

THESIS

FUNCTIONAL BEAUTY

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE **THESIS** PREPARED UNDER OUR
SUPERVISION BY ANNE BOSSERT ENTITLED **FUNCTIONAL BEAUTY** BE ACCEPTED AS
FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

FUNCTIONAL BEAUTY

The impulse to create utilitarian artworks is, for me, a perpetuation of my familial story. As a descendant of many generations of farmers, I understand an agricultural lifestyle requires a high degree of self-sufficiency. I grew up with many things that were made by people I knew, sleeping under quilts stitched by my grandmother and great aunt, eating vegetables from my mother's garden that she had canned in the kitchen my father built, and wearing clothes sewn by my mother. There is a blend of creative expression and functionality in the well made objects that surrounded my youth. This way of life has ingrained in me a deep appreciation for handmade objects of daily use

The traditional Japanese tea ceremony also influences me. In The Unknown Craftsman, Soetsu Yanagi says of the Tea Masters: "They did not seek beauty apart from actual living. They found the highest and noblest aspects of beauty in the articles close to life. [...] They perceived the essence of beauty in intimacy. Thus they combined beauty and life" (186). The importance of utilitarian art is to bring ritual and meaning to the daily lives of the people who use the artworks. Interacting with the artwork on a daily basis shares the rite of beauty in a personal manner. Using beautiful objects also helps us to be focused and more mindful of the present. Furniture and furnishings made of textiles and wood are the forms of my creative expression. These objects are intended for use in people's homes, to encourage a responsive relationship with the user. These pieces are meant to be used in a practical way and not merely to be observed as untouchable art. Beauty and inspiration does not have to be restricted to our walls. When living with these furnishings, the rich colors, careful details, and sensuous textures will draw the users in and compel them to contemplate what they are seeing and doing.

Another aspect of this artwork that contributes to its appeal is that it is handmade. Works made by hand touch our humanity in ways that machine made products cannot. Yanagi states this sentiment well: “[...] the nature of machinework is such that its products are standardized and thus monotonous and cold, ill-fitted to serve as man’s companions in his daily life” (107). The mark of the human hand softens and personalizes the artwork. In essence, these furnishings are my handprint. Having these handcrafted objects in people’s homes is one way of extending myself into my community. The processes I use become a metaphor for community, joining and weaving separate components together just as a community are individuals comprising the whole.

Like a community, this body of work can appear to have somewhat diverse components. It consists of coffee tables, side tables, folding screens, floor rugs, and enameled bowls. But they are all unified in vivid colors and the pattern of stripes. Working with color is the aspect of my artwork from which I derive the most joy. I get satisfaction out of executing a good design. But I feel outright joy from discovering a striking combination of colors. Playing with color combinations within each piece offers the most spontaneity and looseness for me when making these objects. The vibrant colors used in these furnishings are meant to excite the eye and to add a playful quality to the technically executed forms. Research into the colors of other cultures has yielded recent color inspirations. Japanese kimono and Moroccan craftwork illustrate color combinations that are especially exciting to me.

The Baltic birch plywood, of which the furniture is constructed, has a fairly active grain pattern. The transparent color that dye imparts to wood allows the wood’s grain to show through. The organic undulations of the wood grain reflect the ripples and folds of the cloth, visually integrating the hard and the soft elements. Unifying the wood and cloth further is the ornamental use of the striped pattern that

exists in the plywood and the stripes that I dye into the cloth. The creative expression and functionality of furniture and furnishings come together for me as I interact and evolve with the materials, patterns, and colors.

