Mind, Body, and Handwoven Cloth

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Mind, Body, and Handwoven Cloth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

MIND, BODY AND HANDWOVEN CLOTH

By Andrea C. Donnelly, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Major Director: Susan Iverson
Professor, Department of Craft/Material Studies

My work explores the nature of individual perception, and the side of our lives lived entirely within our minds. I do this through the lens of self-reflection, examining the images of my own mental life and translating them into delicately handwoven cloth. These images and their structures become sensory experiences of the intangible, and a meeting place for my internal life and that of my viewer.

The cloth I weave is simultaneously familiar and strange. Through woven surface and imbedded imagery, I attempt to illuminate the deep emotions that necessarily isolate us from each other, and the shared experiences of our physical beings, which connect us. The quiet, ritualistic act of weaving expresses an overlapping of mental and physical space: the resulting cloth bears within each line of warp and weft the metaphor of that process.
Section I: Mind, Body, and Cloth

“We insist, it seems, on living. Then again, indifference descends. The roar of the traffic, the passage of undifferentiated faces, this way and that way, drugs me into dreams; rubs the features from faces. People might walk through me. And, what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught? The growl of traffic might be any uproar – forest trees or the growl of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. I think also that our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones, and silence.”

- Virginia Woolf, The Waves

Isolation and Connection

As a child, I remember being both tormented and fascinated by a great flaw in our ability to communicate with one another. The problem, as I saw it, was “color”. How could I ever know if the color I understood as green, didn’t appear as my version of orange to someone else? I imagined myself and the masses of people moving around me, collectively seeing an infinite palette of purples and pinks and blues in the summer foliage, all thinking we were on the same page of “those leaves are green.” After much fretting over how to solve this problem, I finally accepted that the world must look very different to each of us, but I could never truly know what those differences might be. A mounting list of innocent philosophical questions like this one eventually led me to study psychology before I ever studied art in college. Today, I am still very curious about the human mind, and the ways in which we study and categorize the infinitely

variable aspects of our own psychological roadmaps. However, to explain our thoughts and emotions through the genetic makeup of our bodies and the electrochemical makeup of our minds is to reduce poetry to a mathematical formula. In his 1958 presidential address to the American Psychology Association, the esteemed Henry Harlow admitted that as psychologists, “the little we know about love does not transcend simple observation, and the little we write about it has been better written by poets and novelists.”

I am equally interested in this “anecdotal” evidence of the individual emotional experience, the depths of the human mind so eloquently revealed by poets and novelists.

An intense reader since childhood, human experience as told through literature and poetry has deeply affected my views of the relationship between the individual and collective experience of mental life. Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* has been especially influential. The story is told entirely through the interior monologues of a group of six young schoolmates, as they grow up, separate, and come together at various points in their lives. Their thoughts illuminate the hidden frailties and projected facades that each nurtures, and reveal the ache of an incomplete but deep understanding of themselves and each other. Being keenly aware of my own experience as I move through my days, I have continued to wonder about the parallel internal experiences of others around me. I still believe, like my childhood uncertainty about color, that there is much variability within our interpretations of the same neutral reality. I feel this as both a place for connection, and as perpetual isolation and separation. It has been through

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literature, my window into that parallel mind space of another human being, that I find my evidence of a deeper connection between individual experience and the shared struggle of being human. Writers like Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickenson, Edgar Allen Poe, Federico García Lorca, Virginia Woolf, Gabriel García Márquez, and Ernest Hemmingway, among many, many others, present me with a reflection of my own experience, or a deep connection to the circumstances of an unknown life. Through the imaginative space conjured by their words, I feel my isolation dissolving into recognition: I see their blue in my red, and though different, they are the same.

**Body as Communication**

“‘But when we sit together, close,’ said Bernard, ‘we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory.’”³

- Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

I am aware of my internal states and external environment through the sensations of my body. Air is weight on my shoulders. Light has sound, and rooms breath back. A book is a warm bath. Upon arrival at graduate school, I found myself in an unknown place and away from close contact with loved ones, and a dull but persistent anxiety seemed to creep into my bones. I attempted to make sense of this anxiety, hoping to master it, through my work: in the first piece I

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made at VCU, I tried to capture the uncomfortable restlessness of my body in a scattering mass of tumor-like woven pod forms, held to the wall with multiple thin steel rods. But the emotional content I was exploring did not reveal itself in the formality and abstraction of the finished piece. My response was to bring my actual body into my work, using action and gesture to express the emotion I felt beating under my skin, and *Quietly, Quietly* was the result. Ever since, I have been working with altered images of my body as manifestations of the mind, exploring the intertwining of internal states like fear, desire, sadness and stillness.

My figurative work begins with photographing my own body. I use myself to give physicality to the intangible concepts I’m exploring, revealing their presence through the gestures of my body. Just as a single poem can speak to so many private aches, I seek to touch on the collective experience through my personal experience. My photography is done alone and for myself. I see these photographs as raw material for my large-scale weavings. My review and manipulation of the images is the breaking point between the highly personal act of photographing myself, and my desire to speak
about a wider human experience. When I select an image with the intention of translating it into a woven piece, I’m searching for a resonance beyond any particular objective I may initially have felt during the photographic process. I shoot hundreds of pictures, hoping to capture the subtle movements I make between breaths. I seek the serendipitous moment, in which the vaporous and ethereal substance of the life lived in my mind might manifest itself through the subtle movements of my body. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, implosion, and moments of calm, are revealed through the curling of toes, or a long exhalation of breath.

