A possible Profile or a Profile of Possibilities

In attempting to capture, in writing, a profile of educator artist designer Gunnel Hag, I found myself being taken in many different directions. She, and her career, are so multi-faceted that it is hard to know where to start. She came of age in a time of change --- change in definitions, processes and approaches within the textile crafts.
practices a fledgling textile arts movement and changing approaches in education: that were partly philosophically driven, and partly reinvention and experimentation. Fibre based production, use and meaning where expanding from a primarily domestic use that was either functional or decorative into a conceptual playground that was as virulent, fecund and robust as the “fine art” world. Fibre based production became a central location for a feminist reclamation and the re-defining of creativity. Located at the intersection of craft, fashion, art and industry, a movement was organizing disparate practitioners under the banner of Surface Design and achieving the creation of a home grown Canadian organization, Surfacing: Textile Dyers and Printers Association, and saw the beginnings of Harbourfront Centre and their Craft Studios. This was a time when craft based fibre work was seeking equal recognition with ceramic and glass, when “Textile Art” was demanding recognition outside of Craft.

I began by interviewing her, intrigued I started to do more research and found a 1985 article in Ontario Craft, the Ontario Craft Councils magazine by Alison Parsons entitled “Running Gunnel.” It seems to me I have been running after her for the past few weeks and now have found her in this spectacular place. Think of this as “part one” - since I seem to have left her in 1985 where Parsons' Article begins her story. Part two will involve a much longer conversation with the woman herself.

Gunnel Hag a short profile:

-She studied textile design in Sweden and England.

-She was a founding member of the Textile Printers and Dyers Association whose publication Surfacing Journal, and annual conferences held at the Harbourfront Centre changed the position of textiles in the craft and fine arts arenas of Canada.

- Her studio, Trees Textile Designers and Printers, in Toronto, produces fabrics for film and theatre productions.
She taught in the Textile Studio at Sheridan College, Oakville, Ontario for 12 years and continues her role as teacher at Haliburton School of Art, Sir Sanford Fleming College, and has been a visiting lecturer at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India.

Her fabrics have been represented at international design exhibitions, and she has published two books: Creating Texture and Creating Texture: Soft Textures.

Gunnel Hag has been an integral part of Canada’s continually growing community of textile artists and designers for over thirty five years. In her roles as textile printer/business woman, fashion designer/entrepreneur, educator, workshop leader, and the
developer of a non-toxic dye product/process, “ColourVie”, her influence has been more in the background than on gallery walls. However, she has had her time on the catwalk. In September of 2008 she, along with Valerie Knapp and Margot Miller, revisited their fashion work in “Changes: A Comparison of Embellished Fashion Through the Ages” at The Handweaving Museum and Arts Center in Clayton New York.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit her at her studio in Toronto to talk about life, education, fashion and love of textiles---dropping by on what she said was the coldest day so far this winter. She said that the fact that she grew up in Sweden didn’t prepare her for Canadian winters anymore than having been born here would have.

She studied Textiles at Stockholm University then finished at the Royal Collage of Art in London. Of her time in London in the “Swinging Sixties,” she said it was difficult to get work done due to the sit ins and student strikes. “My rebellion did not come until I went to Hornsby College of Art in London, England. They taught “space filling” in textile design class. I won a prize in a student competition for a blanket design, white with a large black circle --- much to the consternation of my teachers. My teachers at the Royal College of Art were much more understanding......” She had come from Sweden where a continuum of weaving had not been disrupted by the industrial revolution and that had evolved in the early twentieth century as Art
Fabrics. The work of Marta Maas Fjetterstrom was the most significant within this movement, according to the 1973 book ‘beyond craft: the art fabric,” by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen. Gunnel's Swedish textile influences were those of the weaver Elsa Gullberg, the printed textiles of Marimekko and Austrian designer Josef Frank. The latter moved to Sweden in 1935 and became the backbone of what is now Swedish Modern. His printed textiles were more inspiring than those of Stig Lindberg. Gunnel notes that “Stig Lindberg's fabrics were simply part of everyday life, so I guess you can say that they probably were a subconscious inspiration. Not just textile designers, but also artists were a source of inspiration Hundertwasser - the list goes on. I was in thrall of pretty much all design”

At the time the “fibre Revolution” was just heating up, with tapestry weaving leaving the wall and becoming three dimensional, Gunnel Hag finished her textile education in the United Kingdom. She came to Canada “to find work as a designer in the textile industry.” Finding that industry virtually non–existent, she began tie dying T-shirts on her Kitchen Table, soon graduating to a spare bedroom and she adding screen printing to her repertoire of techniques.“

Through contact with the colourist weaver teacher Helen Francis Gregor, a fellow graduate of the Royal College of Art at the then Ontario College of Art, she found a blossoming community of fledgling textile artists, weavers, dyers and printers that were breaking new ground. Connecting with this group of like minded Canadians who where watching the recently formed Surface Design Association in the US challenge the status quo everything seemed interesting.

