

The understated fiberworks of Lewis Knauss, on view at the Craft Alliance Gallery in St. Louis, Missouri (November 1-December 2), function in the same manner as any minimalist work. After the first impression, our eyes are naturally drawn to the subtle surface aberrations inherent in the material, and we are left with a sense of the artist's quiet mastery of his subject. Knauss, who teaches at Tyler School of Art of Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, claims that his images are taken from landscapes: remembrances of his childhood in Macungie, Pennsylvania; scenes glimpsed in Saratoga, New York, where he spends a part of the year, and on a recent trip to Israel and Egypt. The elegance of his work is the product of artistic restraint. He presents the essence of each landscape rather than a detailed description.

Some of his most compelling images come from the Middle East. *Saggara*, for example, was inspired by the Egyptian segment of his trip. It is made of flatly woven Austrian hemp which extends for seven inches from a horizontal band. A puckering in the band produces a slight indentation at its center. This effect seems to be a signature for Knauss; it appears in each of the 12 works exhibited. The surface of *Saggara* is rough, emphasizing the tactile quality of the yarn, and it is woven simply. Threads cascading down the remaining 27 inches of fabric have been painted light blue, pale lavender and pink. The tinted washes on natural adobe and the delicate pastels of the morning skies that Knauss encountered in the Middle East caused him to reconsider his use of color.

The artist is equally at ease within monochromatic restrictions, as in *Desert Haze*, which contains a short flat woven area wrapped around a horizontal pole from which the hemp threads hang. Midway down the length of each thread a double strand of hemp has been attached with extremely delicate strands of the same material. The process is repeated two more times so that the quantity of threads increases geometrically with the length. "The knots I used in *Desert Haze* come from camel decorations," Knauss says. "I like them because their interlocking forms produce a netlike quality." The piece is evocative of the golden heat of the desert, shimmering and relentless.

*Last Street in Giza* is probably the most directly referential work, the idea coming to him when he was traveling through a rundown area in Giza. "On what was literally the last street in the town, I could see crumbling adobe structures painted in pastel colors, and towering over these modest buildings were the three great pyramids of Giza." Knauss has incorporated a faint triangle into the otherwise flat dense weave of the top nine inches of the piece. The remaining two thirds consists of free-hanging threads which have been painted to correspond to the hues observed on the adobe structures. The paint has been applied in specific patterns, each strand painted first light blue, then lavender, blue, pink, and finally, lavender. The unpainted areas between each color result in a slight vibratory effect such as one might expect in an arid desert atmosphere under brilliant sunlight. The last few inches of thread have been evenly coated lavender, producing a bristling density of color which is unexpected, though formally sound, since it balances the assertiveness of the triangular image at the top.

A contrast to the subtle Middle Eastern-inspired work is *Early on the Green*, with its riotous colors and textures. It has a short section of flatly woven hemp at the top with

# LANDSCAPES RECALLED

TEXT BY NANCY RICE



*Saggara*, woven pile, sewn, with linen, hemp twine, paint, 34"x27".





TOP: *Fire on the Plain*, woven pile with paint, linen, raffia, 36"x36".  
 ABOVE: *Desert Haze*, woven pile, knotted, with hemp twine, paint, 42"x36". OPPOSITE PAGE: *Rain on the Mediterranean*, woven pile with hemp twine, paint, 46"x36".

threads hanging for about four inches. These threads are knotted and extend halfway down the piece to a rod wrapped with hemp. A bright red string with yellow beads is slung like a necklace from one side of the horizontal rod to the other. More threads hang from the rod and slivers of bright green wood have been attached to these by fine copper wire which winds its way up the lavender strands of hemp. "I was trying to get away from the dense surfaces that make up most of my work," Knauss explains. "I have long been fascinated by fringes, and I used them freely here. I concentrated the dense areas at top and bottom. The wood slivers are from plant stakes and represent a carry-over from an earlier period when I incorporated found objects into the woven material." Knauss has taken risks—even stretched beyond the boundaries of "tastefulness"—to produce a work replete with dynamic tension.

Diametrically opposed to *Early on the Green* in concept and execution is *Hillside Rain*. Though technically complex, it appears simple and sedate. One flatly woven rectangle bows out as if unpeeled from the middle of another which rests against the wall. Loosened warp threads have been drawn from the back rectangle through the curved piece, then knotted and painted gray. The result, a bristling gray fringe, echoes the gray linen threads that have been woven throughout with mathematical regularity. The effect is of a wet spring day, its mistiness punctuated by torrents of rain. "In Saratoga I watched as the early spring deluge took place and was enthralled by the way the water streamed down and dissolved into mist."

Another variation on the theme is *Rain on the Mediterranean*. It was suspended freely in the gallery, enabling the viewer to see through it in the same way one can see through rain. The threads hang from a pole and are tied at even intervals to produce four progressive horizontal lines of knots. Between each row of knots the threads are painted a light blue and the final fringe a green blue. Knauss's inspiration "... was the view from my hotel window in Tel Aviv. There was a shabby billboard—I have forgotten what it advertised—and I remember that the color was predominantly light blue and was set off by the pervasive sandy color of the buildings and landscape and finally by the brilliant green blue of the Mediterranean."

Knauss also uses fire effectively as a theme. In *Fire on the Plain*, there is a dense, flatly woven hemp area extending for about three inches. Wheat-colored raffia attached to the hemp threads produces a dry, brittle effect. Attached to the raffia are delicate threads of purple, tan and white, the latter unevenly coated with red paint. The colors flash like fire and seem to consume the raffia as fire would consume the dry grass of the plain. Four hemp braids slung across this active field are caught by four corresponding strands of hemp which have been painted red, the red becoming sparser as it approaches the knot. The braids both echo the action underneath and formally contain it. As Knauss explains, "In *Fire on the Plain* I returned to raffia after having used it extensively in an earlier series based on Pennsylvania farmland. The braid exists as a path or boundary to bind the piece together. I used braid rather than individual thread because it has a more definite shape."

Knauss likes to think of his work as being elegantly still. And even when he is at his most dynamic, as in *Early on the Green*, it exudes a sense of repose. Though the pieces are quiet, they are not retiring. Contemplative clarity is the keynote of Lewis Knauss's oeuvre. □

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