

# Notes From Academe

By Lawrence Biemiller

## An Evolving Weaver Builds Worlds One Thread at a Time

PHILADELPHIA

IT WAS 1968. Bhakti Ziek was graduating from college, and naturally she wanted to join a commune and live off the land and prepare for the eventual collapse of industrialized society. Lots of people wanted to join communes in 1968.

The problem was, Bhakti Ziek had majored in psychology. "I thought, Why would a commune want me?" says Ms. Ziek, who had grown up as Judy Ziek in a Long Island suburb called Malverne. "What could I do for them when the electricity went out? So I decided to learn weaving and ceramics—at least I'd be able to make fabric and dishes." Ms. Ziek signed up for weaving classes at the Craft Students' League in New York. "The teacher ran me through one weave after another, and I found I really loved it," she says.

She never did make it to a commune, but she and her husband now live in a loft in an artists' co-op—the next best thing. And she has stuck by weaving for 25 years. She studied it in Guatemalan weaving towns, at the University of Kansas, and at the Cranbrook Academy of Art; now she's teaching it at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, where she is an assistant professor of woven design.

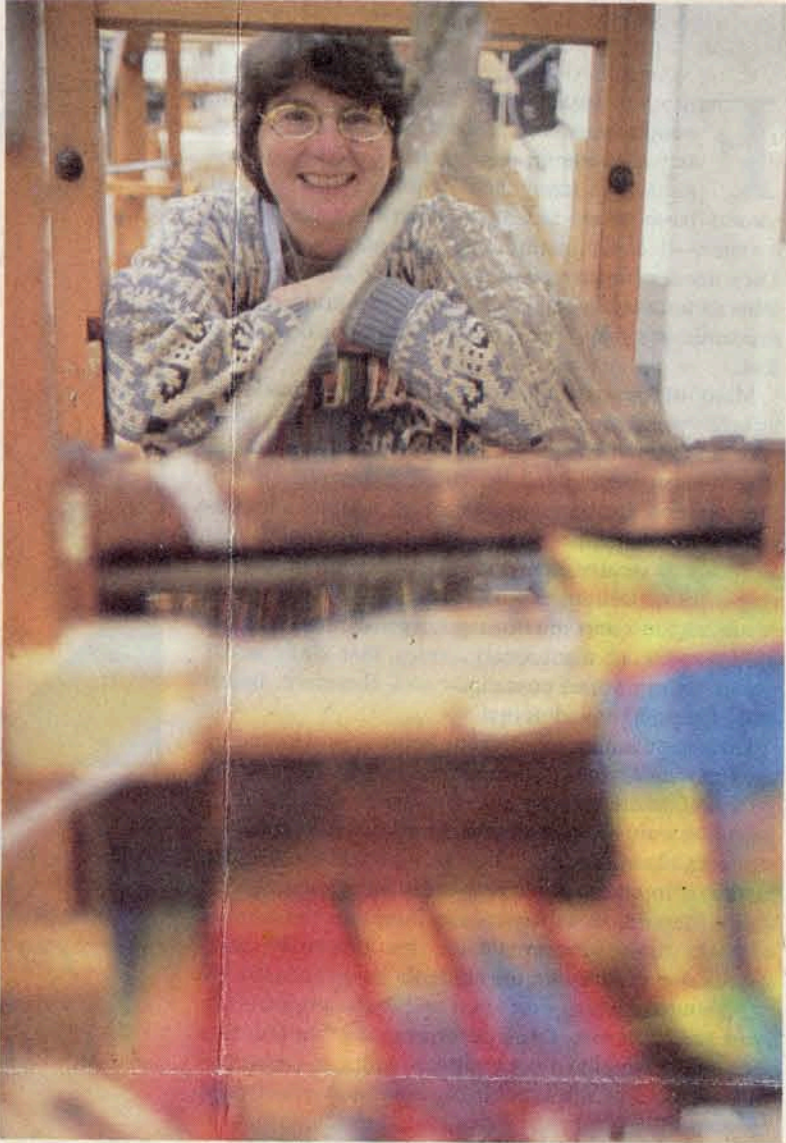
Ms. Ziek's experience runs the gamut from traditional to technological. She has written a book about Guatemalan backstrap weaving, in which the weaver stretches a series of threads from her waist to a tree and then weaves another thread in from side to side, using sticks to maintain her pattern. She has also mastered the industrial-scale, computerized Jacquard loom, which can add hundreds of lines of thread to a piece of cloth each minute. This year Philadelphia's new convention center has hung a piece of hers in its lobby, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is showing her recent works through January 23.

