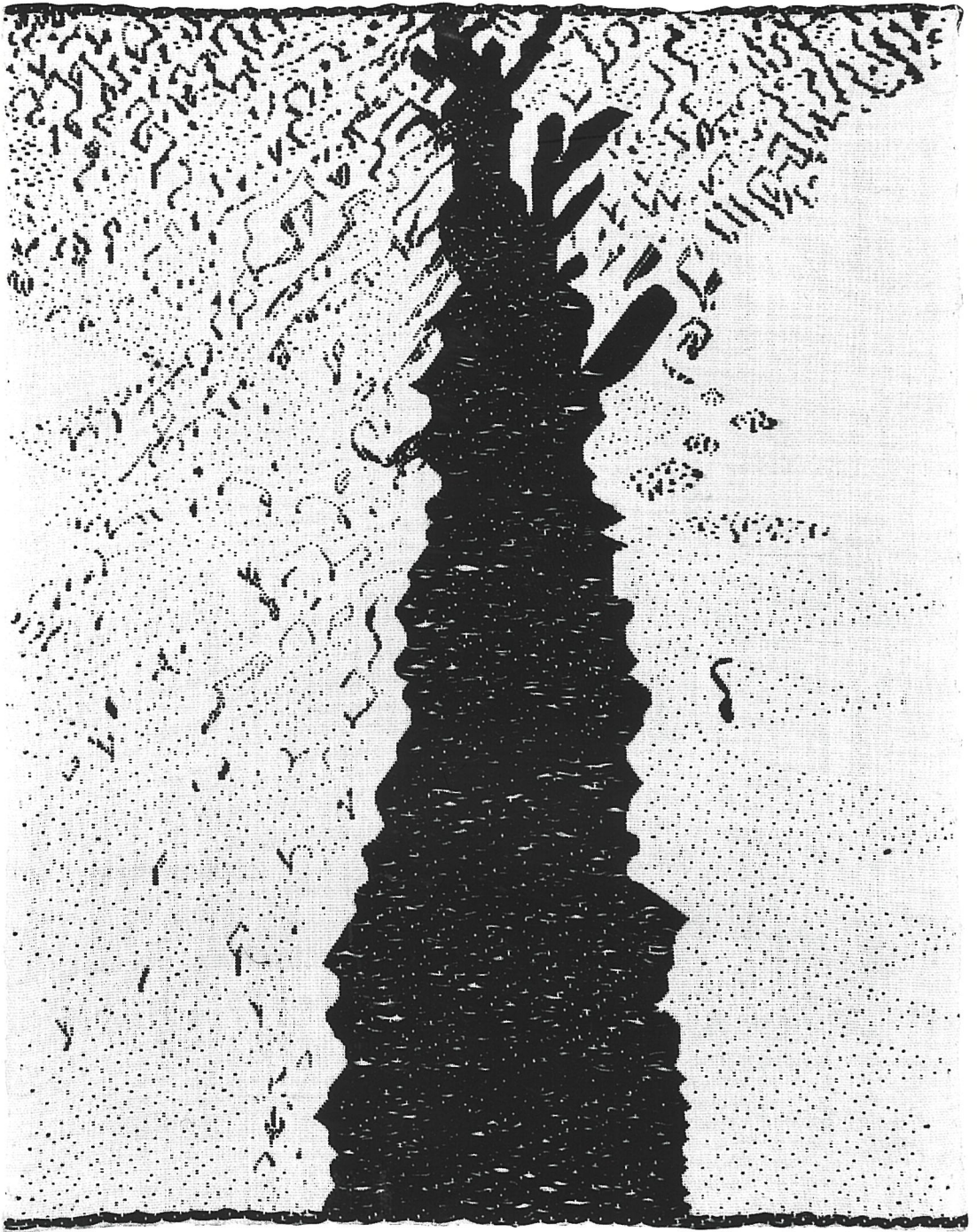




w e a v i n g o u t l o u d

S A N D R A B R O W N L E E



W O M A N 1994

Cotton sewing thread, supplementary weft pick-up, 18 x 23 cm
Collection: Anna and Bill Smukler

The Woven Imagination



B E G I N N I N G S

*What is the impulse that compels an artist to
bring the commonest of black and white threads into an intricate order?*

