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WOVEN IMAGES: ALL TECHNIQUES CONSIDERED AS EIGHT FIBER ARTISTS**SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS**

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Weavers through the ages have used labor-intensive ways to create images in fibers, with techniques and equipment ranging from brocades, drawlooms, pick-up weaves, tapestry, and more. With the invention of the jacquard loom at the beginning of the 19th century, the kind of complex image making that was previously only common in laborious hand controlled methods became mechanized. With many alternatives now on hand for making images with weaving some fiber artists move to “high tech” means for their creative expression while others continue to select traditional methods like handwoven, weft-faced tapestry.

Curiosity about not only the weaving method and technology selected by an individual, but also the more fundamental question of why one chooses to make images was the beginning point of this investigation. In an attempt to explore further, questions about choices of means for image making in fiber and the role of technology for artistic expression were presented to eight fiber artists: Susan Iverson, Bethanne Knudson, Sigrid Piroch, Kaija Rautiainen, Jennifer Sargent, Alice Schlein, Christine Spangler, and Bhakti Ziek.¹ Following are selected answers to questions asked of each of the artists.

Susan Iverson is a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. Her work is exhibited widely and is in a number of collections including the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Susan Iverson. Left: “Dream Landscape”, handwoven tapestry. Middle: “Sorting Chaos”, Jacquard woven at Oriole Mill. Right: detail of “Sorting Chaos” showing further hand stitching. Photos courtesy of Susan Iverson.

When asked why she makes images, she replied that she has “...a very strong desire to visually communicate how I see the world to other people.... the images basically clamor to be brought to life....” She goes on to say, “I became interested in tapestry when I realized its potential for physicality.... it can be so dense - so strong - so object like.”

Iverson is most widely known for her tapestry work, in which images are based on personal symbolism

¹ Equipment for weaving used by these individuals includes the Thread Controller Loom (TC-1) developed by Vibeke Vestby and Digital Weaving Norway; AVL dobby looms; and industrial weaving machines with Jacquard heads, specifically those at Oriole Mill in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

and memory of experiences, and which are somewhat abstracted in design. In recent years, she has studied Jacquard designing at The Jacquard Center and has had several pieces woven at Oriole Mill, Hendersonville, North Carolina. About that experience and the work created at there she says “I have always been interested in photography ... I use the camera as a compositional tool. I saw jacquard weaving as a means to use photo-based images in my work. I have absolutely no interest in using photo based images in my tapestries.” About the fabrics made at the mill she says: “...when it is woven I look at it as a surface on which to add more - I have been embroidering and this adds a physicality that might otherwise be lacking.”

When asked to compare her hand woven tapestries and the Jacquard woven pieces Iverson says: “My tapestries and my jacquard fabrics are visually very different ... they really serve very different purposes to me.... I am so comfortable with tapestry - my ideas flow easily and quickly - the image and the technique always in close communication with each other. The images for the jacquards are much more literal....”

Bethanne Knudson is Design Director at The Oriole Mill and President of The Jacquard Center, Hendersonville, North Carolina. She has participated in numerous symposia and conferences about Jacquard and digital textiles over the past decade. Her artwork has been included in exhibits throughout the United States. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Bethanne Knudson. Left, “Dissention”, handwoven ikat with inlaid areas. Right: “Let Go” Jacquard woven at Oriole Mill. Photos courtesy of Bethanne Knudson.

About her desire for image making, Knudson says, “I have always loved to draw and to build. It is a process that satisfies me in a way that nothing else does. It is communication, it is reflection....”

Why weaving for image making? “The integration of image with the fabric structure ...” is important to Knudson. “To build the image simultaneously to building the physical structure, such that the two are inseparable is a challenge. It uses the analytical and visual, systematic and responsive skills involved in the creative process.”

Knudson has worked with Jacquard since the mid 1990s being involved with: “...training and technical support for software used by the industry to design Jacquard woven textiles. Since my hand woven work had been image based, there was a natural affinity to individually controlled threads. I no longer had time to weave two hours to the inch on my hand loom. Having access to the industrial looms gave me the only possible weaving outlet for years.” For her current work she has access to five industrial Jacquard weaving machines at Oriole Mill.

About the work she executes with the Jacquard Knudson says: “In some cases I weave only one [piece], in other cases I may weave a short, limited edition. Change of scale, speed of execution, level of control, editions and iterations are expedited by the computer and by the electronically controlled weaving machine.”

When asked about what differences she sees with use of digital and Jacquard means as compared to her hand loom work, she says: “I think the concepts and imagery [I use] have the same source, they are rooted in the subconscious. How I use the woven structure to build the image has changed.”

