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Single Element Fiber Forms

by

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August 1, 1970

Advisor: Lawrence Williams

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those of my fellow students who over the past two years have unselfishly and not without sacrifice made a sincere attempt to bring forth both quality and equality in the textile program.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My most immediate wish of thanks must go to my advisor, Prof. Williams, who in a very short time was able to help me to recognize my direction and obtain a better understanding of my goals. To him I am genuinely indebted, for without his guidance the best pieces of my thesis work would not have been accomplished.

A special thanks must go to Prof. Walter Nottingham of Wisconsin State University who turned me on and tuned me in to what fiber art is about. And who is really responsible for giving me the initial impetus for this thesis.

But of all of the people who have given me help, guidance, impetus, etc. I must acknowledge my husband, Prof. James E. Thomas, for without him none of this would exist. At times it has been HELL but somehow he has survived and there is nothing that I can say that would fully express the depth or breadth of my gratitude.

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"Art is not a pleasure, a solace or an amusement-
Art is a matter of prime importance. Art is an
organ of human life..."

Tolstoy

"What Is Art?"

INTRODUCTION

"To the craftsmen his first and most important tool 'the hands' ." ¹

Greek philosopher Anaxagoras said that man is the most intelligent of all creatures because he has hands. Aristotle, commenting on this remark, thought that more probably man was endowed with hands because he is the most intelligent being. The same observation occurs, perhaps independently, more than two thousand years later, in the Anthropology of Immanuel Kant, he wrote: "The characterization of man as a rational animal is found even in the shape and organization of his hand, his fingers and the tips of his fingers. It is through their build and tender sensitivity that nature has equipped him, not for just one manner of handling things, but unspecifically for all of them, which is to say, nature has equipped him for the employment of reason and thereby designated the technical capacity of his species as that of a rational animal."

Thus, the hand produced object is the reminder and promise of inexhaustible and unpredictable variety; and to make things by hand is almost indispensable for a person in order to contemplate the image of his own individuality, without which he loses his place in the world of the humans.

¹ "With These Hands" ABC Television Documentary
on American Craftsmen May 14, 1970

Today we are accustomed to our functional problems being solved efficiently and economically by mechanical means; yet we are acutely aware of our particular need for the self-created product in satisfying esthetic and psychological urgencies. The artist-craftsman has begun to engage function in a challenge as a formal and objective determinant. He now subjects design to the plastic dynamics of interaction of form and color and avoids immediate functional associations- the value by which machine-made products are defined- a value which can impede free sensory discovery of the object just as its limitations can impede his creative act. And so, the value of use becomes a secondary or even arbitrary attribute.

Fiber like all areas of craft today is now groping for a new esthetic to meet the needs of our time, or perhaps it is a new anti-esthetic to break the decorative-functional patterns that no longer suffice. The most powerful forces of our environment - electronics and atomic, inner and outer space, speed - are invisible to the naked eye. Craft's esthetic tradition, involved as it has been with decorative-functional experience, does not satisfy the extension and growth of reality in today's world.

All this, then, has made artist-craftsman most susceptible and responsive to the startling achievements of contemporary American painting and sculpture.

For better or worse today's craftsmen are brandishing a new weapon in the technological society; creativity without the functional restrictions. He has allied himself with the plastic expressions that come from his own culture and his own time, and from an attitude toward his work and its processes with which he can identify.

Even the most traditional of craftsmen, Anni Albers, who's background was totally saturated with the idea of functionalism first has said:

"Today it is the artist who in many instances is continuing the direct work with a material, with a challenging material, and it is here, I believe, that the true craftsman is found - inventive, ingenious, intuitive, skillful, worthy of linking us with the past. His work is concerned with meaningful form, finding significant terms for newly unfolding areas of awareness. And dealing with visual matter - the stuff the world is made of - the inherent discipline of matter acts as a regulative force; not everything "goes". To circumvent the 'no' of the material with the 'yes' of an inventive solution - that is the way new things come about, in a contest with the material.." ²

As Mrs. Albers points out, the craftsmen who are

² Anni Albers - A.C.C. Forum, Craft Horizons
July/August 1961 Vol. XXI No. 4 page 52

contributing the most to their fields are the craftsmen who are bringing things like imagination, invention and ingenuity into every piece of work they do; no longer is decorative-functionalism enough. The creative mind must play the important role with the skilled hand as it's tool.

I enter (stage left)

My work goes where I go - it lives in my body,
my hands give it birth.