For millennia, handwoven textiles have provided a place for recording information, memory, and symbolic perception, and the means to communicate social, magical, and/or religious ideas and values.*¹ Especially important to the language and meaning of textiles has been the association between the act of weaving and the generative aspect of life. Since prehistoric times patterned cloths have served as a bridge between the weaver (traditionally female) and the Creatrix (the universal source of all life). One of the earliest known “messages” of creative veneration is the *kilim* pattern design of the birth-giving womb from Catal Huyuk c. 6400-5700 B.C. Through fields of imagery and symbols of fertility, nurturance, continuity, and regeneration, life-giving designs (for instance, the diamond-glyph, labyrinth motif, or the birth symbol) were imbued with sacred qualities.² In essence, primordial patterns laid out since ancient times functioned as an “alphabet of the metaphysical.”³ They may be viewed as “an endless incantation given visual form,”⁴ like a poem or prayer which gives sight and sound to the cosmos. In traditional cloth cultures such as India, Mexico, Indonesia, and Peru where there is a commitment to the transmission of shared, sacred ancestry, it is still possible to contact the wellsprings of woven symbology.



S Y M B O L S

*A true symbol (from the Greek verb meaning to “roll together, join, unify”)
always encloses two complementary poles; it is always ambivalent, ambiguous and indeed polyvalent...⁵*

The visual symbolic language – the condensation of widely shared and deeply felt information and experience into primal nodes of truth – is at once universal and particular, dynamic and radical. For a visual symbol to communicate subtle, hidden life and function with spiritual grandeur and fecundity, it must be allowed to pervade all levels of reality, from the mental layer through to the mythic. Lamentably, in contemporary Western culture’s unravelling of traditional narratives and tendency toward an ever-increasing, devitalizing fragmentation, few are in touch with the resonant, unifying power of the symbolic language. Vital symbols, once a treasure for constructing an understanding of our humanness and a means to further spiritual life, have been eroded by what communications critic Neil Postman calls “the great symbol drain” by technology: the trivialization of the symbolic language by advertising and entertainment enterprises whose sole interest in the visual is to further commerce.⁶ Public myths and images circulated daily in the media make difficult the maintenance of a holistic perception of the world and the

ability to establish relative priorities from the multitude of sensations that engulf us. Today we consume images, yet we do not know how to access their deeper source and meaning. The larger, more cosmic truths, and thus the grammar and syntax of a meta-language, have been ignored or overwhelmed by technology and “progress.” The opportunity for grasping the substance of our lives (a sense of rootedness and continuity) has faded as the pace of activity has increased.



A N A P E R S P E C T I V A L V I S T A

The exhibition *Weaving out loud* – Sandra Brownlee’s layering of history, myth, and fantasy – shows that one can pursue alternatives to the exclusive position given to technology by recognizing that there are sensitive layers of meaning which compose reality. For artist Brownlee, the delight in the ability to convey is based in a strong connection to tradition, and a desire to carry early pictorial conceptions forward alongside new elements from her visible and imaginal world. Brownlee’s works reveal that symbols, and the narratives from which they are gathered, are spontaneous centres of action which may draw on specific non-spatial depths and meaning. More than mental constructs, they serve as bridges between the seen and unseen. If one can see beyond the hold of technological, disembodied habits of thought, one becomes aware of the living, regenerative power of symbols and their relation to time, the past, the forgotten, the spatially invisible. That is, to the eminent, life-dispensing value of our age.

Patterned in black and white, Brownlee’s work demonstrates trust and conviction in her own relation to the world and the idea of creation as a never-completely-new act. She is nourished through the making of vital connections to history, and what emerges is a slow evocation of a world; something is carried forward to a new synthesis. She expresses and dramatizes an inherent respect for, and experience of, the living symbol and the personal quest for meaning. For her, the process of weaving allows for focus, settledness, and absorption. As with the concise, yet immense woven cosmologies of traditional handweavers, Brownlee gives qualitative form to otherwise blind energies. Like the throbbing of a pulse (remarkable and boundless; a silent, teeming activity) her works support an act of opening to a level of knowledge and experience that goes deeper than surface perception. Unlike the linear determinations of technological experience, her works generate a plenitude of time freedom: a tangible *durée*, a lengthening of time which is conceived of as a non-objective essence of being; a non-spatial reality. One experiences a tantalizing rupture in the conception of thought and life. Continuously, one enters the beginning and the whole at once.



