

# CONFLUENCE: Beyond Surface



by Pat Hickman

An edited excerpt from Pat Hickman's Keynote Address delivered June 9, 2011, at the Surface Design Association's Confluence conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**"Confluence: Beyond Surface" addresses where we are in our field at this moment in time.** Surface in art is like surface in water. What it reveals to us—movement, pattern, color, texture—is inseparable from invisible depths. By plumbing those depths, what comes to light is richer, touches more intensely, strikes more fundamental chords. Whether it is a confluence of streams flowing together to become one or a river that flows both ways where it meets the ocean tides, these minglings, advances, and retreats are useful notions to bring to the making and viewing of art.

When trees fall into the water, over decades they decay, eventually disappearing into the river bottom. What resists this disintegration is the cross-grained, pitch-hardened core formed where the branch joins the trunk. I cover these wooden forms, which still have the tree in them, with gut (sausage casings) further extending their life. I am exploring visual metaphors with these river teeth, the last part of the body to let go. For me, the source of ideas can exist within the material; materials lead to meaning.

During a Textile History class in Berkeley, California, at Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts, I gave the assignment to simulate a sampler, wanting students to consider what they had to say. Lillian Elliott was sitting in on that class. She stamped small "x's" on her sampler: "What do I have to say? What do I have to say that Matters? If I say it in cross-stitch, who listens?"

What do each of us have to say? What matters? Who listens? How do we measure success in our art making? Who is the audience? How do we know if what we've said visually communicates?

So where *are* we in this field? In looking back, I'm also looking forward. Almost twenty years ago Harriet Nathan interviewed Ed Rossbach for an oral history series at the University of California, Berkeley. She asked about the future of fiber art. Rossbach predicted that fiber art "is going to be absorbed into painting and sculpture and there's going to be a whole renewal of things that have been totally ignored. I think it influences the other arts, is used by fine artists who are not textile or fiber artists." Rossbach seems to have voiced what we are living today.

Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf in *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*<sup>1</sup> have given us our story. We can look back and place our movement

in a larger context. In the past twenty to thirty years, the boundaries between high and low art and medium-specific recognition have blurred. We have the freedom to transcend materials and tradition, giving credit where it is due.

Some of the best critics in *The New York Times* are covering more than the hierarchical fine art painting and sculpture shows. A small, out of the way exhibit in Brooklyn, New York, *Art/Sewn* curated by Ward Mintz, head of the Coby Foundation, was reviewed by art critic Holland Cotter.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition [at FiveMyles] included the work of nine women artists exploring with needle and thread. Cotter wrote of the "ever-expanding sameness of the art world universe," where boundaries have blurred if not disappeared. He implied the democratization of media.

*The New York Times* recently ran a full-page article on Sheila Hicks's 50-year retrospective at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, showing small studies alongside monumental sculptural works.<sup>3</sup> Sheila Hicks claimed the freedom to be who she wanted to be, exploring the presence of cloth in every facet of human existence from birth until death. She acknowledges her love of historic textiles, which fed her own exploration.

At the Park Avenue Armory [last] spring, there was the largest textile exhibition ever held in New York City. Entitled *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*, it presented 651 quilts from the personal collection of Joanna Rose.<sup>4</sup> It was shown for her 80th birthday as a gift to the people of New York. The quilts were vertically suspended, like playing cards tossed into the air. Viewers came by the thousands. I saw one old man, with his cane held high, pointing at his favorites.

Sculptor Louise Bourgeois, speaking of her fabric works of the last decade says, "sewing is my attempt to keep things

PAT HICKMAN *River Teeth* Wood and gut, 2011.  
Photo: George Potanovic, Jr.

LEFT: PAT HICKMAN *River Teeth* Detail.  
Photo: George Potanovic, Jr.

BELOW: ELISA D'ARRIGO *Reconstructed Cloth*,  
acrylic paint, thread, 2008.  
Exhibited in *Art/Sewn*.  
Photo: Courtesy of FiveMyles.





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together and make things whole." We know this impulse.

Our field has outgrown some of its names. Artists in other fields have appropriated our materials and techniques. Sheila Hicks doesn't use the word "fiber" in describing what she does, despite her use of fibrous materials. We've struggled with what to call ourselves—makers (most of all), weavers, dyers, printmakers, knitters, spinners, quilters, surface designers, basketmakers, fiber sculptors, textile artists, fiber artists, mixed media artists working in the fiber medium. It's hard to let go of these (perhaps?) limiting terms, not to mention whether or not we see ourselves first as artist craftmakers. We love what we do—our craft of creating with our hands—and the history of our field, acknowledging the roots we come from and give credit to. We are not rejecting that rich past. We can embrace in both directions, accepting that we are artists, trying to express visually what we have to say. I don't have another word for who we are but artists. Most of all, what does it mean to be a maker, passionately plumbing the depths? It's time to put to rest the old arguments of art



vs. craft, the old debate that shouldn't make a difference to our making of art. Despite

the confusion of terminology, the field has moved forward and will continue to do so. Each artist must answer questions for her/himself with their own naming, but most of all we need to plumb the depths and bring to the surface, answering:

What do I have to say, what do I have to say that matters, if I say it in... whatever technique or material, who listens?

The key is to keep working, being with our own work, seeing where it will take us and sticking to who we are as makers. The meaning of work comes in the work itself. This is a time of change, of uncertainty—of people looking for meaning. It's an exciting time. Barbara Hurd, a brilliant essayist writes, "one arrives at the rightness of work by working, by making. And when you feel that convergence, there is the sense of how much more there is to do, as you reach an unfinished state."<sup>5</sup> That's where confidence

LEFT: *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts* Presented by the American Folk Art Museum at the Park Avenue Armory, New York City, March 25-30, 2011. Photo: Gavin Ashworth.  
BELOW: *Sheila Hicks: 50 Years* Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. March 24-August 7, 2011. Photo: Aaron Iglar/Greehouse Media.



comes in—knowing you're capable of doing good work, even if you don't always get it, even when it feels unfinished.

I walk along the river and watch the currents—reflecting on which way the water moves, where it is still and where it suddenly deepens or is shallow. I go back to my studio uncertain where work is going and end up with uncertainty. It's exploration and probing a space of curiosity and imagination, pursuing the unknown. I go and play, "and in the whirling"... see what might happen.

1. Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
2. Holland Cotter, "Art/Sewn: Tradition, Innovation, Expression," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2011. The exhibition took place at FiveMyles, March 26-May 8, 2011. Visit [www.fivemyles.org/](http://www.fivemyles.org/).
3. Leslie Camhi, "A Career Woven From Life," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2011. The exhibition *Sheila Hicks:*

- 50 Years*, curated by Joan Simon, opened at the Addison Gallery of Art, Andover, Massachusetts (November 5, 2010-February 27, 2011) and traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (March 24-August 7, 2012). Its final venue is the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina (October 1, 2011-January 29, 2012).
4. *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*, presented by the American Folk Art Museum at the Park Avenue Armory, New York City, March 25-30, 2011. Visit [www.folkartmuseum.org/infinitevariety](http://www.folkartmuseum.org/infinitevariety).
  5. Barbara Hurd, "Finding and Making: The Strange Attractor's Contribution to Form," *Haystack Reader, Collected Essays on Craft, 1991-2009*, pp. 289-297.

—Pat Hickman, a studio artist living and working in New York, currently has a solo exhibition, *Pat Hickman: Traces of Time*, at the University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, in New Bedford (December 8, 2011-January 27, 2012). See Hildreth York, "Pat Hickman: A Confluence of Time and Art," *Surface Design Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Winter 2011.