Creating theme bedspreads through loom and non-loom techniques

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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Creating theme bedspreads through loom and non-loom techniques.

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The purpose of this thesis is to explore bedspreads, through loom and non-loom techniques. The concentration in the four pieces proposed will consist of variations derived from a basic theme.

Each theme will be explored, through the use of various processes, allowing the materials, yarns, fibers, and dyes to dictate either loom or non-loom techniques.
CREATING THEME BEDSPREADS THROUGH LOOM AND NON-LOOM TECHNIQUES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY
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The work completed for my thesis represents a personal and an aesthetic growth. My basic thesis and the resulting variables, emerging from an evolution of ideas and thought processes, will become more apparent as I describe each piece and the chronology of change. I completed six major pieces and two smaller studies, incorporating in them woven and non-loom techniques, as well as a wide variety of materials. The completed work visibly shows the conceptual premises upon which the thesis itself is built.

The initial premise behind the thesis was functional. I needed a bedspread, but several other ideas, integral in the conception, pushed me beyond the limited format of a typical bedspread. Although the term bedspread is usually conceived of only as a functional piece of fabric completely covering the top and sides of a bed, I use the term more loosely to suggest both small and large pieces that could be used on a bed and elsewhere. Basic to these ideas was that of making a piece versatile. I wanted the piece to be able to stand as a work of art, outside the limited context of bedspread, and yet still have the properties which would make it functional. The approach included the investigation of three techniques most often employed in the making of a cover for a bed: tapestry, quilting, and stuffing. The tapestry used a traditional woven technique, exploring the use of a loom in a very structured format. Quilting helped me become involved with the idea of stitchery and with the sculptural quality arising from
the combination of the line quality in stitchery and the limited stuffing involved. Stuffing became more prominent. Several pieces which began with a functional concept behind them, became more sculptural. Materials used became very important. I felt inhibited by yarns which are beautiful in themselves. The immense variety of texture and color posed too easy a solution. Instead, I went to rags: used, discarded, found or purchased remnants. I tried a variety of dyeing and over-dyeing techniques to achieve the colors I desired, but the quality of rag, which I wanted to explore, remained. In later pieces I used cheesecloth, clear plastic and wool roving, in an attempt to explore some of the possibilities open to making a bedspread in an experimental process. After completing one or two pieces, I discovered that each side had a character of its own which I responded to, aesthetically and emotionally. This relates to my earlier premise on the versatility of a piece and the ability to use both sides as a bedspread. There wasn't a specific front or back and the pieces could even function as a wall sculpture, a room divider, or a free handing form, when not being used specifically as a bedspread. Function then became limited only by my imagination and my original concept of a purely functional piece grew and changes in technique and materials resulted more in multi-functional and sculptural pieces. Why can't a bed be a basis or supporting structure of a sculpture, or a wall take on sculptural elements? Limiting the work to pure functionalism leaves no openings for creative utilization of pieces in making up and/or changing our environment. I found myself more inspired to explore unique combinations of different materials and traditional techniques with the end result of discovering not only a great many possibilities
for a bedspread, but for creating an environment to live in, a flexible, changeable one where art and functional object become one.

The initial piece was a basic approach to the problem of a functional bedspread. Piece I is entitled "Institute," 108" x 108", woven on a loom using dyed rags and tapestry technique. Much of the fabric used in this piece was drapery material, chosen for its heavy, durable quality, and then bleached of its original color and torn into various size rags. The rags were then redyed, predominantly in dark greens and browns. Because of the limited size of the looms available, the piece was woven in two sections and then sewn together. The concept behind "Institute" was the conversion of an aerial view of the landscape, showing, land as it appears with the combination of earth tones, lines and general shapes becoming predominant. Superficial detail is lost in the natural blending of earth elements. I also incorporated in the piece raised textured areas, pockets and holes, analogous with an overview of a landscape, to give it a more interesting shape. The piece had a distinct front and back side, each of which appealed to me in different ways. The insertion of lumps, holes and pockets was a distinct break from the usually solid bedspread and I believe became the beginning of the sculptural inclinations I developed in later pieces.

