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The Idiom of Weaving: Warp, Weft, and Inspiration

Sing in me, muse, and through me tell your story.[1]

There have been times that I have questioned the importance of looking back in my reading at the historical aspects of critical theory and art history. This is usually because the language put forth in these decades old texts can be quite dry and slightly archaic. Additionally, on occasion the critical opinions contained within can be so out-of-date that they might read as offensive to the 21st century scholar; even to one who approaches most everything from an anthropological standpoint like me. But then quite often, just as I am starting to give into this feeling of apathy, I come across some small nugget of intriguing information that makes it all worthwhile, and I am once again reminded of the wisdom to this approach of study.

This synchronistic phenomenon happened to me recently while reading an old copy of *Heresies* (a publication produced by a Second Wave feminist art collective in New York City in the 1970's). While I was enjoying the collaborative spirit of the periodical, as well as the mashup of topics, and the throwback handmade punk-rock-like 'zine ethos to its production and design, it *was* rather a slog to get through in parts. But, as I persevered through an excerpt of an article entitled "Women and the Decorative Arts" by the iconic feminist art historian and critic

[1] This is the mantra or small prayer that I try to remember to say three times before I start to work in my studio. It's the "Invocation of the Muse" and the first line of Homer's *Odyssey.* Not only does this practice help to center me before I start to create, but I also like to think that the invisible sentiment is woven throughout my artistic output, and in this way, it goes out into the world with my work. I wish that I had though up the idea to do this myself, but I didn't. I stole it from the book *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles*, by Steven Pressfield. Thank you, Steven! Somehow, the process always tends to go much smoother in the studio when I take a moment to engage in this small ritual.

Linda Nochlin, I came across a reference to the Omega Workshops, which was an English decorative arts movement prior to World War I (Nochlin 43). The guild was started by the artists Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell, members of the notorious Bloomsbury Group, who were "a set of aristocratic bohemian intellectuals whose name derived from the London neighborhood where they lived." (Hass 83) This in turn, reminded me of an article that I had *just* read in a very current issue of the *New York Times Style Magazine* on this same topic; the gist of which was about how the Omega Workshop had influenced a whole new generation of artists in both America and England who are currently producing colorful, abstracted goods that are patterned in and designed with the creative spirit of the original movement in mind (Hass 83). At the time, this article had caught my eye for two reasons: 1) the abstracted bold patterns and colorful palettes intersect with my own artistic interests, and 2) I have been brainstorming an idea about creating some sort of artist's workshop or collective in my neighborhood.

So, when I came across the reference in the *Heresies* article from 1978, in an instant, my artistic antennae went up and I realized that maybe I was onto something. I was starting to see one of the gossamer threads that connect one generation's creative innovation to another's, and how it can be woven through years of history, only to break through the warp and weft of the cultural fabric to become relevant once again. Through the search for inspiration and nostalgic connection, all that is old will become new again.

> **The warps are the parallel paths of her choices that bear her in a single direction, the teeth of the comb fit them, for a moment the colors appear superfluous to the continuing texture.**[2] (Burnside 27)

[2] In *Heresies*, Volume 1, Number 4, 1978, one of the articles entitled "Weaving" by Madeleine Burnside, is a short descriptive text about weaving that is interspersed throughout with prose that are what the author—a writer and weaver—referred to as "a metaphor for [her] craft." I thought that certain lines, when distilled out from the rest of

I was reading the specific issue of *Heresies* in question, which bares the subtitle and subsequent theme of "Women's Traditional Arts—The Politics of Aesthetics," in an attempt to get some background on where pattern, design, and the decorative fit into the art-historical narrative through the lens of feminism. And by doing so, I was hoping to catch a glimmer of a connection to my own work as an artist and graphic designer whose impulses lean towards some of these very proclivities.

Additionally, along with the reading of timeworn feminist prose, I have also been meditating on the meaning of my artistic impulses and interests, as well as the other artists, artistic movements, and cultural touchstones that inform my work and help to provide inspiration. Something that has proven harder to put into words than I thought because the reasons can be far more deep-seated and unconscious than anticipated.[3]

For example, chroma, or the love of a bold and bright color palette, has long been a hallmark of both my visual art and graphic design practices. This is what I have always gravitated towards in my work, it is what is visually pleasing to me. The reasons *why*, have been harder for me to discern.

Chromophobia, as described by David Batchelor in his philosophical book by the same name, is "a fear of corruption or contamination through [color]." Logically then, he describes the inverse of this obscure cultural phenomenon as *Chromophilia*—the love of or obsession with color.

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the text, were beautifully poetic. I have pulled four of these lines of text from the article and woven them throughout this paper, thus creating not only a visual metaphor of weaving, but also a literary device for shifting from one thought to the next.

