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Mary Zicafoose. *Blue Print*, 2008. Hand-dyed, handwoven weft-faced ikat diptych tapestry; wool, linen; 74 by 48 inches. Photograph by Kirby Zicafoose.

Fiber Exhibitions

by Polly Barton, Mary Anne Jordan, Eleanor McCain, and Mary Zicafoose

by Suzanne Smith Arney



Mary Zicafoose. *Counting Cloth #5—Double Orbit*, 2006. Weft-face ikat tapestry; wool, linen; 63 by 29 inches. Photograph by Kirby Zicafoose.

The San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles offers four solo shows, running concurrently November 18th through January 25th—artists Polly Barton, Mary Anne Jordan, Eleanor McCain, and Mary Zicafoose. For aesthetically malnourished winter refugees, it is a stimulating and re-energizing tonic. But for those who really look, the rewards include the tonic, and much more.

Each fiber artist is stellar in her own right, but together they create a conversation in thread and fabric. Viewers are invited to participate, comparing Barton's weaving in silk with Zicafoose's in wool. Both use ikat technique, but Barton's are almost ethereal, where Zicafoose's are bold and color-saturated. Quilt aficionados could compare McCain's reinterpretations of traditional patterns with Jordan's insubordinate drips. Finding the many analogies and distinctions among the four will bring a new understanding and appreciation of contemporary fiber approaches.

Curator Deborah Corsini says she looked at a hundred images before choosing these four artists. "I know their work," she says. "They are masters of their medium and they push the boundaries. I would describe them as mid-career, and still evolving. Yet, each one's work shows maturity and sophistication." Corsini brings more than a scholarly eye to the selection—she is herself a nationally recognized weaver.

As different as it may appear at first glance, the work has another commonality. "Process," says Corsini, "is very much a part of their identity." For each of these artists, color is a significant feature of their artistic communication.

Wrapped/Unwrapped: Ikat Tapestries of Mary Zicafoose maps the weaver's ongoing dialog with ancient and archetypal communication and definitions of identity. For a current series based on her own thumbprint, she and her assistant spent three weeks wrapping and knotting the intricate pattern. She has used weft-faced ikat since 1987, and her designs are recognized by their soft exactitude and bold, saturated color. Working in a dye kitchen off of her home studio, she transforms two-ply natural wool bundles into a color spectrum unique to each series. "Color is a measurable frequency of energy—it is the liquid heartbeat of my work," Zicafoose says. "I dye because this frequency must contain and carry my energetic thumbprint. It must record my consciousness, my sensibility and my unique tweaking of value, hue and intensity."

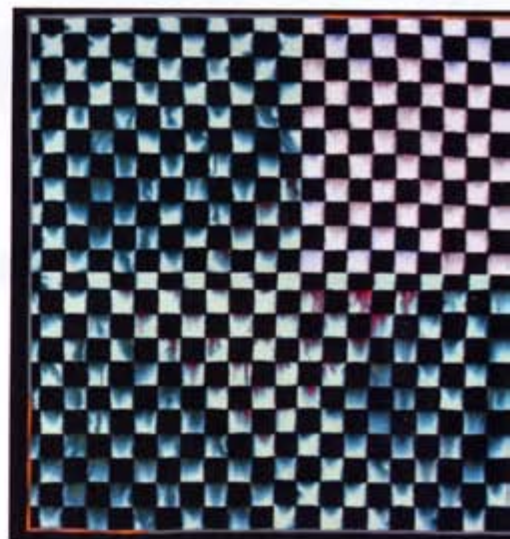
This exploration of identity began with an unexpected design, *Broken Code*, which was shown at Convergence in 2002. "It was out of context for my work then—jarring," says Zicafoose. However, the *Counting Cloth* series, 2005-2006, picked up the concept of encoded textiles, such as Incan khipu, and combined it with archetypal solar symbols. Zicafoose has always sensed that ikat can be read as a language. In fact, she describes the graphic look of ikat as resembling pixelation, tying our computer age to ancient craft societies. "Lately, all the different currents of my work are moving in the same direction," she says. With her latest *Thumbprint* designs, the code she is exploring is her own. "Our genetic code reads like a text in us," she says. Deciphering that message, or at the least recognizing our connecting threads—with people everywhere and throughout time—is one of the greatest rewards of this multi-level conversation with art and artists.

For Mary Ann Jordan, color is a metaphor. Although she followed a traditional art school program, she has always considered her medium to be textiles. The attraction to quilts, especially the improvisation she found in African-American quilts, was shaped during a year as a Visiting Faculty Fellow at the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska. Jordan says she thought of her early quilts as drawings, and she still treats them that way. She paints fabric with dye. She also drips, dribbles, and dabs, often working vertically. Black is her favored color choice, but even "black" dye, she reminds me, is not a simple color. "There is actually a lot of variation in black," she says, "and I can add more of something, such as blue, to the black." By adjusting the dampness of the fabric, the amount of added color, and the liquidity of the dye, she affects the rate and intensity of its drips and smears. Using *One Patch Variation* as an example, Jordan hand-printed the checkerboard pattern on a table, wet the fabric, then hung it to dry. She does this "wet work" in the textile studios at the University of Kansas, where she is Professor of Textiles. Piecing the four squares and quilting them is done in her home studio. *Black Rungs with Dots* was made three years earlier. "Part of what I enjoy is having a strong, clear idea of what I want and then having some aspect that is out of control," she says. Thus, her exhibition title, *By Chance/By Design*. "It's a metaphor for what happens in daily life."

