

# Musings at Midcareer

by Kathleen McCann

**T**hree established artists discuss the development of their work, specific difficulties they have encountered, and how they achieve a balance between their professional and personal lives at midcareer. Since all three are teachers, they also were asked to comment on the challenges facing a new generation of artists. Interviewed were Louis Knauss whose off-loom fiber structures slowly and meticulously evolve from a knotted base, and Janet Leszczynski, whose recent works are a significant departure from her familiar small, densely embroidered designs. The third artist, Carmen Grier, is best known for her production work, which includes rag rugs and elegant scarves.

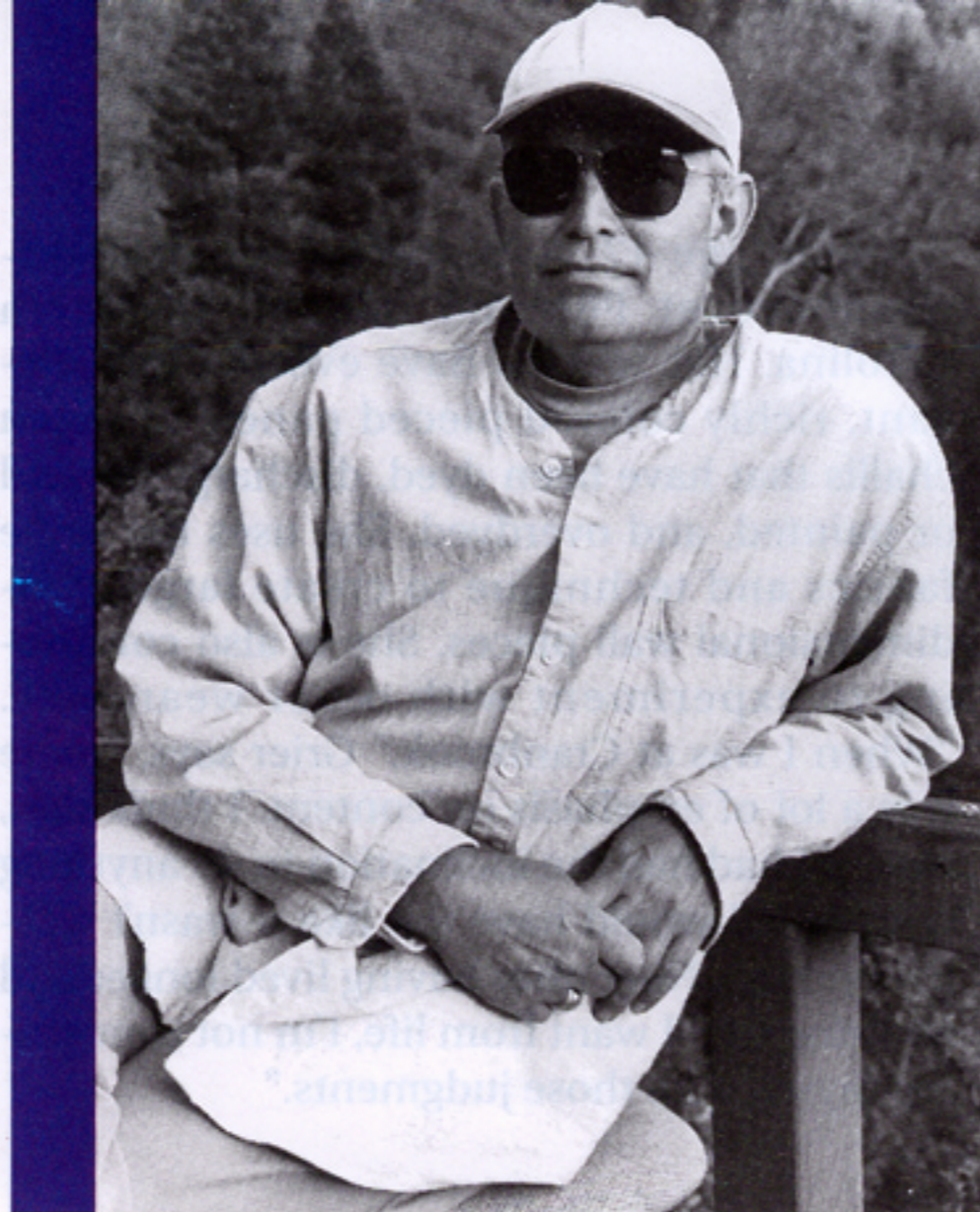
## LEWIS KNAUSS

In the Pennsylvania farming community where Lewis Knauss was raised, the stripes of corn and wheat stretching across the landscape before harvest and the Indian burial ground at the foot of the mountains where his family lived inspired his art for many years. Then, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, landscape faded from Knauss' work, reflecting a time of economic pressures and demands from commissions and teaching. In 1992, an offer from a former student to use her Colorado studio during the summer and an invitation to teach at Anderson Ranch led to a reminder of what Knauss had lost, a sense of connection. Now, at 48, landscape is back in his work and Knauss says he feels he is only beginning to explore the ideas he touched on many years ago.

