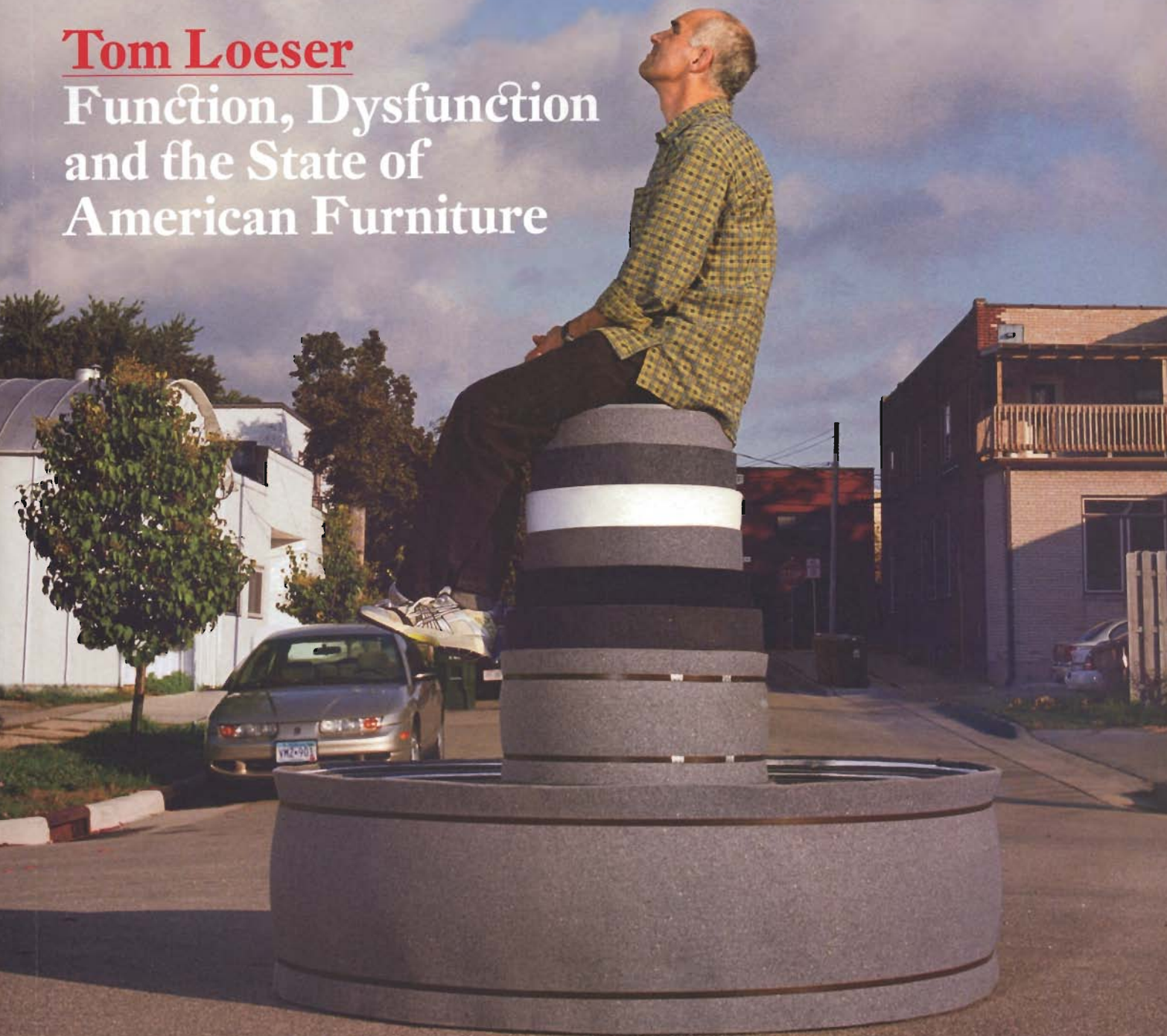


# american craft

Midwest is Best  
From Chicago to  
Cincinnati, Craft  
in the Heartland

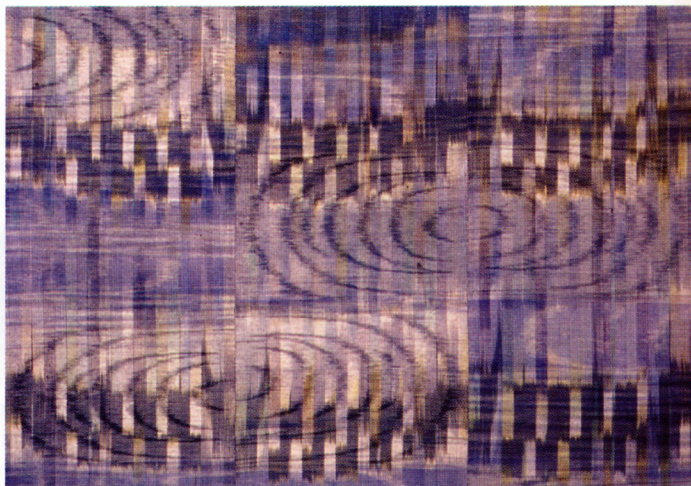
Terry Brown  
Eye-catching  
Architecture from  
Another World

Tom Loeser  
Function, Dysfunction  
and the State of  
American Furniture



# Speaking with the Text of Textile

STORY BY  
Suzanne Smith Arney



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*The sources for these four artists are varied—other artists and media, nature, a detail like a fold of fabric, or even poetry.*

Top:  
**Polly Barton**  
*Tide Pools*, 2003, ikat,  
silk warp, rayon weft  
{h. 37½ in, w. 52 in}.  
Courtesy Gail Martin Gallery

Visible Presence  
**Polly Barton**

By Chance/By Design  
**Mary Anne Jordan**

Variations<sup>2</sup>  
**Eleanor McCain**

Wrapped/Unwrapped  
Tapestries  
**Mary Zicafoose**

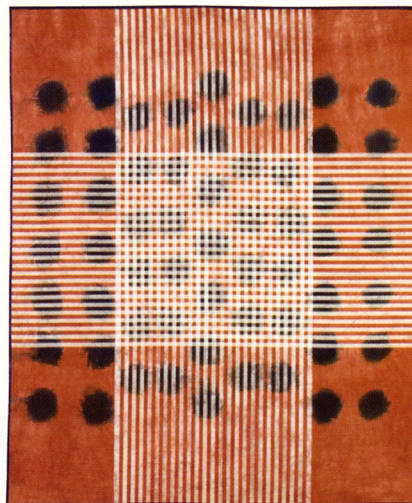
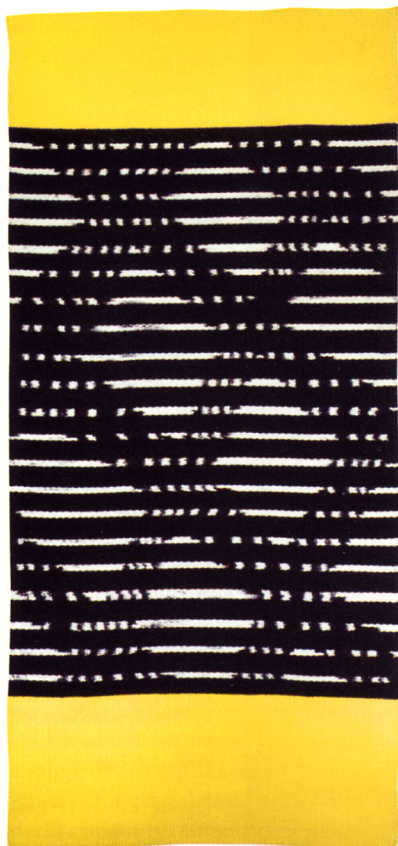
**San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles**  
San Jose, California  
November 18, 2008 – January 25, 2009  
[www.sjqiltmuseum.org](http://www.sjqiltmuseum.org)

The range, technical mastery, visual vitality and artistic maturity of four exemplars of contemporary fiber—the weavers Polly Barton and Mary Zicafoose and the quilters Mary Anne Jordan and Eleanor McCain—are companionably on view in solo but concurrent exhibitions at the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles. Curator Deborah Corsini, who has given each artist separate gallery space, says, “Solo exhibits give a cohesive, in-depth experience and understanding of what an artist is creating.” And having four simultaneously invites contrasts and comparisons and offers a broader understanding of “art making, its profound beauty, the time-consuming process, and the intelligence and gift that each of these artists brings to the field of fiber.”

