



Mary Zicafoose: Weavings & Prints

The Nebraska artist's tapestries require control at every step; her monoprints are more spontaneous. They share a language of saturated color and bold shapes. *by Suzanne Smith Arney*

Mary Zicafoose pores over newly arrived prints in her home office, alternating large, heavy sheets, redolent of printer's ink, with wispy sheets of tissue. She is unaware of the retrospective of her work and her life that surrounds her: a favorite tapestry, *Three Hills Burning*; images from her website on a computer screen; a framed miniature silk tapestry commissioned for Nebraska's Governor's Art Awards in 2004; family photos; Kuba cloth;

ABOVE: Zicafoose holding colographic monoprint Tools for the Millennium. Behind her is a 2004 slit-woven tapestry, Three Hills Burning (handdyed and woven wool on linen warp). Photos: Kirby Zicafoose.

a basket woven from a single frond of river reed. "We raised a baby monkey in that basket!" she says, recalling a year she and her husband, Kirby, spent in the Bolivian tropics.

All of these experiences—the skills honed in thirty years as an artist and the events of a full life—are woven together

in her work. Zicafoose has a national reputation as a weaver: Her tapestries hang in private and corporate collections and U.S. embassies; exhibitions, public projects, and awards accumulate on her CV; and her workshops garner devotees. She describes herself as "a very old weaver," claiming membership in a timeless clan who share a visual, archetypal language written in textiles. Her hangings are a modern response to ancient and ongoing questions, and her openness, even eagerness, to discover involves challenging the boundaries. That inquiry translates to not only continual learning at the loom but investigating ideas in other media, similar to exploring another language.

Printmaking has partnered her core work since 2004. Like her tapestries, the prints are strong, abstract designs worked with a warm and intense palette of primaries. These are created at Hand Graphics, a comprehensive printmaking studio in the foothills of Santa Fe (www.handgraphics.com). During an intense week, Zicafoose and master printer Michael Costello investigate ideas in her current body of work, producing sixty to seventy-five prints. Costello admires her work and her daring. "It takes courage for someone to be a beginner again," he says. "It's a risk, going into someone else's world."

Zicafoose's current series, *Ancient Texts*, was distilled from previous reconnaissance. Her weaving season, fall through June, is a time of introspection, focus, physical effort, and self-directed seclusion. She relaxes by wandering through textile books, rich with engaging photographs. "The *Ancient Texts* series was inspired by my love, my infatuation with old, ethnic textiles," she says. "Those classic designs are the unique thumbprint of a specific time, geography, and people. I come away pondering 'What is my time and story?'" Although they share a root, her tapestries and prints aren't duplicates. Each medium focuses on a particular aspect of the central theme, a dialogue spoken effortlessly in colors and images. "One completes the other's thoughts," says Zicafoose.

Printmaking and weaving require very different approaches. While her conceptual designs are deeply instinctual, her weaving process is exacting. It begins with thumbnail sketches in pencil, followed by color mockups, then designs drawn to scale on graph paper. Her signature technique is west-face ikat, an extremely detailed method in which yarns are wrapped, then dyed, before weaving. Gorgeous colors, particular to each series, are created in the dye kitchen adjoining her home studio. For the *Ancient Texts* series, her palette included indigo, ocher, yellow. In the tapestries, the "text" is black-and-white ikat, with borders of rich color, like bookcovers. In contrast, print designs are spontaneous and freehand. "Mary brings in some drawings, sketches of ideas that may become prints or weavings," says Costello. The comparable speed of printmak-

ing allows Zicafoose to quickly judge which medium would be a better vehicle for her visual storytelling.

