

CELEBRATING  
20 YEARS

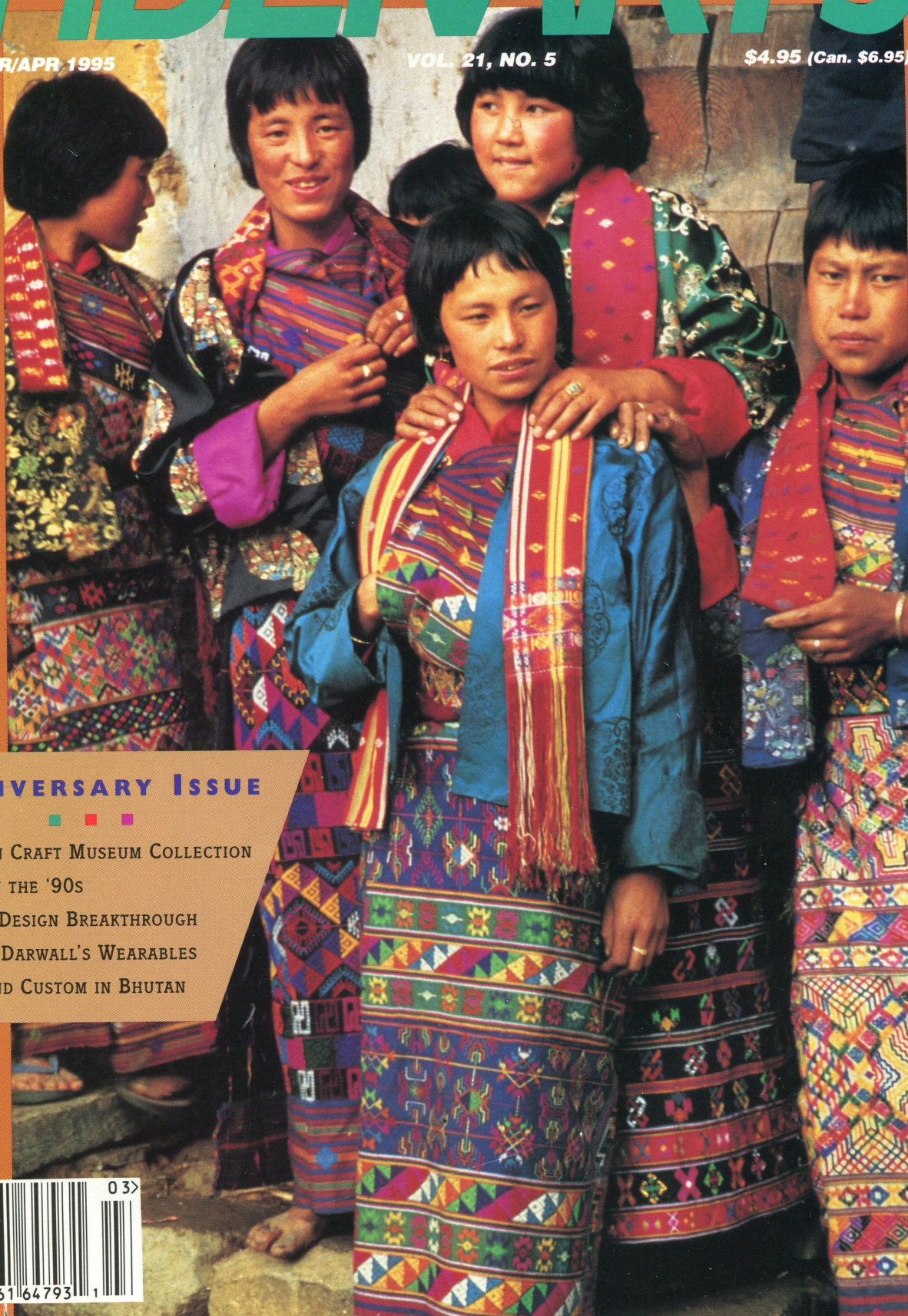
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## ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



