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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

AWAKENING THE SPIRIT

By

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August 1987

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To my parents who provided love, strength, and support and enabled me to fulfill my dreams.

For Candace, who shared her love and knowledge and taught me how to believe in myself.

And of course...

many special thanks to B, Max, and Barbara.

Beginning.

Chaos,
willingness to change,
self transformation from which comes a gift --
freedom.

A new path, a fresh insight.
A void, darkness --
the unknown.

In choosing death we choose life.

The limitations of the present sphere destroyed,
personal barriers removed,
increased vision,
the universe opens.

Separation,
leaving behind that which binds us to the old.

Initiation,
transformation,
release,
growth.

The inner self acts alone,
solitary,
the external world is nonexistent,
from within the cleansing begins.
Healing,
rectification,
to correct that which impedes growth,
requires faith.
Vulnerability is exposed,
shields lowered.
Pain,
fear,
progress,
change.

Exposure,
testing,
trials --
accepting.

For in change is growth,
accept the process,
live in the true present.

All occurs in its own time,
independent of human will,
nourishment,
joy,
happiness.

Realignment with the self requires patience,
when the seeds are planted one must await the harvest,
endurance,
perseverance,
determination,
birth.

The old is cast away,
discriminately.
The desire to return to the old no longer remains,
excitement balances with fear.
The urge to move forward.
Knowledge has opened up that which was blocked by the unknown.
centering,
change,
progress,
cultivation.

Transformation occurs as movement transpires,
fluidity.
A door opens that leads us to another door,
the intuitive develops a heightened awareness.
The old is cast away in a final struggle for self change.
Reunion.

The outdated, unnecessary give way to the new,
strengthened with the learned knowledge of growth and change,
calm
meditation,
understanding.

Breath deeply,
rest,
review,
integrate.

A radical faith is needed,
a belief in the unknown and in the process.
faith,
hope,
liberation.

From the darkness...,
renewal

Beginning.

INTRODUCTION

I have chosen to create a series of woven rugs and handwoven panels which reflect a personal vision. I choose to think metaphysically about the world I live in and about the objects that surround me. Life represents a spiritual journey in which each of us is involved. The Bible says that, "Many are called, but few are chosen." However, I tend to agree more with the following statement: "We all are called and we are all chosen if we simply have the courage to step into the unknown."¹ Many things could cause a person to begin an internal evaluation of the human spirit. For me the process of self-realization was initiated by great pain and loss of hope. My awareness of the human spirit's capability of positive change and growth allowed me to develop a clearer understanding of the person within. I have approached this thesis as an opportunity to share my insights with others.

INFLUENCES

"Often what we are supposed to learn is not clear at first."

Lynn Andrews
Jaguar Woman, p. 52

The greatest influence on my work has been the involvement with and readings about the Indian: those of ancient South and Meso-America such as the Inca and the Maya, but also the Native American Indian. A more contemporary source of inspiration has been the paintings and notes of Georgia O'Keeffe. However, I will choose to first elaborate on the Indian cultures since they have had the greatest impact on my work.

I first became involved with the culture of the Indian during my studies in South America. Subconsciously I became captivated and involved with their culture as I became further removed from twentieth century realities and explored the lost territories of the Inca in the highlands of Peru. Immediately I felt an affinity for the customs and arts of these people. It was as if I were a sponge, ready to absorb as much as I could to understand the spirituality and knowledge of the Indians. Visiting the ruins and viewing their textiles ignited a spark that would later spread into my work.

I have since visited and seen the ruins of the Aztecs and the Mayas, and have been reading about the various cultures of the Native

American Indian. Through these efforts I have discovered a common thread among all these groups. Each culture strove to attain a heightened spiritual state through an understanding of themselves which was closely linked to the earth and the universe. Humans did not exist in a sphere separate from earth and the heavens. The earth and the heavens were the source of energy and an integral part of human spirituality; people were merely a reflection of a larger plan. It is this interaction with the environment and human spirituality that has inspired my work the most.

