



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Christine Laffer: Lines of Inquiry

Mary Lane

Weaving is, by nature, a linear process. Whether in small areas, or across the entire width of the fabric the cloth builds line by line, in an additive fashion. It seems appropriate, therefore, or perhaps even inevitable, that weft stripes occur in textiles from all cultures. They are quintessentially “texture,” one of the universal, graphic components of the language of weaving. It might come as no surprise that a thoughtful artist, one who has been concerned with the nature of her chosen medium and the implications of that medium’s qualities and properties for her own creative path, might become interested in stripes, might even develop a creative conversation in which lines and stripes become a leitmotif, a subtext of the work. It is through this lens what I wish to consider the relationship between the different forms of expression within Christine Laffer’s artistic oeuvre.

Christine began weaving tapestry after pursuing studies in architecture, another field in which the product arises out of building in an additive fashion with a set of forms that are bound into conversation with the vertical forces of gravity and the horizontal nature of the ground. The corresponding grid in weaving is, of course, the warp and weft. Beginning with the tapestry *Red Escape*, but developed in a more methodical manner in *Pillowry*, Christine has employed stripes of varying thicknesses to both ornament and define shape. Running horizontally, vertically, diagonally, and following the bulging and undulating forms of airing bedding and a shadowed figure, these stripes not only describe the various elements in the image, they also create an undercurrent, a secondary conversation that the artist engages with her medium, in which the decorative potential of geometric patterning that seems to arise so naturally from the grid of woven cloth meets storytelling, meets narrative. Stripes are, in *Pillowry*, both the medium and the message. They are the technique that defines the architectural shapes and creates the illusion of three dimensions in the cloth and the figure. They are also a form of ornamentation that has its own *raison d’être*.

In 1990 Christine began experimenting with eccentric weave and the resulting forces that push and pull the tapestry out of its flat plane into an undulating topography more suggestive of cloth as a covering than cloth as a passive substrate for image making. The textile’s properties as

an object, its physicality, began to assert themselves as one of the subjects of the tapestry. Fabric buckles, it bends, it hangs. It has weight, and volume. "Working with this physicality, and the unruliness of a technical variation that I call bas-relief or eccentric tapestry, I can play between the illusion of an image and the actuality of the object." Within this paradigm of thinking the line between the subject and the object began to dissolve.

White Sac is a monochromatic rendering of a torso in profile. The cloth, like the sagging skin it represents, folds and puckers. The three dimensionality of the tapestry and the image embedded within the cloth are reinforced through shading techniques based on the classical color blending systems of historical French and Flemish tapestries called hachure and battage. These rhythmic and structured systems create intermediate values through the alteration of light and dark stripes and elongated triangles. They are related to the mark making associated with engraving, although, unlike the marks in engraving, which travel in any direction and even cross each other, the woven stripes in this piece are confined to running parallel to the direction of the weft. However, because the weft in White Sac is running eccentrically throughout the piece, the lines of the color blending techniques also follow divergent paths. The thin woven stripes, for the most part, reinforce the volumetric folds of the pliable cloth skin that, like our own flesh, has an incredible capacity to transform itself in order to accommodate an ever-changing body. The sensuality of cloth invites touch – our skin touching woven skin. However, this representation of flesh raises questions about the cultural attitudes towards sensuality and beauty. This flesh droops and hangs. Ruptures in the skin, created by gaping, elongated slits, suggest the eventual breakdown of our body's covering and the dangling warp ends insinuate the leakage of bodily fluid. This sagging and imperfect sac evokes mortality and disintegration, rather than health and vitality. As viewers, our emotional response to this troubled body reflects the interrelationship between mental and bodily states. How are we to feel about this body? How are we to feel about our reactions to this body?

In Collapse, the woven marks, the now familiar vocabulary of thin stripes, has been freed from following the path of the weft. Diagonal lines cross each other, creating patterns of cross-hatching. They evoke the fine lines that mark the surface of aging skin and symbolize the accumulated weight of personal experience. The convoluted puckering of the surface of the head created through the eccentrically woven weft and reinforced through the complex system

of lines and cross hatching that create highlights and shadows, suggests not so much the relatively smooth casing of the skull, as it does the intricate and complex surface and nature of the brain itself. The black warp running behind the head produces shadows in the openings left for the ear and eye. It cascades out of the mouth and neck of the severed head. No longer a taut, rigid support structure, its limp, disordered state contrasts with the rational logical thinking normally associated with the mind. The contents of this mind spill out in a profusion of tangles that bear little resemblance to the structure of the language. The metaphors of inner and outer, of structure and function, of order and disorder resonate throughout the image, the materials and the woven structure.

