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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Monumental Wall Reliefs

Submitted by: Susan Ferrari Rowley Date: October 2, 1980

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MONUMENTAL WALL RELIEFS

By

Susan Ferrari Rowley

Thesis for Master of Fine Arts

May 1981

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INTRODUCTION

My work has changed rapidly in the past five years, and this change has been a factor of which I have been constantly aware. It bothered me sometimes that I did not remain with one particular technique or style of expression for long. Perhaps I was not giving a certain idea enough time to develop fully? I went from sculpted forms with raw edges to woven constructions with raw edges to, finally, the flat planes of fabric that I am currently utilizing. I have been pursuing a strong personal rationale through each piece and the impatience, if five years show impatience, was the manifestation of the need to identify and strengthen this direction. The purpose of this thesis is to explore and confirm my personal convictions of what textiles are and can be.

VIEWS ON CONTEMPORARY TEXTILES AND MY OWN WORK

On looking back, I feel that I have been dissatisfied with the complexity of many textile pieces created by other artists, as well as myself, as they often seemed overly preoccupied with techniques rather than content. Any content at all was in those works which relied on being totally representational to get the point across. It seemed that artists retreated too easily into this safe and comfortable area of imagery rather than risk the doubt that comes with change. This safe imagery deals with the creation of a realistic image, such as a cactus, for example. If a realistic image is created, to what degree has the artist made decisions that affected the final product? Has the cactus been copied exactly or has the artist interpreted it in his own way? It is my opinion that in soft sculpture, when directly copying a realistic object, that one relies more on techniques only as they are related to the direct copying of that object. It is not a personal translation. When any artist deviates from the model the decisions may be less comfortable to deal with because they are changes from what is seen or maybe, what is expected. Making aesthetically pleasing decisions as you personally alter the model in your interpretation is somewhat of a risk. This, in my opinion, has been more evident in the emergence of "soft" sculpture as an art expression.

The use of color often was more arbitrary than intentional and selected more for prettiness than function. This is not to say that a pretty object does not have a function, but I am referring to one which creates prettiness as its only function. I fear that in many cases little thought was given to what came before it and what transitions could be foreseen in its future. The area of fabric sculpture seems to have been degraded in the past five years by a great number of artists using the term "soft sculpture" as liberally as they possibly could. A general example of this would be the influx of work at craft fairs and exhibits that seems to resemble a child's stuffed toy more than what we would attempt to put in the category of "art." I think that it is this great quantity of personal interpretation that many of us react to in attempting to formulate definitions and standards for the medium. Artists and critics have been susceptible to this lack of clarity as well as guilty in fostering its continuation. If the artist does not have answers to these questions on both a personal basis as well as in historical overview, I do not see how their present work can be as relevant. Without being an art historian or being able to project myself two hundred years into the future to look back on this time, I must try to account for the purposefulness and place the textiles (and my textiles) will

have in contemporary art. Purposefulness, for myself, is the awareness that my work is expressing personal growth and possibly a degree of uniqueness in terms of what has been done before. In this way, others can possibly be influenced by my work.

The categories of contemporary fiber creations are becoming less clear as artists are remaining with traditional techniques or experimenting with new techniques and ideas, and combining additional media with fiber. This lack of clarity that I speak of is evident in a comment on the Lausanne Biennial, originally an exhibition of tapestry:

...stage several exhibitions - a biennial of young artists' tapestries, a textile sculpture biennial, a biennial of wall tapestries. 1

As the textile medium expands with the acceptance of mixed media and the realm of two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and relief means of expression, I must remain open-minded and allow myself to be influenced.

I have realized that the lack of clarity in the textile medium could have a negative effect on my personal direction, if I did not actually identify a personal direction. With all of the possibilities, a person could create contentedly, but aimlessly, very easily. Thus, it has been important for me to recognize

and define what I have done in the past, and what I hope to attain in these current works.

The content of my current works involves the element of color and its use in the creation of the illusion of movement. While attempting to define the content of my textiles, I became aware of a strong appreciation for printmaking, being attracted to the most simple and bold prints. The pattern to my preference centered on large scale work with shape and color as the major design elements. The colors were magnificent and their meaning in the usage was an integral part of the work.

Experiencing color through a medium other than my own helped me to pinpoint my goals. To be satisfied with my usage of color, I had to force myself not to use it purely as a decorative element. This is also my reason for the many white and monotone pieces that I produced in the past. I could put colors together at any time and felt they would be aesthetically pleasing. Why, however, make something purple when white says what you are trying to express? Until color became a major element for the overall content of the image, as stated earlier, I feared it would lessen the sculptural forms I was creating.

