

Surface Design

the Journal of the Surface Design Association

WINTER 2007 / \$8.00



mind & body

0 74470 89282 3 02

by Kathleen McCann

Lewis Knauss

Recording Sites & Seasons

Subtle changes in the grasses as August yields to September, newly-fallen snow in the woods, torrential rain sweeping across the desert. You may have experienced these moments, but did you really see them? For much of his career, artist Lewis Knauss has been observing the landscape, studying its composition, and noticing how it varies, day by day by day. He wants us to appreciate the importance of place in our lives and so, in wall pieces sometimes no larger than 12 x 10 inches, he strives to achieve a sense of recorded time.

In recent years, Knauss has been presenting his work as a series of open books, individual pages from books, and long narrow markers. Each exists as the landscape exists, as a myriad assortment of materials. Among Knauss's materials are linen, hemp, paper twine, reeds, horsehair, feathers, twigs, graphite, and hand-made paper, each individually incorporated into his panels because, he says, "I want people to pay attention to the complexity of the landscape, to have more than a generic impression of things."

Knauss, 59, developed his appreciation of landscape in the eastern Pennsylvania farming community where he was raised, and for many years it was the focus of his work. Following the deaths of his parents, however, and influenced by summer visits to Colorado and New Mexico, Knauss became increasingly fascinated with the open spaces of a vastly different landscape. Although he continues to live and teach in Philadelphia, with few exceptions, today his focus is on the deserts, canyons, and horizons of the Southwest. Details have become even more important and, as in the past, he photographs them and fills notebooks with sketches. So much of Knauss's work celebrates the significance of the moment. Sometimes he takes the same walk for several days, noticing the smallest changes and later recording them in works like *August/September*, which reflects the golden light hinting of autumn to come and dying grasses that yet contain scattered wildflowers. The way the intense southwestern sun filters through leaves in autumn, rendering them almost transparent (*Leaf Leaves*), a light snowfall on a clear morning in a woods near Santa Fe (*Snow in the Woods*),

LEWIS KNAUSS *First Snow* Woven, knotted, linen, hemp, acrylic paint, feathers, 22" x 16" x 2", 2004.

Photo: Wendy McEahern.





