



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

a personal and particular kind of beauty...

Margaret Sunday

The ATA-talk discussion list hosts occasional *Ask Me Anything* weeks when members are invited to query a willing individual about art and life. For a tapestry newcomer, untutored in technique and uninitiated in weaving's social-artistic protocols, to be asked if I would be first of those willing was . . . curious, and curious I was—so I took it on. The resulting thread ran June 3-13, 2014. The questions were provocative, and the interweaves of collaborative learning valuable. This article is offered in the spirit of that discussion, with a nod to ATA-talk—an evolving, multifaceted forum.

a circuitous path: back from printmaking and book arts to tapestry—

My first experience with threads involved scotch-tape and hand stitching fashions for my ruby-haired troll doll. Those projects progressed to canvas hip-boots that I designed and sewed for myself as a teenager. Seeing looms in the homes of friends, I built one out of imagination, two-by-fours and coat hangers, only to find the weaving went best when I over-rode the contraption and wove in and out with my fingers. Herein a lesson of “simplest means to maximum ends” that I’ve used ever since in teaching and artmaking.

Later, I met some hippies and spent a summer coercing a sheep’s fleece to become yarn: hammering out wood ticks, simmering it in dockweed dye, and spinning it with a hand-whittled drop spindle. Back at home, Dad suggested I needed de-programming—but those long days of sensory profusion and productive solitude were essential in defining my life-long artistic habits and expectation for joy in creating.

I would not suggest that my path to becoming an artist was clear, or that I or anyone considered me a natural. In my sophomore year of college, at the age of twenty, a signal event summed it up. In my “Life Drawing II” critique the semester’s work was spread across the studio floor, and my veteran professor began, “Of course you’ve been told you have talent . . .” And I said, “No.” Why this could happen would fill a memoir, but suffice it to say that where and when I grew up, a fairly adjusted, academically inclined, acceptably pretty girl was not thought to *need* talent in art. I know now that *talent*—the *notion* of it—pales beside *desire*—that part of one’s nature that

subverts the restraints of one's environment, thrives in open waters, needs creative work like breathing, and matures as an attribute of an artist's character.

In the 1970s, Art studies at The University of Iowa did not include Fibers. The looms were across the river in what we used to call Home Ec, where tapestries made by Art Education majors sometimes featured kittens and advertised badly to fine arts students—a painful reflection on fields identified with women and the perception that critical approach to content was not taught.

So, printmaking—a prestigious graduate program with rigorous undergraduate introduction. Drawing into engraver's copper with a drypoint needle brought a physical dimension to image-making that would become urgent. Soon I was relief-etching "auto-graphic" reverse-written poems into plates that I printed on the intaglio press. I intuitively thought of cotton etching papers as shapes of cloth, and the Japanese papers I came to prefer bore wild, irregular deckles, tensile strength and a quality known as the "hand" of the sheet—aspects akin to handwoven textiles. Other characteristics of intaglio printmaking have counterparts in tapestry weaving: mark-making, a limitless language of surface and touch; the objectness of the image-bearing plate; the bas-relief character of the printed impression; and the plate-mark/ border with its built-in esthetic and contextual realities.



1. *The Shepherdess*, approx. 6½ in x 2 in, 1978. Relief etching.



2. *In the spirit he carried me* , full image approx. 40 in x 32 in, 1978. Relief etching.