I made a conscious effort to increase the scale of my work. An early series of sculptures could be held in

your arms; the second series could stand at your side, like a pet; the third was life size (my size). The growth in scale, while maintaining sculptural interest and the content of surface contrasts from the use of texture, was difficult to achieve. I wanted monumental pieces that were unmistakably fabric doing what fabric can do best. Fabric drapes, pulls, tucks, and flows by its nature, and I wanted to create sculptural relief and sculpture out of it for those reasons. At this time the combination of the concept of color/movement and scale gives a sense of dignity to my work. By dignity, I mean the fact that even though fabric does not fall into the classical definition of a sculptural medium, it will be part of an evolving definition of contemporary sculpture.

Not only was the work that led to this thesis becoming larger, but color was being introduced cautiously. First, I produced a monochromatic colored piece, and then a white one. Then I moved on to a tri-colored piece, and another white one. It took months of this see-sawing for me to begin to trust that a rationale for my use of color was surfacing. This fundamental reason for the use of color was the various relationships it could have to the illusion or heightening of the sensation of movement. Though I did not write my feelings down in words, they are evident in my sketchbooks and slides of

of the work that followed. The evolution is there visually. The internal struggles I will not forget.

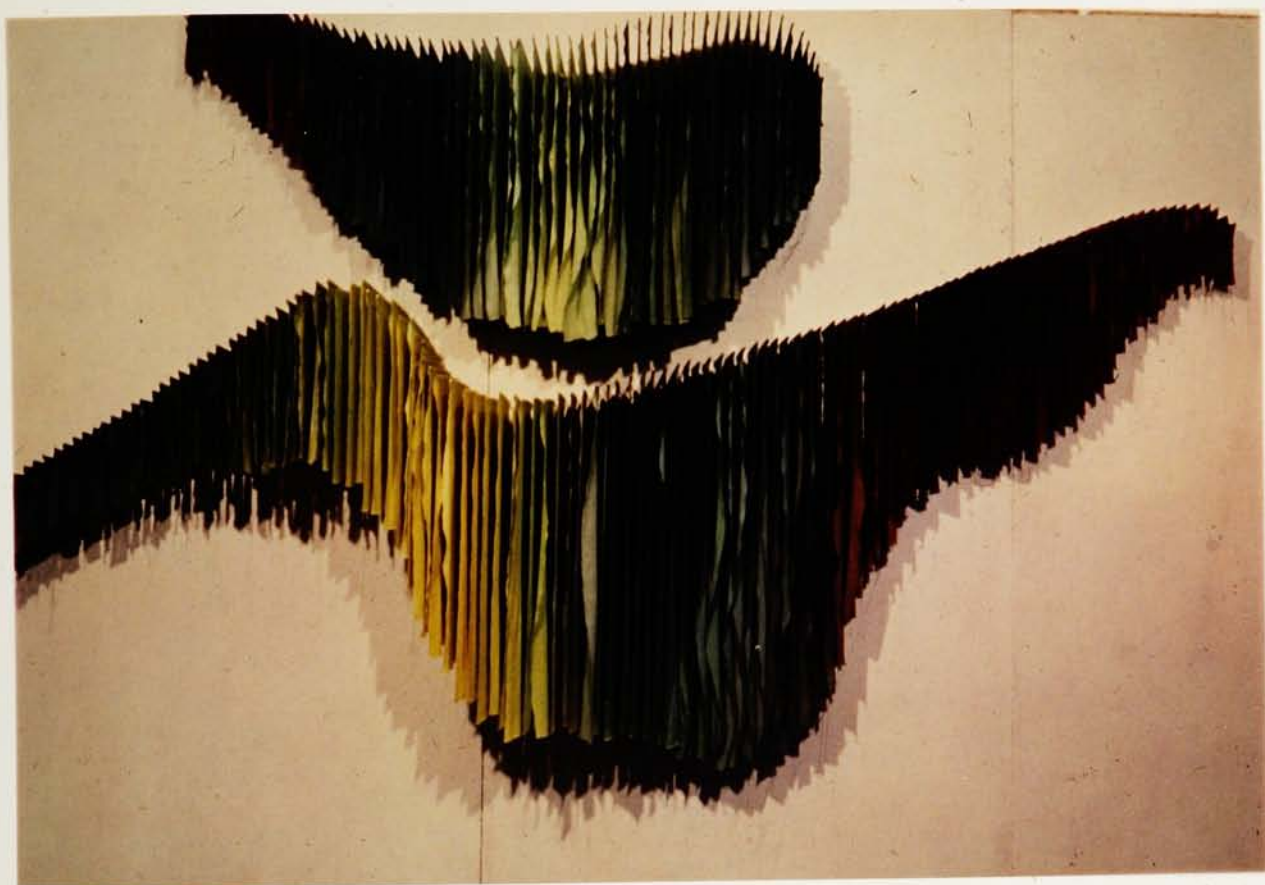
Sixteen months ago, I finally created Pink Sky and Repetition. The color in Pink Sky (Figure 1, page 8), was a monotone pale pink with the edges of each panel tinged in a deep brown tone. The changing sizes of the hanging fabric is extremely subtle until you look at the deeper shade on the lower edges, which serves to clarify the illusion and the changes more. The overall pink color gave the sense of volume that I was also hoping to achieve.

