

*immaterial* b e a u t y

m a c k e n z i e f r è r e

for my parents,  
Edward Frère and Lorna Sarah

thesis statement presented to  
Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University  
MFA Advisory Committee:

Sandra Alfoldy  
Bruce Barber  
Naoko Furue  
Susan McEachern  
Robin Muller  
Kye Yeon-Son

in conjunction with the exhibition

*(im)material beauty*

at the

Anna Leonowens Gallery

Halifax, Nova Scotia

March 1 to 12, 2005, opening reception, February 28, 2005

sequence	<i>i</i>
prologue	
<b>1</b>	
(im)material beauty	4
history	8
a memory of <i>intimate immensity</i>	17
material, process, presence	23
<i>(im)material beauty</i> : an exhibition	31
“whose-weaving-melted”	33
endnotes	34
epilogue and thank you	
appendix one: descriptive list of works in the exhibition	
bibliography	

The array of theoretical source material available to artists and the intransigently subjective nature of art itself guarantees that virtually any discourse on art practice encounters the simultaneous truth of paradoxical conceptual elements. Artist and writer, Trinh T. Minh-Ha proposes a kind of discourse where an “alert in-betweenness and ‘critical’ non-knowingness...are infinitely more exigent than the attempts to ‘express’ judge or evaluate.”<sup>1</sup> Her proposal for transcending the binaries of judgment and valuation presents an effective model for discourse on contemporary art practice. The continued integration of art making with its own explication presupposes the hybridity of a contemporary approach to art making that is inspired not only by material, process or concept, but by one’s subjective position in a broader theoretical context. Writing about one’s work inevitably develops into a parallel creative project in which the artist becomes a curator of theory and historical narrative, and perhaps most importantly a translator of the tacit processes of art making and the human experience.

Self-expression relies upon the self-conscious, subjective positioning of the artist on a continuum of individual and communal practice. My work as a weaver is profoundly rooted in the traditions of cloth making. I work in cloth, with cloth, often about cloth. My yarns are always composed of natural materials and coloured almost exclusively with plant and animal-sourced dyes. Many of the techniques used in both natural dyeing and handweaving are typically hundreds of years old, and I am dedicated to preserving these valuable textile traditions in my studio practice. At the same time, this activity occurs in a contemporary context that includes technological conveniences like computer-assisted drafting and the marvel of hybrid threads like silk stainless (steel) yarn.<sup>2</sup> Working in this way, I have discovered that the context in which my work is made, and the context into which it is received is often circumscribed by an oppositional and reductive debate between craft and art that has lingered beyond any perceptible usefulness.<sup>3</sup> As a maker of contemplative cloth, I believe that art occurs in our cognition of aesthetic,

conceptual or spiritual relationships between ourselves and objects or imaginary/conceptual objects. This cognition may be enacted in response to nearly any artwork or crafted object, regardless of an artist or craftsman's self-definition. I am no longer interested in the relative position of my work as either an art or craft object. I am interested solely in the exploration of the nature of cloth and its enduring tactile presence in our daily lives *and* in art. Further, my work in cloth proposes that material relationships are an eloquent embodiment of the various phenomena of human cognition and have the potential to transform our thinking. For a textile artist, it is not incidental that theoretical discourse sometimes adopts the language of weaving and textiles. In writing, I might spin a yarn, pick up a thread of reasoning, untangle a skein of thought<sup>4</sup> or even weave thoughts together. In her poem "The Weaving of Words" artist and poet Cecilia Vicuna writes: "teks, to weave, to fabricate, to make wicker or wattle for mud-covered walls/text, textile, context."<sup>5</sup> Like language, weaving is, as Vicuna suggests, an act of fabrication and of building. What follows is an attempt to untangle my own skein of thought regarding my weaving practice and cloth in general, and to weave a contextual fabric that elucidates my current thinking about working in textiles up to this point.