AMERICAN CRAFT MUSEUM COLLECTION

QUILTS IN THE '90s

SURFACE DESIGN BREAKTHROUGH

RANDALL DARWALL'S WEARABLES

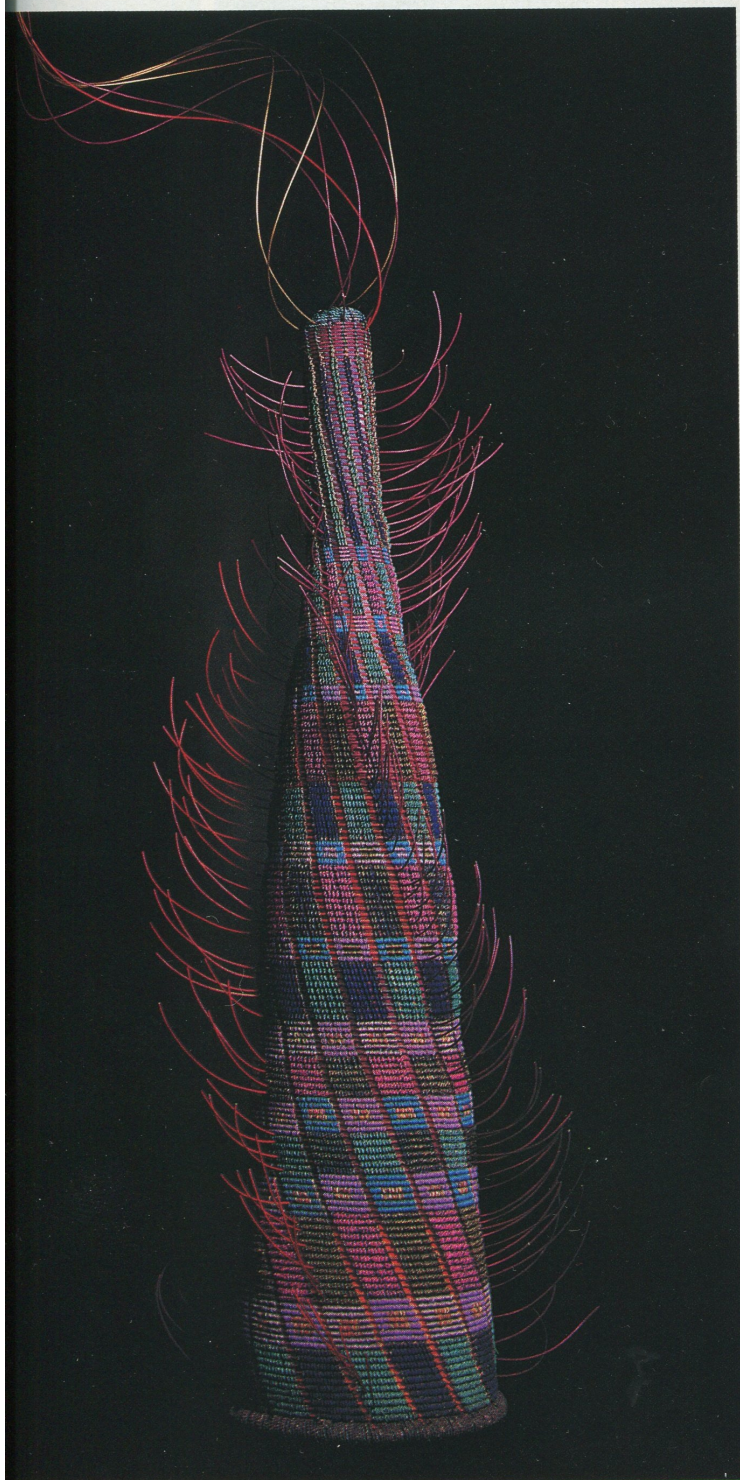
CLOTH AND CUSTOM IN BHUTAN





# Unraveling the Weave

*April Kingsley critiques five decades of fiber works from the American Craft Museum's collection.*