Repetition (Figure 2, page 9) does not have as great a sense of volume, but it does have a less subtle sense of movement due to the four colors of panels that reverse every four inches across the eight foot horizontal piece. You are repetitively led in and out as your eye travels from one color to the next. Being satisfied with the direction of this work, I realized that I would remain with this style and format for presenting my work, and continue in this vein. Upon returning to R.I.T. last summer, I produced Letters (Figure 3, page 10), which kept the original content of color and movement, but intensified every design element to a much greater degree.

Instead of one form, I designed the piece in two parts that hung one above the other to visually comprise







the entire piece. The depth of the relief was much greater than before, with asymmetrical undulations and the widest palette of colors I had ever used. I did follow the theory of light colors advancing and dark colors receding, but when using multiple hues the tints and shades of each become more complex to deal with. Creating this piece was at times frightening, but I preferred to call it a challenge to my own ability. It was one of the most ambitious pieces I had ever done, and was also the most costly, which added a degree of pressure. I did learn to enjoy the risk factor that exists when hand dying some sixty yards of fabric, which always kept me off balance regarding the ultimate outcome of the piece.

Letters is, to me, a successful piece because it embodies the goals I have striving toward. When I look at it I am satisfied and encouraged to go on to the next work. At this point I set out to design the two pieces for this thesis.

INSPIRATION AND REASONING

The inspiration for my work stems from the works of Anne Flaten Pixley, in paper, and Agam, the painter. Both of these artists have concerned their work with elements that I feel strongly about. Thus, my work could be labeled a mixture of the two, though this would not be obvious to another artist or viewer because of the personal nature of the act of being influenced.

When seeing the work of Flaten Pixley I am struck by the obvious repetition involved in creating the total image. This repetition is an extremely powerful facet in the success of her work, and is also something by which I have been fascinated and drawn over the years, purely as an element of design. Her work triggered the realization that I was now ready to utilize this element in my own means of expression. I had observed repetition long enough and felt that at this time it would become a major factor in the monumental works. My earlier works dealing with texture and its relationship to light and shadow as the major concerns are having a very secondary effect on how I view Flaten Pixley's work and create my own. The awareness and use of light and shadow is major for Flaten Pixley's Post and Paper Series #3, (Figure 4, page 13) as the individual leaves of paper extend upward at a set angle,



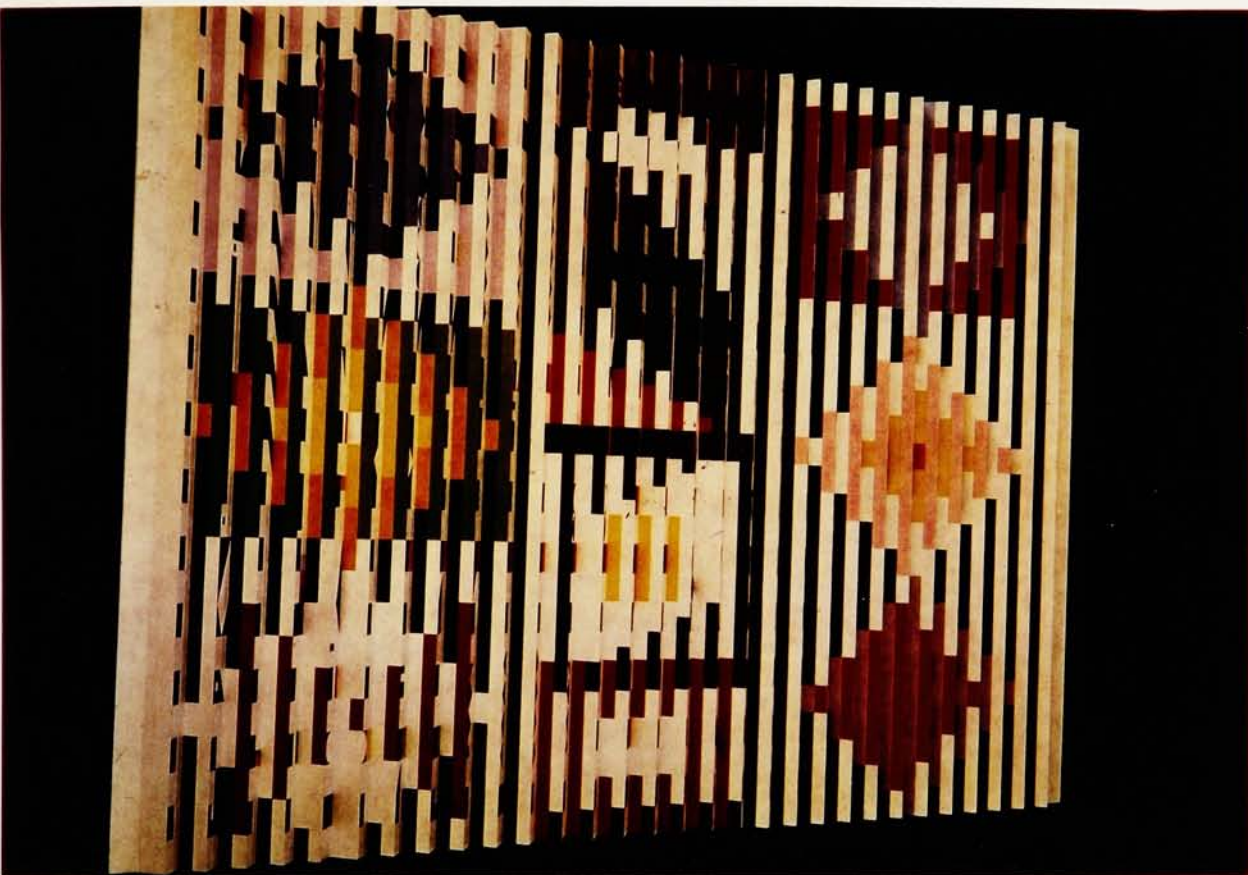
which enables them to catch the light, enhancing the illusion of depth. The play of light, as it creates subtleties of color, and emphasizes the subtleties of one handmade sheet to the next is crucial to that work. For myself, it is an area that I was totally concerned with in the past, and has evolved as an area to depart from. My color changes are actual, not illusionary, so that the shadows are no longer a necessary element to the success of the piece. They exist, but the work is not dependent upon them to any degree.

