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Mary Zicafoose:

The Power of Transformation



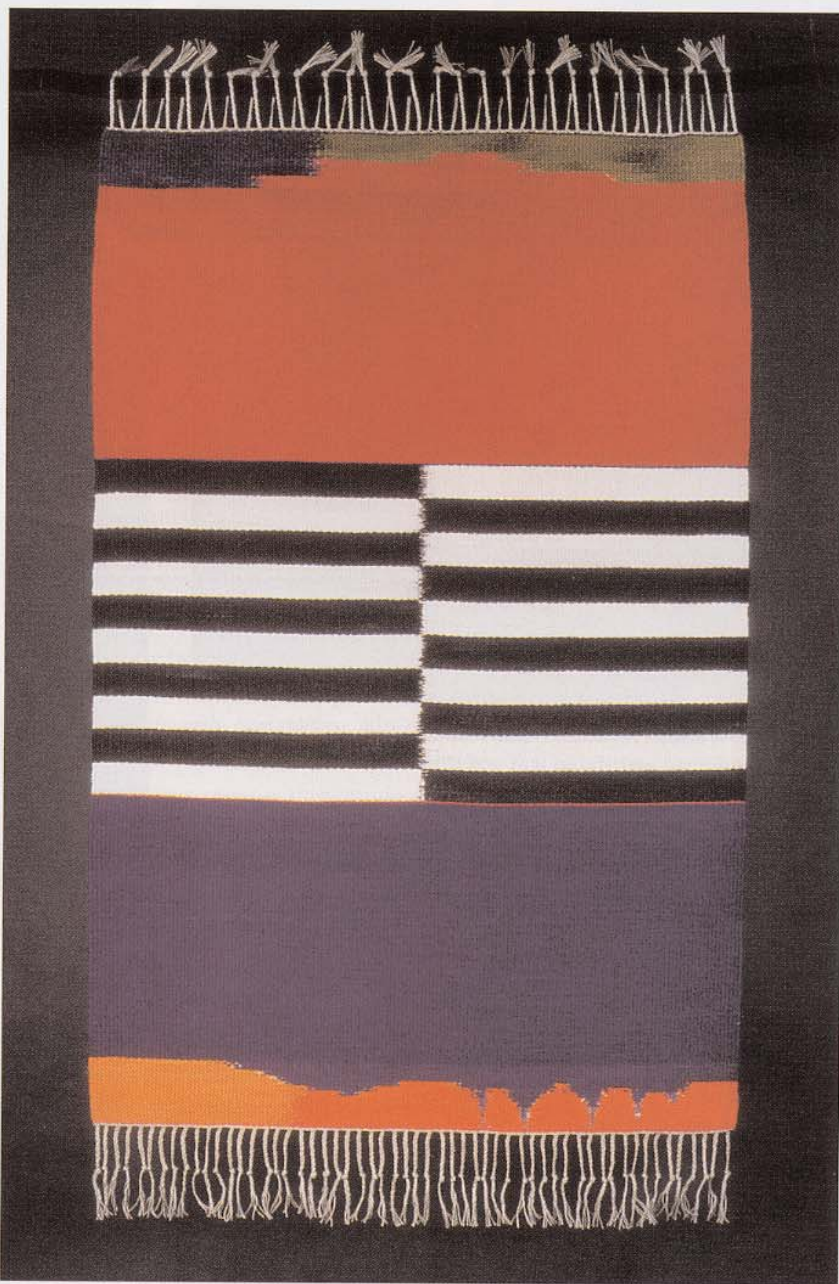
by Suzanne Smith Arney

Mary Zicafoose weaves transformation. Using as materials wool and linen, life experiences, and archetypal symbols, she not only continues the rich history of textiles, she is an agent in its evolution.

