

"Innovations in Textile Art"

A Japanese theme underlies fiber art symposium

by Carol Ferring Shepley

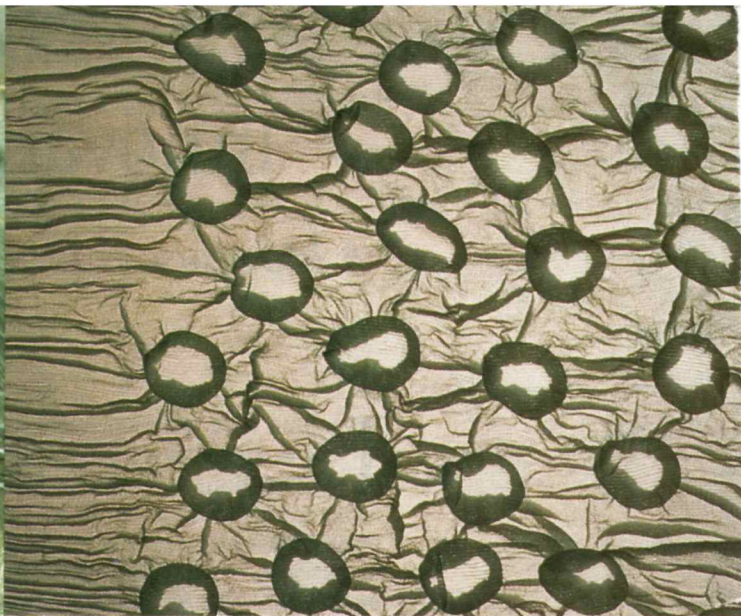
In June 1999, the fiber world focused on St. Louis with its third city-wide symposium, "Innovations in Textile Art III." Nine galleries (seven not-for-profit and two private) participated with exhibitions, lectures, a panel discussion, and workshops during the weekend event. The St. Louis Art Museum pre-

sented the keynote exhibit, "Structure and Surface, Contemporary Japanese Textiles." Two other galleries responded with exhibits honoring Japan, the country where the terms "artist" and "craftsperson" are synonymous.

Jane Sauer, basket artist and chairman of the American Craft Council board of trustees, orga-

Jiro Yonezawa. Jizo 6, 1998; bamboo, cedar root, wood, urushi lacquer; 9 by 8 inches diameter. From "The Japanese Aesthetic," courtesy R. Duane Reed Gallery.





nized the first two St. Louis fiber symposia under the auspices of Craft Alliance. This time, Sauer put "Textile Art III" into the harness but handed over the reins to Craft Alliance in 1998 when she moved from St. Louis to Santa Fe. Nevertheless she curated two shows for the symposium.

The Japanese textiles at the St. Louis Art Museum represented the extremes of innovative experimentation contrasted to ancient traditions, and industrial production compared to hand weaving and dyeing. Cara McCarty, who curated the exhibit with Matilda McQuaid, associate curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, said, "These things are new but enduring. They are not fashion but a reflection of our lifestyles today and represent some of the most serious design activity of the present moment." The beauty and care with which the exhibit was hung reflected how seriously the museum takes fiber art. The textiles hung sensuously from poles parallel to the ceiling, with fiber-optic lighting dramatically highlighting sheen and texture. Because it is almost impossible not to touch these surfaces, small swatches awaited viewers' hands. The display, which McCarty termed "not a comprehensive but a good survey," was divided into six sections: transparent, dyed, reflective, printed, sculpted, and layered.

In the transparent space, handwoven silks floated like wraiths—light, diaphanous, and quivering at the slightest breath. Michiko Uehara describes her silk making as "weaving air" or the "weave of a dragonfly's wing." Another transparent fabric used in the conquest of outer space, thanks to NASA's development of a triaxial weave (two warps and one weft) to create a fabric of maximum strength and flexibility to line space capsules, hung in contrast to the ancient silk tradition.