I have evolved my work to the stage of beginning an idea or thought with one solitary, but not simplistic concept. By this I mean that the concept is emerging from a one-word design element which has not been oversimplified by ignoring the complexities or complications of it. To this concept I judiciously add factors, one at a time, until I feel the concept has grown into a statement. At this time I have chosen the design element of repetition. To this I have added the idea of constant movement. It is by the repetition of one sheet of fabric to another and the frequency of that repetition that the "idea" or suggestion of movement is achieved. The proximity of the sheet of fabric which can be termed planes, control the rate of movement which simultaneously controls the mood of the movement. Complementary Movement,

(Figure 7, page 18) and Undulating Movement, (Figure 6, page 17), have planes of fabric placed dense enough to create an image caught in a more rapid movement, affecting more excitement than tranquility. In describing the intent of this new work, I use the phrase "caught as it travels in space" to reflect the sense of the movement I am characterizing. It is a characterization of the movement when you catch "something" streaming past your line of vision, while at the same time being aware of the fact that you cannot discern minute details of it, being consumed by the movement itself. It is the movement that distorts all chance for detail, and forces one color to blend into the next.

My use of color, being influenced by printmakers, attracted me to the work of printer-painter, Agam. His work (Figure 5, page 16) deals with the optical illusion of changing shapes via color and the position that these colors are viewed from. By painting on corrugated surfaces, he creates the illusion of movement, depth, and change that is far greater than what is physically taking place. It is stated of his work:

He has transcended the boundaries between the arts to achieve bold new synthesis of static sculpture and kinetic movement. ...Agam's work marks the beginning of a movement centered in Paris which has devoted itself to transcending the







boundaries between media and has introduced the elements of time, space, and light into art. The vehicle of this revolution is metamorphosis in time, expressed in two forms: imitation of movement, and optical irritation. 2

Like Agam, my work is created out of the colored planes but is ultimately reliant upon perception. In Undulating Movement (Figure 6), where I worked sculpturally in a high relief, and in Complementary Movement (Figure 7), which is actually in the round, I did not have to create the illusion of depth which already exists. I did, however, choose to intensify this depth through the placement of color which was specifically selected. Both pieces in reality are stationary and capable of suggesting movement through the depth of their own relief when translated onto an exceedingly convincing visual statement. To view Agam's work, the viewer moves and experiences changes in shapes and coloration dependent upon his position. The work does not actually alter but the viewer accepts the illusion being perpetrated upon him. My work is viewed similarly, in that you, the viewer, move, and the piece appears to change. The planes of color do not physically change in either tone or actual order. It is their proximity, however, which allows the viewer to sense the changing shape, coloration, and movement.

