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Winter 2012

Fiber Art Now

**The World
on a String**
with Carter Smith

**FIBERS AT THE 54TH
VENICE BIENNIAL**

Born to Collect: A Love Story

**FIBER ART ROOTED
IN THE LANDSCAPE**



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Curating *A Sense of Place* by Bruce D. Hoffman

“As curator of *A Sense of Place*, I am here to present in the clearest and most concise fashion what I believe to be an art form that will continue to evolve, stimulate, question, and most importantly, indulge us in a remarkably visceral and visual art form.”

While working on developing FiberPhiladelphia 2012 I approached the Art Alliance in Philadelphia, one of the oldest art centers in the United States, with a proposal to guest curate an exhibition focusing on a select group of artists whose work explores the notion of *Place*. The issue of *Place* in the context of environment (literal, physical, and political), health, and well-being has been a theme I have been pondering for several years now. For 25 years I have been an artist and art advocate.

Recently I find myself exploring a new stage in my life. After battling serious illnesses as well as finding myself in new waters regarding my career, I am grateful that I can turn to art as a place of solace, contemplation, and in a strange twist, security. *A Sense of Place* is designed to allow the viewer a glimpse into a wide variety of processes in creating art.

This exhibition explores eight artistic views of how *Place* is visually defined by literal interpretation of landscape and environment as well as metaphoric reference to *Place* as a state of mind and how it fits into social consciousness. *A Sense of Place* is designed to take the viewer on a journey of discovery: materials, process, image and message. Eminent geographer Yi-Fu Tuan considers how people feel and think about space and how they form attachments to environment.



Ke-sook Lee **Green Hammock** Recycled army nurses uniforms, thread, mixed media, 167" x 72" x 70"



Marian Bilenga **Waterland**, Paper, yarn, dyed horsehair, 47" x 55", 2004

An artist aims to protect, preserve, enhance, redefine and even alter ones perception of environment. We witness this in the writings of Mark Twain (the Mississippi River), the compositions of Aaron Copeland (the Appalachian Mountains) and the photographs of Ansel Adams (National Parks). Tuan suggests that “place comes into existence when humans give meaning to part of the larger, undifferentiated space.”

In the process of choosing the artists and works for *A Sense of Place* I was fascinated by the ease in which just the right works began to emerge in almost a stream of conscious fashion. The work is installed to guide the viewer through a process of exploration.

One is asked to move from breathtaking seascapes by Washington State based artist, Barbara Lee Smith, to an installation of a hammock comprised of recycled nurses' uniforms by Korean born artist Ke-sook Lee (Kansas City). From Lee's work one moves into a room comprised of hundreds of *River Teeth* (tree roots gathered from riverbeds in Maine) covered in gut by Pat Hickman (New York State), while on the adjacent walls one finds an installation exploring traditional Hawaiian Kapa cloth by Wendeanne ke'aka Stitt (California).

Moving into the third and final space, the viewer is confronted with Bhakti Zieks' (Vermont) large scale jacquard four-panel weaving, which maps the artists' "nomadic" life and Marian Bijlenga's (Netherlands) ethereal mapping of marks made on a studio wall. In the center of the room resides Amy Orr's (Philadelphia) House of Cards constructed of recycled credit cards exploring the "beauty" of urban life. The final installation is comprised of series of works by New York based artist Marcia Docter. Her work, which includes a video installation, explores Docter's political, social and environmental concerns. *A Sense of Place* examines the creative outlet an artist must pursue.

~Bruce D. Hoffman is a freelance curator and co-director for FiberPhiladelphia 2012. bruce@fiberphiladelphia.org

IN THEIR OWN WORDS



ABOVE Pat Hickman *And in the Whirling* 2011, approximately 10' 8" in diameter with variable dimensions depending on the installation. Constructed of wooden river teeth, covered with gut (hog casings), installed with pins for mounting insects.



Any Orr, *House of Cards*, Doll house, credit cards



Barbara Lee Smith *Whitecaps*, Painted, collaged, fused and stitched nonwoven polyester industrial textile, 72" x 144"

BORN TO COLLECT

STORY BY CHARLENE JOHNSON

PHOTOS BY MAGGIE WINTERS



From the time I was a child, I was collecting paper cut-outs or scraps, insects, leaves, seeds, stamps, and doll clothes. It was the way my mind worked, how I saw things. Whatever it was, I wanted to possess more than one of a thing; it was never enough to have just one example of something I loved. I wanted as many as I could get my hands on.

