

Reviewed by Suzanne Smith Arney

**Mountains & Ghosts:  
New Ikat Tapestries & Prints—  
Mary Zicafoose**  
Robert Hillestad Textile Gallery  
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

The tapestry *Mountain for the Buddha: Sky* took command of the Robert Hillestad Textile Gallery's entry wall. This bold introduction to Mary Zicafoose's *Mountains & Ghosts* exhibition (December 2, 2013 - January 17, 2014) is strong, in the way that silk is strong—and soft, lustrous, enduring. The mountain's power is not brute strength but intense energy, flowing through white channels against a black matrix that ricochets upwards, back and forth, along the hard-edged red and white inlay border of the diptych panels. These bands guard the entry to the mountain; they release its energy to the sky.

In her studio on the perimeter of the Great Plains, Zicafoose weaves mountains from wool and silk, memories of ancient walls overlooking even more ancient vistas, news stories, primal songs, and prayers. When making a print, she layers shapes and archetypes, smooths

creamy color, welcomes ghosts (both imaginary spirits and, in printmaking, the second pull from an inked plate) for their unexpected revelations. She has been working with mountain imagery since 2011, although the triangular element has been an ongoing thread in her work. Mountains, pyramids, and temples, says Zicafoose, represent the “archetypal symbol of the trinity.”

Zicafoose is a master of weft-face *ikat*, a resist dye technique mostly seen today in Japanese indigo-dyed cotton, indigenous Mayan clothing, and Malaysian ceremonial garments—but rarely used for large-scale tapestries. Zicafoose has learned *ikat* (a Malay word meaning to “bind” or “tie”) over nearly three decades of self-study and trial-and-error. She describes it as “an adrenalized process that allows a more painterly touch to the hard-edged intersections of warp and weft.” The process is daunting. Shunning a computer, sketches are developed and written into specific patterns. Every individual weft thread is bundled and tied with a resisting wrap, then dyed, untied, dried, and carefully coded before winding onto shuttles. “In my first project, I tied six design areas,” says Zicafoose. “Now, some of my tapestries have 68,000.” It takes Zicafoose and an assistant months to complete this phase of the tapestry—and the yarn has yet to touch the loom.

*Mountains & Ghosts* included seven tour de force diptych tapestries alongside large monoprints, all recent works defined by Zicafoose's signature fields of color so intense they seem to vibrate. Interspersed ghost prints challenged viewers by the degree of correlation to their original.

The dynamic between the traditional, labor-intense *ikat* technique and the spontaneity of her contemporary prints created an almost palpable energy. An example is found in adjacent works with the



MARY ZICAFOOSE  
*Mountain for the Buddha - Caution*  
Weft-faced ikat tapestry, diptych, wrapped,  
dyed and woven wool on linen warp,  
60" x 60", 2013.  
Photos: Kirby Zicafoose.

tapestry *Mountain for the Buddha: Caution* and the monoprint *Mountain with Purple Flames*. Each radiates intense yellow countered by a dark contrasting color to very different effects. The tapestry's wool fibers are saturated with yellow dye pooling to gold; the print's delineated color comes from inked shapes laid onto a paper matrix. Elsewhere, the print's ghost pulls a trompe-l'œil trick without its purple flames.

Looking from one to the other, we find ourselves engaged in the same questions the artist must have pondered, the ageless juxtaposition of harmony and tension. "We all dance with it," Zicafoose says. Her work is an invitation to circuit the mountain and see all of it, to dance with both mountains and ghosts.

[www.textilegallery.unl.edu](http://www.textilegallery.unl.edu)  
[www.maryzicafoose.com](http://www.maryzicafoose.com)

—Suzanne Smith Arney is a freelance writer living in Omaha, Nebraska, who enjoys writing about artists and their work, and the role of art in our everyday lives.

MARY ZICAFOOSE *Mountain with Purple Flames*  
 Collagraphic monoprint 1/1, 32" x 24", 2013.



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