In Homer's ancient Greece, faithful Penelope undid during the night what she wove by day as a ruse to prolong the time for her beloved Odysseus to return to her arms. Penelope's legacy has come down through the centuries to us, associating weaving with faith and love, with deception, with long time instead of short, with an obsessive repetitiveness that carries meditative, even therapeutic overtones, and, perhaps most important, with a story. However implicit and un verbalized, a story is always woven into the threads. All these associations and more are present, but waiting to be discovered, in the Fiber Art Movement of this half century. The artists make those associations and the viewer senses them, but only rarely have they been voiced aloud. It is time to look into the weave for its meaning.

"Tactile Realities: Five Decades of Fiberworks from the Permanent Collection of the American Craft Museum" offers a special opportunity to do so. It is a survey of those museum holdings that illustrate the trajectory taken in fiberwork between the mid-1950s and the present. Although much else of quality was happening, the main thrust of the Fiber Art Movement during this period was to break loose from the confinement of the loom, to grow in size and scale, to move off the wall into three-dimensional physicality, and then, after a climacteric around the three-quarter century mark, to reverse direction in a search for the verities and essences of the medium.

"Tactile Realities" is concerned with fibrous materials—cotton, wool, silk, linen, and burlap; sisal, hemp, and jute; goat or horsehair; nylon, rayon, acetate, acrylic or metallic threads and Lurex, polyurethane tubing, monofilament or metal wire, alone or in combination—that have been woven, plaited, knotted, netted, crocheted, or otherwise interlaced in tension, whether comprised of one element or many, in one or numerous layers, oriented in one direction or two or more, with silkscreen-printed, dyed, painted, gilded, or otherwise embellished warps or surfaces. Abstraction and pictorialization are to be found, as are minimal- and maximalization, freestanding, wall- and ceiling-hung pieces of



Cynthia Schira's *Near Eleuthera*, 1986; cotton, rayon, mixed fibers; woven; 65 by 64-1/2 inches. Collection: American Craft Museum, gift of Suzi R. Schiffer and Franklin Parrasch (1991.39). Photo: Jon Blumb.



use of milled and prestructured cloth for creating fiber constructions in the 1970s. She has been one of the few, highly successful fiber artists executing enormous public commissions around the world, and has wisely included a maintenance program with each piece.

Seen at first as an antidote for the cold utilitarian architecture so ubiquitous in urban America, wall hangings of fiber, with its human connectedness and implied warmth, were viewed as the perfect answer to a perennial problem. However, light, humidity, and temperature changes wrought havoc with the fragile organic materials used in them, and architects soon turned away from their use. Many commissioned pieces not wrecked by environmental factors were removed for other reasons, and few are in situ today.

Sheila Hicks has had major exhibitions of whole cloth works in noncraft contexts, but she keeps returning to her craft roots. Many of the

other principal progenitors of the Fiber Art Movement became increasingly oriented to the sculptural, some even eschewing all but the most arcane reference to fiber in the end. They moved fiber from craft into the fine art world and were not willing to come home again, whether or not they were particularly successful in the next context. Lenore Tawney, who has not woven in many years, devotes herself to her semi-Surrealist collages and assemblages. Alice Adams, who was an important theorist about fiber and who made vital contributions to the movement in the 1960s, has moved completely into architecturally referent sculpture and is doing well with public commissions. Magdalena Abakanowicz has truly become a sculptor, as her latest exhibition of enormous mixed media structures at P.S. 1 in Queens bore ample witness.

Monotone color, colossal size, raw, crude expression that bordered on brutalism, intu-





Magdalena  
Abakanowicz's *Abakan  
Violet* c. 1969; 94 by 86-  
1/2 inches; fiber, sisal;  
woven supplementary  
technique. Collection:  
American Craft  
Museum, gift of the  
Dreyfus Corporation,  
1974, donated by the  
American Craft Council,  
1990 (1974.1). Photo:  
Eva Heyd.

itive searching in the construction process, which often entailed single elements and the use of "own" and off-loom techniques, characterized the fiber art of the 1960s.