Traditional weaving holds little interest for Knauss. His preference is for knotting, twining, and twisting yarns, threads, and reeds. "I love the processes that I work with," he says. "I lose myself in them. The knotting is meditative. It's about physically putting things together and solving problems and not having technology between me and what I am creating." In the early 1980s, influenced by trips to Israel and Egypt, Knauss began adding paint, often in bright colors, to the surfaces of his materials. More recently, the colors are neutral, minimal. "I'm interested in creating an impression of landscapes as meditative spaces, quiet pieces that give a sense of time and place. I would like to do more fragile pieces and smaller pieces. I would like some to be peaceful and calm, and others more agitated."

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—Louis Knauss



Knauss became involved with commissioned work in the 1980s. Sometimes it is tremendously rewarding, he says. Often it becomes a design project between architect, client, and agent. "You're solving a problem for a purpose. But I think that's fine. I just see commissions has having another job, and at the end of all the changes there's always a check." What bothers him most about commissions is that "nothing moves on. Very often they are based on something that people have seen, not on what you are thinking about doing in the future. You're revisiting things."

Financially, Knauss has always struggled to earn a living. Last year he taught textiles at two Philadelphia colleges, leaving little time for his art. His income varies wildly from year to year, only rarely has it been derived entirely from his art. "But then I never expected it to be any

other way," he says. "I don't know that there is enough of a market for what I do to make me totally self-sufficient. Sometimes, in a year, I've had six or eight jobs. I've had a house-sitting business. It's a constant struggle putting things together to make ends meet. I've always been precariously financed and I've always managed. I've survived this far, unexplainably, and I've not had too bad a life."

"I think students should understand that there are good and bad times. I don't know anyone totally committed to their work who is not in this predicament. False impressions were given during the 1980s. It was an unnatural time. The arts became a status symbol and many people, myself included, were financed by that corporate buying frenzy. That time is over, and I think it was a fluke. Art school enrollments have gotten enormous relative to what they used to be. Giving art students the impression that they are going to make a living if their resumés are well written, their slides well taken, and they are out there on the street, is unrealistic."

Students should also understand, Knauss says, their dependence on computers is creating a two-dimensional barrier between them and the rest of the world. "I see my students losing the ability to communicate. There's a screen and a program, and they never have to be sympathetic to someone else's condition. To a large extent students are very happy looking at slides and CD-ROMS rather than original art. When you look at the actual object, you almost see, by the thickness of the paint and so on, the moment when it was being made. It's important to see the details and know that those details came about because someone cared."

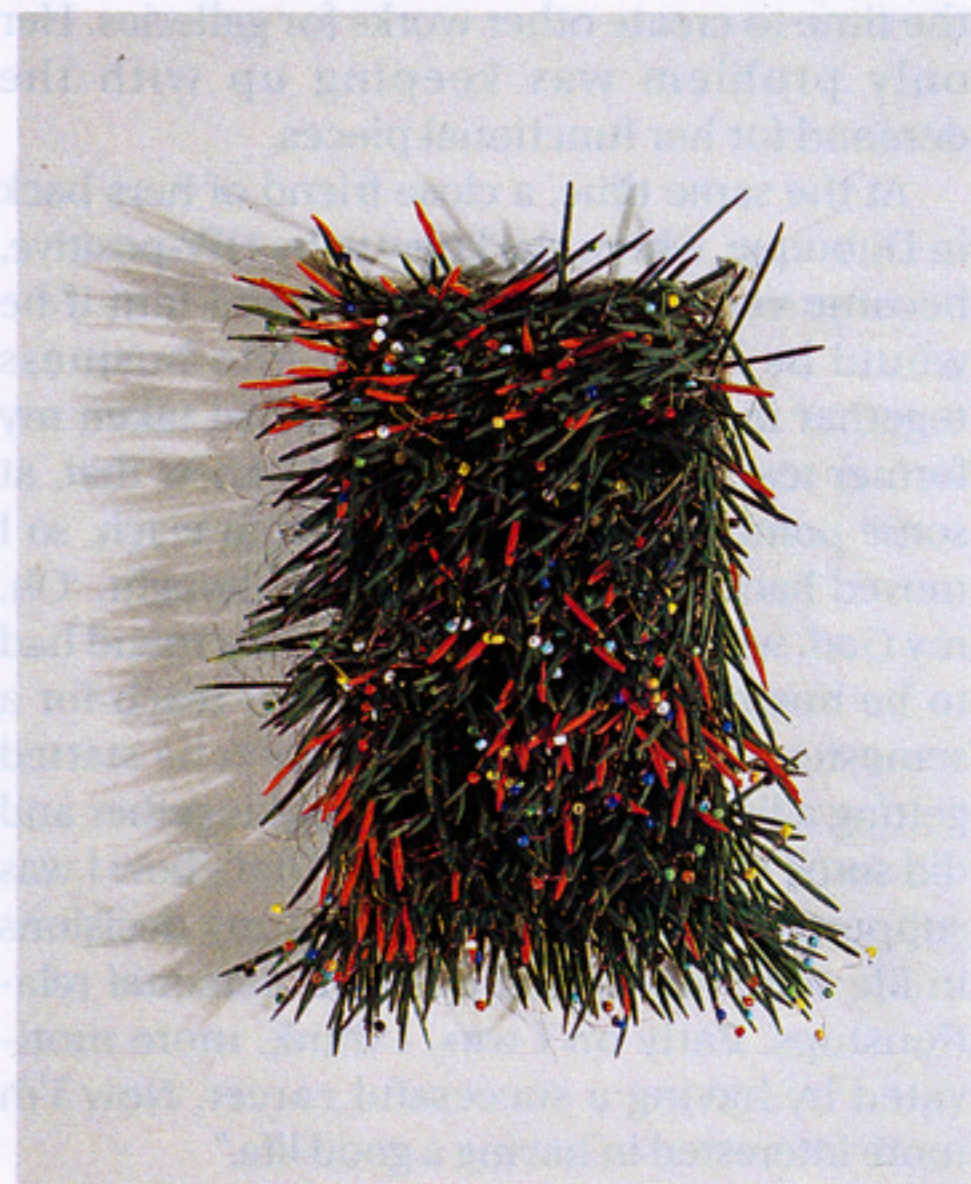
At Anderson Ranch, Knauss has found a different kind of students, adults who find art is helpful to them in dealing with the issues in