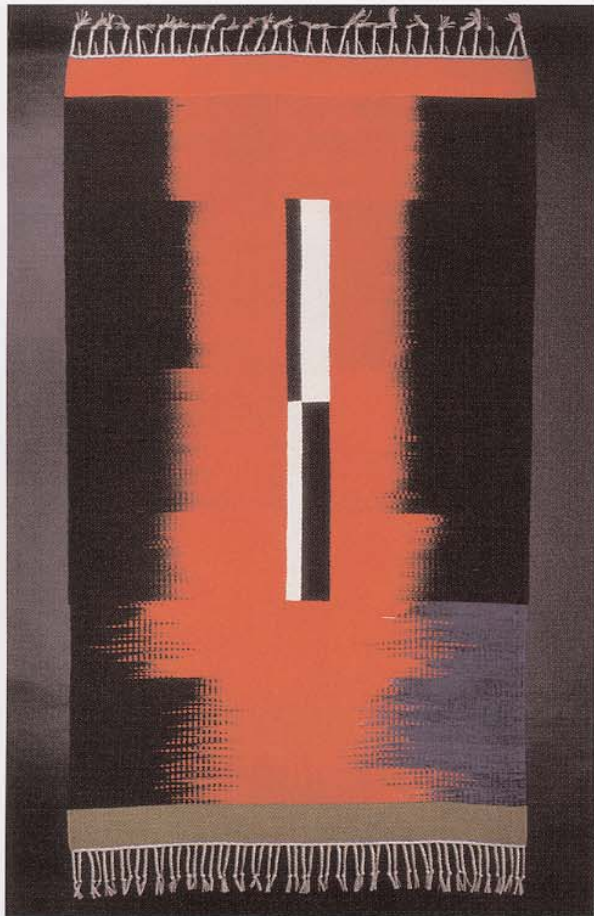
Zicafoose's life-long interest in art, symbols and cloth has roots in her childhood and has bloomed over two decades of weaving. She has moved from learning the skills to expressing her personal response to eternal and essential truths. "The esoteric and the mundane literally get spun and woven together," she says. She speaks of the tapestries' frequency, vitality and presence and is ever open to their silent invitations and revelations.

One transformative moment was a lecture by the inspirational teacher Sharon O'Hara, co-founder of The Growing Place in Bridger, Montana, articulating the necessary evolution of archetypal symbols. O'Hara's description of a "...process of symbols as we know them, molting and changing form, taking on new dimensions and qualities, resonated so deeply for me," related Zicafoose, "that there was no question that I had a role in helping this evolution." The resultant series, *Wildfire* (exhibited at Thirteen Moons Gallery in the summer of 2003), began "...an investigation into fire as an archetype and visual symbol, past, present, and future." Some of the tapestries from the series, *Prairie Fire*, *Night Fire*, and *Spring Burn*, reflect her life in Nebraska, where she now lives.

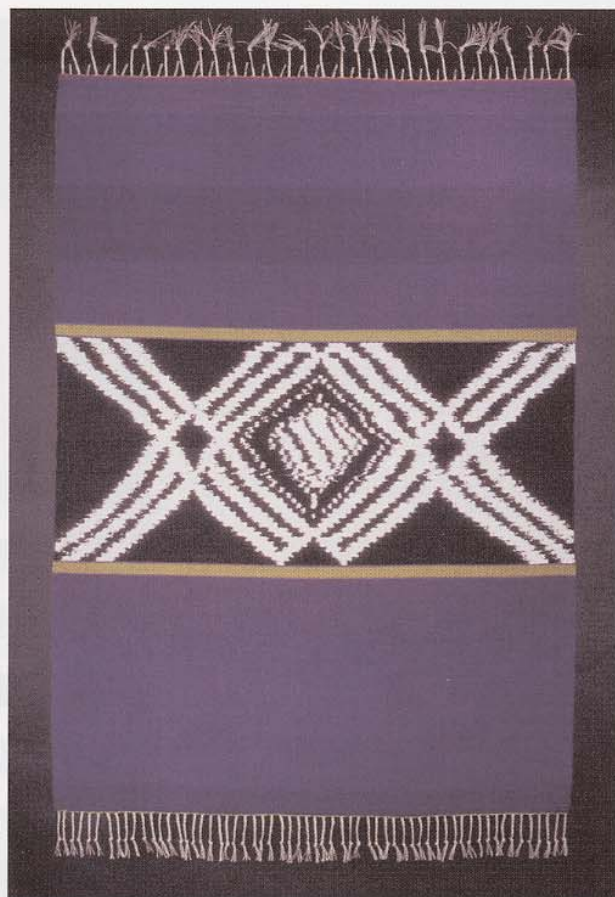
Her 1998 *Tornado* series also drew from symbolic Great Plains imagery. "I spend quite a bit of contemplative time before I begin a new body of work, asking such questions as 'What needs to be said at this moment in time? What do I want to