By using myself, my movements in front of the camera are searching rather than staged. My nakedness is a reflection of that honesty, the nature of my gestures expressing the complexities of vulnerability/protection and connection/isolation. In John Berger’s words, “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself.”4 My gestures are concerned with my own internal states, and not with the gaze of a potential viewer: in this way I attempt to defy the concept of my body as a purely passive object. My nakedness is also a way to remove the context of real time and space revealed through clothing, suggesting instead the intimacy of my mental self. I connect my nakedness for this purpose to the photography of John Coplans, who wrote of the body, “…unclothed, it belongs to the past, present, and future.”5 Coplans’ large-scale images of his ageing body reveal its fragility. Vulnerable and exposed in detail down to hairs and wrinkles, it is a site for curiosity and compassion. Body is connected back to the earth, to landscape and geology, becoming more

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than itself. When I transform the image of my body through cloth, exposing its vulnerability through scale and material, its nakedness is an exposure of the mental more than the physical.

Roni Horn states, “I have a certain way of working that is concerned – not with the invisible, but with the nonvisible; meaning it’s there and you can sense it.” 6 Her photographic work and her sensitivity for the “nonvisible” have been important to my own thoughts on what might be moving around us, unnoticed, as we move through our lives. Like the wind and atmosphere she references in *You Are the Weather*, which leave their traces upon the face of her model, I see the mind leaving traces on the body, and attempt to capture that evidence through the camera. When *You Are the Weather* is installed in a gallery, one hundred images of the woman’s face project her experience of weather back at the viewer; the viewer then becomes the

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stimulation, and the weather\(^7\). In my work, I am also bringing the viewer into dialog with my figures. Where Horn uses the confronting gaze of her subject to return the attention of the viewer, I use gesture: the self-protective nature of my figures might be a reaction to an intrusion into their space. I relate my photographic process to Horn’s obsessive picture taking in works such as *Her, Her, Her, and Her*, *You Are the Weather*, and *This Is Me, This Is You*. In these series, the repetition of form or subject causes heightened attention to their subtle variations between images. Presented in book format, the images in her collections ask to be deciphered through their incongruities, the “nonvisible” revealing itself in the shifting of eyes or a blurred motion. *Her, Her, Her and Her* especially uses physical space and the body to do this, capturing both presence and absence.

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My interest in the acts of thinking, feeling, and imagining has resulted in literature taking an active role in the concepts behind my work. The literary genre Magical Realism, and the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, has deeply influenced my imagination in regards to the coexistence of physical reality with a “nonvisible” reality of superstition, spirituality, and the mental life. García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is about the beauty and absurdity of our struggle to meaningfully exist:

“They had indeed contracted the illness of insomnia. Ursula, who had learned from her mother the medicinal value of plants, prepared and made them all drink a brew of monkshood, but they could not get to sleep and spent the whole day dreaming on their feet. In that state of hallucinated lucidity, not only did they see the images of their own dreams, but some saw the images dreamed by others. It was as if the house were full of visitors.”

This beautiful passage, and the entire book, illustrates the power of forces that work upon our psyches: in a place where reality is indistinguishable from imagination, our psyches can work back. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reminds me that by suspending disbelief, humanity can be found in the underlying ridiculousness of daily life. A few years before my introduction to the stories of García Márquez, I read *Labyrinths*, a collection of Borges short stories, over a high school summer vacation at the beach. The imaginative depths revealed in his stories struck me profoundly. I remember being very aware of the sun on my shoulders and the warmth of the day.

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8 García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970, p. 49.
as I sat there with my book. Sitting close to the vast ocean, I might have been totally alone on the beach. As I read “The Library of Babel,” my body rested warm and relaxed on the sand while my mind ascended the cool, dark staircases through the infinite Library. To this day I still delight in the idea that within this library, among endless combinations of letters and characters that result in books of nonsense, hide books that by the pure chance formation of letters reveal:

“Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels’ autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.”

Reading “The Library of Babel” at the edge of the ocean, hearing the rhythm of water and feeling the gritty sand and the sun’s heat, I became very aware of the joy I took in the capacity of the mind in conjunction with the sensory experience of the body to exist beyond physical reality. Sharing the

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imagined world of another allowed a new reality to unfold around me. I experience this with all of my favorite writers, but through the Magical Realists especially. The overlap of physical and mental, of what is seen and what is imagined, is deeply engrained into how I understand the world, which translates into my work. My attempt to capture the presence of the “nonvisible,” is my attempt to give tangibility to the parallel experience that so captivates me.

**Transformations of the Body: Scale, Space, and Structure**

“Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream.”

- Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

My photographs, unlike those of Roni Horn and John Coplans, are a starting place, raw material for further exploration through their transformation into large-scale weaving. In altering the scale of the body, I remove it from a realistic context. Instead, the body becomes an expression of the psyche. In the space around my figures, I leave room for the space that emotions occupy, in the way that fear, desire, sadness, or joy can seem to radiate outward, too big for the physical container of our bodies. The importance of scale in relation to the body and psyche led me to Ron Mueck’s work. From the large-doll-sized *Two Women* to the monumental baby, *A Girl*, Mueck uses a range of scales to convey the physical and emotional experience of life in all its stages. As my own work was growing in scale over my first year in graduate school, I decided at the beginning of my third semester to try working with my figure on a

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smaller-than-life scale as well. *From Here*, a three-quarter-scale image in a long expanse of cloth, feels much more like a representation of emotion, a woven painting, than a presence of that emotion. After making that piece, I feel comfortable in my inclination to work larger and larger: though Mueck’s small figures elicit sympathy and vulnerability, it is the overwhelming quality of my figures and their environments that becomes a presence rather than a representation. Ron Mueck’s larger-than-life figures, especially the adolescent girl of *Ghost*, speak to me of vulnerability and humanity through the combination of realistic rendering and exaggerated scale. The scale shift highlights the surfaces of the body, but more importantly it reveals the feeling of being in one’s skin, as though the mind is acting upon the body, causing the body to reflect its interior state. While Mueck achieves this by
exquisitely rendering all visible surfaces of the human exterior, the image of my body is stripped of the details that Mueck’s rely upon for empathy and connection. More than being in one’s skin, I’m trying to capture being in one’s head. My figures are delicate, transparent, and shifting. Woven into cloth, the body is transformed from the physical to the psychological; an internal ghost of the life lived externally. Mueck’s figures are solid and gravity-bound, but I see my figures, submerged in their cloth, as these ghosts made visible.