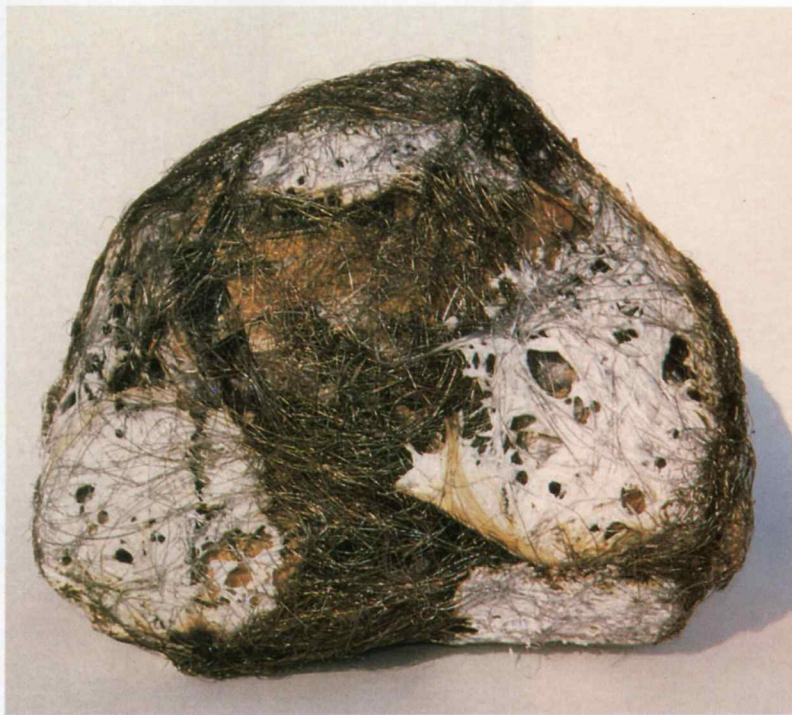
Layered fabrics also included both traditional and industrial techniques. Chiyoko Tanaka wove her textile on a hand loom, a

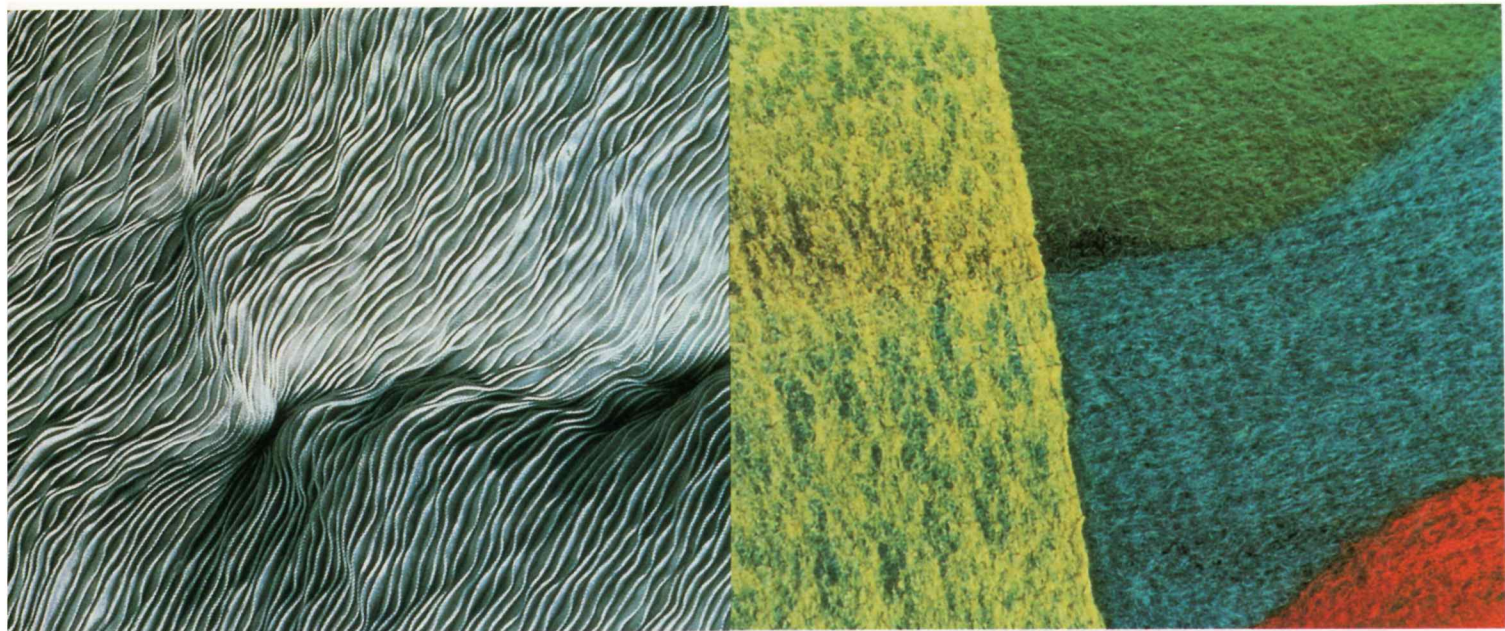
process she believes conveys time. She ground different types of soil into her fabric, thus coloring it and breaking down the fiber for a worn look also symbolizing the passage of time. Fashion designer Issey Miyake layered swatches of wool, polyester, chiffon, and batting together with needlepunching for his elegant prism series. McCarty said this reflects the fact that "the Japanese are leaders in the environmental movement and are very interested in recycling." Reiko Sudo designed a gossamer fabric that combined industrial and hand work in **Feather Flurries**. Huge machine looms were stopped periodically so real feathers could be inserted by hand inside pockets in the double weave.