Going into detail about each Indian culture which influenced me would take pages of description to give each adequate coverage. I will not pursue a lengthy discussion of Indian cultures because my work represents a synthesis of my personal experiences. Each culture, although striving towards the same goal, used different ceremonies, symbolism, architecture and means by which to carry out its goals. Recently I have been reading and integrating into my work a series of books written by a white woman, Lynn Andrews, who had been initiated into the ways of the Native American shamans. Her process of growth and self-change echo the statement I am trying to make with my work. Her involvement is at a level of knowledge that can only be obtained through initiation ceremonies with those who share the knowledge and can pass it on to her through specific rituals. In today's society the same issues of personal growth and change are relevant, but it is through the strength of an individual's will rather than the support

and direction of leaders that this initiation or rite of passage can occur.

I took the culture of the native Indian and began to apply it to my work. The symbolism and meaning applied to each piece of art that I created brought me to the conclusion that art does reflect the inner thoughts and beliefs of the artist: "To create an act of beauty is to create a mirror for the self, so show us intimately who we are."² As a piece of art is created it becomes a means of expressing one's feelings to others and simultaneously gives its maker insight into herself.

One particular initiation ceremony into selfhood among the native American Indian is the teaching of the shields. According to Andrews, each shield represents a different geographic direction on the medicine wheel, which is a "circle of learning."³ "You find your circle only when you are ready, and no one will ever succeed in this great and worthy struggle without being close to self-completion."⁴ A person constantly goes through different directional phases in an effort to become properly aligned or centered.

South is the position of trust and innocence, it is a position of learning. Like a child we listen to everything, take it all in, learn all that is told. The south represents a time for gathering of knowledge, which can only be done by retaining one's innocence and childlike desire to listen and learn. In our innocence we blindly

believe in process, allowing events to shape us without understanding why.

West teaches about introspection. It encourages us to look within to see the self, the person we truly are, including the faults and weaknesses. Self-scrutiny is generally more severe than the scrutiny of others. As Andrews states, "To go through your own fears, you have to learn of yourself." We take the time to look within to see what we have to offer and begin to build our strengths to reach our full potentials. This is a phase that requires courage to move forward, a time to rely totally on self and not seek outside reinforcement. It is a time to trust the intuitive side of one's nature and to look inward for guidance and direction.

North is the position of strength and wisdom. At this point a person becomes less introspective and begins to look at the external forces at work. One begins to see how environment shapes the person. This becomes a time to externalize and step out into the open and awaken to the knowledge that life in all its misgivings and joys, affords answers and growth, which are an integral part of life. The process allows one to reach a deeper understanding of self.

East is the sacred position of death and rebirth. Here a person can learn about the other side of self, opening a new vision that allows insights and how the environment and all living things influence transformation and healing. "East is the only way to the center, to

the core, east is the acceptance of spirit.⁶ You have true death in enlightenment--this is one of many mysteries."⁷

A person continually moves within these directions of learning, experiencing, and growing. The process is never complete but merely an ongoing cycle of life. "Our cells contract and expand and produce regeneration and life. We, as life forms, reproduce this effect in love and in knowledge. We're the great mirror. We're nothing but the reflection of each other. If I didn't have anybody around, I would only have myself to define myself."⁸

I found Andrews' ideas insightful because they echoed the feelings of change and growth that I had undertaken. Although my work does not attempt to literally translate the concept of the shields into a personal statement, the ideas represent a similar understanding of the pattern of personal growth and change I have developed.

Shortly after reading Andrews' series I began to look at the work of Georgia O'Keeffe who had lived a good portion of her life in the Southwest. She spent time with the native Indian watching the rituals and striving to understand the importance of their work. These people revered Mother Earth with the magic and power she held.⁹ She used this knowledge of nature in much of her own work to create her own vision. She said, to learn from others but not duplicate another, to truly see with your own vision; this is when you come on your own.¹⁰ Georgia O'Keeffe demonstrates to me how we can learn from other people

and other cultures, and how the insights and knowledge we gather from these experiences can be translated into our own work.

