

Bhakti Ziek
Artist's Statement

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I remember going to the Museum of Natural History in New York in 1968 to study their models of looms. I wanted to learn how to weave so I could have a skill that would make me a useful member of a commune. It never occurred to me to go to the American Craft Museum. Weaving as art was not my intention.

When I actually took lessons, at the Crafts Students League, I was more interested in acquiring the ability to produce different types of cloth than in any aesthetic outcome. I was still thinking about my hypothetical commune and the need to have some practical knowledge. I was thinking artisan. I am quite sure that the idea of artist never entered my mind.

About a year and a half later, when none of my friends picked up on my commune dream, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in weaving. I didn't even question if my B.A. in psychology was adequate preparation for graduate work in fiber. I didn't know enough about the fiber movement to ask those questions, and I found a school that also didn't ask. So I went to Mexico, and then moved on to Guatemala.

In Guatemala I was trained by weavers who learn their craft as children. I lived in villages where every woman weaves, just as every woman makes tortillas. Cloth making was a way of life, an important carrier of tradition and information. Their hand-woven cloth identified their village, their language, their customs. I never tried to be different in my weaving, to assert my individuality through this process, even when color combinations were both foreign and distasteful to me. I just tried to imitate my teachers, to be as skilled and fluent as these beautiful and generous women. This was their way of life, and this was the way to show respect.

In the late 70's I had the good fortune to land in Lawrence, Kansas. I discovered a textile program at the University, and had a generous mother willing to support a second undergraduate degree. I pursued a B.F.A. in fibers. At first I was mystified that no one seemed interested in my experiences in Guatemala, but then I got absorbed by this new and exciting field of textiles as art and also saw them as two separate worlds. I learned to call myself a fiber artist instead of a weaver. I learned new processes to combine with the Guatemalan brocading, and produced abstract images. I felt like I had found my voice.

My tastes are eclectic. I am drawn to stories, to details, to elaborate embellishments. I'm also drawn to stripes and fields of color. My first religious experience with art was in a room full of Rothko's paintings. My heroes include Agnes Martin, Sean Scully, and Brice Marden. I was drawn to simple and sublime but within my own work I was intent on complexity. If I simplified one area, then I would come back to another with a vengeance. I was working towards something unclear-- something within me, something known, but something unknown. I would watch friends who had it all planned out with great envy. They could do drawings. They could explain every aspect ahead of time; they could draw relationships between material and form. I would say that I was in a fog. Clumsily inching forward step by step, fumbling, blindly moving on. While I was making, it always felt good. When I finished, it always felt bad. The whole was wrong--the details were right. The scientific test was my heart. Directed by emotions. Hungry to produce something of beauty.

There was a famous Indian teacher whose method of teaching was through subtraction. Instead of aiming straight and walking towards his object, his was the path of rejection. Not this, not that. Not this, not that. I used to be worried because I didn't know what I want. Today I understand, I know what I want--I just don't know its name, its form, or where it is. If I try something then at least I can look at it--and then I know. And I can say, not this. Every not this gets me closer to the yes. What ever that is.

In the mid-80's I was in New York again. While defining myself as a fiber artist, I did a stint in the textile industry. It was another world view of textiles that I had not encountered before, and it was quite mysterious to me. In this world, all my previous textile experiences counted as nothing. Out of frustration of not understanding, out of curiosity, and just for fun, I began to go to the F.I.T. Swatch Library. Feverishly I would study old fabrics for their weave structure and design. During graduate school I took the path of narrative. It was a wonderful time. I learned to look at my life, and my personal experiences, and use them in my work. To generalize from me as the individual to the all-encompassing we. I wove literal images--not photo realism but identifiable. The cellist was clearly a cellist. I enjoyed a process of working that I had envied in others. I knew my characters. I told myself elaborate stories as I wove, and I wove more elaborate ones with words afterwards as I looked at the work. I received excellent publicity and found myself writing and talking about the work, and about narrative work as an art form. I built this neat box. And then I realized that I didn't want to work this way any more, that in fact, even as I was writing and talking, my weaving was moving again into an abstract realm.

This building of boxes, or identities, and then the Houdini-like movements of extracting myself from these enclosures seems to be part of my path. I am learning to temper my words and my enthusiasm. To recognize that I do talk from my heart, from a place of honesty and truth--but to acknowledge that truth changes. What was just said, and was true, may no longer be true, moments later.

Since 1990 I have been teaching in a college program dedicated to the textile industry. Among other things, I talk about woven cloth in terms of end use, price point, and the marketplace. I work with elaborate CAD/CAM systems, including computerized jacquard looms. In my own studio, I have watched my work move from the literal to the abstract. I watched the discomfort of several years of weaving that felt like nothing was happening, just confusion. Today I have just finished some well-rooted work and I see that time as a train switching tracks. The slowing down as it gets derailed from one path onto another. At the moment I am happier with my work than in years. Last weekend I saw a flat woven piece come off my loom and pop up into a strange dimensional form. Another derailment might be beginning.

For me the path and the process are more important than the outcome. After almost 25 years of weaving I am just beginning to understand the process. I can finally see plain weave and, frankly, I am just fascinated by this complex interlacing of threads. The more access I have to sophisticated machinery, the more I return to the simple. Sitting at my 8-harness loom picking my way across the cloth, paying attention thread by thread is exciting to me. It connects me to my breath. It gives me back my moment.

A tenuous fine thread has grown into my life line. A silly notion has grown into an intense curiosity and an every expanding question. Beginnings give way to something else, and come around years later with new power and vibrancy. I still have much in common with those weavers of Guatemala. I am interested in making something significant for me. Weaving marks my time, it is the record of my life. Most moments pass unnoticed. Many are experienced in anticipation, with anxiety, of the future. Others as memories, often changed. I don't want to wake up and find it is gone and I wasn't there. Weaving brings me to the moment. Weaving gives me back my life.

This is my present soap box. Change, moment to moment. Breathing in, breathing out. Warp up, weft down. Their intersection is the present.