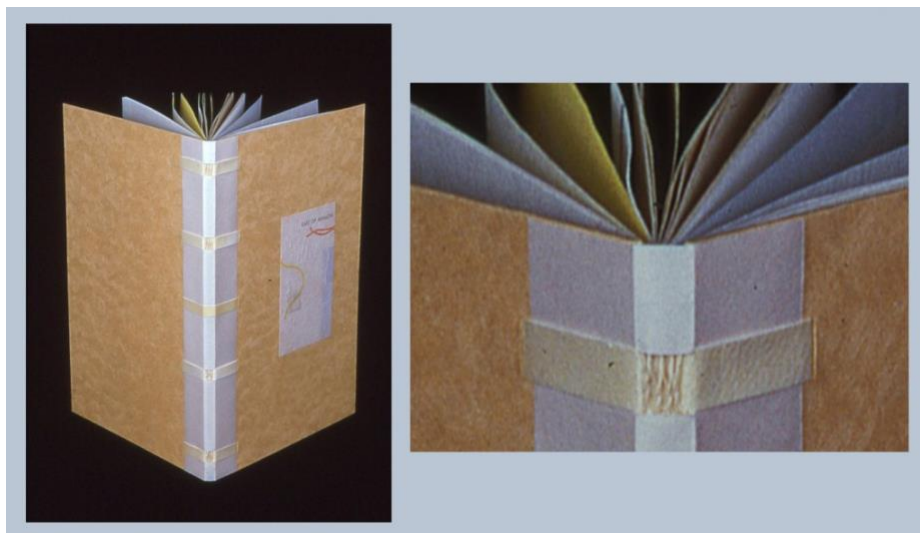


3. *Hamlet/ Snow White*, 36 in x 27 in, 1989. Oil on canvas and carved sugar pine frame.

Iowa's Liberal Arts ethos and reputation as a writers' school supported inter-departmental study of handprinting from moveable type and book design. In grad school, I printed and illustrated limited edition books with my etchings and lithographs. After completing my MA, I engraved over 200 color woodblocks, which, when printed, composed abstract elevation views of New York City, in collaboration on an artist's book. (See illustrations for *Manhattan* under "abstraction: beginning, middle and end" below.) And I painted with oils. Never easy with the illusion of the picture plane as an end in itself, I carved low-relief frames from wood that

extended the imagery of the canvas into other spatial dimensions. For me, the key to color is painting—mixing colors on the palette and *seeing how* they interact with each other and with light—in distinction from the methodical color theory taught in design disciplines.

Matriculating again, at University of Wisconsin-Madison with a focus in book arts, I was printing like crazy and sewing Coptic and longstitch book structures with exposed spine threads that could be needle-woven like warps. An assignment prompted the making of a series of miniature figures from kozo papers, book conservation waste and linen bookbinding thread, and led to a bellwether moment, when I heard myself say in critique—with the certainty of an old troll outfitter—that I feel more natural “drawing with needle and thread than with a pencil”.



4. *East of Avalon*, Poems by James Harms, 11½ in x 14¾ in open, 1998. Woodcuts and binding design by Margaret Sunday. Edition bound by Caroline Gilderson-Duwe. Exposed sewing on parchment tapes over vellum spine cover. Japanese paper-covered boards and label. Printed on letterpress from woodblocks and Optima type.

5. *East of Avalon*, detail of binding. Structural stitches exposed and interlaced on tapes.



6. *Tragic Figures Series: Smiley and Lucky*, approx. 3 in x 2 in, 1991. Mixed media.

7. *Granite Lace*, 24½ in x 12½ in, 2007, photo: Brennan Studios. Improvisational tapestry techniques. Natural and synthetic threads, silk ribbon.

I went on to teach printmaking and book arts at universities, when for reasons of my health and family life, I left academe and discovered the freedom to refocus my art. I needed a softer path. Casually and impulsively, over the years I had been gathering materials for weaving: a child's loom, intriguing hand tools, skeins of various yarns. I met Shirley Ellsworth, owner of Lambspun of Colorado, near my home, who surprised me with mailed packets of marvelous custom-dyed fiber snippets. During my off-and-on history of appearances in her shop, she encouraged me to weave in my invent-the-wheel ways, yet provided instruction when I asked. I literally stumbled upon another friend, Teresa Loveless of Weaving Southwest at Taos (and now Arroyo Seco, New Mexico) when feeding the meter. She took my roll of small weavings to plop in the lap of her grandma, Rachel Brown, and they took me in their gallery, where the tapestries were big and technically expert and all splendidly colorful—with uncrossed wefts!—but mine. And Teresa, this young kid, my *agent*, was telling me, enter shows and do Taos Fibers Marketplace, and Small Tapestry International was opening at the gallery, and I got in.

a culture of timelessness

The idea of an unknown culture is really provocative. I once declared that my favorite artist was “Anonymous”, because I revere the *time-less*, the thing that retains authority, authenticity—without or despite its cultural/ historic context and independent of a narrative. Fragments can

have this kind of power, not for what they imply about a whole (which is interesting, too), but in and of themselves, as self-referential witness.

Memorably, Anonymous are the mummy-makers whose handiwork I saw at the Minneapolis Institute of Art as a child. An x-ray display showed they had wrapped an extra arm in with the body of a woman, and I remember staring, wondering how a person's arm could come to be lost, and then found. But I remember most the off-white cloths, so beautiful I would have touched them, if not for the glass case—not minding the thing's being dead, superstitious and violated. This is the kind of culture I would invent for my tapestries. The presence of the object and its impact on the senses are paramount—but a good back-story never hurts.



