

Going with the Flow:
The Lives and Work of Three Contemporary Canadian Fibre Artists

Judith Penney Burton

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ABSTRACT

**Going with the Flow:
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Judith Penney Burton

This thesis recounts the stories and experiences of three contemporary Canadian fibre artists who have emerged onto the artistic scene within the past decade. It is my intent to examine the possible internal and external motivational factors involved in their choice of career path, and their choice of fibre as a medium. In-depth interviews examined the early lives of these women from their own perspectives, delving into their family and cultural influences as well as their educational experiences. Fibre artists are often involved in techniques and processes that are repetitive and extremely time consuming. The relationship between the body and the mind that occurs while engaged in this type of intensive art practice will be explored, such as: notions of flow; losing track of time; peak experiences; meditative moments; body kinaesthetic knowledge; tacit knowing; and the body memories often involved in creating with textile materials and processes. Potential links between spirituality and creative practice will be explored. Time will be considered from many angles, including: each woman's perspective on how time relates to their individual practice; how they manage time around completing such labor intensive work; and the time that it takes to become a successful fibre artist in the current artistic climate. Each artist's identification with feminism and the possible subversive nature of textiles as a medium will be explored. As well as looking at issues related to the artist's personal, public and private space, the role of place in their current art work will also be addressed.

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Chapter One - Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

This thesis recounts the stories and experiences of three contemporary Canadian fibre artists who have emerged onto the artistic scene within the past decade. It is my intent to examine the relationship between the mind and the body that these women experience while creating their work, as well as the possible internal and external motivational factors involved in their choice of career path, and their choice of fibre as a medium. The ideas behind this research stem directly from my past experiences as an artist who works in textile techniques and materials, and from my experiences in studying textiles at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, as well as fibres and art and craft history at Concordia University.

Using in-depth interviews as a qualitative research method, I interviewed three women who have begun to reach prominence in the North American fibre art milieu. These women will be briefly introduced in Chapter Two of my thesis. This chapter will examine the early lives of these women from their own perspectives, delving into possible links that may exist between their educational experiences and their choice in career path.

As the fibre artists that I have interviewed have all been trained in both fine art and craft milieus, I feel no need to go into the art/craft debate here, as it has been tackled more than adequately elsewhere.¹ These artists sit on the fence to some extent with their work, using craft or medium based techniques to complete conceptually based projects. I was interested in their self-definitions as artists, fibre artists, or craftspeople and this will be discussed in Chapter Two of my thesis as well. This chapter will also look at their experiences in higher education, and how that shaped their current creative practices. The role of mentors in their training and career will be considered, as well as any professional development that they have received post-schooling. These artists are all somewhat subversive in their practices in that they are, for the most part, not interested in the push towards digital technology that is a current focus in many fibre programs in North America, therefore, I am interested in knowing the reasons behind their decisions to create with traditional textile techniques.² Finally, an analysis of one work of art from each of the women I have interviewed will discuss the techniques used to make the work as well as how each piece relates to their educational history and training.

Chapter Three of this thesis will delve into personal choice of medium, as well as the physical, emotional and spiritual benefits and repercussions involved in being a fibre

¹ For instance, see Rob Barnard, "Paradise Lost? American Crafts' Pursuit of the Avant-Garde" in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen [Lanham, Md: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 56-65; Sally J. Markowitz, "The Distinction between Art and Craft," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 28, no. 1 [Spring 1994]: 55-70; Larry Shiner, "Beyond Art and Craft?" in *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*[Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 269-301; John Perrault, "Crafts Is Art: Tampering With Power" in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen [Lanham, Md: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 68-85.

² For example, a symposium took place at the Montreal Center for Contemporary Textiles on October 15, 2006 focusing on the future of digital technologies and textile education in Canada, the US and Australia, as well as on technical advances in the field.

artist. One way that craftspeople are classified is through their choice of medium. I was interested in investigating the specific reasons that these women chose fibre art and materials for their creative expression, therefore, I queried these women to discover if there were certain qualities that drew them to fibres as a medium. Craftspeople in general and fibre artists in particular are often involved in techniques and processes that are repetitive and extremely time consuming. As my personal studio practice tends to focus on the use of accumulative and laborious craft and textile techniques, I have become interested in the relationship between the body and the mind that occurs while engaged in this type of intensive art practice. Notions of flow, losing track of time, peak experiences and meditative moments experienced will be investigated in Chapter 3 of my thesis, as well as the concepts of body kinaesthetic knowledge and tacit knowing, and the body memories often involved in creating with textile materials and processes. Potential links between spirituality and creative practice will be explored as well. Family and cultural influences from their early lives will be considered in terms of the role that they may have played in their ultimate decision to work in fibre as a medium. One work from each artist will be analyzed with regards to social, cultural and material concerns.

In the final chapter of my thesis I will be employing a feminist perspective to examine the artist's viewpoints on time, as well as notions of public space and private space. Time will be considered from many angles, including: notions of time in everyday life; each woman's perspective on how time relates to their individual practice, how they manage time around completing such labour intensive work, and the time that it takes to become a successful fibre artist in the current artistic climate. Each artist's identification with

feminism will be explored, along with their ideas around the possible subversive nature of textiles and fibre as a medium. As well as looking at issues related to the artist's personal, public and private space, the role of place in their current art work will also be addressed. Synchronicity will be investigated with regards to its relationship to each artist's career path. Time and space will inform the analysis of an artwork from each artist, incorporating many of the ideas from this chapter, and cohesively drawing it to a close.

I have considered many methodological approaches and methods for use in this thesis. My investigations have revealed some confusion around terminology in the area of research interviews in general, and what is defined as an oral history interview in particular. Shulamit Reinharz, a professor in Sociology at Brandeis University states "I found the following terms used interchangeably with "oral history": case studies, in-depth life history interviews, biographical interviews, life histories, and personal narratives."³ As a historian whose academic specialty is oral history, Valerie Yow distinguishes oral history from a focused interview, stating "the recorded in-depth interview, or oral history, is a specific research method within the general designation of qualitative methodology and is close to the basic principle of grounded theory."⁴ I have known from the start that I wished to do qualitative research in order to study the lives of women fibre artists using some sort of in-depth interview technique. The in-depth

³ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 129. Reinharz is the Founder of the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University. Her academic profile available at: <http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/sociology/reinharz.html> [accessed August 2, 2007].

⁴ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. [Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005], 8. Personal profile available at: <http://www.valeriyow.com/About.htm> [accessed August 2, 2007].

interviews that I conducted could be considered short life history interviews, case studies, or as partially focused interviews. The interviewees did go through their artistic history from the beginning, and describe their family as well as their cultural and educational history. Two education professors who specialize in qualitative research methodology, Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman explain that “life history methodology emphasizes the value of a persons own story and provides pieces for a ‘mosaic’ or total picture of a concept” and suggest that “life histories are helpful in defining problems and in studying aspects of certain professions. Their value goes beyond the usefulness of providing specific information about events and customs of the past by showing how the individual interacts with the culture.”⁵ My goal for the interviews I have conducted is to provide a social and cultural history of each individual, as well to detail their educational training and their idea of vocation. In this sense, then, I have conducted life history interviews; however, in my estimation, life history and oral history interviews ought to involve multiple interviews, and likely should not be completed in less than three hours. Therefore, I classify the interviews as in-depth interviews that are closely related to oral history and life history reviews.

As a woman studying women, I am using a feminist perspective from which to interpret the findings in this research. Sherna Berger Gluck, the program director of the Oral History program at California State University, Long Beach, writes that:

⁵ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1995], 88. Catherine Marshall’s academic profile available at: http://soe.unc.edu/fac_research/profile/marshall.php [accessed August 2, 2007]. Gretchen B. Rossman’s academic profile available at: <http://www.umass.edu/education/departments/epra/profiles.htm> [accessed August 2, 2007].

Women's oral history is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist. It is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women's experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity that has been denied us in traditional historical accounts.⁶

Although huge strides have been made in the amount of information and research available highlighting women's life experiences in recent years, in my opinion, there remain gender imbalances, especially in case of documenting the lives of women artists and craftspeople.⁷

Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith is known to be a pioneer in the area of "women's standpoint theory." Smith posits "the standpoint of women situates the inquirer in the site of her bodily existence and in the local actualities of her working world" therefore, we are looking to the women themselves for their experiences of their worlds, and she continues that "from this standpoint, we know the everyday world through the particularities of our local practices and activities, in the actual places of our work and the actual time it takes. In making the everyday world problematic we also problematize the everyday localized practices of the objectified forms of knowledge organizing our

⁶ Sherna Berger Gluck, "What's So Special about Women?" in *Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* eds. Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart and Karen Weathermon [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002], 5. Academic profile available at: <http://www.csulb.edu/colleges/cla/departments/history/programs/oral/oral03.html> [accessed August 2, 2007].

⁷In the Smithsonian Archives of American Art oral history interviews, a conservative estimate of the number of men to the number of women interviewed is 70 to 30. The Nanette L. Laitman Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America was a little bit more gender balanced, as they interviewed 61 men and 39 women. http://www.aaa.si.edu/news/index.cfm/fuseaction/Content.ViewNewsItem/newsitem_id/7 [accessed August 2, 2007].

everyday worlds.”⁸ I will be examining these women’s viewpoints from this everyday perspective with regards to their working worlds, but also in relation to their family histories, and cultural identities. In a sense, it could be said that women’s standpoint methodology is somewhat similar to phenomenology. Kathleen deMarrais is an educational psychologist at the University of Georgia. In discussing the study of phenomenology, she claims a researcher will be discovering “the essence or structure of the experience through an interpretation of the rich, textual data provided by the participants describing the particular experience being studied.”⁹ Unlike the open-ended yet somewhat narrowly defined questions of phenomenology, however, the interviews I conducted were freer in form in that a wider scope of questions were asked which allowed many experiences to be relayed, and the interviewees more choice in their responses from their own standpoints.

I realize that the end result of this research must be considered in the context from which it emerges. As a researcher, I have been exclusively involved in its design: the questions to be asked; the people that I interview; and the direction that the interviews ultimately take. Therefore, I have had heavy influence on the research and the end result before I even begin. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, and Denise Leckenby, two sociologists who specialize in qualitative methodology, consider the dynamics of power involved in feminist research, stating “in much of feminist research, researcher positionality and

⁸ Dorothy E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990], 28.

⁹ Kathleen deMarrais “Qualitative Interview Studies: Learning through Experience” in *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Sciences*, eds. Kathleen deMarrais and Stephen D. Lapan [Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2004], 56. Curriculum Vitae available at: <http://www.coe.uga.edu/leap/faculty/vitae/demarrais.pdf> [accessed August 2, 2007].

power are deconstructed either implicitly during the research process, or explicitly in the writing of the researcher.”¹⁰ Therefore, I feel that I need to state my own position and my agenda behind the research.

The artists I have chosen to interview were selected for several reasons. First, they are all involved in artistic practices which involve repetitive and labour intensive textile techniques. I also engage in this type of artistic production in my own studio practice, however, collectively, we belong to only one stream of fibre art. Other streams of fibre art include: installation art and performance, new media, digital technologies and interdisciplinary practices, amongst others. I have come to believe that in my case, part of the reason for engaging in labour intensive practices is that I am often able to reach some kind of meditative state through making; as such, I obtain both physical and mental benefits from this practice, and I was interested in knowing whether this was the case for other artists engaged in similar forms of practice, whether they also received positive reinforcement of some kind in making their work. Secondly, like me, despite having attended universities that stressed the conceptual approach to art making over materially-based practices, all three of these artists were using textile materials and techniques nearly exclusively in their work, yet still doing conceptually-based work. Using these manual processes in which the art works are constructed in a time consuming and accumulative manner makes these artists’ practices somewhat subversive in nature in

¹⁰ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Denise Leckenby, “How Feminists Practice Social Research,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Michelle L. Yaiser [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], 218. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber’s academic profile is available at: <http://www2.bc.edu/~hesse/> [accessed on August 2, 2007]. Denise Leckenby was a PhD student at Boston College who collaborated on several major academic projects with Hesse-Biber.

comparison to their colleagues and peers involved in utilizing advanced digital technologies or new media, or other streams of fibre art in their work.

The insider stance provided by my own experiences as a fibre artist has, in my opinion, allowed for the development of a richer set of interview questions; however, I also realize that this position may limit my perspective in other ways. All of the questions I have asked the interviewees relate back to the primary question of choice of medium and career in one manner or another, which will be elaborated upon as the responses are revealed. I used a semi-structured interview guide, but there was freedom to discuss issues and ideas that were of importance to each artist. At times, I asked questions related to each specific artist and their life experiences as well. As previously stated, the artists that I have interviewed were primarily chosen due to the techniques that they used and the fact that they were emerging artists, but also by their prominence in their field as well due to both access and opportunity, in terms of being able to arrange an interview with them.

In this case, all three of the artists are white, North American, upper-middle class women, between the ages of thirty and thirty three, who have completed some university education in textiles or fibres programs, in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. Aside from being in my mid-forties, I am very similar to the women that I have interviewed, being a white, upper-middle class artist myself, and having had university training in fibres and textiles, however my artistic career is not as advanced as these women. I had previously met two of the artists as I was a student at the same universities that they attended,

however I did not know them well. I knew the work of the third artist, and felt that she would be ideal for the research I wished to undertake. In this sense, there is not a huge power differential involved in the interviewer/interviewee relationship with regards to the interview itself; in fact they are all more accomplished and successful as artists than I am, so perhaps, I was “researching up.”¹¹

The in-depth interviews with two of the artists were conducted in their homes, and lasted between two and a quarter and two and a half hours, followed or preceded by viewing images of their artistic career together. These interviews were tape/digitally recorded, and then transcribed word for word into transcripts, which composed the primary research materials for this thesis. The third artist had been traveling in Australia, but expressed great interest in being involved in this project. Therefore, we conducted the in-depth interview by email, and she filled out the questions as she was able, sending them to me a few at a time. We were prepared to do a telephone interview if necessary, but her responses were carefully considered and easy to understand, so I did not feel there was a need to do so. All of the artists also sent me images of their work, their CVs and other promotional materials.

Due to the fact that this research is interdisciplinary and somewhat experimental in nature, there are few studies which directly relate to the topics in question. Thus, throughout this rest of this introduction, the ideas behind the questions I have asked the

¹¹ As quoted in *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*, by Leslie Rebecca Bloom, p. 37. “Researching up is defined as conducting research in an elite setting with respondents who have more power and status than the researcher (Nader, 1969)” Laura .Nader, “Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed., Dell Hynes [New York: Pantheon Books, 1969], 284-311.

artists will be introduced, and the literature related to the diverse fields of art history, craft history, psychology, leisure studies, education, sociology, women's studies and oral history will be presented as appropriate, in order to ground and support the primary research that follows in the next several chapters.

Literature Review

In order to research contemporary textile or fibre art, it is necessary to look to craft history, as the former is often seen to be a component of the latter. Following this, I will examine resources that are available in the area of oral history and fibre art. Canadian craft history is a relatively new field. Therefore, the resources available in regards to both historical and contemporary craft in Canada are few. Historical research is necessary to consider as a precedent when examining contemporary craft and fibre art, and as a result, I have studied most of the literature available. Although this research is somewhat secondary material to this thesis, it has grounded this study. Therefore this literature review will focus upon contemporary resources in the field that have been of benefit.

Canadian craft historian Sandra Alfoldy has completed both an MA thesis as well as a PhD dissertation that deal directly with contemporary Canadian craft. Her MA thesis, "Theory and Craft: A Case Study of the Kootenay Christmas Faire," completed in 1997, attempts to tie craft to contemporary theory and examines the works of Janet Wolff, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Terry Eagleton, and Clement Greenberg, amongst

others. This thesis is of great importance to Canadian craft, as Alfoldy writes “it is my hope that through this thesis – with its incorporation of the methods of social theory, consumption and materialist feminism, as well as its re-examination of modernism in relation to craft – I have demonstrated that craft can and must work with contemporary theory in order to take an active role in its future directions.”¹² Contemporary craft theory and discourse are still in their infancy, and Alfoldy has helped to bring forth possible avenues to look to in its future growth.

In her 2001 PhD dissertation, Alfoldy looks specifically at the impact of the U.S. on Canadian professional craft from 1964-1975. She highlights the influence of Aileen Osborn Webb, the founder of the American Craft Council, as well as examining key written resources, and conferences and exhibitions held during this time. Alfoldy’s dissertation is informed by archival research and provides a comprehensive and critical view of Canadian craft and its associations and organizations during this time period. In her epilogue, which examines what has happened in Canadian craft since 1974, she traces the decline of the Canadian Crafts Council. Alfoldy also discusses the use of the internet in the marketing and promotion of Canadian craft, and cautions “the excitement over the possibilities of new markets and audiences generated by cyberspace sound international in scale, but as the internet is increasingly critiqued along social, cultural, political and economic lines, it becomes clear that virtual reality technologies are mediated spaces,

¹² Sandra Alfoldy, “Theory and Craft: A Case Study of the Kootenay Christmas Faire” [master’s thesis, Concordia University, 1997], 95. Press profile on Alfoldy is available at: <http://mqup.mcgill.ca/book.php?bookid=1779> [accessed on August 7, 2007].

operating largely within boundaries prescribed by western culture.”¹³ This is an issue of import in this increasingly digital age, and has a multitude of implications for those making and marketing craft and textile works. This thesis was also beneficial in describing the close relations between the US and Canada in terms of craft in general, and these relationships certainly still have many effects on the world of contemporary fibre art as well.

Alfoldy’s PhD dissertation led to her book *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada* published in 2005. She stresses that craft need not adopt the same theoretical stances as fine art, but should branch out to consider alliances with other disciplines. Proposing that “interdisciplinarity affords craft the prospect of slippage, the chance to explore opportunities for itself within a range of disciplines without entirely abandoning its own disciplinary rules,”¹⁴ Alfoldy goes on to suggest architecture, design and industry as potential collaborators in craft’s survival.

Recent scholarship has provided different perspectives on craft emerging from varied disciplines. Jen Anisef’s 2004 MA thesis in Communication Studies, completed at Concordia University, examines the politics of craft culture. Looking closely at the DIY (Do It Yourself) movement, as well as several of the many international online discussion sites related to crafters, she investigates the use of craft as a form of political resistance in

¹³ Sandra Alfoldy, “An Intricate Web (b): American Influences on Professional Craft in Canada 1964 – 1974.” [PhD diss., Concordia University, 2001], 260.

¹⁴ Sandra Alfoldy, *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada*, [Montreal: McGill – Queen’s University Press, 2005], 218.

young adults.¹⁵ Marie Louise Danese, in her MA thesis in Art Education, at Concordia University in 2006, interviewed four women in regards to their participation in craft activities, and the personal meaning that this provides for them.¹⁶ Both of these theses examine craft from more of a leisure time perspective, as opposed to those involved in professional craft; however, I feel that both the idea of craft as political resistance and subversive tool and craft as a meaningful venture are valid topics of study for both populations, and as such they inform this thesis.

Cinzia Colella's 2005 MA Art History thesis, completed at Concordia University, examines the work of three contemporary Canadian glass artists who are straddling the fields of both art and craft. Colella states that "by working within a liminal space in which there is an absence of rigid limitation, the discourse surrounding the work of these three artists is enriched by the opportunity to discuss it outside the framework of strictly defined fields."¹⁷ This idea of a space being created in between the disciplines of art and craft is also of value for the women that I am studying.

An art education MA thesis from Concordia University which examines the early years of three well known women artists is also noteworthy. Emily Griffith interviewed Miriam Schapiro, Amalia Mess Bains and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith in 2002, and several major themes emerged which are relevant to the research I am doing. She concluded that all of the artists viewed themselves as artists from an early age; these artists all

¹⁵ Jen Anisef, "The Politics of Contemporary Craft Culture" (master's thesis, Concordia University, 2004).

¹⁶ Marie Louise Danese, "Interviews With Four Contemporary Women Craft Makers About the Personal Meaning of Craft Making" (master's thesis, Concordia University, 2006).

¹⁷ Cinzia Colella, "A New Space in Canadian Art: Liminality in the Work of Three Glass Artists – Kevin Lockau, Susan Edgerley and Brad Copping" (master's thesis, Concordia University, 2005), 82.

established their own networks in order to survive the art world; and all three women found mentors that assisted and influenced their careers.¹⁸ Of the three artists studied, only Miriam Schapiro is a fibre artist, however these themes translate easily and are present as questions in the interviews that I have conducted as well.

There have been conferences and symposiums on contemporary craft in Canada in recent years which have presented the ideas and research of the leading craft writers, historians, curators, critics, and practitioners, resulting in the publication of several of the main academic resources in the field of craft history. "Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing" was published from the symposium's proceedings, held in March of 1999 at the Harbourfront Center in Toronto. It includes writings from the top scholars in the area of international craft today, including Gary Griffin, who writes on materiality and craft, and Janet Koplos, who critically examines crafts criticism. Similarly, "Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft" was published in 1994. The symposium was held in October 1993 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and was sponsored by the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft. Writers included Sandra Flood, Carol Mayer, Paul Matthieu and Stephen Inglis amongst others. These monographs have had a hand in furthering discussion on craft history, craft education and craft theory and writing. Although many strides have been made in recent years, the field of Canadian craft history is still in its infancy, and could benefit further from academic contributions from scholars, craft professionals and teachers in the field. A new international academic journal will be launched in Canada this summer which will

¹⁸ Emily Griffith, "Three Women's Formative Experiences in Art: Amalia Mesa-Bains, Miriam Schapiro and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith" [master's thesis, Concordia University, 2002], 127.

provide a forum for critical commentary and/or research on contemporary and historical craft.¹⁹

In terms of documenting the history of studio craft in Canada, progress is slow. However some strides have been made including *A Fine Line: Studio Crafts in Ontario from 1930 to the Present*, (1998) by Gail Crawford, a Canadian cultural historian. This book briefly traces the studio movement and its history in Ontario, and provides detailed profiles of the “Movers and Shakers” in Ontario Craft.²⁰ In *Ornament and Object: Canadian Jewellery and Metal Art 1946-1996*, Anne Barros outlines the studio craft movement in jewellery and hollow ware in Canada, interpreting the changing jewellery scene, and placing Canadian jewellers and their work in a historical context.²¹ Gail Crawford has recently completed a book about the studio craft in Canadian ceramics and I feel it is imperative that similar contributions about the fibre, wood and glass studio craft movements in Canada are written in the near future.²²

Craft and fibre artists and their work are often discussed by craft historians, critics, curators and connoisseurs, but aside from infrequent interviews in monographs and craft journals, their own voices are rarely heard. This issue is being addressed by the practice of conducting oral history interviews of craftspeople and fibre artists in the United States

¹⁹ The first issue of *Cahiers métiers d'art * Craft Journal* will be published in late summer 2007, and will provide a welcomed opportunity for academics and practitioners in the field of craft world wide to share information. The journal's website is available at: <http://www.craftjournal.ca/en/home>, [accessed August 7, 2007].

²⁰ Gail Crawford, *A Fine Line: Studio Crafts in Ontario from 1930 to the Present* [Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998].

²¹ Anne Barros, *Ornament and Object: Canadian Jewelry and Metal Art, 1946-1996* [Toronto: Boston Mills Press, 1997]. Barros is a practicing jeweler and jewelry historian.

²² Gail Crawford, *Studio Ceramics in Canada 1920 – 2005* [Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane Editions, 2005].

and in the United Kingdom. In Canada, however, there have been few steps taken to mine this rich and valuable resource or to develop this necessary and pertinent primary material. Although I am conducting in-depth interviews that are similar in form to oral histories or life histories yet are shorter and somewhat more directed, I have been influenced greatly by the work of other scholars in the field. Many of the questions posed to the artists I interviewed were originally drawn from a number of these diverse sources, from interviews of other artists or craftspeople found in print, or accessible online, and then were modified to suit the scope of my research project. I found interviews of well known American fibre artists in online oral history databases such as the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) website in Berkeley, California²³ as well as at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute through the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.²⁴

In print, several books I found outlined projects that studied the lives of craftspeople. *The Craftsperson Speaks: Artists in Varied Media Discuss Their Crafts* by Joan Jeffri examined the lives of contemporary American craftspeople.²⁵ Working with the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University, Jeffri sent questionnaires to 4000 craftspeople, and 33% of them responded. Personal narrative interviews were

²³ Regional Oral History Office is part of the University of California Berkeley, and the Bancroft Library. They have conducted various oral history interviews with various leaders in the arts in California. Lillian Elliott and Kay Sekimachi were the fibre artists whose transcripts I examined online through <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/about.html> [accessed on June 18, 2007].

²⁴ The Laitman Documentation Project was the result of a five year grant given to conduct oral history interviews with 100 leaders in craft and the decorative arts in America. These included artists working in glass, wood, metal, clay and fibres. A number of the interviews are still in progress. This information was available through http://www.aaa.si.edu/news/index.cfm/fuseaction/Content.ViewNewsItem/newsitem_id/7 [accessed June 18, 2007].

²⁵ Joan Jeffri, *The Craftsperson Speaks: Artists in Varied Media Discuss Their Crafts* [New York: Greenwood Press, 1992]. Her academic profile is available at: <http://www.tc.edu/faculty/index.htm?facid=jj64> [accessed August 6, 2007].

then conducted with 50 key players in the studio craft movement in the United States, but the focus was far more vocational in nature, interested for the most part in the details of their training and their professional career. The research was general in nature and not media specific.

Another book by Elliot G. Mishler, entitled *Storylines: Craftartists' Narratives of Identity* takes a totally different approach.²⁶ Mishler is a prominent professor in Social Psychology at Harvard Medical School, and his open-ended in-depth interviews with a handful of craftartists focused on their patterns of adult identity formation, as well as taking a socio-linguistic approach to the data.

In “The Potential for Oral History and Life Story Research on the Crafts Movement” Paul Thompson discusses the benefits and the problems involved with using oral history interviews in research on the Crafts movement. One of the pioneers in the methodology of oral history research in the UK, he comments on the tendency for art historians to focus on artworks, as opposed to also researching the social and personal contexts of the artist. He suggests that investigating interconnections in the different spheres of lives, such as home life, work life, and family life, would make for compelling research. Specifically, Thompson would like to consider “how children are brought up in the families of craftspeople. Why is it that they become creative: are they encouraged from very early on? Or is this a kind of rebellion against the middle-class conventions of their

²⁶ Elliot Mishler, *Storylines: Craftartists' Narratives of Identity* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999].

own families?”²⁷ These are questions that I will be asking in my interviews, as I also believe them to be of import when studying fibre artists’ lives.

Craft and fine art education is another key area of interest, as when considering why artists choose their profession, it is important to delve into the type of training that they have received. Literature in this area is sparse, but I did find several resources. These resources informed my research, however, only a few of the following are directly related to this thesis. “On the Education of Artists” by Misa Nikolic, “Craft Education in Canada: A History of Confusion” by Virginia Wright, “Collective Memory, Craft History and Theory: A Canadian Perspective” by Ron Shuebrook, “Craft Theory and Education” by Dr. Alexandra Palmer, and “Canada’s Art and Design Schools: A Critical Survey” by Dick Aaverns are all informative, and demonstrate that the experts on this issue have some concern regarding the direction of the state of art and craft education in Canada and the United States.²⁸ Specifically, they present craft history as an area that is under developed at present.

²⁷ Paul Thompson, “The Potential for Oral History and Life Story Research on the Crafts Movement,” in *Obscure Objects of Desire: Reviewing the Crafts in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Tanya Harrod [London: Crafts Council, 1997], 46. Thompson’s biography is available at:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/online/data/edwardians/biography.asp> [accessed August 6, 2007].

²⁸ Misa Nikolic, “On the Education of Artists.” *Artichoke* 26, no. 3 [Fall/Winter 2004]: 36-38.

Virginia Wright, “Craft Education in Canada: A History of Confusion,” in *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft*, ed. Gloria Hickey, 79-85. [Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization and The Institute for Contemporary Craft in Canada, 1994]. Ron Shuebrook, “Collective Memory, Craft History and Theory: A Canadian Perspective,” in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing*, ed. Jean Johnson, 68-73 [Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Center, 2002]. Dr. Alexandra Palmer, “Craft Theory and Education,” in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing*, ed. Jean Johnson, 54-61. [Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Center, 2002]. Dick Aaverns, “Canada’s Art and Design Schools: A Critical Survey.” *Artichoke* 16, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2004): 40-46.

Digital technologies are playing an increasing role in craft. In “Craft’s New Tomorrow: A Case For Technology Within Craft-based Education,” craft critic Dennis Stevens suggests a combination of established educational theory and emerging technology offers the best opportunity for exploration and growth within the field of craft education.²⁹ The field of textiles also strongly embraces digital technology. Computerized looms and new digital printers are now present in many North American universities and colleges. “Fibre Education: The State of the Art” by art historian J. Susan Isaacs addresses the use of digital technology in the United States fibre art programs.³⁰ In “Artmaking with an Industrial Jacquard Loom” Bethanne Knudson describes the growth of computer weaving programs in the universities today and the impact of these new techniques in the field of fibres in both Canada and the US.³¹ In her MA Thesis, Rosaline Edeh researches Louise Lemieux Bérubé, the co-founder of the Montreal Center for Contemporary Textiles. The Center was able to purchase a jacquard loom and, as part of its mandate, it provides young and emerging artists the opportunity to use this new digital technology.³² All of these resources were useful when considering the role of these new technologies in the fibre field.

²⁹ Dennis Stevens, “Craft’s New Tomorrow: A Case For Technology Within Craft-Based Education.” *The Studio Potter* 32, no. 2 [June 2004]: 83-88. Stevens is also a ceramist, and creator of the Redefining Craft website. Profile available at: http://www.redefiningcraft.com/?page_id=63 [accessed on August 6, 2007].

³⁰ J. Susan Isaacs, “Fiber Education: The State of the Art.” *Surface Design Journal* 24, no. 2 [Winter 2000]: 15-21. Profile available at: <http://pages.towson.edu/sisaacs/cobj.htm> [accessed August 6, 2007].

³¹ Bethanne Knudson, “Artmaking with an Industrial Jacquard Loom.” *Fiberarts* 32, no. 2 [Sept/Oct 2005]: 40-45. Knudson is the President of the Jacquard Center in Hendersonville, North Carolina, which gives workshops and expertise regarding jacquard weaving worldwide. Website available at: <http://www.thejacquardcenter.com/index.htm> [accessed on August 6, 2007].

