

INDONESIAN TEXTILES

By Richard Tuttle

Photo captions by Richard Tuttle and Mary H. Kahlenberg

Captivating examples abound of how contemporary art has sought inspiration in the textile arts. Three artists, in particular, who interest me: Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin have important ties to textiles. Josef Albers was married to the great weaver Anni Albers. One can see his work as textiles, painted, rather than woven. Ad Reinhardt used a crosslike, over/under, under/over design scheme in his Absolute Paintings from the early 60s. Agnes Martin was friends with an extraordinary proponent of weaving, Lenore Tawney. Martin's grids have, unlike mathematical grids, an independence between the verticals and horizontals, like the independence between the warp and weft.

In 1967, I decided to use the material canvas as the material of my work. From the start, I looked for an original form, something I thought the 20th century had failed to produce. It became clear there was a push/pull ambiguity in the cloth itself, which was subsequently reflected in the over/under, under/over, play in all of my shaped compositions. After these earlier works, and following the rule of simplicity, which asked for the least number of cuts in the canvas, a group of irregular octagonals emerged. Dyed one specific color, they are the same front and back; on the wall one knew the back (because it had to be the same as the front) but couldn't see it. I think my interest in textiles generated from this point, for in a sense, I didn't know the material I was working with any more than as I knew it from the starting point that it was a textile, which was for me a fascination with the unknown at that moment in time.

Some have pointed to the place of ever-developing mechanical looms as parallel to the course taken by the computer to the essential binary foundation of both weaving and computation. We can no longer afford to weave by hand; there is virtually no textile industry left in the U.S., while digital technology is completely woven into our daily lives. If one goes back to the fascination of building and brings it up to the fascination of computation, one finds the fascination of weaving built, woven, computed, solidly within. These fascinations are all binary. The fascination of art is another thing. Is there a binary of art? Can art make the same journey? Can it make the leap from woven to computed?

All the ingredients are the same, and art is the same. But has the screen, the overstrate and substrate, been

altered? There is an interesting and undeniable fascination with handwoven textiles among artists. A list of contemporary artists whose work intrinsically reflects interest in handwoven textiles would include: Carl Andre, Keith Sonnier, Jackie Windsor, Robert Kushner, Eva Hesse, Cecilia Vicuna, Fred Sandback, Tom Friedman, Charles LeDray, Ghada Amer, Sarah Sze, Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Janine Antoni, and Andrea Zittel. In the work of these contemporary artists, one feels that textiles and their respective processes have an almost political message, that they are used, in the end, to express an emotion that would be lost or silenced without them. At the very least, they bring awareness to a structure that becomes more and more invisible as it transfers the physicality of the hands to the cerebrality of the head. Perhaps, it is the evidence of the hand that makes the textile visible, or vice versa, for the two so often go together. It is the study of these concepts in the following sections and exhibits, that may lead to a new context and purpose for these masterworks of Indonesian handweaving and drawing, as well as to a new way of seeing them as they are all the more redolent and symbolic for coming from one time and place, and encompassing related sources, as they do. In this study, they may tell us what they are, or of what they are made for ultimately we will have to ask: What is in this piece of cloth?

PLUMAGE AND CUSTOM

When we see the deeply dyed blue on a textile from the island of Sumatra and its contrasting design in white ikat, we are seeing a dye, indigo, which stays on the surface, as in blue jeans whose color normally wears off. But in this case it is so deeply dyed it seems and acts permanent. The labor, born of intention, to do this somewhat magical procedure is a skill immediately recognizable to the inhabitant of Sumatra as the price someone has paid for designer jeans is to a teenager in America. This depth, which seems so precise in the dyers mind/culture, is accessible to us in the dimension of visual experience we give to art. It is truly eye-opening, and the grid of weaving at this point seems to hold the contemporary, something the weaver in his own culture may not apprehend.