Beginning with *Holding In*, I started considering the importance of the space around the figure. *Holding In, From Here*, and *The Weaver’s Bench* (thesis) all use the expansiveness of woven cloth as thought space or emotional space. Loosely woven and expansive, the lines of warp and weft and the additive nature of the panel construction imply that their planes could extend outward infinitely around us, a web of this mental atmosphere. Densely woven, as in *The Awareness*, the structure seems to tighten over the figure as its gesture pulls inward, obscuring the body. The scale of these works makes them unavoidable: both confrontational and yet more vulnerable. Installed, these large weavings become an environment: the figures they contain bring
awareness of the viewer’s own body, as well as to the physical space they occupy together. I draw parallels to Antony Gormley’s use of form, space, and the body of the viewer. *Total Strangers* is especially compelling: the presence of body forms inside and outside the gallery space as both object and viewer of the real viewer, suddenly forces an awareness of body and space, as Gormley put it, “transforming the viewer’s experience of his or her place in the world.”11 By confronting the viewer with an unfamiliarly large expanse of body and woven cloth in my own work, I hope to create a shift in their perception of the space it occupies, and their presence within that space.

The structure and scale of these weavings reference walls and screens in large architectural spaces. I am interested in this connection between cloth, divided space, privacy, and the body. A curtain serves to hide something from an unsolicited gaze, and a screen reveals the shape but not the substance of what lies behind it. My figures feel close, but unreachable: the physical barrier of cloth reinforces the psychological barrier of body language. They are trapped

within their screens and curtains, which both reveal and obscure their private and solitary moments. The veil-like aspect of the cloth emphasizes the voyeuristic nature of the viewer’s gaze, the gesture of the figure further emphasizing its privacy. In contrast, the scale demands attention. *The Weaver’s Bench* addresses this most directly by depicting a figure obscured by cloth, which is then obscured by the process of weaving that image into cloth. With all of my figurative work, it is up to the viewer to decide whether the figure is aware of their presence, and therefore whether their self-protective gesture is caused by the viewer’s presence, or something within themselves. In revealing what is behind the screen through the very fabric of the screen, I intend for the viewer to see what is normally hidden: moments of our own humanity, vulnerability, doubt and contemplation.

**The Intimacy of Cloth: Knowledge Through Skin**

I have a powerful memory of the blanket I dragged around as a child, a memory I feel more than see. I remember the sensation of soft material on my cheek, and a tickling from fuzzy threads escaping from the edges of a hole I worked into the cloth. I think everyone has some version of this memory: one example of the many ways in which cloth is a powerful signifier of both collective and individual experience. Used for purposes as basic as shelter and clothing, to signifiers of power or transmitters of history, cloth
is deeply connected with the everyday and congruently imbued with deep reverence and ritualistic significance. In thinking about the importance of cloth, I enjoy looking at art that engages the specific nature of certain types of cloth to speak about its cultural context or aura. Anne Wilson’s *A Chronicle of Days* and Ann Hamilton’s *indigo blue* are powerful in their use of specific kinds of cloth to evoke themes of history, labor, and social status, a sense of absence and loss, and the fragility of existence. *A Chronicle of Days* is a series of stained and hair-mended fancy dinner linens. With this work I recall my discomfort at the rare formal dinner: the furniture of my great grandmother’s house, and the strangeness of traditions that were not really a part of my own life. Hamilton’s *indigo blue* was a site-specific installation and performance in Charleston, South Carolina, which included a 14,000-pound pile of men’s blue work shirts and pants. Though I have only experienced this work through its documentation, in imagining myself with the piece I become aware of the fact that neither I nor any member of my family has ever worn that type of clothing. I recall having seen plenty of men who do, and I become very

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aware of the anonymity and transience of their lives in relation to my own through the overwhelming pile of their empty clothing.

The weight of so many memories and associations within the humblest to the most decadent cloth makes it a wonderful material to engage artistically. I use the collective knowledge of cloth to create an intimate experience between the viewer and my work that defies the nature of its scale. My cloth is not a neutral canvas, but an active environment weaving its way through the image imbedded within it, asserting its own physical presence. My lengths of handwoven cloth are simultaneously familiar and strange, as are the figures they hold. Though most people have little experience with handwoven cloth, they can sense the weight of its drape,
or the lightness of its translucence. Similarly, though the figure is not specific to their experience, they know the tension in the arch of her neck or the self-protection of her folded arms. With the visual warmth and softness of handwoven cloth, I hope to spark a connection between its touch on the body contained within it, and its imagined touch on the body of the viewer. I want to create a sensory experience beyond the act of looking, one that mirrors the sensation of thought or emotion. At its large scale, my work is absorbed slowly as the viewer approaches, revealing a complexity of information behind the simplified figure, and a shifting of perception depending upon their vantage point.

Due to the nature of cloth and light, the density and vividness of its color, surface, and image all shift: the experience of these elements differs from a direct front view, to viewing the cloth at an angle, to looking down its surface from the side of the cloth. The sensuality in that shifting and unfamiliar surface beckons the viewer closer despite the scale, into the physical space of the figure within the cloth. With enough white cloth to become its own gallery wall, *The Weaver’s Bench* softly encompasses the viewer as they trespass upon the private moment of the figure. *Holding In* literally explored the idea of encompassing, its panels subtly articulating outward.
away from the wall and the central figure like the starting point of a huge circle. The specific
and purposeful relationship between each cloth and its figure demands consideration, and the
barriers between image and object, created environment and real space, become fluid when the
work is installed.

