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Deliberate Entanglements: The Impact of a Visionary Exhibition
Emily Zaiden



Figure 1. Deliberate Entanglements exhibition announcement designed by Timothy Andersen, UCLA Art Galleries, 1971. Courtesy Craft in America Center Archives.

In the trajectory of fiber art history, the 1971 UCLA Art Galleries exhibition, *Deliberate Entanglements*, was exceptional in that it had an active and direct influence on the artistic movement. It has been cited in numerous sources, by participating artists, and by others who simply visited and attended as having had a lasting impact on their careers. In this day and age, it is rare for exhibitions at institutions to play such a powerful role and have a lasting impact. The exhibition was curated by UCLA art professor and fiber program head, Bernard Kester. From his post at UCLA, Kester fostered fiber as a medium for contemporary art. His contribution and this particular exhibition caused waves across the globe.

The exhibition brought together thirteen artists from across the globe and a total of twenty-three objects. The show was intended to spotlight, as Kester described it:

“The move towards architectural scale; the inventive use of weaving and non-woven techniques to create tall, aspiring forms; work that was deliberate, restrained and sure; works that stood firmly in space; and the structural order and poetic worth of the pieces.”

In a press release for the exhibition, it was stated, “the impetus is the experimentalism of the late 1950s and 1960s in the US. It is attributable to the fact that artists are designer-craftsmen who execute their own work, and intimate involvement with the material brings out the unity of materials, concept and form.”¹

Kester brought the work of Europe’s leading innovators such as Aurelia Munoz, and a strong Eastern European contingent of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Tadek Beutlich, Jagoda Buic, Ritzi and Peter Jacobi

¹ UCLA, Special Collections, Wight Gallery Records Series 665, Box 53

together with Columbia's Olga de Amaral to the West Coast for a groundbreaking moment. In some cases, it was the first time that works by these artists had been shown anywhere in the U.S. In addition, Kester included important work by Kay Sekimachi who lived in Berkeley, California, UCLA graduate Neda Al Hilali who lived in Venice, California and Françoise Grossen, who was in New York but who had studied at UCLA, which helped bring attention to the fertile California fiber scene and the program that he helmed. He filled out the show with pioneering work by Sheila Hicks, Walter Nottingham, Dorian Zachai and Claire Zeisler.



*Figure 2. "Black Cloth," Magdalena Abakanowicz, 1970-71.
"Deliberate Entanglements" exhibition catalog, UCLA Art Galleries, 1971.
Courtesy Craft in America Center Archives.*

The pieces were massive. Among the largest were Olga de Amaral's, *Wall #77*, which was thirteen feet by one foot and Magdalena Abakanowicz's, *Orange Abakan* that was thirteen feet by almost twelve feet and three feet deep. The smallest piece in the show was by no means small, Dorian Zachai's stuffed textile *Woman #3*, stood four and a half feet tall by over two feet wide.



*Figure 3. "Procession for a Dead Love," 1969 by Dorian Zachai.
"Deliberate Entanglements" exhibition catalog, UCLA Art Galleries, 1971.
Courtesy Craft in America Center Archives.*

The show debuted at UCLA in November of 1971 and was on view for a month before it began touring for the following year to four venues, the Portland Art Museum, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor through September of 1972.² Kester, an exceptionally gifted exhibition designer as well as curator, traveled to each venue to install the show at the other locations.

This was a particularly fertile moment for innovation in the medium. The environment was open to avant-garde ideas that generated new approaches, as evidenced by the large, unorthodox work featured at the Lausanne biennials starting in the mid-1960s. Few before Kester however, had made the links between the international artists and brought the work to the States for Americans to view on their home soil. Four important American precedents that helped increase awareness of the emerging fiber art movement included; *Woven Forms*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, in New York in 1963, Moma's 1969 *Wall Hangings* exhibition that marked the crossover for fiber art into the mainstream art world, *Objects USA: 1970*, and the *California Design* exhibitions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with which Kester became actively involved, as well.

² UCLA, Special Collections, Wight Gallery Records Series 665, Box 53

The works in the show could stand their own ground. They were the chapter beyond MOMA's *Wall Hangings* exhibition. Here, fiber had moved off the wall, occupying space properly and in three dimensions. These were no long wall flowers. They took over the space.



Figure 4. "Nar" with artist Neda Al Hilali. Courtesy of Neda Al Hilali.

These were architectural experiments. The words used to describe the pieces and their titles were terms such as "environment, structure and column, form, and "free-hanging". By referring to the work as fiber forms in his exhibition statement, Kester called attention to the inherent and unprecedented physical monumentality and independent identity of the works. No other pre-existing description could adequately sum up this revolutionary body of "forms".