This thesis is not a study of a technique nor is it a historical rehash. It is the documentary, written and visual of my ideas about fiber craft and my use of fibers as a medium for 3-dimensional expression. I came to my thesis with one primary goal, that was to try to create form ideas. Along with it I undertook to learn a technique which was completely foreign to me.

The work that I produce is a combination of personal give and take, the constant compromise of life, but life is the force that demands I produce.

To me it is the product of ideas, digital dexterity and physical material. The form concepts are wholly my own; they are personal, no one can say she is doing things like so and so's but nature must receive credit for inspiration.

My work is of things that are alive, things that look as if they can move and grow. My products are of total things, not fragments. They are complete forms.

Craft as well as art can be a form of communication. I feel that if one is able to project oneself through his work it becomes a unique and extremely interesting way of expressing oneself. Look, see, feel, this is who I am.

Your creative statement can only be as strong as

it's idea. Without a concept your art becomes mere decoration.

It seems to me that there are two ways of working in fiber craft. One, you have an idea and then you proceed to find a technique to express it or two, you know a technique and try to find an idea that will fit it. The latter way seems to be the greatest pitfall and helps to contribute to the classification of craft as a lower form of art.

I vehemently agree with Dorian Zachai when she said:

"I consider techniques to be 'tricks' that are absolutely necessary to learn, but once learned, better forgotten. No technique or material is a solution or end in itself. What is vital is to live a concept and this concept must overpower the materials, the techniques, and the composer..."³

For the technique best suited to my ideas, I have chosen to return to a basic and primitive one. I employ the use of my hands and a small rod with a hook on one end. This technique is known by the French word for hook; crochet.

Long before recorded history, Pima Indian women in America did the first crocheting we know. They were making a kind of cloth by pounding the inner bark of trees, but some bark, pounded, crumbled to dust and

³ The New Tapestry by Rose Slivka Craft Horizon March-April 1963 Vol. XXIII No. 2 Page 12

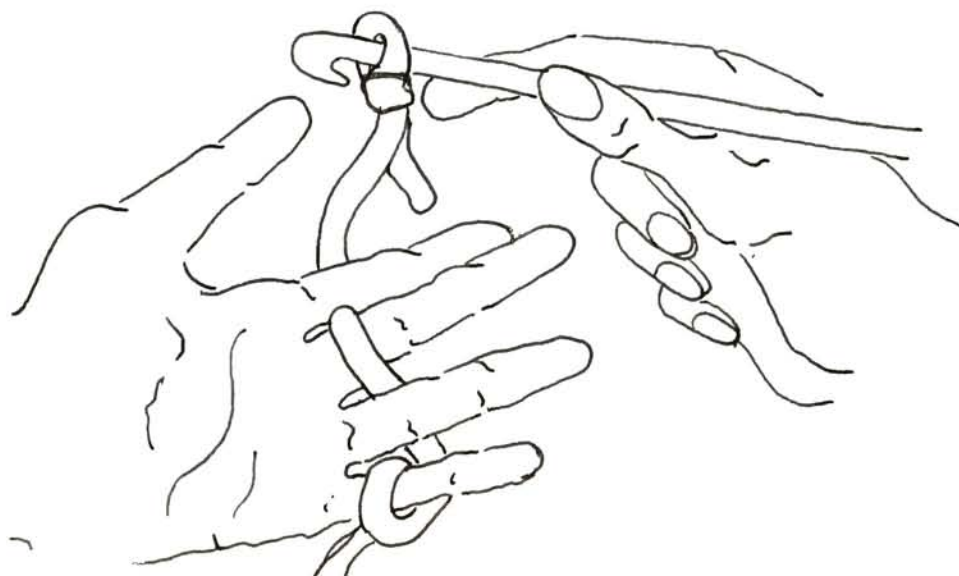
fibers. Fingers pulled loops through loops of these fibers, and some woman thought of making a bowl like form. The loops made a sort of basket; she plastered it thickly with clay inside and out. Sure enough, it held water.

I have borrowed this simple consecutive loop technique to produce not water bowls but sculptural forms. In realizing the potentiality of this simple technique my feelings must be similar to those of Mary Walker Phillips when she first began experimenting with knitting. She wrote:

"I came to see the technique in an entirely new way, for it was a familiar discipline rediscovered in another context with totally new freedom." ⁴

One stitch known as the single crochet has provided me with the ability to produce a variety of forms. The simple process of increasing and decreasing stitches provides me with the means to expand and reduce the form.