³² Rosaline U. Edeh, “Louise Lemieux Bérubé: Artist in Motion.” [Master’s thesis, Concordia University, 2002]. The website of the Montreal Center for Contemporary Textiles is available at: http://www.textiles-mtl.com/English/e_Main.html [accessed on August 3, 2007].

In terms of new technologies, Hexagram, The Institute for Research and Creation in Media Arts and Technologies is housed in the new Engineering Visual Arts building at Concordia University. It is a cutting-edge organization formed in 2001 focusing on technological advancement in the arts which involves over 75 researchers, and 350 graduate students from Concordia University, University of Quebec at Montreal and University of Montreal. Canadian fibre artists and professors Ingrid Bachmann, Barbara Layne and Joanna Berzowska have published academically and have traveled worldwide to discuss their work. Their branch of Hexagram, the Interactive Textiles and Wearable computer axes, involves doing research and utilizing new technologies in the making of textiles, either by using new equipment or techniques, or by embedding the technology into the actual cloth. In terms of access to cutting-edge textile technology and research, it seems that Concordia University is one of the leaders in the field. Hexagram points to the role of artist-as-researcher, which is one direction the field of fibre arts is following, and is of particular interest here because of the type of student this is drawing to the Concordia Graduate Program in Fibres, and the impact it may have on their choice of technique and their level of involvement in technological processes.

The decision to join the digital revolution is one that many craftspeople carefully consider. In "Post-Digital Textiles: Rediscovering the Hand" Susan Brandeis, a professor of Art and Design at North Carolina State University points out both the benefits and disadvantages to using these technologies. Some of the benefits of digital technology for fibre artists include: an increased speed of production; the ability to create increasingly complex designs and patterns; the ability to better control dye colours and to choose from

a much wider spectrum of colors; the option of increasing the size and scale of the work; and the reduction of physical body strain. Some of the disadvantages to using digital technology include: the prohibitive costs of the equipment; the challenge of mastering digital technologies; sensitive equipment resulting in frequent malfunctions; samples and smaller pieces are difficult and expensive to produce; there may be a loss of material manipulation and a feeling of immersion in the work; and finally, the work may seem too perfect and not show the mark of the maker in the final product.³³ Although Brandeis is a practicing fibre artist who employs digital technologies in her work, as well as a professor teaching fibres students design skills, her point of view regarding digital textiles may not be shared with others in the field; however, in considering my own experiences in this area, these reflections provide a comprehensive and balanced look at the pros and cons of using these advanced technologies.

As previously mentioned, many current students in fibres are choosing to create their artworks by using these complex and expensive new technologies. One concern that I have around this is that the amount of time it takes to learn these new techniques will take away from the already shrinking time the student has to learn traditional fibres techniques, which may eventually result in deskilling of textile techniques. Although the students would be skilled in using digital techniques, the opportunity for them to have access to these technologies upon graduation would be minimal. The costs of purchasing the computer equipment and programs alone would be prohibitive, especially for students just entering the work force with a high student-debt load. Jacquard looms, Mimaki

³³ Susan Brandeis, "Post-Digital Textiles: Rediscovering the Hand." *Surface Design Journal* 28, no. 4 [Summer 2004]: 44-51. Susan Brandeis's academic profile is available at: <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~brandeis/> [accessed August 3, 2007].

printers and digital embroidery machines are extremely expensive. However, traditional fibres techniques of knitting, felting, and needlework, amongst others, may all be done in any studio or home, if the student has learned these accessible techniques. I was interested in discovering the reasons behind the decision to use manual techniques and processes by the artists I interviewed, as opposed to choosing to employ digital technologies. Certainly, accessibility, or a lack thereof, may be a concern for them in this choice.

Historically, fibre art came into being in the early 1960's in North America, as well as in Europe. Jan Janeiro, a textile historian traces the development of this medium in "The Crucible: Textiles in the Sixties." Beginning with the seminal fibre artist Lenore Tawney, Janeiro recounts the history of the movement from modernist concerns to the influence of the Bauhaus, and discusses the leaders in the textiles field, including Claire Zeisler, and Ed Rossbach.³⁴ These artists went on to mentor and teach many of the next several generations of fibre artists. Also of note was *The Art Fabric: Mainstream*, which was published in 1981, and introduced another few generations to the world of both two and three dimensional fibre art. Written by art historian and curator Mildred Constantine and prominent textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen, this book had a major influence upon the careers of several of my professors, resulting in their eventual choice of fibre as a medium.³⁵ In "Defining a Movement," Jessica Hemmings traces the history and investigates the efficacy of the term fibre art. In her estimation, fibre art came into being

³⁴ Jan Janeiro, "The Crucible: Textiles in the Sixties." *Surface Design Journal* 21, no. 1 [Fall 1996], 18-19, 36-38. Janeiro is also a fibre artist, writer and fibre art professor.

³⁵ Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *The Art Fabric: Mainstream* [New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981].

at the same time as the magazine *Fiberarts*, in 1975. When questioned about the term fibre art, Dr. Hilary Carlisle relayed that “the general issues with the word *craft* seem to hold true for *fibre art* too. The terms still hold associations with femininity that have not escaped from the historical mapping of masculine prioritization.” Others, however, such as the Winchester School of Art are newly incorporating the term into their programs.³⁶

In the tenuous position of being a fibre artist, these women straddle the fence in regards to personal affiliation in both the fine art and craft worlds. All three artists have been trained in both fine art and craft techniques, both in their communities and in their university education, and they consciously choose to use textile techniques and materials in their current work. In “Textiles in Context: Investigating the Location of Textiles in Contemporary Visual Practice,” a paper presented at an international conference on craft in 2004, Deborah Crowe states “the reception and classification of art works with textile content relates to: the maker’s contextual position, methodology and /or training, site, how the work is discussed in publication and the curatorial practice.”³⁷ Indeed, it often seems to be the case that a work based in textile techniques or practices is judged to be viewed as fine art according to who made it, and what exhibition records they have in the fine art realm, as well as where the work is shown. Many artists working in fibre still

³⁶ Jessica Hemmings. “Defining a Movement.” *Fiberarts* 32, no. 2 [Sept/Oct 2005]: 30-33. Dr. Hemmings is a professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, who holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. Dr. Hilary Carlisle holds a PhD from the Department of Fashion & Textiles at Nottingham Trent University in the U.K. Her CV may be found on her website: <http://www.hilarycarlisle.com/biography.htm> [accessed on August 3, 2007].

³⁷ Deborah Crowe. “Textiles in Context: Investigating the Location of Textiles in Contemporary Visual Practice.” Paper presented at the international conference Challenging Craft, Grays School of Art, Aberdeen, September 8-10, 2004 [accessed on June 18, 2007]. Crowe is a textile artist and professor. <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/challengingcraft/ChallengingCraft/papers/deborahcrowe/dcroweabstract.htm>

find themselves marginalized, and not fully accepted into either the fine art or craft realm, and this will be considered in regards to the women I have interviewed.

Fibre art is difficult to classify, even within its own field. Women and textiles have been linked together for centuries. In the introduction to *Material Matters*, a book which includes contributions from many of the top fibre professors and practitioners in the field, editors Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing discuss the role of textiles, commenting “their association with daily life, ritual and functional use, the scripting of textile work in the West as a feminine activity, and the role of traditional patterning in communication and maintaining cultural and social identities, all affirm that materials do, in fact, matter.”³⁸ There is another set of books published in the UK that have also provided contemporary textile artists and academics with the opportunity to share their ideas within the field. Published by Telos Art Publishing, *Reinventing Textiles: Volume 1: Tradition and Innovation* was published in 1999, and edited by Sue Rowley.³⁹ *Volume Two: Gender and Identity* (2001) was edited by Janis Jefferies, the director of the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre as well as the Artistic Director of Goldsmiths Digital Studios, University of London.⁴⁰ These collected essays have

³⁸ Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, eds., Introduction, in *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles* [Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998], 16. Ingrid Bachmann’s website is available at: <http://hybrid.concordia.ca/~ibachman/> [accessed August 7, 2007]. An academic profile of Ruth Scheuing is available at: <http://www.capcollege.bc.ca/programs/textile-arts/faculty/ruth.html> [accessed August 7, 2007].

³⁹ Rowley was once the Head of the School of Art History and Theory at the University of New South Wales, and is the current Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice President of Research at the University of Technology, Sydney. An academic profile of Sue Rowley can be found at: http://www.uts.edu.au/about/executive/people/sue_rowley.html [accessed on August 3, 2007].

⁴⁰ Jefferies is also an artist, writer and curator. Academic information on Janis Jefferies may be found at: <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/gds/people.php> [accessed on August 3, 2007].

allowed for international input into the academic field of textile and fibre art, and have served as an engaging resource for many, myself included.

Journals such as *Fiberarts*, *American Craft*, *Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot* and *Surface Design Journal* have been important sources of information in the textile/fibre field since their beginnings in the 1970's. As these magazines could be sent to rural textile enthusiasts throughout the United States and the world who may not have had access to library resources or peers working in the field, as well as to artists working in the cities, they served as an important resource and a source of connection to a community of like-minded others. In the September/October 2005 issue, Editor Sunita Patterson traces the development of *Fiberarts* magazine back to its beginnings 30 years ago. She shares some of the goals of the publication, including "we work to satisfy the need for serious criticism in the field while at the same time encouraging and inspiring our readers and giving them helpful resources and information."⁴¹ This desire for criticism is one that is shared throughout the craft milieu.

In "Critical Imperatives: A Reflection of Contemporary Textile Art" Betty Park reflects on criticism in contemporary textiles. Park wrote that craft criticism should assist the artist by presenting their work in a language that moves beyond technical and material concerns to consider the meaning behind the piece. She concludes "critics must welcome the expanded range of vision and understanding made possible by criticism of a

⁴¹Sunita Patterson, "Fiberarts Turns Thirty," *Fiberarts* 32, no.2 [Sept/Oct 2005]: 26-29.

deconstructivist bent, and to an even greater degree, by feminist criticism.”⁴² Park then, is advocating for a style of criticism similar to that employed in the art history realm. This raises a concern, however, that art critics are not familiar enough with the language of craft to adequately decipher the works. Historically, there has been little critical review of craft objects and exhibitions. When a review has been written, there has been a tendency to focus on positively promoting an exhibition or individual craft works to the public as opposed to actually criticizing the work. Art writer, critic and senior editor at *Art in America* Janet Koplos addresses this issue, stating “if I wanted to be mean about it, I’d say that the main limitation to serious criticism is the niceness factor. What I refer to is the kindness and sense of community that pretty much characterize the crafts.”⁴³ Perhaps this lack of critical review is also a result of limited educational opportunities within which to train to become a craft critic or curator. One suggestion on how to ensure that fibre art exhibitions and artworks are being reviewed comes from J. R. Carpenter. In “Con-textilizing Critical Language” she writes “is Fibre Art being written in Art Criticism? Now we must push that discursive envelope to demand: What is Fibre Art writing about itself?”⁴⁴ Carpenter advocates that fibre artists themselves should be the ones contributing to the literature in the field of fibre art, as they are intimately familiar with both the historical and material language of textiles. She suggests that fibre artists

⁴² Betty Park, “Critical Imperatives: A Reflection on Contemporary Textile Art.” *Surface Design Journal* 15, no. 1 [Fall 1990]: 35. Park was a prominent writer and craft critic.

⁴³ Janet Koplos, “What’s Crafts Criticism Anyway?” in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing*, ed. Jean Johnson [Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Center, 2002], 87. An academic profile of Koplos is available at: http://www.parsons.edu/faculty_and_staff/faculty_details.aspx?dID=74&sdID=97&pType=2&id=3790 [accessed on August 3, 2007].

⁴⁴ J.R. Carpenter, “Con-textilizing Critical Language” in *Surfacing Journal* 27, no. 1 [Winter 2006], 7. Carpenter is a poet, writer and web artist, who trained in fibres and sculpture at Concordia University. Information on J.R. Carpenter may be found at: <http://luckysoap.com/bio.html> [accessed on August 3, 2007].

submit reviews and writing to various publications, citing several examples. It could be that art criticism is not a good fit for craft, as suggested by Park; or that art and craft speak different languages and therefore it should be craft practitioners and those schooled in the field that are writing critical reviews, as suggested by Carpenter; however, this issue remains a primary concern of artists working in craft media.

A relatively recent development on the fibre arts front is *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*. Launched in March of 2003, the editors write “rather than dwelling on definitions and territories, we want to encourage debate – and argument – across disciplines, borders, and cultures, by bringing together cutting-edge research in an innovative and distinctive international academic forum.”⁴⁵ They advocate a multidisciplinary field that brings with it a multifaceted view of textiles and fibre. The journal is based in Britain but has provided authors from many countries the opportunity to publish academic work in textiles research. It is interesting to note that since its inception, the journal has devoted two of its last eight issues to Digital Dialogues: Textiles and Technology. In their editorial statement, Janis Jefferies and Robert Zimmer discuss the role of the artist as researcher, stating “a new generation of artists are researching and functioning within a computer-mediated culture. How their work unfolds will become a crucial part of our cultural heritage.”⁴⁶ It is obvious that textiles and digital technologies are currently enmeshed, and it will be interesting to see where this link will lead.

⁴⁵Pennina Barnett, Janis Jefferies and Doran Ross, eds., “Letter from the Editors,” *Textile* 1, no. 1[March 2003], 1.

⁴⁶Janis Jefferies and Robert Zimmer, eds., “Letter from the Editors,” *Textile* 3, no. 1[January 2005], 1.

Other possible motivational factors involved in the decision to become a fibre artist may relate to possible mind, body and spiritual connections that the artist experiences while making their work. In researching this area, interdisciplinary research into body and mind relationships was considered, including the experience of Flow, a concept developed and then expanded upon by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi.⁴⁷ Flow is simply described as being engaged in an activity so enjoyable that you lose track of time, and in my case, it is a major factor in why I choose to do the labour intensive and repetitive art activities that I do, and I was interested in discovering if the women I had interviewed had enjoyed similar experiences.

The next body and mind relationship that I was interested in pursuing in my research emerges from Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. In his 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* proposes a theory of seven human intelligences which include: linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, spatial intelligence, interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence. Gardner's premise is that some individuals learn more easily by engaging a different type of intelligence than the linguistic or logical-mathematic intelligences, the two types which are favoured by Western

⁴⁷ Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's books include: *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (1993), and *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (1997). Csikszentmihalyi is the Director of the Quality of Life Research Center at the Claremont Graduate School, whose areas of expertise also includes personal motivation and happiness, as well as creativity and work satisfaction. Csikszentmihalyi's academic profile can be found at: <http://berger.claremontmckenna.edu/board/mike.asp> [accessed on August 4, 2007].

educational systems.⁴⁸ I first learned about Howard Gardner and this concept through the work of Bruce Metcalf. His article “Craft and Art, Culture and Biology” linked bodily kinaesthetic intelligence directly with the physical experiences of craftspeople. My own experiences in weaving and papermaking have given me the intuitive responses that Metcalf equates with this bodily intelligence, and I wanted to explore if this was true for other fibre artists, who practiced different types of needlework and beadwork.⁴⁹

Another construct which engages the body and the mind is tacit knowledge, a term that I first read in relation to the work of a writer and critic in the craft field, Peter Dormer, in his book “The Language and Practical Philosophy of Craft.” A simple definition Dormer proposes is that tacit knowledge is learned through experience. He goes on to suggest a more complex definition, stating “craft, as I have defined it, with making as its central activity is all bound in with tacit knowledge and connoisseurship – knowledge that cannot be described very easily but which can often be demonstrated.”⁵⁰ The women interviewed were questioned about their experiences with tacit knowledge.

“Peak experience,” a concept which may engage the body, the mind and the spirit, was first introduced by Abraham Maslow, a pioneer in humanistic psychology. His 1968 book *Toward a Psychology of Being* went into great detail about the actual definition of a

⁴⁸ Gardner is a Professor of Education and Cognition at the Harvard Graduate School in Education. He further expanded his ideas in his 1999 book *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*. Gardner’s academic profile is available at: <http://www.howardgardner.com/bio/bio.html> [accessed on August 4, 2007].

⁴⁹ Bruce Metcalf, “Craft and Art, Culture and Biology” in *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer, 67-82. [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997]. Metcalf is a prominent U.S. jeweler, craft writer and critic.

⁵⁰ Peter Dormer, “The Language and Practical Philosophy of Craft” in *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 229.

peak experience – that is the conditions necessary in order for one to occur, or the feelings or emotions experienced that let you know that you had experienced one, and were somewhat complicated in nature to both measure and clearly define. Therefore, in this case, I let the artists that I interviewed interpret what a peak experience was for them.

Similarly, when I questioned the artists about spirituality, I did not define it, but let the artists consider their own definitions. In *The Vocation of the Artist*, Deborah J. Haynes defines spirituality as a vague term, stating “it conjures the ineffable and mysterious; it points to the beyond (however we conceive it) or to the deepest inner core. It transcends denomination and religious tradition.”⁵¹ Spirituality and art, as well as art and religion have been linked for centuries. Mary W. Helms discusses skilled crafting in traditional societies in her book *Craft and the Kingly Ideal*. She comments “given the fundamental processes of crafting in general, it is no surprise to find such activities explicitly associated with concepts of transformation and creation in traditional societies. Transformation is most forcefully or unavoidably expressed in, and frequently metaphorically associated with, the highly obvious changes in physical state readily observable in certain fabrication processes.”⁵² I was interested in knowing whether the transformational changes in the state of the materials involved with craft processes and techniques potentially play a role in how or why fibre artists today are drawn to their medium.

⁵¹ Deborah J Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 26. Haynes is a professor in Art History at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

⁵² Mary W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993], 18. Helms is a professor in Anthropology at University of North Carolina, Greensboro. An academic profile of Helms is available at: <http://www.uncg.edu/ant/helms.html>, accessed August 4, 2007.

Although historically, in the West, there has been a strong correlation between art and spirituality, mostly in terms of a religious connection, in contemporary art as in academia, the topic had seemingly become quite taboo. In “Concerning the Spiritual in the Twentieth Century Art and Science” Mike King relays that “while contemporary artists write little about spirituality, it seems that the spiritual is an important undercurrent of influence in the arts.”⁵³ This seems more the case due to the incorporation of new media and digital technologies into art practices, and the tendencies in fine art today towards disembodiment and altered realities. Repetitive and labour intensive work has often been linked to ritual or meditation practices. I have personally found this type of work to be directly related to my spiritual practice, and I wondered whether this had also been the case for the artists I had studied.

The final section of this literature review will examine time, space, place and the everyday. Time will be approached from several different standpoints in relation to the artists interviewed. Rita Felski elaborates upon feminist conceptions about time and temporality in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. She proposes a “distinction between three temporal levels: everyday time, life time, and large scale time (history and myth).”⁵⁴ These temporalities will be explored in relation to the artist’s individual experiences. Feminist ethnographer Karen Davies, in her book *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* as well as Henri Lefebvre, in

⁵³ Mike King, “Concerning the Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art and Science” *Leonardo* 31, no. 1 [1998]: 30. King is a professor in Computer Art and Animation in the Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media and Design at London Metropolitan University. His academic CV is available at: <http://www.jnani.org/mrking/cv/career.htm>, [accessed on August 4, 2007].

⁵⁴Rita Felski, “Introduction: Timely Meditations” in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 17. Felski is a professor at the University of Virginia who specializes in feminist theory and cultural studies. Her academic profile is available at: <http://www.engl.virginia.edu/faculty/felski.html> [accessed on August 4, 2007].

Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life discuss the gender differences between linear time and cyclical time, which will be considered in relation to the working process and the daily life of each artist. In “Craft, Creativity and Critical Practice” Sue Rowley discusses time in a different manner, positing that “the long duration associated with acquiring craft skills could not easily be assimilated into the rhetoric of modern art, with its insistence on newness, spontaneity and ever-faster turn-around of ideas and their visual articulation.”⁵⁵ Marcia Tucker suggests that time can be thought of as either monochronic or polychronic, which may be related to craft processes.⁵⁶ These ideas, along with the relationship of the viewer to the work will also be considered briefly.

Due in part to their association with women and the feminine, many of the academic writings on textiles approach them from a feminist perspective. In 1995, the Conseil des arts textiles du Quebec celebrated its fifteenth anniversary by hosting a symposium entitled *Textiles Sismographes*. More than thirty textile-based exhibitions took place during October 1995 in many regions of Quebec and a detailed monograph of the symposium was published which included an article entitled “In Visible Center” written by Vita Plume. She comments on the different perspectives of fibre artists over thirty, and those of the new generation in regards to feminism. She outlined that “the difference I would like to explore here is time based; it is age, different experience, a generational shift, it is the result of the intertwining of feminism into textile history over the past thirty

⁵⁵ Sue Rowley, “Craft, Creativity and Critical Practice” in *Reinventing Textiles: Volume One, Tradition and Invention* [Winchester: Telos Art Publishing, 1999], 14.

⁵⁶ Marcia Tucker, “A Labor of Love” in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen, [Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 125. Tucker was a freelance art writer, critic and curator whose biography is available at: <http://www.marciatucker.com/bio.html> [accessed on August 4, 2007].

years.”⁵⁷ This was written over 10 years ago, and the artists that I interviewed, who are currently in their early thirties, were questioned as to where they sat on this continuum. Both textiles themselves and fibre art have gendered connotations, and have historically been associated with the domestic sphere and women’s work. In discussing feminist viewpoints around textiles, it is important to acknowledge Rozsika Parker’s book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Parker traces the history of embroidery and textile art in the West from a feminist perspective. Her final chapter, “A Naturally Revolutionary Art?” examines women’s historical and subversive use of textiles and embroidery throughout the suffragist movement, the hippy era, women’s liberation and the women’s peace movement.⁵⁸ Given this precedence for using textiles in subversive ways, I wished to derive whether the artists I interviewed deemed themselves subversive in any way as well.

Other scholarship addressing political and social uses of textile arts includes Alison Crossman. Her 1999 MA thesis “Framing the Quilt: Historical and Contemporary Quilts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia”, completed in the Art History Program at Concordia University, outlines the history of the quilt from the 1800’s onwards in the Maritimes. The Aids Memorial Quilt is discussed, along with the work of Barbara Todd, Janet Pope, Barbara Carter, Margaret Sawyer and Joyce Weiland, bringing attention to contemporary quilt makers who have used the quilt in a subversive way, in order to address social

⁵⁷Vita Plume, “In Visible Centre” in *Textiles Sismographes: Symposium Fibres et Textiles 1995*, 45-54. [Montréal: Conseil des Arts Textiles Du Québec, 1995], 46. Plume is the former coordinator of the Fibres Program at Concordia University, and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Design at North Carolina State University. Her CV is available at: http://ncsudesign.org/content/images/CV_PDF/plume_vita.pdf [accessed August 3, 2007].

⁵⁸Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, [New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1989], 189-215. Parker is a psychotherapist and an art historian.

welfare and political issues.⁵⁹ In her 1996 MA thesis “Needling the System: The Textile Art of Collette Whiten, Barbara Todd and Ann Newdigate” Michele Roycroft, also from the Art History Department at Concordia University, examines how the work of these artists reveal the dominant social and political powers that continue to devalue both textiles and the women who make them.⁶⁰ These themes are considered just as potent today, and the social and political aspects of fibre art will be examined in relation to the work of the artists that have been interviewed.

Some believe that simply using craft to create objects in this day and age is subversive in itself. For example, in “Writing about the Studio Crafts”, Rosemary Hill, craft critic and writer, states “in so far as the studio crafts are radical or subversive they are so because they challenge notions of hierarchy in the arts and hence other, social and philosophical assumptions about value.”⁶¹ On the other hand, Katy Kline, in her catalogue essay for *Subversive Crafts* deems craft to be subversive in “the injection of disruptive imagery or subject matter into a tradition in which the viewer’s guard is down.”⁶² An interview question regarding each artist’s own definition of the subversive nature of textiles was also incorporated into the research.

In this thesis, space and place will be approached in terms of their gendered meanings.

Artists working in textile materials and techniques are strongly associated with the

⁵⁹ Alison Crossman, “Framing the Quilt: Historical and Contemporary Quilts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia” [master’s thesis, Concordia University, 1999].

⁶⁰ Michele Roycroft, “Needling the System: The Textile Art of Collette Whiten, Barbara Todd and Ann Newdigate,” [master’s thesis, Concordia University, 1996].

⁶¹ Rosemary Hill, “Writing about the Studio Crafts” in *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 195.

⁶² Katy Kline, *Subversive Crafts*. Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1993. Kline is currently the Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

private sphere, especially since many of these artists create their work in their homes. *No More Separate Spheres*, edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher has been informative in consideration of these issues.⁶³ Place may also have a large impact upon an artist's work. Whether an artist is originally from Quebec, Canada, or another country, identification with their cultural heritage, or the loss thereof, may inform the work that they make. Similarly, the surroundings that they find themselves in may also influence an individual artist's working process. The notion of place is currently a common theme in contemporary art, although it is difficult to define. Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, in their book *Artworks: Place* write "place is something more often sensed than understood, an indistinct region of awareness rather than something clearly defined."⁶⁴ Crafts, especially ceramics and textiles, have been closely associated with place and local resources since their beginnings. Many craftspeople and fine artists today continue to reference nature and their surroundings, in terms of materials and/or subject matter in the pieces that they produce. Therefore, the women that I interviewed were asked about the role of place in their current work.

Synchronicity or being in the right place at the right time may contribute to the success of an artist. The art world is often touted as being all about who you know and the contacts that you have. On the other hand, opportunities may seem to happen totally out of the blue, when you need them the most, due to chance meetings or events. In my life, it has been my experience that synchronicity has often led me to the next right step along my

⁶³ Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds. *No More Separate Spheres!* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2002].

⁶⁴ Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, *Art Works: Place* [New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005], 14.

career path. An interview question was developed which examined each artist's experiences with this phenomenon.

Introductory Conclusions

The women I interviewed for this thesis have all dedicated themselves to fibres as a medium. Final interview questions examine what this has meant for them, in terms of what their ideal career would look like, as well as discussing their progress to date. This thesis will therefore be exploring the current state of the field of fibre art in Canada from the artist's own perspectives, as well as from that of the researcher. Although I have only interviewed three women, due to their educational affiliations and their current level of success internationally, I feel that they represent an excellent cross-section of emerging professionals in fibre art and textiles in this country today. Overall, this thesis will draw conclusions regarding potential internal and external motivational factors which may play a role in an artist choosing to become a fibre artist, including social, educational, cultural, political, and personal considerations. The thesis will also examine the field of fibre art as a whole, from the current post-secondary educational programs for textiles and fibre art in Canada, to the available opportunities for the artists to exhibit, promote and receive critical reviews of their work.

Chapter Two -Education

Many factors may play a role in the development of a fibre artist. Exposure to the medium during their formative years may play a large role in their eventual decision to work in textile techniques and processes. After briefly introducing the artists, this chapter looks at the educational opportunities provided to the fibre artists that I interviewed for this project from their early educational experiences, right through to their university education. I am interested in exploring possible links between elementary school and secondary school exposure and participation in textile activities as well. The research will also explore the personal and professional development of these women, since they graduated and became professional artists. The role of mentorship in their experiences throughout their lives to date will also be examined. Finally, one work from each artist will be analyzed considering the responses that I have received.

I will briefly introduce the artists who took part in this project. Andrea Vander Kooij crafts contemporary art work using the traditional textile techniques of knitting and embroidery, amongst others. She holds a BA in Theatre and Visual Arts from Redeemer University, and she graduated with an MFA in Fibres from Concordia University in 2005. In the past several years Vander Kooij has won several prestigious artist awards, including the Lillian Elliott award from the Textile Society of America in October 2006, the Brucebo Foundation Travel Scholarship in 2005 and the Handweavers Guild of America Scholarship in 2003. Her work has been written about in *Fiberarts Magazine*

and the *Surface Design Journal*, and she has taken part in over 23 group shows and several solo exhibitions throughout North America since 2000.¹

Dorie Millerson uses embroidery and fine needlepoint lace techniques to create her delicately figurative work. In 2000, she received her Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA) in Material Art and Design from the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), where she won the Melville P. White and the Friends of Fibre award in 1999, as well as a medal for Material Art and Design and the Nora E. Vaughan Award in 2000. Following this, Millerson completed her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Textiles: Craft at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in 2003. She has shown her work throughout Canada, and in several prominent exhibitions in the United States, and has taken part in two solo shows and eleven group exhibitions since 2000. Millerson currently lives in Toronto where she works as the Public Programs Coordinator at the Textile Museum of Canada, and teaches fibre and drawing courses at both OCAD and Sheridan College.²

Natasha St. Michael creates three dimensional organic forms from glass seed beads and thread. She attended a pre-college program at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1992, and received her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1997. Although usually based in Montreal, Quebec, she has spent the past year and a half traveling in Australia, and just recently returned. St. Michael has shown her work

¹ All information on Vander Kooij was obtained in a personal interview with the author, February 18, 2007, and from her CV, which she provided the author. Vander Kooij currently lives and works in Montreal, Quebec.

² All information on Millerson was obtained in a personal interview with the author on November 18, 2006, or from her CV, which she provided the author. Millerson is currently living and working in Toronto, Ontario.

internationally to wide acclaim, garnering her prestigious awards, including the Prix François-Houdé in 2003. She has received artist and travel grants from both the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and from the Canada Council for the Arts. St. Michael's work is held in both public and private collections in North America and France, and she has had two solo exhibitions and has exhibited in over 35 groups shows in North America and overseas since 2000. St. Michael is currently a full time professional artist.³

In looking back to their childhood years, all three artists studied had varied educational experiences. One's formative years may have both positive and negative repercussions in the life of an artist. After being told that she would never be an artist by a grade five teacher, Vander Kooij bowed to her authority and gave up the dream she had cultivated since early childhood. Therefore, despite the fact that they had art classes in her secondary school, she did not participate. It was later in university that she came back to art. She recalls:

At university, I started taking art classes again, and I did a minor in art. I went to a Christian university which did not have a very extensively funded art department, so your choices were painting and drawing, or if you were particularly ambitious, you could do a little sculpting on your own. Or photography....however, doing embroidery was a very big deal for me.⁴

Despite the limitations at her university, she utilized textile techniques and processes in her art from the beginning of this period, in fact, she had been continuing to knit and

³ All information on St. Michael was obtained via an internet interview completed on January 16, 2007, or from her C.V. which she provided the author. St. Michael completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in 1997 at the School of the Art in Chicago, USA.