The abrasively rough, hairy surfaces, the gargantuan proportions and sheer weight, the intrusive physicality, even violence of the work were shocking at the time. Today the work can seem overbearing and its meanings heavy-handed, but that should make it all the more accessible in a content-driven time. Although the work was rarely discussed except in terms of its formal and technical innovations, those issues seem less interesting today than the associations and meanings the works call up in the mind through those forms.

Jagoda Buic's *Fallen Angel*, c. 1965, for example, was discussed in terms of its slit tapestry "fenestrations" and "castle keep" quality, but when the piece is seen against the gothic spires of a cathedral, as she once had it

photographed, the relationship to religious imagery comes out. (One remembers Milton's glorious descriptions of the dark angels tumbling from heaven and darkening the firmament in their dramatic fall from grace.) Francoise Grossen's *Shield* seems more like a gigantic insect from which one desperately needs protection than the shield to hide behind. Its Rorschach symmetry has sinister overtones that are clearer in other works, such as the more obviously titled *Locust* of 1969. Similarly, Kay Sekimachi's *Kumoyuki* seems to be one transparent, organic form floating or twirling within another, the way the body and tentacles of a jellyfish swirl inside a transparent "umbrella." Olga de Amaral's work remains deeply imbued with the mythos of her country, Colombia: one of writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez's characters ate ashes, de Amaral wove ashes into her "walls." She also wove walls of gold, a substance with which her coun-



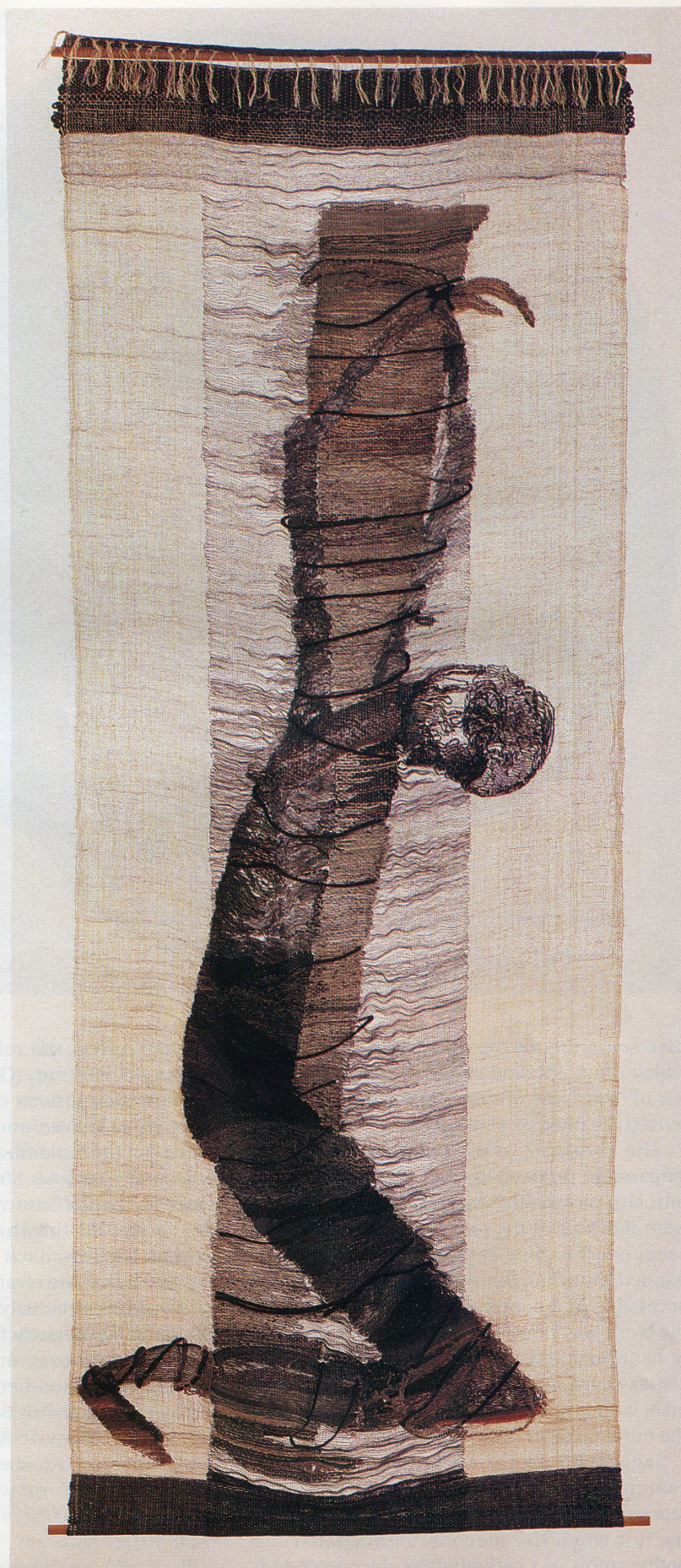
try has been identified since the conquistadors came to these shores in search of it five centuries ago.