METAMORPHOSIS

Working through ideas for my thesis I continually returned to the idea of conveying personal experience through a body of work. A series of changes, trials, and frustrations caused much growth which always led me into a new direction. The woven rugs and panels represent the changes and growth.

The woven rugs were the first part, representing a personal experience and insight. Here was a medium in which I felt comfortable. I had worked at length in flat woven tapestry and felt confident I could carry out the tapestry process successfully. The first year of graduate studies had been spent exploring new ideas and new media, and although much of it was exciting, I kept returning to the structure of the woven rug. Implementing a tapestry weave allowed greater freedom in design and created a solid structure.

The first rug in the series was all white with random shapes representing chaos. (The meaning of each rug is discussed at length in the description of individual pieces.) The emotions to be conveyed were clear in my mind, but the transition of taking this idea from my mind and creating a woven statement presented several problems. As the rug was enlarged to scale, the design which worked well on a smaller scale looked quite simple and empty because it had large areas of open space. The design projected randomness, but not as clearly as originally intended. I felt great disappointment in not being able to

express clearly in another form that which I felt so deeply needed to be expressed. The first rug was set aside and used as a tool to gather information before beginning to weave the successive rugs.

The second rug in the series represented the first step into the world, which perhaps is the most difficult. I saw this as the first step necessary in trying move from chaos and begin to find the beauty, faith, and belief that had been lost. This rug also failed to express the idea I hoped to convey and created instead an incredible amount of frustration and pain. I was too close to my work to allow my intuitive sense to influence the designing and weaving. Reflecting on the first two rugs gave me the opportunity to determine how I could improve on the design and symbolism of each piece. What could I do to make these rugs more powerful and meaningful to myself and the viewer? For as much as these rugs were for me and a part of me I wanted others to see a process and to recognize that a message was being conveyed.

I remove the first piece, using the same shapes and designs, but altering the outside shape to ease some of the awkwardness of the structure. Fiber embellishments were used to create a livelier and more exciting surface. This piece was successful and I remove the second rug. The new ideas developed from the failures of the two first rugs proved worthwhile. Because too much conscious control was used in making them, the first pieces lacked life. I continued weaving the remaining two pieces and found myself learning more about my own intuitive process and design.

While working on my rugs I began using pastels in a painting class. I was accustomed to having control over my designs because I generally worked with graph paper, geometric shapes and rulers, so at first I was intimidated by the freedom of the painting process and had difficulty creating without the tools to which I had become accustomed. However, the pastels allowed the intuitive part of my personality to come alive. Designing became a freer process and designs flowed more easily from my mind onto paper. I began to appreciate the intuitive stroke of a dash of color put across a page and I began wondering what would happen to my textile designs if I somehow could apply this newly-found realization. I know that I was trying to build a body of work to express a controlled state of growth. I knew, too, that sometimes the human spirit has little control over the events that initiate change and growth. A certain amount of control was necessary to allow me the courage to move forward and face the risks of moving into the unknown. However, at the same time I also learned to trust my intuitive side. There is great validity in trusting an impulse and the combination of courage and faith are what help create the peace within myself.

The insights I gained opened up a new direction from which evolved a series of hand-painted panels using a reflective material. The series constitutes an abstraction of personal vision, a culmination of all my experiences. The colors, designs, and weavings are all intuitive. The reflective surface represents to me the reflections we see of ourselves, in other people, and in different situations. I have

developed a sense of freedom and openness of spirit that never previously existed in my work.

I had chosen to express the awakening of a spirit which, in fact, was my own. Through my introspection and evolution the spirit I had previously though had evolved had only gone back over the lessons learned in the previous year, reworking and rethinking until a part of me that I never knew existed was opened up. I have also learned that I never truly reach a point where I can say, "Good, that part of my life is finished," for moments from our past continually connect with the present. It is this continual relearning and merging of the old and the new that offers fresh insights into the nature of the human spirit.

"Indeed we are running away all the time to avoid coming face to face with our real selves."