⁴ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

embroider throughout her teenage years. At that point, however, she just didn't consider it art. In her MA thesis "Needling the System: The Textile Art of Collette Whiten, Barbara Todd, and Ann Newdigate" Michelle Roycroft proposes "although stereotypes of femininity have resulted in a derogatory view of fibre-based arts, they may also be seen as sites of resistance or as systems which subvert the very codes of meaning with which they are associated."⁵ It is possible that it was a subversive move on the part of Vander Kooij to create textile based art in this Christian university that was rife with limitations and rules.

Both Millerson and St. Michael had very different and mostly positive beginnings to their educational art experiences. Millerson explains that:

In England, it's a different system; there is a primary school and a secondary school system. We emigrated when I was 14, so my early years were all in the British education, and we had art classes throughout. There is a fairly good level of art education in Britain, and moving here, I actually went to an art high school in Toronto, and that meant that I had art everyday. So, that was like a mini art college experience really, because we did life drawing, we did everything. It was a huge bonus for me, and really cultivated my discipline and interest. We studied art history, and that probably gave me an edge for going on.⁶

Although she was in Montreal and not Toronto, St. Michael's experience was similar:

I went to St. George's Elementary School and St. George's High School. There was a big focus on the arts in these schools, everything from music to visual arts and drama. I mainly focused on the visual arts. I was very fortunate as well; my last year in high school I was applying to art universities in the United States and my high school art teacher really wanted to support me with my application and portfolio. We would meet once a week after school, she looked at my art work, gave me a critique

⁵ Michelle Roycroft, "Needling the System: The Textile Art of Collette Whiten, Barbara Todd, and Ann Newdigate" [master's thesis, Concordia University, 1996], 12.

⁶ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

and recommended artists for me to research and read-up about. She also got the school to allow me to use one of the spare storage rooms as a studio, so I could focus more on my art work with no interruption. I was very fortunate!!!⁷

Both of these artists, then, had a very strong sense of being an artist from an early age, and were supported in that sense of self-expression. In “Conflicts in Creativity: Talented Female Artists” Robert Kirschenbaum and Sally Reis utilize a comparative case study involving intensive interviews with ten women artists. This study examined the impact of education, marriage and family in the development of their art. They concluded that as youngsters, all of the artists considered themselves to be creative or to have artistic talent. They also discovered that their level of interest and involvement in art as teenagers was closely related to the amount of interest they currently held.⁸ Millerson and St. Michael certainly fit that profile. Vander Kooij also kept her creative activities going throughout secondary school.

When queried about her post-secondary art education, like most students, Vander Kooij found graduate school to be somewhat of a challenge. She ended up at Concordia University because they accepted her into their Fibres program. She remembers:

It was an interesting experience to be at Concordia - it wasn't always as supportive as I would have liked it to be. I never had a problem with the Profs, it was more the classmates. My interactions in crits (critiques) were a little difficult, but it was ultimately a learning experience, ultimately good at making me really understand what it was that I wanted to do, as opposed to what other people wanted me to do...and not getting anyone else's approval really helps you figure that out, which is good, although hard. And I like the theory, I grouched about it while I was doing it, but now that I'm out in the world, its really nice to be able

⁷ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁸ Robert Kirschenbaum and Sally Reis. “Conflicts in Creativity: Talented Female Artists” in *Creativity Research Journal* 10, nos. 2&3 (1997): 2-62

to talk about your work within a certain context, so that was useful, although at the time it just felt frustrating.⁹

The Concordia MFA program has a reputation as having a more rigorous theoretical component to their program in comparison to others in Canada. For many students, it is a shock to their systems, as they have done very little writing in their BFA degrees. A common complaint is that there is no time left over to do their studio work.¹⁰ Having attended a Christian University during her undergraduate degree, Vander Kooij thought that graduate school would be completely different:

I went to Christian school up until Concordia, which appropriately has a reputation for being a little bit repressive. When I decided to go to graduate school, I thought that I am coming to the world of freedom and permission, and you can do anything that you want, and no one will ever judge you....and imagine my shock, to find that its just like Christian school, only the answers are different. There are still right answers, and it's not about everybody flying their own flag high, and walking to the beat of their own drum - it's about conformity in a different way, which was a really good and important lesson for me to learn.¹¹

Often, students who end up in fibre arts or textiles have started training in another area first. Through varied experiences in art school, they find their way to fibre/textiles in different ways. Millerson wasn't sure what she wanted to study when she first went to art school:

When I went to Art College, I didn't really know what I was going to do with my life. I knew I loved art and wanted to make art, but didn't quite know if you could be an artist, as a career. I had been told by my grandfather, you should be a graphic designer, that's really the way to have a career. So, I went into illustration my second year at OCAD, and loved it, all these different challenges and problem solving, but after a while I learned that I didn't have the same competitive drive as the others did, and didn't really want to do it for a career. I would look

⁹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

¹⁰ I spent one year in the MFA Fibres class in 2005/6, and experienced this first hand with my classmates.

¹¹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

through the hallway, through the window of the textile studio, and I would see all these gorgeous colors on the wall of all the spools of thread, and it just seemed to beckon me - because here I was, with these blank pieces of paper, mostly working at home, and there was this amazing studio that seemed so fun and bright, and endless possibilities, so I transferred into Material Art and Design (MAD) instinctively because I have always been interested in textiles. I found myself not fitting in with the design ethic, in that I was too outspoken, too political, and I questioned everything, so MAD was a better department for me, much more relaxed, and had a kind of social conscience to it in a way.¹²

Millerson equates this change being made due to her personality being more in line with the Material Art and Design program. For St. Michael, her post-secondary experiences eventually led her to try many media, and finally settle upon fibres. She recalls that:

School of the Art in Chicago (SAIC) was known to be more conceptual, progressive. At SAIC you didn't have to declare a major. For the 4 year Bachelors program you could take whatever courses you wished, and they encouraged students to experiment with all sorts of media. I did everything from contemporary performance art, sound, to fibre art and ceramics! Eventually I did focus in fibre arts. There were no grades either. The school's philosophy was you couldn't grade someone's art. So no grades and no majors—the result was there was no competition between students, no making art for the grade or to satisfy the teacher, and a great amount of unnecessary pressure was taken off.¹³

The fact that her school was non-competitive without grading was a benefit to St. Michael. All three of these artists, then, began somewhere else, and eventually gravitated towards working in fibres; for Vander Kooij, it was theatre; for Millerson, illustration; and St. Michael tried a little of everything. Since they made the choice to work in fibres, however, they have remained committed to the medium.

As I had come across several studies of women artists which examined the influence that mentors have had on their lives, I became interested to know how significant this was for

¹² Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

¹³ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

the artists I studied. All three of the women interviewed mentioned some sort of mentor.

In the case of Vander Kooij, she responded:

Hmmmm...mentors....well, Mrs. Milk, my chain-smoking knitting teacher! I don't know if she's a mentor though, but she was very cool. Because I studied theatre so long, a lot of my theatre professors were really supportive of me, like in my undergrad - Raymond Lauder, was the theatre professor who really supported my choices in art as well, and Betty Spockman was the professor in my undergrad that helped me find a place to have my show, and Gerard Pau - he's pretty well known, he's a contemporary of Greg Curnoe, I believe, and he was also very, very supportive, telling me "Don't take it, don't let them grind you down" Yeah, they were all good.¹⁴

Millerson recalled many individuals that lent their support at various phases of her life:

I think a lot of support came from my parents, in terms of they would read what I would write and encourage me that way, particularly my dad. And mentors, in college, the faculty in Material Art and Design was quite supportive of me. People like William Hodge, who runs the textile department, and Beth Alber, who is the chair of the MAD department, were both helpful in many ways. At NSCAD, looking at mentors, I would say Sandra Alfoldy was a definite mentor for me, not only the support, but in her generosity, in terms of her time, but I worked as her teaching assistant, and learnt a lot about teaching and how you could investigate craft as a history, or give it a context. Volunteering with Jean Johnson at Harbourfront was another big mentoring experience. She's just such a wealth of knowledge, and she's also so generous, and she again was very supportive of me. Another mentor who I have is Patricia Bentley at the Textile Museum, who has really inspired me in terms of how you can educate through textiles, because she is such an incredible educator, she really knows how to interpret textiles for people, both children and adults, and I have learned volumes from working with her for a few years. I think those are the people, I would point to - Sandra, Jean and Patricia as having a really big impact.¹⁵

Interestingly, Millerson mentions three women who are not studio artists themselves, but that work in the area of craft and textile history. Perhaps their impact is so large because her current work teaching textile history as part of her studio classes and working at the

¹⁴ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

¹⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

Textile Museum has slightly changed her focus, to that of wanting to be an excellent educator. St. Michael mentions several influential teachers she had along the way:

My high School art teacher, Tori Cattell was the first school teacher that really encouraged me and gave me a sense of purpose. She was one of the first teacher's to pass down personal knowledge and insight. In university, Helen O'Rourke was a teacher of mine, and someone I consider to have the most impact on my art making, both while I was in school and even today. Helen had once told me 'just create a lot of shit. Make something, throw it on the wall and move onto the next. Never concentrate on making that silver-platter piece.' Those words trained me to broaden my vision, take a step back from the self-imposed pressures of perfection, and to let the ideas come out and take risks. Helen also helped train me as an artist, specifically in the realm of self-motivation and independence. She felt I needed to train myself to be doing art on my own, using my own resources and facilities, which later on when I went into making art as my profession, it became an asset.¹⁶

The experiences of all three of the artists tie into the existing research on the subject. Karen List and Joseph Renzulli, educators who work with gifted children, examined societal conditions of the female artist, such as their academic experiences, and whether their family and possible mentors played a role in their success. Their results indicated that "all of the women in this study had either males, females, or both as mentors who were critical to their creative and personal development."¹⁷ Sally M. Reis, reporting on the literature surrounding creative women, states that "Roscher (1987) studied a group of 12 highly creative successful women scientists who attributed part of their accomplishments to a role model, whether during high school or college, or to an individual professor or family member who provided encouragement."¹⁸ Regardless of

¹⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

¹⁷ Karen List and Joseph S. Renzulli. "Creative Women's Developmental Patterns through Age Thirty-Five." *Gifted Education International* 7 [1991], 119.

¹⁸ N. Roscher. "Chemistry's Creative Women," *Journal of Chemical Education*, 56 [1981]: 748-752, as cited in Sally M. Reis. "Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women," *Creativity Research Journal* 14, nos. 3 & 4 [2002], 308.

where they came from, or whether they were in the same field or not, mentors do seem to play an important role in the artistic development of the three women I have researched.

The opportunity for professional development is frequently stressed in national and provincial craft organizations, as well as in the medium-specific organizations and local guilds. It provides artists with the opportunity to learn skills that they did not have access to in school, especially regarding promotion and marketing of their work. I was interested in knowing if these women had taken part in any workshops, seminars, or courses. I left the term professional development open to their definition, and the responses I received were varied. Vander Kooij spoke of awards that she had won, and the opportunities they had provided her with:

I got a Brucebo scholarship, and went and did embroidery in Europe, which was really nice....we did more than ten cities, we did a ridiculous amount of cities, but we saw a lot....I got the Lillian Elliot award, and I used that to make the work for the Hand/Body/Face show. I haven't taken any workshops...I'm really an auto didactic, in that I tend to get books out and learn how to do something, to teach myself to do from a book, but I do that a lot. I gave (an artist talk) at Harbourfront recently, I gave one at Concordia portfolio day, I was their alumni artist. I went to Mary Wong's class, I think to Laura Endacott's class too - I think that's about it.¹⁹

Vander Kooij has profited from her success in the field, as the Lillian Elliott award came with a small financial prize, and the Brucebo scholarship allowed for travel in Europe.

Millerson defined professional development somewhat differently. She commented:

I am very busy all the time investigating textiles.... I've been a member of a number of societies, like the TSA (Textile Society of America) for a couple of years, the Surface Design Association in the States, subscribed to a whole bunch of magazines that keep me informed about what's

¹⁹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

going on....I go to museums, to study the textile collections, particularly the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Textile Museum of Canada. The volunteering is a big thing I've done, I have volunteered with Jean for a year, at Harbourfront, working on special craft initiatives. She is working on a big project called Pioneers, so I was working on that with her. I have volunteered with the Ontario Craft Council, and I have been a juror for their awards. I have given a few artist talks in different places, written a few articles. In terms of professional development, I was on the board of the Surfacing Journal for a few years, and I wrote their grant for the final year they were operational.²⁰

It seems that despite next to no funding being available for the arts, and few opportunities for full time employment in the fibres area, there are plenty of opportunities to volunteer and to get involved in the field of textiles.

St. Michael, on the other hand, recognizes that art school does not always prepare artists for the real world. She commented:

The down fall of attending SAIC was we were trained to make art, but not be artists. There was no bridge between art school and the real world - no training on how to make a career from your art, no how to's on writing grant proposals, exhibition proposals, researching opportunities, building portfolios, etc. For myself, post-university was all trial and error, follow the instructions and do everything to the best of your ability.²¹

It seems that art schools are somewhat lacking in both giving students the required tools to be able to go out and sell themselves, and in providing forums for graduates, providing ways to gain personal support of some kind once they are out there on their own. The Center for Craft, Creativity and Design is one of the most prominent craft institutions in the US. This past April, they held the "2007 North Carolina Craft Think Tank," in which over 20 worldwide leaders in the field of craft got together to brainstorm about where craft is at professionally, and where it is headed. In a session examining what craft

²⁰ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

²¹ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

education is required for studio craft artists to achieve economic and artistic growth, many felt that craft students who had graduated did not receive the practical and critical skills necessary to succeed in the field. The report stated that “business skills are seldom included in the BFA or MFA programs. Curators and participants who have served on visual arts grant panels observe that graduates/artists seem ill prepared with even the basic understanding on how to write a statement, provide decent images, or submit the materials that must speak of them when they are not there to explain.”²² In Canada, I feel that this is where the guilds and professional art and craft organizations may assist in providing some sort of structure, and a sense of belonging, as well as the skills needed to market and promote artwork effectively. The Think Tank also suggested apprenticeships, mentoring by faculty, internships in galleries and museums, as well as entrepreneurial courses as possible solutions to this issue.²³

Regardless of how those involved in fibre art would like the whole issue of the art versus craft debate to be over, somehow, it stubbornly clings on. I wanted to hear the opinions of emerging artists in the field on the subject, as well as discover where they classify themselves along the art/craft continuum. Were they being penalized for working in a craft medium, or did it make a difference at all? In response, Vander Kooij contributed:

I wish that the whole debate didn't exist at all, because it always feels like taking sides, and I feel like if you choose a side, you're putting somebody else's side down...and I feel like there's room for so many different ways to make art. That was the biggest lesson that I learned at Concordia that nobody meant to teach me, was that it sucks when people are like...Here's the right way. And coming from the Christian

²² The 2007 North Carolina Craft Think-Tank report is available from the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design's website, at: <http://www.craftcreativitydesign.org/pdf/2007CRAFTTHINKTANK.pdf> [accessed on August 10, 2007]. The information mentioned is available on page 2 of the report.

²³ Ibid, 3.

undergraduate school where I was told Here is the right way you make art and you're not making it the right way, and coming here and being told AGAIN, you know, this is not necessarily the right way...and thinking wow, does there have to be one right way? You know, if somebody wants to do something that I'm not as interested in, it doesn't mean that it's not valid, or not worth consideration, or not worth as much money as big A art, little C craft....it just makes me cranky, that that all exists...²⁴

Being self-taught in textile techniques, in terms of her self-definition, she responded:

I have chosen, through my education and through the choices I have made to define myself as an artist, as opposed to a craftsperson, and for ease of comprehension, I will tell people that I work in fibres for those who understand - although for those who don't, I might as well just say I paint with thread, which sounds like an unbearably cheesy thing to say...I would like to just say we're all artists, and just leave it at that, and then everybody gets to figure out what that means for themselves, but that's very wishy washy...so I would probably just say a fibres artist.²⁵

Millerson has also had varied experiences with this issue. She replied:

Ah, the art/craft debate. I wrote an article, for the MAGazine, (the metal arts guild) and the whole issue was about the art and craft debate, and a lot of the people I mentioned it to said, 'oh god, isn't that dead already?' It's definitely on its last legs for some people, but I surveyed some of my fibres students at OCAD to find out what sort of terms they use and how they identify themselves, and found out that most of them didn't even identify themselves with craft - they thought of themselves as artists and designers. We don't have the words to define the blurriness, and we keep going back to hierarchies, and what has more concept versus technique versus material.... What I have discovered is that a lot of people who call themselves fine artists are like craftspeople, in that they are deeply committed to process, and are deeply involved in handwork but they do not identify with craft, and that's been interesting to me.

In recent interviews with four BFA fibres students from Concordia University who were about to graduate, I found the same tendencies. All of the students called themselves

²⁴ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

²⁵ Ibid.

designers and artists, and none of them mentioned craft in any way.²⁶ In terms of her own self definition, Millerson explained:

I'm a weird example because I predominately make work that's shown in galleries, or exhibitions. Occasionally, I've done personal commissions. I haven't really sold the textile work per se, because I price it too high, and because I don't make it available for sale. I move in more of a gallery circle, but I really have a foot in the craft world, the fine craft world, because I think of my work as being really informed and based in craft, in textiles, more than in fine art. So here I am sort of masquerading, because I do have a solid education in textiles, but I definitely am in more of the art gallery world with that, than I am selling one-of-a-kind work or perhaps selling a production line or retail line. So, it's a weird blurry area, but having said that, I completely identify with all of the publications about craft in terms of a discourse, much more so than art publications and discourse. I mean a real focus on art, on conceptual work and on installation, and on the art canon - that just doesn't speak to me at all, because it doesn't include me, it doesn't include people who work in textiles, and reference themselves as textile artists. Occasionally they'll nod to us, but mostly it's still a real closed, traditional canon. So, again I find myself with the craft world even though my work is shown in galleries. So, how I feel about the debate, well I guess it goes on...it goes on until we have new terms.²⁷

I identify strongly with Millerson here, because I am also in that world of which she speaks. As professionals making our way in the fibres field, we are required to show our work in galleries in order to advance, or to be offered any sort of teaching position, regardless of whether we have an MFA or not. I discussed the shift that is occurring in craft discourse and in the field, of linking craft with design and architecture as opposed to with fine art. Millerson responded:

It's strategic. I think they are trying to keep craft alive. And I think it's easier to justify craft when it's attached to architecture and really respectable design fields, because the kind of people who make macramé, and all this sort of stuff that we're associated with, are looked down upon. And, of course, there's also the digital textiles phenomenon,

²⁶ I interviewed the graduating students from the BFA fibres program at Concordia University in May 2007 for upcoming artist profiles in *Fibre Quarterly*, the online journal of Fibre Art in Canada. The *Fibre Quarterly* website can be found at: <http://www.velvethighway.com/> [accessed August 10, 2007].

²⁷ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

and that's the other way that textiles are being justified. And I think that the other thing that's happening is this whole "fine artists using textiles" business....installation... it really treads on some sensitive ground at times. Because there's some appropriation going on with that, and there's a lot of controversial work being made that's....it's touching on textiles, but it has no depth.... you know, just the sheer weight of textile history...and it's not that it needs it, but I personally feel it's lacking, I personally am interested in all that, so I find when I look at work that is arbitrarily textiles, you know, it could have been made from anything, but it's arbitrarily textiles, it looks vacant to me.²⁸

In more recent years, there has been a tendency for fine artists to appropriate both textile materials and techniques in installation and performance art. In "Thinking Aloud" Warren Seelig, a prominent fibre artist discusses this trend, stating "now, instead of being out of phase with the art mainstream, this quirky, hybridized, peripheral medium – fibre – is suddenly seen as possessing all the qualities that are in sync with the current pluralistic mood."²⁹ Some feel that this tendency weakens the position of fibre art as a whole, and potentially places the field in jeopardy. Others, such as Twylene Moyer in "The Importance of Being Fibre" find that this work is missing some key ingredients. She relays "while this new fibre art pays lip service to 'evidence of the hand,' few artists convincingly demonstrate an engagement between head, hand and material."³⁰ Millerson, and I for that matter, agree with Moyer, as important elements of fibre history and tradition are often being lost in this appropriation by fine artists.

St. Michael touched upon her experiences straddling the art and craft worlds. In terms of the debate, she agrees that:

²⁸ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

²⁹ Warren Seelig. "Thinking Aloud: Contemporary Fiber, Material Meaning." *American Craft* 65, no.4 [Aug/Sept 2005]: 43.

³⁰ Twylene Moyer. "The Importance of Being Fiber." *Surface Design Journal* 26, no. 4 [Summer 2002]:8.

The art/craft debate has been very touchy and more complicated than it seems. You can't always define art, put it into a category, and why should it be? I see my work fitting into both, separately and together. It's been to both my advantage and disadvantage, but in all, it stirs things up and makes people think, which is a good thing. I've been disqualified from exhibitions and prizes specifically because of this issue, and in other cases I believe it has furthered my career, gained my art recognition due to the boundaries it has pushed. Because my work doesn't necessarily fit into one category, I have the advantage to be exhibiting within the crafts and within the visual arts. Then there is also the design movement as well. My art work also has been in the debate of whether it's a textile or glass.³¹

Those who use traditional craft media in new and innovative ways tread on new ground. There is difficulty in their placement into the traditional and long-established genres of craft. Paul Greenhalgh discusses innovation in craft practice stating that “for all practitioners in these genres, from radical innovators to the celebrators of tradition, permanence is a central quality that constantly has to be mediated. Undoubtedly, acceptance or rejection of the idea of permanence sharply divides types of practice and practitioner in the visual arts.”³² It seems evident that history and tradition in the form of permanence will continue to play a major role in factions of craft practice. As a result, there is not yet agreement on where to place these “new” expressions of age-old media, such as the work of St. Michael. In terms of her self-definition, she concluded:

I define myself as an artist, but an artist who uses craft technique. I bead weave, which is a craft technique, but what I create is not a craft product. It also depends to whom I define myself to. How Quebec defines an artist/craftsperson is different than how Canada defines an artist/craftsperson, and that is different from how the United States defines an artist/craftsperson. Same goes as to whether I'm considered a textile artist or glass artist—that too differs from country to country. Also, my background and training has been within the visual arts, and that too has an effect on the work I produce, and how I define myself.³³

³¹ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

³² Paul Greenhalgh, “Introduction: Craft in a Changing World” in *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003], 10.

³³ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

Clearly, her CV shows that St. Michael has been successful, as she has received artist and travel grants from both the Canada Council and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, however, even with her proven track record, she still experiences issues related to the placement of her work in the art/craft divide. As these artists have stated, there are still many issues for those making “conceptual craft”, “fine craft”, “fine art with craft materials” or any work which is not clearly art or craft.

The different teaching philosophies of the educational institutions that these artists have attended also play a role in their placement in the art or craft milieu. At present, there are only two options for completing an MFA in Fibres or Textiles in Canada: Concordia University or NSCAD University. As Vander Kooij related, it was challenging at times for her to continue to work in a technique-based medium while in the MFA program at Concordia. Millerson, on the other hand, did her MFA at an institution which places Textiles in the Craft Department, so the focus in that program was totally different, although she did attend her classes together with students in the fine art realm. With a much smaller graduate class encompassing all of the disciplines, and from my experiences in meeting some of the other students involved in that program, I understand that craft at NSCAD in the MFA program is seen to be on somewhat equal footing with those in sculpture, photography, jewellery, ceramics, painting, etc. Now, with the advent of the digital technology revolution, both NSCAD and Concordia have computerized high-tech jacquard looms. I wonder if the students at these universities will embrace the model of artist-as-researcher, or if they will still have a choice as to the extent of technology that they employ in their work. At the moment, the artists I interviewed have

purposely chosen to use time honoured, manual, labour-intensive textile techniques and materials in their work. Vander Kooij spoke of this choice as one of personal preference, stating:

For example, I don't machine embroider, I have seen people do amazing, beautiful machine embroidered things, but I really want to do hand embroidery, because it's got to be portable - I've got to enjoy doing it, and I don't really enjoy working with machines - they break... I'd be frustrated, the needle would break...so far my wrist has never broken.³⁴

The low-tech preference of the three artists in this thesis will now be considered in the analysis of one of their works. I will also consider the role that their artistic and educational training plays in the pieces that they create.

³⁴ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.



Figure 1.

Cynthia (1999)
Andrea Vander Kooij
Embroidery on fabric
Cotton thread, fabric
21.25" x 24"

Cynthia (1999) is one of a series of cross stitch embroideries of siblings and close friends done by Vander Kooij in 1999 and 2000. This work is perfectly suited to the medium employed for a number of reasons. The black on white contrast is striking, and the cropping of the image somehow makes the work more intimate. Stitched in black thread on even weave fabric, this extremely labour intensive work is vibrating with energy, popping out at the viewer from inside the frame. As an intricate study in positive and negative space, from afar, the work resembles a photograph. In terms of textile techniques, this work could be mistaken for a jacquard weaving which often incorporates photographic images into woven cloth. Jacquard weaving involves very complex digital technology and computer knowledge yet Vander Kooij's work is a panacea for these digital times, as it is done totally by hand, cross stitch by cross stitch. At 21 ¼ inches by 24 inches, it would not seem that huge a feat, until you get close to the work and can actually see that it is done by tiny repetitive stitches. In terms of education, Vander Kooij taught herself to cross stitch as a child, so this work could have been done without any post-secondary training in textiles, art or photography. However, her training was most definitely an asset in knowing where to crop the photo, how to shade the face correctly, and how to balance the black with the white effectively in the work. This work was created after her BFA, yet before her entry into the MFA program at Concordia University and most definitely exemplifies her commitment to creating art from cross stitch embroidery.



Figure 2. *Enlace: Caress* (2003)
Dorie Millerson
Needlepoint Lace Technique
Cotton Thread
10" x 10"

Millerson's work, *Enlace Caress* (2003) was created as part of her MFA thesis show at NSCAD University. Essentially a drawing in negative space, the work is made from needlepoint lace, which is derived from blending embroidery and lace making techniques together. Created from white cotton thread, the work hangs suspended in space, and is displayed with direct lighting shining through it. This results in a shadow being cast on the wall behind it, creating a large and somewhat ghostly image of the original work. The piece depicts hands in motion, captured during the act of crocheting, doing involved handwork similar to the needlepoint lace employed by the artist. Millerson's needlepoint lace works are, quite simply, drawings in thread, however, the thread is continuously looped and attached onto itself in a complex manner in order to create the structure which holds the work together. The entire work is only ten inches by ten inches, so it is delicate yet sturdy. The lace areas of varied sizes and intensities become the background of the work, and the hands emerge from this dense network of threads. This work is one of a series of pieces created during Millerson's MFA experience, and although she had a small class that she related to, she was the only one doing this technique during her degree.³⁵ She is self-taught in this technique, and like Vander Kooij, although her education has made her work stronger, it could have been created without the benefit of the MFA experience. Millerson's skill at illustration has become a large component of her work, so her time studying design at OCAD has served her well.

³⁵ NSCAD University usually accepts one textiles student per academic year into their MFA program. They have plans to increase the size of their MFA program, but as of this year, it is still much smaller than those at other universities.