Above left: Michiko Uehara. Yuyake (Evening Glow), 1991; double weave silk dyed with annato, madder, and gromwell.

Above right: Yuh Okano. Epidermis (Forest), 1997; shibori dyed polyester, heat pressed. Both from "Structure and Surface," courtesy The St. Louis Art Museum.

Below: Hideho Tanaka. Vanishing B, 1998; woven wire, burnt paper; 11 by 12 by 8 inches. From "The Japanese Aesthetic," courtesy R. Duane Reed Gallery.





Above left: Inoue Pleats Co. Crystal, 1997; machine pleated and manually compressed polyester.

Above right: Issey Miyake. Prism Series: Coat (detail), 1997; hand applied and needlepunched wool, polyester chiffon, and batting. Both from "Structure and Surface," courtesy The St. Louis Art Museum.

Below: Fran Reed. Can NetEscape the Snapper?, 1999; red snapper, gut, willow; 12 by 10 by 9 inches. Photo: Chris Arend. From "Baskets & Beyond," courtesy Craft Alliance.

In his book *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, Leonard Koren writes about a Japanese aesthetic—"a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete." In this spirit, many of the sculpted fabrics make a virtue of polyester's tendency to wrinkle. Looking like elegant Fortuny pleats, the polyesters made by the Inoue Pleat Co., Ltd., were folded into origami-type paper molds and then heated to press these pleats into memory. In *Epidermis (Ocean)*, Yuh Okano also used heat-set polyester to create a fabric with the bumpy skin of a sea creature. He accomplished this startling effect with a variation on the Japanese art of shibori, tying little disks into the polyester before applying heat.

Reflective fabrics by their very nature combine opposites—the sheen of metal with the pliability of fabric. In Sudo's *Copper Cloth* and *Stainless Steel Gloss*, real copper and stainless steel from the automotive industry were "splatter plated" into cloth to an iridescent effect that in no way recalls cars. Some of the most beautiful and unconventional fabrics were created by Junichi Arai, whom McCarty called "the grandfather of the Japanese textile movement with his wonderful experimentation. His whole house is a lab. He experiments in his kitchen, like a mad scientist." In his *Deep Sea*, wrinkles and shimmer of blue, green, and silver played off against each other in a mix of polyester and aluminum with sculptural presence. In *Moon Light*, a bold strip of silver shot through a field of black, encompassing micro-slit polyester film with aluminum, wool, and nylon filament rendered with shibori and melt-off techniques. A catalog, *Structure and Surface: Contemporary Japanese Textiles*, was published by MOMA, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., and made possible by the Japan Foundation.

"Converging Cultures," an exhibit at the Center of Contemporary Arts (COCA), mirrored the "Surface and Structure" show. Curator Barbara Simon, a St. Louis weaver, chose textiles made by Americans who have lived or studied in Japan, or by Japanese who have lived or studied in America. Simon said she loves the Japanese because "they don't have the same division we do between art and craft. If it's functional, they think: why not make it beautiful?" As compared to the art museum exhibit, all these pieces depended upon hand work, whether shibori, ikat, roketsu-zome, printing, or stitching. Some of the most interesting work was also some of the most minimal. For example, Yoshiko Wada's *Unfolding* is an installation of two sheets of nearly black cloth; yet closer inspection



revealed subtle colorations of sienna, perhaps vermilion, maybe blue. The textiles retained the memory of folding in a complex geometric pattern. Wada explained, "My work has to do with marks on cloth. There are eight different folds that yield peaks and valleys, all different." Wada, who is Japanese, is currently a visiting scholar at the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The author of *Shibori, the Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped Resist Dyeing*, the definitive book on the subject now in its seventh printing, Wada taught a workshop at the symposium.