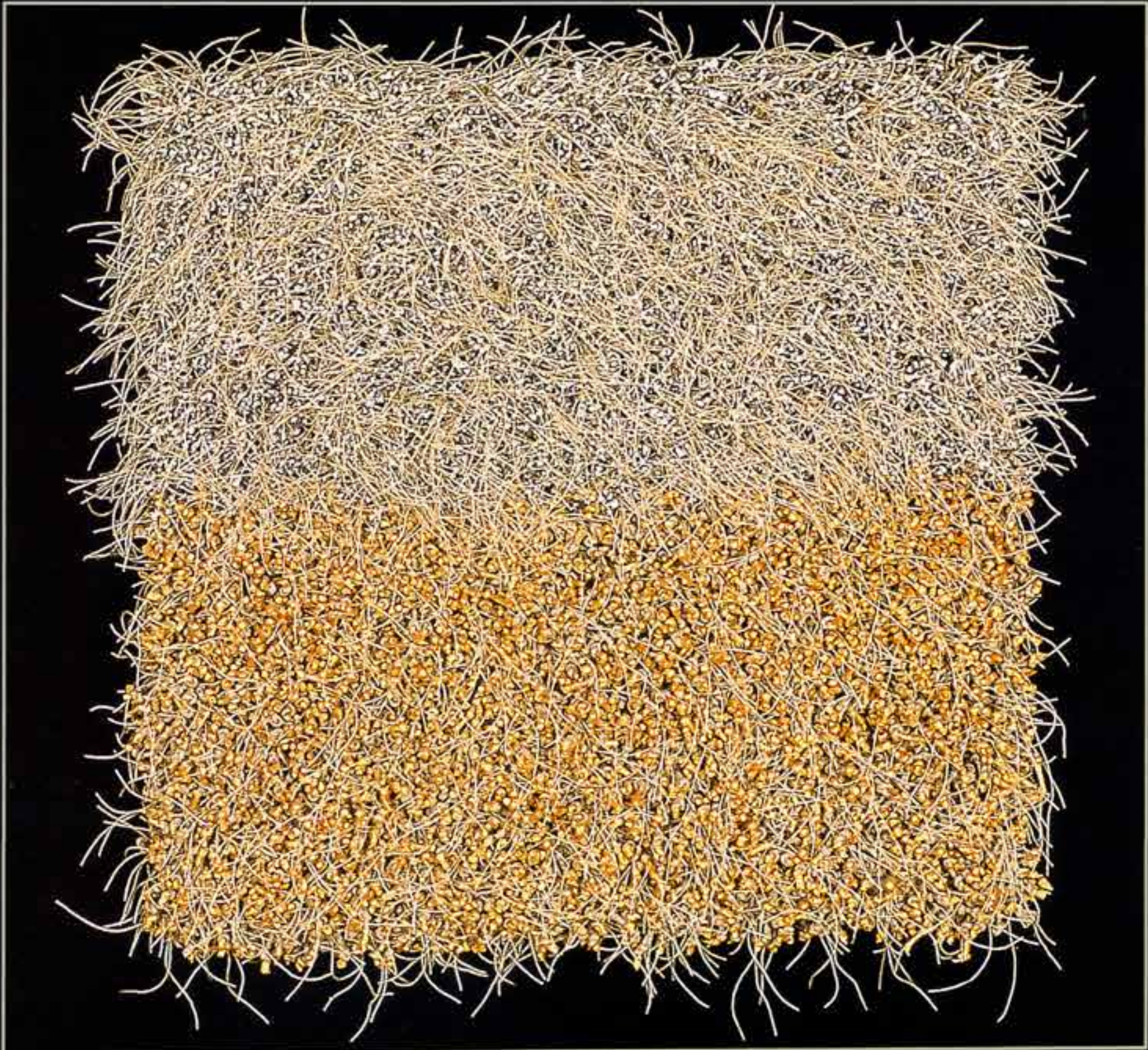
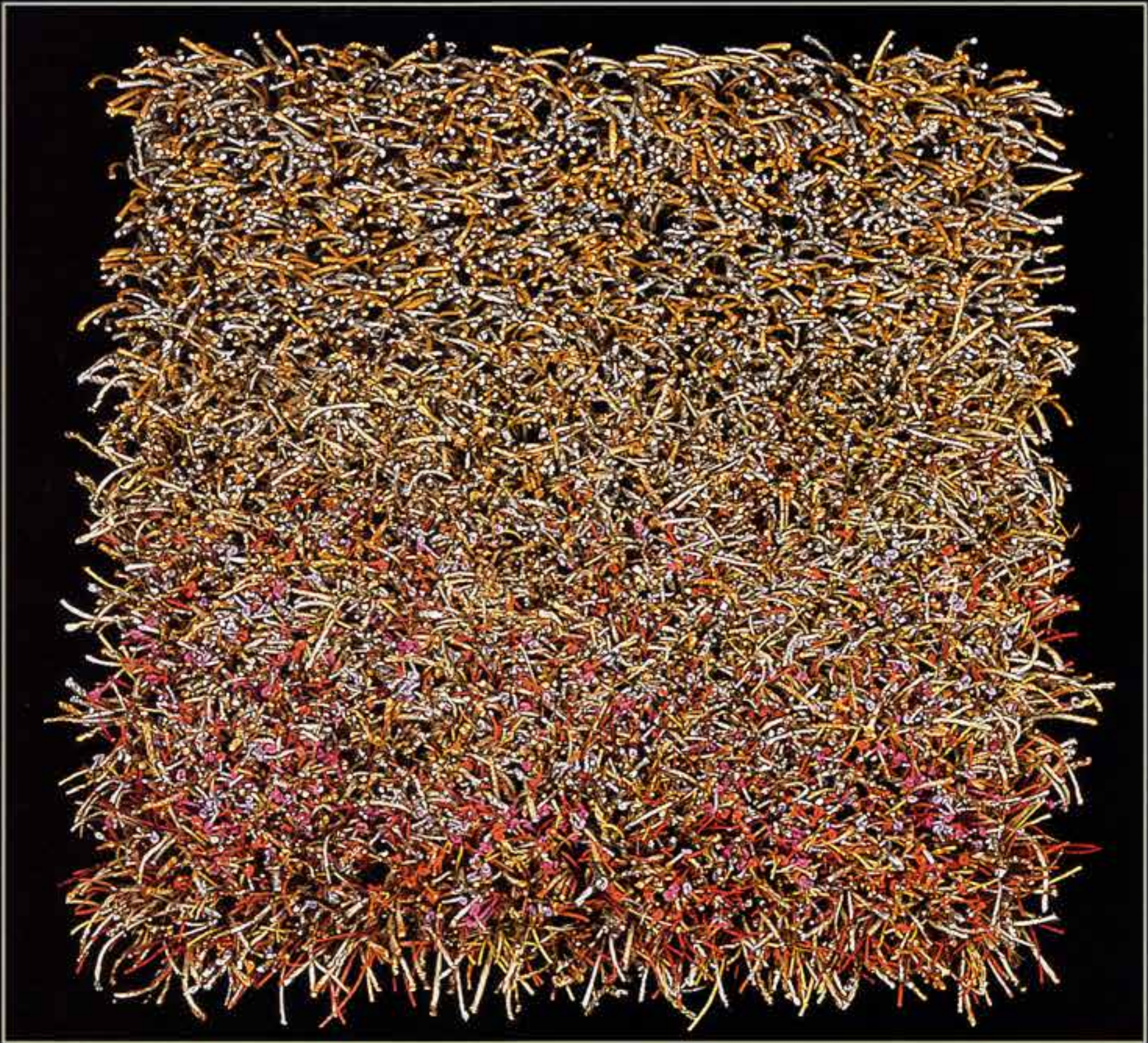
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the night sky as seen from a meadow on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, filled with stars and silence (*Night Book*).