Movement, in my work, is expressed in a variety of speeds, according to how rapidly one color grades into the next. If one color remains for several planes, the movement stops for a second, or rather, your eyes stop, and then move onward to the next plane. The piece must be divided into the areas of background, middleground, and foreground, and it is decided at this time which of these areas is to project more than the others. The actual depth can be negated or neutralized by color placement, or it can be supported by color selection. I have employed both these strategies in the creation of my work.

By creating this piece in fabric, I am capitalizing on the following accepted notions in regard to fabric. It is generally considered to be light in weight, in comparison to other materials which can be suspended in vertical planes, such as paper, plastic, wood, and metal. The rigidity of fabric planes suspended but not anchored is questionable, given the variables of humidity and air currents. It is the notion (I use notion because it is more readily disputable) regarding weight and more logical facts on rigidity or the lack of it which encourage the illusions that I am offering the viewer. The fabric is lightweight and adds to the floating effect that you would expect to encounter with a movement "caught in

space." The fabric does move slightly with the air currents, but this movement does not detract from the piece. To attempt to use the fabric in a more rigid way at this time would, in my view, negate the use of fabric at all for this piece. It must remain fabric-like, which is why I prefer to leave the edges raw and sculpted lower edge as natural as possible in a pre-conceived form.

The planes of color would not remain positioned in space without a support system. It is my theory that intentionally creating a means of suspension that becomes a part of the piece would distort the original intent of the panels. The support would have to become as important, design-wise, as the planes of color and could potentially become decorative and lessen the impact of the color as it is now. In remaining as true to my original intent as I have, the problem of supporting each individual plane of fabric in an unobtrusive manner became a major factor. This could not be done by hanging each plane by monofilament, which is thought to be invisible, but really is not. Nor could the armature be made of wood or plastic, so that it would ripple like a partial mobius strip over the planes. The more visible the armature could be in this way, the more it would call attention to itself. Being beautiful and well crafted,

it would vie for attention, and become as important as the fabric planes.

There can be a fine line between a support system becoming part of a work, design-wise or not, or of interfering with the intent of the work. This is not only dependent upon the actual visibility of the system but on the effort of the artist to take conscious steps towards negating the existence of the support, or of relegating it to the background. In this way it is not noticed because the artist does not want it to be noticed and has crafted it to meet this criterion. In creating what I call the armatures I have borrowed historically from the sculptors and have made that armature so secondary, so incidental, that one does not know it exists until they wonder how the piece is suspended, as it cannot defy gravity. By this point, the intent for creating the work at all has already been experienced.

My armatures are made of aluminum, chosen for the fact that it is extremely light in weight in contrast to the strength it offers. Excessive weightiness, as in steel, is not always synonymous with strength. The aluminum does not bend, break, or chip under normal conditions and affords me many possibilities for the placement and frequency of the perpendicular rods from which

the fabric is suspended. Aesthetically, the aluminum appears to be a better choice than my earlier wood armatures which had to be bulkier to support the piece. Wood also had a finish less slick and unobtrusive than the aluminum, and I found the wooden armatures distracting to the overall clean lines of the work.

DISCUSSION OF THE SCULPTURAL ASPECTS

It is crucial for me to comprehend some general progressions of sculpture, past and present, in an attempt to make my work more relevant by my own definition. This relevance is in the sculptural aspects of my own work in fabric. The terms sculpture and sculptural relief are used to define works that are a combination of past contemporary expressions. According to Trier, in Form and Space, contemporary trends are not typically comprised of forms that are solid or have evolved from a solid; nor are they hole sculptures of positive and negative space.

...The sculptor abandons the primacy of the compact solid, neglects the emphasis on weight and loosens up the composition to allow light and air to circulate inside it.... Its transparency frees the sculpture from the static perspective.

3

Both Undulating Movement and Complementary Movement utilize light and air circulation in attaining such an illusionary quality. These factors not only affect the sculptural quality of the work but the color relationships to each other, including a transparent or glowing quality which can be perceived under certain lighting conditions.

Several quotes on the visual aspect of sculpture are extremely appropriate to my work, whether wall-hung

or in the round. The evolution of sculpture from block-like forms such as in the works of Mirko and Henry Moore is described as follows:

...Mirko goes so far in reducing bodily substance that his work can be taken as a transition to the next formal type in which the opening up and attention of solid volume create a new sculptural function, that of a sign in space.

4

There is a definite sense of volume to my work that comes from the great number of fabric planes that alternate with negative space. I am not favoring volume or space, but I am employing both of these factors to achieve the desired illusions of depth and movement. Although parts of the quotes allude to being concerned with the sculpting of the figure, I feel these same tendencies described transcend into non-objective work as well and serve to characterize my work.

The mobiles of Alexander Calder have also been described in a manner that is close to the qualities I have described and tried to achieve in my own work.