Anonymous
Chop Wood Carry Water, p. 27

DESCRIPTION OF INDIVIDUAL PIECES

Isolation

The first rug represents chaos and the search to find the source of confusion and isolation. Inherent in the human being is the warrior spirit which gives one the courage and strength to search through chaos and rubble and find that which is good and full of hope. I have developed an understanding of the process of spiritual development; from the moment of chaos to my present condition. My initial move into this process is echoed in the first rug. Often it is difficult to find words to express inner feelings, to find a means of expressing that for which no words seem appropriate or accurate. For me the best way to describe my experiences was to create this body of work. I have heard it said that life is the single most important learning tool. For an artist it is important to recreate what has been learned and to express one's vision to others. I am committed to my work, but more importantly to life, for in turn it becomes a direct outpouring of my work.

This piece took two tries before it reached a point of completion. The first design was flat and lifeless. After embellishments were

added and changes were made on the outside shape of the rug, the piece represented the title and intent of the design. The work is all white, representing a feeling of being lost and alone. White to me represents the presence of all color, but the color is hidden amid the chaos. The randomness of the forms represents chaos. The forms lack continuity and appear to be floating on the surface of the rug. The forms can best be described by Anni Albers when she said, "Geometric shapes are reassuring, with the potential to provide balance and calm."¹¹ The geometric forms within the piece represent to me that which is truly everpresent in the human condition; under all the surface confusion the shape or core is constant within. The exterior irregularity of the rug enhances the discord of the interior design, but will change from piece to piece in an effort to enhance the sense of growth and change.

The rug is woven in white Persian wool. The interior portions of the rug are embellished with a variety of materials--raw mohair, wool, and feathers, all adding texture and indicating softness. The surface additions add excitement and life to the flat structure and help reduce the harshness of the geometric design. Together the opposite qualities of softness and excitement work well together and help unify the piece. The materials are all natural to reflect nature and represent earth's relationship to the human spirit. In the Indian way Mother Earth represents life itself and is integral to the physical being.

"At the beginning of the spiritual path, we are like children whose only real knowledge of themselves is a reflection cast in a mirror."

Rick Field
Chop Wood Carry Water, p. 9

Separation

In the second rug I attempt to portray a sense of separation from the old. The first step outside of the routines, habits, doubts, and fears of the past. It is at this point that the most faith is required, the fear of the unknown can be debilitating and hinder any progression and change. Contemplation and introspection are required before proceeding further.

It took two attempts before I became satisfied with this piece. The introduction of a small amount of color was difficult yet critical to the expression of the title. The color indicates the growth, change, and progression of the human spirit. Because this was the first piece with any color, the indication had to be subtle to clearly demonstrate the slow process of self change. My first attempt at weaving this rug was not successful. The color cut halfway through the piece, and the colors used for the surface designs of the rug were harsh and abrasive; the outside shape was awkward. This piece in no way reflected the sentiments and thoughts I had wanted to express.

I reworked the rug, redesigning the piece to accentuate the negative space of the first and third piece in the series. Noting that all

four of the rugs were top heavy, I determined that a sense of evolution could best be incorporated by moving the weight to the base of the rug. The viewer could then visually see the movement of the exterior shapes more clearly. I reduced the background color of this rug and had it cover less than a third of the design. The surface images were added, using more subtle and quiet colors. At this point in the process the person is more introspective and working within and the total reduction of color created this emotion. I felt that any harsh or bright colors might disagree with my understanding and view of introspection.

The shapes in the white portion of the rug are step-like and enhance the sentiment of stepping into a new area of thought. The white areas are embellished with feathers, mohair, and a clear mylar. The mylar is subtle, yet catches the eye of the viewer due in large part to the translucency of the fiber. The lower shapes in color are minimal and subtle and represent a sense of creeping out of a shell, a quiet and uncertain step into the unknown. The colored shapes were created with commercial mohair. The introduction of the embroidered embellishments help direct the viewer's eye upward, indicating a new direction of growth.

"Even when walking in a party of no more than three I can always be certain of learning from those I am with. There will be good qualities that I can select for imitation and bad ones that will teach me what requires correction in myself."