**Handwoven Cloth: Process as Metaphor**

The figure and the woven cloth have equal presence in my work. To weave the figure
within the cloth is to capture it there. Before they are woven, I often imagine my painted warp
threads collapsing without the structure of their weft into a tangle on the floor, the image of the
body lost within the pile. By painting the figure only on the vertical warp threads before
weaving the cloth, I literally submerge it within the cloth as I weave, fusing the elements of
structure with image. In works like *From Here, The Awareness,* and *The Weaver’s Bench,* the
color of my weft thread is white while the image is dark, and this submersion becomes more evident
as the white weft mutes the image: the finished cloth this process reveals the form as it seeks to
obscure it. The idea of body imprinted into cloth, leaving its
shadowy presence, is a powerful one: the Shroud of Turin most notably bears witness to the significance we tend to impart to any cloth that has been an important part of a life or death. In my thesis works, *Shift* and *The Weaver’s Bench*, I used a length of muslin as a screen during my photographic process to obscure and alter the translation of my body through the camera lens. Many of the resulting images strongly referenced a shroud or body imprint. In *Shift*, that obstruction manifests itself as a slightly strange breakdown in the continuity of the form, the initial shroud-like quality of the image lost. That quality remains in *The Weaver’s Bench*. Traces of the muslin screen between my body and the camera are still present in the image I weave, a layer of cloth within cloth, and a figure both behind and within a veil.

The cloth I weave speaks of presence as much as it holds a presence. My process and the properties of my handwoven cloth hold metaphorical content in my work: through weaving I explore the nature of the internal life and its relationship to the external world. As in my photographic process, the solitary, ritualistic act of weaving is a site for the blurring of mind with body. The repetition of motion and the soft rhythmic shimmer of a loom at work create a meditative space. Handwoven cloth holds the passage of time within its threads, recording the care given as I place each line of thread, and the subtle irregularities in the strength of my beat. The resulting cloth bears within it the metaphor of those actions: the overlapping of mental and physical space. Though that connection to the experience of the weaving process is really only
for myself, the overall sense of the cloth is built from those subtleties, and it emanates those qualities in a quiet presence regardless of one’s knowledge of weaving.

**Woven Inkblots: An Analytical Approach to the Nature of Perception and the Experience of the Mental Life**

During my second year of school, as I got deeper into examining the nature of my own internal experience, my interest in the scientific side of my inquiry into the mind reasserted itself. I began thinking about the nature of perception, and the notion of objective measurement for subjective experience. I considered the history and form of the inkblot, and it became for me a compelling symbol of the merging of chance, scientific inquiry, and imagination. Inspired by this icon of psychological analysis, I began thinking about how the staining and folding process of creating an inkblot on paper could be reinterpreted as a weaving process. Whereas the rich metaphors of weaving as mind/body collaboration and physical record of internal experience are the undertone in my figurative work, they are the focus in these explorations. The woven inkblot is an examination of its making process, both physically and metaphorically.

As the Rorschach test is used as an objective tool to reveal the subconscious, I imagine that in making the woven inkblot I am both test subject and outside interpreter. I compare my inkblot explorations with Annette Messager’s *Handbook of Everyday Magic*, in which she created a daily ink blot from her own signature, and then interpreted her coming day from the stain.14 This

notion that the study of my woven inkblots will somehow reveal larger truths is a testament to my desire to understand the mysterious laws of body and mind. I am fascinated by our binary brains, the recurrence of that binary throughout nature, and how through processing information we necessarily break it down and reform it, unavoidably changing it. The making process for my interpretation of the inkblot is straightforward, though methodical and painstaking. I view each physical act in that process as metaphor for mental concepts such as the complexities of perception and interpretation, and how we attempt to negotiate and control our place within the stimuli of our environment. In creating a “mirror image,” I apply a pigment stain onto handwoven fabric. Next, I slowly unweave the cloth, separating the stain into its vertical and horizontal elements. Finally, I carefully reweave the weft image beside the warp image instead of back into itself\(^{15}\). The resulting bilateral form reveals the history of its making: the shifts and subtle irregularities that occur during the reweaving process are evidence of an imperfect collaboration between body, mind, and tool. In small works, I also explored this process with text, carefully copying favorite poems and passages from books onto the woven cloth before unweaving it. Broken

\(^{15}\) See Section 3: Woven Inkblots and Figure 37 for in-depth explanation and detailed photographs of this process.
down, the text was illegible, but retained the look of text or code when rewoven, becoming another layer of subliminal information. After much technical exploration on a small scale, I created a series of three large-scale Blots. The scale shift separated these pieces from simply being technical exercises, and literally magnified their purpose as investigations into the subtleties of symmetry and the breakdown and reformation of information. I see these final inkblot forms, which are not necessarily viewed in the orientation of their creation, as a space for examining my exploratory act, with the hope that they become catalysts for a new cycle of absorbing and interpreting information. My interest lies not in the direct associations the forms might invoke, but as with my figurative work, in creating as meeting point for collective and individual experience.
Section II: Watching the Line

Aesthetics of Order and Chaos

Visually, I find myself drawn to the chaotic piling of natural and man-made pattern within my urban environment: the disintegrating patterns of old brick sidewalks uprooted by trees and spread with bright green blooms of moss, an intricate iron gateway casting skewed shadows onto its checkered tile walkway, or line and pattern in old architecture melting into the natural growth that creeps around it. These details seduce me with their brilliant clashes and chance harmonies, their chaos revealing an underlying structure and order. Though my work is anything but riotous and unruly, the pleasure I take in untangling the visual patterns of my daily life is the same pleasure I take in watching structure emerge on my loom. The rhythmic overlapping of threads, and the subtle shifts and imperfections that occur within the cloth I weave reflect my absorption and distillation of the environment I experience every day while biking and walking through the city.