[3] I was just reading something about the artist and educator Corita Kent (also known as Sister Mary Corita) and her hand lettered, collaged and "vibrant serigraphs" from the 1960s, in which she confronted issues such as poverty, racism, and war with messages of peace and social justice. One of her most well-known works is the ten rules poster that she created for the art department at Immaculate Heart College. Rule number 8 particularly resonates with me now. "Rule 8: Don't try to create and [analyze] at the same time. They're different processes." This is so true. I guess I am now in the analyzing phase of the process. https://austinkleon.com/2019/11/20/corita-day/

Batchelor writes that the fear of color has woven its way "through Western culture since ancient times," which is "apparent from the many attempts to purge [color] from art, literature and architecture, either by making it the property of some 'foreign' body—the oriental, the feminine, the infantile, the vulgar or the pathological—or by relegating it to the realm of the superficial. . ." He goes on to state:

> [Color] is dangerous. It is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness—at least for a moment. [Color] requires, or results in, or perhaps just is, a loss of focus, of identity, of self. A loss of mind, a kind of delirium, a kind of madness perhaps. (Batchelor 51)

This is almost poetic, but when I think about my own preoccupations with the topic, I prefer his use of the two metaphors "falling and leaving" in reference to color:

> Their terminologies—of dreams, of joys, of uprootings or undoings of self—remain more or less the same. More than that, perhaps, the descent into [color] often involves lateral as well as vertical displacement; it means being blown sideways at the same time as falling downwards. (Batchelor 41)

Besides chroma, another element to color is the meaning, or the social and cultural associations that can be attached to it. In Kassia St. Clair's book, *The Secret Lives of Color*, she gives what she calls a "character sketch" of the 75 shades in the spectrum that intrigued her the most, along with suggestions for further research and quotes like this one by John Ruskin, "The purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love color the most." (St. Clair v) Of course, I tend to agree with this sentiment! But I also find the cultural associations, symbolism, and histories behind color an endless source of inspiration.

There are many interesting historical facts about all of the colors in the spectrum, but one color in particular that St. Clair writes about—Pink—struck me as particularly remarkable. First, she states "Pink's current image problem is partly due to the feminist backlash against old-fashioned sexism. It is seen as simultaneously infantilizing and… [when used] to depict naked female flesh, sexualizing." (117) But then fascinatingly she goes on to say:

> Recently it was revealed that products for women, from clothes to bike helmets to incontinence pads, routinely cost more than products for men and boys that are practically identical. In November 2014 French secretary of state for women's rights Pascale Boistard demanded to know *"Le rose est-il une couleur de luxe?*" ("Is pink a luxury color?") when it was discovered Monoprix [a major French retail chain] was selling a pack of five disposable pink razors at $1.93. A ten-pack of blue disposable razors, meanwhile, cost $1.85. The phenomenon has come to be known as the "pink tax." (St. Clair 117)

Somehow a *color* has been used to not only infantilize *and* sexualize women, but to also *penalize* us economically! It never ceases to amaze me how deeply embedded within our cultural systems and societal norms that patriarchal inequities can exist. I keep thinking that there has to be a way to use this as metaphor in my work but have not quite figured out how to do it yet.

> **She wishes to include her children, those changing qualities in her life, but as she withholds herself from her disappointments so she comes no nearer to her desires.**
>
> **She perceives this stage as a part of a chain, the links placed in her life as an offering.** (Burnside 27)

Something else that I continue to ponder when it comes to my being a woman, a mother, and an artist is how these three realities and subsequent perspectives inform and impact my creative practice.

In another very recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "Where the Body is Buried," the journalist Rachel Cusk profiles the female painters Celia Paul and Cecily Brown, while also exploring how contemporary women artists "navigate a medium historically dominated by men." (Cusk 42) Additionally, Cusk asks a few very thought provoking questions: "How do women become more than objects in art?"; "To what extent does the creative artist experience herself as gendered?"; "Can a women artist—however virtuosic and talented, however disciplined—ever attain a fundamental freedom from the fact of her own womanhood?"; and "Must the politics of femininity invariably be accounted for, whether by determinedly ignoring them or by deliberately confronting them?"(Cusk 48)

I could probably write a whole book trying to answer these questions for myself in relation to my own art practice, so I won't attempt to answer them here, but I know that this is something I need to keep thinking about and exploring in my work.

Finally, there is one further element to the article that I want to touch on briefly, and it is about the way that both Paul and Brown approached motherhood in relation to their work. Celia Paul—a generation older than Brown—had a child when she was very young with Lucien Freud and chose to give her son to her mother to raise in order to focus fully on her art and her relationship with Freud.[4] While Cecily Brown was ambivalent about motherhood through most of her young adulthood, choosing to focus on her art career only, until she decided to have a

[4] Although, I would like to point out that what Celia Paul chose to do when it came to her son, was no different than what Lucien Freud chose to do as well. A choice I am fairly certain Paul suffered over much more so (both emotionally and culturally) than Freud ever did.

child at forty. Now at fifty, Brown is happily raising her daughter with her husband, but she does express some resentment over the fact that she can no longer be fully consumed by her work in the way she could be before becoming a mother.