Confucius
Chop Wood Carry Water, p. 19

Growth

The third rug came easier than the previous two rugs. I learned from the failures and successes of my former work and applied that knowledge in weaving this piece. This rug indicates the growth of the human spirit. After undergoing a period of self-examination, the next step was to view the effects of the external world on the self. The title of this rug, "Growth," reflects that sentiment.

The interior design consisted of three-quarters color and one-quarter white. The increased color emphasizes change and movement or the awakening of the spirit. As additional color is added one develops a feeling of emergence. The interior shapes in the upper portion of the rug are larger, all white, and reaching downward as if it were trying to connect with the shapes in the lower portion of the rug. The designs are consistent with the white portions on the two previous rugs. The patterns of the bottom half of the rug are slightly larger than the forms on the previous rug. This larger size, although small in scale compared to the overall size of the piece, indicates a timid and quiet step into a new direction.

The rug appears to be divided into separate sections with each portion reaching out toward the other half. This represents a struggle towards reaching a balanced state. The embroidered embellishments are a blending of all the colors on this piece and accentuate the feeling of coming together by acting to unite the two separate portions. The exterior design consists of a step pattern which echoes the forms in the lower portion of the rug, accentuating the feeling of a climb and struggle to reach a balanced state.

"I have always known
 That at last I would
 Take this road, but yesterday
 I did not know that it would be today."

Narihira
Chop Wood Carry Water, p. 4

Renewal

The fourth rug is the last in the series. It represents a culmination of all experiences and expresses a point of renewal of the human spirit, which is indicated in the title of the piece.

The entire rug is engulfed in color from the surface shapes to the background area. The full breadth of color enhances the feeling of energy and life and indicates a journey's end. The color no longer is striving to fill the shape; it has reached the point of completion. The forms are inlaid with commercial mohair, with several colors being hand dyed. The colors in this final piece are found in the previous three but appear stronger with color being the dominate feature in this rug, especially when compared to the previous rugs.

The patterns and designs are mostly in the center of the rug, indicating a sense of balance. The blocks are built upon each other to reinforce the feeling of building onto previous states to reach the final point. The forms that appear outside of the central block structure all aid in balancing the design and also help draw the viewer's eyes to the center of the design. One looks at this rug and

sees a whole design, without the sense of trying to join or unite separate emotions. The lack of movement that before had been strong has now subsided and the forms appear to be resting in their final place. The position is controlled and planned, indicating a resolution to the chaos and isolation. The embroidered embellishments are pointing to all directions of the medicine wheel since this final rug represents a culmination of all experiences.

"Visualize yourself standing before a gateway on a hilltop. Your entire life lies out behind you and below. Before you step through, pause and review the past: the learning and the joys, the victories and the sorrows--everything it took to bring you here. Observe it all, bless it all and release it all. For in letting go of the past you reclaim your power. Step through the gateway now."

Ralph Blum
The Book of Runes, p. 103

Light, Chakras, Energy, Auras, and Assorted Spiritual Matter

The seven painted and woven panels represent a culmination of all my life's experiences and become a departing point for my next area of personal work. I have always admired any fiber artist who could create a piece which was not immediately recognized by its process but looked at primarily for its beauty. With the object rather than the process as the focal point the viewer can gain a clearer insight into the artist's meaning.

These panels succeeded in remaining independent of the technical process, as was made more apparent by the comments made to me of those viewing the panels for the first time. Several people were not aware the panels were woven, the process of color application perplexed others. Yet most were captivated by one consistent quality; they were light, airy, and fresh in appearance, unlike many textile pieces that are heavy and weighted by many threads and yarns. The mylar reflecting the light caught the viewer's attention and seemed to draw many people closer to investigate. The panels reminded people of

different emotions and thoughts, all which were positive and good. I felt a sense of accomplishment and success with these pieces. I wanted to express joy and happiness abstractly through the light, transparency, and colors of each piece. I feel an energy radiates from these panels partly due to their size, but also from the combination of fibers, colors, and weave structure.