He was the first to think in sculptural terms, of a floating, not carried object,...of freedom from the earth....His Small Mobile of Seven Elements recalls Lippold's Sun in the flimsiness of its material components. But it does not stand motionless like a taut sail; it moves in complex rhythm with every current of air that disturbs its balance, and then

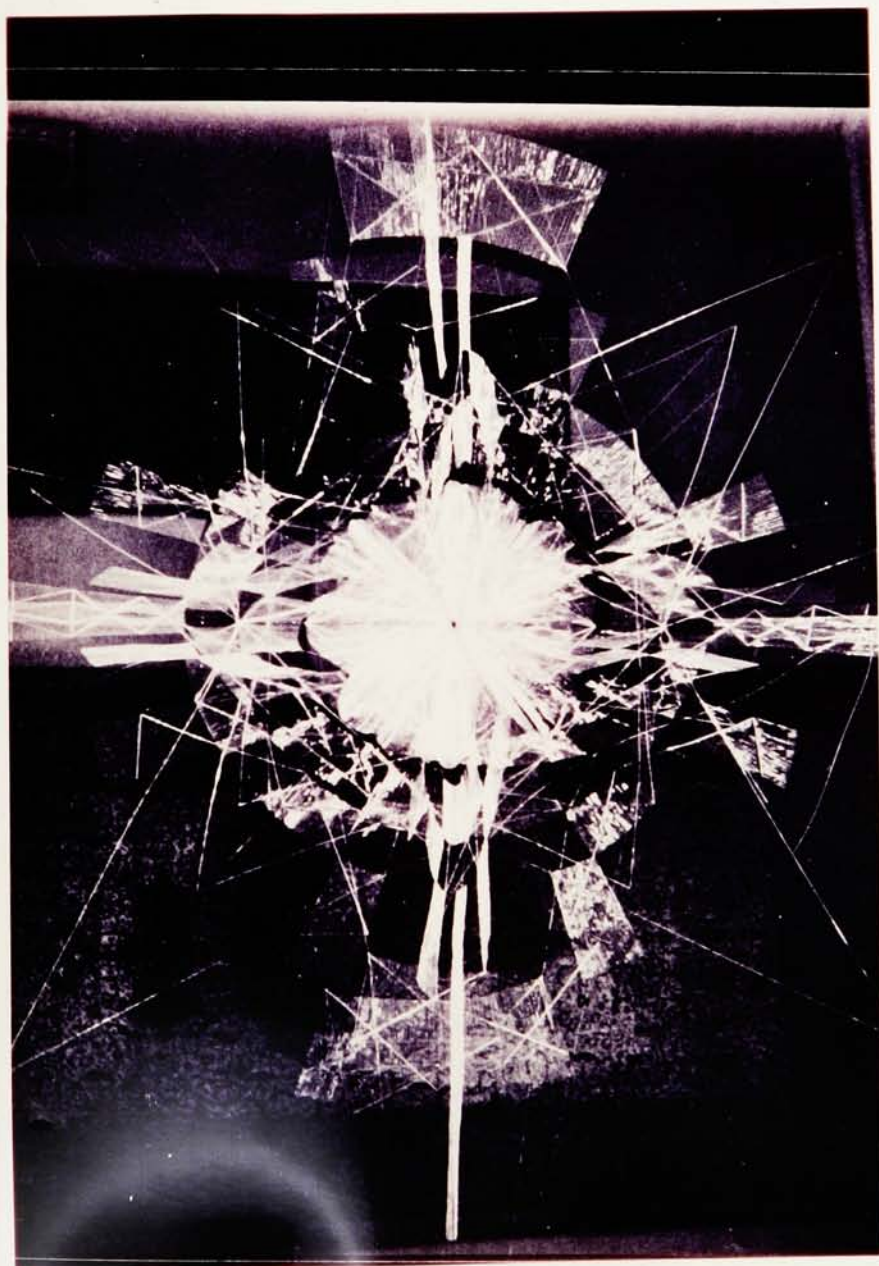
(Figure 8,
page 27)

slowly comes to rest. As for its relation to space, no one system of data defines it. Volume, extension, and position vary according to the degree and kind of movement, entailing a succession of spacial patterns.

5

The total composition of Calder's work does not depend upon the movement, but actual movement does become a part of it. Calder's work was created with the ability to move in space, but it does at times stand motionless. My work was not created to move. The fact that the fabric would actually sway slightly, however, was recognized and permitted as characteristic to the medium. The fabric planes never attempt to deny that they hang free to the air currents with any slight movement intensifying the illusions stated earlier. The idea of a "floating not carried object" parallels my thoughts on how my own work is envisioned by others. The pieces being "movements caught in space" are created as if they were floating in space.

