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Textiles

James Bassler (b. 1933) had a long career as a teacher, primarily at UCLA but also a significant two-year period at the then-new Appalachian Center for Crafts. He is noted for his interest in ancient Peruvian techniques, his development of wedge weave and his promotion of indigenous textiles and techniques from other cultures, particularly the Americas, as well as his willingness to cut up his weavings to reconfigure the work according to a different visual order.

Bassler's father was a professional baseball player who in the off season and after retirement made hooked rugs. The father's folk-art projects, along with Bassler's exposure to craft-making on a fortuitous trip around the world as a young man, affected his work once he found his way into weaving. He studied at UCLA under Bernard Kester, whose teaching at that time focused on conventions of textile beauty, not any notion that a piece had "content."¹ This training, coupled with Bassler's personal response to materials, yielded what now seems a rather innocent approach of exploring and working for his own ends, without any great drive to create a signature form, exhibit widely or devise career strategies.

He first taught in Los Angeles public schools, then lived and worked in Oaxaca, Mexico. During his two years in Tennessee, 1980-82, he read widely (John Cage, among others) and developed his uncommon weave technique. Wedge weave involves inserting and beating the weft at an angle to the warp; it gives a firm structure and a shaped edge. Bassler made a tapestry series composed of four-inch strips of rags from clothing, set horizontally in yarn-wrapped sisal warp. The casual appearance of the work follows the lead of Mexican and African work, yet dye color was applied according to throws of dice (inspired by John Cage's writing on chance).

While his works were still of modest size during the textile explosion of the early '70s, his scale increased in the '80s in a series of shield works. In these works he painted the warps and wedge-wove lengths, but then, surprisingly, cut them up and reassembled them. In the late '80s and '90s, Bassler constructed what he called "shrouds"—baglike forms with an opening for a face, but less than life-size, which were meant evoke injustices to Third World peoples. His most politically sharp piece in this series is *Old Glory/Shroud #1*, a wedge-weave tapestry that takes the form of a dirty American flag imprinted with letters spelling SOILED, the O, I and L particularly prominent; before it is a black coffin-shaped pedestal with a wrapped body shape showing black stains.

Nance O'Banion's career has been a progression of interests, one leading to the next, her materials often used in combination or in collaboration. The artist (b. 1949) is best known in the crafts world for the wall works of interlaced bamboo and handmade paper tied with strings and sometimes painted, which she made during the '80s. They have basket qualities but not basket form. Some were large-scale commissions for public places.

Both of O'Banion's parents were painters, and she had painted as well, but her initial area of concentration at Berkeley was printed textiles, taught by Mary Dumas. She studied there from 1967 to '73, earning both BA and MA degrees. Ed Rossbach's attention to structure and his historical references influenced her thinking. Her first work was woven double ikat, and her weavings alluded to change and metamorphosis. But at Fiberworks (she was one of the founders) she took a workshop on handmade paper in 1974 and immediately felt that it freed her from the constraints of the loom. She started showing paper works in 1976, using it as a pliable substance. In 1977 she was cutting, folding and "quilting" the paper and adding imagery by drawing and painting.

After a trip to Japan in 1979, she introduced a bamboo grid into what she called “3-d drawings.” Although this work was no longer strictly textile in material it was included in *The Art Fabric: Mainstream*, probably because it used a textile technique (the handmade paper strips were diagonally plaited through a vertical and horizontal grid of slender bamboo elements tied together with short lengths of linen)—and because the definitions were becoming looser in the fiber field. These works emphasized the pattern of structure, the alternately revealed and concealed bamboo, and various appearances of color in or on the paper and applied to the bamboo as well. In 1982 O’Banion’s work was featured at the Allrich Gallery in San Francisco, a great supporter of textiles. In 1983 she had a solo show in Kyoto in association with an international paper conference.

Her further developments in this body of work included exploring the translucency of paper made of abaca (banana fiber) rather than cotton, which was lightly sprayed with metallic enamel paints, and by using longer and more prominent threads, which yielded works that she called “hairy.” These works also offered landscape allusions and vivid color. Crumpling paper in despair ironically introduced a new imagery of lines that were variously interpreted as “the play of sunlight on water, a magnified view of skin, or sand dunes [seen] from a plane.”¹ She also explored tearing paper. Her links to fiber dissolved as her interest turned to artist’s books in the ‘90s.

Rebecca Medel’s works seem to have emerged from another culture and another time. Her large-scale, often cubic sculptures, which consist of multiple planes of open knotted netting, have been associated with Japanese temples and Zen sensibilities. Their seeming dematerialization and the illusion of light at the center can also seem futuristic, like a visitation from the cosmos. The works offer a reduced sense of incident, but they cannot be called

Minimalist because their distant effect is illusion and their close-up effect is delicacy, rather than the industrial impersonality.

Medel (b. 1947) dyes her linen or cotton threads dark blue, gray or black and uses as her structural unit a simple sailor's knot. When each net is complete it is dipped in an adhesive/sizing mixture and then hand-stretched to dry under tension. The stiff nets may be hung from wooden frames, from the wall, or from the ceiling, in layers that progressively shift color-position and that produce a moiré effect as the viewer moves around them.

Earning a BFA in environmental design from Arizona State University (1970), Medel took an introductory fiber course and developed it into a textile program at Tucson High School, where she taught for five years. She learned as she went along, from books and workshops. She in fact learned netting from a student who had taken a workshop with Anne Wilson.¹ She earned an MFA in fiber from UCLA in 1982, in 1983 had a piece accepted in the Lausanne Biennial. She has exhibited steadily since then, pursuing her concern with structure into forms as large as 22 by 27 feet in the case of a piece inspired by the 1,001 images of the Bodhisattva Kannon at the Sanjusangendo in Kyoto. She has also created freestanding knotted-linen spiral sculptures (*Spira Mirabilis I*, 1988) and a four-armed white circle within a dark square (*Microcosm*, 1987), as well as illusions of concave and convex surfaces. Medel, who painted, embroidered and also worked with her watchmaker/jeweler father from a young age, uses her refined and controlled visual effects in works that are “about the spiritual, about infinity, about other than this physical plane of existence.”¹ The symbolism of nets—expansive, interconnected—works well to her purposes.