Claire Zeisler's **Red Wednesday** clearly makes reference to African ritual masks, but other of her 1960s works, such as **Winter White**, took the configuration of female genitalia.

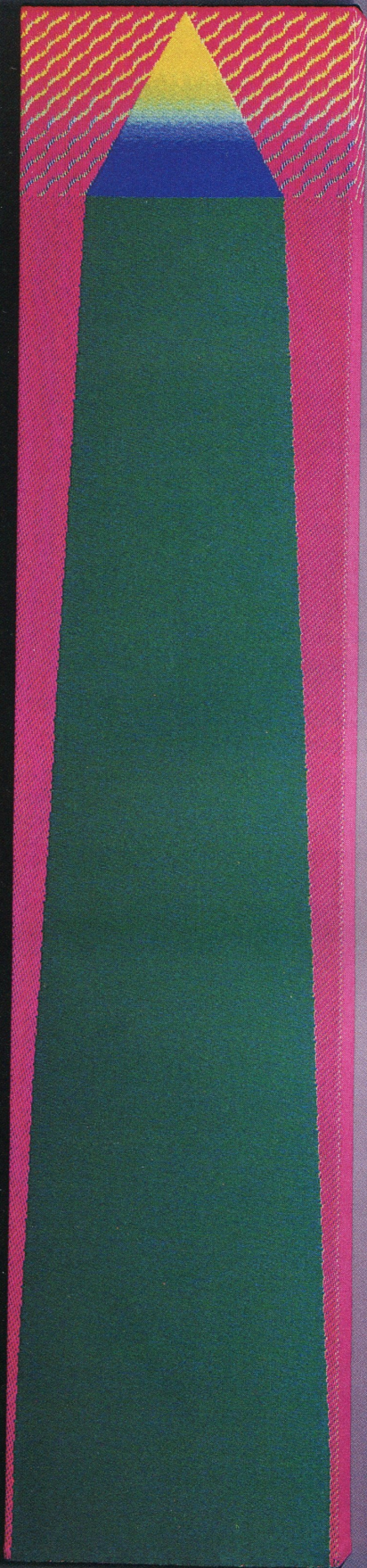
Such imagery was practically ubiquitous in the 1960s and then the 1970s, when it fed right into the women's movement's hunger for positive expressions of femaleness. In no one's work was the vaginal made more explicit than that of Magdalena Abakanowicz, particularly in her "Abakan" series. Interestingly, she had the series photographed out of doors on sand dunes. Silhouetted in that way, without the body's appendages of movement and thought that ordinarily indicate life, the round form essentialized femaleness, just as the rounded backs of seated figures later became generic humanness for her.