Kester proposed the show to Frederick S. Wight, director of the gallery, who saw the significance and was credited with the title. It helped to put the UCLA fiber program and Los Angeles for that matter on the map, to connect the fiber art community, and to assert the importance of fiber in the overall contemporary art scene.

As for Kester's background and involvement with fiber, he entered UCLA as an undergrad in the fall of 1945. He declared art as his major from the very beginning but quickly gravitated towards ceramics, graphic design and textiles and continued on at UCLA as a graduate student in 1950, earning a Masters degree in ceramics. In 1956, he was hired by the art department to teach ceramics with Laura Andresson

who had been his mentor, but serendipitously, when the weaving teacher left, he took on the courses, which then allowed him to build his own program and niche on campus.

Former student and subsequent fiber program chair, James Bassler, remembered Kester's nascent weaving studio and dedication to fostering the field;

“Kester had always been interested in textiles, which they wouldn't even allow in the building, because it takes up space...you can't have a room with looms and teach anything else. So he found space in Royce Hall, in the basement, next to the women's bathroom. And that's where he offered textiles.”³

Kester established his reputation as an authority through professorial and curatorial work. He was active in the American Craft Council leadership and its museum and he became a West Coast and fiber correspondent for the council's journal, *Craft Horizons*. As an instructor, Kester helped artists evolve. Under his guidance, more expressive forms were able to flourish.

For Kester, each piece had to offer something rare or exceptional in terms of the visual and technical. A designer to the core, he taught students the importance of proper installation. They were characterized by finesse and sophistication. Kester was known for using operatic colors on walls instead of creating cool, white galleries that were typical in New York. With Kester, it was always about color.

A year before Jack Lenor Larsen's influential *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric*, 1972 was published, Kester documented the new fiber movement through the exhibition, showcasing the fresh art form and including those who were deemed the first to make tapestry as sculpture: Zachai, Hicks, Zeisler and Sekimachi. One review spoke of the show as revealing, “prehistoric epic emotions, and grand mythical Wagnerian scenery, strange and grand.”⁴ Zachai created figure forms for the show while Hicks worked off loom to wrap thick yarn with vivid threads on a monumental scale for her red and purple *Trapeze de Cristobal*.

Zeisler had discovered that fall was her trademark by this time and her piece was a strong point in the show. In her words, she “was interested...in making a form that was really unique to fiber... I also wanted to see how far I could stretch the fiber and still have it say fiber...I started with all these threads, and the means is also the end.

Kay Sekimachi took her work off the loom and pioneered multi-layered open mesh pieces that were ephemeral. Regarding Kester's deep understanding of the material from both a curatorial and a designer's perspective, she felt “...it was the best installation of my work ever. He gave it a separate room, had it hanging in the center so it turned, lighted so it cast shadows