M A K I N G C L O T H

Developed line by line using the technique of supplementary weft pick-up,⁷ Brownlee uses the inherent limitations of weaving to provide an essential, structured ground for the inscription of thought and feeling. She has entrusted her creative commitment to the straight line, creating a structure through interwoven linear elements. It is the intense in-and-out continuum which gives form and structure to each visual element.

The vitality of Brownlee's work is conveyed largely through compositions that evolve instinctively without much preparation or sketches. Proceeding in this manner is not an aimless wandering. It requires concentration, play, keen response (the child's method of expression) and a thorough technical understanding, for there is no changing, no altering, no opportunity for refinement. The potential for an image to become something at any time – the probability of what it will resolve into – is always open. At any moment during the weaving process, only a partial sense of what the whole can become is present. Yet, this also enables greater flexibility and spontaneity as the work develops, permitting an enthusiastic exploration of new forms and possible permutations.

Each woven cloth, with its markings drawn *alla prima*, reveals a pictorial world of ceaselessly mutating visual signs. The power of Brownlee's imagery, never clearly defined but endlessly absorbing, draws the viewer into a dense and delicate space where an intimate, personal, yet profound collective narrative is disclosed. The record is vivid and refined.



N O T A T I O N S O F B E I N G

Brownlee refers to her weavings as equivalent to the woven page. Messages... notations... records... fragmented glimpses....⁸ Like the notebooks she writes in constantly, her weavings seem to contain the written signature, the emotion of handwriting. The weavings are drawings in thread as well as musings; a form of thinking out loud. In some cases, the language that is formed surfaces as tiny murmurs, calibrations of movement, wanderings in time. They are an emergent language from a preformative substratum, rather than a composed text. Without finitude, these weavings do not set out to forge conclusions. The weavings are experienced as a felt, primordial, precognitive language. They are woven in the spirit of the first moment of discovering, and render a shape of thought in a world that is forever becoming.

Brownlee activates the peripheral edges of awareness, stirring one to make connections between facets of life. She channels her view of the world within a global energy field. And thus, an immersion in her intimate spaces enables one to dwell in an expanse, a state of mind. The weavings offer shifting views of far and near, multiple perspectives and numerous viewing planes in which images are often magnified and superimposed. One becomes aware of a participation in the world based on empathy and identification.



C R E A T I O N

Creativity is a visibly emerging impulse of origin which "is" in turn timeless, or more accurately, before or "above" time and timelessness. And creativity is something that "happens" to us, fully effects or fulfills itself in us.⁹

To follow the images that gather and crystallize within one requires both imagination and craft. For Brownlee, coming to life during the creation of her textiles necessitates weaving her heart

into them – her “story.” She must be receptive, open to the cloth becoming alive in every single intersection. To follow the development of her work is to be taken through an emerging narrative; a true co-creation. Each line shapes the character of vital experience, of the spontaneous activity of living forms. Zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and fabulous creatures appear, tumble, and dance. Historical references circulate in a wondrous, cumulative memory.

In her woven worlds, as in creation itself, Brownlee’s weavings are about how things take form out of the chaos; an energetic sea of dots congeals into meaningful semblances. In the *Creation Series* (1991) in particular, she evokes this sense of gathering, invention, and the awareness of possibilities. There will be subtle changes, repetition, and rhythm. Families of images build in unanticipated ways. They dissolve, resolve, and dissolve again. One sees continuous and immense variation: shapes, dots, and marks are there and gone. The activated field is spatially alive, organizing and reorganizing according to its own laws. One feels the pulsing relationship to creation itself. Origin luminesces in the present, disarranging, transforming, and liberating itself.¹⁰

Brownlee’s vision is not to be solely contained within the woven form. In fact, as with any act of poetic formation, it offers promise, inspiring mutual creation in others. The bookwork *GRRRHHHHH: a study of social patterns* (1986) by New York multi-disciplinary artist Warren Lehrer is an example of a rich, intense, and daring extension of Brownlee’s *Unusual Animals*, with chants and stories by Dennis Bernstein. Obviously the works’ vitality excited him and fueled his own imagination. In this bookwork, Brownlee’s woven images have not only been interpreted and digitally transformed using the computer, but have been given new life through pictorial and literary development and elaboration. This remarkably convincing meeting of ancient and contemporary technologies speaks to the genuine relevance of Brownlee’s vision, and further challenges (if that is necessary) the narrow perception of the weaver as a current-day Luddite. Lehrer has pushed and played the edges, nudged the bounds and given them wild power.