To me either of these choices is fraught with the eventuality of some sort of painful regret, as both motherhood and creativity require tremendous amounts of mental absorption and physical time, making it almost impossible to do both well at once. This reality means you will always have to choose one over the other, leaving the unfocused on thing to suffer the consequences.

> **This is her substance in which the moments are caught, their outline fingered, and their matter consumed in such a way that they themselves become the fiber of the web**. (Burnside 27)

Going back full circle, to the original thought that I had at the beginning of this paper, in regard to the issue of *Heresies* that I am reading, so many different connections and inspirations continue to catch my eye.

When thinking about the themes that interest me in my work such as pattern and mark-making, structure and connection, design and typography, and how they may or may not be linked. I see connections between how I tap into elements from nature and the cosmos for color and pattern inspiration, and how there is an element of the sublime and a level of spirituality to some of the processes and habits—some aspects of which rely heavily on chance—that I weave into my practice. It seems that there are so many different threads that I can follow.

For example, the article entitled “Political Fabrications: Women’s Textiles in 5 Cultures” provides pattern and mark-making ideas to me, while also commenting on the gendered binary between what is considered to be craft and high art. (Feinberg et al. 28)

While further along, an article entitled “Trapped Women: Two Sister Designers, Margaret and Frances MacDonald” is about the sister duo who were associated with the early 20th century Glasgow School and the renowned architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Mackintosh, and now I realize after reading this article, the sisters (Margaret married Mackintosh in 1899) have been a source of graphic design inspiration for me in the past. (Gear 48)

And then there is the article entitled, “Women of the Bauhaus” which coincidentally just celebrated its 100-year anniversary and was a cause for much hype in the media and nostalgic looking back over the past year.(Keller 54) This in-turn lead me to an essay by Anni Albers from 1938 entitled “Work with Material.” In the article Albers states:

> We must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material…Material, that is to say unformed or unshaped matter, is the field where authority blocks independent experimentation less than in many other fields, and for this reason it seems well fitted to become the training ground for invention and free speculation…But most important to one’s own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one’s whole being. Self-confidence can grow. And a longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means, within oneself; for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know. (Albers)

Indeed, I have come to realize that much of my own creative practice revolves around not only the process, but the materiality of the mediums that I engage with.

And to go back to the metaphor of weaving, when thinking about some of the impulses in my own work[5], Albers writes about the craft:

> Weaving is an example of a craft which is many-sided. Besides surface qualities, such as rough and smooth, dull and shiny, hard and soft, it also includes color, and, as the dominating element, texture, which is the result of the construction of weaves. Like any craft it may end in producing useful objects, or it may rise to the level of art. (Albers)

Finally, there is so much more information in that one issue of *Heresies* that I could probably dive into for inspiration, but one last article that I want to think about here is entitled "Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled" by the artists Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro. In relation to my own art journaling practice, the collection of ephemera from my day-to-day life as a form of memory keeping and that I use for collage, this article tackles the "radical collage aesthetic" called "Fremmage." Which is a word coined by the authors that is defined as a mash-up of collage, assemblage, découpage, and photomontage that is "practice by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art—sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking, and the like—activities also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women." (Meyer 67)

There are so many great things to pull from here. From a thought about Virginia Woolf and her talk of "the loose drifting material of life" and how "she would like to see it sorted and coalesced into a mold transparent enough to reflect the light of our life and yet aloof as a work of

[5] Using many different mediums—including collage—I weave the color, texture, and marks throughout the many varied layers of my paintings, fitting the pieces together almost like a puzzle. With each finished piece infused with multiple levels of visual information, leaving the viewer to come away with something new each time that they look, as well as to elicit a response from them that is unique unto themselves.

art." (Meyer 66) To the part a few pages in that talks about the "collected, saved and combined materials used represented for such women acts of pride, desperation and necessity. Spiritual survival depended on the harboring of memories." To the little nugget of information about how women would name their handsewn quilts for their political beliefs as a hidden way to exert their personal opinions at a time when they did not have the right to vote. (Meyer 68)

In ending, I would like to quote Helen Frankenthaler, an artist who is a big influence of mine, not only for her artform, but also because she was a successful women artist (for nearly six decades). Frankenthaler said "There are no rules. That is how art is born, how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules. That is what invention is about." In my ongoing search to find sources of inspiration that will hopefully lead to my own unique "visual voice," I remind myself of this sentiment and try to use it as a guiding light in my efforts to remain authentic within my art practice. I suppose we will always need to look back at the past in order to move forward towards the future.

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