8. *Way up the Mountain, Middle Ground*, 29½ in x 14 in, 2011, photo: John Blake. Natural and synthetic fibers, silk ribbon, improvisational tapestry techniques.

Clewsian contrasts, reveal/ conceal, matters in hand

Dorothy Clews' experiments in weaving are mutually compatible with my own unorthodoxies. And the structural irregularities in ancient Coptic and Peruvian weaving are admired by both of us, perhaps referenced in spirit by the fleshed and skeletal contrasts of interacting warp and weft in our work. We each see woven lines within a textile matrix as metaphors for human

markings on the landscape, visioning the planet's surface like a responsive tissue. Topographic maps and aerial viewpoints are another link, and we share a fascination with edges—in place, time and in weaving.

Yet we differ in approaches to age and ancientness. Dorothy responds directly to materials she encounters, recognizing implicit content in their qualities, such as the fragility of crushed lead battery covers, which she collected at abandoned opal mines and used as matrices for a series of raffia woven pieces. In her composts, she addresses woven structures that have been altered by natural processes with active intervention, scrubbing then stabilizing the exhumed textiles with stitches in new threads. This work came out of Dorothy's experience of being airlifted during the flooding of St. George in 2013.



11. Dorothy Clews, *boxes*, detail, 2014.

12. *Flooding at St. George*, 2013. Satellite image.

Mine is more a translation of sources. The pre-industrial textiles I admire seem as close to nature in their state of being, however precarious, as any manmade thing can be. Their authenticity suggests clues about what is important in life and in art—and what makes a creative life meaningful in the long view of human existence. I see contrasting dualities in old cloths—thick and thin, obscured and fresh, flat and layered, matte and luminous, aligned and organic. And I improvise the building of tapestries out of the tensions that these excite.

My fibers are new and my techniques are additive: weaving, interlace, stitching, crochet, wrapping, knotting and appliqué. When I occasionally darn a good wool sock, I enjoy the technical challenges—to weave into knitting, to match thicknesses and extend directions of

stretching, to join odd contours without adding bulk, all while improving strength. Each hole, each sock is a puzzle. This describes something of my way of connecting passages in a weaving, with the difference that selvages, crossed warps and changes in weft topography are consciously exploited for the sake of design and expression.



9. *There-to-Here, Black Watershed, detail, 2013, photo: John Blake.*

10. *Fracked Selfie, detail, work in progress.*

“Skytract Matrix” is a new piece that uses repositioned warp families. Similarities have been noted between this experiment and Peruvian scaffold weaving, in which an organic unity of making and esthetic builds from supplemental warp and weft yarns. Related techniques, such as plaiting, netting, knotting and open spaces woven in place, are incorporated, while sticks, stakes and trees are utilized in tensioning the various yarn groupings. These methods from the ancient Peruvians lie well within my comfort zone and suggest a wealth of intuitive and practicable models.



13. *Skytract Matrix*, 29 in x 9 in, 2012, photo: John Blake. Cotton, flax, wool, silk, silk ribbon.

14. *Skytract Matrix*, detail.

My mentor, Walter Hamady, coined “Admission of Structure,” a concept of book craft that reveals the elements of construction and fuses them to style and content. Hamady’s manipulations of structure formulate an inimitable logic, which plays tag with itself throughout his limited-edition books. A foundation of my own thinking, Admission of Structure is evidenced where I reveal and conceal the matrix in my weavings. Concealed Clothing—an old practice of concealing garments within walls of houses when they were built, believed to be directed at the spirit world—expands this idea. The garments are folded, bundled and made unwearable, hiding their structures while redefining new outer contours; similarly, with discovery of these garments, the structures of the houses are redefined as enclosures, no longer solid. The origination of these garments, as well as their intriguing re-purposing, raise questions about connections between materiality and imagination—the most basic of reasons for art-making.



seeking images, composite ideas: the case of the Barbie leg

For me, meanings unfold in the process of making. Especially in this slow kind of making, which is weaving. If there were not the prospect for discovery, switch-back and play as the pieces evolve, I would not be interested in making them.

I begin a tapestry with a composite idea: formal, technical and metaphorical. A story of one small-format weaving will illustrate. “A Little Something from the Manufacturie” is saturated with iconography and associations, both personal and of the Western Civ type. It seems like a crazy mix, yet each of the main pieces (form, technique and content) fit in finding solutions to a central problem. Recognizable imagery makes this example unusual among my weavings, yet my creative process is essentially the same as in my abstract works.