The panels are handwoven and incorporate all the colors that are woven into the rugs. The color was airbrushed onto different locations of the panels. By varying the location of color, interaction and blending would be enhanced. Some areas would remain all white and only one color would shine through from another panel, while other portions would have a blending of two or more colors. The weft is a clear reflective mylar which is barely visible, yet adds a mystical quality to the pieces. By reflecting warm colors the mylar created a different mood when combined with the airbrushed color on each panel.

The panels work well with the four rugs and reinforce the sense of completion of the process described in this thesis. The colors are similar, as most certainly is the message I wished to convey. These panels are the end product of my education, but more importantly a blending and merging of emotions and thoughts from many years that allowed these panels to evolve.

TECHNIQUES

Rugs

The techniques used for the four rugs was a four harness plain weave utilizing the tapestry techniques of inlay and soumak to create the surface embellishments. To create the irregular shapes of the exterior of the rug I calculated the full width of the rug at its widest point and then reduced and increased the weaving surface as needed. To keep even tension along the warp threads that were not being used I packed the unwoven areas with paper. The warp was a 10/5 linen sett at 4 ends per inch, with the selvedge having 3 ends per dent on the edge and 2 ends per dent on the adjacent dent, to reinforce the edge and keep the rug from pulling in. The weft was Persian wool, averaging approximately 30 picks per inch.

The Persian wool was hand dyed with Benzyl acid dyes. This dye was chosen because of its lightfast and colorfast qualities and the ease of creating and regulating the color. The wool was dyed in seven gradual value changes. When woven the color change would be in degrees barely discernible to the human eye. The darkest value was dyed using 1.5 milligrams of dye to three pounds of wool. The color was then decreased by very small increments until the lightest shade, which used such a small amount of dye powder that it did not register on the gram scale. The colors used for the inlaid forms were mostly commercially dyed colors with only two colors hand dyed. With only a

limited amount of mohair being used for the internal patterns I used Cushing dyes to obtain the proper color. These dyes are easy to use and are adequate when dyeing small portions. Their lightfast qualities are not as strong as the acid dyes, nor the color desired as accurate, but the process of applying color easier and adequate for my needs.

To create the embellishments on the surface of the rug I combined the technique of soumak and rya knots in the white portions. This created uneven and chaotic qualities as the thread used for the rya knots varied in length. Soumak is a technique where an additional thread is wrapped around the warp threads. By varying the number of warp ends crossed over, the surface became more interesting. In addition, I added feathers and raw mohair to create unique textures. The irregularity in thickness and textures caused by the combined processes of soumak and rya knots created an exciting and lively surface.