Sigrud Piroch is founding director of *ARTS STUDIO* in Foxburg, Pennsylvania where she works as a textile artist, researcher and publisher. She has taught widely throughout the US and other countries and her publications include *The Magic of Handweaving—the Basics and Beyond*, 2005. For much of her work she uses a TC-1 loom. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Sigrud Piroch. Left: Piroch standing with “A-Maze-Ing I”. Middle: “A-Maze-Ing I” (detail). Left: “Save the Swordfish” (detail). All woven with TC-1 hand jacquard loom. Left photo by Tommye Scanlin. Middle and right photos courtesy of Sigrud Piroch.

Piroch says that her family was a great influence for her choice of image making: her mother was a visual artist and her father, an orchestra/opera conductor. They and their artist/musician friends “... had immense influence ... each having a unique imprint upon my future work.”

When asked about hand controlled image making methods in weaving she has used before and the current work with the thread controller loom, Piroch replied: “Although I have woven many tapestries over the years ... the shuttle is faster.... The Jacquard is able to integrate various complex structures throughout a work and so is not limited to simple structures (such as the traditional plain weave for tapestry).”

She appreciates the hand Jacquard because, as she notes, “I can weave essentially anything from satins/damasks to multi-layers, for art works and high fashion fabrics. ... Not until the TC-1 was developed could I fully engage each and every heddle independently [in her own studio]...in any yarn type, color, structure to produce any detailed image my imagination generates.”

Piroch works with a wide variety of imagery and end uses for her woven fabrics. “Because of the versatility of the mechanics, the types of designs I create for Jacquard [may be] of a completely different nature—from photographic images to fashion fabrics to reproducing art in its many forms. I am able to weave some of my mother’s many hundreds of varied art works now and have recently woven audio tapes of my father’s concerts into my weavings.”

Kaija Rautiainen studied fiber arts in her native Finland and currently lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. She moved from traditional handwoven tapestry technique to computer-aided weaving to realize her

interest in creating works that marry image and weave structure. She has exhibited her work internationally. (Fig. 4)

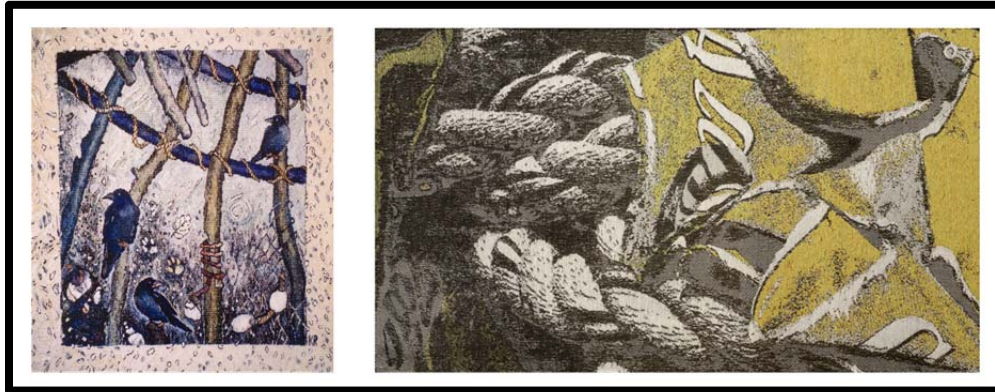


Figure 4. Kaija Rautiainen. Left: “Sense of Earth”, handwoven tapestry. Right, “Passage to Nowhere”, woven with TC-1 hand jacquard loom. Photos courtesy of Kaija Rautiainen.

Rautiainen says: “My work has always been image based. My way of expressing ideas, emotions My great idol Dora Jung, who wove pictorial tapestries on her altered draw loom [was an influence].” When asked about the importance of weave structure to her work she says: “I started as a cloth weaver. Interlacing of warp and weft [are] important to me.” About the designing process for her work, she notes: “The freedom and challenge with Photoshop [have appeal]. I love weaving the image and seeing it emerging little by little.”

Comparing her traditional technique handwoven tapestries with the current work she says that now there is: “Less color, less texture. I have to think of the image in a new way, what works in this medium. My imagery has changed away from texture and color that were my strength in traditional tapestry.”

Rautiainen notes that the images in her work are evolving: “I’m slowly replacing images of nature with images of people...and...animals. I’m currently working on a body of work dealing with people in urban landscape.”