How these cloths, then, have meaning for us is the direction in which we want our culture to go. One of the most outrageous tenets of modernism is not that civilization proceeds from the primitive, but that all of civilization is already found in the primitive; I see this in the use of African sculpture by Picasso, or in the uncivilized elements in the Deep South described by Faulkner. However, one interesting question is that given the significance modernism has attributed to textiles of non-industrialized societies to use an awkward phrase, what is our relationship to this material in today's post-modern world, so much formed in reaction to modernisms tenets? In addition, a world has grown up where we fall, faster and faster, into exclusive now significance, where pleasures, more and more, are only permissible through these tenets. More so, what is Indonesia to us now?

Our society has divided our resources so that we approach anything in different, specialized ways; this text, for



■ Ceremonial Textile, Pasemah, Sumatra, early 20th century. Handwoven plain weave cotton, 73 ¼ x 27 in. (186 x 69 cm). Blue and red with the brownish hues of natural undyed cotton are the dominant colors that compose the Indonesian palette. This tonal simplicity is clearly not a limitation: here the subtle modulation of line, color, and texture reveals the essence of the textile medium. Mary H. Kahlenberg
Luminosity controlled, carefully bounded, look at the introduction of double wefts to make this red. Always direct the care that went into making something like this. Light becomes dark, dark light— this tells it all as the light penetrates the blue but structures the red with its equivalent in line. Richard Tuttle



example, is not approached as an anthropologist, art historian, or textile engineer would, but as an artist would. This artist's interpretations will most likely be tolerated, but judged accordingly and patronized by the more formal approaches, all buttressed by one scientific/scholarly method or another. Yet, we are witnessing a weakening of certainty in science and in the grip of modernism. If this text has relevance it must come from not allowing art's stance to soften, but to use it to vitalize, through appreciation, the material under our consideration in our times.

We are experiencing a shift in values such that Indonesians do not value their own textiles (despite the exceptionally high evaluations their cultures could bestow on them) as much as we can. There is no perspective on this,

■ Celandi / Pant Leg, Kombring, south Sumatra, 18th century. Brocade in silk on a silk ground with appliquéd pieces of mica, 35 1/2 x 17 1/2 in. (91 x 44 cm). One can visualize the elegance of the original wearer crossing a rich red lacquered palace room by candlelight. – MK

Unapologetically blood red, order in no order, whose leg was fit inside this staggeringly sumptuous pant-leg? Yet not every technique is used, not every color is used. For some reason, A Thousand and One Nights, conjures. Light would have it, light would take it away — in the law of light. – RT



which both fascinates and perturbs me. In fact, these trends need the light of a new discipline lest in this absence, they obscure the particular reasons for which textiles primarily interest us here, their actual beauties, their existence in the bare world of today, something like the burr in the side of the horse to make him run, or like the irritation of a piece of sand which starts the pearl.

FOUR OR FIVE

A woven line does not stop and start somewhere. Lines must make their way according to thickness, lightness, proximate connectedness, everything except by line, itself. Lines display count, rhythm, images, process, intent, and

■ Kain Kepala Taman Arum / Headcloth, Cirebon, Java, late 19th century. Hand-drawn batik on machine-woven cotton, 43 x 43 in. (109 x 109 cm). The Taman Arum is the fragrant meditation garden that still exists at the Cirebon palace. This headcloth worn by a prominent Islamic member of the Cirebon court illustrates a royal design representing the Hindu abode of the gods as well as the Buddhist Nirvana—a true Indonesian layering. — MK

When you are in the hands of a master draftsman, power derived from speed in control—everything in order like a great race car driver—an expressivity leaps out not common in every effort you see. You are free to catch it or not, so you try everything to catch it. You can see the origin of batik, how the dyed and undyed are one. — RT



obedience to principles, like ethics, in life. All of the principles are brought to mind in the simple apprehension of textiles, new and old, but mostly if they are handmade. As in Peruvian pre-Columbian textiles where many hands did many operations, the collective establishment behind the weaving is poignant and strong, lifelike, establishing a field, from which we can look back toward life that we ourselves have made, representing all that we are and can be, something that absorbs all content as it reflects none. It is extraordinary we could

wear such a thing, for how exactly do we think of what we are

wearing but as some small portion of this whole? The machine textiles we mostly do wear are absent of the hand. In fact, technology has driven us to the point where we cannot have handmade textiles. Does this make us nostalgic for them? Does this set up some form of a compensation found in no less a place than our highest art forms made by our most gifted artists/priests, Josef and Anni Albers, Ad Reinhardt, or Agnes Martin, whose squares collectively exhibit culturally what is lost when line becomes form, so that we can finally see line, itself? Hence, the progress of our humanity gives credence and focus to our progress in art and technology, and vice versa? Why not? It is probably true?

An origin of the artist's employment of textiles can be found in 16th-century Venetian painting, which portrays spirit with oil paint on cloth, as in Giorgiones or Titians paintings of saints and divinities. In their works, the breath

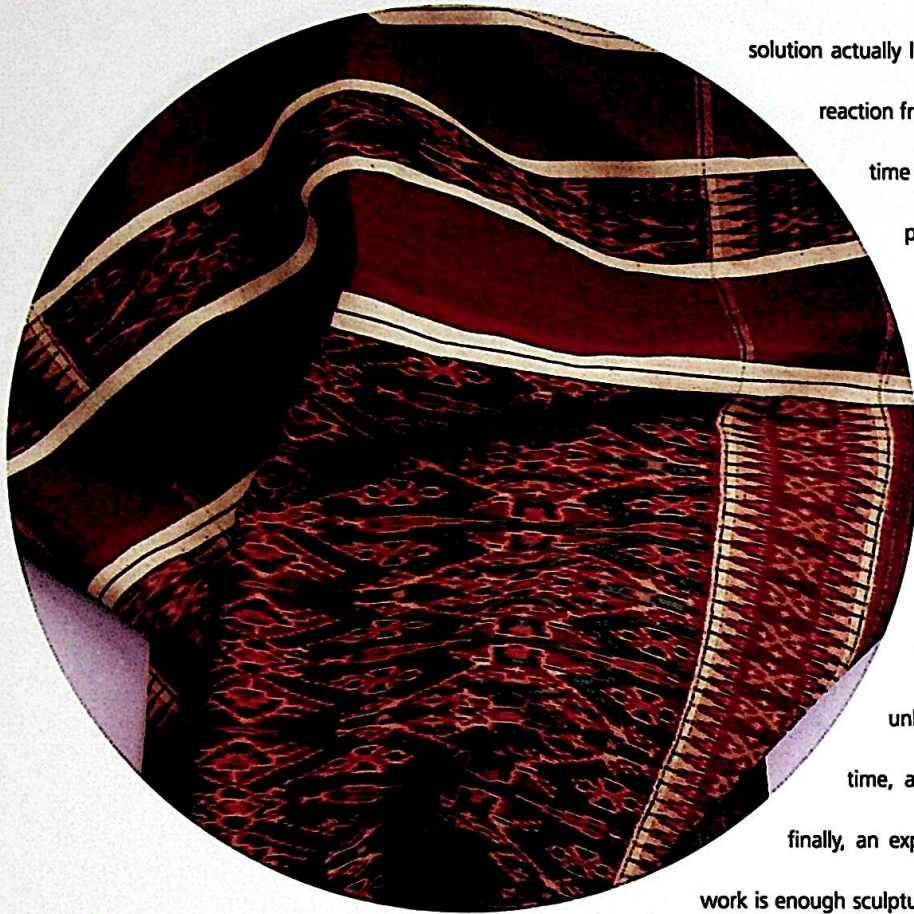
■ Padang Derman / Ritual Garment, South Bali, 19th century. Handwoven plain weave, cotton, bast fibers and metallic yarns, 64 x 29 in. (163 x 74 cm). Textiles used for Balinese rites of passage ceremonies connect the past to the present with a sense of timelessness. The sober red, blue and green plaid – an ancient Buddhist pattern – is defined by a very fine and shiny bast thread. The use of this pre-cotton fiber establishes the essential link with antiquity. – MK

Despite the apparent regularity of the weave, the charm this piece exudes comes from the underlying, handspun cotton. A wildness proceeds from that level, which rises to the new level where the rough, silver-wrapped wefts are laid down along the front end. Coming out of weaving per se, the sheer taste for this art form is a leap of faith we can feel though not be part of. It is a story also of the beauty in the return of things to former states, colors, advocacies. – RT



of life manifests itself in the physical weave of the cloth as seen through the transparent layers of oil paint. Thus this interlocking of spirit, paint, and weave has been evidenced ever since in the works of major figures like Cezanne and Pollock. The technical development of painting has paralleled the artist's ongoing efforts to portray the human spirit. In the case of Ad Reinhardt, paradoxically, textiles contribution of the over/under, under/over, however graphically rendered in his work, is understood conceptually, as it separates art from the object. In this, its solution, the work is also able to represent spirit as it defines the human being with unflinching accuracy, simultaneously challenging the presumed physical, the actual physical is there any need for arts permanence? Is the humanity suggested in this

■ Saput Pelangi / Torso Wrapper, Bali, 1900-1940. Handwoven tie-dye silk, 15 x 100 in. (38 x 254 cm). Rainbow is the literal meaning of pelangi, the Malay word for tie-dye. As in a rainbow—an Indonesian symbol of prophecy—a soft edge defines each radiant color. In this resemblance, the cloth carries the portent of significant events. – MK
Wild energy, sensual, adrift with no formula to control it; mysteriously the wild is brought to control. Yet the same mystery leads to no control. White lines between colors connect opposite worlds in one sinuosity. – RT



solution actually like a punishment for, or a constructive reaction from destructive inhumanity? What is the time and space of inhumanity? Or does the painting in the fact of its existence in the first place, show how time and space naturally lead back to humanity?

American sculpture has always followed painting, reinterpreting its space and time. A painter like Ad Reinhardt embodied principles of both time and space previously unknown. His paintings force you to take time, and in that time you take is art, and, finally, an expression of fundamental humanity. My

work is enough sculpture to have objectified this space (which was time), making it an example of reinterpretation in the third dimension, in its rearrangement from the square to the cube, the course of my work was set toward humanity. Just as in Ads case, where it took a lifetime, and taking time is obviously key here, my own work and involvement in textiles come to where the significance of the human, not the machine, is the issue. It is here we see if the textile is about the weaver or the machine. And it may be the artist has upheld the weaver's side, except with naturally wistful thinkers like Seurat (Someday a machine will make art.), Andy Warhol (I want to be a machine.), and Sol LeWitt (An idea is a machine for art.), all of whom may think making art is harder than being human.

If you were going to weave a text, wouldn't you start by finding the most beautiful fibers, twist them together in the most beautiful manner, dye them in the most beautiful colors, and so on until the fabric was reached? Where would the dark side fit in, the rotten, the strife of labor, the ugliness? Left behind, dismissed by the art whose light is its own subject.

■ Kamben Cepuk / Wrap-around Cloth, Nusa Penida or Bali, early 20th century. Handwoven cotton in the weft ikat technique, 93 x 30 in. (236 x 76 cm). Cepuk cloths are used as active protectors against dangerous forces. Their visible power, achieved by a resonance of color and line, gives them the strength to purify a place or a person. – MK
Imagine controlling what you know—that is the extreme charm of a piece of cloth, something evidently made in the dying and weaving, another side (though not seen), in evidence, too...this red body surrounds spirit. – RT