Figure 20. Front porch, walkway, and gate in Richmond, VA.
In my second semester of school I took some time to examine the patterns of my environment in relation to the visual aesthetics of pattern and line underlying my work, and *Systems Meditation Series* and *Memory Studies* were the result. *Systems Meditation Series* is a catalog of details from my real and imagined environment, a filtering of the interesting patterns and visual juxtapositions I encounter every day. In a series of nine scratchboard drawings, these patterns were flattened and stripped of color and detail, becoming only line and shape. Unconsciously, many of the pieces became about patterns in my fiber processes as well as the urban patterns that inspired them: *Systems Meditation* #4, #6, and #8 contain strong references to textiles. *Memory Studies* followed a similar urge to catalog what fascinated me about my environment, but in this case the environment was my studio. In this project I explored the seemingly infinite textures and structures I saw layered within the simplest construction of cloth. Coating small samples of a variety of my own handwoven cloth in plaster, I both obliterated and highlighted the textures and structures within its surface. I layered these pieces together, creating
new systems. I explored freezing the graceful and fluid motions of thread, making hard and inflexible what was once soft and pliable. As investigations, these two series helped me place the visual information that attracts my eye daily within the context of the formal interests underlying my main bodies of work. I condense the chaos and pattern to its essence, to an overlapping of horizontal and vertical threads, which I study with the same fascinated intensity as a white line scratched through black ink, or the meeting of cobblestone alleyways. I see line, direction, and distraction: a whole built from the tangling or taming of its parts.

As I find myself absorbed in my visual environment, the influence of literature has also left its mark on me aesthetically. I have a great love for the pattern of text, and for line-drawn illustration and etching. Artists working at the intersection of story telling and line drawing, like Kiki Smith’s etchings after Lewis Carroll and Little Red Riding Hood, the illustrator Gustav Doré, and on a lighter note but as dearly appreciated, Edward Gorey, work at a meeting place of
verbal and visual language, which is for me a space of imagination and pure visual pleasure. My life-long experience of illustration is laden with memories of the books in which I discovered them, and the rituals of reading itself, so their qualities carry deep layers of context and mood. Holding a beloved old book in my hands, I come suddenly upon an engraved or etched illustration, the slow bumping of text making room for the accelerations of thin and fast line.

Figure 24. 1932 copy of Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley. Illustrations by Nino Carabe.

This experience merges the visual with the tactile and intellectual, and speaks of the understated quality of line, of restraint that communicates quietly and powerfully, like poetry. In my own work, that sensory experience merging art and literature has become an aesthetic of touch and the
slow reveal, an intimate space for the reading of line. I equate weaving with the act of reading: I see text in the lines of my weft as they are broken by warp. As I weave, I run my hands over the unwoven warp and the building cloth. I watch those lines of thread like I run my eyes over the pages of my favorite books. Weaving through areas of painted warp is like turning the page and finding an etched illustration among the text.

**Seductions and Challenges of the Grid**

With handwoven cloth as my medium, I work around a specific set of parameters. Because cloth and imagery are of equal conceptual importance, I view these parameters not as limitations but as opportunities to layer content or reveal process and materials. The size of my loom in relation to the size of my image is the greatest technical consideration. I must almost always subdivide my image to fit the width of a loom, and where I choose to divide the figure, and the number of panels I decide upon, can have great visual or conceptual impact. Often the final size of an image is tweaked a few inches to allow it to fit properly onto the loom, or to assure the divisions fall in appropriate places, as two panels meeting through the middle of the face or bisecting a long limb can affect the work in a way that does not interest me.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 25. The Awareness detail.*
The idea of the panel is as conceptually important as it is technically necessary. Within the large scale of much of my work, the human scale and the quality of the handmade remain visible through the scale of the individual panels. These panels, their physicality evident in the quality of their edges and unique undulations, break up the continuity of the image and surrounding space, causing the eye to move back and forth between image and object. In *The Awareness*, the solid nature of each panel causes a pull between abstraction of the figure as each panel is recognized as a unique object, and the figure coming together across all three.

My interest in the use of panels is also aesthetically motivated. Panels are part of the domestic architecture in cultures such as Japan, and intrinsic to many cultures’ traditional clothing, such as kimono or African Kente and mud cloth. I have been highly influenced by cultural use of textile panels for function and art. The simple beauty and sense of intimate space inspired by the delicate indigo-dyed Japanese room partitions of Roland Rickets, and the quiet presence and masterful skills in the work of Hiroyuki Shindo are aesthetic and technical inspirations for my own work. During an undergraduate study-abroad studio in Ghana, I witnessed the making of Kente. Long thin panels of intricately woven and symbolically patterned cloth are stitched together to make these special garments. Since then, the aesthetic of those
imperfect and lively edges of handwoven cloth has been part of my work. *Shift*, more than any of my other pieces, is about my making process: the physical nature of the panel as it relates to Japanese noren curtains and Kente, and the many-layered relationship of parts to a whole.