Undulating Movement falls into the category of sculptural relief, within which both painters and artists using traditional materials of sculpture have been working. Terms used to describe what is happening to this work may deal with space, but it is space defined in terms of depth rather than in the terms of volume and space as used to describe sculptures in the round. Sculptural relief is difficult to define



because it includes such a variety of expression. Relief in painting involves the background to a greater degree than relief with projecting objects which often are adhered to a background that is of little importance to the total composition. The following quote attempts to define sculptural relief:

Henri Laurens' still life of 1919, Bottle and Newspaper, in painted wood and metal, is an early attempt to go beyond the Cubist conception of relief, as painting with sculptural means, and construct with fragments of ready-made objects, a new type of sculptural entity in space. Laurens dispenses with background, but props his construction, an interplay of mass and void, against a wall. His collage is thus a cross between relief and sculpture; its spatial possibilities were developed by the Constructivists who did away with the aperspective overlapping.

6

Even though Laurens' piece was created in 1919, I am struck by the timelessness of his intentions and how they inspire and relate to my own work. Undulating Movement does not rely on the wall from which it is hung for anything more than its support, and for this reason it can be classified as a sculptural relief as defined by the earlier statements.

Complementary Movement can be assigned to the category of sculpture, as it abandons the "primacy of

the compact solid," with the spaced separation of panels that can be viewed in the round. In this way, you are able to sense the volume while being compelled to walk around the piece. The viewers' ability to look through the piece from side to side does not break the overall cohesion of the outline. The spaces between the planes of fabric become "planes of space" which are equally integral to the creation of the entire form. "Planes of space" are not physically sealed to transform them into actual negative space, but the eye overlooks this technicality in the recognition of the form that is very much a part of the space into which it is projecting itself. The fabric and spacial planes move you both visually and physically into concave and convex areas that incorporate the surrounding negative space of the environment. Viewed from any angle you catch a glimpse of the overall form that compells you to continue walking around the piece in its entirety.

The work has now been defined in terms of sculptural intent and the sculptural classifications identified. Discussion of what sculpture has meant to architecture and the possibilities for these fiber creations to meet twentieth century needs can now be described as they fit into the history of sculpture.

Sculpture is by tradition a public art and, after a period of alienation, the problem of its function in society has again become relevant. Sculpture appears in the public realm in one of two ways: either as a monument or in combination with architecture.

7

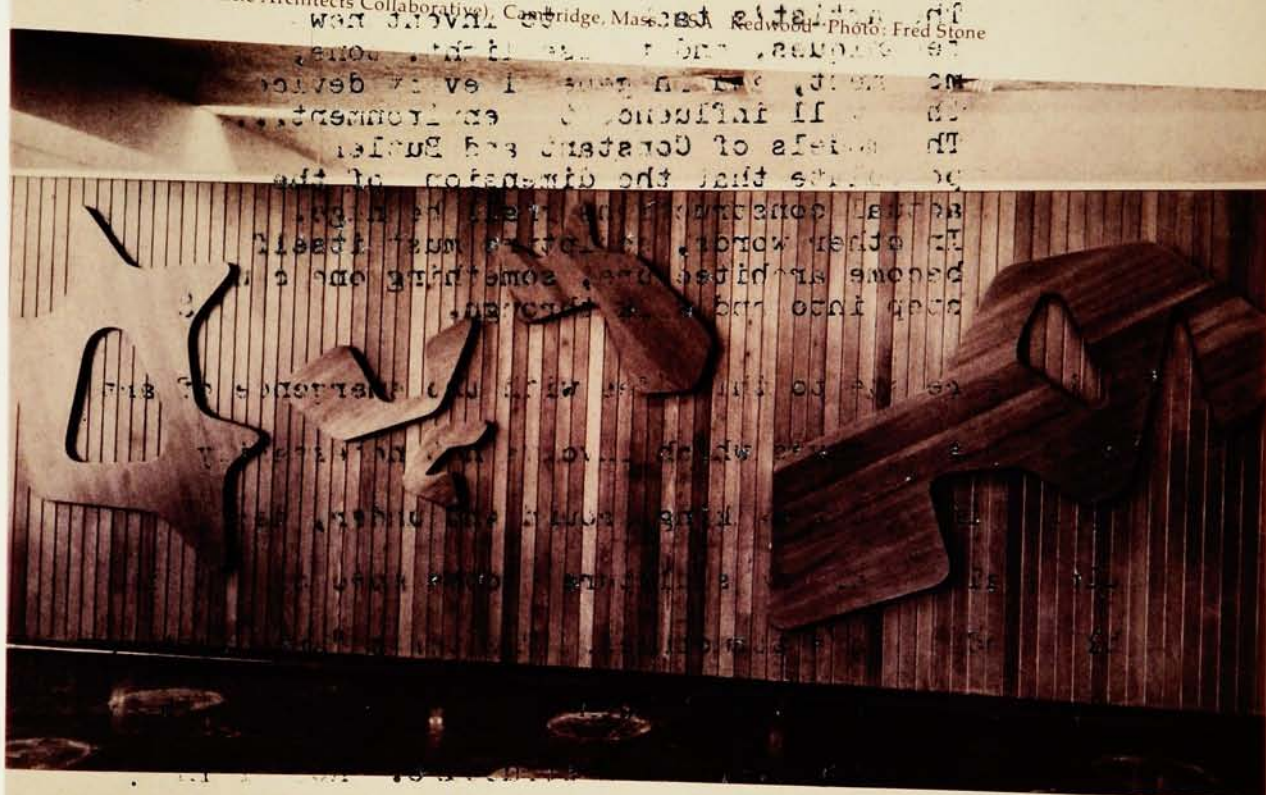
My work does not fall into the category of being a monument, but it is monumental in the relationship of itself to the space in which it is displayed. Its overall size is to be congruous with the scale of the structure that houses it. The work relates and may be created for a specific space. The reliefs utilize an actual wall for their background, and the sculpture interrupts open space with a variety of possible intentions. Sculpture can also take the form of an actual structure as in architecture, and a relief can also be part of an exterior structure, but neither apply here. Because I chose to create monumental wall reliefs, it is important to verify this expression as it is used in architecture. This is evident in Henry Moore's relief for the Boucentrum Wall in Rotterdam, (Figure 9, page 31) and in Hans Arp's wall relief in the Harvard University Graduate Center (Figure 10, page 32). These are the most directly related to my own works due to the similarity of size and actual placement on the wall.