"Pete and Repete," Piece II, was an outgrowth of "Institute" a 42" x 42" square combining woven tapestry technique and sewn strips of rags. Some of the rags I had dyed brown for Piece I were bleached again and put in a red dye bath. Others I left unbleached and dipped in the same dye bath, resulting in a subtle tonality in the same basic color field. The construction consists of a tapestry woven center
surrounded by four triangular sections of sewn rags. Using the same colors and textures of rags, in both the woven and sewn sections, holds the piece together visually while presenting an interesting contrast in techniques. The total effect has a strangely bold look to it even though the individual colors of the rags are basically drab, consisting primarily of a muted rose color. It is with "Pete and Repete" that I really became involved with the idea of a two sided piece and instructed that, in the graduate show, it be hung freely from one corner, in a diamond shape, to emphasize the two approaches to the piece. Here its function takes on a purely aesthetic form, as necessary to a comfortable environment to me as a bedspread because of its visual appeal. And yet if placed on a bed, it does, in fact, become a bedspread again, enhancing the bed, but not being overcome by the formidable structure of the bed itself. I prefer the rough or ragged side of this piece where the seam lines and stitchery from sewing the outside strips of rags together, as well as threads hanging from the rags themselves, give it an intriguing line quality. This quality led me into an interest in the possibilities of stitchery.

Piece III, "Landfill," developed from certain techniques utilized in making the first two pieces. It is 48" x 48" and consists basically of two layers of fabric lightly stuffed, stitched around particular contours in the dye pattern of the fabric, and then restuffed. In the process of dyeing the fabric for "Institute" (Piece I), I added to the dye pot some smaller pieces of fabric. These came out unevenly dyed in a quasi tie-dyed effect due to the bleaching, dyeing and redyeing. The design that emerged from the random procedure was in itself very fascinating and I wanted to emphasize particular dyed areas, using the
fabric as a whole, rather than tearing it into rags as I had done for the earlier pieces. The best way to accentuate the natural color phenomenon that occurred was by using a contour stitchery technique. I stitched together the two pieces of fabric, lightly stuffed, in a thread color close to that of the dyed fabric and then restuffed certain areas to make them even more dominant and sculptural. This piece more closely approaches a quilting technique for a bedspread, but the added stuffing, and the variation of it in the same piece, increases interest in the piece beyond that of a mere quilt, which is generally more uniformly stuffed. This was my first entire non-loom approach to the original problem of a bedspread. I found the depth resulting from the stitchery and added stuffing increased my original interest in the dye pattern since the stitchery did not detract from the material due to the closeness in color of the thread to material. The vicarious and uneven stuffing added an unexpected line and shading quality. Functionally, I find its uses even more exciting than the previous two pieces. Placed on a bed, the piece has an amorphous quality, a plump, inviting softness, so unlike the flat bed we are used to. This element of unexpected contours could easily be applied in making soft and undulating walls, or even rugs that would be more sensual to walk over, especially if their texture was also very soft and luxurious. This, again, takes on an environmental approach in an even more complete way, since the piece may not only be used purely to enhance the room visually but, also, could become part of the very walls or the floor of the room itself.

The fourth piece completed follows the technical aspect of "Landfill" (Piece III) and yet the visual impact is entirely different.
Piece IV is entitled "Contours of Port Wine (Cheddar)," 40" x 48", and is constructed basically from dyed cheesecloth and quilting material. The concept developed in the making of "Landfill" as I saw the effect of the stitching on the soft, permeable quilting material used as stuffing. I liked the light, airy feeling in its sensual softness and decided to emphasize this by covering it with cheesecloth rather than an opaque fabric. The subtle, pink coloring of the dyed cheesecloth further enhanced the soft quality of the stuffing material, like a captured pink cloud. Technically, it was created following the previous pattern of two layers of cloth, lightly stuffed, stitched with a pink thread closely resembling the pink of the dyed cheesecloth, and re-stuffed to achieve a more sculptural quality. The end result so closely resembled clouds that I hung it in front of a window. Its semi-transparency is especially interesting with the daylight coming through the window since, as the light changes, so does the quality of the transparency-opacity relationship in the piece itself. An idea came to mind: the soft-sculptural quality, especially evident in this piece, could, in fact, become three dimensional, rather than two sided, by using stitchery, tucking and multiple pieces of fabric in a single piece. The shape could then become even more structured. Additional shading, done with dye techniques, would further emphasize the depth of any particular contour beyond what the stitching techniques already achieve. Varying the color would also have a strong effect on the end result: the obvious range of blues, mauves, greys, pinks and combinations thereof would suggest entirely different feelings from the dreamlike quality evoked in the pink I used. I see these pieces hanging free-form from the ceiling, especially in a room with a good
light source, natural or artificial, in combination with the environmental possibilities I mentioned, concerning the use of "Landfill" techniques on the walls and/or floors. A room could lose all of its traditional severity of flat walls, ceiling and floor meeting at right angles and become a soft room, comfortable and inviting.