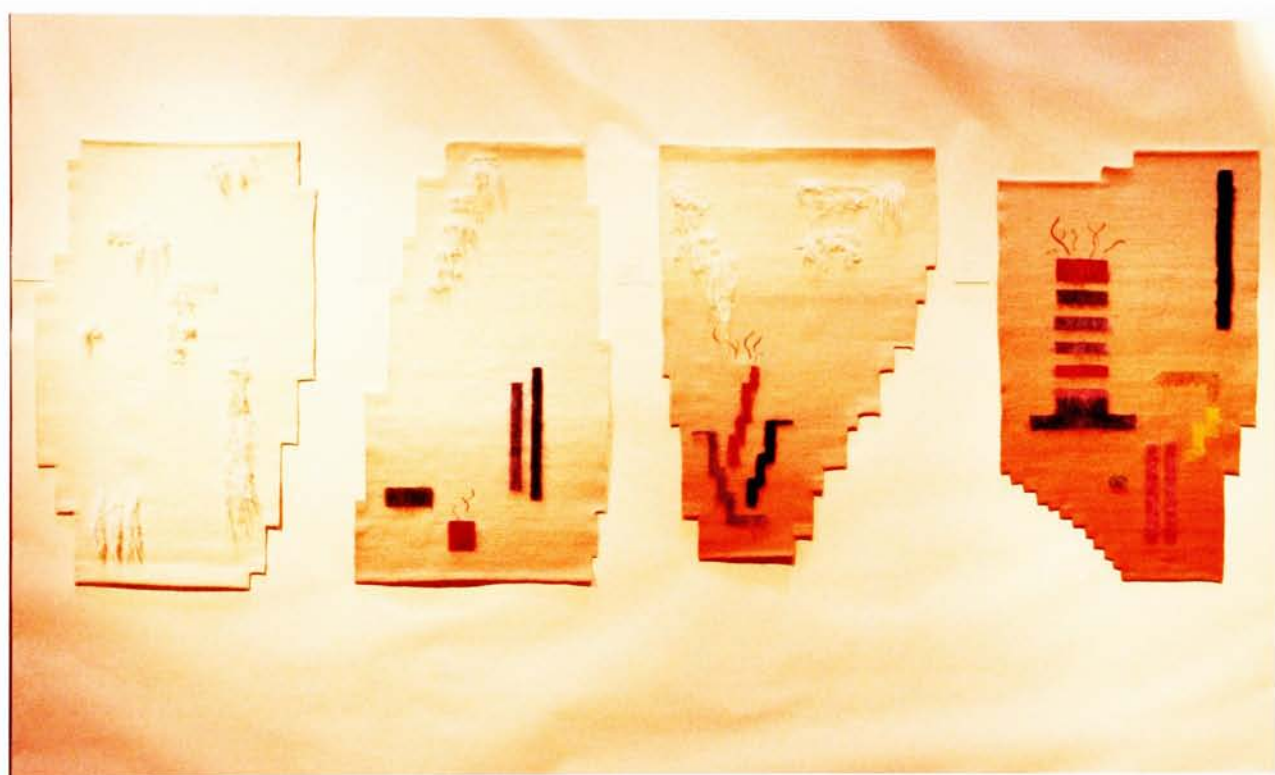
Panels

The panels were also woven utilizing a four harness plain weave structure. The irregularity of the weave structure is caused by varying the denting sequence in the reed and the combination of rayon and cotton in the warp. These fibers have different reflective qualities and varying sizes and thicknesses.

The surface color was applied with an airbrush. The colors used were French dyes because of the vibrant and rich color palette. I had the warp already threaded, then the warp was unwound approximately nine feet and then airbrushed. The warp was spaced out using a raddle to evenly distribute the threads. A knot was tied at the end of each group to keep the warp from slipping through the raddle. Rubber bands were then placed over the nails on the raddle to keep the warp from popping out of the nail division. By securing the raddle with clamps to a table I was able to airbrush on the warp while it was under tension. The colors and placements were already drafted onto paper, so I needed only to enlarge the scheme and apply the color. I chose the airbrush because I was able to cover large areas of space quickly, and add more color to areas that I wanted darker. In addition, the effect produced was subtle as the paint only landed on the upper portions of the warp leaving the underside only slightly colored. When the piece was eventually woven the irregular colored surface produced a quieter shade of color and a more subtle surface. I airbrushed each panel using varying intensities of color, always incorporating gradual color transitions which complemented the color transition on the four woven rugs.

CONCLUSION

By creating a body of work that is and has been so expressive of myself I feel I have allowed a part of myself to be seen and understood. I can now begin a new direction with my work. Perhaps it will not be so personal, it may just represent that which is beautiful to me; nature, pattern, shapes, and colors. For in doing the rugs and the panels and by having to rework the first two rugs I began to understand what it means to really go back into your work, to go beyond that which is limiting and push a design so it can reach its fullest potential. I find myself a freer artist, not so self-restricting by my own inhibitions and fears, but able to really search out and let the hidden parts come forth. I have developed a stronger intuition and learned to follow it--perhaps a bit blindly but knowing the outcome can be rewarding and exciting as it always allows a little light of the inner self to shine through.





FOOTNOTES

¹ Lynn V. Andrews, Flight of the Seventh Moon, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. XII.

² Lynn V. Andrews, Starwoman, (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 8.

³ Lynn V. Andrews, Flight of the Seventh Moon, p. XI.

⁴ Ibid., p. 172.

⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶ Ibid., p. 155.

⁷ Ibid., p. 185.

⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

⁹ Jean Garden Castro, The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985), p. 158.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

¹¹ Anni Albers, On Weaving, (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), p. 96.

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