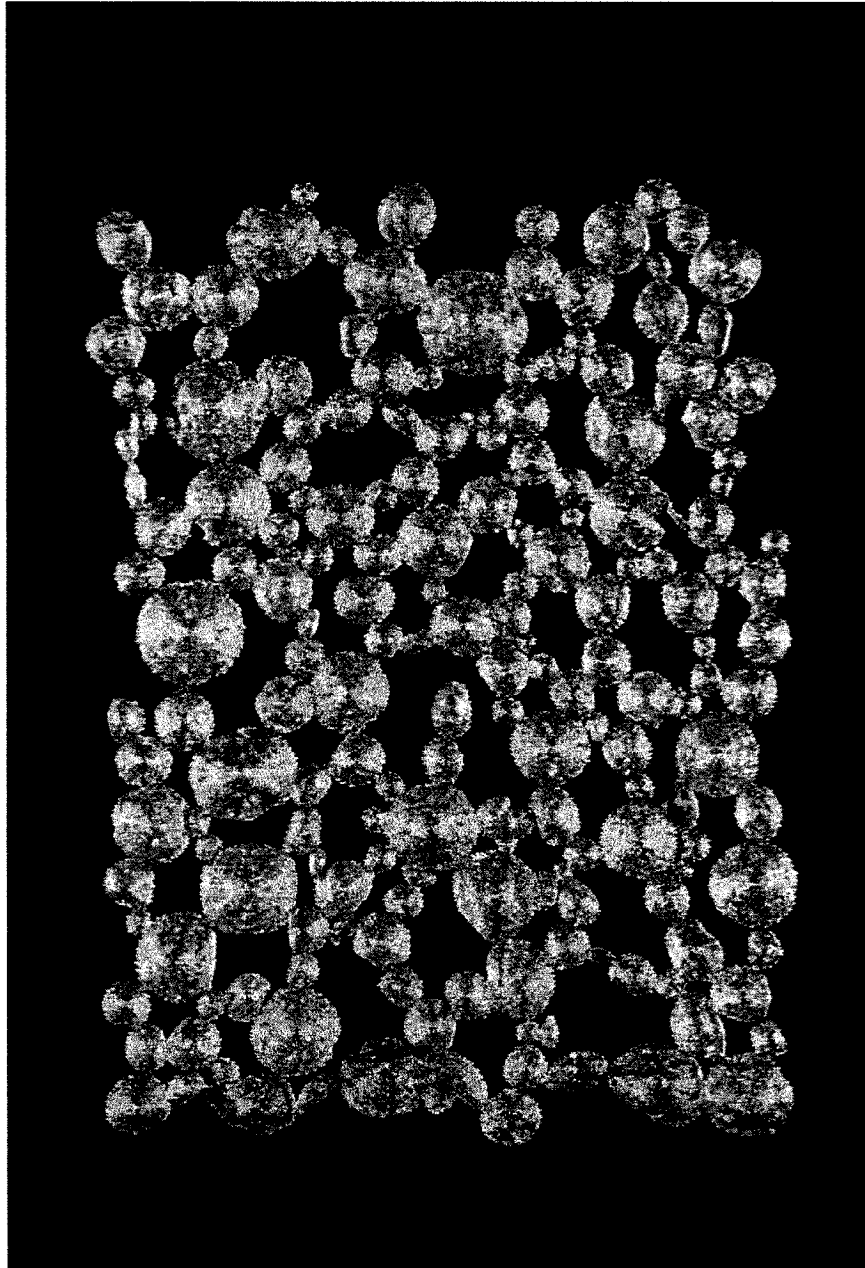


Figure 3. *Oh the Webs We Weave* (1999)
Natasha St. Michael
Hand woven bead sculpture
Glass beads and thread
22" x 20" x 1/4"

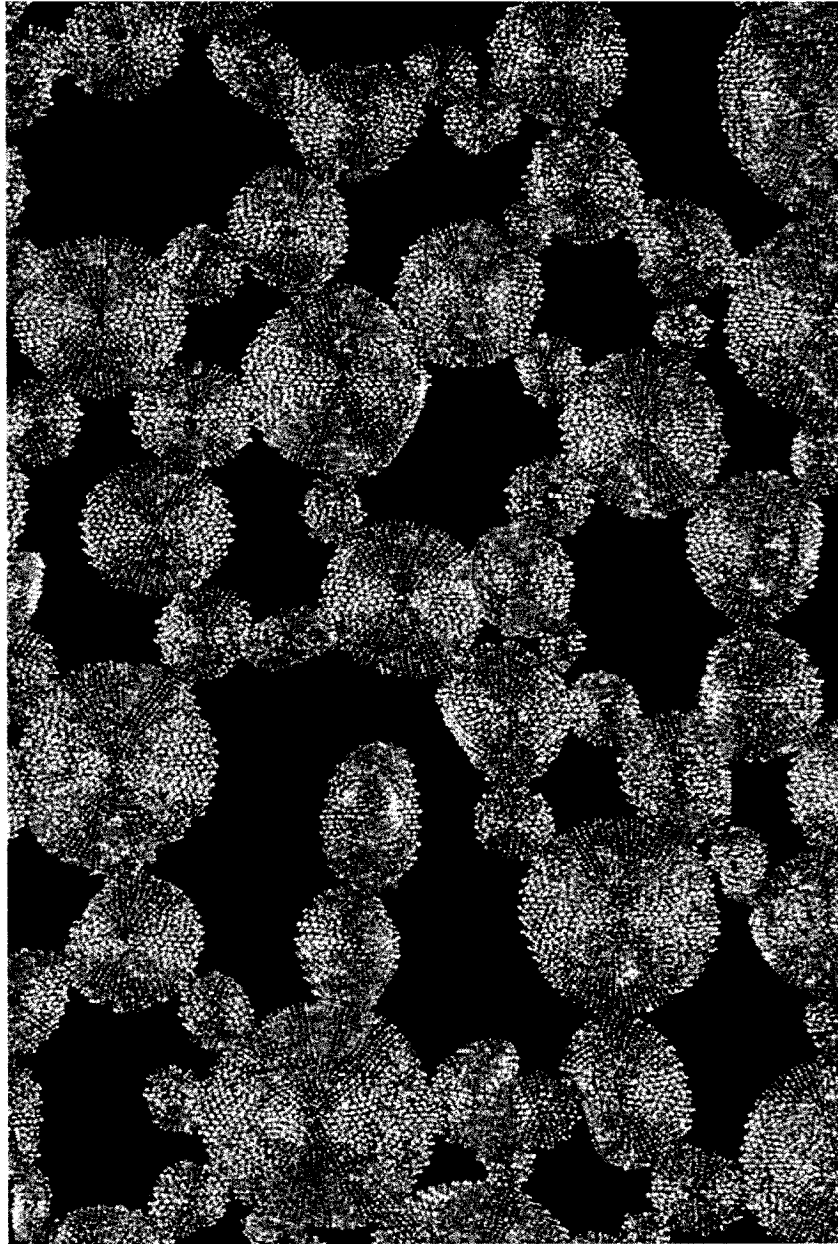


Figure 4. *Oh the Webs We Weave* (1999)
Image Detail
Natasha St. Michael
Hand woven bead sculpture
Glass beads and thread
22" x 20" x 1/4"

Oh The Webs We Weave (1999), by St. Michael was one of her first large scale bead weavings. Woven from only clear, silver lined glass seed beads and black thread, at 24 inches by 20 inches, this multi-faceted work is grandiose in comparison to other bead work that I have seen. Originally drawn to beads for their light and transparency, as well as their low toxicity, St. Michael was soon consumed with both the weaving process, and its final results. This work is incredibly time consuming to make, so to create on such a large scale is a huge undertaking, as St. Michael's works take anywhere from one to five months to make, working 6-12 hours a day, threading beads onto tiny needles, everyday. The artwork consists of solid and circular bead spirals of various sizes which have been joined together in many places to form a composite whole. Mostly two dimensional in form, the piece could be seen to be decorative, as beads do have primary associations with jewellery and other finery. Their shiny surfaces glitter, drawing you in to examine the work further. Yet on some levels, because of this, the work could be dismissed by those in the fine art realm, as it would seem to have no conceptual basis. From a design point of view, however, this type of work could be of interest to interior designers as a luxury item to present to their clients. St. Michael trained at SAIC in fibre and material studies, first working in surface design and weaving. Although her experiences in that program assisted her in working with light and transparency, she learned bead weaving independently from her studies, on her own. Therefore, she could have made the same sort of work without this background, but it is obvious that all of her high school and university fine art training have informed both her working processes and the final products. Many of her contemporaries likely would be aiming at gallery representation in the fine art world, yet it is difficult to know where to place this work and which market

would most suit it. This ambiguity has yielded St. Michael mixed results in terms of artist grants, sales of work, gallery representation and exhibition opportunities.

In the case of these three artists, educational opportunities from an early age may have played a role in their eventual choice to use textile or fibre techniques and/or media. As we will see in the next chapter, Vander Kooij got hooked (no pun intended) into needlework when her sister took knitting lessons, and later left a cross stitch book at home on her university break. Millerson took textile classes as part of her schooling in the UK before coming to Canada, so she had a strong interest in the medium as a young teen. St. Michael's mother was a fashion retailer in the United States and Canada, and always wanted her daughter to go into fashion design. Although this observation is based on these three particular artists, I believe that it is fair to speculate that many textile artists have been introduced to some sort of textile work directly or indirectly before choosing to go into the field, whether in their school, in their homes or in their communities.

Chapter Three

Internal and External Motivational Factors Influencing Choice of Medium

Although their educational experiences may have had a large impact on why the women I studied chose to become an artist, in this chapter I will examine other potential influences. In my efforts to determine internal and external factors which may have led to the decision to be a fibre artist, I will first closely examine the home life and the cultural history of these artists. Next I will discuss the impact of both close and extended family support on each artist's career. The effects of materiality when choosing fibre as a medium, as well as potential reasons behind the choice to do labour intensive techniques will be also be investigated. Finally, the nuances and complexities of the mind, body and spirit relationship the maker experiences when engaged in such labour intensive techniques will be examined in order to determine what role this plays in the choice to become a fibre artist.

The activities and communities that surround us as we grow can't help but have some sort of effect on the person we become. With that in mind, I was interested in what type of exposure to textile techniques and practices were present in the early years of these artists' lives. Vander Kooij didn't really remember her mother being engaged in many textile activities, but they were present in her extended family. She recalled:

My mother was very traditional, her job was as a homemaker, although she also did all the books for the farm - my parents were farmers. She wasn't a quilter or a sewer, but I think she had a sewing machine, which I now own, because she never ever used it, like for mending, which she also never did. And she worked on the same knitted afghan for her whole life; it's still in the closet at home unfinished. But my sister had

knitting lessons with my Oma, my paternal grandmother - my sister is eight years older than I am, there's a big gap in the middle of the family, and by the time I was old enough to have knitting lessons, Oma had moved into a retirement home an hour and a half away. I'm so bummed that I didn't get to have that, because it's such a nice matrilineal experience...¹

Vander Kooij managed to get knitting lessons all the same, to be just like her sister. She recounted:

I wanted to do everything that my sister did, I really wanted to learn to knit, and my mom bought me lessons with a lady who lived three concessions up from us named Mrs. Milks, who chain smoked and knit a sweater a day. I went every Thursday nite, and we watched lottario, cause she had her tickets, and the Cosby Show as I learned to knit, and I was like 11 or something. She was really cool, and she never used a pattern. Never ever, just, she would be like oh now we'll put the armhole in there, she was very cool.²

Following this experience, her next foray into textiles came a few years later:

Then my sister learned plastic canvas needlepoint, brought it home one year from school and said, we are going to make coasters for Mom for her birthday, and then she went off to university and left the book with me, and it was actually a cross stitch book, and I taught myself to cross stitch from the book. And then I started, jumping in - an entire course in cross stitching, did a lot of cheesy teenage cross stitch - and then when I was in my undergrad, I decided to make it part of my art practice and was pretty pleased with myself, because I thought that I had invented it, embroidery as art, because I was like so sheltered that I had no clue, I didn't know anything. Then my wonderful art professor, Betty Stockton, was like, have you heard of Judy Chicago? (Laugh) ...and I was like, oh, I see, other people do this...but you know, I was thrilled that other people did it...³

As children, often the desire to be like someone we admire will lead us to try and emulate them, and may potentially introduce us to activities that will become a huge part of our lives. Such is the case with Vander Kooij never stopped her textile explorations from age 11 onwards, after following her sister's lead to learn to knit.

¹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Millerson didn't really have direct access to any textile activities in her home, but other creative activities were encouraged:

My parents were very interested in art and music, particularly classical music, so art was always in our house, and there's a real appreciation. They're both professors, academics, so there was definitely an interest in the arts of all kinds. My grandfather was an art teacher, an art high school teacher. And my aunt, my mom's sister, is also an artist, she teaches children. So, there was definitely a precedence of art in the family, and my parents were very supportive of me pursuing any kind of art, they really would encourage it.⁴

Similarly, St. Michael didn't necessarily have direct access to actual textile making in her childhood, but she was encouraged to get involved in creative activities from an early age:

Mother was in the fashion industry. She had boutiques in Montreal (Crescent Street, Laurier Street), South Hampton NY, and Boston. She imported a Dutch clothing line Oilily, high-end ladies and children's clothing. Both my parents had great appreciation for the arts and in particular, design. From a young age my parents always sent me to art classes at local arts and community centers. They always hoped I would eventually go into fashion design and at the early age of 12, I was sent to sewing school on the weekends.⁵

Alongside encouraging art at home, her parents also believed in experiential learning:

My parents loved to travel as well, and both my brother and I would accompany my parents on trips to South America, South East Asia, India and Europe. They believed in educating us through exposing us to different cultures, traditions and ways of life, and through that I learned about many forms of arts and crafts, design and creative traditions from all over the world.⁶

This early exposure to art and creative activities had a huge influence on all of the artists studied. The formative years are of great import when preparing young minds to freely

⁴ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁵ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

explore and to have a sense of their creative skills early. Another marker found in studies of artists was cited in a study done by Keri Jones, Mark Runco, Casey Dorman and Darryl Freeland, entitled “Influential Factors in Artists’ Lives and Themes in Their Artwork.” They concluded in part “seeing artists working professionally in the field was a major influence for most of the artists in this study.”⁷ Similarly, all three artists I have studied had some experiences of either seeing or hearing about family members who were artists. Vander Kooij discussed her father’s untapped artistic talents:

I am sure my father would have been an artist if that had been an avenue that was open to him, because he was a very good drawer, and you know, he talks about this drawing of a kingfisher he did when he was a little boy that the teacher put on the wall. But they were first generation immigrants, you didn’t get to be an artist. If you were really successful, you got to buy your own farm instead of working on someone else’s so that’s what he did. But we always joke, he’s the one with the EYE. He has this huge vase collection, he arranges all the flowers and really cares about how the house is decorated and what colors are used.⁸

Millerson brought up her mother, her aunt and her grandfather as role models of artistic endeavors in her early life:

My mom is a very accomplished pianist, and I play the piano too...so different people are creative in different ways. My aunt makes puppets. I think she went to Art College for a short time. My grandfather was more of an illustrator, he liked civil war images, you know, drawing corpses and so on. My grandmother knit me baby clothes and another relative too, so there were things like that around the house, quilted things and knitted things that had been made in the family.⁹

St. Michael, as well, remembers creative times in her childhood with family members:

⁷ Keri Jones, Mark A. Runco, Casey Dorman and Darryl C. Freeland, “Influential Factors in Artists’ Lives and Themes in Their Artwork,” *Creativity Research Journal* 10, nos. 2 & 3 [1997], 226.

⁸ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁹ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

I do come from an artistic family. My grandfather was an architect. In his spare time he was always painting and drawing. The basement of his home was used as a painting studio and my fondest childhood memory was him teaching my brother and I how to do cartoon sketches. I always loved watching him paint and draw. My mother's first cousin is Henry Saxe (a well known contemporary Canadian sculptor). Both my parents are very creative, but their strength is their eye, their appreciation for the arts and design, and their natural ability to put things together. It's like the other side of the creative process; some people can create and produce art, while others have a keen sense of aesthetic, appreciating the beauty and every detail. My father in particular, would pick up an object or a garment and could go on and on about why it's beautiful, why it's so well made, and why in particular, it's so special. My brother has a passion for photography and writing. He works hard to save money to travel the world and take photographs.¹⁰

It is interesting to note here, that all three artists have mentioned that their direct family members were "creative in different ways", according to Millerson. In the case of both Vander Kooij and St. Michael, they even used the same words to describe their parents, stating that they were the ones with "the eye". Both Millerson and St. Michael's grandfathers would draw in close proximity to them as well. In this case, as in the research study by Jones, Runco, Dorman and Freeland, seeing these family members as artists likely had a huge influence on these young artists-to-be.

Home is one place where people are exposed to these types of artistic activities. Another place is in a person's culture, or community. Traditionally, in Canada, craft has been upheld as a positive expression of our national culture. In *A Quest for Balance*, Stephen Inglis wrote "the very finest contemporary works of Canadian craftspeople are legitimate treasures of our national heritage. They bear witness to the harmony of skill and insight that is the basis of craft tradition. Yet, their full significance is realized only when they are understood not as ends in themselves, but rather as brilliant moments in a continuous

¹⁰ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

flow of creativity.”¹¹ In this passage, Inglis allows for growth and change to be incorporated into craft traditions, showing an open mind to new creations. This is not always the way with cultural traditions.¹² I was interested in knowing whether or not the cultural heritage of these artists played a role in their creative development, or if it came up in the themes of their artwork.

Vander Kooij shared her family history, as both of her parents immigrated to Canada in 1945 from Holland:

They came over on the first boat out, because both of them got bombed, there was nothing left, and the Canadian government was advertising, you know, they wanted good hard working white people, and Holland was a good place to look for that.¹³

Her parents’ families both settled in communities with other Dutch immigrants. Her father’s family, however, was in an area that remained quite segregated from other Canadians. She described:

My mother’s family settled in Owen Sound, and my dad’s family settled in the Holland Marsh....and the Holland Marsh is a much more Dutch little enclave, almost everyone that lived there was Dutch, whereas my Mom’s family moved into a Canadian town, so assimilated a little more...People who came over just after the second world war that live here now in the same group that they came over in are more Dutch than the people in Holland. Holland is a very progressive country that picks up trends quickly and moves forward fast, and those people who came

¹¹ Stephen Inglis, “A Quest for Balance” in *Works of Craft from the Massey Foundation Collection* [Hull: Balmuir Book Publishing Ltd., National Museum of Man and the National Museums of Canada, 1984], 23.

¹² See, for example, discussions on authenticity and stylistic hybridity in Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner’s “Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*, eds. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999]; Barbara A. Babcock’s “Mudwomen and Whitemen: A Meditation on Pueblo Potteries and the Politics of Representation,” in *The Material Culture of Gender: The Gender of Material Culture* [Winterthur: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1997]; and discussions of “cultural distinctiveness” in Alfred Young Man’s “The Metaphysics of North American Indian Art,” in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, eds. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, [Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992].

¹³ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

over after the second world war are very traditional people who have sort of kept culture static as it was like in 1945, which is really interesting.¹⁴

Vander Kooij has strong examples of what life in Holland was like in the mid-twentieth century from her grandparents. These are traditions that most Canadians know little about. This is significant, for as Sandra Flood states in *Constructing a Craft History*, “everyone came to this country with culture bred into their bones, and as in other situations where different cultural groups came into contact, there was transference, adaptation and loss. We have largely not considered even the basics: what cultures came, by whom and how cultural selection was made, and what remains.”¹⁵ In terms of the textile activities that Vander Kooij was exposed to, she recalls:

There’s a lot of knitting...my Oma, both grandmothers knitted, and probably both of them sewed, I’m guessing, because they made their kids clothes a lot. And there’s a big textile tradition in the Netherlands of lace...lace, knitting, I’m sure there’s some weaving, I know there’s embroidery...but I haven’t done like a big historic research into Dutch textile practices. But my relationship with my ancestry is that I identify very strongly with being Dutch, I have my Dutch citizenship, so technically I am dual - but my understanding of Dutch is very much immigrant Dutch...¹⁶

Her experiences of her cultural heritage, then, are through her memories of time spent with her relatives, many years ago. And though Vander Kooij strongly identifies with being Dutch, her understanding of what that entails comes from those who came to Canada in 1945. In discussing the study of Canadian culture, Laurel Doucette states “because of the effects of colonialism and romantic nationalism, Canadian understandings of traditional culture have not been integrated into the life of

¹⁴ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

¹⁵ Sandra Flood. “Constructing a Craft History” in *Artichoke*, Special Edition No. 3[2003], 51.

¹⁶ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

contemporary society.”¹⁷ The majority of Canadians have not been exposed to the many different cultures that populate this country, and as a result, many craft skills and practices have not been brought to the attention of the general public.

Millerson arrived in Canada as a teenager from Britain. She recalled:

Well, the three of us emigrated in 1990. My mom is American, so her family is dispersed throughout the states, she is from Michigan, and they are all over the states, California and so on, but mostly it's Michigan that we are associated with, that part of the family, her sister and so on. And my dad's side were all in Britain, so there are still a couple of relatives there.¹⁸

In terms of having textile techniques being practiced around her as a child, she related:

There were a few things made for me as a child. And certainly, I think there have been textiles that I have been attached to for a long time, like I have a shawl of my mother's that is very evocative to me, and I have a number of my parents clothes that are very sort of sentimentally important to me, the shirt my dad was married in - I have a couple of things like that that I have hoarded, but nobody made anything, or showed me how to make anything.¹⁹

As for the impact of immigrating to Canada, Millerson acknowledged:

I often think about where is home, in terms of both a physical and emotional sense. Having lived in two countries, and traveled in many others, I think I have more of a sense of global diversity than some people do, if they haven't moved countries, and thankfully, in my case, because both were English, I didn't experience a language problem living in Canada - but I certainly experienced a culture shock, and a real rupture in terms of my sense of identity, because when you leave your country of origin, you leave your sense of belonging, and Canada, thankfully, is a country, it's multi-cultural, so it isn't too hard to find your place.²⁰

¹⁷Laura Doucette, "Reclaiming the Study of Our Cultural Lives" in *Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada*, eds. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye [Montreal: McGill – Queen's University Press, 1997], 24.

¹⁸Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall postulates “cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.”²¹ Some of this past history, culture and power remains within oneself from one’s country of origin, yet in coming to a new country, there is another history, another manifestation of both culture and power that one must constantly negotiate in order to survive and thrive in the new environment. Millerson was lucky enough to have had her art with which to express these experiences.

Not every family is so connected to their roots, or where their families came from when they arrived in Canada. For instance, I only just found out recently that both sides of my mother’s family were Scottish. I had somehow mistakenly understood that I was one quarter Scottish and one quarter British. I don’t even know where my father’s father is from. Our family never really seemed to think it was of much importance. As a result, it is difficult now to ascertain this information, as there are few relatives left on that side. Similarly, St. Michael revealed:

On my Mother’s side, my grandmother came from Russia in the early 20th century to Montreal. My grandfather’s parents came from Lithuania. He was born in Montreal 1908.²²

However, like me, she is unsure of her father’s family history. As a result, when questioned about the relationship of textiles to her cultural heritage, she had no response.

²¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory – A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, [New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993], 394.

²² Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

Besides family history, family support could potentially play a large role in the choice to become an artist of any sort. Along with encouraging art expression and activities as a child, being emotionally and maybe potentially financially supportive throughout the artist's career can assist the artist through their rough times. Vander Kooij has always had her family's support with regards to her desire to be an artist:

When I was little, I said early on that I wanted to be an artist and they seemed fine with that, they didn't oppose it. I think because they probably just thought at that point that I would eventually get married and be a mom, so art's a fine thing to take up your time until then, right?? And now, they are extremely supportive, even when they have no clue why I am doing what I'm doing. I have a great family and they always come out to openings, my sister says that she's the president of my fan club. My Aunts are actually quite into it... my Mom and Dad are really quite supportive, but my Aunts, especially on my mom's side, because my mom talks about my work all the time, a lot of them ask me about it now, and its just really nice.²³

Vander Kooij has another supportive family member, her husband. She married another artist quite young, and they are mutually emotionally, and financially supportive. She explained:

We decided we both wanted to do graduate school - we decided that we would apply, and the chips fall where they would, whoever got in would go...and I got in first, so we came here, and he worked for three years while I was in the program, and supported me. Now he's in the program, he's handed it off, and I work full time to support him going through, to avoid the debilitating student loans...so that's been very good, you know - say what you will about being married to another artist, you sure won't have a lot of money - financially, we both should have married investment bankers, but at least I never have to justify anything that I'm doing. I never have to say here's why I'm going to do this, he doesn't get upset when I use nudity in my work, or something ridiculous like that - he's very supportive of my work, which is great.²⁴

Millerson experienced a different sort of support from her extended family:

²³ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

²⁴ Ibid.

I've had an experience with my partner, where his mother makes a lot of textiles, and we've had a real connection in that we're both interested in them and we both make them. Her mother, a typical grandmother, was a bobbin lace maker, so I inherited all of her tools - they're Danish, so I have her lace cushion, her bobbins, some of her patterns and some of her lace....not all of the lace, but a few little started pieces because it was felt that I would be most able to make use of them and was interested, so that was a real privilege.²⁵

St. Michael has always experienced family support towards her choice to be an artist:

My parents always wanted me to go into the arts. I loved art and it was always my childhood dream to be an artist. They always sent me to art classes (Visual Arts Centre, Concordia University—they had weekend art program for kids, Saidye Bronfman Centre, etc.) I did all sorts of classes from painting to ceramics. I went to sewing school when I was 12 on weekends, which lasted for about a year. My family is extremely supportive about my career path. We come from a family of artists, they know the challenges of it, and they know that it's not easy, but they also do know that it is possible. They want their children to be happy and to support the decisions we make. On a financial level, the arts are obviously not the best career path to take - there is no financial consistency or guarantee and can be quite a struggle. They've seen my struggles—I know that they wish it could be easier, but they also see the pleasure, satisfaction and happiness that I get from my art making and career.²⁶

All three of these artists, then, have experienced ongoing support from their family, from childhood onwards, allowing them the freedom to choose a creative path in life.

When it comes to choice in medium, many dimensions of this issue could come into play. In the choice of working in fibre, anything from being a hands-on kind of person, to having a certain personality, a dedication to your craft, or a desire to work in transparency and light could affect the decision to be a fibre artist. I was interested in knowing if there is something specific that makes these women choose textiles as a career

²⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

²⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

path. Craft artists are often known for having an intense dedication to their mediums, and in part, this is where some of the criticism comes from in terms of the fine art perspective on making. Favouring the conceptual approach, it is difficult for many fine artists to understand both the training and time it takes to work in a craft medium. If they wish to have something made in clay because it works with their idea, fine artists may even hire a craftsperson to do the work for them. In “What’s Crafts Criticism Anyways,” Janet Koplos writes:

I assert that there’s nothing wrong with being devoted to a medium and having the medium shape the work. That’s not inherently a weakness; in fact, I can see a philosophical and psychological strength in engagement with a single real substance. This intimacy and depth of knowledge in a way is like a marriage. It seems to me that this kind of bond is wonderful for the maker and can be vicariously experienced by the viewer if the intensity of the feeling is visually expressed in the work. And I should think that would be a greater value as an alternative in a virtual age in which our hands are often empty.²⁷

The commitment to one medium may indeed be like a marriage, choosing to spend your entire lifelong artistic career with one medium. There are so many different techniques to explore, and the area of fibres offers many challenges, both of the manual and the high technology variety, depending upon one’s tastes. In terms of choosing fibre as a medium, Vander Kooij had this to say:

It’s something that I always wanted to do, that I always liked doing ...I do it because it gives me pleasure, it’s why I haven’t made a video yet, not because I don’t have lots of great ideas for wonderful videos, but because I don’t think it’s very fun. And since I only get to do it in a limited way, since my time is really precious, I really want to do the thing I like to do most.²⁸

²⁷ Janet Koplos, “What’s Crafts Criticism Anyway?” in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing*, ed. Jean Johnson [Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Center, 2002], 83.

²⁸ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

As she literally spends every free minute completing textile projects, wherever she is, Vander Kooij makes good on that statement on a regular basis.

As mentioned above, pleasure could be one reason to choose a medium. Another factor to consider would be the mindfulness of the maker, specifically the relationship between the mind and the body that contemporary fibre artists experience while creating their work. Craftspeople in general and fibre artists in particular are involved in techniques and processes that are repetitive, cumulative, and extremely time consuming. Notions of flow, losing track of time, peak experiences and meditative moments experienced will be explored, as well as the concepts of body knowledge and memory often involved when creating with labour intensive textile techniques.

The labour intensive techniques used in most fibre arts are often repetitive in nature. Perhaps this is fulfilling some sort of base need that is no longer filled in other ways. For instance, in *Overlay*, Lucy Lippard, a prominent feminist art writer suggests that “the active, or formal, element of repetition which characterizes so much and such diverse American art from the last three decades can be seen as an acknowledgement of the need for ritual.”²⁹ This could be one reason for engaging in such activities, certainly many craft processes involve several steps that need to be carried out in a certain order, and they may easily become quite ritualized. There may, however, also be other considerations, such as the role of embodiment, or the physical sensations that one has while engaged in these processes. Writer Steven Horne, in “Embodying Subjectivity,”

²⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, [New York: Pantheon Books, 1983], 160. Lippard’s academic profile is available at: <http://www.indiana.edu/~scsweb/jchicago/lippard.htm> [accessed on August 6, 2007].

suggests that repetitive processes occurring in certain works of art “focus time and bodily action, integrate reflection, action and materiality in a process of embodiment, empowering the self as the investments of ego involvement diminishes.”³⁰ When discussing the choice of a medium which involved labour intensive, repetitive motions and activities with the artists I interviewed, there were definitely commonalities in responses. Millerson stated:

I think it's important for me that I'm interested in the work I do and that that interest is sustained. It must be something in my personality that is drawn to meticulous, highly crafted work. It's sort of a hard thing to explain...it's a very interior thing. I don't think I would be satisfied if I made a kind of work that wasn't highly meticulous. It's a bit about being a perfectionist, to an extent, and it's a bit about being most interested in those kinds of work.³¹

St. Michael also has a sustained interest in the work that she does. She regularly spends many hours a day intensely engaged in her practice. She explained:

It's something in my personality that is drawn to doing this type of work. It is extremely labour intensive and meticulous, but that is specifically why I choose to do this. I enjoy it. This type of work involves patience, care and detail. Everything has to be done right; one loose knot and the piece will fall apart. I don't necessarily believe I have an overly patient personality, but I've learned to cultivate one through my art. You do something long enough, eventually it becomes a part of you. I also have a perfectionist personality and my work enables me to create something of value out of that.³²

Vander Kooij, on the other hand, was not as personally conscious of the choice to do this repetitive sort of work. She recalled that:

Coming to Concordia (University) for the first time, I had someone tell me that my work was obsessive, and use that word obsession around the

³⁰ Stephen Horne, “Embodying Subjectivity” in *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, eds. Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing. [Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998], 39.

³¹ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

³² Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

work, and I guess there possibly are aspects of my personality that are obsessive, and that's kind of how it works out.³³

As all three of these artists mention, having a certain kind of personality and/or being a perfectionist leads directly to the choice to engage in such intricate activities in the first place. Other positive physical and psychological aspects of the work could also play a role in the choice to do this work. Along with being a perfectionist, these artists all use their medium to relieve stress and anxiety. Vander Kooij disclosed:

I have a hard time concentrating if I am not knitting. I knit in every single one of my graduate seminars. I started bringing my knitting to church; I sit in the back, I don't disturb anyone, I'm not trying to piss anybody off, I use quiet needles....but at the same time, if my hands are not busy, my mind is so busy that it's very hard to focus, and I do much better thinking when my hands are occupied.....you know, I just focus better.³⁴

Millerson has a similar tendency, and finds this work to be helpful in conquering the stresses of life:

I am often kind of highly stressed about all sorts of things, and getting into that mode, where it's a meditative, kind of repetitive state is very calming - I have found because it takes so many hours to do the work, and there is no way to speed it up, I often have to stimulate my mind in other ways as well so I listen to books on tape, on CD, and I listen to all kinds of things in order to keep myself occupied while I work, because I can't do anything else - I can't take my eyes off it, but I also enjoy the kind of thought process that you go through when you are working on a repetitive thing -you sort of start reminiscing, or you think about the past, and my work will remind me of something, or the image might remind me of a memory, or I'll start thinking about a person I haven't thought about in a long time, and so, it's a real state you get in.³⁵

St. Michael shared a similar response:

Someone once commented that I must be a very patient person to be doing the work I do. My response was, 'No, actually the reverse, I'm full

³³ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

of anxiety!' I need to do the bead weaving to bring me down a notch. The majority of the time it is soothing. There is something for me about repetition that puts me in a rhythm or calm, physically, mentally and spiritually.³⁶

As stated by the artists, their repetitive art practices help to soothe their anxieties, their stress and their chattering minds. They are getting a physical and emotional dividend from doing this sort of work which may contribute to their choice of fibre as a material.

