



**Macungie Notes—Lewis Knauss**

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Hadler Galleries  
New York, New York

by Betty Park

A couple of years ago Lewis Knauss put up a fine show at the Hadler Gallery—startling for the incorporation of razor blades, nails and safety pins in fiber images and strong in the use of natural and raw materials, laquered twigs, for example, or torn strips of muslin. Crossing the threshold of his new show, I wondered if he could equal his past success. Happily, he has done just that, staking out the same territory, mining it a little deeper. Some of the freshness and energy of those early pieces is gone, but in their place comes a refinement of perception, idea and image as well as a more subtle and complex play of one material against the other.

In fact this show is the very model of the way in which a one-person show functions at its best. Reacting against the disjointed nature of many shows which are merely a collection of an artist's work from a certain time period that the viewer must deal with as an assortment of totally unrelated visual experiences, Knauss wants his one-person shows to be all of a piece, a series of images which are interrelated in theme and material and technique so that each piece is strengthened by its association with the others. He often works in series, and each series is capable of standing on its own; but the privilege of a one-person show lies in the opportunity to create an environment, a mood or a clearly focused point of view; and Knauss succeeds admirably.

He began a year and a half ago, choosing as his subjects the fields and streams, mountains and forests of Macungie, Pennsylvania, as well as his household within that setting. There are no representational images in the show; but each piece, down to its last

finishing detail, is related to the land or to an aspect of Knauss' life in that place. He works on the intimate scale increasingly favored by fiberists, with few pieces larger than 18" x 18".

His study of African additive sculpture convinced Knauss that its strength is the result of materials chosen, not for their surface quality, but because of their significance in African culture. In a similar way he has chosen materials significant to him: nails that were used by his carpenter grandfather, straight pins holding canvas squares to a background, the whole resembling the geometry of the laid-out dressmaker's patterns Knauss saw at home. The MANUSCRIPT series, like a visual diary, incorporates references to other enterprises: an armor of threaded embroidery needles, the hard gleam of tacks, and the transparent delicacy of rice paper triangles. All adhere to a knotted ground, solidified by layers of acrylic medium, encircled by a tied-on pile of painted canvas strips.

The range of experience encompassed by these autobiographical "notes" includes Knauss' pleasure in painting, particularly as it is done with water color on rice paper stretched over canvas. Adapting this technique, Knauss has done several series of pieces which incorporate paper and paint. For RAIN WEEK fiber was laminated between sheets of rice paper. The whole was then mashed with a stiff brush to break the paper down into pulp, and finally many coats of acrylic medium were applied so that fiber and paper became one. At a time when more and more fiberists are working in mixed media, Knauss' approach is interesting. He uses paint freely—ends dipped in it, stripes painted on, painted canvas elements—but generally applies it with stenciling brushes so that he can literally pound the color into the threads to avoid the glossy appearance of paint setting on the surface of the fiber. These involved processes typify the thoughtful approach taken with each piece. Even so, Knauss says that only one out of three pieces he does meets his standards for exhibition.

One of the formal strategies which unify the show is Knauss' use of pile with something added at the end of