Stripes are a natural choice for me. Growing up in the rural Midwest, the landscape was arranged in the striped patterns of crops planted in the fields. As a student of the fiber arts, I refer to a traditional textile pattern to pay respect to the history of cloth. In Western contemporary society, the ornamental patterns on clothing are often taken for granted or overlooked completely. The bold pattern of stripes, however, has a long history of functional use. I am acknowledging the social history of stripes and highlighting this common pattern with veneration. The pattern of stripes offers the best mode of display for the colors that I prefer. Stripes can be very bold and arresting to the eye, emphasizing the color choices. A striped pattern helps me organize colors within the textiles. Stripes align the colors side by side, making an ordered field that gives the eye a pathway to follow. This creates a structured environment in which colors can be juxtaposed to create varying effects. To continue the stripe motif in a sculptural manner, the striations of the layers in plywood are exploited for various striping effects. Within this three dimensional application, the stripes participate in the delineation of the forms. This active function complements the more familiar two dimensional stripe.

As a contrast to the stripe pattern, and as another reference to traditional textile patterns, round enameled bowls allude to polka-dots. The bowls, as accessories for the tables, also contribute another quality to the various surfaces that are coexisting within the tables. The semi-gloss finish on the wood leaves a thin, clear barrier between the wood and anything that touches it. The dyed wood appears simultaneously transparent in color and opaque in nature. The rectangle of glass set into the table tops is shiny and clear. The viewer looks through the glass to see the matte surface of the woven polychrome

cotton cloth inside the table. The glossy bowls, which can be placed inside or on top of the tables, are enameled with brightly colored opaque glass. Although there is a broad range of surface qualities found in the tables, the various elements come together to create an overall aesthetic interest.

I have been combining different elements to create an overall effect since I was a child hammering nails into boards and winding string around the nails in various configurations to make string “drawings.” I now see this as a precursor to the furniture I am currently making, in which cloth is combined with woodworking. Beyond color, the main aesthetic question that I explore is: How can the flexible cloth relate to and interact with the rigid wood? The tables address this question in the horizontal plane. The screens use the vertical plane, with a completely different result.

Within the tables and screens, the cloth is used in different ways. In the tables, the cloth is protected by a recessed box and placed under glass. In the screens, the cloth is put to use as a spatial divider, which is the main function of a screen. Often, when cloth is horizontal, it is being utilized in a functional manner, as in the case of tablecloths, rugs, and bed sheets. And when vertical, it often assumes the role of art, as with tapestries or embroidered samplers. In the case of this furniture, the horizontal cloth’s only function is aesthetic, while the vertical cloth has material as well as artistic utility. Because it is placed inside the table with conventional utility removed, the horizontally displayed cloth assumes a formal, more ceremonial role. The cloth is like a relic and the table its reliquary. In contrast, the vertical cloth is hanging unprotected and functioning as a screen, as well as contributing to the overall beauty of the piece. In both instances, physical properties of the cloth are exploited. In the tables, the fabric is folded and rippled to exemplify its unique qualities as a textile. In the screen, it is used for its translucence. Due to the way it is woven, the cloth allows some light to pass through, although it remains

generally opaque. Because of this translucence, cloth offers a liminal space between the solidly opaque wood that frames it and the empty space that occurs between the wood and the cloth.

The cloth used in the tables and screens is woven with fine cotton threads. These threads were chosen for their dye absorption and delicate size, allowing for greater detail. They were woven to reflect the reverence I feel for cloth and its place in our society as an overlooked but essential part of daily life. But it would not be fitting for me to only make utilitarian works using completely untouchable and austere textiles. Much of what I love about textiles is the tactile warmth of “fuzziness.” To complement the furniture, I have woven woolly rugs with furry mohair stripes. Their mammalian texture is intended to be walked upon with bare feet, so that users can revel in the tactile experience of these fibers.

Aesthetic choices were made in all of these pieces to make them more engaging and playful. The ubiquitous vibrant colors grab attention and create a general air of fun. The use of mohair in the rugs invites touch. The hinges of the screens have been designed to fold in either direction to give users a greater range of options with their display. The table forms are curved to appear more animate and organic. The woodworking of the screens and tables allows for another level of aesthetic interest. With the decorative quality of the stripes in the plywood, the wood joinery can assume ornamental attributes. Whenever pieces of wood were joined, structural as well as decorative considerations were measured. In this way, the details of the woodworking echo the purpose of the furniture.