While working on Piece V, "Two Sided Affair," I completed two smaller studies based on the technical premise applied in "Landfill" and "Contours of Port Wine (Cheddar)" (Pieces III and IV), but using different approaches with the materials. Study VA combines the sewn strips of rags constructed as those on the outside of "Pete and Repete" (Piece II) with the contour stitchery pattern of "Landfill." The resulting study, 20" x 30", consists of two layers of fabric, the back a solid color material and the front a series of dyed rags sewn together. These layers, lightly stuffed, were then stitched together using the contour line pattern and restuffed in certain areas. This is yet another variation on the "Landfill" theme, but here the strips of rags could be used to accentuate particular sculptural areas by the color of the rag used in that area. Subtle dyeing of the various strips could create color gradations giving the effect of shading. One of the main ideas behind the use of combining stitchery with the straight rows of sewn rags was to see if the undulating stitchery line could create optical effects in distorting the basic parallelism of the rows of rags. This was achieved to some extent but could become more efficacious in conjunction with the subtle dyeing of the rags.

Study VB, also 20" x 30", was made entirely of clear plastic; one side a solid piece and the other rows of plastic strips sewn in the same fashion as the rags used for Study VA. The major difference
resulting from the use of plastic is that the stitched seam line, done in pink thread, shows whether or not the seam is inside or out, due to the transparency of the plastic. Thus, the seam line itself is always apparent and makes a very dominant series of parallel lines running the length of the piece, as opposed to the more subtle vertical line quality of the rags in Study VA. When I stitched the two layers of plastic together, using the same basic shaping pattern of VA, the severe vertical linearity was noticeably disturbed, resulting in a continually changing line quality, further emphasized with the additional stuffing, and a linear optical effect, more pronounced than that of Study VA. The opposite solid plastic sheet side achieved the same interesting sculptural quality without the somewhat disturbing linear emphasis and brought out, to a greater degree, the strange dichotomy of texture between the plastic and the quilting material. These two elements combined make, at the same time, the piece soft and cold. Visually, it evokes a deceptive "cuddliness" yet, tactiley, it is almost unpleasant in its unyielding plasticity. This was an unexpected result, but a very intriguing concept for making pieces that visually read one way and yet when touched produce the antithesis of that visual invitation.

Piece V, "Two Sided Affair," was produced concurrently with the smaller studies I have labeled as VA & B. It differs in that I eliminated the stitchery and additional stuffing so that the resulting piece returns, in a sense, to the more functional basis premise of a bedspread. This piece consists entirely of sewn strips of dyed rags, 52" x 58". The edge quality of the rags intrigued me and I did not want to detract from it by combining the other previously used techniques. This piece also has two distinct sides: one where the seam
lines do not show (nor therefore the rag edges) and the other where the rag edge produced by sewing the rags together becomes the outside. These two pieces were sewn together with a thin layer of quilting between them to add a little softness, and functionally, for a bedspread, more warmth. I prefer the texture and interest of the more ragged side, as opposed to the clean seam line quality of the other. But, again, either side may be used, so its function is not as strictly limited as traditional bedspreads that have a distinct front and back. This piece has a particular appeal to me as a bedspread because it supersedes the strong structure basic to the bed and in so doing makes the bed function as a structural base for the woven piece rather than having the piece mundanely act as a "cover" for a bed. When not being used on a bed, "Two Sided Affair" could become a "reversible painting" or, as in Piece II, be hung free form or as a room divider since its creation is dependent not only on function but visual appeal.

The final piece, "#110 Hook" (Piece VI), was based on the "blow-up" of an individual crochet stitch. Piece VI is wool roving, dyed a deep, rose color and crocheted in absurdly large stitches. This is a personal reaction to the general disregard people have for fine detail especially evident in very delicately crocheted pieces. The individual stitch and even especially fine segments are neglected in place of the overall impact of the entire piece. By blowing up the size of the individual stitch to such an extreme degree I hope to force the viewer to become aware of both the total piece and the quality of each crochet stitch. Because this was done completely by hand, much like chain-stitching a warp to prepare it for the loom, I discovered I especially enjoyed the direct physical contact with the material. Functionally,
it is a very pliable piece and could easily be used to bundle up in to keep warm, like an afghan, or could be used as a bedspread. It has a very inviting, cuddly appeal, most likely due to the texture of the wool roving itself and the warm color it was dyed. "#110 Hook" could also be very suitable as a hanging since its pliability lends it easily to changes in form by mere manipulation. Some of the cloud-like feeling of Piece IV is also evident here, due to the color, texture and openness of the large crochet stitch.

My interpretation of functionalism in weaving progressed and expanded as I worked through these pieces. Any additional work I do, will profit from this thought process, since I realize the limitless possibilities that can be derived in making even, at the start, a basic functional item. Thus, the end result is not an end, but a beginning, an opening up to ideas, materials and techniques that I discovered during the year.
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