Other states of mind may play a role in the choice to do these sorts of activities. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has done extensive research into states of optimal experience. In 1990 he introduced the concept of flow, which he describes as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.”³⁷

Millerson has experienced this type of state:

I always try to do something that is really coming from me, and I really enjoy that kind of involvement that you get into with intense, repetitive work...you fall into it, it's hypnotic, and I am such a cerebral kind of individual. Getting into that mode, where it's meditative, a kind of repetitive state is very calming.³⁸

Giovanni B. Moneta an academic whose research interests include subjective well-being, personality, development, and creativity and learning, describes flow academically: “Flow is a state of profound task-absorption, cognitive efficiency, and intrinsic enjoyment that makes a person feel one with the activity in which s/he is involved.”³⁹

Absorption and enjoyment are key for each of the artists studied. St. Michael discloses:

³⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

³⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* [New York: Harper and Row, 1990], 4. Csikszentmihalyi's book has been influential in the fields of psychology, leisure studies and business amongst other disciplines.

³⁸ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

³⁹ Giovanni B. Moneta, “Flow Experience across Cultures.” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 5 [2004]: 115.

With my line of work, it's all about being that involved in the production, as to losing yourself within it. The majority of my works take 2-5 months to complete, 6-14 hours a day, everyday. Those months involve weaving the exact same form every single day, over and over again. In order to maintain my sanity, I have to enter some sort of mind state to get through it, to enjoy it.⁴⁰

This state of increased awareness and calm seems to be a perk of this sort of practice, or it may actually be the main reason some artists are involved in these activities in the first place. However, the experience of flow is not always present while performing these labour intensive activities. Vander Kooij describes her relationship with flow as being more elusive these days, due to lack of time available to work in the studio:

I'm very disciplined in that if I have 20 minutes, I can sit down and work on art in those twenty minutes. Because I don't have the luxury of the eight hour block of time, you don't necessarily get to get into flow as much, but there are times when I have had more time, in my studio and working on something, or when the project is flowing. And then in the end, in the actual making of the objects, in the knitting of them, because there are a lot of large areas of unchanging work, you get to have that nice, sort of meditative quality of flow.⁴¹

Clearly, flow may come and flow may, at times, be more elusive. Although all three artists have experienced flow, it nevertheless remains a concept that is difficult to define verbally.

Another concept that engages both the body and the mind comes from Howard Gardner, an academic in the field of Education, who developed a theory of multiple intelligences that are presented in his book *Frames of Mind*.⁴² These seven human intelligences

⁴⁰ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁴¹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁴² Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences was influential on the field of education in the United States, and was utilized at Project Zero, a research project at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. [New York: Basic Books, 1983].

include linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, spatial intelligence, interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence. Although many of these different types of intelligences relate to being an artist, it is the bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence that I am most interested in exploring with the artists that I interviewed. Being trained as a craftsperson at one point in my life, I have learned that there is something particular about the relationship of physically creating something that affects both the body and the mind. Gardner states that “bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence entails the potential of using one’s whole body or parts of the body (like the hand or the mouth) to solve problems or fashion products.”⁴³ When queried about this type of intelligence, the artists agreed that there is some kind of relationship, some bodily way of knowing that takes place in their practices. Relating this concept to her current role as a textiles instructor, Millerson can’t quite remember exactly when or how she learned to weave:

You get amnesia about some of it, because you build on techniques. You can physically have a list of instructions, press this, lift this, pull this, but that’s not enough. There is something in watching someone do it, and then physically sitting down and feeling the materials that is essential.⁴⁴

This kinaesthetic bodily knowledge is seen by Bruce Metcalf to be one of the potential motivational factors involved in choosing to become a craftsperson in this day and age. In “Craft and Art, Culture and Biology” he relates how his personal experience of teaching “leads me to believe that the potent response exhibited by a young craft student is an intuitive recognition that the bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence has finally found an

⁴³ In *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences For The 21st Century*, [New York: Basic Books, 1999], Gardner revisits and updates his multiple intelligence theory.

⁴⁴ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

outlet. It's the mind speaking through the body."⁴⁵ St. Michael discusses this concept in relation to her work experience:

It's an intuitive process. I can honestly say that when I started bead weaving, it just came completely naturally; whatever form I've wanted to create, I just know how to do it. I can say I knew from the beginning that I would continue working with beads, partially because I have so many ideas that I want materialized, but also the media feels right. And yes, there is a certain mind-body connection I have with my work; it's a clear knowing that what I'm doing is right. There is no struggle; it's a natural flow of using what is already there, what is already a part of me.⁴⁶

Bodily kinaesthetic knowledge is extremely difficult to explain, and is akin or possibly indistinguishable from tacit knowledge in this way. Peter Dormer, writing about the nature of craft, relates that "tacit knowledge is acquired through experience", and stressed that this knowledge is "learned and absorbed by individuals through practice and from other people."⁴⁷ As this knowledge is physically learned by one's body and not necessarily their mind, there is difficulty in verbally expressing how to do a skill that one has embodied. This difficulty is reinforced in "Education and the Hybrid Process: Reflective Craft Practice" where Maggi Toner-Edgar and Mitch Phillips state that "tacit knowledge cannot be explained in full detail, as it is a condition as opposed to a consequence of experiential learning. The intrusion of 'linguistic intelligence' can be a disadvantage to the making process. The practice and concepts that intertwine are part of

⁴⁵ Bruce Metcalf, "Craft and Art, Culture and Biology." in *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 77. Metcalf, a jeweler and a lecturer at University of the Arts in Philadelphia is one of the leading writers on craft in the United States.

⁴⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁴⁷ The idea of tacit knowledge is brought forth in Dormer's "Craft and the Turing Test for Practical Thinking," and is related to the work done by Michael Polanyi regarding tacit knowing and personal knowledge. Peter Dormer, ed., *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*. [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 147.

an intuitive process, which is built up over a period of time.”⁴⁸ Millerson has experienced tacit knowledge in her student’s development. She recounts:

There’s a kind of transformation of knowledge. I’ve had moments where I could barely find the words to explain the technique to somebody and I end up saying, watch me do it, and then I’ll show you with your hands, watch me. And I have gone through moments when I actually am saying, see how my thumbhole fits, and watch my fingers move here, and then I twist, watch where I am holding it - you know, if you are teaching knitting or crochet. I don’t have the words beforehand, because I can barely put it into words, it becomes such a manual activity. It’s very different than teaching theory or teaching history, the manual things are difficult and mental.⁴⁹

The idea that learning physical skills involves a complex relationship with the mind is discussed by Eric Wesselow, an art philosopher, in his book *The Way of the Maker*. He states: “in the process of making, we are not aware of the invisible strings running through our hands from our heart and mind to our brain. This happens in such a subtle way that we may indeed say that it is our hands that are thinking. As makers, our mind might receive signals from our hands.”⁵⁰ Vander Kooij discusses her experiences in learning and storing tacit knowledge in her body. She conveyed:

I don’t know if I can remember consciously when I was learning to do them (textile techniques). I haven’t embroidered for a while, and yesterday at the studio, I was going through some materials, and thinking I’m going to start an embroidery project. I feel so excited about it - then when you get it back into your hands, it’s just like your hands know. They know the way ~ its like when you walk home from school after a really long, hard day, and you don’t remember how you got home, you’re just there, its the same way ~ I’m like, oh yeah, I

⁴⁸ Maggi Toner-Edgar and Mitch Phillips, “Education and Hybrid Practice: Reflective Craft Practice.” Paper presented at the international conference Challenging Craft, Grays School of Art, Aberdeen, September 8-10, 2004, 3.
<http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/challengingcraft/ChallengingCraft/papers/toneredgarphillips/toner-edgar01.htm> (accessed June 16, 2007). Toner-Edgar’s biography is available at:
<http://learningthrumaking.cumbria.ac.uk/biogra.html> [accessed August 8, 2007]. Phillips has an MA in Contemporary Applied Arts from the University of Cumbria.

⁴⁹ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁵⁰ Eric Wesselow, *The Way of the Maker: Eric Wesselow’s ‘Life Through Art’* [Lanham: University Press of America, 2002], 11.

remember this, this is familiar, and I always say it lives in your hands. That feeling of it being there, sometimes for a while it's dormant but then you pick it up and it comes back to you.⁵¹

This feeling of the technique being “in” your hands is related to the embodiment of craft techniques. There are different ways of thinking about this relationship. This embodiment may be one of the features of hand crafting that will prevent it from being totally replaced by technology in the digital age. Independent art critic Polly Ullrich, in “Beyond Touch: The Body as Perceptual Tool,” finds that “paradoxically, it is craft that allows us to be positioned, embodied, in the midst of this Postmodern fluidity of the moment. It is craft that subverts deconstructive tendencies not by denying the complexity and changeableness of the world we live in, but by affirming embodiment.”⁵² All of these things may be felt by the artist, yet they have one thing in common - an elusiveness in description is the essence of body-kinaesthetic awareness, as well as tacit knowledge, and is also common in attempting to relate experiences with flow and other feeling states related to the body/mind relationship. This may be one reason that these states are not often academically documented in relation to the making processes of artists or craftspeople.

Another body, mind and spirit state is described as having a “peak experience”, which was brought to the fore by Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology who developed the ‘hierarchy of needs’⁵³. His studies also included

⁵¹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁵² Polly Ullrich. “Beyond Touch: The Body as Perceptual Tool.” *Fiberarts* 26, no.1 [Summer 1999]: 47. Ullrich’s biography is available at: <http://www.chicagoartcriticsassociation.org/B/ullrich.html> [accessed August 9, 2007].

⁵³ Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is built upon a pyramid. At the bottom are base needs such as physiological and safety needs. Further up the pyramid are the need for belonging and esteem, and finally, the top of the pyramid is self-actualization. All of the base needs need to be fulfilled in order to progress to

motivation, creativity, self-esteem and self-actualization in human beings. Maslow's classification of peak experiences includes many of the same qualities that also relate to flow, such as a characteristic disorientation in time and space, the experience having its own intrinsic value, fascination or complete absorption in the task at hand, the flavour of wonder, awe or reverence, and loss of fear, anxiety, and inhibition.⁵⁴ When questioned as to whether or not they had peak experiences, there were many similarities in the answers that all three of the artists provided. Millerson reveals that for her:

That's what I long for, and that's what keeps me doing it, in that every piece informs another piece. If it didn't, I would be in trouble, and the only thing I am lacking is time to pursue these ideas. My favourite state of mind is to be involved in making and to be thinking about the next piece...I mean, it's just so organic, that process, I don't even think there are words for it. I often think its like, in your mind, there's this idea incubating, it doesn't necessarily come out until you are involved in making something, or it strikes you at a certain point in time.⁵⁵

Relating peak experiences to making, and especially to uncovering the idea for the next work, was also mentioned by St. Michael:

While coming up with ideas for the next piece is usually where I could describe going through the 'peak experience'. I think any and every artist can relate to the feeling of uncertainty of future works, wondering if that next piece can be actualized, and whether it will surpass the one made before. For me, the most daunting and exciting part of my art-making is coming up with the idea for the next piece. Usually while making one piece I will simultaneously come up with ideas for the next, make models, sketches, etc.⁵⁶

Vander Kooij concurs with a strikingly similar response:

the top. Maslow's theories are described on a web-page created by C. George Boeree, a psychology professor at Shippensburg University: <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/maslow.html> [accessed on August 8, 2007].

⁵⁴ Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Third Edition, [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968, 1999].

⁵⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁵⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

I know a lot of the really good moments are when I have the idea for how it's going to be, like the best time is when you have the really great idea, and you're like...Ahhh, that'll be great, that's how I'll do it, that's going to look amazing, and it's great, because it all works together. Oh I'm glad this came...and you have this great moment - where you're like essentially writing down notes, and it's a really great moment.⁵⁷

It is clear that for these artists peak experiences seem to be closely tied to both the creative process and their motivation to continue their art practice. Perhaps it is that, as Bruce Metcalf puts it, "to act in concert with one's own ability and sensibility brings a meaningfulness to life previously experienced by few of these students. Those who listen to their inner voice often discover an inexhaustible motivation to pursue craft as a life's work."⁵⁸ Whether it is the result of flow, peak experiences, bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, tacit knowing or meditative moments, these women are fully engaged and intensely dedicated to their artistic pursuits.

Body and mind are linked traditionally with a third element, that of spirit. In their study of artists, Jones, Runco, Dorman and Freeland determined that "all the artists, except for one, had a strong sense of the spiritual and mystical nature of themselves, others and the environment."⁵⁹ There has been a tendency for any mention of the spiritual to be somewhat taboo in contemporary art. Peter Abbs, an educator who writes about incorporating spirituality into both art and the school system links this denigration of the spiritual with the overriding consumer culture. He states that:

⁵⁷ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁵⁸ Bruce Metcalf, "Craft and Art, Culture and Biology" in *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dorner, [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 77.

⁵⁹ Keri Jones, Mark A. Runco, Casey Dorman and Darryl C. Freeland, "Influential Factors in Artists' Lives and Themes in Their Artwork" *Creativity Research Journal* 10, no. 2 & 3 [1997]: 226.

The words traditionally used to describe our sense of ultimate value – words such as sacred, holy, spiritual, divine, sublime – have become the language of deep hesitancy and embarrassment, the half-displaced concepts of perpetual unease. They have no secure place in a highly technological society, nor do they belong to the consumer society with its free market economy, or to the prevailing postmodern sensibility where the coolness of irony and relativity prevail.⁶⁰

In recent years, there has been slightly more openness, and as a result, there is more artwork emerging that is linked to spirituality. In “Beyond Post Modernism: the Spiritual in Contemporary Art”, Anne Morgan posits that site-specific environments or installations are ideal for presenting the viewer with an experience of this type of work, stating “this transience reflects a spiritual truth common to many spiritual paths about the importance of direct experience, of being present, of fully experiencing the ‘now’.”⁶¹

In looking at spirituality in relation to the artists I studied, I will employ the ideas of the feminist activist Starhawk, outlined in her writing “Power, Authority, and Mystery: Ecofeminism and Earth-based Spirituality.” Three spiritual concepts are brought forward by Starhawk: immanence, interconnection and community.⁶² I take immanence to mean indwelling, which is defined as existing within as an activating spirit, force, or principle, and I relate this indwelling to some of the art materials that I have worked with over the years.⁶³ In discussing choice of art materials, Warren Seelig links Eastern religions and

⁶⁰ Peter Abbs, *Against the Flow: Education, the arts and postmodern culture*. [London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003], 29.

⁶¹ Anne Morgan, “Beyond Post Modernism: The Spiritual in Contemporary Art,” *Art Papers* 26, no. 1 [January – February 2002]: 32.

⁶² Starhawk, “Power, Authority and Mystery: Ecofeminism and Earth-Based Spirituality,” in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein [San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990], 73. Information about Starhawk is available at: <http://www.starhawk.org/>, [accessed August 18, 2007.]

⁶³ Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, definition of Indwelling, Available at: <http://www.mw.com/dictionary/indwelling> [accessed on August 10, 2007].

philosophies with the desire to engage with a specific material in his monograph “Craft and the Impulse to Abstract”:

The notion that materials have a personality, spirit, soul or whatever we use to characterize that with which we as human beings can identify, is a universal concept, dominant in Eastern philosophies, which can be traced back to primitive man. However, for the artist who has established a deep and intensive relationship with materials, the feeling of psychic identity, something of one’s spirit becomes closely identified with the physical, is very real. The artist working with materials, over time, may reach a heightened reality. A deep and overriding commitment to a certain materiality will reinforce the notion that this stuff is other than inanimate.⁶⁴

In eastern philosophies, then, materials could possibly be imbued with an activating spirit, and therefore be spiritual in nature. When materials are mixed, or manipulated with skill, there is further potential for some sort of transformation to take place. Mary W. Helms in *Craft and the Kingly Ideal* discusses skilled crafting in traditional societies, revealing that “given the fundamental processes of crafting in general, it is no surprise to find such activities explicitly associated with concepts of transformation and creation in traditional societies. Transformation is most forcefully or unavoidably expressed in, and frequently metaphorically associated with, the highly obvious changes in physical state readily observable in certain fabrication processes.”⁶⁵ Millerson relates to this transformation, in the alchemy involved in making cloth. She states:

I think fibre chose me. I was always trying to do it, and never thought it could be respected as an art form, so that’s why I was always doing other things too. Looking up into that window (from the illustration class) and seeing the colour, it beckoned me over, and the minute, the first weaving class I ever took, what I got out of it was that real fascination with the alchemy of weaving - the way that you took individual threads and turned them into something else, they

⁶⁴ Warren Seelig, “Craft and the Impulse to Abstract”, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Monograph, [Haystack Institute: Deer Isle, Maine, 1992], 14.

⁶⁵ Mary W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal*, [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993], 18.

transformed into cloth. So that's an enduring interest, coming right out of process, coming out of how clever this is and how historical this practice is.⁶⁶

Along with this history, Millerson related that working with fibres and the feelings they bring also involves a different sort of alchemy:

To me, the meaning behind the work is about memory and intimacy, and about what I think are the most important things in life, you know, love and connections between people, so all of that is kind of embedded in the work - and textiles are just such a perfect medium for those feelings, because you are so intimate in your process, with a hands on experience, touching each thread, forming each thread, to become something else....and that alchemy to me is something powerful.⁶⁷

In this case, the alchemy is derived through combining actual materials with personal feelings, actually intimately inserting memories and parts of yourself, or memories of people in the past right into the work. This immanence involved in combining the materials with the transformational process of making the object, results in spirit of the work, which may then result in a sense of connection between a maker and their finished work, and a feeling of interconnection for the purchaser or recipient of the work.

The alchemy involved in textile materials and processes and in the experience of the maker also has the power to link the artist with those who have used the same techniques in the past. In my case, over the years, when deeply involved in creating textile work on the loom, I have experienced a strange feeling that I am somehow connected to the centuries of women who have done the same act before me. Sometimes while weaving late at night, I felt some sort of like-minded presence with me. However, I experience the same sort of feeling when I encounter some vintage textiles as well, especially particular

⁶⁶ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

objects created with an open weave, or in patterns that I myself have woven. I believe that this feeling of interconnection with previous makers could also be considered an aspect of large-scale and historical time, and I was interested in knowing whether these other women had also experienced this phenomenon. Two of the three artists had experienced some sort of interconnection as well, although in different ways. Vander Kooij discusses her experience with this phenomenon:

I remember the very first time I bought a vintage dress that I knew someone else had made - it was black and white and gingham, and it had an embroidered band around the bottom where they had embroidered on the check, to create a little optical illusion pattern - I remember just holding it in my hands, and thinking, someone else made this, someone else's hands were here. And I feel like some sort of kinship with them ...like wanting to conserve things.⁶⁸

As a maker herself, Vander Kooij related to the unknown creator of her dress, knowing the time it took to embroider those details, and appreciating that on a personal level. Her desire to keep the vintage clothing from being destroyed could be related to her strong interest in textiles and textile history, or perhaps, she is tapping into a more personal history here, that of the maker. In Bettina Aptheker's 1990 book *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*, quilts are considered as an artefact with which to understand the everyday life of women. The hand-crafted textiles that women leave behind once they pass are often the only remnant or trace of their lives. In this way, textiles relay the stories of these women's daily existence.⁶⁹ By keeping this dress, by appreciating it and wearing it, Vander Kooij has kept the anonymous maker's legacy alive, and despite not knowing who she was, there is an interconnection between them.

⁶⁸ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁶⁹ Bettina Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*. [Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989], 70, 74.

In regards to whether she has ever felt any connection with women doing needlework lace or textile work from centuries before, especially in relation to the gift of the grandmother's bobbin lace equipment and lace samples that she received from her partner's family, Millerson states:

It's a really interesting connection, a physical connection, even when I look at it, I feel a connection, there's something - I've never met her, but I know things about her....you can kind of relate to someone who spent so much time doing the same activity as you, you know something about them, about their drive. It's almost like recognizing each other; I think that happens when you work in the same discipline.⁷⁰

This recognition results in an interconnection between Millerson and her partner's grandmother, whom she never met.

The final spiritual concept to be examined in this thesis is that of connection. Humans have an innate need for connection, whether it is with friends and family, or with others engaged in the same activities we are. Millerson has looked to other generations and to history to provide this link at times. She states:

I've often felt that I am in isolation, even though I've been in these institutions where there's a program in textiles. I've had colleagues and peers who are involved in art making that I connect with, but in terms of the kind of work I do, I haven't known anyone on a personal level who has done this kind of work, so I might look towards history instead, to feel connected to other people who have done it ... we connect on some levels. I feel very connected when I sit and do it.⁷¹

Connection may be developed by sharing beliefs and doing activities with others who enjoy the same type of past time or vocation. However, personal connection with the

⁷⁰ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁷¹ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

divine may also be found in spiritual and meditative practices. Bell Hooks, in “Aesthetic Inheritances, History Worked by Hand,” discusses her grandmother, who was a dedicated quilt maker, “to her, quilting was a spiritual process where one learned to surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she had learned to approach quilting from her mother. To her, it was an art of stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit.”⁷² This is similar to what I go through while making my work. I was interested in knowing if the artists I studied had the same sort of experiences. In discussing the relationship between spirituality and her art practice, Vander Kooij hadn’t really considered the link before, and approached the question from a Christian point of view:

There’s a meditative quality. It’s very strange.... Western Christianity unfortunately has the problem of not having a strongly emphasized history of meditation, and meditative practices... It’s much more free form in Protestantism; it’s like a conversation that you’re having with someone that you can’t necessarily see at the moment. So, it’s different....I would really have to think about that, I haven’t thought about my practice in that way.⁷³

In terms of her graduate school experience, however, she often found it challenging, as in seminar classes, she constantly had to negotiate “being the token Christian person in the room and having to out myself as the Christian at certain points in the conversation, and then deal with what people’s assumptions are about that.”⁷⁴ Despite this, Vander Kooij continued to be open about her religious and spiritual affiliations.

Millerson, on the other hand, associated spirituality with being outside of herself, and did not make any connections with her art making:

⁷² Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* [Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990], 116.

⁷³ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁷⁴ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

I don't really think of my practice as spiritual. There is a sense of calm and peace that I associate with the act of becoming involved with the work. I don't think of this as coming from outside me or of connecting to anything spiritual. It is, instead, my internal need to communicate through making and to express myself in this way.⁷⁵

St. Michael, on the other hand, was clear in her artistic intentions and where they emerge from:

I am Buddhist; I have been practicing Buddhism for 10 years. My practice involves daily meditation both in the morning and evenings, and chanting. Chanting in itself is a practice of repetition. There is no doubt there is a link between my Buddhist practice and my art - one feeding and strengthening the other and vice versa. The mere act of doing something over and over again brings one into a certain mind state, a mental calm, awareness and a means to tap into yourself. I believe my art making enables me to get to a certain space where I uncover the answers I need.⁷⁶

She has experienced connection by practicing her faith with others on the same spiritual path, yet also in the stillness of the meditative moments involved in her making. St.

Michael also relates this directly to her art practice, in terms of finishing work:

I've always posed the question to my self - when do I know the piece is done. What happens is that one day I wake up and decide it's time to put the piece together, production is over and I have to move on. My only response to this is that when I come to the point where the work has come into completion, something within myself has also become whole; where in an abstract kind of way; I feel I have some sort of answer, some sort of turning point in my personal life. I get to this point with all my work, but what is most mind boggling is having an answer revealed without knowing there was a question.⁷⁷

St. Michael directly links her Buddhist practices with her art practice. This link has become more evident in the case of other artists as well. One book that explores these connections is *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, edited by Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob. The book includes writings by many curators, as well as profiles on artists,

⁷⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁷⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁷⁷ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

including Ann Hamilton, Mariana Abramovic, Lee Mingwei, Marika Mori and Bill Viola about the influences of Buddhism on their art.⁷⁸ Anne Morgan also discusses a consortium know as AWAKE, which stands for Art, Buddhism and the Dimensions of Consciousness, and describes AWAKE as a “multi-dimensional, multi-year umbrella project which fosters curated exhibitions, artists’ residencies and publications dealing with the implications and the manifestations of Buddhism in the arts” with the overall goal being “to analyze and present the common ground between the creative mind, the perceiving mind, and the meditative mind.”⁷⁹ There is evidence, then, of a strong Buddhist community emerging in the midst of the contemporary art world.

Another community related to spirituality is also closely linked to feminism. Ecofeminism combines feminist sensibilities and concerns with connections to the environment. Although some branches of ecofeminists may be quite political in nature, Karen J. Warren, in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* states that “at the heart of ecofeminist spiritualities is a movement toward healthy, life-enhancing, nourishing, restorative values, beliefs, practices and systems.”⁸⁰ In this sense, all three of the artists studied have ecofeminist tendencies, in their desire to minimize the impact of their art practices on their environments, and to use environmentally friendly materials. Vander Kooij divulged:

I love using reused materials, I use a lot of reclaimed vintage...and I love the way a pillowcase gets all kind of yellow, which is really gross,

⁷⁸ Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, eds., *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004].

⁷⁹ Anne Morgan. “Beyond Post Modernism: The Spiritual in Contemporary Art,” in *Art Papers* 26, no. 1 [January – February 2002]: 32. Information on AWAKE can be found at: <http://www.artandbuddhism.org/> [accessed August 10, 2007].

⁸⁰ Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it Is and Why It Matters*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000], 198.

but I love it...I love seeing that mark of someone having lived there, or breathed on it. My favourite things are scavenging second hand stores, buying old bed sheets and aprons and tablecloths ~ so my work is very, very materially based. The way I buy fabric is so serendipitous, like there isn't some big huge warehouse where I can just go look at poplins with certain small print.⁸¹

Similarly, with regards to her current choice of materials, Millerson is also very conscious of what she uses:

Right now, I only work with cotton; it's just a personal choice to work with cotton rather than anything else. I work with cotton sewing thread, and mostly I do that because it comes in the right size with the right twist. I work with quilted thread weight, and all kinds of colours. And I could see at some point, dyeing my own cotton, but you really have to have the time and the resources. I am very environmentally conscious, and that's one reason that I don't do a lot of dyeing and chemical processes, because of the weight of that; dyeing can be very hazardous, and chemicals can be very hazardous, and yet, at the same time, of course, I am using these threads that have been chemically dyed, so it is on my mind. I did work with white on white or off white for a long time, unbleached, undyed stuff that you would like to think of as having the least impact on the environment, but it got to a point where it made more sense to work with these commercially available threads. But I'm super conscious of the environmental impact of working with materials, and part of the reason is that I don't want any sort of pollution.⁸²

This environmental impact and the health hazards associated with dyeing are very real. A very large number of the first generation of fibre artists in the 1960's and early 1970's used no precautions when handling dyestuffs and other toxic chemicals, and a large number of them developed cancer and passed away at a relatively young age.⁸³ St. Michael, also, is well aware of these concerns. She originally chose fibre partially for the effects of light and translucency that she could create on fabric:

⁸¹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁸² Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁸³ This information was passed on by professors and technicians in fibre and textile programs that I was enrolled in, with regards to safety procedures around hazardous and toxic dyestuffs.

While in art school, I focused in fibre arts, mainly hand painted fabric and batik. I love working with dyes and the chemistry (interaction) of translucent colours. Post graduation I had a job as a weaver, hand weaving custom designed chenille upholstery. I continued for a couple years working on hand painted fabric but found the flat surface too limiting. I needed to take it one step further, plus I was also searching for a medium that was non-toxic. Too many years working with air-born toxic dyes and chemicals, it was too much, and the majority of the time, my art making and its materials would take over my living space.⁸⁴

She continues by describing the satisfaction she derives from working with beads:

I had done some embellishment and beadwork in university, and one day I just started experimenting and an idea came about. With the glass beads, it allowed me to develop three-dimensional forms; plus considering glass is transparent, it simultaneously allowed me to continue working with transparent colour and experimenting with manipulating colour by using a contrasting woven thread. Also the element of light and form became increasingly intriguing and taking the next step into beadwork opened new doors, new options and new things to discover and learn. It just worked.⁸⁵

As seen throughout this chapter, and demonstrated by this research, a fibre artist's reasons for choosing a particular medium or a particular technique may be influenced by many factors, from a feeling of interconnection with the materials they are using, to a concern for the environment, to links to their spiritual practice. In the case of St. Michael, her spiritual practice has a direct link to her art practice. Although she identifies as a Christian, Vander Kooij had not considered these potential links with regards to her body of work. Millerson did not feel that spirituality had any relationship to the work she created. All three of the artists had experienced mind and body involvement in the techniques they employed, and it seemed to contribute to their relaxation and enjoyment while engaged in their labour intensive practices. These women had also been drawn to specific fibre materials, yet for different reasons: after

⁸⁴ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

working in weaving and surface design, St. Michael explored light, colour and transparency in the beads; Vander Kooij wanted to be like her big sister; and enjoys scouting out and working with vintage materials, and Millerson was ‘beckoned’ over to the Material Art and Design studio by the multi-coloured spools of yarn and thread, which remain her primary art making material. All three of the artists had been introduced to art and creative activities at a young age, and were encouraged and supported in their artistic endeavors by their families. In the case of these artists, their home lives and cultural heritage seemed to have played a minor role in their choice of medium, although all three women had knowledge of a family member that was an artist. Both their family and their cultural heritage, however, have played a role in the content of the work of both Vander Kooij and Millerson at different points in their careers.