Bilateral Agreement, 2000.
Handwoven, hand-dyed weft-faced
ikat; wool, linen; 60 by 40 inches.



LEFT: *Bulls Eye*, 2001. Handwoven, hand-dyed weft-faced ikat and slit-woven; wool, linen, 68 by 44 inches.



RIGHT: *Broken Code*, 2002. Handwoven, hand-dyed, weft-faced ikat; wool on linen warp; 59 by 41 inches.

say? Are these mutually inclusive statements? How do I say this visually?" Designing is a receiving process. The more awake and open I can be, the deeper the visual language and possibilities."

Home has always impacted Zicafoose's art, whether the American Midwest, Northwest, Southwest, or the Bolivian rainforest where she and her husband spent a year. "My greatest inspiration is place," she says. Wherever she lives or travels, she finds textiles to be "...distinctive and powerful conveyers of cultural sophistication, expression, and storytelling." In fact, her introduction to textiles was an aunt's serendipitous gift of a bit of Malaysian ikat fabric. Originally Asian, she explains, but used by literally every culture as a decorative fiber technique, ikat is a method of resist-dyeing the yarn to create optical designs with soft inexact edges. She has incorporated ikat design in many of her signature tapestries and rugs. "It's always exciting to use a very old technique in a contemporary context." Zicafoose is one of a very few who teach weft-face ikat in the United States. At Convergence 2004, she will be offering a three-day workshop on her version of the technique, *Ikat for Tapestries & Rugs: Contemporary Applications of an Ancient Technique*.

Zicafoose has taught throughout her career. "I love to teach and lecture," she exclaimed. "And I love to show many slides of the opulent history of textiles. My approach to teaching a class is not so much about the mastery of a particular tech-



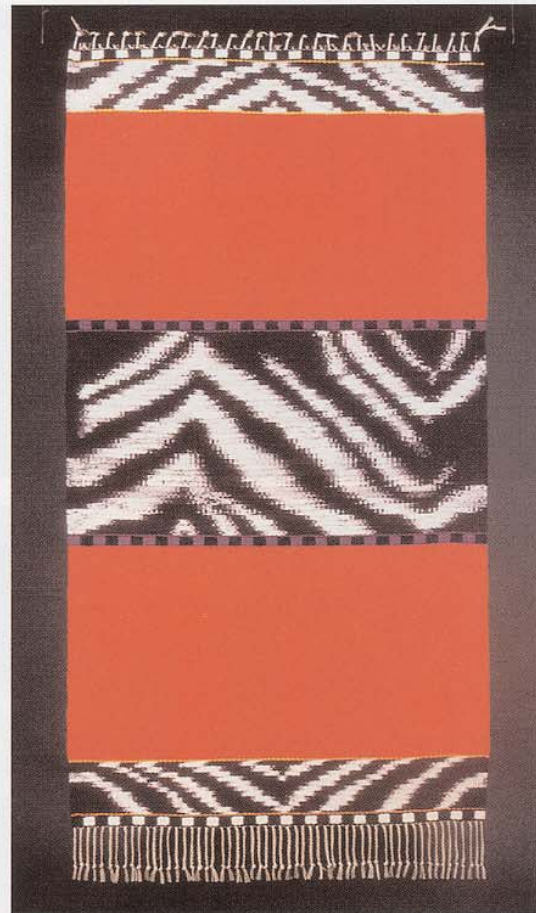
nique as it is creating a tangible spark. It's about communicating my truth about color, design, symbol, and cloth."