⁴ *Artweek*, Vol. 3, Num. 25, July 15, 1972

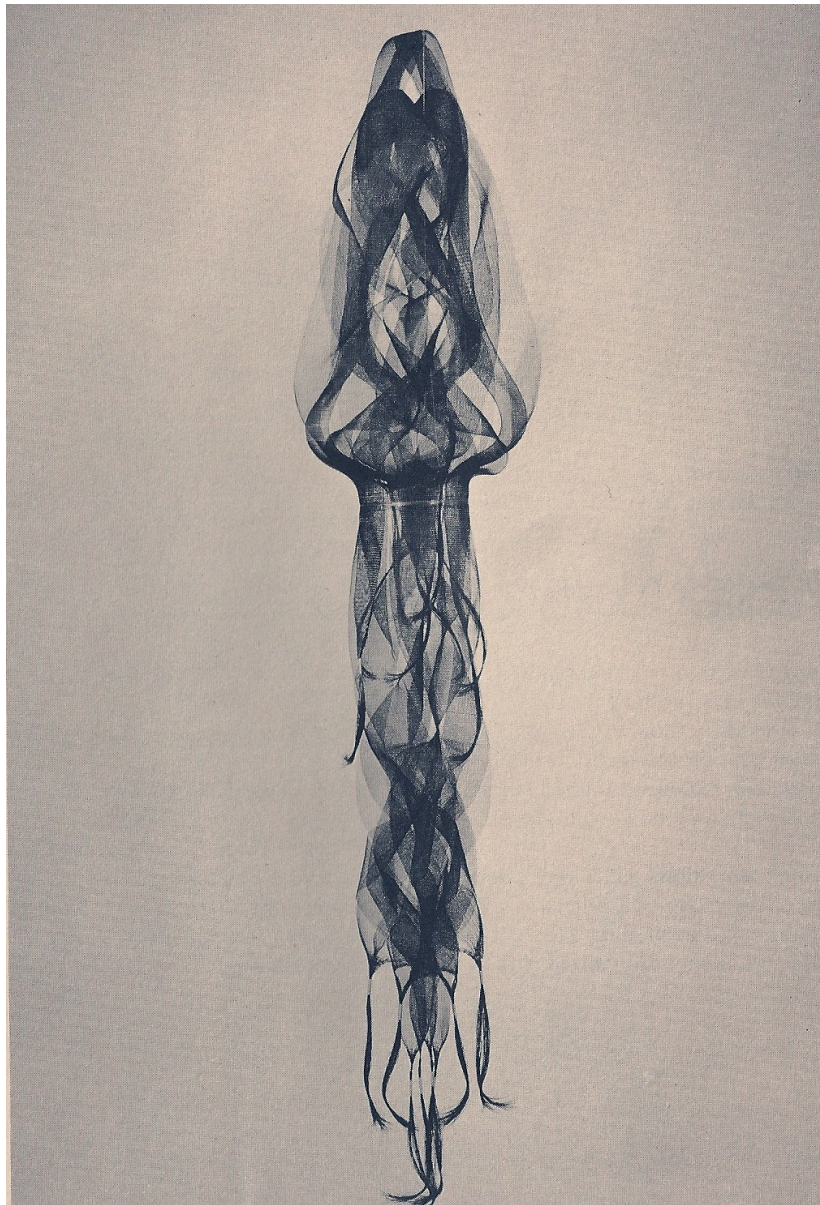


Figure 5. "Nobori," by Kay Sekimachi, 1971. "Deliberate Entanglements" exhibition catalog, UCLA Art Galleries, 1971. Courtesy Craft in America Center Archives.

She felt that the 1971 *Nobori* was probably her best and the piece went on to the Lausanne Biennial in 1973 where it was sold. Sekimachi was excited to be included and to see the work of Abakanowicz and Buic for the first time. The artists who participated had powerful experiences.

For Neda Al Hilali, it was a pivotal moment in her career. "To be in the show with these international stars, I was overwhelmed. It was almost a shock to see yourself on the same page." Czech-born Al Hilali had learned needlework as a child from her mother who was specially skilled, but it was always grey wool until she lived in Bagdad and could see camel gear, and markets, where she was overwhelmed by sumptuous colors, textures and tassels. She came to UCLA and graduated in 1965, then moved to

Texas and got the Regents Fellowship to do graduate research with Kester, her mentor, and she would fly out once a month. Since she didn't have access to the loom enough, she had to think of other methods off the loom like plaiting, looping, and knotting. It pushed her into the non-woven.

She finished the masters in 1969 and came back to Los Angeles where the fiber scene was buzzing. "There was a grapevine in those days between Mary Jane Leland at Long Beach, Virginia Hoffman at Cal State LA. and Northridge had Mary Ann Glantz (Danin). The programs were connected." Kester always focused on integrity. He guided her, but she was free to do what she wanted.

What made the show an added success was the related conference and programming that allowed the community to connect face to face, entitled, "Fiber as Medium." Created by Kester with his colleague and friend Eudorah Moore, the curator and director of the California Design exhibitions for the Pasadena Art Museum, they organized a weeklong series of lectures, symposia, meetings and occasions involving a number of the artists focusing upon the structural and aesthetic possibilities and explorations of fiber. These events were hosted by various institutions throughout the LA area including San Fernando Valley State College, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Otis Art Institute, The Egg & the Eye gallery, the Southwest Museum, California State College, Los Angeles, and California Institute of Technology.

The symposium gathered leading international artists like Sheila Hicks, Jagoda Buic, who talked about the new potential scale and applications of fiber, and researchers from industry who shared their vision and knowledge through a juxtaposition of evolving technology with advanced and developing concepts of form, and a review of historic attitudes. Talks on manmade fibers and recent innovation in industry were also offered.

The exhibitions and the *Fiber as Medium* conference had an inspirational impact on artists in the field who simply visited or attended without actively participating. The title, alone, for the conference declared the importance and establishment of fiber art. Some credit it, and Kester, with originating the phrase "fiber art". Regardless, it undeniably had a role in demarcating the movement.

Gerhardt Knoedel, who had studied with Kester at UCLA in the textiles program attended as a member of the audience, and remembered the exhibition as an "extremely important moment that had to do with the scale." To artists like him who were guiding the expansion of fiber art, the show gave them an identity and it declared that everything was possible. It also assisted in establishing a level of professionalism for this burgeoning branch of the art world. In Knoedel's eye, the show "*Deliberate Entanglements* pulled the potential together. It was a predictor."⁵

The reception was strong and the show was widely covered by the press. *LIFE* magazine called the work in the show, "wildly imaginative and somewhat too big for the average living room. It might be wise not to get too close..." The feature had a full color spread that highlighted the walk-in polyptych by Buic and the woven feathers of sisal and other fibers that formed Beutlich's *Archangel*, among other works.⁶

⁵ Gerhardt Knoedel interview with Emily Zaiden, April 28, 2014.