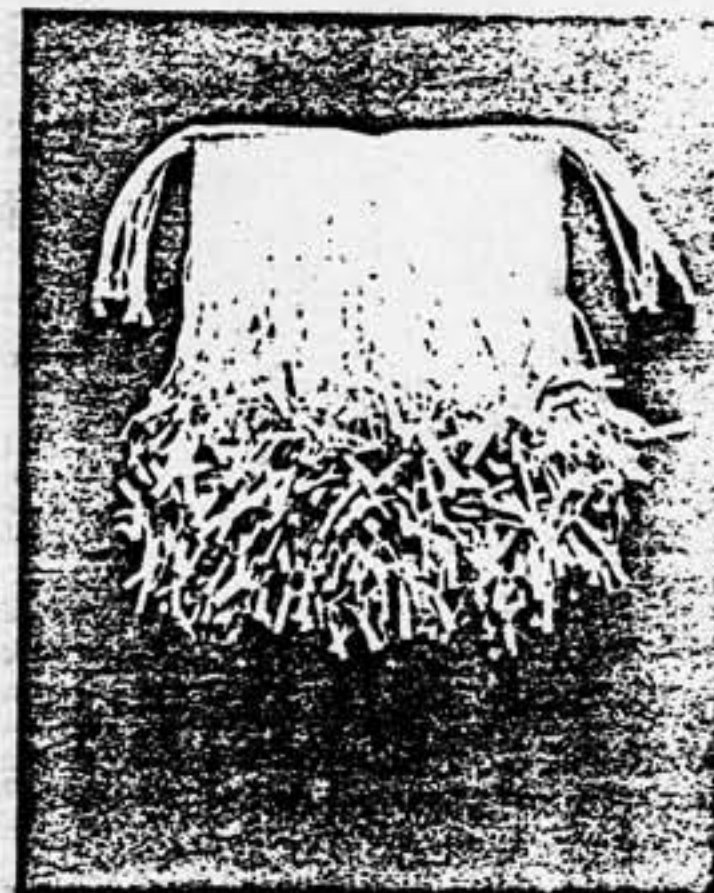
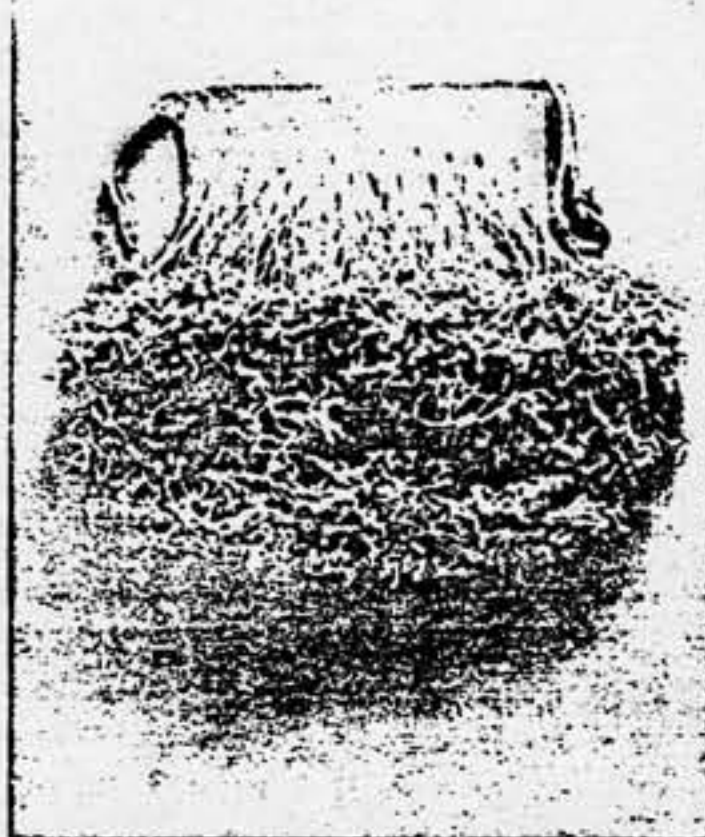
Above: MANUSCRIPT, each unit 10" X 6".

each element in the pile. In his work it is not just the total impact of the texture which is important but rather the increments of detail by which the texture is built up. The title pieces in the show, MACUNGIE NOTES, illustrate some of the possibilities he explores. His #4 is the most successful, a froth of knotted heavy linen cord tied onto the slimmest of pile threads. The density of the knots accentuates the linear, separate quality of the pile threads. In #1, squares of black painted canvas contrast with fine loops and sprays of thread at the end of the pile; in #5, canvas strips add a lofty dimension. Elsewhere ends are wrapped around spikes of reed or become like tassels to form a mass, says Knauss, of 2500 knots in one piece!

A sense of time and place is subtly evoked in MACUNGIE NOTES. Knauss uses only white, natural and black, frequently combining the three in serial form to suggest the passage of time from day to night. FIELD STREAM recreates the path of a stream through the town; a thick stand of raffia is parted by a flat ribbon of linen and wood elements. HIGHWAYS is a series of elegant transformations of smooth road and rough hedge into fiber. Few of us will ever see Macungie, Pennsylvania, but there is in these pieces both the quiet repose and the kind of visual contrasts that we all know as the scheme of things in the country.

Knauss, who teaches at the Parsons School of Design in New York, seems able to spin off endless intriguing variations within his chosen range; his sensitive associations of material and idea make it a pleasure to contemplate the details of each piece. One wonders if he has reached the limits of this territory; this work could conceivably become imitative of its own original form or too precious. For now, he has honed this mode of expression to a fine point; it will be interesting to watch for the next turn.

Betty Park frequently contributes reviews and articles to FIBERARTS. She resides in Pennington, New Jersey.



MACUNGIE NOTES #1, #4, #5. Photos courtesy of Hadler Galleries.