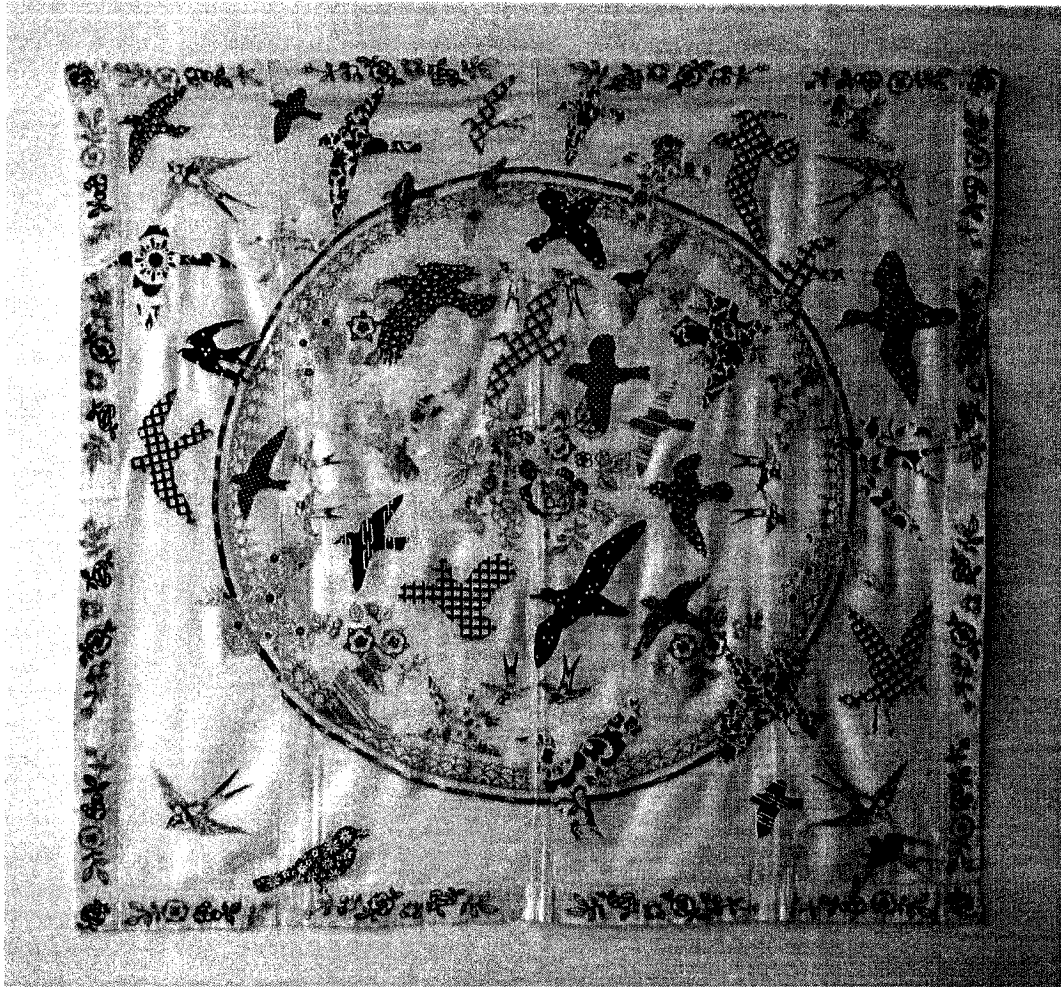


Figure 5. *The Reluctant Nightingale* (2007)
Andrea Vander Kooij
Embroidery and Appliqué on fabric
Vintage Textiles and thread
51.5" x 50"

Vander Kooij recently completed *The Reluctant Nightingale* (2007) for an exhibition in which artists referenced their cultural backgrounds in their contemporary textile works. Her parents immigrated to Canada from Holland in 1945, and as a result, Vander Kooij often acknowledges this fact by stressing the Dutch work ethic in her art pieces, which is evident in the labour intensive works that she creates. This piece began as a vintage tablecloth which belonged to her grandparents, and was then transformed by the addition of a flock of migrating birds which have been appliquéd and stitched onto this base fabric. The fabrics are traditional in colour, with the blue and white birds perhaps referencing Delft ceramics and Dutch design ware. The one bird that is not in flight represents her grandmother, who did not want to immigrate to Canada, and came reluctantly. This work is especially poignant, as several stains mark the surface, and the primary designs are fading in places, indicating the surface is well worn and this cloth has most definitely been used, likely on a regular basis. The artist statement indeed confirms that this is the tablecloth used by her grandfather as he ate alone after his wife had died. This referencing of home and family, as many of her works do, shows Vander Kooij's desire to depict everyday life, and those around her that she holds dear. By telling her grandparent's stories, she is sharing her cultural heritage with the viewer, and exposing them to references from another culture.

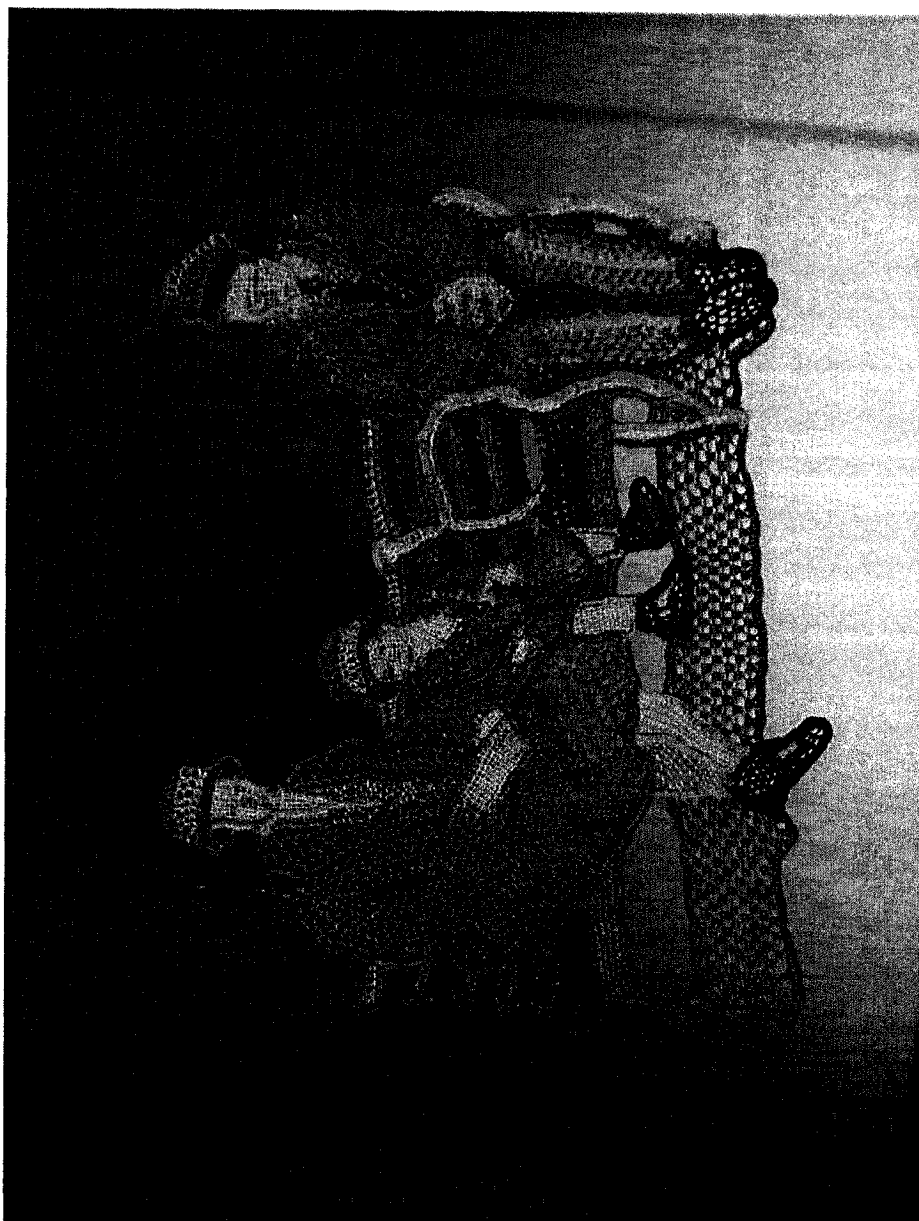


Figure 6.

At the Park (2005)
Dorie Millerson
Needlepoint lace technique
Cotton threads
4" x 4.5"

At the Park (2005) was a piece that Millerson created for her solo show, *Attachments*. In this work, we can see that her needlepoint lace pieces have progressed to using sepia toned threads to depict a narrative, that of a small child sitting between two adults on a park bench. Their clothing leads the viewer to believe that it references a time long ago, but it is some what difficult to pin down exactly when. As opposed to the needlepoint lace making up the background, as in the last piece, in this work, it actually makes up the positive elements of the picture, the actual people and the bench upon which they sit. Due to the sepia tones, I surmise that this work is derived from a photograph, and as such, references nostalgia and a sense of a moment captured in time. Knowing that Millerson came to Canada as a teenager from London, it would make sense that she would be referencing her own life in Britain, however, the non-descript faces and bodies of the people make them somewhat generic, and therefore anyone could claim them as theirs, making the work easy for the viewer to access. The stitched areas are far more regular, and uniform, yet each material, be it the bench, the skin of the people or their clothing, has its own distinct flavour.

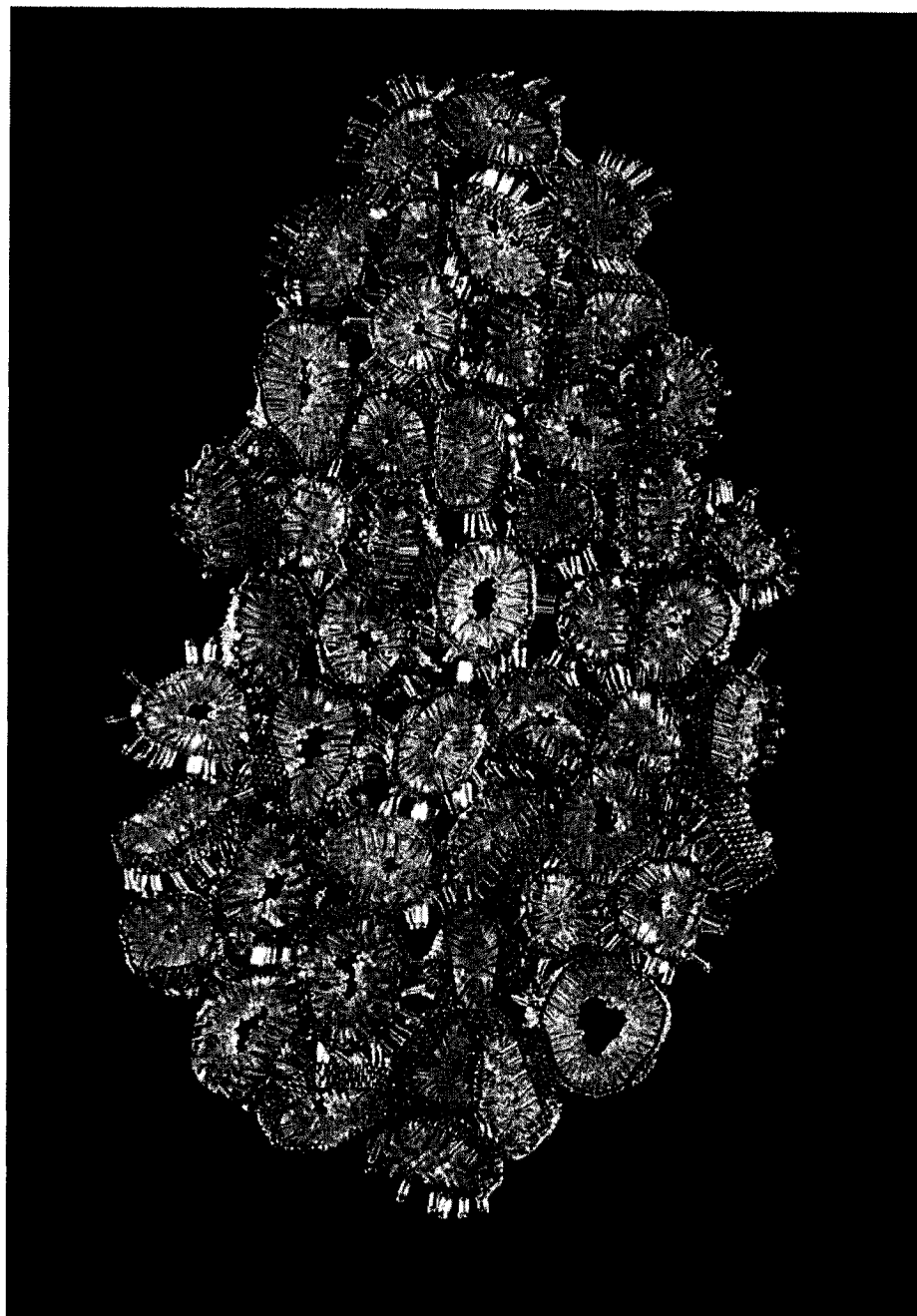


Figure 7.

Blue Cluster (2000)
Natasha St. Michael
Hand woven beadwork
Glass beads, nylon thread
10.5" x 6.5" x 1.5"

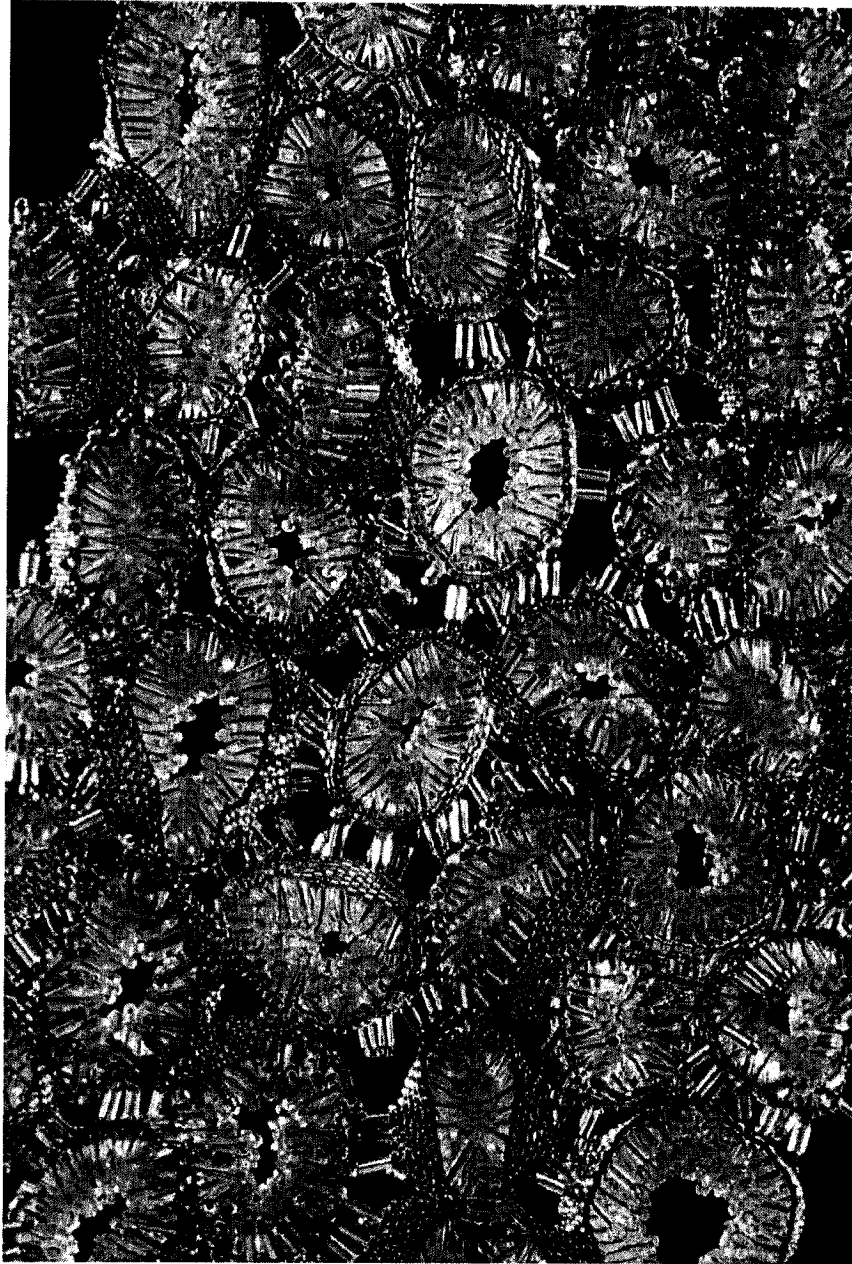


Figure 8.

Blue Cluster (2000)
Image Detail
Natasha St. Michael
Hand woven beadwork
Glass beads, nylon thread
10.5" x 6.5" x 1.5"

St. Michael created *Blue Cluster* in 2000, only a year later than her previous work. Her work has progressed from using one type of bead to incorporating several, as well as adding colour to the mix. The black threads are still evident when sewn through the clear beads, yet are not so obvious when the coloured beads are sewn together. This work resembles a semi-precious stone cluster, as the crystal-like beads are similar to the crystals that form those precious rocks. This work is slightly more three dimensional, more sculptural, and less decorative in nature than *Oh the Webs We Weave*. It is difficult for me not to reference time when I look at these works, as I have done beadwork, and I know the intensive labour that this piece must have taken to create. It is easy to get drawn into the work, and to attempt to identify exactly what it is portraying. The cool tones of blue and green are combined with the clear beads to great effect, and the work is compelling. It is easy to imagine getting lost in its intricacies, and spending meditative time with the piece if it was seen in person.

As we have seen in this chapter, family and cultural influences, as well as the positive benefits derived from the complex relationship of the mind, body and spirit interactions that result when creating with labour intensive textile techniques may all affect an artist's choice of medium. The influences explored have been of both an internal and external nature in this chapter of the thesis, and this will be contrasted in the chapter that follows, as gendered notions of time, space and place will be considered.

Chapter Four

Social and Societal Factors Affecting Career Choice

In the previous chapters, internal and external factors with the potential to affect fibre artists in their choice of medium have been explored. Family, educational and cultural influences begin as external factors in this decision, which possibly become internalized in the mind of the artist. Internal factors such as the mind and body connections present while making art work and the lure of specific materials also affect this choice. In this chapter, I will use a feminist perspective to examine external societal influences with the potential to come into play as these women forge ahead in their lives as fibre artists, including: the artist's personal viewpoints on how time affects their art practice; each artist's identification with feminism and the possible subversive nature of textiles and fibre as a medium; issues related to public space and private space; and the role of place in their art work. The role of past and present employment, as well as their current situation with regards to succeeding in the field of fibre art will also be examined. Time and space will inform the analysis of an artwork from each artist, incorporating many of the ideas from this chapter, and cohesively drawing it to a close.

Time is a very complex matter which has been studied in many disciplines, and from many different points of view. In *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Post modern Culture*, Rita Felski considers time from many feminist perspectives, and proposes that gender has an influence on time on three specific levels: everyday time, life time and

large scale time.¹ These three levels blend and co-mingle, and may even occur simultaneously. The realm of everyday time is a phenomenological, second by second time. Our perceptions of how our time either flies by, or crawls ever so slowly is likely affected by many influences in our environments. The second level is the life time realm. Felski suggests that this is an autobiographical construct, one in which both genders look for the meaning of their lives in the grander scheme of things. The third realm is that of large-scale time. This time is that which brings us together with others, and becomes part of something which is larger than ourselves. This allows for the formation of group identities - the communities that we associate ourselves with in terms of religion, leisure, nationality and culture, for example, which may also be considered from a historical viewpoint.² I will consider these ideas in relation to the responses the artists gave me to questions surrounding time.

In terms of discussing time in relation to their art practices, time was interpreted by the women themselves. Vander Kooij approached the question from the practical side:

I feel like sometimes handwork stretches and collapses time at the same time. But when you are doing something really enjoyable, even if it's time consuming you know, that same time just flies by, you don't feel it, you look up and you can't believe that three hours has gone past because it feels so good. So it makes it very clearly quantifiable, and also makes it completely irrelevant –it's very odd.³

This being in the moment would be considered in the realm of the everyday, as these women spend many hours engaged in their work, often while holding down a paying job

¹ Rita Felski, "Introduction: Timely Meditations," in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 17.

² Rita Felski, "Introduction: Timely Meditations," in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 17-18.

³ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

(or two). Millerson spoke more about the stresses of running out of time, and the thought process and content involved in her work:

The making of work is all about time - sparing the time, committing the time, running out of time - all those things, and often the work is about memory, it's about precious time. A lot of the work is about what I think is taken for granted, or that which is precious, so all of that is about time. And time is really so integral, the time it takes, and then, that kind of thought process where you think about the past and the future - you think about the next piece that you're going to make, and it's all about the future.⁴

Millerson bridges everyday time with that of her life time, by ruminating upon the past and the present and projecting into the future while creating her artwork. St. Michael, on the other hand, discloses how the materials she worked with came together to present her with time as a conceptual challenge which she faces in her work in the past, the present and the future:

Portraying the notion of time has been an ongoing challenge since I started working with beads. What dawned on me after completing my first piece was the crystallizing effect the glass beads had on the piece. The first year I was working with glass beads, I was working primarily with clear beads and black thread. These works, no matter what form they took on, how solid or fragile they appeared, seemed to continually appear as though captured in time. This is what brought on the idea of time and the notion of actually portraying a life cycle of a given organic formation.⁵

During the everyday, her actual process and the resultant work came together to present her with the preoccupation that would become the concept behind her work for years to come, moving into the realm of life time, yet still remaining grounded in the everyday, as she spends between 6 and 12 hours making her work every single day. Time truly has different meanings at different times for these artists. These women are part of a larger group of artists, those who come from a grounding in craft techniques, materials and

⁴ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁵ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

processes, yet have a conceptual message embedded in their work.⁶ These women also exhibit and sell their work as fine artists. I hope that eventually, in the future, they will turn out to be part of large-scale historical time, as being on the forefront of the new avant-garde - artists who, rebelling against the technological boom, turned to hand techniques in revolt.

In relation to personal time spent in making work, which I would classify as being in Felski's category of the everyday realm, these women engage in labour intensive activities that take anywhere from a few hours to a hundred or more hours to complete a piece. This is evidence of a commitment of time to learning and practicing skills. In our hectic and hurried lives, this time investment is increasingly unusual as, according to Sue Rowley "it appears that skills in making things take too much time to acquire through practice."⁷ All three of the artists studied, however, most definitely have spent the time required to properly hone their textile skills. In "A Labor of Love" Marcia Tucker contrasts the time required to make labour-intensive textiles, deemed as a polychronic sense of time, as "at odds with the evolutionary, progressive, monochronic sense of time that informs the high art tradition." She continues that this polychronic sense of time is seen as "interactive, multitasked, social and in flux, rather than linear or goal-oriented."⁸

In many communities and cultures, textiles were done in a community setting, as well as

⁶ See, for example, the work of Janet Morton at: http://www.ccca.ca/artists/artist_list.html under Janet Morton, [accessed August 9, 2007]; Joanna Close, at: <http://joannaclose.com/> [accessed August 9, 2007]; Lorraine Roy at: <http://www.lroytextileart.com/work.html> [accessed August 9, 2007]; Frances Dorsey at: <http://www.nscad.ns.ca/showcases/faculty.php?leftmenu=1&memberID=16&collectionID=5> [accessed August 9, 2007]; Allyson Mitchell at: <http://www.allysonmitchell.com/upcoming/index.cfm> [accessed August 9, 2007].

⁷ Sue Rowley, "Craft, Creativity and Critical Practice," in *Reinventing Textiles: Volume One, Tradition and Invention* [Winchester: Telos Art Publishing, 1999], 14.

⁸ Marcia Tucker, "A Labor of Love," in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen [Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 125.

in the home. I feel that this type of community textile making is closer in nature to what Tucker refers to as a polychronic time, as she relates it to the Mennonites and other religious communities that live simply and are directed by tradition. As the artists that I have researched currently lean towards craft-as-art, or craft materials and techniques being used to create art pieces, their practices would blur the lines between these categories of monochronic and polychronic time, with due consideration paid towards tradition and labour intensive making, yet a focus towards progress, conceptual work and change over time.

One thing about time is that the majority of North Americans seem to be running out of it. Around this issue, two of these artists also shared another interesting similarity. In order to balance their everyday lives in the working world with their tendencies to create artwork using repetitive and time consuming techniques, they came up with personal strategies to deal with the ongoing production when they were running out of time.

Vander Kooij outlined her strategy:

It's a very clear measurement of your time, especially when I have a large project that has to be done, and I know that I can do x many rows...I know I can get this many stitches done. For things that are really repetitive, I can break it down and know what my productivity in fifteen minutes is, or know what my productivity for an hour is - then you can look at something and literally see the time.⁹

Similarly, Millerson recounts:

I commit myself to too much so I am always running out of time. It's come to a point, I have had to be methodical now, and I actually have to time myself - so I will time how long it takes to do a certain area, and I will multiply that by the whole area, so I know how much time I am looking at and so that I can be realistic...I think that you get obsessive in this medium, about how long it takes to do a certain thing, so I log in

⁹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

every aspect. So I have these time sheets showing that this little inch took about an hour, I have to mark it out.¹⁰

Thus, at certain points in their working processes, both of these artists use time management skills, breaking down their actions into timed component parts while completing their complex art works. Working in such a manner shifts the emphasis from one temporality to another. In my estimation, they are moving from a cyclical process and a state of being engrossed in the work to that of a linear and regimented working state, in which a race against the clock is taking place. Feminist Karen Davies discusses the gender differences between linear time and cyclical time in her 1990 book *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life*. She deems linear time as well as the emphasis on clock time to be gendered as male. Cyclicity, on the other hand, is seen as feminine in nature, and directly related to many of the repetitive and reproductive cycles and moments that fill the lives of women.¹¹ These two artists, then, are engaging with both masculine and feminine elements of time. In *The Rhythmanalytical Project*, Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier discuss the “antagonistic unity” between the relationship of the cyclical to the linear, stressing “in industrial practice, where the linear repetitive tends to predominate, the struggle is intense.”¹² In a sense, then, by moving from the process-oriented state, deemed feminine in nature, to a more linear and clock-oriented state in which every second is accounted for, the artists have moved into more of an assembly line type mentality. Although this state likely has its own rewards, it is possible that the intrinsic rewards of meditative moments and a sense of connectedness

¹⁰ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

¹¹ Karen Davies, *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* [England: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1990], 239.

¹² Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier, “The Rhythmanalytical Project,” in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore [London: Continuum, 2004], 76.

with the work have been lost in translation. Millerson shared her reasons behind approaching her work in this way:

I mean, obviously you do it to figure out it's value, to an extent, if you pay yourself per hour, but you also do it just to know – it's about proving to yourself, or understanding yourself, the commitment you've made in each piece.¹³

The emphasis on hourly wage is certainly more linear and closely linked to the industrial practice mentioned by Lefebvre and Régulier, and I concur with their suggestions that there is some sort of unity occurring between the cyclical and the linear concepts of time for both genders in this day and age in the Western world. This relationship is most definitely difficult to negotiate as well as to explain, however, in the case of the artists I have studied, the negotiation is ever-changing and ongoing.

In terms of the reference to time in their actual artworks, both Millerson and St. Michael feel that there is a strong link, albeit in very different ways. Millerson described her series *Attachments*, stating:

I think the works reference time - because they are in sepia tones, they talk of a past, they talk of a history, another era, you know - the clothing references history, so there are some actual references to history. And as I get older, I do think about the past, and I do think about people that have come and gone, it's all involved.¹⁴

For Millerson, then, the choice of materials and the rendering of the figures in her works directly reference time gone by. St. Michael's work references time in a completely different manner:

It's been an ongoing personal challenge in striving to convey a life cycle, specifically decay. Because the art works are made up of one form that is multiplied hundreds of times over and then inter-woven into a

¹³ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

¹⁴ Ibid.

formation, an essence of multiplication, reproduction and continuum become a given. That continuum is my struggle - how to portray that the formation is in a cycle of growth, but that growth is in fact its decline. This challenge has been ongoing for many years, but because of this challenge this idea has evolved and new directions have come into fruition.¹⁵

In attempting to create death and decay, or the effects of time in her art works, St. Michael's work has undergone structural and conceptual changes over time, presenting yet another example of how time and temporality are intricately involved in the everyday lives and bodies of work of these artists.

Another reference to time is the viewer's reactions to the artworks created. Millerson spoke of her interaction with the people who have attended her gallery shows, and how they have referenced time:

One of the first or second questions people ask, is how long did it take? I think it's because, today, we don't see people making work in the same way - you don't see people making textiles regularly, you don't see the old crafts around you, so when someone actually steps out of that, like myself or other artists, and you bring it back into contemporary society - here is lace, a piece of lace that I spent time on, you haven't seen this before - it intrigues people for that reason, and, they want to understand how it's possible this was created, and they need to connect to it somehow. So they say to you - how long did this take you? - Because it gives them a context, like if you said a hundred hours, well, it gives it value somehow - they think time equals money.¹⁶

Along with this context, the viewer also can attempt to relate to the work in a more personal way, to link themselves to the work. Because such value is placed upon time, a viewer can understand and appreciate how long one hundred hours is. The fact that the work is made from textile materials and techniques often makes the work more

¹⁵ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

¹⁶ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

accessible, as most people have had some sort of experience with seeing textiles being created. Millerson also recognized this, and related:

Often people will tell me about their lives when they look at the work, and they say things like: this reminds me of my grandmother or my grandmother used to do this – it's often their grandparents generation they reference. People will find their own entry point into the work based on their experience, or their family.¹⁷

Another factor related to time which may play a role in career choice is mentioned by Karen Davies. In *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* she discusses the reasons behind the choice to become an artist for some women, explaining “an artistic occupation may be chosen in part because of temporal issues. These women do not wish to have their lives dictated by the clock and a central feature of artistic work is that it is structured by process time.”¹⁸ She goes on to cite the relationship of women's work to the life of an artist, such as both often work in the home, and have no set hours of employ, yet often are constantly working in one manner or another. Despite this, not many of the women in Davies study chose to become an artist, despite artistic tendencies. This may, in part, be due to the fact that “Benjamin Franklin's maxim, ‘time is money’, is not applicable to art – which influences women's rejection of art as an occupation when they wish to economically support themselves and their children.”¹⁹ Although the women I have studied all continue to see themselves as artists, this is a bone of contention for them as well. I will discuss this further when examining ideas of time and space together, such as the time it takes for these artists to make it in the field of fibre art today, and whether there is room for them to succeed in this vocation.

¹⁷ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

¹⁸ Karen Davies, *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* [England: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1990], 211.

¹⁹ Karen Davies, *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life*, 215.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, feminism, textiles, and those who align themselves with either have often gone hand in hand. Seen as a feminine occupation or past time, hand textile practices have also been closely associated with the home, and therefore, with the domestic sphere. As Marcia Tucker states, in *A Labor of Love*:

“Many of the skills employed to make handcrafted, or highly detailed, or labour-intensive and time-consuming pieces have traditionally been considered women’s work. Because they were made within the domestic, rather than the public, sphere, were done for love rather than money, or were simply done by women (deemed incapable of creating great art), these handicrafts were ipso facto inferior to fine art, made in the public sphere for money by men.”²⁰

Although we have come far in terms of gender equality over the years, I also wanted to explore whether the artists studied were interested in or deemed themselves to be feminists. I was especially interested in seeing if there truly was a “generational shift” in personal experiences of feminism, as described by Vita Plume.²¹ As a woman in my mid-forties, my generation experienced many changes in the treatment of women over the years, and many were affected deeply by feminist issues. However, I have experienced this potential shift in the attitudes and ideas of those students I am exposed to who are currently in their early twenties who do not relate to the feminist movement in any way, and seem to take their rights as women for granted. I was interested in the experiences of the artists I have studied who were all in their early thirties. Vander Kooij identified herself as a feminist, and stated:

You know, I’m a Christian feminist, I’ve been a feminist since high school. I think of everything we were saying before about how textiles or working in fibres has such a strong link to feminism because it’s this

²⁰ Marcia Tucker, “A Labor of Love,” in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen [Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 118.