In addition to the restriction of weaving width (I will point out that there is virtually no restriction on length, meaning that by embracing the necessity of panels I have the ability to weave an image at virtually any scale), weaving at its basest level is tied to the intersection of horizontal and vertical lines. These rules are part of what draws me to weaving, and I thrive within the grid. Woven ikat, a traditional technique involving the binding and dying of warp and weft thread to create image or pattern in the woven cloth, both follows and gently transgresses the grid structure. Though my warp is painted, not resisted, I seek the shifting effect of ikat at the boundaries of my images. Like the meeting of two woven edges, I find the activity of a traditional ikat pattern, especially those from Central and Southeast Asia, deeply satisfying. Virginia Davis’s woven ikats are formally and technically captivating to me as a fellow weaver: the subtle movements as her
lines break are like a visual of sound. Where two colors meet, crossing at warp and weft, they begin to reference pixels. In both my figurative work and the inkblots I use the grid of warp and weft like a pixilated plane, referring to the tradition of ikat as well as the digital process used to translate my figure into a large-scale and graphic image. Within the woven grid, I play with the notion of resolution and magnification. In my woven figure, unlike a highly magnified digital image, a greater density of material information is revealed the closer one gets. I also use the effects of warp shifting to create directionality within an image. In the inkblots, where warp and weft are first painted together, the separation of vertical and horizontal elements creates oppositional movement within the bilateral image. In *Shift* and *From Here*, the length of the cloth and corresponding directional shift accentuate movement along those lines. I have upset that structure: *Walls Around Her* turned a delicately woven grid into a frayed and pulled version of itself, and in *Memory Studies* I distorted then froze it under a layer of plaster. I am most interested,
however, in working from within it. The forceful distortion of those two pieces has settled into my later works as more understated transgressions of its structure: I accept little kinks in the weft and subtle irregularities in the warp as welcome signifiers of life and history within the surface of handwoven cloth\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{16} For images of my thesis works, \textit{Shift} and \textit{The Weaver’s Bench}, including details and installation shots, visit andreadonnelly.com.
Section III: Technical Processes

Photographic Process

With the progression of my figurative work, my photographic process has become increasingly complex and controlled. When I first began photographing my body, I used a point-and-shoot digital camera, available light and flash, and a partner to take the images. The goal was to capture my form and gesture in a straightforward way, in order to translate it in Photoshop into a high-contrast black and white image, highlighting the gesture and eliminating detail. As my ideas for the technical treatment of the image as a weaving became more complex, I began directing the image more specifically at the photographic stage. The nature of the photography session changed: I added directional light sources and began photographing myself with the use of the camera’s timer. I also stopped thinking about specific poses, concentrating on spontaneous movement and gesture in response to what I was feeling or thinking. In photographing myself I was able to move less self-consciously. In these first two stages of picture taking I placed myself in a neutral environment, my figure sharp in focus. Moving into my thesis work, I wanted to abstract the figure by softening and camouflaging it. To do this, I manipulated my environment, lighting, and the capabilities of the camera itself. I shot in a very dark room, obscuring my body from the camera with a veil of thin muslin, and used indirect backlighting to reveal the shadow of my form pressed gently against the cloth. These photos were taken with a professional digital camera, allowing me precise control over the aperture and shutter speed. The evocative and
haunting quality of Francesca Woodman’s blurry photographs of herself was an inspiration as I experimented with the blur of movement in my own photos.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 30. From House Series. Francesca Woodman. 1978.**

**Shifting Translations: Digital and Manual**

After sorting through my photographs, I move selected images into Photoshop, and manipulate them to reveal or diminish form, heighten gesture, and, with *The Weaver’s Bench*, reveal an abstraction of the muslin veil along with the body behind it. I use digital technology as a fast and accurate way to translate the gestures and emotions I enact into two-dimensional images. First the digital photograph is manipulated in Photoshop to make it suitable for my warp-
painting process. The image is scaled up to my required dimensions, from the size of the photo to an image of 3’ x 4’ at the smallest, and 8.5’ x 8.5’ at the largest. With this scale shift the sharpness of the image begins to break down, and the jagged edges of pixels become visible. The full-scale image is divided into small sections, printed on a regular printer, and then reassembled. The only exception to this process is Shift, whose image was projected onto a wall and traced onto paper. In order to paint the image onto my warp as it passes through the loom, the full-scale “cartoon” of the image is most often cut into horizontal strips and secured under the warp in the weaving window of the loom. The warp is painted strip-by-strip using textile pigment, which is set into the cloth with dry heat after weaving, and does not require rinsing. This literal breaking down and reforming of information on each level of making continually and subtly shifts the final figure away from its original photograph.
Though not central in my concerns, I find the parallels within my translation of image from technology to weaving to be an interesting side conversation. The digital image converts a seamless physical object into a collection of pixels, and at some point of magnification the image breaks down into senseless data. The intersection of warp and weft within cloth can mimic pixels (indeed, the first computer was developed from the punch-card system of the Jacquard loom)\(^\text{17}\), and both digital image and cloth are examples of the relationship between a whole and its parts. I enjoy the reverse flow of technology in my process. I move from digital speed into slower and slower analog processes as I transition from the computer’s version of painting, “cut and paste,” and printing, to literally cutting and pasting my image in paper, and finally to weaving and painting the image in cloth. The action of my painting/weaving process is itself parallel to that of a printer, though one which prints just a single line of pixels every minute or so.

Though there are many ways to more or less quickly transfer images into or onto cloth, through fabric printing or digital jacquard weaving for example, the processes I use and the sensibilities I strive for in my work do not translate through technology alone. The slow, ritualistic, and metaphorical nature of the painting and weaving process, and the resulting evidence of the hand, all influence the final sensibility of the work. Lia Cook’s work with large-scale imbedded imagery of photo-realistic quality has been important to the development of my own relationship with cloth and technology. We share an interest in structure and the importance

of the sensibility of handwoven cloth in conjunction with figurative imagery. Though her cloth is woven by hand, the imagery is achieved digitally through her loom, and the final intervention with the image is done through a computer program. In this case, the image is imbedded in a different manner, through the threads themselves. The resulting cloth greatly refers to the digital process that created it, and to the specifics of her complex structures. With this deeper involvement of technology, her photo-based works feel analytical and removed. Lia Cook’s work has been a great place to move forward from, realizing that though I want to work with imagery that begins as a photo, my use of technology should stop before the loom, in order to evoke the sense of fragility and lightness that I’m seeking.