As a young adult, I acquired objects in many genres—porcelain figures of women and girls stitching, hand sewn dolls, watercolor paintings, more scraps, and functional craft. I also made things, though not of my own design.

I quilted blankets, embroidered napkins, and needle-pointed pillows. Made by hand was always important to me, even when I was a child. By the late 1970s, “Buy American” was a prevailing political theme, and that cultural movement along with my own sensibilities about the significance of handmade objects, provided the engine behind my penchant for collecting.

Craft thrived in the mid-Atlantic in the 1980s. Outdoor shows flourished at Frederick and Gaithersburg, Maryland; at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia; and at Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Indoor shows also thrived, such as the Winter Market in Baltimore and The Smithsonian Craft Show in Washington, DC. Galleries that represented craft artists also were active, such as Fendrick Gallery, Jackie Chalkley and Sansar in Washington, DC, The Gadfly in Old Town Alexandria, The Works in Philadelphia.

During that time, I went to every craft venue I knew of, scouring the newspapers every weekend for gallery exhibitions and craft shows in the area.



Fifty Dollar Basket, Donna Marder \$1 dollar bills, matchsticks, and various threads

At first, I could only justify purchasing useful objects—bowls, plates, vessels. Then, in 1977, I read an article about a shop in Georgetown, Washington, DC, called the American Hand. It specialized in ceramics, both functional and non, and it was exhibiting the work of well-known ceramicist, Ralph Bacerra, who made vessels, but they were considered decorative and sculptural. They were referred to as non-functional vessels.

For me, this was as good as it got—a handcrafted item with implied function. This concept both satisfied and challenged my sensibilities in a new way. I could still justify the purchase as a vessel that could be used—though not *meant* to be used—a place where craft and art met.

Another early experience that comes to mind is the day that I bought a basket made by Lissa Hunter. Coiled and covered with paper, it was not intended for use. I made three payments of \$200 instead of a single payment of \$600 because it was the only way I could deal with the cost, from both a mental and budgetary standpoint. At that point, I was still telling myself that six hundred dollars was too much to pay for a non-functional basket. A few years later I had the opportunity to meet Hunter, and found out she was teaching a basketry class at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee; I registered for the class and learned weaving, twining and coiling techniques from her. I gained an understanding of the labor-intensive process behind making baskets and how difficult it is to create beautiful shapes. This is when I started to gain a core understanding of what quality craftsmanship really entails. That learning experience plays into every single acquisition decision I make today.

In the early years of collecting craft, I was asked by Addie Draper, a woodturner and artist, to describe my aesthetic. At the time, I didn’t understand what she meant and she suggested that I consider what I like about an object and how I choose what to acquire. Is color important? What shapes are pleasing? What forms appeal to me? Does hand work show up in the piece? Does size matter? Does it have meaning or a message that I can connect with?

One day, at the Baltimore Craft Show, I was in the midst of choosing between two small objects—a bowl and an irregularly shaped vase. Out of the clear blue, I said, “I’ll take the bowl. I’m a symmetrical person.” I had not thought about symmetry being a part of the decision-making process until that day, but when I surveyed my collection, I saw lots of symmetry.



ABOVE *Maile* by John McQueen, willow twigs, waxed linen thread



In the past five years, I have developed a taste for asymmetry and a whole new world has opened up for me. It started with a small piece by Ed Bing Lee. The series of vessels he had knotted were asymmetrical for the most part, but I found the work incredibly beautiful and lusted after a piece, so I chose the least asymmetrical bottle. I began to stretch in this area and the next piece I acquired was very asymmetrical. I needed to step over the line just that one time and soon asymmetry became a habit.

Evidence of handwork is extremely important to me. I want to see the artists' hands at

work on the piece. I like precise, finely-crafted pieces that present some mystery in their making. At times I find myself asking questions such as: "How did she make this?" or "I wonder how much time he spent on this?" or even, "What kind of unique thinking process does this artist have?" I am intrigued by pieces that give rise to these kinds of curiosities.

