



ELECT TO ENGAGE

Published on Friday, June 15, 2012.

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Switch on the radio or pick up a newspaper – one thing is clear: It's an election year. A welcome addition to the fray is the [Craft in America Study Center](#), where “Looming Election: Woven Works” opens on Saturday. Featuring five innovative artists, “Looming Election” promises to wash away political fatigue with artwork and installations exploring the state of American politics.

We talked to Study Center director [Emily Zaiden](#) and artist [Cameron Taylor-Brown](#), whose [Angels and Men/Quartet](#) was featured in our June-July 2012 issue. Enjoy their answers – and let us know if you see the show. “Looming Election” runs through September 1.

~ EMILY ZAIDEN ~

Part of what drew us to “Looming Election” is our interest in what you could call “craft in action” – purposeful work that engages viewers with social, cultural, or political content. As an organizer of this exhibition, what draws you to this kind of work?

Emily: Each of these artists feels compelled to comment on the state of American politics through their work. It is on their minds, just like it is on all of our minds. Where are we heading? What have we built? What can we change? As we all know, our political and economic system is in a state of turmoil. The past and present are what will shape this next election. These works touch on several of the myriad of concerns that we are facing. There is a mixture of frustration, derision, and disappointment but also a glimmer of hope. Some of these statements are very visually forceful and immediate, such as the pieces by Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, while others are more veiled, such as Michael Rohde's contribution. All of these are undeniably, exceptionally crafted.

What pulled you to fiber/textile art for this show? What did you look for in artists selected to participate?

I think there is still a common misperception, particularly among the public outside the craft community, that fiber is soft and demure. By utilitarian origin, fiber is meant to keep us warm and protected. But what we will show is fiber with a bite. There is something about the softness of the medium having an unexpected impact when employed for these heated political commentaries. The message creeps up on you.

Since the fiber revolution of the 1960s, artists, many of them women, have used the medium to create purely expressive, politically imbued statements. Furthering that trajectory, we were captivated by the potency and currency of the political messages made by the works we selected. It is a rather stylistically disparate group and we intentionally wanted a broad cross section.

Cameron was actually the impetus for the show. She contacted the center so that we could connect with the Handweavers Guild when they hold their biennial conference this summer in Long Beach. We want to be a resource and a permanent base for craft and we open our doors to the community. Once we started the discussion, it became obvious that we needed to feature Cameron's work. Her three-dimensional fiber sculpture is particularly powerful.

In your description of the show, you note the artists' "messages speak loud and clear." If "Looming Election" itself had a message, what might it be?

Let's take these fragments of our society and weave a new chapter.

~ CAMERON TAYLOR-BROWN ~

I'm intrigued by how you describe your process – this idea of shaping order out of chaos. Can you tell me a little more about how that unfolds? What inspires you?

Cameron: Order out of chaos explains my creative process, both how I think and how I make – beginning with bits of thread, cloth, paint, and so on, that eventually become a work of art. Although much of my current work is mixed-media, at heart I remain a weaver – and weaving by its very nature creates order. But I love the "chaos" that remains – for example, the back of the weaving (that I sometimes like better and end up using as the front), the threads that hang off, bits of colored thread on the floor and in the wastebasket.

I get inspiration from everywhere – I live my life as a “participant-observer” and try to look at everything with fresh eyes. When I start a piece I don’t know where it will end. Every piece is a conversation and I respond to what develops.

What role does color play in your work?

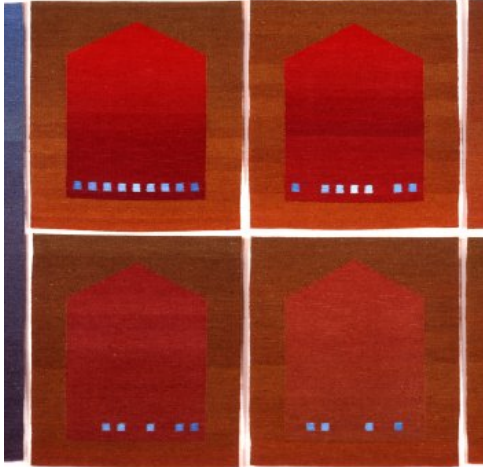
I *love* color; it is central to my work. I particularly love how color, fiber, and structure interact, which is why I continue to be a weaver. Color is such a great mixture of left and right brain, of theory and emotion. And cultural, too. Good fiber and good food make me salivate – I’ve discovered I’m not alone in this. Many fiber people are also foodies.

Tell us a little more about *Angels and Men/Quartet*. How did it come together? How you see this piece (and/or your work) fitting into the theme of the show?

Angels and Men/Quartet is inspired by a quote from John Muir’s journal, *My First Summer in the Sierras*.

“The perfection of beauty in these lilies of the wilderness is a never-ending source of admiration and wonder... So extravagant is Nature with her choicest treasures, spending plant beauty as she spends sunshine, pouring it forth into land and sea, garden and desert. And so the beauty of lilies falls on angels and men, bears and squirrels, wolves and sheep, birds and bees, but as far as I have seen, man alone, and the animals he tames, destroy these gardens.”

The work itself could be perceived as a group of beings – angels? men? – and also as a field of lilies, pulled up by their roots and doomed. I like the ambiguity. As to the theme of the show, Emily selected two pieces that speak pretty directly to politics. *Angels and Men* addresses environmental concerns – politicians often present us with the false choice of environment versus jobs. The other work in the show, *Elephant in the Room*, was inspired by the political circus of a past presidential election.



Michael F. Rohde, From My House to Your Homeland, hand-dyed wool and silk tapestry, 54 x 98 in. Photo: Courtesy of Craft in America Study Center



Cameron Taylor-Brown, Angels and Men/Quartet, weaving, mixed media, 16-24 x 4 x 2 in. Photo: Courtesy of Craft in America Study Center



Cameron Taylor-Brown, Elephant in the Room, weaving, quilting, mixed media, 41 x 27 in. Photo: Courtesy of Craft in America Study Center