Fig. 1 Position of yarn hand and hooking hand.



Insert thread between ring finger and little finger of left hand. Then weave thread toward back, under little and ring fingers, over middle finger, and under forefinger toward you. Next grasp hook which as had loop knot attached to it, with thumb and forefinger of right hand.

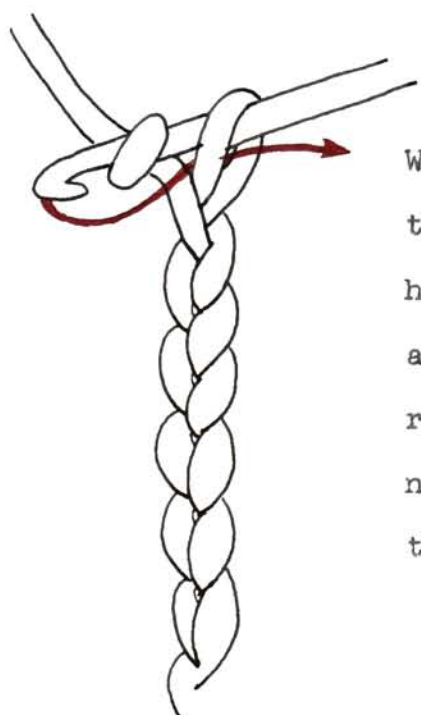


Fig. 2 Making a chain.

With the first loop on hook, pass the hook under the thread on left hand and pull through a loop (making another stitch.) This operation is repeated until the chain has the number of stitches necessary to achieve the desired length.

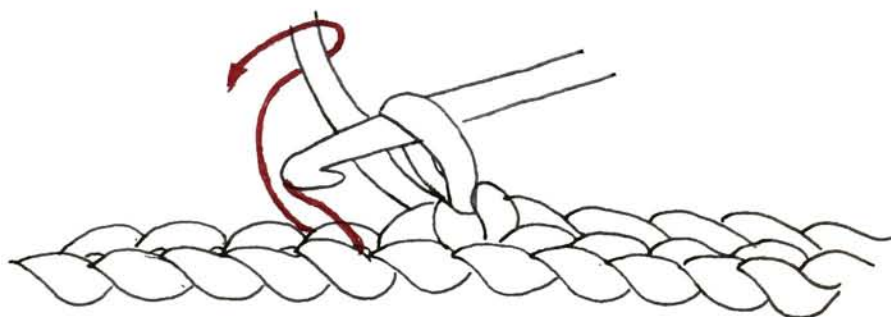


Fig. 3 The single crochet.

Adding a second row of stitches is accomplished by inserting hook into the next to last stitch on chain then catching wool with hook and pulling it through original chain. This process is repeated until desired form is completed. The variation of shape is obtained by the increase or decrease of stitches.

As the fibers run through my hands I feel every particle of material that goes into my finished piece. This process has made me acutely aware of the varied dimensionality and the tactility of fibers. Formerly my eyes were my main sensory receptors for fibers but now my fingers play an important part. This has helped to expand my awareness of the form. For me the act of making can be as rewarding as the fulfillment one derives from the finished piece.

To know your material in all it's potentiality and to be able to invent a solution for it's limitations; it is this challenge that keeps me interested. Since my material does not necessarily dictate a form idea, such as wood might, I am free to conceive any possible form idea.

My approach to the medium of fibers has been a personal preference of three dimensionality. It is the way in which I would approach any material, for it is my inherent way of communicating.

(refer page 3)

⁴ Mary Walker Phillips by Alice Adams
Craft Horizons Jan.-Feb. 1965 Vol. XXV No.1 page 24



"Landscape Pillow"

Formulation of my first form concept was based on learning the elementary techniques of crochet. The idea was to make a large pillow with a relief surface. I made a number of rough sketches of a flat design, much like those used for a tapestry cartoon. The final design was later transferred into full size paper pattern pieces. Each pattern piece was then reproduced in crochet. When the flat crochet forms were finished a backing was sewn to them and they were stuffed with dacron quilting.

One form was not handled in this manner and it was a very large flat piece that would be used as a background. It was to serve as a form onto which the smaller forms could be sewn and it was also a unifying edge around the whole work. When I began to assemble the pieces on this background it became apparent that the scale of the stitch on the larger crocheted form was drastically out of proportion with the smaller stitches of the other parts that were to be attached to it. Instead of unifying the forms, the large piece produced the opposite effect so it had to be abandoned.

Now that one very important member was missing my design needed to be reworked. I approached it's rehabilitation in the manner of a person doing a jigsaw puzzle; trying to fit parts together to complete

a total design picture. One more smaller form was discarded and finally a semi-satisfactory inner and outer shape was arrived at. The forms were then sewn together, backed with grey wool felt and a corded edge was added.

The materials were single and double ply wool of white, medium and dark grey and black wool cording.

If this piece can boast of any accomplishments they would be of showing a certain amount of ability with a previously unknown technique and that it does serve as a functional object. But these alone no longer satisfy, if they ever did. I had not instilled this piece with a life. It is not a totality as yet, it is lacking; it is apple pie without a crust. I do not know exactly what is necessary to save it from an unresolved existence. Somewhere within that form the solution is hidden and until the time that it becomes apparent, it lies waiting.





3



4

"Sea-Form In Orange"

I came away from my first experiment having learned the basic technique that I would use for the rest of my work and also the realization of how not to go about designing a three-dimensional idea. I had tried to take what was essentially a flat design and transform it into something of an opposite nature. In other words, I had used the 'typical textile approach', one of an inherent tendency toward flatness or a two dimensionality but obviously this was what I was striving to overcome.

Now that I had conquered or maybe having been conquered by the crochet idea, I began experimenting with a completely dimensional crocheted form. I discovered I could create pod-like structures which helped lead me to my next form concept.

I wanted to make a grouping of different pod forms. The size, color, texture and shape would produce the variety in them. Again, unity of parts became my main form objective. This time unity would develop a relationship through many conflicting colors and texture, while the pod forms would remain fairly similar in structure. The piece was to encompass both conformity and individuality. I wanted a surprise awaiting the viewer as the piece turned before him; a new size, color or textural idea, slightly different from the immediate previous visual experience but not so different as to divorce it from its' total concept. The initial idea

was similar to a family gathering, lots of visual resemblances but no two exactly alike.

Since this pod-shaped form had given air to a sea-like creation. I continued this concept by the addition of sea-moss-like hanging forms at the bottom of the pod groupings.

The choice of color was derived from two things; One, because I had an idea about juxtaposing color with form. It seemed to me that the warm color range, orange, yellow, red combination, should also be part of my visual surprise because when I think of sea life a cool, blue-green palette immediately pops into my mind's eye. Secondly, I had a special feeling for one of the yarns and I wanted to do something with it.

Materials were greatly varied; mohair, one, two and three ply wool, raw silk that I had dyed and even some wood excelsior which was used to stuff the pod forms.

From this piece I was able to gain a certain amount of satisfaction that had been denied me in my earlier piece. Technically I had learned more and I was beginning to see new possibilities for crochet. The piece had flow and rhythm, it had a life of its' own. Definitely the pod grouping seemed to contain interludes that might be labeled confusing but somehow that was overcome by a certain feeling of naturalness. I much preferred this overpopulated feeling to a 'designi-decorative' quality so many hangings seem to try to achieve.

Upon completion of this piece I felt that I had made a firm step forward and that what I had learned from both works could only be considered a constructive experience.

As dawn began to appear over my horizon of understanding, I suddenly began to see how I was dealing with my ideas in relationship to that old 'typical textile approach'. I was limiting myself, I was trying to say something but with a vocabulary that didn't contain the right words. I was 'hung up' with words like 'function and hangings'. They were two valid modes of expression but they belonged to someone else's way of communicating.

I decided that no longer would I use function as a factor in determining the worth of an idea. I would stop thinking sculptural pillow and start making sculpture. If it could be used as a pillow fine, if not, ok. I also tried to break away from that hanging syndrome. Wall hangings themselves, those one sided excuses for an inability to think beyond the two-dimensional world, contain some sort of logic, I suppose. For if you are use to working on the loom where only one side of your work is visible during the whole making process, it is then only natural that the weaver, liberated from function and wanting to create pure aesthetics, should return to the loom still carrying with him the two dimensional idea. For this is the way he has approached things throughout all his previous weaving experiences. Just

the use of hanging threads, be they original warp or hanging additions, have become a cliché and for something to avoid. Since the technique that I employ does not limit the possibilities of self-supporting pieces, I began my next work with that in mind.