## *immaterial beauty*

*An object is not an object, it is the witness to a relationship.*

*A thread is not a thread, but a thousand tiny fibres entwined.*

Cecilia Vicuna<sup>6</sup>

A gift of handmade cloth resonates with the accumulation of breath, care and time. These are the ineffable materials of compassion. In cloth, care becomes tangible. Cloth wraps and enfolds us, warming and protecting our bodies. The ancient legacy of this utility and its substantial social history make cloth the most familiar and intimately personal material construction in human history. The development of textile technologies closely parallels our own; with each innovation in structure, equipment or material reflected economically in the rise of industrial production, and culturally in terms of methods of social organization and the fluctuating styles of personal adornment. Handweaving is essentially a material practice born of human necessity and aesthetics that, in its mindful application, offers a compelling conceptual model for sensorial consciousness. In a meditation on the immateriality of thought, Hannah Arendt wonders whether thought and “other invisible and soundless mental activities”, are fit to appear at all, “...or whether in fact they can never find an adequate home in the world.”<sup>7</sup> Handweaving may provide a non-linguistic, bodily expression to these “invisible and soundless mental activities,” as the accumulation of hundreds or even thousands of nearly identical movements of hands and feet in weaving constitutes a gestural thought process, enacted through an interval of time, imprinting the appearing object (cloth) with the temporal. Thus, cloth woven by hand becomes a tactile analog of the invisible phenomena of thought and perception.

I am a weaver and dyer. My work is a response to *material beauty* and a meditation on the spiritual and emotional resonance of cloth. In his introduction to *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard distinguishes between two types of imagination present in the natural world and in the mind; the formal and the material. According to Bachelard, the formal imagination creates unnecessary beauty (that which is born of novelty and picturesqueness) and the material imagination “aims at producing that which, in being is ...eternal.”<sup>8</sup> I have selected the term “material beauty” as it may describe the beauty inherent in tangible natural materials like stone,

water and fibres. Additionally, the term suggests another kind of beauty not unlike Bachelard's material imagination that "...is attracted by the elements of permanency in things."<sup>9</sup> One's perception of material beauty is an aesthetic memory of moments in which one has experienced beauty in the natural world, in the eyes of a lover, or even in a work of art. Agnes Martin writes, "When we see life we call it beauty. It is magnificent - wonderful. We may be looking at the ocean when we are aware of beauty but it is not the ocean."<sup>10</sup> Martin suggests that beauty is an awareness in the mind.<sup>11</sup> Beauty is not contained in the object of our vision, but rather it is that which is seen *through* it, in our cognition of its presence. This formula presents a classic aesthetic model for perception that may be expanded to include the body's *kinesthetic*<sup>12</sup> relationship to objects. In a woven textile, structure and surface pattern are often one and the same, each affecting the other. The textured surface of a textile, for example may absorb light, changing its appearing qualities. If we add to this our intimate familiarity with the touch of cloth on our bodies, the visual experience of a textile becomes almost tangible. If we are able to recognize that a hand woven object's materiality is intransigently enmeshed with its appearance, it becomes clear that any perceptual encounter with cloth is not only visual, but a synesthetic experience of its tactile *presence*.

The tactile presence of cloth is both material (fibres) in its construction and immaterial (emotional, spiritual, political) in its communicative potential. At its most basic, cloth is an arrangement of fibres held together by friction.<sup>13</sup> The air between and within fibres determines a cloth's density. This perpetually collapsing/expanding space within a textile is materially unique to any other utilitarian or aesthetic construction. The shape of this space and the relative proportion of air to fibre produce the particular character of any fabric. The rectangular space between threads in plain weave, for example, gives a very different texture or hand (feeling) to cloth than the rounded, looping and stretching space of knitted thread.<sup>14</sup> Air accumulates in cloth as an ephemeral architecture of air - of breath. If fibres are its tactile body, air is the breath that gives cloth its spiritual and emotional resonance. The gentle conflation of the immaterial and the material in a hand woven piece of cloth creates an other materiality, the *(im)material*. My recent work is a meditation on the *(im)material* as it relates to the beauty that emerges in the space between ourselves and cloth, and the emotive potential of cloth as a tacit communication of the sublime. *(im)material beauty* is an exhibition of contemplative cloth that creates a quiescent

space for an encounter with the ineffable. In this space, something as familiar as cloth is subtly, yet wholly transformed, and in its accumulation of thread, time and breath, we may glimpse the (im)material beauty of being in the world, if only for a moment.