Because they are monotypes, each print is unique. Every day at Hand Graphics brings an exploration of the strongest expression of an idea. The morning begins with mixing color into thick, sticky, oil-based ink until it is very workable, buttery. Zicafoose cuts freehand shapes from oiled tagboard, and brays them with thin coats of ink. The shapes are then composed on a Plexiglas plate that has been inked in that day's background color, and run through the press. Impres-

BELOW: *Ancient Texts*: Nepal, 2007; handdyed wool on linen warp; west-face ikat tapestry; 31" x 63".





sions in the resulting print will have an embossed feel and fine, white outline. The images have large areas of saturated color and a distinctive flat and hard-edged style, a shared signature in Zicafoose's prints and weavings. Likewise, both techniques are executed on natural fibers—cotton rag paper for the prints and wool yarn for the weaving. The processes, however, are completely different. In printmaking, the colors are separately inked shapes overlaid on a matrix, whereas in tapestries they're meticulously interwoven with myriad threads. Zicafoose's exacting weaving technique requires control at every step; however, "printmaking," says Costello,



ABOVE LEFT: *Caravan*, 2007; colographic monoprint; overall dimensions, 42" x 27"; image size, 30" x 14 1/2". ABOVE RIGHT: *Eleven Thoughts/Green Box*, 2007; colographic monoprint; overall dimensions, 42" x 27"; image size, 30" x 14 1/2".

"is about giving up control. That's part of the magic." Relief prints reverse the image from the master plate to the paper. Also, "ink colors are complex," Costello continues, "and as they dry, they change. It's all a process of transformation."

The *Ancient Texts* prints are her largest scale works on paper to date, printed on unwieldy 3- by 4-foot sheets. Each image was "pulled" twice, creating two prints, an original

image and a "ghost." The original, for example, might appear a strong orange and black with a green background. Its ghost reads as an uncanny pale purple with an orange base and an aura. Working in what she calls "an iconic alphabet," Zicafoose describes some of the shapes (her "text") as pictographs (resembling cuneiform or Inca *kipu*) and some as tools (suggesting ancient scrapers or chopping tools, or the beaters used in weaving). It is this primitive expressive quality layered with contemporary awareness and style that is so exciting to see. "The recognition of these symbols and forms triggers cultural memory, an awareness or quickening in the viewer," says Zicafoose. "This is what art does best: it takes you from the familiar to a new understanding."

Printmaking has taken Zicafoose to new turf. For one thing, she says, "it's made me much more graphically awake. I am constantly referencing what is being done in contemporary graphics and advertising." She also points out how it has broadened her work's marketability. "Prints offer a different price point for the collector, and can go to shows, venues, and homes where weaving is not yet invited," she says. She also thinks that prints will draw the attention of a 2-D-savvy audience to textiles. "Exhibited together, weavings add dimensionality to prints; prints spotlight design."

Another off-loom adventure is the sculpture she has created for several public art projects. Omaha, Nebraska, where Zicafoose lives, saw twenty-two interpretations of the city's logo "O!" during the summer of 2007. For *wO!ven*, Zicafoose enclosed the 6-foot fiberglass O-and-exclamation-point form within a woven metal armature. She fabricated its "warp" from steel rod and rebar and its "weft" from various widths of commercial ropes, scrap metals, wires, and industrial cast-offs. Besides referencing weaving, "*wO!ven* is also a metaphor for the diversity within our community," she says. "The sculpture intertwines many individual materials and components, which are simultaneously beautiful and dissonant, into a powerful icon far stronger than the sum of its parts." Most recently, she tore into strips and naturally handdyed 200 pounds of recycled cotton hotel sheets, ceremoniously wrapping and rebirthing dead trees in Fontenelle Forest (Bellevue, Nebraska) for an outdoor exhibit titled *Elements*. As with the printmaking, Zicafoose finds such forays both challenging and invigorating, as they clarify her focus in weaving. ●

Mary Zicafoose will exhibit work at the Tampa International Airport in conjunction with the Handweavers Guild of America's Convergence 2008 conference in Florida June 22–28 (www.weavespin.dye.org). After Convergence, at the American Tapestry Alliance's biennial retreat (June 29–July 1), she will be a keynote speaker and will teach a three-day design-focused workshop (www.americantapestryalliance.org). She is also teaching workshops in July through the Mendocino [California] Art Center (www.mendocinoartcenter.org) and in September through Wisconsin Handweavers (wihandweavers.org). She has a solo show at the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles November 1, 2008–January 1, 2009 (www.sjqmilmuseum.org). Visit the artist's website, www.maryzicafoose.com, to see more work and events.

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BELOW: New Dreams, 2006; handdyed wool on linen warp; weft-face ikat tapestry; 65" x 29".