**Opposite:**  
Lewis Knauss'  
Meditations on the  
Landscape #6, 1995;  
liner, paper, shells;  
woven, knotted, collage;  
10 by 7 by 3 inches.  
Photo: Annie Somerville.

**Above:** Photo of Lewis  
Knauss by E. Brady  
Robinson.

**Right:** Meditations on the  
Landscape #1, 1995;  
linen, plant stakes,  
beads, paint; woven,  
knotted;  
10 by 7 by 2 inches.

**Far right:** Meditations on  
the Landscape #5,  
1995; linen, cane,  
paper; woven, knotted,  
collage; 15 by 12 by 6  
inches. Photos: Annie  
Somerville.



their lives. The shared experiences between students and teacher have been mutually rewarding. Many of the students, Knauss says, believed they were incapable of creating anything expressive because, at some point in their lives, an art teacher said they had done something wrong. "There is no 'wrong' in the arts," he says. "I was always fascinated by non-Western cultures where art is part of everyday life. But what I had never realized is that maybe art making really is a way of coping."

### CARMEN GRIER

Growing up in Iowa, Carmen Grier began sewing as a young girl. After taking drawing and painting classes, she decided to apply to the graduate textile program at the University of Iowa. It took her four years, working as a waitress and at other odd jobs, to earn her Master's degree but, from the beginning, she knew she had made the right choice.

After receiving her M.A., Grier taught for two years at the University of Kentucky and began showing her work. Then, in 1983, she entered the M.F.A. textile program at the Cranbrook Academy of Art.

It was difficult for her to find a full-time teaching position after graduating from Cranbrook, so she accepted a part-time job at a small liberal arts college in Dubuque, Iowa. Later a full-time position was offered at the Appalachian Center for Crafts in Tennessee. "I was very excited," says Grier. "I thought it was going to be the full-time job I had been waiting for, later it proved to be a disappointment."

Throughout all of these transitions in her life, Grier continued to experiment with her work, teaching herself new techniques. She always directed part of her efforts to functional work. She began producing scarves and rag rugs with the idea that these would be the least expensive items to make and still afford her the time to create other works for galleries. Her only problem was keeping up with the demand for her functional pieces.

At the same time, a close friend of hers back in Dubuque, whom she knew to be HIV-positive, became very ill. "I called and asked him if he would be interested in going into business together in Iowa," she says. "He had taken my former teaching job in Iowa and I knew that, at some point, he would not be able to teach, so I moved back in late 1989. At first I thought, 'Oh, my God, what have I done?' Then my friend had to be hospitalized and he couldn't teach for a semester, so I taught for him. When he started getting a little better we made rugs together and did some national crafts shows. That's how I was supporting myself. I realized that my decisions in life were now based more on personal relationships. Early on I was, I think, more motivated by having a successful career. Now I'm more interested in having a good life."

Grier, age 47, is currently an artist-in-residence at Penland School, in North Carolina. Her scarves have evolved into elegant, richly colored pieced panels of rayon challis that have been dyed, discharge printed or painted, and overdye. She uses the same fabrics and technique to create large, two-dimensional wall pieces. She is also continuing to experiment with other wearables. "When I was at Cranbrook," Grier says, "there was a lot of emphasis on content. I think that, even if I had had the inclination to do anything wearable, I would have felt like it wasn't worthy enough. Now, after having lived longer and realizing that I want from life, I'm not concerning myself with those judgments."



*Carmen Grier's A Striped Affair, 1994; rayon challis, corduroy, buttons; dyed, discharged, overdye, pieced; 16 by 20 inches. Collection: Johnson County/Iowa City Public Library. Photo: Craig Kohl.*

*Photo of Carmen Grier by Dana Moore.*