At this time, the older, pre World War II, depression era textile organizations that began as "Adult Education" programs, along with the newer post war “Studio Crafts " groups, continued to see textile works as traditional, functional and domesticated, with practitioners “chained to their looms.” (*2)
A turning point was the Lausanne Tapestry Biennales 1969 & 71, where the growing influence of ground breaking tapestry and “Soft Sculpture” work that was happening in Poland was shown. The traditionalists could no longer control or quell the growing experimentation that was being produced. Elsewhere in the world the Polish influence was being felt and in North American weavers, quilters, textile designers, dyers and printers were rebelling. These practitioners were breaking away from traditional roles and demanding recognition that their work was separate from and equal to Ceramics and Glass, while gaining entrée into the world of “Fine Arts”.

At an early SDA meeting in Baltimore (as Gunnel recalls, and that Dorothy Caldwell thinks was Purdue), Khadejha McCall from Montreal was among the participants. All Canadians found themselves grouped together and talking. Their conversations lead to the creation of the Textile Dyers and Printers Association in 1978. Their newsletters lead to the first issue of Surfacing in 1979, a publication lasting until 2005.

Through the 1970s, working first at home before moving into a series of larger more professional studio spaces (including time at Harbourfront Centre’ Craft Studio), Gunnel was able to hone her skills and focus on her production. From T-dyed T-shirts through a line of whimsical kitchen accessories (fried egg aprons, lightning bolt oven mitts and hotdog pot holders), she also printed silk scarves for the gift and fashion market. By 1978 she was printing yardage and producing “wearables” which were, in other words, clothing. A support system for textile people was coming together around her from different directions. The Surfacing Textile Dyers and Printers Association held their first conference at Harbourfront Centre.
‘Beyond the Gallery and Into Society’ in 1979 saw “Surfacing 79” mounted at the Craft Gallery at 346 Dundas St and brought crafts person Merton Chambers as key note speaker. As someone involved in the beginnings of the Professional Craftsmen’s’ Assoc., The World Crafts Council, the Ontario Crafts Council, his talk was controversial. He questioned the current model of “do your own thing” for craft education suggesting that ideas without technical skills were equally as useless as technical skills are without imagination.

Jean Johnson, while heading the whole Craft Studio program at Harbourfront, “organized a Fashion Show to provide the studio craft people working with textiles an opportunity to develop professional skills in present designs for fashion. To accomplish this, Johnson invited people who where already established in their carers to participate with the Harbourfront designers.” *4) This led Gunnel to develop her Trees Studio printing business as a small run fashion house. In her March 1985 story, “Running Gunnel” in Ontario Craft magazine, Alison Parsons, chronicles this development. From Gunnel’s arrival in Toronto at the beginning of the 1970s until the mid 1980s, while operating her studio, she was also involved with the Art Gallery of Ontario’s “Artist with their Work” Program and the “Artists in Schools” program of the Ontario Arts Council. She was exhibiting and presenting workshops through out Ontario. She was actively assisting with the establishment of the Textile Dyers and Printer Association -- as well as dealing with the results of the toxicities involved in the materials with which she and all dyers and printers work.
Historically, water has always played an integral (if unknown to the general populace) part of all fabric production. Beyond the initial role of water in the growing of natural plant and animal fibre, the processing into yarn and finishing the product, the colouring of fabric (either by dying or printing) has been a toxic soup that has been re-introduced into water systems and into water tables for centuries. The impact on human and animal health resulting from the development of synthetic dyes in the later half of the nineteenth century (and which led to today’s Pharmaceutical and Petro-Chemical industries) has only lately become of concern. The creation and delivery systems of pigments which involve liquid extraction and drying and pulverizing [creating powered forms of the materials] enables more economic travel in terms of space and cost, but it also creates airborne health hazards at both ends from production as it must be unpacked and liquefied again for use. In the last 20 years, there has been a concerted effort on the part of individuals, and now also of industry, to lessen the ecological damage this production sequence. Gunnel Hag’s 3-part water based “Colour Vie Pigment System” has been her contribution to the solution of this major problem. First it delivers pigments in a wet, non powder form, lessening the airborne impact on individual users’ health. Secondly, the clean-up of equipment does not involve solvents.
from "the Collection", Harbourfront 1987
Gunnel Hag Valerie Knapp, Margot Miller

http://www.colourvie.com/

notes:

*1) & *4), Alison Parsons "Running Gunnel", Ontario Crafts Volume 10 Number 1, march 1985

