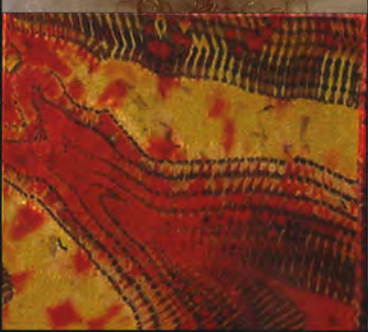
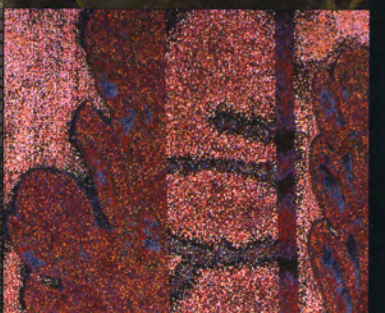
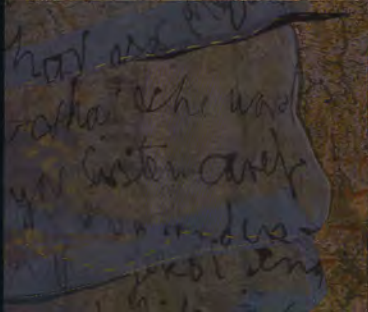


Crossing
Boundaries | **M**aintaining
Traditions
Teaching Artists
of the Southeast



Crossing Boundaries Maintaining Traditions

For ancient peoples, textiles meant survival: fishing nets, ropes, baskets, shelters, and clothing. Textiles predated the arts of ceramics and metallurgy and were highly developed before man could write. For over 10,000 years humans have made textiles for everyday use and ritual, for status and protection, for work and adornment, for money and pure delight. Initially, we respond to their lively decoration, their touch, and their protective comfort. If we stop to look more carefully, however, we can be moved deeply by their ability to embody meaning and to evoke associations from our own lives.

For thousands of years textiles were made slowly, and entirely by hand with skill, patience and artistry. Today most of the textiles in our everyday lives are mass-produced at astonishing speeds and are easily available in cheap abundance. Although the preciousness of the handmade textile object is still widely acknowledged, the hand making of textiles in America, once passed down from mothers to daughters, is no longer widely taught in the home. Beginning soon after World War II, that responsibility shifted to the many new programs established in colleges and universities across the country. Some programs started and remained in home economics departments, but by the end of the 1960's, many state universities included textiles—along with ceramics, metalsmithing, and woodworking—in their art departments. But, inclusion in the academic setting did not necessarily guarantee universal acceptance. For decades, textile artist/educators have worked with dedication and persistence to wrest the medium from its simultaneous denigration as “women’s work” and “craft” and to secure its deserved equality with other visual arts.

Across the country, in all types of academic settings, teaching fiber artists demonstrate an unswerving commitment to the preservation of the ancient hand techniques, and an equally courageous embrace of new tools, new chemistry, and digital technologies. While they maintain and pass on the traditional techniques, they also cross boundaries of concept, material, and technique—the inspiration for the title of this exhibition.

Armed with the skills and sensitivities of a good textile arts education, an individual can choose many paths along a “creative continuum” that includes the studio artist, the studio craftsperson, the production craftsperson, the free-lance designer, the entrepreneur, and the on-staff designer working in industry. Each choice is valuable to society and provides creative challenges worth embracing. With knowledge about yarn, cloth, structure, color, pattern, and dyes, each will bring into being objects of use, beauty, and/or meaning. The expertise and accomplishments of the artists in this exhibition span the full range of this creative continuum.

The making of “textile art” (also referred to as “fiber art” or “art fabric”)—objects that are intentionally nonfunctional and that embrace fine art concepts as well as material considerations—is largely a phenomenon of the 20th century. Its roots reach to the Arts and Crafts movement in the 19th century and the legacies of important craft schools like the Bauhaus in Germany, and Black Mountain School in North Carolina. Its practitioners draw on influences from traditional European tapestry, American quilt making, and important 20th century Western movements in the visual arts such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Decorative Art and Conceptual Art.

