

# MARY ZICAFOOSE: MIDWAY



JEFFREY HAHN, PARADIGM CREATIVE MEDIA

It is said that there are certain substances on this planet that carry, store, and record memory. One is stone. One is bone. One is natural fiber. I don't know if our ancestors gave much thought to their cosmic and cultural legacy as they squinted by firelight with spindle and needle and backstrap loom. But as they worked, the electromagnetic vibration of the planet at that particular time and space, as well as their own vibration or frequency, were being absorbed and stored into the very fiber they manipulated. Textiles are like holograms: both are dimensionally coded sources of information. They transmit their mystery and magic, generation after generation.

If we could clearly see and clearly hear and were equally clear on subtle energetic levels, when shown an ancient Peruvian woven "cushma" (shirt) we would not only experience the world at that time, but the weaver herself. And, on some level, we do. At the very least, we listen to the language of textiles, through designs and symbols and their repetition, through texture, drape, and the function of a piece—and through the frequencies and juxtapositions of color. The making of color and the wooing of it onto my materials is critical to my process. I began experimenting with dyes on the day I began weaving, establishing the foundation for a career spent in the dye kitchen, alchemically tweaking earth elements to frequencies of subtlety and luminosity.

In Mongolia, there are more than 300 words for the color of horses. I have 300 names and dye recipes for the pigment that carries the transformative power of sunlight. Of all the colors in the rainbow, yellow



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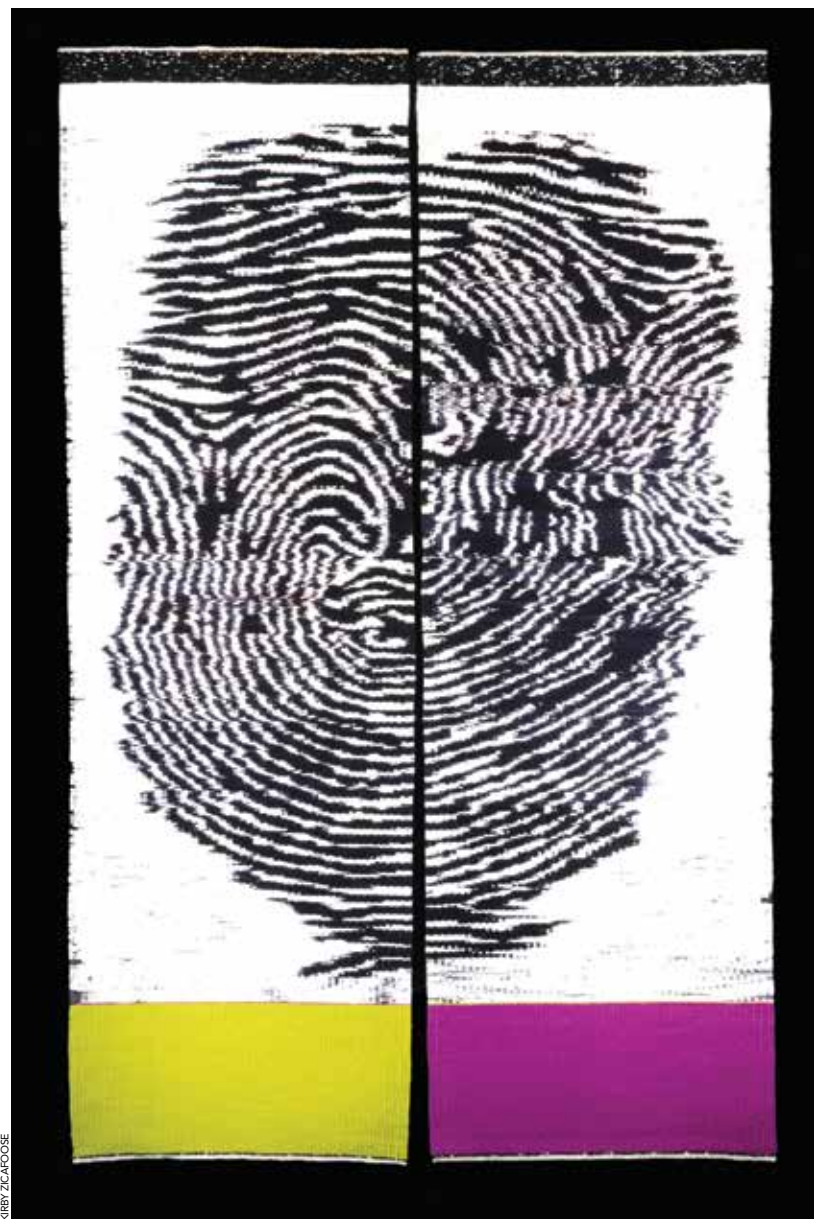
OPPOSITE PAGE: Mary at her Cranbrook loom, Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture studio, 2017.  
THIS PAGE TOP: **Mountain for the Buddha: Wine** (weft-faced ikat tapestry, diptych); 2014; ikat wrapped, dyed and woven wool on linen warp; 57 x 63 in.  
ABOVE: **Red Tapestry Wall** (installation), The Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center, University of Nebraska-Omaha; 2014; 55 x 8 in.

is the color frequency I understand the most. When weaving yellow, I am transported, transfixed, inspired, spoken to, and directed. The shelves in my studio are always overflowing with yellow. A single large woven piece of my work can contain more than forty distinct shades of dyed and blended yellow wools. Of the six large notebooks of my personal dye records, which contain over 1,000 dye recipes and formulas, one volume is completely devoted to recipes for making yellow. Names like Wildfire, Slash & Burn, Inca Yellow, Tornado Yellow, Eclipse, and The Central Sun. We know that Tibetan yellow came from the spice turmeric, which was earthy and cheap. Indian yellow was made from the dried urine of cows who had been fed mango leaves. But the most exquisite yellow of all, precious and luminescent, was derived from the crimson stigmas of the purple crocus. It is called Saffron. This is the year I will dye using Saffron.