²¹ Vita Plume, “In Visible Centre,” in *Textiles Sismographes: Symposium Fibres et Textiles 1995* [Montréal: Conseil des Arts Textiles Du Québec, 1995], 46.

medium that is so heavily aligned with femininity and domesticity and the appropriate role for women ... then its very interesting to bring it into the art context and see all the reaction against it, often, like how easily it's denigrated to craft, with the brackets around it, because I don't like that either.²²

Vander Kooij is referring to her experiences in the fine art educational system, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I have also been continuously challenged when it comes to feminism, from the very first course I took in art school onwards.²³ Millerson relates her educational experiences to her feminist beliefs as well. She recalled that:

I had some negative experiences that kind of fuelled me and my interests. I was raised in this sort of feminist mentality and atmosphere, so I always expected that women should have equal opportunity. When we studied art history in high school, it was all about great men of history, and I did all sorts of research on women artists, and I would bring them into our classes and say, why aren't we talking about these women? And they would just laugh at me. The male teacher, the head of the art program just laughed at me, he thought it was funny. He obviously found me sort of charming, but he obviously didn't agree. There was, for instance, this art history time line from the beginning of time around the top of the room, and not one woman on it....there was even this series of slides that the board of education in Toronto had put together on women artists, and I actually got hold of it and brought it in to the school, and he still didn't take advantage of it...so things like that just fuelled me.²⁴

Millerson shared that these early experiences continue to have an effect on her life and her artwork today:

That has informed a lot of my life, that idea that women have every reason to do whatever they like with their life, and should be equal to men, so there's just kind of a undercurrent meaning, because I can't

²² Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

²³ A professor that I had in my final year of independent sculpture studio at NSCAD (2003) actually said "Feminism in fine art is dead" and refused to discuss the issue further.

²⁴ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

possibly do anything that is not informed by that knowledge, and I think it's present in everything that I do.²⁵

St. Michael, on the other hand, did not feel closely aligned with feminism, except from the viewpoint that she was using textile techniques and materials in her work:

I've deliberately chosen bead weaving as a means of representing my ideas. It's an extremely tedious and meticulous process involving a great amount of time and energy. I could have chosen another media to execute my ideas, but I chose bead weaving specifically because it's such a laborious process. Personally, I need to be doing something that takes time, that takes care and effort.²⁶

This ethic of care is another concern of feminism and of women in general, regardless of the form that it is expressed in. St. Michael does not choose to call herself a feminist, however, unlike the other two artists studied.

The subversive nature of textiles has been discussed by many, from Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, to Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, Rosemary Hill, and Katy Kline, amongst others.²⁷ In addition, there is a current movement underway of "craftivism" as well as craft practices and groups who focus upon political issues as part of their practices.²⁸ In "Craft Hard, Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism in Unruly Contexts" Nicole Bursch and Anthea Black relate that "the rise of craftivism and other politically engaged crafting practices – which often value the radical potential

²⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

²⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

²⁷ For example, see Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* [New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1989]; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* [London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981]; Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, eds., *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles* [Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998]; Hill, Rosemary, "Writing about the Studio Crafts" in *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997]; Kline, Katy, *Subversive Crafts* [Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1993].

²⁸ "Craftivism is based on the premise that activism + craft = craftivism." Amy Spencer, writing on Betsy Greer in *The Crafter Culture Handbook* [London: Marion Boyars Publishing Ltd., 2007], 192. Greer's website is available at: <http://www.craftivism.com/> [accessed August 9, 2007].

of a particular craft activity rather than its finished end-product – shift traditional emphasis away from polished, professionally-made craft objects themselves and towards the political and conceptual focus, positioning and deployment of this work.”²⁹ The popularity of these subversive groups, and the websites, books and zines that they spawn made me wonder if these practices had influenced academia or to the work of these artists. When questioned as to whether they deemed their textile/fibre art practice to be subversive in nature, the artists once again had varied responses. Vander Kooij stated:

There is such a lovely opportunity to be subversive with textiles and fabric and knitting, because people don't expect it, and it's just something that is so present - fabric is everywhere, always in our life, and people don't think about it it just allows a point of entry for people, people have a quick point of access; people will be afraid of that painting because they don't understand it, but if you embroider something, they'll try to get into it - they don't have the same sort of wall up so it's easier to communicate with people and it's easier to be subversive because there are all these assumptions already about what you're doing when you embroider or when you knit, and they are just sitting there waiting to be poked at, it's really nice.³⁰

Putting this into practice, she related the story of her Bachelor of Arts solo show, and the drama it caused at her Christian university:

I had a lot of trouble in my undergrad, when I started to do embroidery - my thesis show was called *Never Done...* I did a body of work where I took cleaning product logos and blew them up and put in the name of female anatomy, so instead of saying Ivory it said Ovary, instead of saying Clorox, it said Clitoris, or Crest it said Breast, which at the time it was a really big breakthrough for me, and I wasn't allowed to show it in the gallery, I actually got censored.³¹

²⁹ Nicole Bursch and Anthea Black, “Craft Hard, Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism in Unruly Contexts,” in *New Craft, Future Voices: Proceedings of the Dundee Conference, July 4-6, 2007*, eds. Georgina Follett and Louise Valentine [Dundee: Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, 2007], 135.

³⁰ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Luckily for Vander Kooij, there were those at the university who totally supported her art practice, and her desire to show her work. She finally found an alternative venue with their help:

They had an empty dorm, which was like a town house, so thematically, it worked, and I had my show in the empty dorm...but it was the best attended show that I had ever been to at school, because of the scandal. People lined up around the block to get in, which was crazy, at this little school, like people from on-campus, people had heard about it...and because only so many people could get in at the same time, it created kind of this supply and demand kind of frenzy, and it was all very exciting, and very interesting.³²

Ironically, then, Vander Kooij's artwork likely had more of an effect on the student body than she would have had if the administration had not censored her work. Alison Crossman, in "Framing the Quilt: Historical and Contemporary Quilts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia" (1999), determined that "through the three manners of generating meaning, a quilt has the ability to: delineate information and emotion; organize and cultivate women's social and political activities; and raise awareness for important social issues."³³ Likewise, Vander Kooij's thesis exhibition, the art work it contained, and the fact that it was singled out for censorship may have had long-reaching affects on the student body at the Christian university she attended.

Millerson, on the other hand, does not really deem her work to be subversive in nature:

My work might or might not reflect that to other people, but using a textile medium as an art form is a bit of a feminist act, in that you are kind of reclaiming this traditional women's practice, but in a contemporary way. I certainly feel that the work has power and that power is because the work was often associated with silence, and quiet, and the domestic - just the act of embroidering has so much deep history

³² Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

³³ Alison Crossman, "Framing the Quilt: Historical and Contemporary Quilts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia," [master's thesis, Concordia University, 1999], iii.

in it, that speaks of women's oppression and depression. I think it's a bit subversive that I do it in textile form, and then put it in a gallery and expect people to look at it; but I don't think that it's subversive, in that I'm not. I don't think it shocks, I think my work is more subtle than that.³⁴

Others, such as Polly Ullrich, deem craft to be subversive for different reasons. In "Workmanship: The Hand and Body as Perceptual Tools" Ullrich relates that "long relegated to the non-cognitive realm of brute matter, craftsmanship has emerged as a subversive stance, as a means of conveying aesthetic risk. Craftsmanship provides an opportunity to critique and redefine the status of materiality or physicality in our media-based postmodern culture."³⁵ This stance is closer to that of St. Michael, who responded:

I come from an urban environment, but my work is inspired by organic elements found in nature. My inspiration comes from the need to get back to basics, go back to the wonderment of life.³⁶

Part of St. Michael's return to basics is the return to the hand and hand work, previously discussed in Chapter Three. Manually creating artworks that reference natural processes and organic life cycles is definitely counter to the current trend in textiles of utilizing digital technologies, and engages the materiality which Ullrich references.

Alongside addressing textiles and their subversive nature, feminist theories are also benefit when considering constructions of space. In "Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Mobility and Spatiality" Iris Marion

³⁴ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

³⁵ Polly Ullrich, "Workmanship: The Hand and Body as Perceptual Tools," in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen [Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 203.

³⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

Young argues that the norms of feminine bodily comportment forbid women the fullest realization of their bodies' potentialities, stating:

A space seems to surround women in imagination; this manifests itself both in a reluctance to reach, stretch, and extend the body to meet resistances of matter in motion and in a typically constricted posture and general style of movement. A woman's space is not a field in which her unalienated body intentionality can be fully realized, but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined.³⁷

I was interested in knowing how the women I studied approached space, in terms of both their artwork and their lives, and if this inclination to not take up space is prominent in their case. Millerson responded:

I am very conscious of not wanting to take up space. And because I have always lived in small spaces and worked in small spaces, it's partly that - but it's also that I gravitate towards not wanting to make an impact on the environment, wanting my work to be very portable, wanting to be able to work on it anywhere - as a result, I work on a small scale, with highly intense, labour intensive textile work. It lends itself to that, I don't need a lot of equipment, and I don't need any equipment except a needle and thread. That is very freeing to me, I don't have to rely on an expensive studio, not at all, and it's really portable.³⁸

In this case, I find the first line of her response very telling, "I am very conscious of not wanting to take up space." This, at first and without further explanation, would seem to fit the ideas of Iris Marion Young. Perhaps Millerson has been conditioned to not "take up space" in her life and her work. Looking back at her schooling, there seemed to be no space for women artists in her high school, so from an early age, despite being taught at home that she deserved the same rights as men, at school she was laughed at and placated when she attempted to get women artists to be recognized in her classes. In her response,

³⁷ Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], 325.

³⁸ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

Millerson, however, goes on to really focus on issues of portability with her work. In this case, she holds down three jobs (since there isn't space for her to have a full time faculty position, or a full time museum job), and has to fit her art into any spare moments she can find, not unlike Vander Kooij. So perhaps it is mostly a question of portability, as all three of the artists mentioned this in their interview. Vander Kooij stressed that she considered this in terms of a self-imposed restriction:

I like to put restrictions on my practice and say: I am only doing things that are portable, as I have been doing for the past few years, so that I can always be making work.³⁹

Of the three artists, she was the one who frequently mentioned that she had very little time, and therefore needed to be able to make her work in every spare moment she could find. In this sense, then, Vander Kooij was able to avoid the costs associated with renting a studio space, as well as facilitate her access to her work regardless of what space she found herself in. Similarly, St. Michael answered:

I can also say I did specifically choose beads for reasons of practicality. Beads are small, you don't need equipment, you don't need extra space and you can take it and do it virtually anywhere—there is a freedom in knowing you can do your work anywhere, you are never tied down.⁴⁰

From the interview, it is evident that this was also a key factor in her choice to travel on a work holiday in Australia. The portability of her work was a necessary factor in order for her to take the requisite time off, as well as in her choice to use beads as a medium.

Another way that space could be considered in the lives of these artists is in the size of the work that they ultimately produce. In "Intimate Matters: Objects and Subjectivity" Suzanne Ramljak discusses ideas related to the use of small scale in the making of objects. This art historian recounts that "in simplified terms the equation goes as follows:

³⁹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁴⁰ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

big/male/public versus small/female/private” yet continues that “by upholding the virtues of smallness and intricacy, intimate objects can serve to challenge the entrenched hierarchy of scale in our culture.”⁴¹ This may relate to the fact that “miniatures and detailed objects can also engage us because of the amount of attentiveness and devotion that they require to be fully appreciated. Extremely intricate things, such as the minutely carved ivory and wood sculptures of the Middle Ages, have the ability to immerse us in their complexity, leading to a slowing of time and thickening of experience.”⁴² Millerson was the artist who experienced this phenomenon, as she described:

I’m making the structure, and the relationship between each part is essential, absolutely....and it’s this intense little tiny world that you get into...It’s a magnified world, this Lilliputian sort of process of changing perspective, where you go from looking into the tiny world to being bigger than the world. It’s an interesting change in perspective that happens when you’re working on some formal scale, it’s a really intense relationship with your medium, when you get into that - it doesn’t involve anyone else, it’s just you and your material.⁴³

Her tiny and intricate lace works wholly engage her throughout the making process, as well as drawing the viewer in to ponder the multitude of stitches each work is made of.

This smaller scale may also be of assistance when experimenting with new ideas, thus requiring fewer materials as well as a smaller time investment required in order to investigate these ideas, by creating a sample work, or a maquette. St. Michael has used this technique frequently in the past:

⁴¹ Suzanne Ramljak, “Intimate Matters: Objects and Subjectivity,” in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, eds. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen [Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004], 190. Academic profile available at:

<http://art-uo.uoregon.edu/index.cfm?mode=news&page=events&event=466> [accessed August 9, 2007].

⁴² *Ibid*, 191.

⁴³ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

While developing ideas for beaded art works I create many miniature models out of beads, many of which are terrible, but I experiment and try different things and eventually something clicks. I also keep all these models and go back to them, sometimes one form or one idea may give way to another.⁴⁴

Along with investigating a sense of space, I was interested in knowing if a sense of place is of import to these women. Craftspeople are frequently linked to specific places, through either the themes in their work, or the materials they use, especially in the case of ceramists and textile artists.⁴⁵ Vander Kooij discussed living in Montreal, and the meaning that holds for her:

Montreal is sometimes kind of a funny place to live, because you sometimes feel like an outsider because of the Anglophone/Francophone thing, but at the same time, I really feel like when I go back to the places I used to live, like Toronto, or Hamilton, when I'm there, I feel like a Montrealer - so maybe this is where I'm going to live now. But it really affects you unconsciously, you don't realize it. Somebody said to me that I had the sensibility of Montreal, which I find really funny because I have a hard time getting shown here in Montreal. I've been finding that as far as showing, I've had a lot more success in Toronto, and in the United States, oddly, which is very weird...go figure. I do have my first solo show coming up here next year at Diagonale, so I'm really excited about that... that'll be good.⁴⁶

As her husband has at least one more year left at university, she will not be moving until he graduates. Therefore, regardless of difficulty in showing her work here, she will be staying for at least one more year.

⁴⁴ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁴⁵ For example, profiles of Scottish textile designers James Donald and Fiona McIntosh, as well as Saltwater Designs, by Laura Watson of London, show images of the textile works and the natural environment upon which they are based is featured in *Selvedge*, Issue 13. P 53 - 57. For more information, see <http://www.selvedge.org/> [accessed August 9, 2007]. In a review of *From the Ground Up – 17 Bowls*, an Australian ceramist discusses his development of porcelain stone clay from near his home for use in his work. *Craft Arts International* 64 [2005]: 106.

⁴⁶ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

For Millerson, immigrating to Canada had a large impact on her sense of place. She found that:

I'm so aware that this is one country of many, and Canada, because it doesn't really have a strong sense of nationalism, it doesn't really foster the sense that Canada is all important - so you tend to look away as well as being aware of where you are, so a sense of place is often on my mind, and is often in the work, I think - and a sense of different traditions and different countries, different textile traditions.⁴⁷

One of the things that Canada lacked for Millerson was a sense of history:

An awareness of history has always had an impact on me, and I feel now, being in Toronto, the youth of this city, I feel the youth of this country in terms of its present state. I know that the native peoples have their ancient culture here, but in terms of the way Toronto is really young, I'm very aware of that. It doesn't have the historical depth that other cities have had on me, so I miss that.⁴⁸

This loss was subsumed into her work as a painter. She explained:

I used to paint before I got into textiles, oil painting, and all the paintings had landscapes in them, as well as portraits, a sort of sense of where are you - and often they showed an image of a self portrait in a room with a landscape, you know, and it was just a sense of being apart from a place where you belonged, or looking away, that sense of not feeling totally at home, so its definitely in my mind and in the work.⁴⁹

As well as being present in her paintings, I feel that her current textile work speaks of her memories of her past in Britain, indicating that she is still negotiating this relationship. This sense of displacement is common for those who come from another place to settle in a new country. Even people who have not spent much time traveling, or living in other cultures, find there are certain requirements necessary in order for them to feel at home in themselves. For St. Michael:

⁴⁷ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

I think most importantly as an artist I can create only in places where I have a certain amount of privacy and comfort. While in Montreal, I had worked both at home and shared an atelier. I worked best in the privacy of my own home, but had gotten to a point where I needed the separation of home and work. I shared an atelier for a couple of years and eventually went back to working at home.⁵⁰

This was a key concern when she decided to travel to Australia for several years.

However, she found that her fears were assuaged once there:

My main concern when I left to Australia was would I be able to make my art—and yes...where there is a will there is a way, and in fact I have found the most beautiful spots to make my art. I have been that spoiled to find deserted and isolated beaches and islands in Australia, with random picnic benches under trees, to be able to perch in a shaded spot in front of the ocean and spend weeks/months making my art. Amazing!!⁵¹

Despite traveling in a foreign country, St. Michael was able to find the type of place she required to make her feel comfortable, and to allow her to continue her art work while away.

When one is in the right place at the right time, synchronistic events may happen. I know in my case, I have been lucky enough to have met the right person at the right time, or have received the right opportunity for me to advance myself and my artistic career when I least expected it. I was interested in knowing if this was also the case for these three women. Vander Kooij recounted some of the synchronistic events that have occurred to her in the past year or two:

I think in a way that it's all synchronicity, the fact that it sometimes feels like it's a giant crap shoot all the time, whether or not you're making work that people care about at this particular moment, and fortunately, at this particular moment, there seem to be people who care about what I'm

⁵⁰ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁵¹ Ibid.

making. It's really funny, because I opened a fashion magazine the other day, and there was this whole fashion shoot done in balaclavas. I was like Hey, that's funny...and you never know where that comes from, how it is that people are all thinking about the same thing, or why people are loving skeletal birds right now, like what is that that makes people love that? I love that too.⁵²

Vander Kooij was also surprised about the fact:

There seems to be, I think, a serendipitous return to, an interest in craft practices. All of a sudden people are interested in knitting again. I had to put up with so much teasing in high school when I knitted and embroidered, I was the biggest geek in the world for doing that, knitting got you no props. And now the fact that knitting is suddenly hip, it's kind of a miracle, it's kind of lucky, I'm glad to be in on it when it's hip, it won't be hip in five years - oh well, I'll still be doing it.⁵³

In terms of more practical matters, such as money and recognition, her timing was right as she received the Lillian Elliott award prior to the Hand/Face/Body show at the Gladstone Hotel last October, awarding her the funds she needed to photograph and frame the works that she had planned for the show. Jean Shinoda Bolen states that "when synchronicity happens, it can feel like a miracle, sending tingles up the spine."⁵⁴

St. Michael believes in both synchronicity and in her own power to direct her life, stating:

My whole career has been about this type of synchronicity, or what I call 'being in rhythm'. Right from the start people and opportunities have continually appeared to help move my career in the right direction. I started my career through a series of bizarre events. I had quit a job and that same month my apartment was robbed twice. I had no savings and was living in an unsafe home, and then I moved into my grandfather's home. My initial plan was to stay there until I found work. Two weeks later I was out one night, I had no money to get home and ran into a friend. My friend introduced me to one of his friends who is an artist. Literally just five minutes into our conversation, he offered to share his atelier with me for free, no strings attached. Suddenly even though I had

⁵² Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women*. [San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984], 291.

no job, no money or a home of my own, I had somewhere to do my art work. I took him up on his offer and decided to take advantage of the time, that being to use every spare moment I had while looking for work, to use that time to make my art. That was back in 1999, and I've been doing my art work full time ever since.⁵⁵

In terms of the qualities that she feels are important in directing one's own destiny, St.

Michael responded that:

My own mindset in regards to my career has been to seize every opportunity that appears and take the risks. Whether it is a call of entries for exhibitions, prizes and grant deadlines, whatever is in front of me, I've applied for it. It's been more about the mere act of trying, of putting the doubt aside and learning to give myself a chance, rather than what the out come will be.⁵⁶

Millerson is more pragmatic about things, and does not seem to believe quite so much in synchronicity, although she does acknowledge there are times when things go really well.

She stated:

Rather than any "eureka" moments, I have been able to look back at events and realize their importance after the fact. I have seen that, say, volunteering in various situations has led to meeting someone who later helped me. I have been able to see the benefit of a difficult situation or challenging person later, upon reflection. I have dealt with experiences of grief and loss and been able to create work that has given me some salvation. I have seen that following my instincts and taking risks (entering shows, quitting jobs etc.) has led to more opportunities and put me in the right place at the right time. Overall, I'm very pragmatic and driven and I work really hard to be able to live a creative life.⁵⁷

This dedication to living creative lives and continuing to create their artwork against all of the odds is a trait that all three of these women share. I wanted to look at the effects of time and space on the lives of these artists, specifically, the time it takes for them to make

⁵⁵ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

it in the field, as well as whether there is space for a full time fibre artist to succeed in the current artistic milieu in Canada.

Each of the artists studied is in a different position with regards to employment and the time that is available to devote to their artistic career. This is not an uncommon state in North America, and likely worldwide. Ann Galligan and Neil Apler, in “The Career Matrix, The Pipeline for Artists in the United States” provide data on the lives of individual artists in the United States. They found that “only 24 percent of the artists indicated working solely as artists. The remainder indicated that they had held at least one other job during the year, and 11 percent of all artists were simultaneously working at more than one job during the survey week, a widespread practice among artists.”⁵⁸ Vander Kooij has had numerous and varied jobs since moving to Montreal. After working at Folklore, a clothing and furniture store on Sherbrooke Street, she worked in a Metro store as a grocery clerk. The jobs supplemented her income, yet also affected her work in other ways:

What you do for eight hours a day can't help but affect what you do for the three precious hours at night when you get to do the thing that you really want to do. I got a job nannying for a family in Westmount. That was really hard work, and made me think about care giving, all those things worked their way into my work: motherhood, parenting.... all those issues came into my work in that period of time.⁵⁹

As Vander Kooij recounts, these jobs may present ideas and concepts for future artworks, however, these artists also expend most of the energy available with which to create.

⁵⁸ Ann M. Galligan and Neil O. Alper, “The Career Matrix: The Pipeline for Artists in the United States,” in *The Public Life of the Arts in America*, eds. Joni M. Cherbo and Margaret J. Wyszomirski [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000], 190.

⁵⁹ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

Finally, Vander Kooij found a job as a textile designer at a plant that makes velvet in Montreal. This job is in her field, and has also affected her art practice. She reveals that:

It's been good because it made me more computer savvy too, I didn't really especially like computers, and it made me learn a program that I never would have learned otherwise, and I've become much more comfortable with technology that I need to use, so its been good that way.⁶⁰

However, for Vander Kooij, the dream would be to not have to work outside of her art practice:

It would be lovely to quit my job tomorrow and say that I'm just going to focus my job on being an artist and I'm going to believe that because I'm putting eight hours a day into it, I will, you know....but I don't know if I would be able to make the money to support myself. Like I said, I've had success this year, I did well, but I'm still in the hole - you know, the cost of going to the shows, the cost of shipping the work ...it never evens out, so far.⁶¹

Despite the high profile Vander Kooij has kept by showing in prestigious exhibitions this year, financial success in her art practice continues to elude her. This begs the question, what does success look like for an emerging artist in the Canadian art world. In terms of her own success, she shared that:

My friends and I who are artists talk about this: that no one ever actually feels successful themselves - like other peoples success feels like success, but yours doesn't really look like success when you are in it - because you have this idea about what success is going to mean, and for me, success will mean I can quit my day job. So right now, I just kind of consider myself lucky, not so much successful....but you know, by someone else's standards, they look at it and go, Wow, you've had a really successful year.⁶²

In Millerson's case, she also works several jobs at once in order to make ends meet, and to be able to pay her rent. During her undergraduate degree, she learned event co-

⁶⁰ Andrea Vander Kooij, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, February 18, 2007.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

ordination through her job at the Roy Thompson Concert Hall in Toronto. Along with this experience, she also interned at the Textile Museum of Canada (TMC) as a young student at OCAD. Those experiences provided her with the skill set needed for her current position as the public programs coordinator in the education department at the Textile Museum. In this position, she performs many duties:

What I do is create programs that complement exhibitions - I research possible presenters from all over the world, mostly local people that can come and interact with the museum in such a way that can provide new interpretations for the public. In conjunction with the curators, I will research someone, bring them in, host that event with them, and just oversee every aspect of that event. So for instance, I work on lecture programs, workshop programs, symposia, panel discussions, we have done all kinds of interesting events.⁶³

Millerson combines this job with two teaching jobs. There is a shortage of full time jobs for professors in studio art or craft in fibres or textiles in Canada; therefore, she supplements one with the other, in order to gain as much teaching experience as possible:

I've taught at OCAD for two years, and I have taught seven different courses: Introduction to Fibre, Structures in Fibre, Advanced studies in Fibre, etc. I've been a marker for history classes and a teaching assistant for material art history classes too. It's been a really wonderful experience, teaching is hugely important to me; it's partly having the role model of teachers as parents, but also feeling like it's actually really valuable work. It's exhausting, tiring and heartbreaking at times, but in a way, you feel like you are making a difference, so I do want to continue teaching in terms of a career goal. It has been a struggle to find a permanent position, and this is how I pull together an income, through different jobs.⁶⁴

For Millerson, then, her dream job would be as a full time professor teaching textile history and techniques. She has the requisite MFA qualification, along with the teaching

⁶³ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

experience; however, opportunities in Canada are few, and so it may be at least several more years of working three jobs before she succeeds in this goal:

It's not easy to be an artist and to make money, it's not clear how to do it, and thankfully for me, I am really interested in teaching, and I want that to be a career for me, so that can actually support my art. I remember I showed my class at Sheridan my work, and they said, 'Where do you sell your work'. I looked at them and said, 'Well actually, I rarely sell my work' and they looked at me astonished – 'Do you mean you don't make your living from making textiles?' and I said 'No, I make my living teaching textiles, teaching about textiles.'⁶⁵

Sheridan is a community college in Ontario, and their focus is more vocational, and geared towards preparing students to make a living from their craft skills as a business. This is very different than the model taught at the university level, which encourages their students to embrace a conceptual, fine art focus. St. Michael's path straddles the line between these very different models. Of the three artists I have interviewed, she is the one who makes her living from being a full time artist. However, in recounting her reasons for traveling to Australia, there were many factors to consider:

I reached what I called a 'mid-youth crisis'. I was turning 30 years old and had been working for the past 7-8 years full time on my art work, seven days a week, 6 to 12 hrs a day. I worked really hard to be able to create a career out of my art, but simultaneously I never had the time or the money to take time off. All those years I was very fortunate to receive funding from both the Canada Council for the Arts and le Conseil des arts et des lettres du Quebec, but simultaneously I was still accumulating debt. It's not easy to financially live off of ones art work. It came to a point where I personally needed to shake things up, have a refresher, a change of environment - to simplify things and take care of my financial situation.⁶⁶

In *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, Fraser writes "art making is a profession of social fantasy. The instability of representations of one's social identity and

⁶⁵ Dorie Millerson, interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, November 18, 2006.

⁶⁶ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

legitimate aspirations means that professional consecration can be deferred endlessly into posterity. I would even say that overvaluing and overestimating possibilities, investing in futures that do not really exist, are occupational requirements.”⁶⁷ Known to say and do controversial things, Fraser nonetheless may have hit the nail on the head in this case.⁶⁸ Canadian universities are built upon these next to non-existent futures, leading hundreds of undergraduate fibres and textile fine art students each year to believe that they will be successful artists upon graduation and that they can go do an MFA program in Canada at will. The reality is very different, and many of those students end up feeling like they have been duped by the educational system.⁶⁹ St. Michael is an example of an artist working full time in the fibres field, yet, despite her great success in receiving both provincial and national artist and travel grants, and showing her work in a wide variety of settings, she has been unable to make a decent living in this manner. She became inventive about making money:

I had found out I was still eligible for a Working Holiday Visa in Australia. I left in November 2005, and have been working many odd jobs from pruning a vineyard to working as a chef’s assistant—making money to fund my traveling and paying off my debt. January 1, 2007—I officially paid off a decade’s worth of debt! Throughout my travels I’ve always been continuing to make my art, setting up little art making sites in caves, deserted beaches and various homes. The entire time, I still continue to have exhibitions in Canada and the United States.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Andrea Fraser, “A Speech on Documenta” in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro [Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005], 150.

⁶⁸ Fraser is known for critiquing the art world, and all of its social networks and associated institutions. The Friedrich Petzel gallery website discusses a piece, stating: “*Untitled*, 2003 was initiated in 2002 when Andrea Fraser approached Friedrich Petzel Gallery to arrange a commission with a private collector on her behalf. The requirements for the commission were to include a sexual encounter between Fraser and a collector, which would be recorded on videotape, with the first exemplar of the edition going to the participating collector. The resulting videotape is a silent, unedited, sixty-minute document shot in a hotel room with a stationary camera and existing lighting.” See: http://www.petzel.com/index_fraser.html [accessed August 9, 2007].

⁶⁹ As a teaching assistant in studio art, I have had the opportunity to talk with many young graduating BFA fibres students who have become very disillusioned upon realizing that there are a maximum of 7 MFA positions available each year in Fibres/Textiles programs in Canada.

⁷⁰ Natasha St. Michael, internet interview with the author, January 16, 2007.

It seems that despite being very successful as an artist in North America, for St. Michael, success this year has meant working odd jobs and finally paying off debts incurred as a full time artist. It is still heartening to see that these artists continue to persevere and make their art regardless, anyway that they can. As will become evident, all three artists have experienced obvious progression in their work throughout the years. A very wise sculpture professor once told me that every artwork you complete contributes to your body of work, and that this body of work is ever-changing, and continually growing, with one piece of work building on its predecessors. This is the way that I define progression, and in looking at the artist's work in this chapter, I will be examining how their pieces have progressed over time, and have begun to take up more three dimensional space, as well.