*2) Jason Pollon: president emeritus of SDA, Off the Grid DVD,

*3) Merton Chambers: notes from his speech, Surfacing, Volume 1 Number 3, Summer 1979

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Dorothy Caldwell- Marking Time by Joe Lewis originally printed in TEXTILE FIBRE FORUM, No 96, 2009

In a 1983 article written about her self for Surfacing Journal, Dorothy Caldwell says when she 19, she saw two exhibitions that made a deep impression on her. The 1971 exhibition Abstract Design in American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and a Mark Rothko exhibition. The Whitney Museum show is now considered to have been instrumental in igniting the quilt renaissance of the 20th and 21st centuries. For Caldwell, the quilts, made by women who were untrained as artists, but with a sense of form, pattern and colour “were as exciting as any contemporary paintings” she had ever seen.

Caldwell studied painting at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. She often longed for a strong textile tradition to work in such as those found in Japan, India and Indonesia. She recognized this in quilting and found a surface treatment in the staining in Rothko’s painting, staining so light the weave of the canvas came through.

Somewhere in this work was the key to what has become her signature of deep rich saturated colour from both dying and discharge and the stitchery that is as intense as be an integral extension of the cloth on which she works.

Through a number of methods of resist dying she has come to using discharge working from dark to light to remove rather then add colour. Her stitchery is like scratches scaring a surface with subtle shading and motion depicting the rural landscape in which she has lived for the last few decades.

Getting to this point in time and being able to work in the fluid cohesive way has been a journey. Moving to Canada in 1972 and seeing the World Craft Council 1974 exhibition “In Praise of Hand” that was mounted in conjunction with their annual conference, she saw the fabric work of Lenore Davis which was painted like a water colour, stuffed and quilted. After a two year hiatus from painting she found an
approach to the surface which allowed the qualities of the fabric to remain.

She researched techniques and visited artists working with textiles as art and began to explore. Working with wax resist, Procion fibre reactive dyes, and using her own life a source of imagery, she developed a shorthand of dancing figures that moved across a landscape like surface. As the landscape produced in washes over lines of resist came to the fore, the figures became more fractured -- more line less form.

Improvising with Tjanting tools when those available didn’t work to her satisfaction, she created a finer line. Pieces of branches, sticks stitched on to the surface came to represent figures while landscapes became topographical and the grid came to designate areas of opportunity to appliqué smaller textiles or insets of different treatments (gold leaf,) more stitchery began to appear and vat dying and over dying brought her work to its own individuality.

By the mid 1980s, with large scale pieces such as Landstat being commission by Red Dear College for the Red Deer Arts and Theatre Building, she had gained a level of skill that was appreciated and respected.

Basin (2008) 46cm x 46cm

With commissions, grants and her pieces being collected by individuals and institutions, she began to be in demand for workshops at textile arts events and conferences internationally.

As one of the founding members of the Textile Printers and Dyers Association of Canada, which was an out growth of the Surface Design Association, she was involved in sharing information and practical knowledge with a growing number of textile artists, designers and educators. These two organizations exerted a major influence on the growing re-assessments of “Woman’s” work and the feminist art history movements of the seventies and eighties that formed part of the growing discourse of Fine Arts verses Craft. As textiles’ domestic and functional use went from practical or ritual to decorative, Caldwell-- having come out of fine arts world -- considered her craft to be art. This in turn allowed others to view her pieces in the same way. Her work is now shown in both fine craft galleries and art museums.
This place (2008) 46cm x 46 cm

Her work reached an apex in size with Landstat. It became more intimate and at the same time, it began to become almost jewel like in tones as she moved away from “earth tones” to the dark richness of indigo kept behind wax or paste resist that was discharged to blue whites to set off the appliquéd satins and silk velvet scraps she had been collecting. These pieces became more heavily stitched and more intensively worked while becoming simpler in appearance.

“Driving down Road 25 between Warkworth and Casselton, watching fields of grass blowing in the breeze, I was reminded of how this mass of vegetation is affected by the physics of wind. As the wind passed through the field, its velocity and its forced initiated waves of movement and I became aware of the rhythms and patterns it generated. I saw the “inter-connective-ness” between the land, the air and myself as I observed and processed this experience and then committed it to memory. If I was to investigate the land further, I may wonder what the previous crop had been, whether anyone had ever lived there and when did this road go in”[1]

By the time the Art Gallery of Peterborough, in Peterborough Ontario in Canada mounted her solo exhibition, “Flied Notes,” she was established as one of the top textile artists in Canada. This gallery is the major public gallery in the region where she lives and the work in this exhibition is a portrait of the landscape she inhabits. Like fields seen from the air the work is alive with the motion of wind moving over fields of crops reflecting both the angle of the sun/ light and direction of the wind. .. This observation of landscape has been a hallmark of Canadian artists for over a century and in these terms Dorothy Caldwell’s work is part of the Canadian cannon of fine art.
Walking the Land (2008) 177 cm x 281 cm

In 1996 she was awarded the Prix Saidye Bronfman Award and her work was added to the collection of fine crafts at the Museum of Civilization. This is the top award for crafts persons in Canada. Field Notes toured to five centers in Ontario and to Newfoundland in Canada. Dorothy toured along with it.