For Eleanor McCain, a sense of touch and a family history of fine needlework led to her quilting. "From the first time I tried quilting as an expressive art form, I was completely smitten." Indeed, McCain's impetus is reinterpreting quilt traditions, such as the nine patch, in a contemporary way. "Squares are attractive to me. The title of my show, *Variations²*, is a play on my method of color exploration using the square over and over." For example, in *9 Patch Color Study 5*, the blocks are arranged in a dizzying kaleido-



Mary Anne Jordan. *Black Rungs with Dots*, 2004. Hand-dyed, machine pieced and quilted; cotton; 74 by 46 inches. Photograph by Luke Jordan.



Mary Anne Jordan. *One Patch Variation*, 2006. Hand-dyed, machine-pieced and quilted; cotton; 85 by 85 inches. Photograph by Luke Jordan.

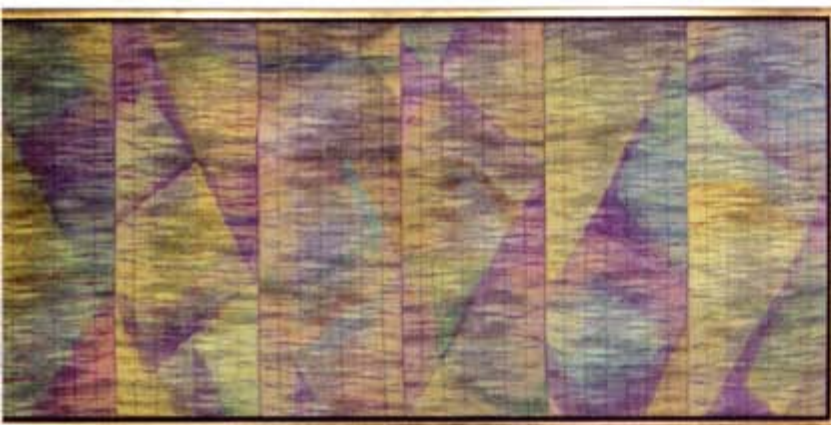


Eleanor McCain. *9 Patch Color Study 5*, 2007. Hand-dyed, cut improvisationally, machine-pieced and quilted; cotton; 54 by 54 inches. Photograph by Luke Jordan.



Eleanor McCain. *Red Crosses*, from The *Thirteens Series*, 2007. Hand-dyed, cut improvisationally, machine-pieced and quilted; cotton; 13 by 13 inches. Photograph by Luke Jordan.

scope of combinations, and it is heavily quilted in a myriad of colors. "It is the most complicated of the *Color Study Series* so far, and accordingly, almost completely improvisational," says McCain. "I had to have it almost completely assembled before I could even tell what was going on. It was a real leap of faith." *Red Crosses* addresses the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and McCain's work in the field hospital in Baton Rouge, but it also continues her color inquiries. "I am intrigued by color relationships—the shifting caused by value, placement, volume of color, and scale." *Red Crosses*, one of the *Thirteens Series*, is only thirteen inches square, each piece one-half inch. She uses only solid colors, hand-dyed by herself or other artists, and limits herself to cotton fabrics. "I mix all cotton fabrics in my quilts—sateen, Pima and muslin," she says, "to vary the texture and reflect the light differently." Many of her color ideas come from nature, such as the pear tree outside her office window. It is a practice of intentional awareness, which is carried over to her practice as an internist. "Anything that makes you 'see' better, that gives you better attention to detail," she says, "makes you a better physician."



Polly Barton. *Soundings*, 2002. Ikat warp with painted-over ikat weft; silk; 22 by 48 inches. Photograph by Wendy McEahern, courtesy of William Siegal Gallery.

Polly Barton, like Zicafoose, uses ikat to create weavings that are both universal and mysterious. "Often I will paint additional dye on the warp (after it is dressed on the loom) to shift the color further," Barton says. "Working with ikat in this way, it becomes more than a double or pictorial ikat (*ekasuri*); it becomes a compound ikat bringing an old universal technique alive in a modern yet distilled (abstracted) expression of the medium."

"Because I usually weave in a balanced or plain weave," Barton continues, "the warp is as visible as the weft." Warp becomes "the design element out of which I must try to wrestle my ideas." *Arcadia* is just such an image—the force of an idea like a windswept branch, gentle, distilled, and abstracted by color on silk and the process of weaving. An earlier piece, *Soundings*, is similar to *Arcadia* in its process, using warp as a pictorial as well as a structural element.

"*Soundings* was a difficult piece," Barton recalls. "Working with the warp was a challenge because of the stripe effect." The main difference between the two is that in the intervening years, Barton has learned to trust the fiber, to respect the force of the idea. She started with a sketch, realizing the tapestry may take a new direction. And while a title sometimes develops with the cloth, in this case it was realized only later: *Arcadia*, a place of peace and simplicity.

Corsini has given each artist a defined space. In this exhibition, each gallery opens into another, allowing a thread of energy to collect and connect the views.

But we can also listen to the conversation, both the visual and the emotional, the articulated and the nuanced. Every stage of making is an effort toward communication—between artist and materials, among artists, and between artist and viewer. Each visitor picks up only a portion, based on both familiarity with the language and personal sensitivity. But that is one reason to visit galleries—to seek the blue within the black, the play of warm and cool, to hear new accents and inflections, and to recognize the mark of another human being.

Suzanne Smith Arney writes about art and artists and people and places from the center of everything—Omaha, Nebraska. The San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles will host a panel discussion with these artists November 22nd, as well as a workshop with Mary Zicafoose November 21st. For more information, see <www.sjqmusem.org/calendar> or call (408) 971-0323, extension 14.



Polly Barton. *Arcadia*, 2008. Double ikat, 2 panels; silk; 40 by 45 inches. Photograph by Wendy McEahern, courtesy of Gail Martin Gallery.