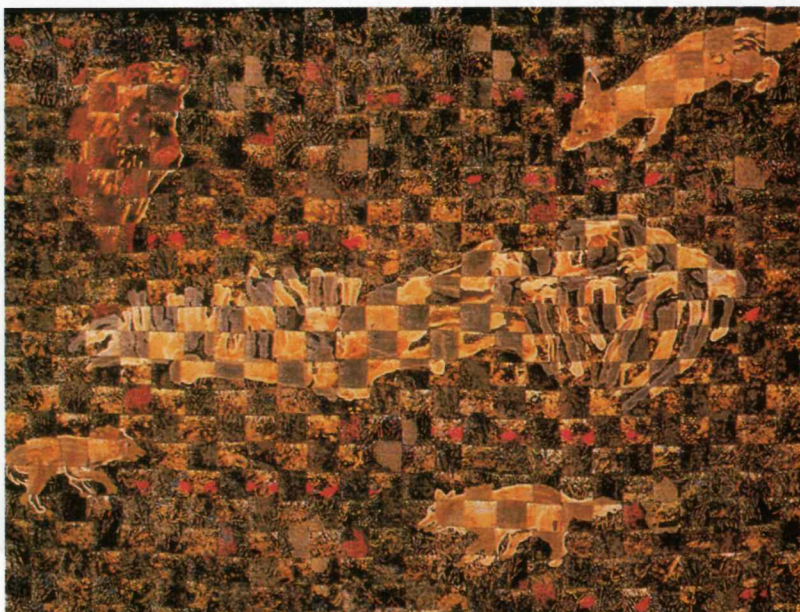
Betsy Sterling Benjamin, Wada's opposite as an American who has lived in Japan for 18 years, lectured on her area of expertise, *roketsu-zome* (wax-resist dyeing). Benjamin's *Winter Rain Triptych* has been resist dyed with a fluid brush and overlaid with calligraphic silk embroidery. At first it appeared to be almost monochromatic, but subtle shades of black, brown, blue, and sienna welled up for an effect that was delicate, yet sure and elegant.

Vernal Bogren-Swift's *Japanese Beetle Coats* hanging and twisting in a breeze with their eight arms added a witty note to the COCA show. Bogren-Swift told symposium participants they were resist-dyed with rust, representing the iron hills of her native Minnesota. In the tradition of Japanese reverence for nature, she said, "Iron means time and breath. Rust means things that hold water like hemoglobin that breathes. Both the rock and the body contain memory in their skin."

Some of the most beautiful work in the exhibit was made by two emerging artists who represented the same duality as Wada and Benjamin. Lisa Zarinelli Gawlik is an American who lives in Japan with her husband, who is in the military, and Akemi Nakano Cohn is a Japanese who married an American and moved to Chicago. Gawlik's works incorporated a mix of natural dyeing and embroidery. In *Fall in Kyoto* she has embroidered golden orange ginkgo leaves to a cloth dyed to look like pebbles. Cohn said, "My kind of work comes from my experience since I moved to the United States in 1985." One work was entitled *Assimilation* and the other *Taking Root*. Using a mixture of rice paste mixed with dye, and resist methods, she printed words, almost unintelligible, both across in English and up and down in Japanese calligraphy.

Defining "The Japanese Aesthetic," the title of the basketry show she curated at the R. Duane Reed Gallery, Jane Sauer said, "The Japanese are in awe of nature. The principle of yin/yang from Taoism appears in their work... Their art is giving homage to the power of nature. Many pieces are about controlling nature or about nature being out of control."

In line with these ideas, Ueno Masao, who has exhibited around the world and has



wrapped buildings in fiber, included a split-bamboo, bentwood piece that seemed to represent forces of nature that are raw and beautiful yet controlled. Many parallel lines, casting shadows to awesome effect, swelled and came together around a pod of air, reflecting the power of wind or light or fertility. Three volutes formed this shape, so simplicity underlies complexity.

In *Vanishing B*, Hideo Tanaka's work was as beautiful conceptually as it was visually. Layers of metal wires curved over each other to weave a nearly solid surface over an irregularly shaped center. The Japanese aesthetic is drawn to all that is gnarled, irregular, unique, and unconventional, like a rock or a branch found on the beach after it has been worked upon by wind and water. But this surface also contained enmeshed burnt paper. Tanaka burned strips of paper hundreds of yards long, leading into the sea so that he could symbolically embed these forces of nature within his art.