Each maker is represented by signature work as well as by new, exploratory pieces. “All of these artists dye their materials in some way,” says Corsini, “but the other processes and techniques used are very different.” For example, Barton and Zicafoose create ikat textiles, an ancient process of resist-dyeing in which bundles

of threads are tied according to the weaver’s plan, dyed and then unbound. When woven, the threads produce a complex, soft-edge design.

“Historical and universal, ikat evokes the abstraction and elegant simplicity familiar to our 21st-century eyes,” Barton says. Trained in traditional Japanese techniques of silk weaving and working at a century-old, four-harness kimono loom, she bends the medium in new and contemporary ways. The silk fiber Barton uses is finer than sewing thread, and her results are delicate and meditative. She works in plain weave (warp *and* weft are visible) and may dye both elements for a double ikat, as she has done to create the ripples in *Tide Pools*, 2003. “I want the ikat to represent my gesture, my expression and my response to nature,” she says. She finds inspiration for her refined pieces in her lily pond, on long walks and in the way clothes reveal the energy of the body. *Tide Pools*, for example, was inspired by drapery on a Buddha sculpture. For Barton, the weaving has so many layers, from the over-and-under pattern of threads and the colors



Top:  
**Mary Anne Jordan**  
*Tablecloth with Indigo Stains*, 2004, dyed, painted, quilted cotton {h. 95 in, w. 78 in}.

Left:  
**Mary Zicafoose**  
*Ancient Text: Yellow*, 2007, weft-face ikat, wool on linen warp {h. 63 in, w. 29 in}.



Top:  
**Eleanor McCain**  
*Orange Grid*, 2000, pieced, quilted cotton {h. 50 in, w. 50 in}.

of dye and overdye to the bringing together of her disparate ideas and sensations into a harmonious whole. “The warp carries one idea, the weft another,” she explains. “When they synthesize, you have a successful piece.”

For Zicafoose, weaving is a quest for connection that has taken her around the world learning and teaching the history and practice of her form of ikat. She refers to her bold palette of hand-dyed wool as a “frequency” creating a vibrational energy that demands a response from the viewer. “I have always understood cloth to be a manuscript, a woven surface encoded with visual symbols,” she says. In the work *Ancient Text: Yellow*, 2007, part of a series inspired by ethnic cloth, she bookends a black and white “text” between sunshine-yellow bands. Through the graphics of repetitive dot-dash markings, Zicafoose interprets ancient text as a contemporary version of Morse code, rendering her message in intricately dyed weft-faced ikat, an “adrenalized” process that lends a painterly touch to the hard-edge intersections of warp and weft.

Jordan, whose medium is pieced quilts, uses traditional methods and patterns improvisationally. Starting with white cotton cloth, she paints it with dye, individualizing seemingly familiar colors like black by mixing in brown or blue to add warm or cool undertones. The colors seep out in different ways, depending on whether the fabric ground is laid flat or hung and how wet it is, each choice inviting collaboration with chance. “I deliberately allow and preserve the marks that ‘happen’ in the process of making things *by hand*,” Jordan says. *Tablecloth with Indigo Stains*, 2004, one of her exploratory pieces, has a ground of ecru-dyed whole cloth, dotted with indigo poured patiently from a spoon. The indigo stains and white lines honor a tablecloth’s homey qualities. “I am interested in the stories of quilts,” she says.

Color is also central to McCain, a quilter whose hand-dyed cotton works bounce with bold graphics. She deploys simple shapes like squares and stripes in irregular, overlapping arrangements and plays with color relationships and the simulation of 3-D space. In *Orange Grid*, 2000, for

example, the small orange boxes of the central grid and the somewhat larger ones in the lower right corner appear to advance against the dark or striped ground. The quilted lines add texture to these shapes. “My goal is to *see*” she says. “Craft forms relate to so many things in people’s daily lives.” Quilts also connect McCain to her family heritage—her grandmother quilted some of her first pieces—and “in a historical, tactile and feminist way to a women’s domestic arts community.”

The sources of inspiration for these four artists are varied—other artists and media, nature, a small detail like a fold of fabric, or even poetry. As viewers of their work, we can’t help but be affected by the value they place on attention and communication. Pointing out that one of her favorite poets is Ted Kooser, Zicafoose says, “Everytime I teach a workshop I recite ‘A Jacquard Shawl’ from his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Delights & Shadows*. The poem describes the story woven into the cloth and will change your relationship with textiles.” So, I might add, will these artists. ♣