"The Footed Folly"

I emerged from my previous learning experience to begin to develop a second sea animal form. It was to be a sort of spiny sponge-like creature. After a few sketches I began to test my ability at producing a spiny projection-like form in crochet. I made one after the other, seeing how they changed and perfecting the control of that change. As I experimented I became aware of how the projection-like form began to take on a life of its' own. They were a statement in themselves with obvious relationships to man, not animal and this idea began to interest me. When other members of my class came by as I worked, their reaction to the form fascinated me. Some were repulsed, others giggled and blushed while still others couldn't keep their hands off them. The form was actually causing a psychological reaction. It provoked an emotional response in almost everyone. Whether it be dislike or pleasure, an idea was being communicated to a group of people. It was then that I began to fully understand that this thing called expression of ideas was only as communicative as the form concepts.

The next step was to develop a superstructure to which my projections would be attached. Keeping in mind the form's relationship to human anatomy I chose an amorphic organic shape that would be not too distracting from the projections themselves.

Keeping in mind my earlier thoughts about using a base instead of the hanging idea, it seemed only natural to employ a footed concept because of the relationship to the figure. It was a combination of hands and feet, not a strict anatomy lesson for it would not have worked here. The essence was what was wanted, something that would leave a little to the viewer's imagination. Of course, getting what was wanted didn't come until after my friend had been fitted with three pairs of toes, but at least a good combination was arrived at. They contained both a feeling of fantasy and the quality of movement and growth.

The form was stuffed and metal supports were inserted to give it stability.

The color selection was another consideration that had to be dealt with carefully. I chose to use a quiet mixture in the green-blue range. Why? For three good reasons: One, I was playing a form game here. The shape of the forms was something I wanted in center stage. Of course that's not saying color wasn't important, it is just that the emphasis was to be on the form. Two, I hoped by not using more exuberant colors the decorative quality or its cuteness would be played down. Thirdly, I believe the colors that were used helped to create a mood for the piece. That mood might be called slightly melancholy, a tone that would match the droopyness of the physical characteristics and again

reinforce the form idea.

The yarn, wool and a cowhair and wool blend, was also of a rather muted personality so as not to interfere with my main concept.

In this piece I felt I have succeeded in making the forms a convincing totality, technically I had mastered the joining of parts without leaving a visible seam, I used color to its' best advantage and I had been able to find a form concept that communicated the visual expression of an idea. In a single McLuhanesque sounding sentence; I had transcended the medium and the method and met the mind.

What I had accomplished sounded great but I must admit, instead of giving me confidence it scared me. Why? Simply because my work no longer fit into any presently existing textile approach. Although I had done what I set out to do; create my own fiber language with its' visual counterparts, I had not fully realized what effect alienation would have on me. Surely I had no wish to be another Dominic Di Mare, Claire Zeisler or Dorian Zachai, for even with the great respect and admiration in which I hold their work, I can not duplicate their ideas. I must do as they had done which is to develop my own path to follow.

My strange victory overwhelmed me so that I returned to my crochet hook to produce something that could relate to Mother craft.







"The Bulging Bump"

It's not a bad piece, infact in some ways it is quite acceptable. The technique and the yarn choice has given it an extremely handsome textural quality. There are areas where heavy yarn creates large stitches and places where a soft fur-like quality was achieved by the use of mohair yarn, while in other areas cowhair or double ply wool was employed. The non-hanging idea was successful and interesting and the actual exterior shapes work from most angles. The basic color is earthy and in combination with the red protrusions it creates a powerful effect.

The idea for this form came from the technical knowledge I had gained from its' immediate predecessor. The ability to create something that looked whole, as if produced all at once was what I wanted. Basically it was a matter of experimenting to find out how much form could be created with just an increase and decrease of the amount of stitches used.

My form objective was similar to that of a large potato. I wanted it to be soft and squishy as possible, but to still retain a feeling of a once apparent structure. An overripe growth with slits that had been created in it's sides by the bursting forth of the inner contents. They would have to look strong enough to break through the skin, something with a powerful visual nature. Hence, I chose the red, repulsive pimple-like protrusions that

push out from a punctured surface.

If my goal was technical it was satisfied, if it was to produce something that could be bracketed as a typical fiber idea then I accomplished that also, but if one considers its' lack of magic then I can only feel neglect in this area. But as Anni Albers has said:

"All progress, so it seems, is coupled to regression elsewhere." ⁵

⁵ Anni Albers On Weaving Wesleyan Univ. Press
Middletown, Conn. 1965 Page 62





13



12

"The Knitted Kniffy"

My step back enabled me to take two forward on my next work. I was involved on some designs for a flat pattern repeat, when I realized that one of them evoked a very sculptural quality and had the potential to become a three dimensional form. It was the simplest form concept that I had worked on during my thesis. A series of plain crocheted tubes which would intertwine and create a free standing structure. Originally it was to be about a yard square but as I began the task of crocheting the tubes I realized that such a time consuming process was pretty silly. For if the concept of a piece is its' most important consideration, why not spend the time on the concept and not the technique, since to complete the crocheted tubes would have taken about six weeks.