The flow of ideas began with an object—the puppy-chewed Barbie doll leg I found in my kitchen and tossed in the basket of small-things-of-no-use-whatever—mementos of unformed suspicions. Then the call went out for ATA’s Unjuried/ Small Format show, this word “manufacturie” came up on the talk-list, and high-tech prostheses were all in the news from the

Sochi Olympics. What is more prosthetic-like than the pink plastic leg of a Barbie; more manufacturied? And more symbolic of our cultural disdain for the fallible body? Or for that matter, *more SMALL*? Recall too, that MIA mummy with spare a-r-m . . .

Formal issues resolved themselves: a palette subdued like the grayish pink doll-part and Olympian paint-bereft marble; a silk/metal ply for the warp was high-tech, yet old as Aegean light. Then, echoing the anthropomorphic leg, the rectangular format grew to suggest a primitive figure. The primary technical problem: incorporating the leg without stressing the substrate. The solution brought metaphors: bandages; a sling; winding sheet shroud; the “garment” of Latter Day Saints, never parted from the skin of the wearer; a mermaid’s net; a stocking of lace. . . . Next (working downward) came stuff from Classical clip-art, enough of it to necessitate adding structural support from the top. Working upward, I borrowed a sensuous tree, like the doll leg in color and line, and split at the top like a fish’s tail, to unify the rising background—a touch of Victorian stitchery with Homeric sea-faring harkenings. Look on!



16. *A Little Something from the Manufacturied*, 10 in x 6 in, 2014, photo: John Blake. Natural and synthetic threads and ribbons, Barbie doll leg.

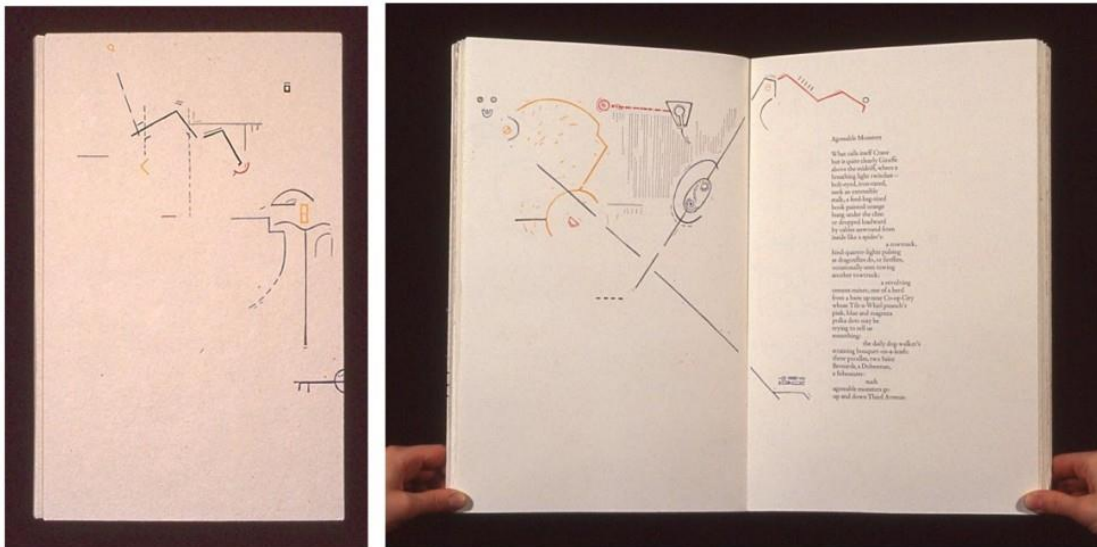
abstraction: beginning, middle and end

Tapestry artists work in non-objective, sometimes culturally referenced imagery, or tend to prefer pictorial content with sources in specific painting styles. My approach to imagery is a dialog with the medium itself, testing its canons while maintaining standards of craft and a sense of contributing to an on-going tradition. In many ways, technique *is* my imagery.