⁶ "A New Form Fit to be Tied, Rope Art," *Life Magazine*, Dec. 1, 1972.

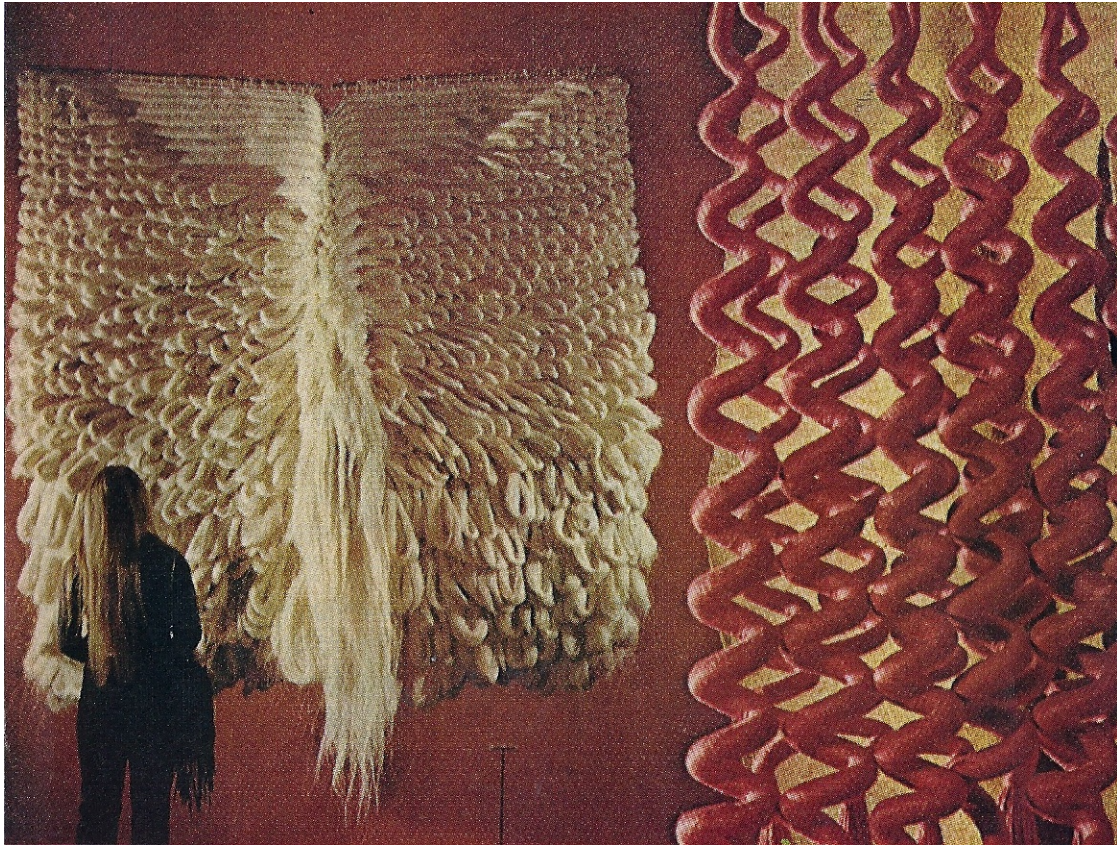


Figure 6. "Archangel," Tadek Beutlich, 1971. LIFE Magazine, December 1, 1971. Courtesy Craft in America Center Archives.

Other reviews called it “breathtaking,” “phenomenal and gargantuan,” comparing the artists’ enthusiasm for the material with Gutzon Borglum’s use of stone. It became clear that it would be a model for artists to experiment with all mediums. The *Chicago Tribune* reviewed the show and called it a, “real breakthrough for the fiber field. “ It did not go unnoted that up until then, the fine arts museums had not exhibited this type of work because they considered it craft.”⁷

A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* was most perceptive. It referred to the “boldly absorbing exhibit” as having a “strong accent on the barbaric, experimental modern mentality but with evidence of thought and design, intention. In conclusion it asked, “where are these things supposed to find a lasting home?” It astutely anticipated the question of the legacy of these massive works and the precipitating collection challenges of storing, displaying and caring for these works. Raising questions we still struggle to answer today, now that the field is wide open and we look back on the achievements of that moment in time.

⁷ Allen, Jane. “Unraveling the Weavers,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct 25, 1972.