Wendy Ross of South Carolina says, "Mary was one of the most generous teachers I have ever encountered, willing to spend time explaining her secrets to me and offering suggestions on how to make my own work better." Jackie Malone of Florida agrees. "She has a unique ability to modify her approach for each student," she says. "She gave me confidence. I learned that the creative process is part of a value system—her mantra, 'trust the process,' is about more than weaving. It's about life."

Zicafoose's undergraduate work in photography was primarily portraiture, and an early indicator of her interest in personal communication and aesthetic composition. One image that she finds particularly significant is of her grandmother, Anna Brelowski, a hardworking and no-nonsense Polish immigrant. "I had changed my major to art, and didn't know where I'd get the tuition fees," Zicafoose explained. "My grandmother gave me a beaded purse she'd made as a young girl. Inside was the money I needed to set my course. With that surprising gift, she communicated her support for my decisions and dreams. I shot a series of photos of her, one of which was published in a national magazine, and she was so proud!" The gift also passed a handmade heirloom from one generation to another.

In graduate school, Zicafoose worked in clay and relished the physicality of it, the glazes and the dirt. Her functional and beautiful tableware led to a desire for functional and beautiful cloth. "From the moment I sat at a loom," says Zicafoose, "it was clear! I am a very old weaver—it felt like I had done this many, many times. And it is because of the ancient guild system of learning from the masters that I am a career weaver today. Through the generosity, patience and honed skills of the Handweavers Guild of Lincoln, Nebraska, particularly the accomplished teacher Bertha Galloway, I learned my craft. Who would have guessed where that apprenticeship would lead?"

If Zicafoose is a weaver in her bones, her heart sings with color. Her signature is bold fields of intense color in simplified, hard-edged designs. One can understand her appreciation of painter Mark Rothko. She has said that, "weaving is the grid that holds all the color together." She refers to color as a "frequency" and creates this "color alchemy" in the dye kitchen off her studio. Using acid dyes and a warm palette, she blends colors to make each tapestry unique. Scrupulously meticulous,



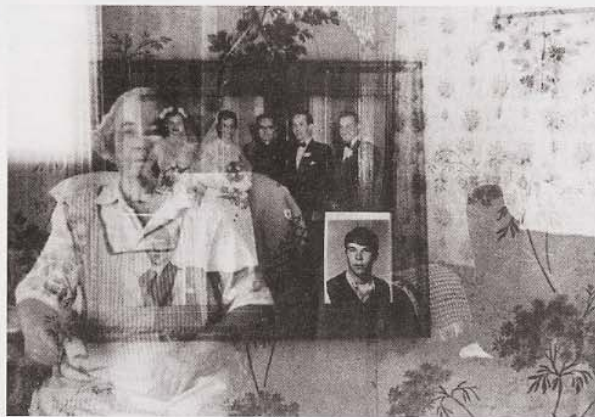
LEFT: Mary Zicafoose, tapestry weaver.

RIGHT: *Prayer Blanket for a Vanishing Species*, 1996. Handwoven, hand-dyed, weft-faced ikat; wool on linen warp; 73 by 40 inches.



she has accumulated five thick notebooks of color samples and dye formulas, records of every piece she has created. A spectrum of dyed wool forms a background for her two working looms, a sixty-four-inch Macomber and an eight-foot maple Cranbrook. The latter she bought on impulse (or instinct?) from tapestry master Jon Eric Riis, and she says, "It's moved my work and my thinking into a larger scale."