Figure 9. *Balaclava for Gazing into Each Others Eyes* (2006)

Andrea Vander Kooij

Knit and Crochet

Wool yarn

Framed Photo Documentation, 38.5" x 48.4"

As mentioned, analysis of the final three works for this thesis will be conducted in terms of both time and space. For the most part, the following art pieces show progression in each artist's body of work, although Vander Kooij's *Balaclava for Gazing into Each Other's Eyes* was actually completed almost a full year before *The Reluctant Nightingale*, (analyzed in the previous chapter as it emphasized the family and cultural heritage which were addressed in the work). As a performance/art object, the balaclava was exhibited as a photograph in a large frame in the *Hand/Face/Body* show at the Gladstone Hotel in October 2006. In keeping with her love of performance, however, I understand that the artist and her partner actually wore this piece at the vernissage for the show. One of a series of works entitled *Garments for Forced Intimacy*, the other works include *Balaclavas for Looking in the Same Direction*, *Balaclavas for Kissing*, and *Glove for Holding Hands*. At 38.5 inches by 48.4 inches, the photos depicted near to life sized bodies which were hung at a height to approximate the actual height of Vander Kooij and her husband, whose wedding rings are prominently displayed. This piece has been created by knitting the balaclavas and then crocheting the contained sight-line which forcibly directs the wearer's gaze. In terms of time, the balaclava is a garment that was popular in the late 1960's and early 1970's so the work has a nostalgic feel to it, and the playful and home-made quality of the knit and crocheted piece is emphasized by the thick yarn used in its construction. However, the *Forced Intimacy* in the title suggests a more sinister use of the balaclava - to hide the face of those about to commit crimes in public, and in this case is closer to a straight jacket in that it acts as a body restraint. The photograph is striking, and the fact that both Vander Kooij and her husband wear the same simple grey t-shirt makes the work less forced and threatening. When worn in

performance, the actual garments and the participants wearing them are obviously three dimensional in nature, both taking up and directly influencing the space around them. Vander Kooij's work is the most varied of the three artists presented, as she often uses performance as well as the craft-based skills of knitting, crochet and embroidery in her works. It is little wonder her work has been receiving such wide and popular acclaim.

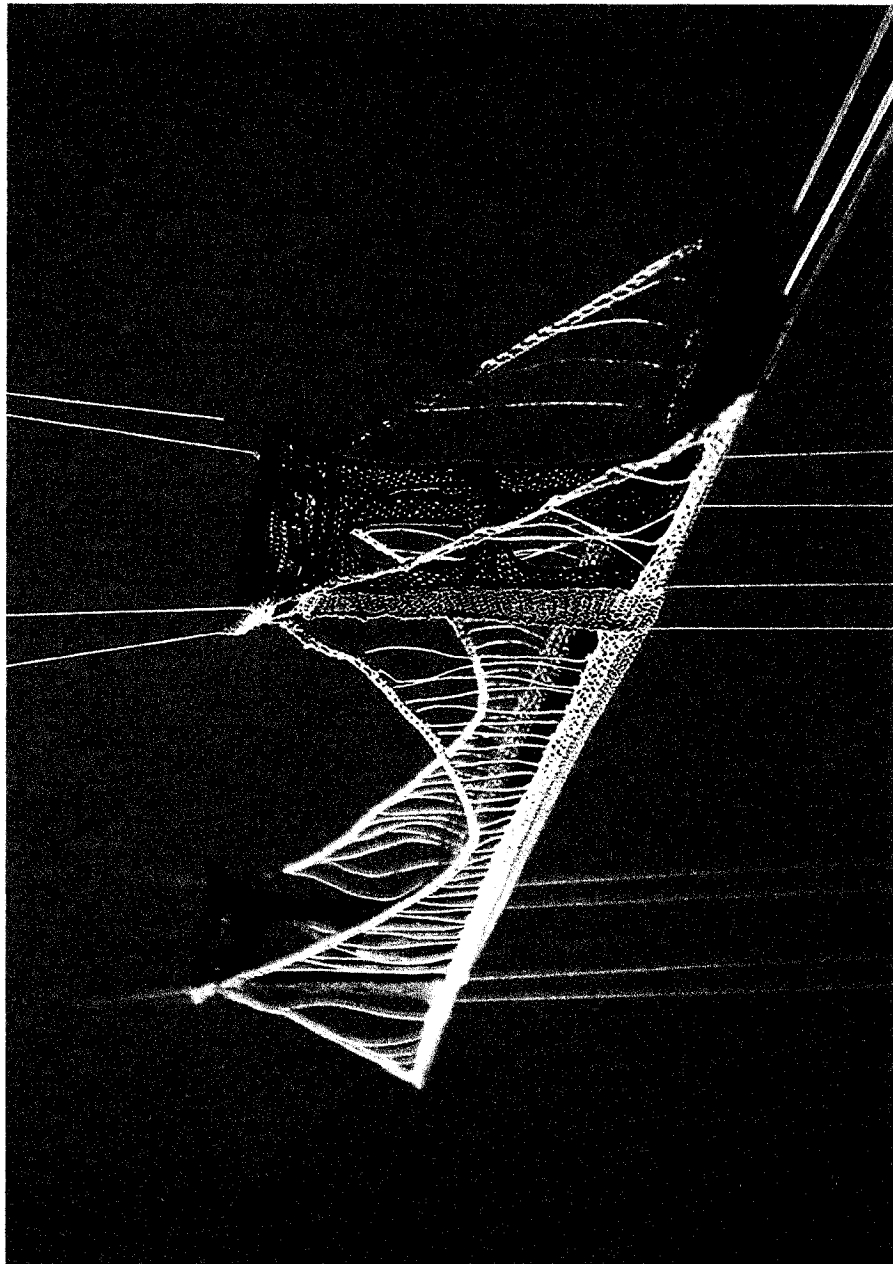


Figure 10.

Bridge (2006)
Dorie Millerson
Needlepoint lace
Cotton threads
12" x 2.5" x 1"

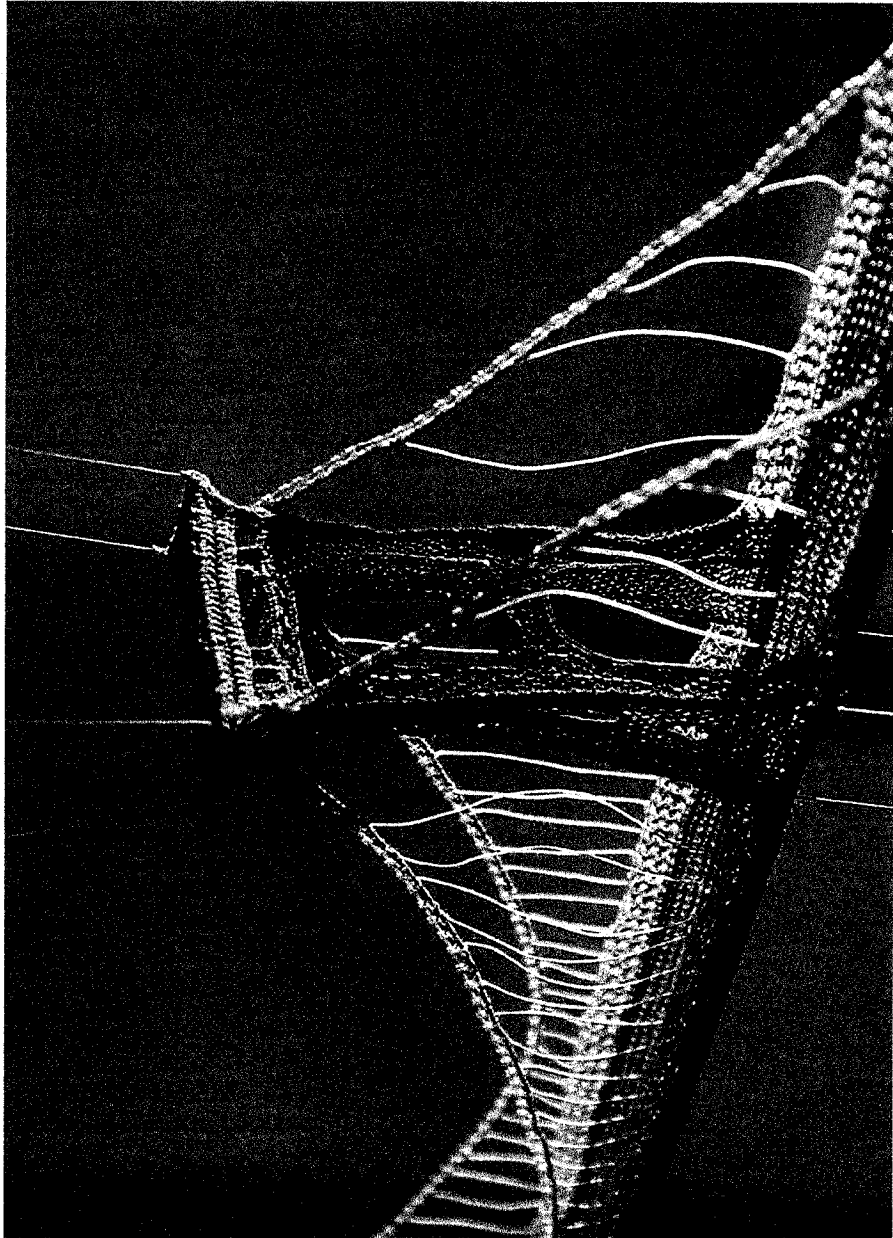


Figure 11.

Bridge (2006)
Image Detail
Dorie Millerson
Needlepoint lace
Cotton threads
12" x 2.5" x 1"

Millerson's piece, *Bridge*, was completed in 2006, and has been architecturally constructed from a drawing on a piece of paper, with the end result being a diminutive and actual three dimensional form. Prior to this, the flat images of both the *Attachments* series (2005) and the *Enlace* series (2003) had been projected onto the gallery wall, essentially filling in the gallery space. *Bridge* was exhibited in a wooden shadow box mounted at the viewer's sightline, and reminded me of the wonder evoked when examining a ship in a bottle. Intricate in its design, the work is constructed using Millerson's needle lace technique, one minute and circular unit at a time. By closely viewing the delicate structure of the bridge, one is amazed at the level of detail, and the time taken to complete the work becomes evident. Constructed from the same sepia toned cotton threads used in her *Attachments* series, the work again references history and nostalgia, making it a relic of the past. Interestingly enough, Millerson has begun to create architectural pieces that she has painstakingly designed, making this an ideal work to comment on the future direction of craft. It has been suggested by many leaders in the Western craft field that in order to fortify our position as a discipline, we need to ally ourselves with both architecture and design, as these fields are closer in nature and language to craft than craft is to fine art. This alliance is purported to secure the future of craft, as well as that of design and architecture, allowing for all three disciplines to continue claiming their space in both the academic and artistic realms. Millerson acknowledged that she was aware of these recent developments in the field, but had not consciously associated her change in direction with these trends. This piece also could be referencing and playing with gender roles, with the masculine and architectural nature of the bridge being composed of fine lace work, giving it a feminine dimension.



Figure 12.

Carcass (2005)
Natasha St. Michael
Hand woven bead sculpture
Glass beads and thread
21" x 10" x 3"

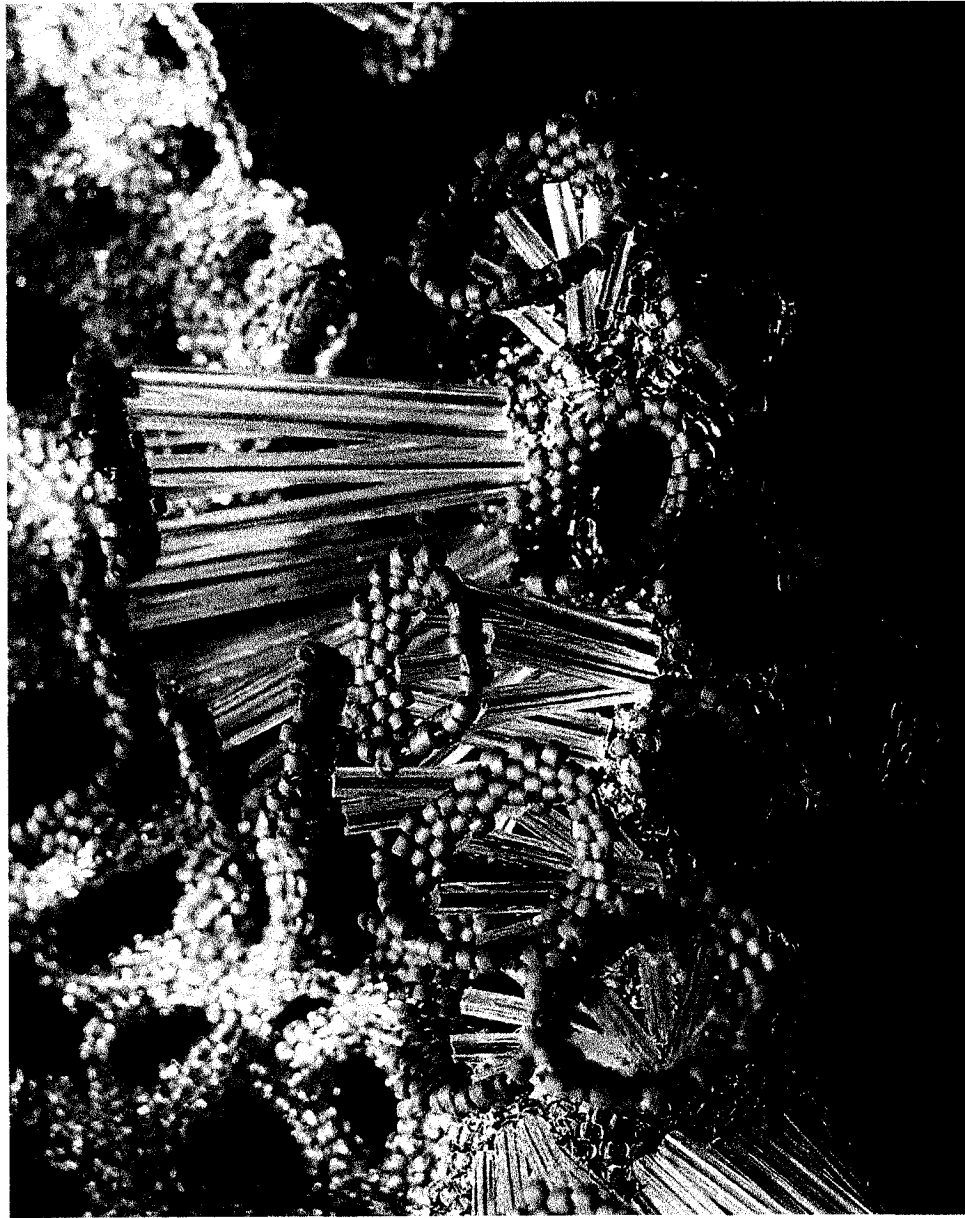


Figure 13.

Carcass (2005)
Image Detail
Natasha St. Michael
Hand woven bead sculpture
Glass beads and thread
21" x 10" x 3"

St. Michael's piece *Carcass* was completed in 2005, making it one of the most recent works in her oeuvre. This work shows her artistic progression and emphasizes both time and space in several ways. The work is much more present than *Blue Cluster*, which although it also incorporated several types and colors of beads in a slightly three dimensional work, was far more static in nature, just as a rock formation would be in real life. *Carcass* depicts time in that it references a living body left to rot and decay. Different beaded forms comprised of varied shapes and sizes of beads in clear and red have been used to create a more three dimensional work that takes up more and varied space, and one can imagine that it is alive, and capable of movement. Far more sculptural and organic in nature, this work begins to speak more of the body, and in fact, I can imagine it draped around a living body. One of the drawbacks of using a seductive material such as glass beads is that the work remains very aesthetically pleasing, which goes against the subject matter of the piece in many ways. It is not abject, or gross in nature, so, therefore, without reading an artist statement, or knowing what the work was about, I am not sure the concept would truly come through for the viewer. As an elegant piece of jewellery, or a one-of-a kind sculpture for the home, the work would excel. St. Michael has won awards and has displayed these works very successfully in art, craft and design shows and exhibitions. It will be interesting to see where her work goes from here, and whether it is possible to convincingly depict decay and death with such beautiful materials, or if St. Michael will begin to incorporate different elements into the work in order to approximate darker subject matter.

This final chapter has examined potential external factors which may influence the life of a fibre artist such as time, space, and place from a feminist perspective. Returning to Felski's constructs of time, this chapter has revealed that gender has indeed influenced large scale time, life time and everyday time in the artists studied. Large scale time comes into play in examining the role of feminism in the art practices of these women. Historically, gender bias has led textile and fibre art to be considered a feminine activity, associated with the private sphere of the home, yet women have also used these practices in a subversive manner, to protest social and political issues that affected their everyday lives. In the life times of two of the artists studied, experiences in higher education have strengthened their feminist beliefs. In terms of all of their practices being subversive, whether taking their needlework to work, church, or class, or making work wherever and whenever they can, such as on the beach in Australia, these women are openly integrating fibre art into their everyday lives in the public domain. By creating with portable and inexpensive materials, these artists have subverted the high costs often involved in renting studio space and buying expensive art materials. In terms of career, their life time is directly affected by the opportunities that exist for them in education and work settings, as well as in the art world. At present, these women have used their everyday time to further their skills and knowledge in their area of expertise, resulting in their making their own opportunities, by securing jobs within the fibre art field that assist in supporting their art making, from working as a textile designer to working in a textile museum, from teaching the next generation of fibre artists, to creating their own work. Regardless of the level of external support available to them, it is likely that these women have made an enduring commitment to their medium, and will be creating with textile

and fibre techniques and materials in their everyday lives, making a place for their art practices throughout their life times.

Conclusions

This thesis has examined the lives and experiences of three contemporary Canadian fibre artists who have been making their mark on the fibre art and textile scene for the past several years. Tracing their personal histories in art and textiles throughout their lives and looking at their experiences in higher education, as well as their current fibre art practices, created a rich source of primary research material from which to draw on in the writing of this thesis. Obviously, broad generalizations cannot be made from such a small group of interviews, and this research is just a starting point from which to contemplate and develop further avenues of study. It was hoped that this thesis, alongside examining the experiences of specific artists, would provide a snapshot of what is going on in the fibre and textile art field today in Canada, and I feel that it has partially accomplished this purpose.

In terms of my research, ideally, I would have liked to have interviewed many more artists; however, I feel that interviewing three artists was appropriate in terms of an MA thesis and workload. It is necessary to continue to share the voices and experiences of women artists, as there still remains a gender imbalance in the fine art, craft and material culture canons. As Nancy Jean Nelson comments in her doctoral dissertation: “methodologies and epistemologies that consider women’s experiences with creative expression are necessary tools for understanding how explanations about the role of

material culture within human experience are guided by the gendered trajectory along which ways of seeing, and thus, ways of knowing, are constructed.”¹

Oral history projects, such as the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, which conducted interviews of 100 prominent and successful craft artists, create an invaluable contribution to the history of craft and material culture in the United States. It is my opinion that Canada needs to follow suit, and to begin to document the history of craft in Canada through the perspective and lives of the makers themselves. Canadians as a people come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, many with their own prominent craft traditions, and as previously discussed, these histories have only just begun to be documented. The works of Sandra Flood, Sandra Alföldy, Gail Crawford and Ann Barros have provided an excellent grounding from which to draw from, however, the detailed histories of Canadian fibre art, wood and glass have yet to be written.

In order for fibre art to become a viable vocation, there needs to be a vibrant and thriving climate for the reception of this work in the art and craft worlds. Several of the requirements necessary for fibre artists to succeed in their field would be: the presence and availability of funding; adequate educational and graduate programs; galleries and museums that specialize in craft as well as textiles specifically; and craft historians, curators and critics to document and promote the field. Regarding funding, according to their website, the Canada Council for the Arts announced July 20th, 2007 that “the

¹ Nancy Jean Nelson, “Women Textile Artists in Ireland: An Exploration of Experience, Expression, and the Everyday” [PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1998], 373.

Canada Council will continue to receive the additional \$30 million, bringing the total funding it receives from Parliament to more than \$180 million a year.”² The fact that craft now has its own category for funding indicates progress, however the allotments awarded to this field are still far less than that of fine art. At a time when many arts programs, organizations and publications are undergoing stern budget cuts, any increase in funding is welcome.

In relation to the academic programs in textiles and fibres in Canadian universities, one troubling issue needs to be addressed in order for emerging fibre artists to succeed in the field or for a field to even exist. Two of the three artists I studied completed graduate studies in fibres and textiles in Canada, and as a result, have received benefits which are rarely available to those who have not done graduate work. Successful artists in Canada, for the most part, are expected to have an MFA degree. They are then considered as professional artists, and the academic backing they receive allows for them to be promoted and critically recognized both within their own discipline and in the local, national and international artistic communities. In order for a discipline to flourish, it requires support from the University in which it is located, as well as for students to be interested in taking these courses. Informal discussions with undergraduate professors in fibre and textile programs across the country have revealed that their classes are overflowing, and many of them are turning students away. Many of these undergraduate students wish to continue their studies in the field, however, currently, there are only two graduate programs in Canada which offer Studio Art in Fibres or Textiles, each with a

² Canada Council Website available at:
<http://www.canadacouncil.ca/news/releases/2007/qm128293500974096163.htm> [accessed July 22, 2007].

very different focus. Concordia University locates their MFA program firmly in the fine art milieu while NSCAD University offers a Master of Fine Arts in Craft: Textiles program.³ The total number of graduate students admitted to these two programs, combined, was 2 or 3 per year; however beginning in 2008, there is the potential for 6 to 7 graduates in the field, still an incredibly low number compared to other artistic disciplines.⁴ Those who are not lucky enough to be chosen during the intense and extremely competitive selection processes either must go to the U.S. or abroad for their graduate studies, continue to reapply year after year, or forgo them completely. More MFA programs in the fibres and textiles field in Canada are required, therefore, to meet these demands. Although several new graduate programs in textiles and fibres are purported to be on the horizon, the situation is currently quite discouraging for students wishing to continue on in studio art in the fibre/textile field.⁵

Artists in the fibre field face a challenge in getting their work exhibited. To the best of my knowledge, there are only two exhibition spaces that exclusively show contemporary fibre art in Canada, both of which are located in Montreal.⁶ I know of no larger galleries

³ The Concordia MFA Fibres program increased enrollment from one or two students a year to five students a year in 2005. <http://mfa.concordia.ca/> [accessed August 8, 2007]. NSCAD website: http://www.nscad.ns.ca/study/grad_overview.php [accessed August 8, 2007].

⁴ It is likely that Canadian universities graduate upwards of 100 MFA students yearly [a very conservative number that I calculated by estimating to the number of students in MFA Fine Arts Graduate Schools in Canada each year.]

⁵ The Ontario College of Art and Design states on their website that “the implementation of degrees at the graduate level at OCAD may be a few years away” however it is hoped that they will include fibres, or material art and design in their degree programs. http://www.ocad.ca/alumni/degree_completion.htm [accessed July 22, 2007]. Sources I have spoken to from the Alberta College of Art and Design Fibres department state that an MFA program will soon be available there as well, although I could not find any indication of this on their website: <http://www.acad.ab.ca/fibre.html> [accessed July 22, 2007].

⁶ Galerie Diagonale is the Centre des arts et des fibres du Québec. Their website is available at: <http://www.artdiagonale.org/> [accessed August 21, 2007]. The Montreal Center for Contemporary Textiles also has an exhibition space. Their website is available at: http://www.textilesmtl.com/English/e_Main.html [accessed August 21, 2007].

that specialize in textile art in Canada. Provincial craft galleries often exhibit one of a kind or production craft and fibre art, while the Textile Museum of Canada, the Musée Marcil, and several of the large museums in urban centers in Canada hold and exhibit historical textile collections, however, contemporary textile art is only a small part of their mandate.⁷ In order for the field to expand, and for emerging fibre artists to become successful, we need to provide more opportunities for both exhibition and sales of unique fibre art.

Along with educational programs and increased exhibition opportunities, for the field of contemporary craft and fibre art to flourish, it requires: craft historians to teach and encourage interest in their subject; craft curators to promote artists and find venues for exhibition; and craft theorist and critics to write about, publish, critique and promote the crafts to the wider population. With only three craft historians hired in Canadian universities, it is difficult to find opportunities for graduate study in the field. At present, Concordia University, through their Art History Department, offers MA and PhD programs that specialize in both historical and contemporary craft. Queens University also offers MA and PhD level studies in historical craft through their Art History Department.⁸ There is a definite need to expand both undergraduate and graduate craft history programs in Canada in order to provide the curators, critics, and craft historians with which to enlarge and expand the field in general.

⁷ The website for the Textile Museum of Canada: <http://www.textilemuseum.ca/> [accessed August 21, 2007]. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, The McCord Museum, and the Royal Ontario Museum also have historical textile collections.

⁸The Department of Art History website is available at: <http://art-history.concordia.ca/graduate.html> [accessed July 23, 2007]. Queen's University Art History website: http://www.queensu.ca/art/arth_grad/programs_arth_grad.html [accessed August 21, 2007.]

There has been a troubling trend in academic craft worldwide that also requires contemplation. Under the threat of closure, many craft programs have jumped on the digital technology bandwagon. Jacquard looms, high technology digital printers and CAD and CAM programs have provided textile, jewellery and ceramic programs with an opportunity to be involved in the trends toward “new media” or “new digital technology” that are abundant in the contemporary art scene. The pros and cons of digital technologies have already been presented. The danger that exists, however, is that a program’s focus on the digital revolution may contribute to deskilling, by putting their focus on learning complex computer programs and devoting less time to skills that the students will be able to use once they have left the academic milieu, without incurring the prohibitive expense of purchasing their own digital equipment. I feel that a more balanced approach may be necessary in some programs in order for students to have options regarding the amount they wish to spend on learning any of the skills offered, whether they be digital, or time-honoured manual skills. I do feel, however, that despite the many inroads digital technology has made into the craft and textiles arena, the historic origins, the sensuality, physicality, and the engagement with materials craft has traditionally celebrated will continue to play a large role in the future of fibre art.

In terms of an artist choosing fibre art as a medium, many complex conscious and unconscious factors may be involved. In the case of Vander Kooij, Millerson and St. Michael, there seems to be some correlation with previous artistic studies in that all three women had been privy to individuals who chose art as a career, as they all had artists in their immediate and extended families. All of the artists experienced family support in their choice to be an artist, both as a child and at present. These women all had begun

some sort of artistic activity well before reaching adolescence, and have continued creating with textile and fibre art throughout their lives. All three artists experienced the support and encouragement of several mentors in their careers, mostly university professors, although one of the artists also chose to name women who were in the craft and fibre fields more peripherally, as curators, craft historians and museum professionals.

Cultural heritage did not seem to play a large part in their choice to become a fibre artist, although two of the artists recognize that their associated cultures do have prominent needlework and textile traditions. All three of the artists chose specific materials which have a very minimal impact on the environment, aligning them with some of the concerns of ecofeminism. All three artists suggested that the mediums they chose suited their personalities, possibly creating links between performing labour intensive and repetitive activities and being a perfectionist. I feel that this link is promising as an area of further research, as it would be interesting to examine whether artists who choose specific craft media have specific personality traits in common.

The mindfulness of the maker seemed to play a role in the choice of fibre as a medium for these three women as well. All the artists experienced personal physical as well as emotional dividends from their experiences of flow, meditative moments, bodily-kinaesthetic awareness and peak experiences. This supports my contention that the benefits of this complex mind/body relationship encourage continued involvement in repetitive textile techniques in the case of these three artists. I feel that this rich area of study could provide further insight into the internal motivations of the many artists and

craftspeople who work in fibre, clay, metal, wood and glass as well as the rest of the fine arts.

In terms of spirituality, one artist mentioned a direct link between her Buddhist practices and her art processes. She confirmed that her spiritual training both enhanced and complimented her daily art practice. Another artist mentioned the stigma attached to identifying oneself as a Christian in a graduate studio art program, and the difficulties it sometimes brought to that experience. She had not considered her spirituality in terms of how she approached her work, but rebelled against the repressive nature of her undergraduate Christian university by presenting feminist and somewhat controversial work for her final undergraduate exhibition. The third artist did not deem her art practice to be spiritual in any way.

Feminism was a subject with which two of the three artists strongly identified. Although I deem all three of these artists to be subversive in nature for shunning digital technology in favour of traditional craft techniques and materials, two of the artists did not think their work was overtly subversive. The third, as previously mentioned, had her work censored before her undergraduate show, but was able to find an alternative venue for the work in the end.

Regarding time, all three artists consciously chose use repetitive, laborious techniques which take many hours to complete. This labour intensity at times caused stress, and two of the artists came up with strategies for time management. All of the artists related to

space in terms of choosing work that was very portable, allowing them to engage in their work wherever they were. As a result, they did not have to rely on expensive studio space or specialized equipment. All three women had also worked in their homes for at least part of their artistic careers.

Finally, in terms of making it in the field, all the artists felt major financial constraints. One artist works three jobs in order to make ends meet, and does her artwork on the side. Another woman had worked several jobs throughout her career, although now she is employed full time as a textile designer, and also continues to make her work in every spare moment she can find. Only one of the artists worked full time as an artist, and relied on sales of artwork, artist grants and commissions for her living. However, she just recently returned after spending almost two years on a work visa in Australia, and just paid off ten years of debt, as of January 1st, 2007. At this point in their careers, none of these artists are able to make their livings from creating their artwork alone. So, then, the question is, why do they do it? Why do they choose fibre art as a career when it is unlikely to support them in the long run? It could be, as Csikszentmihalyi states in his article "Happiness and Creativity: Going with the Flow" that "creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing."⁹

⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Happiness and Creativity: Going with the Flow" *Futurist* 31, no. 5 [September-October 1997], 8.

Somehow, through a series of life circumstances and choices, all three of these women have chosen to work with labour intensive textile techniques and processes to express themselves creatively. It is difficult to know exactly which internal or external motivations have played a role in their choices, but there are many commonalities, as well as many differences in their lives and artistic practices. More research is required into both fibre artists and craft artists in general in order to determine if there truly are a set of personality characteristics which predispose one to their specific medium. Perhaps, as in the case of tacit knowledge, bodily-kinaesthetic awareness, flow and peak experiences, their art practices and techniques become embodied, making them difficult to explain, even to themselves. It is heartening to know, however, that despite their motivations, they all continue to keep these craft skills alive and in the public eye, and to experience success in their careers. This commitment and dedication to tradition and to the making and sharing of textiles bodes well for the future of fibre.

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