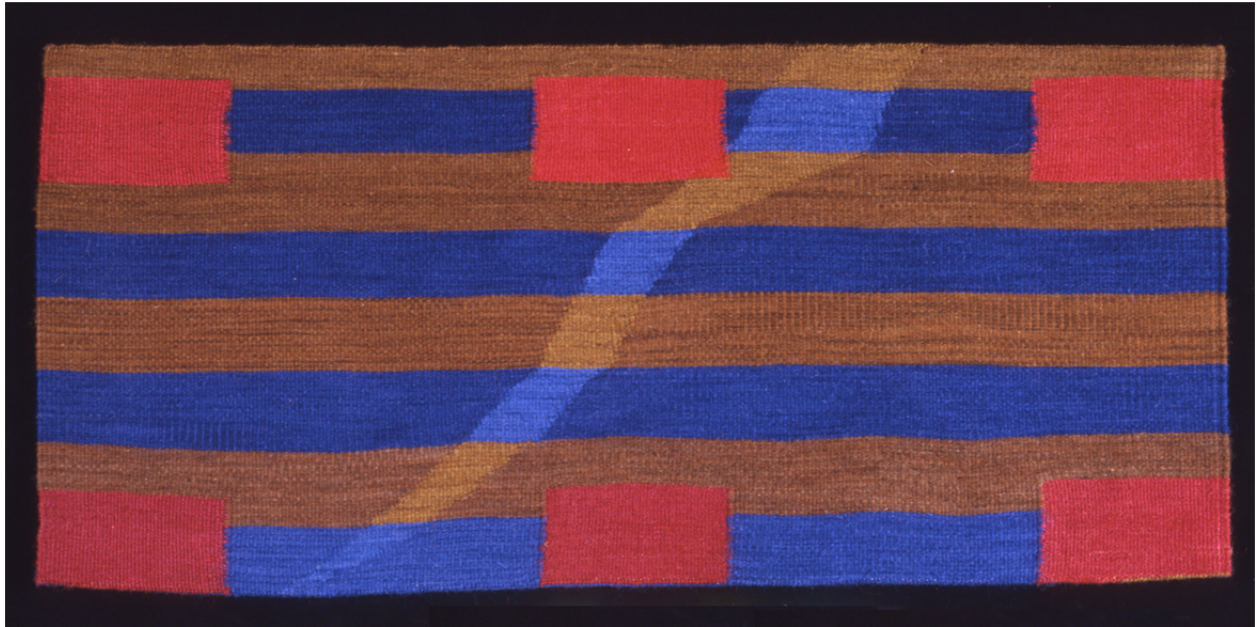


Figure 9. Failed Chief 2005, tapestry with hand dyed wool and silk, 16" x 36"



Figure 10. Sustainability, 2007, tapestry with wool, silk, alpaca, mohair, camel indigo, madder, catch, weld, 66" x 39"



Figure 11. No Terra Incognita 2008, tapestry with wool, silk, alpaca, mohair, camel indigo, madder, catch, weld, 66" x 39"



Figure 12. Water, 2009, tapestry with hand dyed wool and silk, 35" x 48"



Figure 13. Transect, 2009, tapestry, wool, silk, indigo and walnut dyes 75" x 48"

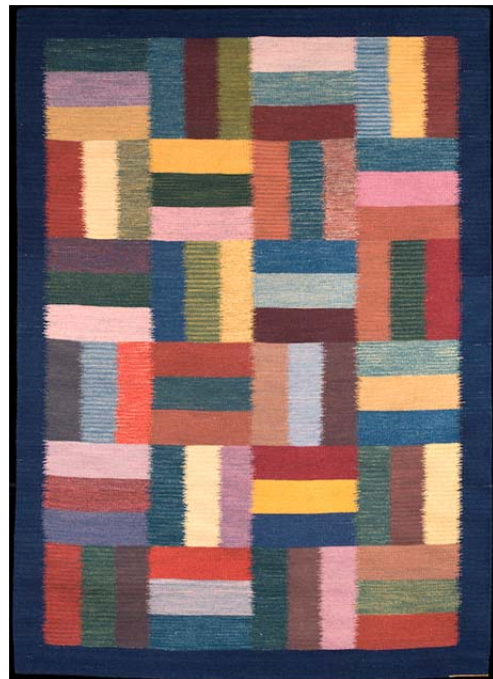


Figure 14. Unity, tapestry in wool, silk, natural dyes, 68" x 48"

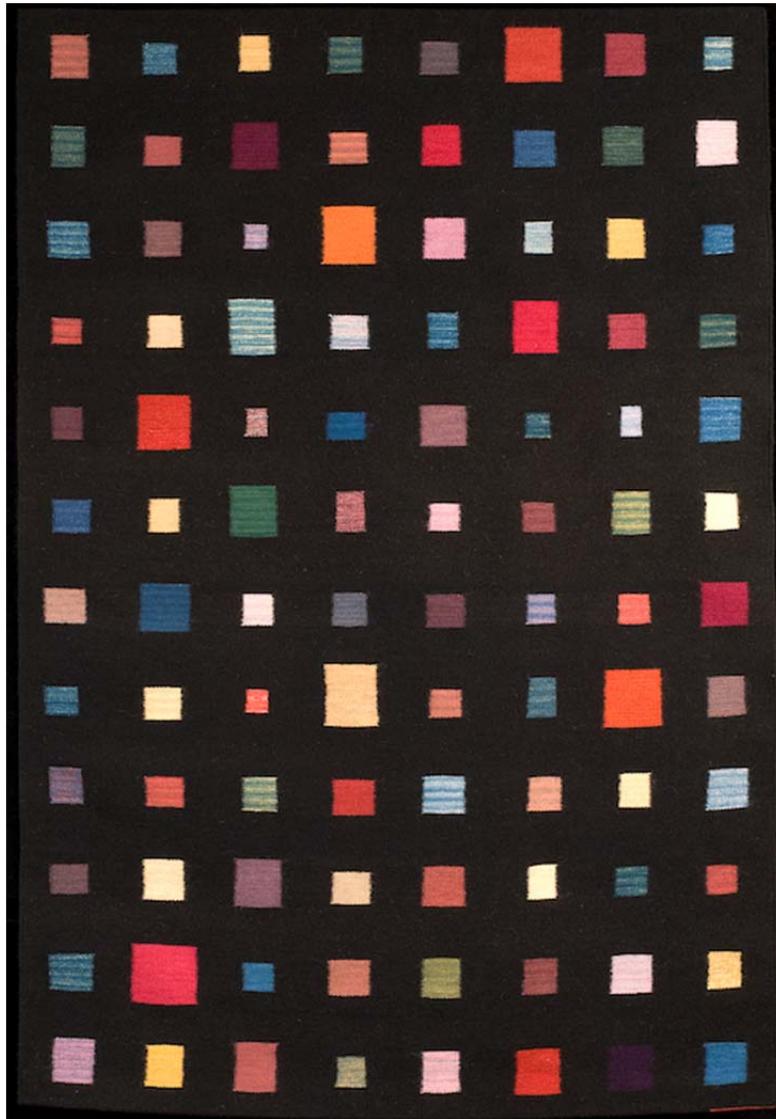


Figure 15. Recollection, tapestry in wool, silk, natural dyes, 70" x 47"

All tapestries pictured in this paper are by Michael F. Rohde