Another wall is covered with designs and notes on the project at hand. The name or theme emerges first and can present itself at any moment—in a dream or while carpooling the swim team. As pragmatic as her grandmother, Zicafoose then develops the idea through a three-step process—a thumbnail sketch, a scale line drawing on graph paper, and finally a full color mock-up using Prismacolor® pencils or Color-aid® silk screen papers. These

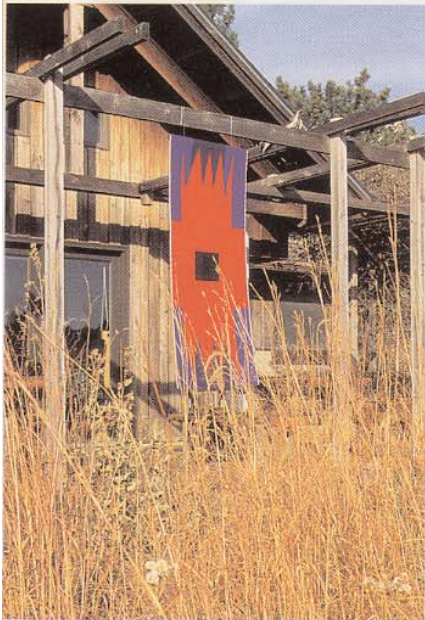


are taped to the top of the loom where she can refer to them as she works. If questions arise, she will have the design blown up to full size. These images exude their own suggestive appeal, but pale next to the explosive power of color-charged wool.

Black and white, red, purple, and that yellow! It must seem like working with electricity. Pieces early in her career reflected a rich but somber Amish palette. Motherhood transformed her personal life and her life as a weaver as well. Faced with the overwhelming time and emotional demands of an infant, Zicafoose doubted whether she would ever weave again. Newly located in New Mexico, she felt very isolated. Driving one day past mountains warmed by fall aspens, she pulled into a tiny weaving shop. There she saw yarn of that aspen gold and, as she says, "Something exploded in my heart!" If she could not find the time to weave, perhaps she could at least dye fibers and create color—at least keep that much alive as an artist. That bit of encouragement and creative nourishment renewed her determination to live her life as she believes she was meant to live it. "In fighting for my work, I achieved balance as a mother. With each place and situation comes a gift. Motherhood *and* weaving have taught me to be *here, now.*"

She expands her art weaving by creating in other media. Opening next summer in Denver, an exhibit of her tapestries at The Native American Trading Company will run alongside (quite literally—the galleries are next door to each other on Bannock Street) an exhibit of her works on paper: drawings, lithographs and monoprints at Emil Nelson Gallery. In 2001, she challenged herself to participate in a public sculpture project entitled *J. Doe*. She interpreted her designs in fiberglass and industrial aluminum to create *J. Doe and the Magic Carpet*, which she describes as "culturally blended and a timeless universal soul. The Doe and the fly-

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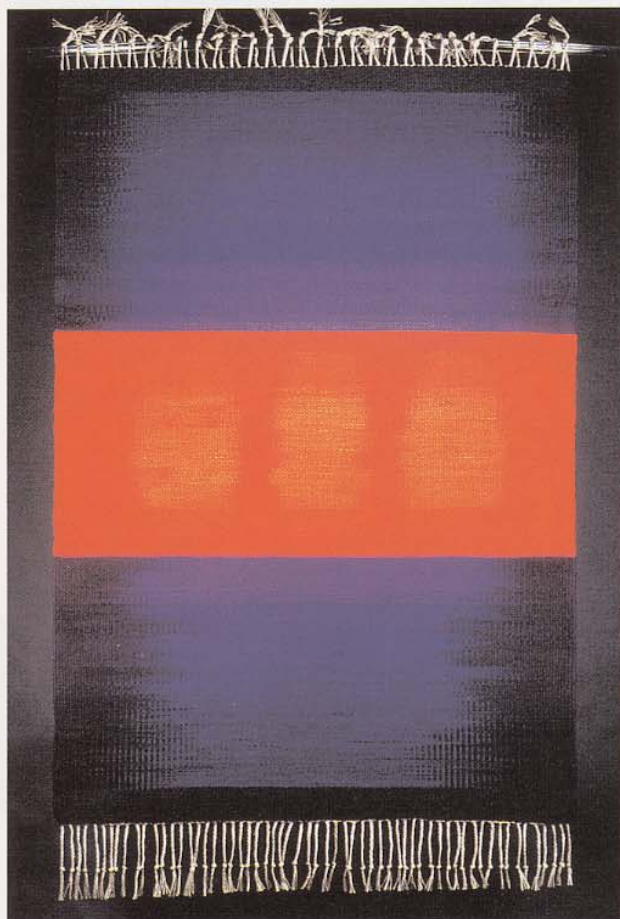


CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP:

Five weft-faced ikat and slit-woven tapestries in group shot, at American Craft Council Show in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1993.