The process-oriented techniques to which I am attracted have dual implications for my working style and intentions for the work. Woodworking, weaving, dyeing, and enameling all require a specific sequence of steps to achieve a successful outcome. The process helps me to organize my focus on each task. Narrowing my focus to the specific task at hand allows me to immerse myself in every detail and

keeps me from becoming overwhelmed by the whole project. I am required to slow down and be in the moment. Because of the details that require time to be noticed, people living with this furniture can experience a similar “slowing down” as they interact with the artwork in their homes. I hope that my efforts of time and attention to create these reflective and participatory objects by hand offer a beautiful antidote for the frenetic atmosphere in which contemporary society functions.

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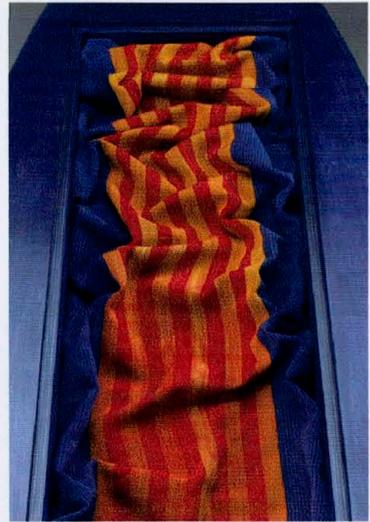


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

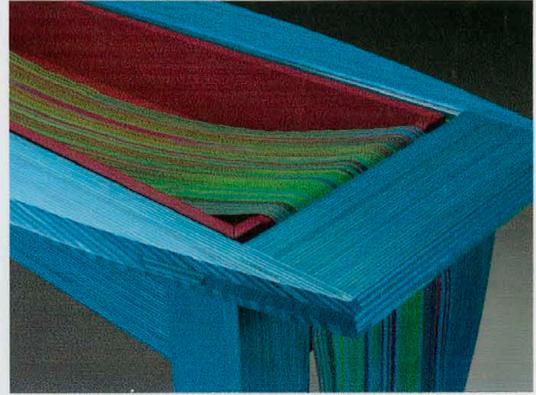


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig.9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

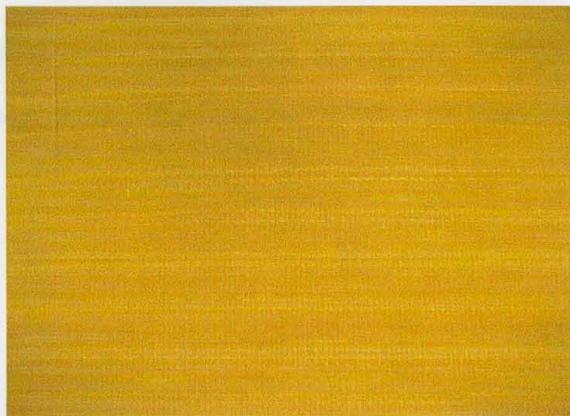


Fig. 15

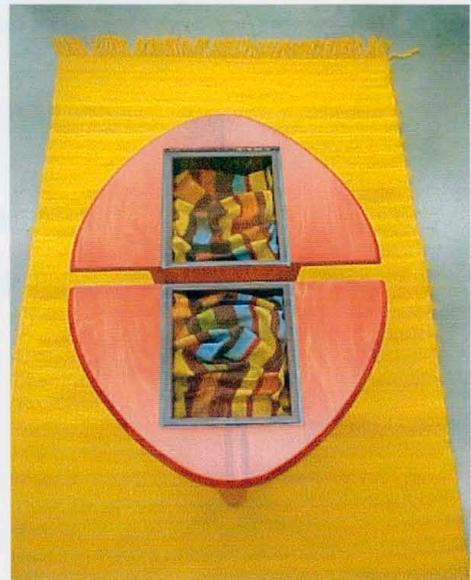


Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

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