So often I cannot fathom the translation of an idea into a work of art. I'm stymied by the length of time the artist likely spent on the piece. The mystery and magic of the piece draws me in, not so much in terms of subject, but of process.

When I worked in the antiques field, I noticed that there are essentially two kinds of collectors—those who shop for themselves and those who send their designers or decorators to select or vet the pieces. I think those who shop for themselves generally love the objects for what they are; they are often interested in maker, material, history, or context.

Those that work with designers seem to be more interested in a total comprehensive look rather than the works themselves. They are generally filling spaces. As for me, I cherish the process of collecting, and learning to collect.

It has represented a personal and creative growth process that wouldn't have taken

place had I sent someone else to select and purchase the art in my home. This is not to imply that this type of collector loves the pieces any less; it's simply a different focus. I love objects and I like my space to look cohesive.

Early on, I would select objects for a certain space; I found that I don't have a good spatial eye, and nothing ever worked in the intended space. In one case, a hanging cabinet I purchased for the top of the stairway ended up in the dining room and caused an entire suite to be built around it. Now I buy what I love and always feel certain that the object will find a home.

At some point as my collection grew, it began to speak out for itself and now accepts a new friend or rejects an intruder that just doesn't augment the collection well.

I don't think anyone can be told how to collect. What I love, someone else might hate. My space is different from their space. Our budgets may be very different. In the early years, I looked to gallery owners and artists to assist me in selecting a piece. The ultimate decision was mine, but I needed to understand what I was bringing home. What did the gallery think of the piece? Did the artist think the piece was one of their best, or simply a good representation of their work?

Given a choice of two pieces, I suggest that novice collectors ask themselves which is the better work from a technical standpoint. Which artist has potential to become a star? Would the piece dominate its space or would it quietly recede? What does the piece say to me?

I collect baskets more than anything else and I think basket makers are the nicest, kindest people in the world. I adore them as I do wood turners and librarians.



UPPER LEFT Maile by Ed Bing Lee, linen and cotton floss, photo credit: Ken Yano-viak

FACING PAGE Basket by Lois Russell, twined waxed linen thread

RIGHT The author, holding two works by Ed Bing Lee, waxed linen

Asymmetrical bottle form by Ed Bing Lee, raffia and waxed linen.

ABOVE Front Row: Pomo Basket, sedge and dyed bracken fern; Nancy Moore Bess, Japanese bamboo, waxed linen and cotton thread; Jan Buckman, waxed linen thread **BACK ROW** Jiro Yonezawa, bamboo



“I’ve met many individuals—makers, sellers, and buyers—who have left an impression on my life’s story in wonderful ways. Every time I look at one of my pieces, it takes me to the place and time when I first found it—the experience of collecting and connecting with the maker.”

I marvel at their patience (it takes a long time to make a basket) and their ability to make beautiful shapes using natural and manmade materials. I’ve been fortunate to meet many fiber artists, so when I bring their work home, I remember the conversations we’ve had and their generosity in sharing their insights and dreams.

Once I commissioned a \$50 basket from Donna Marder. I remember her writing to me and asking whether I wanted a basket made of fifty \$1 bills or a basket made of \$50 dollar bills. We laughed about how much a basket made of \$50 bills might cost. I love that memory. Or when Ed Bing Lee made a wall piece of my dog, Maile; she was an experiment where her head is three-dimensional and her body is two-dimensional. It was a great success and I love the thought that Ed took so much pleasure in making Maile.

Collecting gives me the opportunity to travel, in order to seek out the work. I have visited museums, historic houses and collectors’ homes, which I wouldn’t have otherwise, had I not been acquisitive. I’ve met many individuals—makers, sellers, and buyers—who have left an impression on my life’s story in many wonderful ways. Today Libby and Jo Anne Cooper of Mobilia Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts help to create the best impressions and memories. And I look forward to the debut in the spring of the biennial textile initiative, Fiber Philadelphia, for more opportunities to learn, acquire and connect.

~Charlene Johnson lives in the Washington DC area, where she pursues her passion of collecting fiber arts.



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