History offers an alternate lens through which to conceptualize an artistic practice by gaining an understanding of one's place as an individual within a community of makers. The objective historical account of stylistic changes and technological advances is incomplete however, and does not always illuminate the experience of making for a craftsman or artist. The fact that relatively few makers are also historians<sup>15</sup> contributes to the problem. A thoughtful investigation of the conditions in which the ancient craftsman worked and lived generates a contextual understanding - although perhaps only in a superficial sense - of the contemporary maker's own relationship with his or her predecessors. Craft discourse in particular, has been effective in this aspect, putting a subjective human face to objects and creating a narrative based not only on historical accounts and documents, but also on the crafted object itself. Because my work as a weaver focuses on the communicative presence of material, an examination of textile artifacts in a sociohistorical context is relevant to my exploration of the meaning of cloth in a broader sense. Canadian author and textile archivist Dorothy Burnham found that much of our cultural history may be gleaned from the articles made by our ancestors. She recognized that the way something was made, the availability of material and a person's living conditions are often evident in the product of his or her labour. Burnham's approach was inherently material. "She would always try to see how things were made." says John Volmer, a fellow textile researcher, "She'd hold the material in her hand, she'd stroke it. She took such delight in it, in finding the secret."<sup>16</sup> Burnham's lifelong study of textiles, represented in several excellent publications,<sup>17</sup> has given us an invaluable account of early handwork in Canada that explores the impact of cross-cultural exchange, economic hardship and political events. With reverence and care, she has decoded the material culture of a nation and set a high standard for textile scholarship in Canada.

Like Burnham, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich proposes that a narrative history may be constructed using material clues, as she explores the communicative potential of objects in her book *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. Ulrich challenges the persistence of the myth of homespun as an idealization of domestic life in America during the colonial period and beyond. In a historical sense, the nostalgia surrounding homespun romantically obscures the long hours of labour involved in the production of textiles and the roles that the spinning wheel and the loom actually played in the North American household. With the appearance of America's first textile factory in Massachusetts in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>18</sup> textile trade in the British colonies became a combination of home, factory and imported products. As in Canada, America was artificially dependent on imports from England. The home production of goods was actively discouraged in the colonies until the end of the American Revolution in the interest of maintaining a market for English products. "It was considered part of the duty of a colony to obtain what it needed from the home country[.]"<sup>19</sup> Although the spinning wheel and the loom were fixtures in many homes, often for several generations, it would be inaccurate to state that the whole of textile production in America and particularly in Canada was domestic. After American independence, the myth of homespun became a politically potent expression of liberty and self-reliance,<sup>20</sup> and perhaps a very real necessity as America was for a time, cut off from a British supply of goods. Domestic production was eventually superseded by industrial methods; and although this development was commonly perceived as freeing women from the chore of yarn and cloth production, the opposite was often the case. In her account, citing the mistaken apprehension that "...steam, not workers, produced calico[.]"<sup>21</sup> Ulrich notes that the reality in New England<sup>22</sup> and elsewhere in the late nineteenth century was that women were still the producers of cloth, only now it was in a factory, not beside the fireplace. The "mystique of homespun" persisted however, attracting social reformers and conservatives, precipitating the colonial revival in America and the Arts and Crafts movement in England,<sup>23</sup> which was to lead to the revaluation of hand-produced objects and a reconsideration of the value of joy in labour.

William Morris was a central figure in the Arts and Crafts movement whose passionate, often radical critique of the soullessness of the industrial age not only focused on a revolution within the decorative arts, but also proposed a transformation of the common conceptions of

work and labour at the time. He idealized and somewhat romanticized the contribution of the artist craftsman and was critical of the dehumanizing effects of mechanical methods of production. He argued, "...that only objects made with pleasure and imprinted with the human spirit could in turn bring pleasure[.]"<sup>24</sup> Morris's focus was the development of a collective shift in social mores that respected the contributions of the skilled craftsman not as a mere labourer, but an artist in his or her own right. He believed that "...only by destroying the traditional system of industrial production and replacing it with collaborative enterprises could individuals participate willingly and happily in the creation of art that would impart pleasure to others."<sup>25</sup> Japanese writer and collector of folkcraft, Soetsu Yanagi was aware of the activities of William Morris in the west, even coining his own term *mingei* for "peasant or folk art" in 1918.<sup>26</sup> In his book *The Unknown Craftsman*, Yanagi idealized the unconscious, imperfect beauty that resulted through repetitive, simple manipulations of material by anonymous artisans involved in the production of multiple wares.<sup>27</sup> Of course the societal conditions that allowed for the existence of the anonymous or unknown craftsman romantically envisioned by Yanagi no longer exist. However, it is intriguing to consider Yanagi's ideas regarding anonymity and the unconscious freedom inherent to repetitive processes; particularly in contrast to Morris's idealization of the individual craftsman. In both cases there is a respect for the humble activity of craft, but I would suggest that this respect was manifested rather differently for each man, influenced by his particular cultural context. Yanagi's ideas were rooted in the tenets of Buddhism that promote the dissolution of the self. Transposed into a contemporary context, absence of the maker's identity would seem impossible. Taken less literally, absence could simply mean the willful, self-conscious removal, of one's ego from the work - *revealing* rather than expressing truth. It is an ideology that would seem at odds with Morris's respect for the individual craftsman and yet he, as well as Yanagi placed much value on the pleasure both in appreciating and engaging in (especially Morris)<sup>28</sup> the humble work of the guileless hand. Both men were influential. Yanagi's efforts culminated in the establishment of the Japanese Folkcraft Museum in 1936 and inspired many, including potter Bernard Leach, to incorporate Buddhist aesthetics into their work. Morris's principles inspired his contemporaries in the Arts and Crafts movement, and were to have an overwhelming, transformative and lasting effect on the self-definition of craftspeople for generations.