Figure 10

HANS ARP, HARVARD

s ARP Wall Relief, 1950 Harvard University Graduate Center
h. Walter Gropius and The Architects Collaborative), Cambridge, Mass.



Constant and Butler, who were both doing spacial constructions and monumental sculpture in the 1950's have projected the definition of sculptor through their works.

The artist's task is to invent new techniques, and to use light, tone, movement, and in general every device that will influence the environment.... The models of Constant and Butler postulate that the dimensions of the actual constructions shall be huge. In other words, sculpture must itself become architecture, something one can step into and walk through. 8

I totally relate to this idea with the emergence of art placed in structures which involve not necessarily stepping into, but walking around and under, as sculptural relief and sculpture become more common in public and private structures. The terms "architectural sculpture" has to do with both terms as equals, totally integrated or compatible in a structure. Relief in architecture traditionally decorated the structure, often as an accent rather than an equal part, and was thought of as "gingerbread" and excess by such artist/critics as Horatio Greenough in the 1800's. "The creative ideal that form follows function is now commonly associated with architects like Frank Lloyd Wright."⁹ Greenough strongly believes in this as well as functionalism as taken from nature. The needs of a structure should determine the architecture of the structure and the art

to be placed in or on it should follow through with the same care. The walls serving as backdrops for reliefs, or the structures housing sculptural forms should support each other. The monumentality of my work has the effect of integrating it with the given structure it was designed for. I feel that this is the meaning of environmental works in architecture today. This last quote is based on one person's view of the new directions in fiber.

Another significant trend is toward meaningful scale. In general fiber structures are smaller now - miniature shows have corrected the balance which had veered toward outsize work - but there are many artists whose interest in architectural spaces has led them to create textiles which are truly appropriate to those spaces, whose vision requires a large scale. Awareness of purpose and expressive effect, rather than of current trends, now guides the artist's choice of scale. 10

CONCLUSION

I feel that the final note of this thesis is more of a conclusion than a summary. In the process of creating the two thesis pieces and doing the research, I have discovered what seemed to elude me in the past; which is a more definite direction with which I am secure. This direction is one that combines the medium of textiles with sculpture and relief into a personal statement. The fabric itself becomes secondary to the use of color and shape in creating the illusion of movement, depth, and change.

To me, this is an understanding of why I did previous works, but was not satisfied with them, and why I am satisfied with the most recent work. I hope that my work will help to clarify the term of soft or fiber sculpture. Additional definition within the medium would be positive for those who create as well as galleries and critics.

Awareness of many works done before my own, both in textiles and in other media has helped me in the development of strong personal beliefs or philosophies. I feel the new works have equalled the vision I had regarding what I wanted to produce for several years. For this reason, the thesis is valuable to me.

FOOTNOTES

1. American Craft, October/November 1979, American Craft Council, New York, New York.
2. Gunter Metken, Agam, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, New York.
3. Eduard Trier, Form and Space, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, New York, 1962.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Horatio Greenough, Form and Function, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969.
10. Fiberscope, Volume I, 1979, Interweave Press, Inc.

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