In addition to her work in tapestry, Christine has recently begun a series of drawings on rocks, wood, bone and other found materials. These pieces build upon the vocabulary of ideas and image making found in her tapestries, but they also pursue additional lines of investigation. Working with found materials involves a certain collaboration with both chance (what will I find?) and with the found object itself, which comes with its own physical reality and history. Artwork made with the found objects has layers of meaning – its own, the artist's and the meaning that arises out of the interaction between the two. As fragments they are also imbued with a certain melancholy, a sense of loss that comes with the passage of time and the loss of wholeness.

In 10305 Christine has drawn a network of lines over the surface of a shell fragment. The shell possesses its own three-dimensional shape and its own series of radiating lines that mark the growth of the once living organism, an accumulative pattern of growth reminiscent of the build up of weft in a tapestry. The drawn lines, whose path is often broken by the slight depression of the shell's growth rings, create the illusion of a series of folds that, in turn, suggest the corpus of Christine's textile work and her use of lines and stripes to produce the appearance of cloth molding itself over the body or of the body itself. But the drawn lines also look like a miniaturization of the patterns on sand created by water and wind, or of the striations in rocks caused by the movement of glaciers. They suggest mountain ranges, sand dunes and flowing rivers. The repetitive nature of the parallel drawn lines also alludes to the endless pounding of surf that broke down this shell and to the continuous flow of water and movement of air, the forces of nature that create the landforms and the patterns that these drawings suggest. This

small fragment, through the skill and artifice of the artist, through illusion and allusion, has acquired an extraordinary evocative power. It has become a portal for our imagination.

The increasing density and complexity of the drawn lines in 30401 and 30405 respond to the irregular surface of the rocks. The miniature landscape they create calls to mind topographic maps and fingerprints. In 30406 the lines moves at various angles to each other, suggesting mountain ranges with rivers flowing in the valleys, or perhaps details from drawings of draped and folded fabric. The drawings on bone, 20304, evoke not only landscapes, or the patterns of wind and water on the landscape, but also sinew and the fibers of muscle.

These works are small, close, intimate. In order to view the drawings in all of their intricacy one must hold them, turning them round and round, much as the artist, rock in one hand, pen in the other, cradled the rock as she drew over its weathered surface. The drawings are governed, to some extent, by the erosional history of the rock itself, and to some extent, by the intent of the artist. This is not a clean sheet of paper or a tightly stretched warp with all their implications of unbounded opportunities. These drawings respond to a set of givens that are part and parcel of the found object itself. Perhaps because of this interaction between the object and its history, and the intentions of the artist, these sensitive works evoke a diverse range of associations for the viewer. Through the drawings, additional layers of meaning accumulate, multiplying the rock's metaphoric capacity.

Successful small works possess a focused and powerful energy that is a product of concentrating meaning within a small space, and meticulous labor. Their intensity pulls the viewer near. Such quiet and unpretentious statements require close observation; they must be brought into our personal space. The conflation of the space between object and the viewer pulls us out of the present and into a more introspective, or contemplative mode, a state of reverie that is more receptive to the unexpected, or counter intuitive. In this liminal space of consciousness, associations float more freely, the mind is left to drift in the realm of possibilities. For some, this is the definition of art.

The Artist

Christine Laffer began her studies in architecture in 1969 at the University of Illinois in Chicago. After discovering textiles she moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where she studied tapestry with Jean Pierre Larochette and Yael Lurie. In 1982 she began weaving images of cloth and architecture, and in the following years finished several large commissions. She studied for six months (1984-85) at the Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins in Paris, receiving a letter of high



recommendation from director Gérard Dehais. She completed her MFA at San Jose State University in 1995.

Laffer has shown her work nationally, spoken at professional symposia, and published articles. Tapestry continues to be her medium of choice as she develops a conceptual meld of bas-relief sculptural form and mute image. Occasionally she combines the weaving with cloth found objects drawing, or prints.

Recently completing 2-1/2 years as Gallery Coordinator at [WORKS/San José](#), as an alternative art and performance space, Laffer now works full-time in her studio. She has edited (detail), a journal of art criticism published by the [South Bay Area Women's Caucus for Art](#) and was Guest Editor of June 1998 issue of Switch, an on-line publication of the CADRE Laboratory for New Media.