The over-and-under manipulation of individual fibers into cloth is neither a heroic nor a precious activity. It is a simple, repetitive process which, when plied with intention, artistic vision, and inspired craftsmanship, becomes the agent for textile objects of legend. My relationship with cloth began simply, as a small child with a scrap of Indonesian ikat gifted from my aunt. I first sat behind a loom while working on an MFA in clay at the University of Nebraska. My experience was so direct that I left the clay program, bought a loom, and taught



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myself to weave. I have traveled extensively, studying the handwork of weavers in many cultures. The technique that sets my work apart and uniquely defines me, mid-career, mid-stream, mid-way, is my adaptation and interpretation of an ancient textile technique—ikat. Over three decades, I became a self-taught master of weft ikat, a process of complex textile patterning and image making that is the result of resist dyeing of many thousands of individual threads before weaving. Recognized as the most prestigious of textiles, ikat speaks of origin and identity like no other cloth.

I create tapestries, each an original, signed, and single edition, using a very complex ikat surface-design dye technique—stretching and collating each individual fiber, wrapping, dyeing, unwrapping, re-wrapping, and then over-dyeing to create layers of images and color. The ikat technique is highly important in my process not just because it allows me to create very painterly and complex woven patterns, but also because of what it symbolizes. The term ikat (derived from mengikat) means to “bind” or “tie” in the Malaysian language, and binding is precisely what I strive to investigate: the infinite, intricate, and repetitive ways through which cultures, rituals, and collective memories bind us together. I create textiles that aspire to do more than grace museums, command public spaces, and decorate homes. They are woven metaphors that strive to tie the contemporary, the symbolic, and the timeless together—coded to become a magical and lyrical form of cloth.

Like all artists, I have many stories to tell. I am as compelled to weave tapestries based on symbols of identity as I am to record the line where the earth meets the sky in the Nebraska landscape. *New Dreams, Ancient Texts, Blue Prints, Sun Signs, Grasslands,* and *Mountain for the Buddha* are the names of specific groups and collections of pieces. These are the titles of the stories I have told in an attempt to uphold my part of an old agreement. My work strives to represent a contract I made many years ago with a Peruvian weaver that I encountered on the edge of a high ruin in the Andes. “We’ve woven all the power out of our symbols,” he said in Spanish, after hours of drawing symbolic images for me with a stick in the sand. “It is time for my family to pass on our symbols and stories. Now it is your turn. Take this knowledge with you and weave it into the future.”



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OPPOSITE PAGE  
TOP: **History** (weft-faced ikat tapestry, diptych); Art Seen exhibition, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; 2015; wrapped, dyed, and woven wool, silk-bamboo on linen warp; 59 x 156 in.

BOTTOM: **Blueprint: Wine & Willow** (weft faced ikat tapestry, diptych); 2008; wrapped, dyed, and woven wool on linen warp; 48 x 76 in.; collection Nebraska Museum of Art

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ABOVE: Mary selecting colors, Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture studio, 2016.

Nebraska artist *Mary Zicafoose* has spent three decades behind loom and dyepot dedicated to the opulent practice of ikat. Co-director emeritus of the American Tapestry Alliance, and board chair of the Omaha Union for Contemporary Art, her greatest pleasures are derived from her work in textiles, advocating for the arts, and living on the Great Plains. [www.maryzicafoose.com](http://www.maryzicafoose.com)

The exact visual terms of that deal have to do with the purposeful evolution of archetypal symbols. I also take inspiration from modern abstractionists and draw upon their influence in my signature large, bold color fields. My blending of the archetypal and the innovative results in textiles that span centuries of artistic tradition, and situates them squarely within the contemporary visual lexicon. I am proud to be one of a handful of contemporary weft ikat makers in the world today. The evolution of my technique and voice has stimulated new directions not only in my own work, and certainly that of my many students, but in the field of contemporary textiles.

It is my belief that the activity of working with fiber, the processes of spinning, dyeing, wrapping, weaving, sewing, joining—the simple yet complex acts of making cloth—can trigger spiritual and cultural memory. It is my experience and my belief that inherent in the hum and whir of the wheel, and in the rhythmical bang, bang, banging of the beater, and in the silence and the singularity and focus of the fiber processes, comes a letting go and an expansion. It is my belief that over the ages, as women and men have stooped and bent over their handwork, their simple cloth, as well as the fine brocades of kings and queens, a greater collective emotional, energetic, and etheric fabric has been remembered and woven. Weaving has always been a portal for information, guidance, inspiration, and revelation—for meditation and renewal.

I do not suggest that weavers are prophets and that all those whose lives touch the fiber are visionaries. But one cannot discount that some vast and mighty empires have been dreamed and manifested over cloth and thread when the moon was placed just right in the heavens and humanity was in need of direction. One cannot discount what can happen when a culture sits behind wheel and loom remembering, intentioning, and giving birth in fabric. One cannot discount the power of cloth.