T H E W E A V E R O F I M A G E S

Weavers have been seen as the Great Women of Fate.¹¹ They serve the Creatrix who weaves the web of life and spins the thread of destiny. Brownlee’s works affirm and sustain the integrity of this mythic role, embracing its dual posture: she participates fully in the human dimension of her activity, and yet offers a sense of the wider meaning of this practice as it extends beyond the human self.

Like the mythic figure Arachne,¹² the celebrated weaver of images, Brownlee’s fingers are expert at making refined cloth that expresses virtuosity, imagination, and intelligence. Her works are the celebration and fluorescence of the experiences of a fully embodied individual in the process of weaving, thinking, telling – being a woman. Following the long tradition of textiles, hers are open notebooks recording woes and joys, hopes and visions.¹³ Yet, unlike her mythical prototype, she is not bound by excessive ambition, but respects the “balance between gods and humans.” *As a spider is busy with her web as of old,*¹⁴ Brownlee’s myriad threads connect

to the larger scheme of things. The human act is positioned in relation to its primordial source, where the perpetual activity of weaving is an impulse of creation embracing intricate patterns, and the expansiveness of the web of life. Brownlee's cloths demonstrate humanity and optimism, restraint and humility. And, like any true symbolic offering, they deeply engage the intellect and heart. They "seize us and reveal us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered."¹⁵

Anne West

Guest Curator

Endnotes

- * The idea of the imagination, as used in this essay, refers to two aspects of mind: the corporeal and the fantastic. "Corporeal" embraces the notion of imagination as a participation in the truth of the world; a somatic and spiritual cognizance of the core determination. "Fantastic" considers a repertory of potentialities; what is hypothetical, but does not actually exist. I am grateful to the writings of Italo Calvino for this understanding of the imagination. See *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 81-99.
- 1 The sources for the thoughts expressed in this section are: Buffie Johnson and Tracy Boyd, "The Eternal Weaver," *Heresies* 2:1, Spring 1978; Max Allen, *The Birth Symbol in Traditional Women's Art from Eurasia and the Western Pacific* (Toronto: The Museum for Textiles, 1981); Ferdinand Anton, *Ancient Peruvian Textiles* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987); Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Susan Valadez, "Patterns of 'Completion' in Huichol Life and Art," *Uncoiling the Snake: Ancient Patterns in Contemporary Women's Lives*, edited by Vicki Noble (Harper San Francisco, 1993), pp. 145-154; Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994).
 - 2 "Sacred qualities associated with cloth express sexuality and they also transmit notions of biological and social reproductive capabilities, all attributes associated with women." See *Cloth and Human Experience*, edited by Annette B. Weiner & Jane Schneider (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 25.
 - 3 Gimbutas, p. 1.
 - 4 From insights of art historian, Douglas Frazer on "primitive art." Quoted in Allen, *The Birth Symbol*, p. 8.
 - 5 Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. by Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984), p. 221.
 - 6 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 164-180.
 - 7 The supplementary weft skips over and under varying-sized groups of warp threads, creating the design row by row.
 - 8 Conversation with the artist, December 1993. See, in particular, *1234 Series #1* (1980).
 - 9 Gebser, p. 313.
 - 10 Gebser, p. 314.
 - 11 Allen, p. 10; Wayland Barber, pp. 238-256.
 - 12 Many ancient myths revolve around textiles. I have referred to the well-known myth "Arachne's Tapestry", based on a retelling of the Greek myth Pallas Athenae and Arachne by Ovid (42 BC-AD 17). *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (Book 6), trans. by Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin Books, 1955). In this famous story Athena, the patron goddess of weaving, is challenged to a contest by the self-confident young weaver Arachne. Unaware of her mortal limits, Arachne's arrogance and lack of wisdom eventually cause her downfall. Under the wrath of this divine being, she is condemned to become the Spider and weave webs forever.
 - 13 Wayland Barber, p. 256.
 - 14 Innes, p. 138.
 - 15 Annie Dillard, "Write Till You Drop," *New York Times Book Review*, May 28, 1989, pp. 1, 23.



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