The emergence of the artist-craftsperson from the Arts and Crafts movement and the new valuation of handwork in contemporary craft and art practice, presents the renewal of what appears to be a cyclical pattern of return to handwork. In the twentieth century, there were at least two recognized revivals of hand weaving and the textile arts in North America and Europe.<sup>29</sup> The first began in the period between the two world wars and was to continue into the fifties. Women like Mary Atwater, author of *The Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand-Weaving*,<sup>30</sup> and Mary Black, Nova Scotian author of the *Key to Weaving*,<sup>31</sup> emphasized weaving as an original and expressive<sup>32</sup> activity, and championed the self sufficiency of handicraft in a time of economic hardship. Their efforts were encouraged by and in support of the establishment of arts and crafts guilds throughout North America at this time.<sup>33</sup> The second revival of hand weaving and craft in general began in the late sixties, with a radical departure from tradition in the form of experimental and sculptural *fibre art*. Canadian artists like Charlotte Lindgren and Mariette Rousseau Vermette, Europeans, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Ritzi and Peter Jacobi and American Lenore Tawney (among others) explored the potential of fibre as an expressive and sculptural form. Their work made its way into galleries, shown as sculptural, environmental (installation) or wearable art. The advent of the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennale beginning in 1967, may well represent the crescendo of the fibre art movement. The last of the Lausanne biennales was held in the early eighties, after which fibre art returned to somewhat marginal territory awaiting its next reincarnation. Over the last two decades, fibre art has become an institution in the textile departments of art colleges across North America, contributing to a contemporary flourishing of textile artists and has been embraced by many artists as an alternative and dynamic medium for artistic expression.

Contrary to popular misapprehension, the contemporary weaver is not engaged in a recreational or nostalgic re-creation of the romantic age of homespun, nor is he or she plodding along the joyless path of the textile mill worker.<sup>34</sup> In an age of technocratic imperatives and virtual realities, the perpetual revival of handweaving, and craft in general (including crafted objects in a fine art context), may be seen as a resistance to the digital sanitizing of human experience and the apparent removal of our own material bodies from the discourse of technological advancement. It is important that any return to materiality and hand-manipulation is not misconstrued as a retrograde movement against innovation, but rather one that has the potential to instigate future invention by incorporating the investigation of materiality with

artisanal tradition and contemporary technologies. As in the past, the context in which handwork is created continues to shift radically with the development of new technologies. Ironically, the same technologies whose forebears were the machinery of drudgery for the textile mill worker, now enable new generations of artists and artisans to explore the expressive and emotive qualities of handmade cloth. The availability of computer assisted drafting and weaving completes an uncanny circuit of technological development as it is applied to the very process that initiated its invention. It is not inconsequential that the “revival” of material practices occurs during moments of technological virtuosity. Returning to material exploration in the practice of art and craft enables the human mind to rethink, reinvent and to solve problems in a way that is not possible post-innovation (technological) where the problem has perhaps already been solved by the latest invention. Encountering, reacting to and manipulating material with our bodies is absolutely necessary to activate the sensibilities and stimulate thinking. It may even be argued, that interaction with material is the very reason for cognition, and for thought processes to occur *at all*. The repetition of textile processes offers a meditative retreat not unlike the phenomena of thought itself, where something is rolled over and over again in the mind. I have come to view my own practice in this way as an embodiment of thinking, and as a material metaphor of care and value for the tradition of handwork. Engaging with the traditions of the past within the dynamic context of a humanistic technological present, provides a unique opportunity to propose a human(e) contemplative model for the future of thought itself.