The great themes of mid-20th century textile art—large scale, three-dimensional form, natural materials, and strong but minimal color palettes—established the medium in the visual arts alongside painting and sculpture, and began to break down the barriers between the fine arts and crafts. Since the 1950's, the textile arts have evolved to embrace a wider range of expressions and to allow artists to address more intimate themes; to tell stories; to express ironies; and to shock, provoke, denounce, or delight.

The work produced today takes many forms ranging from large hangings for the wall to miniature works; freestanding sculptures to site-specific works; performance pieces to

installations; and wearable art to functional clothing. To express their ideas, many textile artists now deliberately embrace the traditional aspects of textiles which once branded the medium as “women’s work” and which the previous generation therefore sought to avoid: color, pattern, texture, structure, and even decoration. This development signals a collective maturing in the discipline and a confidence in its stature and acceptance in the art world.

Many mid-career textile artists working today were first drawn to the medium by the slow, meditative, and repeated hand motions in weaving, dyeing, printing, painting, and stitching, or because they craved the feel of the materials in their hands. In the late 20th century this way of making came face-to-face with the computer age. The “collision” raised many important issues about the nature of textile making and was accompanied by waves of both enthusiasm and resistance.

Some artists continue to explore the potential of handmade textiles, achieving increasingly greater sophistication, elegance, and artistic control in their work. Many have leaped wholeheartedly into complete digital production, exploring the potential of a new realm of image possibilities. With curiosity, reflection, experimentation, and careful evaluation, others have “seam”lessly (pun intended at the reader’s option) integrated the new digital technologies into their work alongside the hand technologies. In the new century, digital technology has spawned many new types of images not previously possible in hand made textiles, thus expanding the visual vocabulary of the medium. Using the computer, both surface designers and weavers can easily manipulate their original source images in size, scale, color, and structure, and, if the artist desires, the finished works may display more complex color palettes; layered and blended images; and a renewed interest in the ability of cloth to incorporate photography—as evidenced by many of the works in this exhibition.

One of the realities of teaching the textiles arts is that the programs are usually small, typically a single professor and students. Most textile art faculty therefore work alone in their medium, surrounded by groups of painters, sculptors, or other visual artists or designers who may not understand it (or wish to). The result is that these teaching artists rarely have professional peers in their immediate geographical area. Ironically, just when work in the medium has grown so robust and mature, college-level textile arts programs themselves, always small in enrollment and faculty, are also shrinking in number. A teacher’s retirement often results in the loss of the single fibers faculty position, the selling off of equipment, the shutdown of the program, and the distribution of its budget to larger and more bureaucratically powerful programs. Seeing a need to combat our common isolation and to “network” for our mutual survival, in 2001 I contacted all of the teaching textile artists known to me in the Southeast region, and organized a meeting at Penland School of Crafts to discuss forming a loose alliance that would allow us to share our work; to talk about our teaching successes, challenges and solutions; to strengthen our programs by exchanging knowledge and strategies; to demonstrate the collective strength of our accomplishments; and, most importantly, to create a kind of collegiality we found missing in our own schools. To my delight, that group has grown steadily larger and now enthusiastically gathers each October to laugh; to gripe good-naturedly; to share new artwork; to exchange instructional projects and tactics for working the academic “system” on behalf of our small programs; to celebrate; and to grow.

Each artist in this exhibition teaches the textile arts in a college, university, or art school setting in the Southeast, offering instruction in everything from the ancient arts of hand weaving, dyeing, printing, and stitching cloth, to explorations in digital technology, mixed media, and space age materials. In both the classroom and the studio, these teaching artists synthesize ideas from diverse influences and push the boundaries of traditional materials and techniques as they explore widely diverse concepts ranging from the intimate to the cosmic. Despite the relative insecurity of the current academic atmosphere, this group of teaching artists collectively demonstrates the strength, integrity, vitality, and creative energy alive in the medium today. The works in this exhibition reveal imagination; openness to challenge; embrace of both the traditional and the new technologies; commitment to standards of excellence; and a great and abiding joy in the making. The Southeast Fibers Educators Association and the exhibition organizers hope that you will enjoy this glimpse of the variety, sensitivity, creativity, skill and intelligence of these teachers guiding tomorrow’s textile artists.

Susan Brandeis
Professor of Art and Design
Director of Graduate Programs,
Art and Design, College of Design
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC