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To Stuff, or Not to Stuff

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To Stuff, or Not to Stuff

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Chapter I

Introduction

In the spring of 1972 at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, N. Y., I met a person who was to have an overwhelming affect on my life. Unfortunately we had not met sooner, yet we might never have met at all. We had both applied to R.I.T. after completing undergraduate work at Massachusetts College of Art, Boston. I had come to graduate school to collect that piece of sheepskin which would entitle me to receive an increase in salary as a teacher. She had come, although unaware of it, to influence and be influenced by others. Our backgrounds were identical. We had been to the same schools, knew the same people, yet we were strangers. We were introduced in the Spring of 1972 by one of my professors, Stephen Thurston. The meeting took place following one of his slide lectures, which we both attended. I found her to be very familiar yet different from anyone I had ever known.

I guess I was impressed with her because she thrived on the very elements which I felt were my weaknesses. We spent a year on different levels of accepting or rejecting each other's thoughts. I now feel that our differences can be worked out and we can remain together the rest of our lives. We were always
together in the past yet we were unaware of each other. This person I am referring to is really not a whole person at all, she is instead a very important, unexplored, fragment of myself. This other part of myself is more creative than I, as she is not afraid to experiment and can accept failure as a very important part of growth. She realizes that if you succeed all of the time you must be standing still. One can only progress by venturing into the unknown and conquering it. Perhaps what I admire most in this new aspect of myself is "her" ability to continue working on a piece which seems doomed to failure. Not only does she complete it, but it is given the same love and care which I reserve for the finishing of my best pieces. These works are then shown with no apology for she realizes this is where her mind was yesterday and the progress she has made in doing this piece is within herself. I admire these qualities yet know that she feels them so strongly she has become selfish. She feels no responsibilities other than fulfilling her own desires to create. In this aspect there will always be a great deal of tension between us. I feel that I owe many things to a variety of people and must always consider them along with my own personal happiness. Creatively I have just recently become aware of her, and the feelings of only being concerned with this new aspect of my life. She urges me not to attend school each morning to fulfill my responsibilities as a graduate assistant.
She says that the hours I spend running the yarn room and the time it takes me to write my thesis could best be utilized by letting her help me cope with my weaknesses. She has asked me to remove this structured portion of my life and to stop being concerned with striving to attain a Masters Degree. The me that I have known for twenty-seven years cannot accept this philosophy. If I remained at home with her, others who are also trying to find themselves would be burdened with my responsibilities. My husband, parents, sister and all of my relatives would be shocked and disappointed if I were to leave R.I.T. without putting forth the effort to be prepared as a candidate for an M.F.A. degree. Would my sister feel that I was "copping out?" Would she quit school at the University of Hartford because she misinterpreted my feelings if I were to drop out of the educational system now? Yes, the degree is very important to me, yet it has a different meaning from when I entered R.I.T. Society sees it as the symbol of attainment. To me it means a great deal more! I have found the other part of myself and can now begin to use the collection of technical skills I have learned in a meaningful and personal way. She is still really a stranger. However, I am now aware of her presence and at times she will force me to think of my work above all else. Those who know and understand me will realize the existence of her presence urging me to become something other than a "Sunday Artist."
I hope to present in this thesis a picture of myself before and after we became aware of each other. With her help I have been able to clearly see my weaknesses and strengths. I do not regret any of my life thus far, and am very thankful that I can now look at my past in perspective. I can analyze my successes and strive to expand upon these experiences. I can also cope with past failures and realize that some of them can be turned into future successes. With this new insight I can also accept the fact that I cannot be "All things to all people." My goal in life is to overcome all that I am capable of overcoming. I must extend my self as far as possible, without trying to be something that I am not.

In this soul-searching quest, I found three other people who would play very important roles. My off campus hours would be spent with my husband, whom I had met, fallen in love with, and married just a few short months earlier. In this new relationship I have found a great deal of emotional strength. Never before has anyone committed themselves to me in such great depth. My relatives were mine by birth, my friends acquired through mutual goals in the process of an education. My relatives will remain, while my friends pass in and out of my life in search of their own aspirations. Before marriage there was a period when we both secretly felt a need to remain together throughout our lives. You find yourself expressing a need for another person not
knowing if they have the same need for you. I can't fully express to my husband all that he means to me. What is love? It has been so bastardized, so freely used for all sorts of reasons that it almost needs to be re-defined. How can I express what his very existance means to me? Can he understand that my work has little significance if it only gives me pleasure. Or in the very act of creating, my goal is to evoke some kind of a response from the viewer. Can he realize that he will be my most influential critic? He has brought a new dimension into my life. Our relationship will grow and will expand my horizons into human understanding. As an artist/craftsman my work is a visual outpouring of emotion and in him I find new avenues of thought open to me.

During my hours at R.I.T. I have been in almost constant contact with Laura Glazier and Steve Thurston. How can I express to them the great impact they have been upon me. I had been accepted as the person I was when I entered R.I.T. and they asked nothing more of me. They also took total delight in seeing me meet and accept this other side of myself. They knew what I was going through as they had each in their own way experienced similar feelings. They knew I could not be pushed, for I could only accept what was within my present scope to experience. They seemed to sense when I needed a critique from a fresh eye and when I should make my own decisions.
My experiences with them were to be further expanded at our graduate seminar. During a specific time each week all of the graduate students would meet with Don Bujnowski and Steve Thurston to discuss mutual problems in the struggle to become artist/craftsmen. At this time I found special help in the form of group critiques. I began to know each student more clearly as an artist/craftsman and could see what each was trying to evoke from their personalities and translate into their work. When a piece was criticized there were many different thoughts on ways the piece could be resolved. Real people were trying to give of themselves and in doing so were reinforcing their own thoughts while verbalizing a new source of departure to fellow students.

I was to also be influenced by Budd Statnaker, a professor at Indiana University who gave a workshop at R.I.T. He brought with him many slides of student work as well as his own. During the slide lecture of his work, he explained why he felt each piece was a success or failure and the departure points for his future work. The slides and lecture were very exciting in themselves, but more so because he was restating the concepts I had become aware of in my own work. In the past my failures would be thrown away. Now I am trying to analyze those failures to be able to grow from their experience. I am no longer ashamed of my mistakes and can now take them as an integral part of the learning process.
For the last time in my life I can categorize my occupation as a full-time student. As a student I feel a great need to relate and grow from an association with people. My written thesis will therefore contain no footnotes or bibliography. My sources of reference are not to be found in any library, they are all alive, well and existing at R.I.T. Each person has their own speed of awareness. The awareness of being an individual is the most important "new ground" I can break at this time. My "contribution to the crafts" is recognizing the importance of truly knowing oneself before being able to meaningfully give to others.

I have chosen to set down on paper in this segment of my thesis, a record of my growth. Being aware of myself as the person I am and the realization of this awareness has expanded my schooling beyond a mere collection of various techniques. The insight I have gained has developed through the availability of people and my willingness to search.

I hope by exposing myself on paper the real value of my search will be as clear to others as it is to me. I have only accepted each new phase of life as I was ready for it regardless of the times it visited and was turned away. It is a wonderful feeling to know the weaknesses and strengths which dwell within you. How can you ever feel any personal happiness if you are not aware of what you already hold within your grasp and the uncertainty of what lies beyond to be conquered?
Chapter II

High School - R.I.T.

My High School years were spent mainly in the "Art Room" being the star of my class. During my Senior year I applied and was accepted at Massachusetts College of Art, Boston. I chose to remain at home, and unconsciously sought out a school that had exactly what I needed, strict discipline. I was given class schedules which ran 9-5 daily, five days a week for two years. The faculty cleared one creative path in the woods which must be followed. I had a keen respect for authority, and an eagerness to follow the path that led to success.

The first two years were very exciting as we dabbled in every media the college could house.

Now that I had amassed experience in a myriad of techniques, my next thoughts were turned toward the big decision, "What will my major be?" Gazing into a face mirror one day I confirmed the fact that I was indeed a female. What better choice could I make than to devote my Junior and Senior years to Fashion Design and Illustration. Perhaps I should have looked in a full length mirror and realized that a 550lb. young lady would not fare well in the land of the petit and fashionable. Looking back, I realize that all of the other
girls were experimenting with flashy colors and wild style lines to dazzle an audience at our annual fashion show. I carefully spent my time sewing up wallpaper prints so that I might blend into the background. Although I have exaggerated on size, my mind truly believed that I was an overgrown moose. I managed to get through these two uncreative years and received my B.F.A. degree.

I had no idea of what I wanted to venture into after graduation. The majority of fashion jobs seemed to be in "Big New York City," and I was still not ready to leave home.

During the early part of the following September, I received a call from Mass. Art asking if I would return to teach Fashion Design, as my former instructor was ill. I was frightened to death, but accepted the challenge. The substitute teaching, which was only to be a week or two, grew into several months. I found to my surprise that I enjoyed this type of life. With a small taste of teaching in my mouth, I was to be relieved of this position by two people eminently more qualified than I.