Figure 5. Jennifer Sargent. Left: “Bouree” (detail) handwoven tapestry and painted warp; painted silk background. Right: “Tide Pool” jacquard woven (detail portion shows dense hand stitching applied to the fabric after weaving). Photos courtesy of Jennifer Sargent.

Jennifer Sargent is an Associate Professor at Memphis College of Art. Her work has been exhibited nationally and has been published in *Fiberarts Design Book Seven* and other textile periodicals. (Fig. 5)

Sargent says that she began to search for a medium with which to express herself, artistically, when she worked as a commercial textile designer in New York in the 1980s. At the time she says that she associated fiber with commercial work but, “Then I took a one week tapestry course at the Scheuer Tapestry Studio and immediately fell in love with it. Two weeks later I became an apprentice there and have been developing as an artist ever since.”

About her choices of fiber techniques as her artistic medium she says: “I always start with drawing or sketching to help me think....It seems for me that all techniques become absorbed into fiber in one way or another even if that is not immediately evident in the work.”

Of her Jacquard experiences she says: “I have put my toe in the water. It was mostly curiosity – seeing what other artists were doing with [Jacquard] tapestry - and also [having] the opportunity to take a course at the Oriole Mill in Hendersonville, NC.... Always with the handlooms, structure / texture is an integral part of the imagery. The small amount I have done [with Jacquard at Oriole Mill] has been a somewhat tentative exploration into possibilities. I find the texture is still important to me and I am drawn to the finer woven structure. The speed of weaving at a mill is amazing but can be just as fast producing something good as something bad....”

Sargent’s creative process remains much the same with both her more traditional handwoven tapestry and the works she has had woven by Jacquard weaving machines at Oriole Mill. She says: “...concepts [for my work have not] changed [with the Jacquard experience although] imagery is different.... I still can’t leave the woven fabric as it is ... however I produce the fabric, I will dye, print, embroider, manipulate, until it speaks to me and I am satisfied.”

Alice Schlein has her home and studio in Greenville, South Carolina. Schlein has taught at many conferences and workshops, including Convergences and Complex Weavers seminars. She is co-author of *The Woven Pixel: Designing for Jacquard and Dobby Looms using Photoshop®* (with Bhakti Ziek), 2006 and author of *The Liftpan Connection*, 2010. (Fig. 6)



Figure 6. Alice Schlein—left, view of Schlein’s studio. Her TC-1 loom is in the foreground, her AVL is behind, near the door. Middle: “Casual Friday” woven on TC-1 hand jacquard loom. Right: “Ghost Chairs” woven on the TC-1 hand jacquard loom. Left photo by Tommye Scanlin; Middle and right photos courtesy of Alice Schlein.

Schlein says: “Image-making is just as important to me as writing; both are self-expression and my way of communicating with the world.... I grew up in a fiber-conscious environment... and it was a ‘language’ I learned as a matter of course.”

When describing her development as a fiber artist, Schlein notes: “I wove on shaft looms and doobby looms since beginning to weave 45 years ago, and was drawn to the Jacquard loom in 2000 because I was

intrigued by the technology. The idea of translating digital graphic imagery to fabric has always interested me; I've dabbled with ... [many techniques through the years including] pick-up doubleweave, but having a tool that speeded up the process was irresistible."

Schlein uses both a dobby loom and also a TC-1 for her weaving. She designs the weave structures she uses and she says: "The weave structures are the jacquard weaver's palette, and I believe a thorough understanding of weave structure is a very important part of the design process for jacquard weavers."

"I love designing the imagery via digital photography, drawing, and manipulation in Photoshop, but the part of the process that appeals to me most is figuring out what structures will achieve the effect I desire, and putting these structures into a form that the loom will recognize."

When asked what might be different in her designing process now that she uses "high tech" weaving means, Schlein says: "I do more pictorial and illustrative work now that I have this jacquard technology; the dobby weaving I continue to do remains abstract and geometric in nature.... Acquiring a jacquard loom has stimulated me to more writing and teaching; writing about weave structure is something I enjoy more and more these days."

Christine Spangler began weaving over three decades ago in Oslo, Norway; she now lives in the Washington, D.C. area. Spangler has written many articles for weaving publications and translated the classic handwoven tapestry book, *Norwegian Tapestry Weaving* by Maria Koppen from Norwegian to English. She uses a TC-1 loom. (Fig. 7)



Figure 7. Christine Spangler. Left, "Grandmother's Coverlet", woven with TC-1 loom. Right: Silk scarves (detail), woven with TC-1 hand jacquard loom. Photos courtesy of Christine Spangler.