What she likes about weaving, Ms. Ziek says, is that all of it—backstrap and Jacquard and everything in between—is based on the simplest of principles: Either the warp is up, or the weft is. The warp is the collective name for the threads that run back to front and that are set up in advance; the weft is the thread that is added from side to side as the weaver works. At every point in a piece of woven cloth, one is up and the other is down. "From those two choices you can build the world," says Ms. Ziek, adding that weaving represents to her "the whole duality of our society—in/out; male/female; yes/no; the zero/one that computers use."

What Ms. Ziek doesn't like about weaving is its anonymity. "Who knows anything about weaving in this day and age?" she asks. "This profession is very important, but it's almost invisible. Nobody knows textile designers' names. I mean, I'm totally un-fashion-conscious myself, but I'm a real advocate for weaving."

Ms. Ziek teaches in a series of rooms set up with looms large and small, new and old, noisy and quiet. The clattering Jacquard looms and their attendant thread feeders and video monitors dwarf aging mechanical Dobby looms at the other end of the largest room; the old looms may look like relics, but they're still versatile teaching tools. In the next room are wooden hand looms used by Ms. Ziek's Handweaving 2 students; their current assignment is to make fabric representing their summer memories.

The hand looms work simply, but preparing them seems maddeningly complex. After she plans her cloth, the weaver feeds each thread of its warp either between or into heddles, movable strips of thin metal that hang down from harnesses. When a harness is lifted—by



*Bhakti Ziek at a loom at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science: "Who knows anything about weaving in this day and age? This profession is very important, but it's almost invisible."*

means of a treadle—all the threads that have been fed into its heddles are raised, while the threads fed between its heddles lie flat. After the weft is thrown between the raised and flat warp threads, the harness is dropped. The threads that had been raised end up on top of the weft, the threads that had not been raised end up below. By planning the cloth carefully, threading each of the eight harnesses with a different combination of warp threads, and lifting harnesses in sequence as she weaves, the weaver achieves her design.

Many of Ms. Ziek's colleagues at Textile are interested in weaving's latest technological advances—this is not an art school, after all. Ms. Ziek, however, is big on things like painted warps—warps that are hand-colored or tie-dyed before they are put on the loom and used in a cloth. She is also big on teaching: "I wasn't born talented. I was educated to this. I really believe people can be educated—if you can break down their resistance, people can find how much energy flows through them. And sometimes, even if you never hear from your students again, they're carrying you around on their shoulders."

MS. ZIEK says her relationship with current weaving technology is evolving. Before she came to Philadelphia Textile and had access to its equipment, she yearned to work on Jacquards. Here she experimented with them at length and then lost interest. "All this work on the Jacquard has brought me back to the up or the down of weaving," she says. "Once you understand the Jacquard, you realize you could do any of this by hand, or with sticks. In a way, it freed me to do what's in the show at the Pennsylvania Academy."

The show contains several pieces with painted warps as well as several that mix threads and raffia, a straw-colored fiber from African palm trees. A piece called "Common Destiny" uses an overweave of raffia to create a multitude of circles through which you see an underlying zebra-striped cloth—the product of a paint-

ed warp. The different sizes of the circles make them look like planets floating between the cloth's black borders. Nearby, an especially lovely piece that Ms. Ziek named "Parents" has a gauzy warp of loosely spaced black threads; in with a weft of gathered white threads, Ms. Ziek has laid lengths of raffia that form diamonds in two interlocking columns.

"My mother gave me that shape the year before she died," Ms. Ziek explains later, standing by one of the three hand looms in her loft and showing pieces of cloth. "She had emphysema, and every breath hurt. One time I said, 'What do you do all day?' She said, 'Your life is going like this'"—Ms. Ziek starts both hands at the bottom of a V, raising each along one of its sides. "And mine is going like this"—Ms. Ziek's hands trace an inverted V, rising from its mouth to its point. Ms. Ziek compares the columns of diamonds to "breathing out and breathing in, or living and dying, or going from one generation to the next to the next."

"It's a very natural form for a weaver," she adds. "I'm very close to my process. When I'm weaving I see a piece line by line—I see things in it that I'll never see again. Weaving is so linear. Painters move all over the canvas and see things simultaneously, but I see one little bit at a time."

"There's a Buddhist thing I'm leaning toward now—How do I become nothing? How do I just *be*? I used to be angry all the time and I'd sit there weaving my anger. Now I'm not angry. I sit there hearing the sounds outside, the sounds in the room, the sounds of the treadles and heddles—a music of my own making."

At the afternoon's end Bhakti Ziek tells one last story—the story of her first name. "There were people I was meditating with, and I went with them to a house in New York where they went for a weekly chant, and this man there gave me my name." She reaches out to a point in the air in front of her, as the man did toward her forehead, and she says, "Bhakti."

"It means 'devotion,'" she says. "It seems like a right name for me."