Mary Zicafoose's grandmother gave her a beaded purse she had made as a young girl. Inside the purse was money for college tuition to study art. Photograph by Mary Brelowski Zicafoose.

The Sound of Fire, 2003, slit-woven tapestry at Pahuk Place, Cedar Bluffs, Nebraska. Handwoven, hand-dyed; wool, linen; 68 by 28 inches.



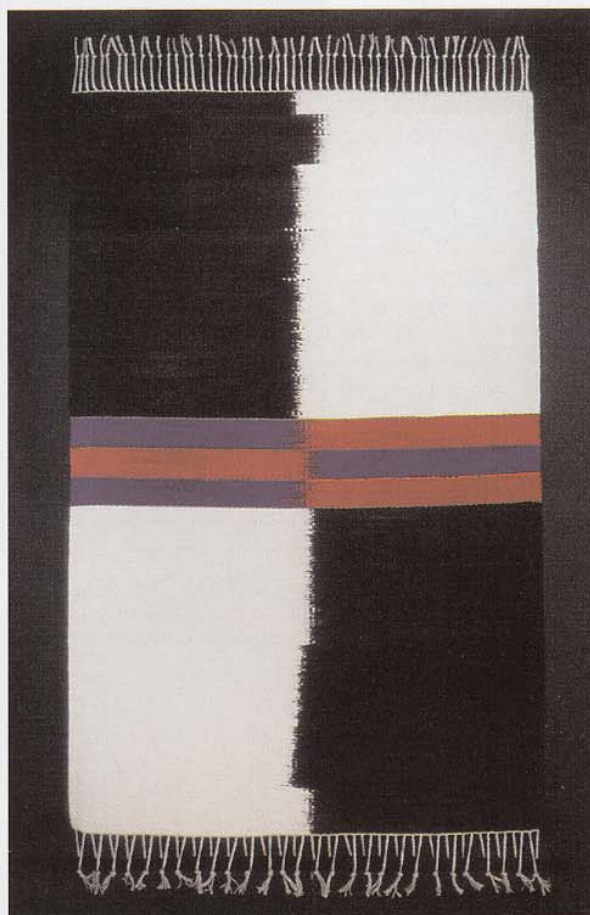
ing carpet mirror each other—a reflection of centuries of symbols, patterns and handwork.”

For Mary Zicafoose, creating unique aesthetically beautiful tapestries combines with weaving stories about time, balance, and place, often through archetypal symbols. Her current series is entitled *Out of Memory*, on view at Native American Trading Company with corresponding works on paper at the adjacent Emil Nelson Gallery. Both exhibits will run June 25th through July 30th, with the opening to be held July 2nd. “The idea for the work to be shown in Denver was triggered by my need to create from a different personal position or point of view. I am at a time of life where the word “reposition” expresses both necessity and truth.” Using the threads of myth and universal experience, Zicafoose communicates this power of transformation. Her warp is her deeply honored creative spirit and her weft is her skill. The finished work is a portal-shaped tapestry that invites and challenges the viewer to step through.

Suzanne Smith Arney is a freelance writer and arts educator in Omaha, Nebraska.

All photographs by Kirby Zicafoose.

At Convergence 2004 Denver Mary Zicafoose will lead a three-day preconference workshop, Ikat for Tapestry and Rugs: Contemporary Applications of an Ancient Technique, and she will present two seminars, Zen and Now: Weaving for Life, and Symbol Weavers and Story Tellers during the conference.



LEFT: *Three New Moons for Jupiter.* Handwoven, hand-dyed weft-faced ikat; wool, linen; 60 by 41 inches.

RIGHT: *Split Decision, 2000.* Handwoven, hand-dyed weft-faced ikat tapestry rug, 60 by 40 inches.