A local knitting mill was kind enough to supply me with thirty yards of tubing in about two and a half hours which not only saved me time but it also allowed me more material to work with. I have no arguments with whether using machine produced material is valid. It is for me, but I must admit I did miss the actual act of producing my idea. My hands still play a necessary part in the mental enjoyment I receive from the work.

After cutting the tubes into predetermined lengths and sewing one end closed, I stuffed them with cotton quilting that had been wrapped around five strand, plastic

coated aluminum wire. The wire was used to provide rigidity and support to the finished structure. Then the other end was sewn and the task of assembling them had to be faced. I had constructed a small model of pipe cleaners which was used for the general positioning of the pieces. The color dispersment also had to be considered in the arrangement of things. The actual color choice was not as wide a range as I would have liked because of the size limitations imposed by the knitting machine, therefore my yarn had to be chosen from the manufacture's leftover stock.

Finally the configuration was decided upon and the joints and junctions where the forms meet were sewn together. When the piece was finished and standing, the pure plastic elements of art, form and movement, were obviously present. It contained the qualities of a growing living thing. The form was capable of expressing itself, it was able to send that visual message. The rhythmic, lyrical movement compounds the feeling that Nature, whether with elements of wind or water current, has acted upon the form to produce a completely non-static quality in it.

This work stands as a visual homage to the idea of using a once exclusively functional medium in a purely aesthetic application. It is an attempt at broadening the field of fiber art; a way to let fresh air into that old stale attic of fiber craft.

This piece had taken me a long way from my first attempts at finding my own means of communicating. It represents a move toward a sculptural concept and away from that 'typical textile approach.' This trip hasn't been a bad experience, I feel I can commit myself now. I have a perspective and I have found a frame of reference.

From Now Forward

(conclusion)

By standard practice or "tradition" this part of my thesis should be devoted to a summing up, a re-statement of important facts or a final analysis and maybe even something called an "ending."

But, what a bore to go over things once said, for if you didn't understand the first time around the rehash is not going to make much difference. As for an analysis I leave that to someone who sees the work without the emotional involvement that I would obviously harbor.

Now for that word "ending", which if used to describe any part of my thesis it would be only of a purely physical nature. For this thesis is just the beginning. So, instead of discussing what I have already discussed, I will take a step forward and tell you where my thesis work has led me. At the present time I have found a suitable way of constructing my form ideas; a technique. The form concepts and their mental counterparts, ideas, seem to be always present. What is now behind me has given me the raw materials with which I must develop my future concepts. And so, I have chosen to explore in depth two varied and interesting areas from my thesis work. My previous dealings had been on a one time basis and I felt a deeper understanding was necessary.

First, I want to conceive more pieces that deal with the plastic ideas similar to those found in my knitted form.

Idea: An enclosed walk in space containing an environmental statement. A forest of bending and twisting tubes would greet the participant. The tubes would grow up from the floor and hang down from the ceiling in an attempt to create a spacial encroachment on visual perception. Light would definitely play an extremely important part. I see it used to intensify the break up of form placement and also as a way of creating shadow effect to multiply the actual number of forms.

My second area of investigation would be to work with similar concepts as those found in my "Footed Folly." I am considering the possibilities of satire and social comment. A caricature, non-portrait type, of today's way of life or the symbols that evoke recognition in our daily existence.

Idea: A pink torso with pregnant belly, long stick-like legs as its support. No head, but on the top of the neck a sunken, puckered form - cerebral cave-in. An umbilical cord extends about six feet from the navel with an electrical plug attached to its end.

Yes, the two proposed concepts are different but I feel that both are worth an exploration. I go forth

in search of a clearer perception through personal growth and to further my abilities to communicate my ideas. The most essential and important factors of this thesis project have been my mental expansion and the learning experiences with which it coincides.

Upon occasion I have the feeling that I am a person with a huge assortment of puzzle pieces, enough pieces for a hundred puzzles. I sit trying to find just enough pieces of one kind so that I can complete one puzzle. To me it seems that everything that is necessary for satisfactory results are at hand, but that it takes a sincere and truly conscious search to obtain one's goal.

And maybe that's just what art is all about.

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