

Connections

Betty Park Reports



Lewis Knauss: New Work

As one of the second generation of textile artists in this country, Knauss bears the influence of Claire Zeisler, whose studies of primitive art led her to see knots as building blocks. But his imagery refers to his rural Macungie, Pennsylvania, home.

Lewis Knauss' one-person shows in New York in 1975 and 1977 are clearly etched in my memory. Modular series of small-scale pieces ringed the gallery walls; all were pile structures rising out of a knotted base—immediately recognizable as a textile format—yet these images evoked a range of experience beyond fiber construction. Masses of safety pins hung from tabs of muslin; vaguely threatening needles and nails lay like fringe to cellular structures. The title of the second show, *Macungie Notes*, brought these strong studies into focus as the artist's recollections of diagonally plowed fields, brush-divided landscapes, Indian burial grounds and familial objects in his rural Macungie, Pennsylvania, home. Their small scale permitted a great concentration of energy. Knauss had found the perfect vehicle for his obsessive interest in the unexpectedly detailed handling of each strand of thread or reed that formed an intricate pile. Endings and edges were the focal point of each piece.

In the intervening years, Knauss has had a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship; he has taught at the Parsons School of Design (New York City), Skidmore College (Saratoga Springs, New York), and Tyler School of Art (Philadelphia) and his work has matured. Seven years after his first show, Knauss maintains the same fundamental orientation toward individual fibers massed on planar surfaces or as elemental units in off-loom structures, the same fascination with layering and sequencing and a deepening integration of life and work. But there have been dramatic changes: Paint now alters the material; luminescent light and color sometimes de-materialize the surfaces; structure is less dense, less controlled; and Knauss' way of working, his processes, and the content of his work are even more thoughtfully reflective of each other.

A modulation of material voice or subtle nuances in form mark the progression from one piece to the next. The physical presence of the pieces is less dominant. Illusion, perspective and the artist's synthesis

of cultural and personal references are more important. His current show at the Helen Drutt Gallery in Philadelphia offers a chance to study the development of his work, especially interesting as it parallels one of the broader movements in contemporary art: the post-modern resuscitation of the decorative impulse and the growing taste for content that was rendered taboo by minimalists.

As textiles grew to be a mature art form throughout the '70s, two primary points of view provided an invigorating dialectic. One was concerned with the imagery inherent in the nature and structure of cloth; the other found its sources in primitive textiles, in the ceremonies and hand-work of ancient cultures as well as in

artists' personal exploration of the expressive range of fiber materials. Knauss followed the latter direction. As one of the second generation of textile artists in this country, he bears the influence of Claire Zeisler, whose studies of primitive art led her to see knots as building blocks, a network of modular units.

Thus there are some constant themes in Knauss' work. From the beginning, he has been interested in materials themselves rather than in technique. His early work was hard edged and architectural, but while taking an M.F.A. at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, he was drawn to primitive art. As a result, he says:

I learned to assess what I wanted to do and to do it in the most direct possible way, just as a



18 X 18 Plus, 1980; woven pile, linen, paper, paint, 18 by 18 inches.

mask maker or a house builder might solve structural problems in the South Pacific using fiber materials. I used what I learned in museums and was fascinated by the idea of how you could do those complex forms without industrialized tools by simply establishing your base and taking off from there. I learned to analyze structure in that way.

The splendid African collection in New York's Museum of Natural History had a great impact: "I was very interested in African ceremonial work. Things in the stacks still had life in them before they were cleaned. I liked that in ceremony, materials were put on for a specific purpose." Although the kinship of Knauss' work with African additive sculpture is significant, it is in no way derivative. He clarifies the connection:

I found myself looking for personal sources, going back to Macungie. I never felt deprived for not having lived in those other cultures. But I did feel deprived in that when I was in school, discussing textiles always meant going back to Western, industrial traditions, meaning back to fabric rather than to individual fibers and to the sense of logic that they contained.

In the pre-industrial traditions of textiles, Knauss found a parallel to the deeply felt sources of his own art, of his love of "sequencing," and of the complex finishing processes that are the hallmark of his work.

In American Indian or aboriginal graphics, things are often tied on in sequence. Ceremonies are plotted as symbols on a field; pattern is used as a means of keeping records, decoration as a gesture of honor or symbol of wealth. The rediscovery of that tradition was important for me. I have always been interested in using threads as markers to relate everything back to some order. If I am binding down a surface, the solution automatically comes to me as a mathematical sequence. This has to do with being brought up Pennsylvania Dutch—life was always concerned with saving money, being places on time, being orderly. I can't live with that order but it is in my work.

I don't think detail is anything extraordinary; it is just necessary to a piece. Weaving is not much for me; it is like a job. But when that base is complete, I live in a quiet, enjoyable space while I do the finishing. I lose complete sense of time. When I am finishing, that state is with me all the time, no matter what else I am doing.

Asked about the relationship of his work to decorative painting, Knauss says he no longer resists that association, but cites the closer tie to primitive art in which decoration always has a purpose. Because the central focus of his work is upon edges and ends of fiber, decoration is essential, the completing element.



My Street, 1980; woven pile, linen, reed, 22 by 24 inches.

While these constants (landscape imagery, additive techniques, sequencing) evolve, there are new directions that reveal considerable shifts in perception. There is, first of all, relaxation of severe order, less density and more freedom. Those Macungie fields provide an apt metaphor for art making: Though they are plowed and planted in a very geometric manner, growth from seeds follows in an organic pattern so that the order is obscured.

Order is essential as the starting point, but then it changes as it grows and becomes more personal. At a certain level my work is architectural and rigid. I see this as necessary, but then I see it also as a canvas, and I work on an image that does not allow it to stay in that rigid system. I have never felt that handwoven fabric is an end in itself.

So it is that in Knauss' new work, the basic fiber structure may be completely covered. Only the beginning and ending of each thread remain as clues to the underlying order and arrangement. Knauss now openly invites disorder, encourages the waywardness of hanging threads he once would have felt compelled to restrain. Ends hang at uneven lengths

and there is often empty space just where one might expect the most dense structure. Within that negative space, threads function as line drawings.

The most significant change in Knauss' work is his now liberal use of paint in bright or pastel hues to change in midstream the character of each fiber. This is in part the result of his recent trip to Israel and Egypt where he observed the effects of light and color on adobe. But Knauss' primary interest in paint is for the way it alters totally the thread's pliability, sheen and twist. Transitions are important: Solid mass dissolves into atmospheric colors, soft fiber becomes inflexible cord, color gradually deepens along a length of thread and layering creates further ambiguity. The unity in Knauss' work sprang from a controlled grid or repetitive structure. Although some repetitive elements remain, recent pieces are unified by Knauss' own vision and perception. With this change has come new elegance, subtlety and refinement. •

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