With her interest in landscape, human presence and human intervention, it was a natural progression for her to look at how humans mark the passing of time. Rock cuts and mining are plentiful in the area in which she lives on the edge of the Canadian Shield; aboriginal petroglyphs are nearby by in a provincial park. Such themes are represented in the permanent collection of the Textile museum of Canada, and such themes are some of the inspirations she took to Pouch Cove in Newfoundland for a residency. Pouch Cove, near the top of the Avalon Peninsula on the east coast of Newfoundland, is one of the oldest European settlements dating back to 1611. It clings to its rocky inlet; the house is on the oceans edge. It was from this local the she started creating the body of work for an exhibition entitled “In Good Repair”. Mounted at the Textile Museum of Canada Jul 16, 2003 - Mar 17, 2005 Caldwell mixed her work with artifacts from the museum’s pertinent collection and items from her personal collection to serve as reference points for her work. Unintended Marks (2003) a child’s cotton night shirt is present on a light table making the patching visible. A dance skirt belt[2] from Democratic Republic of the Congo made by the Kuba peoples has to be closely examined to differentiate the mending from the whole.

“Caldwell participates in the human compulsion to mark the land itself, as in the centuries-old petroglyphs near where she lives, and the rows of trees that delineate property lines. The recurring elliptical forms are examples of Caldwell’s allusive formal vocabulary: the ellipses suggest both land formations and geometrically precise and spatially complex abstract elements; they also mimic the uneven, circular patched areas in a threadbare utility blanket. But the centre of Caldwell's studio practice is poetic invention: she draws out innate qualities from her subject matter and her materials rather than depicting or fixing an image.” [3]

While working on her own career as a maker, and through workshops teaching numerous others in various parts of the world, the multiple skills of dying and stitchery involved in her practice, she has used her knowledge and connections to in cooperation with fellow Canadian textile artist/activist Sky Morrison to bring the Sujuni and Khatwa work from Bihar Indian to a larger international audience and market. Being introduced to Sujuni work in 1996 while in Patna, India, on a research trip, they where soon in the village where it was being produced, meeting the woman doing it and thinking about a way to bring it to Canada. Sujuni can be described as Stitched Drawing, while Khatwa is filled /appliqué drawing on clothe. This work is produced by women’s collectives in rural areas of the Bihar region as a way of generating income. The organization behind these collective and others have reinvigorated traditional textile practices and brought employment to regions stifled by perpetual cycles of poverty. In September 1999 “Stitching Women’s Lives” was presented at the Textile Museum of Canada the commitment to these women continues Morrison’s and Caldwell’s involvement came with a dedication to see further development of income generation textile based project.

In 1997 I went to the Ontario Craft Council’s Gallery to see Field Notes and asked the receptionist when the “quilt” show would be opening. When she realized I meant Dorothy’s exhibition, she looked down her nose and said “Oh you mean the embellisher” with such distain I felt embarrassed for her. She was obviously a traditionalist. In 2006 Dorothy Caldwell become a Fellow of the International Centre for Quilt Study in Lincoln Nebraska which has re connected her with the 1971 exhibition “Abstract Design in
American Quilts” at the Whitney Museum which is now part of the Jonathan Holstein Quilt collection housed at the ICQS. This year she has been included in the new Telos book “Art Textiles of the World: Canada along with 22 other Canadian Textile artists representing a cross section of methods and approaches being practiced in Canada. Embellisher, dyer, printer, quilter, embroider or just maker of textile art, she once said “a single stitch can tell the whole story.” As an artist, a craftsperson, a researcher, teacher and textile believer, Dorothy Caldwell work is an ongoing and important contribution to the history and future of textiles.

Detail of, Map of Tenderness (2007) 155cm x 155cm

notes:


Dorothy Caldwell - Making Time Story by Joe Lewis

Dorothy Caldwell- Making marks was originally printed in TEXTILE FIBRE FORUM, No 96, 2009

Materials: wax resist and discharged cotton with stitching, appliqué, gold leaf; hand quilted
Measurements: 16 x 50 ft.; 4.9 x 15.2 m
Collection: Red Deer Arts and Theatre Building (Commission), Red Deer, Alberta