In the later 1970s and the 1980s a reaction set in against the huge scale and the bombast of the previous decade. This reaction could almost be described as an implosion, so intense was the medium's internalization and exploration of what weaving could do and be when it wasn't just big. The optical sensuality and delicacy of a work such as Trude Guermonprez's 1965 **Banner** took on a new resonance. Ikat techniques, localized dyeing, painting, metallic leafing, and silkscreening on the warp were used to achieve ever more rich and complex visual vibrancy. The subtle geometry of Peter Collingwood, the mesmerizing structures of Warren Seelig, the profundity of James Bassler's rethinking of Native American techniques such as wedge weaving, Joan Livingstone's sensitive handling of non-processed fiber such as felt, the homages Ann Wilson paid to traditional fiber forms by reusing them, the poetic **Japonisme** of Glen Kaufman, the subtle intensity of Evelyn Svec Ward's and Douglas Fuch's totemic forms, the late Diane Itter's perfect union of intense color and complex form in extremely small formats—all these found appreciative audiences for their calming voices during the last 20 years.

Ferne Jacobs' use of unusual organic materials such as porcupine quills, Daniel Graffin's use of leather, Zeisler's of suede, and Ed Rossbach's use of petroleum products, paper, twigs, and just about anything natural or unnatural have all had a tremendous impact on young weavers searching for new forms in which to express their social and political concerns. Some use whole trees and living grasses in their work while others, such as Arturo Sandoval, Patricia Malarcher, Peggy Ostercamp, and Joyce Crain, revel in the







Left: Lenore Tawney's *Bound Man*, 1957; wool, silk, linen, goat hair, fiber; tapestry; 84 by 36 inches. Collection: American Craft Museum, museum purchase 1958, donated by the American Craft Council, 1990 (1958.2). Photo: Sheldon Comfort Collins.

Patricia Kinsella's *Obelisk*, 1992; cotton; woven; 53-1/2 by 11-3/4 by 2 inches. Collection: American Craft Museum, gift of the artist (1994.19). Photo: Eva Heyd.

machinemade look of film, Mylar, and industrial fibers. John Garrett weaves bones, hypodermic needles, and toy soldiers into wire armatures to make political statements, while Lou Cabeen uses traditional needlework techniques, Kate Boyan employs Native American beadworking, and Joyce Scott the beading long practiced in Africa to do the same.

Artists such as Cynthia Schira, Sheila O'Hara, Helena Hernmarck, and Lia Cook, among many, begin to make paintings out of fiber, going back to the wall hung tapestry and through it into the painter's illusionistic space and the fabric's internal structure. They are doing something no painter can do—embedding the painting in the matrix of its material self. Schira treats each thread as an independent entity, breaking the repeat system, part-to-whole relationship traditional to weaving. Some, such as Schira, Virginia Davis, and Pat Kinsella, use computer driven looms to aid them in multiplying the dimensional, textural, and coloristic complexities of their weaves.

Thus technologies developed to increase the speed and consistency of production (as was the loom in the first place) are subverted by artists naturally inclined toward the feel of, and the long time it takes to make, the handcrafted work. "Arduous Happiness" is the title of a recent fiber art exhibition, and it perfectly expresses the joy weavers and other craftspeople feel in the working process. James Bassler recently told me that when he found out that each of us supposedly spends approximately six months of our lifespan waiting for traffic lights to change, he decided to drive less and weave more. And, one young fiber artist, Laura Baird, literally took her cue from mythical Penelope when she repeatedly stitched and tore out the stitches of her needlepoint *Jonestown Carpet* for the ten years between 1981 and 1991 to give herself time to come to terms with that terrible event. It seems that no matter how sophisticated the craft and its technology becomes, the human touch is never lost.

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*The late Diane Iter's work will be the subject of a major retrospective exhibition at the American Craft Museum in the summer of 1995. The museum is seeking to add works by younger artists to its collection, which has significantly expanded in recent years thanks to the generosity of artists and collectors and major gifts by the Dreyfus Corporation and Johnson Wax Company.*