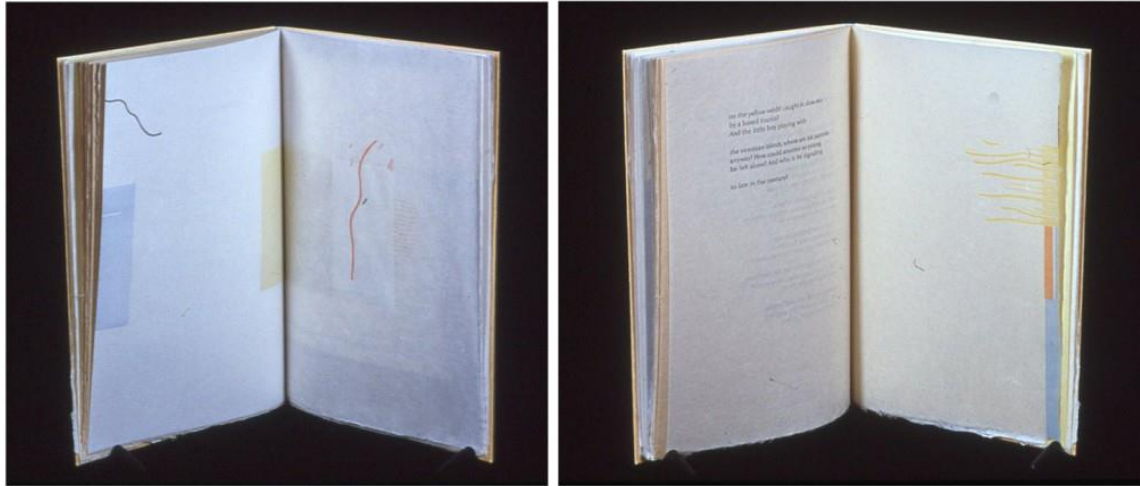
My compositions often derive from the abstract landscape. Abstraction is simplification of a visual event, reduced to its basic elements (color, line, texture . . .) and design principles (balance, contrast, rhythm . . .). Increasingly, my fascination with the workings of formal abstraction is nourished by the mind's eye. I include memory and the misremembering of visual experience, as well as visualized effects of remembered sensations, such as smell, motion, or physical awe. The heart sees, too, and emotional content retained from, or built upon, what I have seen colors the reconstructed image.

Because abstract seeing is essentially formal, it follows that unresolved formal questions from one piece can inspire the next. A problem like how to handle a line—as a purist “design choice” or as a natural occurrence of process, like a vein in the surface of a rock—sets off esthetic, emotive and meaning-loaded relationships.

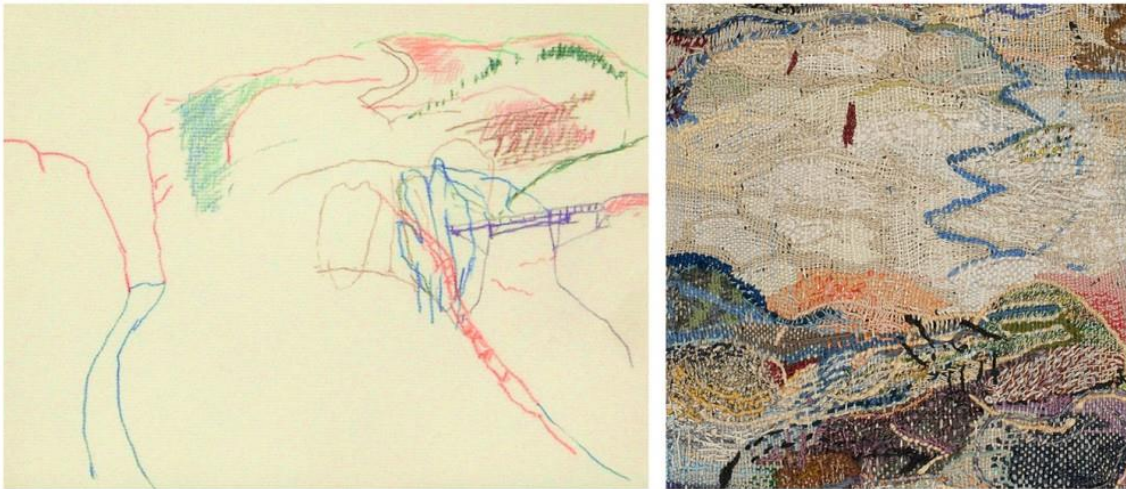
color lines describing elements of landscape:



17.-18. *Manhattan: Poems* by Amy Clampitt, 15½ in x 10 in (closed) 15½ in x 19½ in (open), 1990. Woodcuts by Margaret Sunday. Binding by Pamela Spitzmueller, The University of Iowa Center for the Book, Iowa City, IA,