Jiro Yonezawa's pieces represented the yin/yang principle. The main body of each work was a traditional basket, tightly woven in a geometric herringbone pattern. Yet this tight, conventional basket was wrapped with a flowing branch that creates a linear element, drawing the life force into this geometric construct. And Yonezawa covered the whole in black lacquer to unify these opposites.

The other show that Sauer curated, "Baskets & Beyond" at



Opposite top: Akemi Nakano Cohn. Habitat-2, 1998; color rice paste resist printed on silk, interlaced, hand stitched; 45 1/2 by 60 inches.

Opposite bottom: Leesa Zarinelli Gawlik. Fall in Kyoto, 1999; hand painted, screen printed, machine pieced and quilted; 15 by 51 1/2 inches.

Below: Betsy Sterling Benjamin. Night Rain, 1997; roketsu-zome wax resist, discharge dye, stencil pigment on silk; 22 1/2 by 59 inches. Photo: Y. Tange. All from "Converging Cultures" at Center of Contemporary Arts, courtesy Barbara Simon.

Craft Alliance, contained American artists' work that looked like sculpture, although all in some way contained a hollow core, thus existing within the boundaries of basketry. Sauer commented that, "In American basketry, people are exploring the limits of their material or seeking some interior message connecting them to their ancestry, to spiritual values or to the human body.... It is interesting that the women all talked about some internal process that generated their work." Many of the Americans also worked with unusual materials, and all paid homage to the material.

Soon Ran Youan's knotless knitted pieces reflected the theme of converging cultures seen throughout the symposium (although Ran came from Korea, not Japan). Because of language problems when she went to graduate school at the University of Indiana, and because she was unable to return home, Ran was "isolated, lonely, alienated. I don't think there is anyone who hasn't felt that way at one

time. You can feel sorrow, angst, gut emotion in her works," says Sauer. The totemic figure with its white dappled surface in *Island II* appeared as if with an aura through silkscreen fabric in a light box. It hovered and floated, like a dancer with mysterious power; its head was bent as it looked at its hands, perhaps in mourning or seeking something.

Fran Reed's pieces looked the most like traditional baskets in shape, although their materials—fish skin and scales and gut (hog casing)—were the least conventional in "Baskets & Beyond." Throughout the ages, basketmakers have gathered what is at hand in the world around them. In Anchorage, Alaska, this includes "using materials I find floating upside down in the river," said Reed. In *Can NetEscape the Snapper?*, a pun on fish net and computer language, the reddish scales captured light and color. The fins made a spiky, strong pattern. She also wove willow branches into a net to form the frame.

Barbara Cooper's huge pieces that hugged the floor were created in response to the idea that "trees grow around structures, wounds, almost like a benign tumor. I collected automobile metal parts I found on the street" and incorporated them into wood pieces, said Cooper in her gallery talk. She collected wood burls and observed forms in the water to see how they reflected what has happened to them. These observations reappeared in works such as *Corm*, a sculpture shaped like a tulip bulb incorporating a chunk of bronze like a growth from within. The marvelous, dappled surface was made from chunks of scrap wood she recycled from furniture factories, thus gathering from the urban environment where she lives.

Other exhibits in "Textile Art III" were an installation by Ann Coddington Rast at the Forum for Contemporary Art; "The Tapestry Art of Muriel Nezhnie" at The Gallery, University City Public Library; "Fiber Focus '99," an exhibit juried by Yoshiko Wada at Art St. Louis; "Missouri Wearable Art" at the St. Louis Artists' Guild; and "The Other East" at Portfolio Gallery Center.

The exhibits gave the 52 participants from all over the United States and Japan the opportunity to see an exhaustive selection of fiber art. The many lectures and gallery talks provided insights into methods and materials, and overviews of textiles through the ages, as well as the Japanese aesthetic. The weekend provided an invaluable opportunity to exchange ideas over meals, before events, and in workshops. The tradition will continue. Craft Alliance executive director Sharon McPherron announced the next St. Louis fiber symposium will take place June 8 to 10, 2001.

Carol Ferring Shepley is a writer and teaches at Maryville University in St. Louis, Missouri.