About her reasons for image making and her use of weaving means for that, Spangler says: "Art is communication.... Images are freighted with cultural and anthropological significance. Imagery is a way to tell a story. We all have stories and yearn to tell them. I came to fiber because of my attraction to color and need to create objects.... [I] want to tell stories and make textiles. So I keep weaving."

Spangler states: "Woven textiles have a layer of fascinating technology attached to them. The weave structures are complicated and extremely diverse. There is intellectual challenge in trying to find the perfect structure and materials to express an image and an idea. I came to use the thread controller loom after many years of shaft weaving and dobby designing. I was always trying to push the envelope to

create imagery with dobby looms.... So when I had the chance to acquire the thread controller loom, I jumped at it. Traditional tapestry in plain weave with discontinuous wefts is something I have dabbled with ... but never become seriously involved in. The jacquard/ thread controller allows me to marry love of image making with a large structural knowledge base.”

Christine Spangler says she enjoys the challenges involved with using complex technology and weaves: “The designing takes longer than the weaving. That process is full of decisions that are fun to make. I also do my own dyeing and often paint the warp with dye.” However, she notes: “The freedom the technology gives is a two-edged sword. While I have fewer limitations, I now have more freedom to make more artistic and compositional blunders. Designing has become more challenging. The decision tree is so much larger.”

Bhakti Ziek, who lives in Randolph, Vermont, has a long career as both an artist and teacher. She has extensive experience with many weaving techniques, including intricate hand controlled methods as well as being among the first generation of fiber artists to be involved with new technologies. She now uses a TC-1 for most of her work. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8. Bhakti Ziek. Left: “Chaos and Order, #3”, natural dyes on warp, handwoven, lampas pick-up weave. Right: “Intertwined”, woven with TC-1 hand jacquard loom. Photos courtesy of Bhakti Ziek.

About image making in fiber, Ziek says: “I have worked back and forth between abstract work and identifiable images-- sometimes simultaneously [sometimes] incorporating the two modes in one work.... I am drawn to narrative storytelling....”

When speaking about her evolution from hand manipulated woven methods to hand jacquard, she says: “It has been a progression of learning for me, not something planned or headed for.... I was very happy doing tapestry, then I learned brocade on a warp-faced fabric, and eventually I began to understand shafts and their possibilities, and I started to explore weave structures that showed both the warp and the weft.... I was lucky in getting a job at an industrial college that purchased electronic jacquards early in my tenure there. I already felt comfortable with computers, so the marriage of computers and weaving to create narratives was a good evolution for my work. I especially like working on the hand jacquard because anything I can do on a floor loom (like paint warps, or brocade, or use fine threads and thick threads in one weaving) I can do here, plus I get to play with weave structure and imagery with no boundaries.”

By using digital and hand jacquard technology Ziek says that she is more readily able to use text in her work: “I have always doodled words or letters, not understanding they were visual elements in themselves, but once I grasped that concept, I have not stopped using text in my work. I think it is an essential element for me right now, and I probably could not use as much of it as I do if I didn't have a hand jacquard.”

When asked where the digital means may take her work in the future Ziek says: “I have an aspiration to make some work that is as inspiring to others as [early] textiles are to me. [Once] weaving was understood to be the supreme art form.... Our times are so different.... I know the sublime quality of those past weavings, and I would like to hold myself accountable to at least try and make work that is seen in their lineage. It means paying attention to yarn, and color, and structure, and making imagery that is appropriate to the scale of these materials--and it means allowing a bit of magic to enter my studio.”

In conclusion, this inquiry began as an attempt to explore whether there was a common ground from which to view the seemingly divergent worlds of traditional hand woven image-bearing fabrics (for instance, handwoven tapestry) and the ever-expanding digital and computer aided ways for designing and creating woven images. Asking questions of those who are familiar with both approaches seemed a way forward. The eight fiber artists interviewed indicated that each has chosen to weave images as a result of a desire for engagement with process as well as image, and from intellectual and artistic curiosity. While the freedom offered through technology seems limitless, the fiber artist continues to strive for the best way to approach the medium.

Bhakti Ziek has said: “I am always questioning, what is the appropriate language for a textile and, what is the appropriate loom for that expression?”² The thoughts shared by these individuals seem to indicate that each also feels as Ziek does. After all, there really is no better question to ask about the why and how of image creation in any medium. The answer is that one must learn the language spoken by the tool and how best to say something with it.

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² artist statement, Bhakti Ziek, “Banishing Boundaries: Weaving Digitally”, Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005 <http://www.tronrud.no/uploads/tx_pdforder/Catalogue.pdf>.