*a memory of intimate immensity*

*The rock in my hands keeps the cold of the ground  
until I am at the door. Inside now, I look at the rock on the floor.  
I remember the cold and we are complicit.*

Memory is the impetus for making. Agnes Martin writes, “The function of artwork is the stimulation of sensibilities, the renewal of memories of moments of perfection.”<sup>35</sup> The *renewal* that Martin writes about is not an act of mimesis, rather, it is a renewal that causes a corollary set of conditions eliciting a response akin to an experience of perfection. I am compelled to recreate these moments in my work, if only in echo. My intention is to orient the viewer of the work in a contemplative direction where the perfect beauty of the natural world is not expressed, but rather gently brought to mind. The memory of a beautiful moment is distilled to an emotional response like a feeling for colour, or a peculiar quality of light. Thus, my work references the natural world, but does not express it. This approach relies upon the ability of material, colour and structure to create a visual sign that triggers the memory of beauty, making an artist of the person encountering the work. Soetsu Yanagi describes *shibui* beauty<sup>36</sup> as it is cultivated by masters of the Tea ceremony. He explains that it is a sort of connoisseurship where the beauty of objects is created in their appreciation in the moment of response.<sup>37</sup> True beauty, he suggests “...exists in the realm where there is no distinction between the beautiful and the ugly,...as a state where ‘beauty and ugliness are as yet unseparated.’”<sup>38</sup> Objects in the natural world possess this quality of existing beyond duality, exhibiting a confident “thusness”, or put more simply - a thing is itself.

Our response to beauty is contingent on cultural values and as one might expect, the connoisseurship idealized by Yanagi is not mirrored in the west, where beauty has often existed as a binary term in relative opposition to ugliness. In both east and west however, there is mutual recognition of nature and its forms as an authentic source of beauty. The nineteenth century theorist of the decorative arts, John Ruskin, proposed a model for aesthetics that represents an influential western paradigm of beauty. According to Ruskin, the most suitable forms for use in the arts are those that are found in nature.<sup>39</sup> Observing that nature cannot be imitated,<sup>40</sup> Ruskin

developed a complex aesthetic system for the appropriate application of beauty in the decorative arts that included the suitability of particular materials and motifs in specific contexts. Essential to the appreciation of beauty for Ruskin was the proportional level of repose that one was able to devote to an object.<sup>41</sup> “Where rest is forbidden,” he writes, “so is beauty.”<sup>42</sup> His restrictions on the appropriate use of beauty extended to utilitarian tools and active architectural spaces like train stations.<sup>43</sup> Ruskin’s predilection for repose or contemplation as a necessary condition for beauty presents an unexpected parallel to the eastern experience of *shibui* beauty. Of course Ruskin would likely have become apoplectic at the Japanese taste for irregularity and subtle imperfection. Nonetheless, he remains a compelling figure in the history of the western idea of beauty, situating it, as he does, in the realm of nature.

In the contemporary context of fine art, it is difficult to separate the idea of contemplative beauty from the sublime; whereas in the past, the two terms were much more distinct. In his essay, “Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart, Thomas McEvilley gives an account of what the sublime has meant at different times in the history of aesthetics, outlining its often antithetical relationship with beauty. He begins in the first century AD, with an account of the so-called “ur-text” of the literary sublime written by Longinus. For this early author, the sublime was a primeval natural force that threatened the annihilation of all things, including beauty.<sup>44</sup> The sublime was to reappear in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when writer Edmund Burke theorized an aesthetics of the sublime focused on the terrible grandeur of the natural landscape in painting. According to McEvilley, the Burkean model of the sublime emphasized terror that “...threatens one’s security and injects chaos into harmony and order” in comparison to beauty which makes one “..feel secure and happy about oneself.”<sup>45</sup> Notably, for Burke as for Longinus, one cause for terror is “*immensity and vastness*” [italics mine] whereas the beautiful is human in scale.<sup>46</sup> Immanuel Kant was to reconfigure Burke’s sublime by somewhat conflating the latter’s definitions, transposing reason from beauty to the sublime.<sup>47</sup> Kant developed his “reasonable sublime as a “response one gets,” shifting the sublime to the subjective where according to Kant, it is “...discoverable in the mind.”<sup>48</sup> If we return to Agnes Martin’s idea of beauty as something that is known “forever in the mind,”<sup>49</sup> we might notice that the two terms, sublime and beauty, now occupy a similar subjective space. The Kantian model for sublimity has persisted through modernity to the present, where it has become increasingly subjective, even beautiful, as a

function of aesthetic perception. It would appear, writes McEvilley that in its contemporary re-emergence, beauty has in effect reversed the relationship, absorbing many of the qualities of the sublime.<sup>50</sup>

