

## ***JAN MYERS-NEWBURY: A TOUCH OF KISMET***

### ***QUILTS, COLOR, PATTERN, CHANCE***

The human impulse toward expressive communication has evolved continually over millennia, constantly adapting to developments in technologies of all sorts. With respect to fiber and cloth and the enormous range of technical processes associated with them, dyeing technologies have played a key role in expanding the decorative and communicative functions these materials have served.

One dyeing method in particular has enriched the decorative and communicative capacity of textiles by expanding the nuanced ways that color and fiber interact . That method is commonly known as "tie-dyeing" and its methods and expressive outcomes are as diverse as the cultures that have developed them: *shibori* in Japan, *jiao xie* in China, *plangi* and *tritik* in Indonesia, *mudmee* in Thailand, *adire* in Nigeria, *tie-dye* in 1960s America. Each of these cultures and others employed distinct methods of folding, pleating, twisting, tying, clamping, and binding the fabric to enforce resists of the dyes, resulting in unique and highly variable patternings.

Contemporary artists the world over have adapted these ancient techniques in diverse ways. Foremost among these is Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, credited with introducing the art of Japanese *shibori* in the United States. Californian Ana Lisa Hedstrom, a gifted innovator who combines *arashi shibori* techniques with other strategies including digital scanning and digital printing to create strikingly graphic and arresting fabrics, studied early in her career with Wada. Hedstrom's work was featured in her solo exhibition *Process=Pattern* here in the Hillestad Gallery in 2004. Carter Smith (US; *The Art of Shibori: Untied Treasures*, Hillestad Gallery, 2008), Michelle Griffiths (UK), Reiko Sudo (Japan), and Junco Sato Pollack (Japan/USA),

among others, have each contributed bodies of original work that have enriched these dyeing traditions.

In the world of so-called *art* or *studio* quilts, Jan Myers-Newbury has, more than anyone else, explored the rich possibilities of many of these techniques and used them to create a signature body of work over the course of nearly four decades. During that time she has taught hundreds of students in this country and overseas, increasing the reach and influence of resist dyeing through yet another subgroup of makers in the textile art domain.

Of particular interest to Jan are the serendipitous and unpredictable outcomes of the *shibori* process. "You would think," Jan writes on her website, "that as many times as I have unwrapped a pole after dyeing, I would become ho-hum about the results. But it never fails: I can't wait to see how each piece turns out. I guess that's because I've realized I only have a certain amount of control and the rest is kismet."

This surrender of control – albeit, an "educated" surrender, one informed by years of experience and practice – is not so much abandon as embrace. Jan sets the stage intentionally. She prepares dyes of specific hues and saturations, she organizes particular fabrics, selects poles of certain dimensions around which to wrap, and controls the wrapping and binding of those fabrics around the tubes that serve as the process's spinal columns, giving stability to the fabric in the dyeing and over-dyeing stages.

The stock of dyed and patterned fabrics are then sorted and mentally catalogued as Jan begins the actual quilt making process. This involves a geometric articulation of the quilt surface – a disposition of rectilinear shapes most usually, with circular forms as variants in some instances – that will provide the armature for the surface design's development. The linear networks in each of her patterned fabrics both contrast with and complement one another, and from them arises the compositional unity that each of her quilts embodies.

Formal design relationships are important to Jan Myers-Newbury, but her handling of these is purposeful, directed as much toward emotional expression as toward the purely intellectual. Consequently, her works often assume very moody or introspective attitudes; they brood, they whisper, they seduce, they challenge, they amuse, they provoke. They are not unlike their maker in these respects. Jan Myers-Newbury the person is straightforward and practical, no-nonsense and matter-of-fact, informal, and as comfortable in her skin as the most wizened sage. She has a deeply rooted aversion to pretense and a natural predisposition to honesty and transparency. Her work naturally absorbs and reflects many of these values and in this sense, a reading of any one of these works is a reading of the artist herself.

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*Thank you to Leah Sorensen-Hayes, interim Hillestad Gallery director, for the organizational work of handling and installing this exhibition, and to the artist Jan Myers-Newbury, for facilitating the loans of works in private collections, and for accepting the Gallery's invitation to stage this solo exhibition.*