**Painting the Warp**

My warp painting process has been an ongoing conversation between my tools and materials (which have their own innate tendencies) and my intentions for each imbedded figure. My knowledge of the behavior of warp threads under different kinds of tension has developed with this body of work. As tension shifts subtly in weaving, especially when there is any amount
of warp yardage wrapped around the back beam, individual threads can sometimes pull at different speeds, and a line painted straight across the back of the warp will end up shifting into a slight zigzag as the weaving progresses toward it, one warp thread moving just a millimeter or two where another will not shift at all.

In *Quietly, Quietly* and *Holding In*, I wanted a sharp edge on the painted figure, so I painted the image onto my warp in eight to ten-inch sections, then wove through that small slice before painting the next section of the image. This kept shifting to a minimum, and the final image retained its sharpness. With *The Awareness*, which I wove during the summer between my first and second year of graduate school, I experimented with loosening the sharpness of the figure. First I painted the entire image onto the warp when it was off-loom, spread across a table and under slight but irregular tension. When the warp was wound onto the
loom, coming under consistent tension for the first time, the off-loom version of the image shifted greatly as threads moved up to 2” out of their original alignment. I then painted another layer of the same image onto the tensioned threads in short sections over the first image, weaving as I went, to keep its edges sharp. With the two images slightly out of alignment with each other, the shifted image became a shadow behind the sharp one. *From Here* was the first work in which I used the shifting of the warp painted under tension to create a strong directional emphasis and blurring in the image. This image was painted in its entirety on the loom before the cloth was woven. The painted warp was then wound back through the loom, ready for weaving. This unwinding, rewinding, and weaving caused the image to slowly shift more and more out of alignment as I wove from the head to the feet. *Shift* uses the on-loom shifting process to break down the grid of pixilation in places, and bring attention to the woven grid supporting the image. *The Weaver’s Bench* involves the most complex warp painting process I have undertaken. I used five shades of color from black to light grey to translate the image, the gradation allowing me to render the details in the cloth, and the soft outline of the figure itself.
Woven Inkblots: Process as Exploration

Undertaken in the first semester of my second year, my inkblot investigations greatly informed my understanding of the subtle ways I could control warp shifting. The knowledge I gained from these explorations greatly influenced my painting processes in the figurative work: From Here was developed simultaneously with this body of work.

In the process of making the woven inkblot, a pigment stain, which corresponds to one half of the finished inkblot, is applied to woven cloth. I tried this application in a few different ways, exploring the visual results of painting, spilling, monoprinting, and even dripping pigment and pressing it into the fibers, spreading it outward through the cloth with my hands through a protective layer of plastic. I found that painting was too self-conscious, but that spreading pigment through a layer of plastic was a great marriage of spontaneity and control. Once dry, this “stain” was separated into its vertical and horizontal elements as I unraveled the woven fabric, pulling the weft out of the warp and winding the weft thread back onto bobbins. I was careful to keep them ordered and oriented so they would mirror the warp image when rewoven. The warp half of
the stain was then retied to the loom, and a new unstained weft was woven through it. At the edge of the warp stain, where the center crease would be in a paper inkblot, I ended the new weft and began weaving in the original stained weft, building an image that mirrored the image now imbedded in the clean weft. This warp image runs in a perpendicular grain to the weft image, causing a direction shift between the two halves. In this way a dark black stain becomes two half-strength and subtly different versions of itself in mirror.

In small inkblots, I tested weaving multiple blots at once in a long strip of cloth, leaving unwoven warp between sections of woven warp to make room for the reweaving process. I cut the whole thing from the loom to apply the pigment to each woven section, unraveled them all, and then reattached the warp to the loom to reweave. This allowed me to stain up to four inkblots at once. However, I found that the reattaching process shifted the shape of the warp-based blot so much that it became unrecognizable in relation to its weft-based half. While in some cases this yielded interesting results, in most it did not. I found that there was just enough shifting to accentuate the change in directionality between the two sides of the cloth when the cloth remained attached to the loom as I unraveled it, the blots completed individually. My first inkblots were woven in a plain weave, but I also experimented with a 3-1 and 2-2 twill structure, reversing the twill direction at the center of the blot. I found this structure interesting as another layer of mirroring, but it also served to change the visibility of one side to the other.
Figure 37. Process Images: Weaving an Inkblot. 2009.

1. Full stain on woven cloth.

2. Unweaving stain: cloth stays on loom.

3. Continuing to unweave the stain.

5. Warp half of stain reattached to front beam and ready for reweaving.

6. Beginning to reweave cloth: clean weft into warp stain.

7. Inkblot midpoint: starting to weave with the stained weft on clean warp (with some overlap of stained warp)

8. Nearing the end: weaving with stained weft into clean warp.

A Final Thought

Throughout my time in graduate school, the continually developing intricacies of my working process (the technical problem solving, physical labor, repetitive action and sensual connection to material) have become deeply ingrained as parallel processes to the “nonvisible” adventures of my mental life. As I prepare to leave school, I am already progressing toward greater surface complexity in my work, a complexity that will no longer be contained within single layers of cloth, but will require depth and dimension. My thesis works reveal the seeds of this intention in the visual layering of pixels within pixels, and cloth within cloth. I believe that my relatively separate processes of sketching, photographing and painting my body, and weaving/unweaving/rewraving inkblots are coming to a point where they will blur together into even more complex surfaces and processes. Happily, this academic endpoint, marked by my final exhibition as a graduate student, doesn’t feel final at all; it feels like the next place to start again:

“The train slows and lengthens, as we approach London, the centre, and my heart draws out too, in fear, in exultation. I am about to meet – what? What extraordinary adventure waits me, among these mail vans, these porters, these swarms of people calling taxis? I feel insignificant, lost, but exultant. With a soft shock we stop. I will let others get out before me. I will sit one moment before I emerge into that chaos, that tumult. I will not anticipate what is to come. The huge uproar is in my ears. It sounds and resounds under this glass roof like the surge of the sea. We are cast down onto the platform with our handbags. We are whirled asunder.”18

- Virginia Woolf, The Waves

Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

Andrea Clare Donnelly
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Education

2010  Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2006  Bachelor of Art and Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC
       Bachelor of Arts, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC

Solo Exhibitions

2011  *Solo Exhibition*, Artspace Gallery, Raleigh, NC

2007  *The Lady Series*, The Ravenscroft Fine Arts Center, Raleigh, NC

2006  *Recent Weavings*, Alexander Building, Raleigh, NC

2005  *Andrea Donnelly: Works Across Media*, NC State Student Health Center, Raleigh, NC

Selected Group Exhibitions

2011  *Multiple Personalities*, Craft Alliance, St. Louis, MO

2010  5th *International Student Triennial*, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
       *Pushing the Limits*, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA
       *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
       *Fiberart International 2010*, Society for Contemporary Craft, Pittsburgh, PA,
       Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY, and San
       Francisco Museum of Craft+Design, San Francisco, CA
2009  *Fiber Artistry: Journey of the Imagination*, Hudgens Center for the Arts, Duluth, GA  
*radius250*, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA  
*National Fiber Directions*, Wichita Center for the Arts, Wichita, KS  
*The C Word: Craft/Material Studies Candidacy Exhibition*, Metro Gallery, Richmond, VA  
*FORUM*, Capital One Building, Richmond, VA

2008  *Fiberart International 2007*, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, PA, Mint Museum of Craft+Design, Charlotte, NC, and Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences of West Virginia, Charleston, WV

2007  *Our Play*, Morning Times Gallery, Raleigh, NC  
*HL5*, Heilig/Levine Roaming Gallery, Raleigh, NC

2006  *SparkCon Image Slam*, Moore Square, Raleigh, NC

2005  *AME! Ghana Study Abroad Exhibition*, Brooks Gallery, Raleigh, NC

Grants and Awards

2010  Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Spring 2010, Virginia Commonwealth University

2009  School of the Arts Graduate Travel Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University  
First Place, *Fiber Artistry: Journey of the Imagination*  
Honorable Mention, *National Fiber Directions*  
Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Spring 2009, Virginia Commonwealth University

2008  Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Fall 2008, Virginia Commonwealth University  
Work-study Scholarship, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts  
Surface Design Association Personal Development Grant

2007  Windgate Fellowship, Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design  
Surface Design Association Outstanding Student Award, North Carolina State University

2006  Phi Beta Kappa Academic Honor Society
2004 Undergraduate Research Award, North Carolina State University

Teaching Experience

2010 *Beginning Textiles CRAFT262* (undergraduate-level instruction), Virginia Commonwealth University, Spring and Summer Semesters

2009 *Beginning Textiles CRAFT262* (undergraduate-level instruction), Virginia Commonwealth University, Spring Semester

2008 *Beginning Textiles CRAFT261* (undergraduate-level instruction), Virginia Commonwealth University, Fall Semester

Workshop Teaching Experience

2010 *Felt… and Beyond!*, Visual Arts Center, Richmond, VA

2009 *Felt… and Beyond!*, Visual Arts Center, Richmond, VA
  *Second Friday Sampler: Needle Felting*, Visual Arts Center, Richmond, VA

2008 *Origami Creations*, Durham County East Regional Library Teen Program, Durham, NC

2007 *Designing Cigar Box Keepsake Boxes*, Durham County East Regional Library Teen Program, Durham, NC
  *Learn Origami!*, Durham County East Regional Library Teen Program, Durham, NC

2006 *Holiday Cards and Paper Ornaments*, Durham County East Regional Library Teen Program, Durham, NC
  *Beading: Jewelry and Other Creations*, Durham County East Regional Library Teen Program, Durham, NC

Lectures and Artist Talks

2009 *Andrea Donnelly: Direct Impact*, artist talk given as part of Philanthropy: The Impact of Scholarships panel discussion, SOFA Chicago
  *Works in Fiber*, Virginia Commonwealth University Undergraduate Senior Seminar, Richmond, VA
  *1708 Gallery Invitational Graduate Artists’ FORUM*, Richmond, VA
2008  *Pre-Graduate Work*, Virginia Commonwealth University Undergraduate Senior Seminar, Richmond, VA  
North Carolina Craft Think-Tank participant, The Center for Craft, Creativity+Design, Hendersonville, NC

2007  *History and Process: The Lady Series and Other Recent Works*, Ravenscroft High School, Raleigh, NC

**Reviews and Cited Works**


2007 “Fellowship Leads to Fibers Study in Mexico and NC Mountains”, *Design Influence*, Fall 2007, p. 14-15  
**Fiberart International 2007**, exhibition invitation, catalog, and *Fiberart Forum*  
“Notes”, *Design Influence*, Spring 2007, p. 30

**Other Professional Activities**

2010 Weaver participant in *Local Industry*, part of the *Anne Wilson: Wind/Rewind/Weave* project, Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN

2009 Student assistant, Inspired Design Textile Conference, Hendersonville, NC

2008 “Mental Metals” Iron Sculpture Studio Concentration, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC

2007 Study of tapestry weaving and natural dye processes with master weaver and dyer Éric Chavez, Teotitlan del Valle, Oaxaca
**Weaving and Fiber Art**, multiple presentations and interactive demonstrations, “Be Our Guest: Girlscout Summer Camp”  
**Traditions of Ghana: Kente, Adinkra, Beads and Pottery**, presentation of Ghana Study Abroad Studio experience, Durham County Library Adult Program

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<th>Year</th>
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