Deciding to expand my fashion design background in the hopes of teaching again someday; I enrolled in a two year program at The School of Fashion Design, Boston. This school would provide me with a greater knowledge of sewing and tailoring techniques. While attending S.F.D., I found myself
teaching a one hour general art course at Our Lady of the Assumption High School and substituting in Fashion Illustration at Mass. Art.

Coping with High School students was not one of the more enjoyable chores of my life. The class was held quite late on Monday afternoons. A Church service and the official closing of the school day preceded my class. The mini-skirt revolution was in full swing at this time and a great majority of the class hour seemed to be spent rolling up knee length uniforms to a more fashionable height. It is really not fair for me to make any judgement on the workings of a parochial school however; I felt the strict regime one unconducive to artistic expression. I even found it difficult to get them to leave their seats to view books at a closer range. I overcompensated by bubbling over with enthusiasm at the advent of each project. Unfortunately, their blank faces led me to believe they thought I was a nut.

In June my High School teaching experience ended along with the completion of my first years work at the School of Fashion Design. That summer I began to make plans for my "Senior Line," which is similar to a thesis and the culminating project of my final year. These plans were discarded by the presentation of a more appealing offer. I received an invitation from Chamberlayne Junior College to be interviewed for a position as their first Fashion Design instructor. Since I did not have to pound the pavement in search
of this job I felt compelled to at least attend the interview. A month later I received word I had been hired. Mrs. Jean Torrisi, head of the department, was also a graduate of Fashion Design and Illustration at Mass. Art, thereby giving us a great deal in common. Jean and I worked very well together and I was asked to continue as a full-time instructor.

Planning to return to Chamberlayne in the Fall, I left Boston to become a student at Syracuse University that summer. Two weeks before the end of my graduate courses, I received a call from Jean asking if I would attend an interview with the new President of Mass. Art. In my absence, she became head of the Fashion Department and remained in her former position at Chamberlayne. I attended the interview and began teaching at both Chamberlayne and Mass. Art in September. During that hectic year I enrolled in graduate printmaking courses with the hopes of becoming a full-time student in the near future.

I applied to R.I.T., was accepted and here I am.

In many ways I am no different from hundreds of other graduate students. The initial feelings I had about my participation in the graduate show were like a fairy tale where my work would shine brightly above all others. I would produce more quality works than had ever been done in the annals of R.I.T.
This was indeed a fairy tale. As I began to understand myself I no longer needed that type of competition. My greatest rivalry is in trying to outdo myself.

While still under the influence of wanting to be a superstar, I began a small segment of my thesis. This piece was a quilt designed for a king size bed, consisting of 72 squares of cotton velveteen in various colors. These squares were printed with a silkscreen design in opaque black. My design conceived, cut and adhered; I printed. Everything went smoothly. The blacks were deep and rich. Then disaster struck as I finished my 72nd print. For the first time I placed one color next to another and discovered that the blacks were merely darker tints of the fabric color. As squares butting one against the other they did not work. My first instinct was to complete the quilt by covering the joined sections with a decorative velveteen ribbon. Steve surveyed the situation and suggested eliminating the irregular blacks by cutting around the design. I began this venture and was reaquainted with one of my greatest assets, that of being a real whiz with scissors. That task completed I began cutting out smaller areas of the design to be stuffed and sewn to the larger print. Here my other best asset came into play, a very good relationship with my Singer sewing machine.

The process of cutting took several months and many blisters. It gave me a chance to really know my design and to think about my work while doing a mechanical task. I
began to make a chart of the placement of each color for the final sewing. Laura and I placed each design in its' charted spot on brown paper in the gallery. We then ran to the second floor balcony to look down upon the results along with Steve, Don, and several other students. After making the final adjustments, I returned home and placed the prints on a bolt of black velveteen on my bed. What had looked good on brown paper in the scale of the gallery became overpowering in the bedroom. I spent two days trying every conceivable combination of prints. I found many possibilities yet, could not commit myself to just one. Although I spent a great deal of time on this project without arriving at a successful conclusion I felt my time was not wasted. I learned many things about the design and myself through this exploration.

I learned:

1. Not to let the failure of my original concept keep me from arriving at a successful conclusion.

2. The design had far more possibilities than I had originally conceived and merited further expansion.

3. To explore and develop my assets through reworking the prints by cutting and sewing.

Slowly I realized that finishing the piece as a quilt was not a sufficient goal to conquer. I felt I had a prefect prelude for many answers to one design problem. The fact that I already had 72 beginnings was a good start. With this in mind, I approached Steve with my thesis proposal.
"The purpose of this thesis is to explore the creative possibilities of a single silk screen design. I intend to use a number of these prints as the basis for a series of pillows. I hope each will become a unique and individual statement."

My proposal at that time was set forth in seventeen pages and I must admit sounded very sketchy and unsure. To remedy this situation Steve used what I term "The Stephen D. Thureton Debate Technique." In using this technique correctly the questioner ends up answering his own original question. In addition she is asked for further information regarding the solution she answered. When one has completed this debate they are either fully convinced that they are doing the right thing or have talked themselves out of the original question. I won this debate with myself and my graduate committee.

A thesis proposal is an extremely tricky piece of writing. Initially your ideas are very definite. Unfortunately there is a long time span between the acceptance of the proposal and the final presentation. Most people do not leave room in their proposals to allow for any growth to occur. The tendency is to be too specific ending up trapped by words. Luckily I left myself freedom to experience and grow.
Chapter III
Reflections

The knowledge I have gained from my various endeavors before coming to R.I.T. was extensive. During my years here I have been able to reflect upon these experiences from afar, gaining insight into myself and my relationship to others.

I was the star of my High School art class which is not unique. My Freshman classmates at Mass. Art had all been bright stars in their respective art classes. As first year college students we were all concerned with polishing ourselves to a brilliance which might outshine others. Some tarnished while others achieved blinding success.

The level of success I attained during my first two years at Mass. Art was due to their philosophy of teaching fundamentals. We were given very strict limitations to work within, something I had been accustomed to in High School.

I found little difficulty in remaining within these bounds of creating a satisfactory answer to each problem.

My two years in the Fashion Design Department were totally overpowered by my physical appearance. One might think weight has absolutely nothing to do with my work as an artist/craftsman. This is far from the truth. Every aspect of your life directly or indirectly influences who you are, what you do, and why you do it.
I was constantly trying to improve my appearance by the fashions I created. I did not admit to myself that clothes are capable of only so much and that my "biggest" problem was to be found in what they covered. The American public is saturated with the idea that only the sleek and slender "Clairol Blonde" can live a happy and fulfilled life. I believed this propaganda and hated myself for every mouthful I consumed as it took me further and further away from being one of the "Beautiful People."

This aspect of my life is perhaps a very important factor, as there is a constant tension between what I am and what I strive to be. We all have these tensions in different forms. The role we play in life is everchanging and is tested each time we try to attain higher goals. We seek to reach the top rung on many different ladders of achievement. For some the goal is great wealth, others fame, while still others seek to be on top in their field of endeavor. The goals are endless. A goal obtained does not always solve the problem. I managed to lose a considerable amount of weight at one time, but it did not prove to be the all encompassing answer I had expected. Where was my knight in shining armour, did his white charger have a flat tire? My goal had been attained; however no great change occurred in my life. I was very disappointed, for I had deprived myself of food, but did not reap the rewards I sought. I expected the world to change because I had struggled to become more acceptable.
I had geared my goals toward the masses, rather than seeking a personal achievement, which did not require reinforcement from others.

I feel that I must approach my work in the same manner. I do not strive for fame and fortune. I must set my goals higher. My artistic expression is a very important personal need which must be satisfied. I am aware that 99% of the people viewing my work will be judging me against every other artist/craftsman they know. I do not blame them. They can not know that most of my expansion has taken place in my mind. Only I know when I have succeeded or failed in relationship to my original concept. I have been struggling to overcome my personal "hang-ups" in order to begin my post graduate work as a true artist/craftsman.

My growth has allowed me to have and believe in my own thoughts. My written thesis, although a chore, is an invaluable record of this growth; a growth I must never forget. Another invaluable chore has been my assistanship. Working in the yarn room has afforded me the great privilege of being exposed to fibers which were foreign to me in the past. I have seen raw materials turned into works of love. I have learned the unique personalities of various fiber and the language they speak. "My spirit will materialize when my qualities are understood," each speak out. Every media has its own individual life and can live only when it is allowed to express itself.
When I was a print making student I did not listen to my plate as it etched itself in acid. It was telling me that my ideas could be executed better through the use of silk-screening. My style could not be brought out by using a zinc plate and an acid bath. I was fighting to change a media to suit my own expression. I did not realize that I must work with the media to make the most of the material while still making a personal statement of my own.
Chapter IV

My Work

Basic Blue, plate 1, is the basic cut design form. At that time I began to realize the possibilities of using the zig-zag stitch in finishing irregular edges. Sharp points when sewn on the wrong side, clipped and turned to the right side tend to fray. Exerting the amount of pressure needed to form a firm pillow would burst the seams. The technique of zig-zagging enabled me to accurately follow contours and insured a permanence not possible in the prior method. Working on the right side of the print allowed me to see the effect I was achieving by sewing over the same area many times. I was able to transform the standard look of a zig-zag stitch into a fluid line. I found while mastering this technique that a great deal of trial and error came into play. The best method was to use a medium stitch, building up the surface gradually. Working with a very close stitch tended to give a stiff appearance and often caused entangling in the sewing machine.

I expanded upon this finish in several other pieces, plates 2-7, sometimes using multiple rows to create a rippeling movement. The zig-zag technique caused me to become a fanatic on good craftsmanship. I would spend hour upon hour carefully
finishing each pillow so that nary a stray thread could be found. I was so caught up in this tight little world, that I could not express myself freely. I became chained to my sewing machine and unconsciously longed to be free of any confining equipment.

My first real step into experimentation was shak... It was very important and like most first steps I did not advance far before falling on the floor. Plate 8, Dungarees, was begun while I was still uncertain whether or not controlled chaos could be a part of my personal expression. I began with The idea of weathered dungarees in a pillow form. Throwing bleach on velveteen seemed to have the same emotional effect on me as driving my car into a stone wall at 60 m.p.h., -- total destruction. I was afraid I might destroy a design which had become "too precious."

I knew if I was to progress I must cease feeling that work was too precious and could not be improved. I needed to overcome the fear of destroying what had already been attained in favor of advancing my style. To overcome this fear I had to attack with firm conviction. My attack in Dungarees was a step in the right direction. My initial assault was full of gusto. I threw bleach with true vengeance. My secondary attack laid the enemy flat, sewing every wetted seam with the speed and evasive line of a trained soldier. I seemed to be winning the battle. I fought well, but was quickly tiring. Thoughts of leaving the battle for security
began to fill my mind. I had gained ground; however my defenses had been lowered too soon. The result was not totally satisfying. I had underestimated the enemy. The intended irregular bleaching and sloppy sewing led me to believe that I could finish my piece with very little thought. In my haste I ended up with too much pillow and too little of a dungaree feeling.

The pillow forms in plates 9 and 10 make use of a simple basketry technique. I became fascinated with this process while watching Laura Glazier working. She used many varieties of this technique and manages to create sculptural forms. I learned the basic principle and was overjoyed by its mobility. I purposely limited my knowledge of this technique to a minimum. This enabled me to truly experiment without being aware of what I might be doing "wrong."

My next pieces, plates 11-14, incorporate clear vinyl in varying degrees. Ironically enough I had a deep dislike for vinyls. I was only able to associate this material with coverings for cheap couches to keep them spotless. Emotionally I saw it as a material you stuck to in the summer and froze on in the winter. After experimentation I realized the unique effect the material offers and I now take delight in using this material.

My final piece, pictured in plate 15, combines the techniques of zig-zagging, dyeing, and bleaching. Sewing threads were co-ordinated to my irregularly bleached design spot. I
used multiple rows of zig-zagging with openings left for added interest. After completing the sewing I realized my colors were not properly related. I tried to bleach out some areas but found that my Talon Polyspin thread would not bleach. I then remembered a technique I learned from Don Bujnowski, cross-dyeing. Supersaturating a piece with one color dye can unify your product and often saves it from disaster. I then splattered bleach over the cross dyed pieces to create sparks of light.
Chapter V
The Hanging

My initial thoughts were to multiply my achievements by presenting my thesis as if it were "The Crowned Jewels." Had I followed through with this idea I would have been contradicting the very thoughts which helped me put my work in correct perspective. I could have used plexi-glass, mirrors, and many other props to enhance my product. I did not because I wanted my final statement at R.I.T. to reflect the way I felt.

My years here have been a smorgasbord. When the taste of each bite is over and digestion has occurred, you are ready to eliminate the waste product which no longer has value. You only retain the nourishment gained in this process. In using an "out-house" as my only prop, I am in my own way stating this fact. I have tasted each dish that I was capable of reaching. I am now ready to eliminate that which has been devoured in the past, keeping only the knowledge I have gained from it.