19.- 20. *East of Avalon, Poems by James Harms, 11½ in x 14¼ in (open), 1998. Design, woodcuts and presswork by Margaret Sunday. Translucent overlays printed on letterpress from the blocks and Optima type on Japanese papers.*



21. *BigThompson Canyon, 11 in x 14 in, August 1997. Sketchbook page (bk. #1). Color pencil.*

22. *Rock Garden for Sue Ping, detail, 2014, photo: John Blake. Improvisational tapestry techniques. Synthetic and natural threads, silk ribbon.*

A poetic landscape concept from Chinese painting called high, or vertical space, neatly, yet diametrically(!) converges with the flat stacking of narrative or motif-pattern registers in Tribal art. (Talk about your eclectic duality; but it works for me.) As I weave upwards, aware of both systems of spatial organization, a shift in their dominance spikes the energy of the whole

composition. Shifts between aerial and elevation views play off the textiles' flatness, too. This manipulation of space is clearest in my weavings where solid, crisp-edged shapes meet soft, floating spaces—moving the eye low and high, in and out, near and far.

*From near to far and
here to there, funny
things are everywhere.*
—Dr. Seuss



23. *Near to Far*, 30 in x 10 in, 2011, photo: John Blake. Natural and synthetic threads, silk ribbon

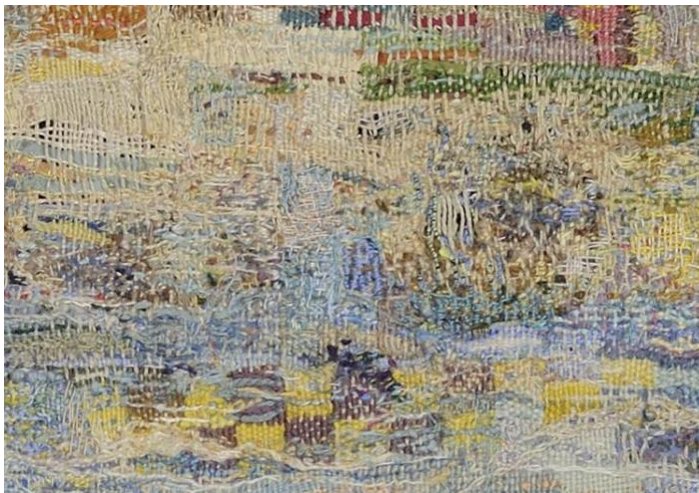


24. *Continental Shims*, 25½ in x 12½ in, 2013, photo: John Blake. Strip weaving. Natural and synthetic threads, ribbons and velveteen cloth.

The contrasts of soft and hard fibers, their weights, sheens and plies have implications for their handling, their adaptation to technical play, and to physical structure. The materials of weaving affect all of the formal aspects of a piece as naturally as they express its content. Moving among a variety of materials in creating a single work, I choose each in response to its “voice” as it interacts with the whole.

I earlier noted my attraction to tensions between dual elements: a strong composition will hold those tensions in balance. Because my weavings are constructed of minutely-worked aggregate areas, there is a tendency for the surfaces to dominate and thus, diffuse the compositions. So critical questions I ask near completion are: is the gestalt healthy? does the piece breathe? is it overworked anywhere—too self-conscious? too much quoting of myself? does it feel authentic? And, once a weaving is cut from the loom: how does it feel in the hand? Like a line in a poem that won't form right in the mouth *because* its meaning is fumbled—if it doesn't work one way, it probably isn't working in another.

My expectation of wholeness does not derive from an imposed standard of craftsmanship, but arises as a perceivable dimension of the singular object's beauty. I am continually rediscovering and redefining what I know, and think I know, in my engagement with this personal and particular kind of beauty, its internal workings and external resonances. And when a piece is done... it should *not* be done: it should be ready... to express what I, its maker, could not entirely see coming....



25. Margaret Sunday, "Way Up the Mountain, Middle Ground," detail, 2011, photo: John Blake.

Author's Byline

Margaret Sunday followed the path of itinerant college teacher until she settled on the high plains of northern Colorado, where, upon earning tenure, she left higher education and, in 2006, began weaving. Her BA, with Honors Exhibition in Printmaking and participation in the selective admission Undergraduate Writers Workshop in Poetry, was followed with an MA in Printmaking (1982) at The University of Iowa. A decade later at University of Wisconsin-Madison, with fellowship grants from the Graduate School and School of Education, she earned her MFA with focus in Book Arts.