Artist Statement

Although an unusual medium for a contemporary artist, I have found that tapestry has a compelling structure for image and content. The classical French method of designing and weaving proceeds in a systematic and exact way, steeped in a long tradition. Yet there remain stray threads of exploration that were dropped or never fully developed, waiting to be picked up by contemporary artists. Since the days of my study at the Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins, I have taken this technical language and tried to release some of the strange potential it contains.

With Gragonard and Boucher in the 18th century the physical quality of tapestry reached its thinnest point, the period of maximum denial of weight and gravity. In the last half of the 20th century the imaged cloth regained its weight and physical substance. Artists from the 1950s to the 1970s worked in thicker and thicker weaves with evident texture grain, shifting to denser object qualities to hold to large-scale static walls. I see these transformations, of the medium forming and reforming itself, as willful attempts to encompass all its possibilities.

Tapestry does not have the translucence of paint, nor the flatness of stretched canvas. It exists outside limited by its "body," its exposed surface, its weight. In keeping with the qualities of this medium, I have conflated the image and the object in what I call shaped eccentric tapestry. The

internal shifts in the weave structure cause surface buckling and undulation, as if the form had collapsed but somehow still lived. Since in my mind the image is the same as the object, I use references to garments and the body to convey an emotionally charged view of difficult human states – particularly those where the physical and mental components are unified, such as the position of sacrifice.

In keeping with the qualities of this medium, I have taken images of cloth and set them in relation to architecture, thereby framing and elaborating on some part of human life. This works enmesh the fabric with the urban images and form another cloth, colored an emotional range of experience. Because of my background in both architecture and textiles, I am constantly struck by the contrasts between them, their different elements of texture, weight, pliability and durability, and how they convey their meanings through the way they are used. These two man-made constructions, through our use of them, come to symbolize aspects of our internal conflicts. They easily oppose stability to flexibility, longevity to ephemerality, wealth to poverty, the desire for moving freely to the need for standing still, and these oppositional images can be interwoven within a single cloth, much as they exist in an individual life.

The two development sources from which I work have been small tapestry sketches exploring the emotional content of form and woven mark, and photographs and drawings that document the cities I have seen. Large projects require preparatory work and go through several stages of development. The final design reaches completion only on the loom. Recent work has incorporated a third stage, with sculptural relief which takes shape only after the warp is cut and the piece is hung on the wall.

The suggestions of the medium continue pointing to other combinations, other folds or twists in the cloth of tapestry, of control or loss. The medium lives because it must, survives because it can. As artists we become the medium of the medium, temporarily occupying a site used by previous nomads and marked by them.

The Exhibition



Christine Laffer
"Red Escape"



Christine Laffer
"Red Escape (detail)"



Christine Laffer
"Red Escape" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"Pillowry" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"White Sac"



Christine Laffer
"White Sac"



Christine Laffer
"Pillowry"



Christine Laffer
"Pillowry" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"Pillowry" (detail)



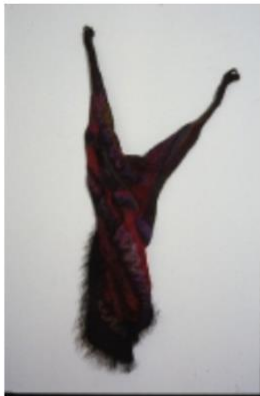
Christine Laffer
"White Sac" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"Collapse"



Christine Laffer
"Collapse" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"Suspension"



Christine Laffer
"Suspension" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"Suspension" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"Suspension" (detail)



Christine Laffer
"10305" shell drawing



Christine Laffer
"10305" (other side)



Christine Laffer
"10307" shell drawing



Christine Laffer
"30405" (other side)



Christine Laffer
"30406" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"20304" bone drawing



Christine Laffer
"30401" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"30401" (other side)



Christine Laffer
"30405" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"20406" wood drawing



Christine Laffer
"20406" (other side)



Christine Laffer
"20407" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"20408" wood drawing



Christine Laffer
"30404" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"30404" (other side)



Christine Laffer
"20501" shell drawing



Christine Laffer
"30407" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"10601" shell and thread drawing



Christine Laffer
"20502" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
"30408" rock drawing



Christine Laffer
Nexus Gallery display