To capture the essence of a moment, Knauss complements his keen observations with a series of exacting, labor-intensive processes that, through the meditative responses they elicit from him, are necessary to the successful interpretation of what he has seen. He paints hundreds of individual threads; ties endless knots, some so tiny they can scarcely be noticed; painstakingly strips bark from tiny twigs he's collected, then may further transform them by rubbing them with graphite. He weaves backgrounds that are never seen, works with pulp to fashion handmade paper to precise density, then writes or draws on some of those pages only to hide them among other pages of his books where they are seldom noticed. Or, he burns row-upon-row of tiny holes in the pages, or paints hundreds of small white dots on them.

To achieve the gnarled surface of *Desert Rain*, Knauss's memory of driving east across the desert as great blocks of rain fell, he tied knots for six weeks, dipped many of them in gold or silver metallic paint, then spent another two weeks sewing them to the woven backing that is the foundation of most of his work. In densely-textured pieces like this, Knauss frequently adds threads as he weaves, but for his books, materials are sewn to the backing and often held in place by tiny wires. In *Leaf Leaves*, wires through the pages control how they hang. The deckled edge of each page was constructed in layers, then the pages were coated with shellac. As light crosses the surface of the completed work, the edges

TOP: LEWIS KNAUSS *Leaf Leaves* Woven, knotted, linen, handmade paper, wire, shellac 10" x 12.5" x 5", 2004. Photo: Wendy McEahern. RIGHT TOP: LEWIS KNAUSS *August/September* Woven with hand-painted pile, linen, hemp, ramie, acrylic paint, 22" x 16" x 2", 2004. Photo: Wendy McEahern. RIGHT BOTTOM: LEWIS KNAUSS *Desert Rain* Woven, knotted, sewn, hemp, linen, acrylic paint, 26" x 26" x 2", 2006. Photo: Kyung Y Cho.





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seem transparent, glowing. In another work, each page is meticulously lined with graphite markings, then overlaid with thin strands of horsehair extending above and below the book. Of course it's familiar. It's *Fog*.

During a visit to Yellowstone National Park several years after the fires of 1988, Knauss recorded his impressions of carbonized trees at the edge of a pond with a high mineral content; their bases were rendered white from the minerals leaching up their trunks (*Silent Book: A Site in the Yellowstone Park*). A few years later, *New Mexico Fire* was his response to devastation witnessed there. Blackened twigs are held by wires against the deckled edges of pages burned with innumerable tiny holes, forever lending a smoky, immediate history to the work.

Once, curious about a small pair of aboriginal hunter's slippers owned by the late fiber artist, Claire Zeisler, Knauss asked her why they were made of feathers. "They thought they made you silent," she replied. I'm guessing he smiled at her response because Knauss has long used feathers in his work to symbolize silence, but never more effectively than in works like *Silence Spoken*, or as evidence of approaching winter in his flat paneled piece, *First Snow*, or scattered over the deckled edges of pages in the book *Softly Snow*.

Knauss says he is totally absorbed and happiest in his studio, where not even a radio breaks the silence he needs to create, and strives to imbue, in his art. Silently, poignantly, these exquisite works remind us time is passing and, unlike the man who created them, we rush through our lives so unaware.

—Kathleen McCann is a writer living in Wayne, Pennsylvania.

LEFT: LEWIS KNAUSS
Silence Spoken Woven,
knotted, linen, feathers,
handmade paper, wire,
10" x 15" x 6", 2004.

BELOW: LEWIS KNAUSS
New Mexico Fire Woven,
knotted, burned, line,
wire, handmade paper,
peeled twigs, graphite
paint, 22" x 15" x 12", 2004.
Photos: Wendy McEahern.
With detail.