The miracle of cognition, the very fact that we are able to perceive beauty at all is an important condition for an experience of beauty or the sublime. Arthur Danto discusses this idea in the concluding chapter of his recent book *The Abuse of Beauty*. He quotes Russian novelist, Vladimir Nabakov's response to an interviewer who "...asked him if he was surprised by anything in life. Nabakov responded, "The marvel of consciousness--that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amid the night of nonbeing"<sup>51</sup> Although he admits that he may be conflating beauty with the sublime,<sup>52</sup> Danto contends that in this instance the "beautiful is the sublime[.]"<sup>53</sup> By equating the subjective phenomena of cognition with sublimity, Danto suggests that any negotiation of the sublime is an encounter with the immensity of the infinite, a vastness beyond ourselves that takes root within. I have found most personal resonance with this aspect of the sublime as an expansion of the self, creating an interior space for reflection and contemplation. Certainly, The intimacy of cloth as a bodily, human artifact make a discussion of the sublime as a destructive or formless expanse beyond ourselves not only improbable but conceptually irreconcilable to the form of cloth altogether. By its very nature, cloth demands an intimacy that is expansive again *within itself*, which is, perhaps not unlike the Kant's subjective sublime or even Danto's beautiful (human scale) sublime. Gaston Bachelard writes about the transformative power of the poetic image as a feeling of intimate immensity.<sup>54</sup> Although Bachelard does not refer to the sublime directly, his description of poetics speaks eloquently of the sublime as a manifestation of the poetic impulse. In recognizing the poetic image one experiences "an extension of our intimate space."<sup>55</sup> He writes "To give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectivity."<sup>56</sup> Such a description certainly speaks to the particular phenomenological presence of cloth, as an object that may contain (wrap) and even hold space within itself. In the process of weaving, I am wholly absorbed into material and structure. While working I am somehow moved beyond myself while, at the same time, perhaps because of the physicality of the weaving process, there is an inevitable grounding of my contemplative self within my body. As an artifact of embodied thought or memory, cloth

demonstrates that “...immensity in the intimate domain is intensity, an intensity of being, the intensity of being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate immensity.”<sup>57</sup>

*...the end must always be simpler than the ends used to reach it.*

*Karl Philipp Moritz*<sup>58</sup>

Material is the substance through which all cognition of the world beyond our skin is mediated. It is stone. It is thread. It is the fragile scent of rain. All may be manipulated, altered or described for the purpose of human utility and expression. In an artwork, as in poetry, the meaning of material expands to include the immaterial. Concept is reconfigured as one might pleat a piece of silk fabric, revealing a new pattern, a new idea. Louis Kahn has said: “All materials in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, and this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to light.”<sup>59</sup> To create an artwork is to give presence to material, conceptual, atomic or spiritual. Much of our conceptual understanding of the universe is enacted in the space between ourselves and objects or apparent objects. It is a space of unknowing and of contemplation where all outcomes are equally possible or even likely. If we claim to know something, it is merely the apparent knowledge of what that thing is not, precluding all other potentialities. Knowing narrows our perception, eliminating simultaneous or even conflicting meanings or contexts that may generate a more thoughtful or even compassionate conceptualization of things. “This is not like that.” for example helps to distinguish one thing from another, but as things are defined so they become separate from each other, erasing their potential interrelationship - or at least our perception of it. In our response to familiar materials, we may claim to know how they will respond to us. In doing so, we have irrevocably extinguished the light within them.

Owen Barfield identifies this kind of reductive thinking as a “contemporary fallacy”<sup>60</sup> that assumes “...we must only distinguish things that we are also able to *divide*.” He goes on to reason that many things “...by reason of their *interpenetration* ...cannot be divided.”<sup>61</sup> Barfield argues that in spite of whatever practical justification for what he calls an “atomic obsession” (The division of matter into smaller and smaller units) “...there can be no evidential justification whatever for the conclusion, or rather the assumption, to which it so often leads, namely, that the parts preceded

the wholes, and that the world was actually built by putting together the units into which our minds divide it, as a house is built by putting bricks together.”<sup>62</sup> Echoing Soetsu Yanagi’s description of a state where things “...are as yet unseparated[,]”<sup>63</sup> Barfield’s conception of the interpenetration of things is particularly intriguing in its potential as a model for conceptualizing material, in particular the relationship of material to the body of the maker *and* the person perceiving the artwork. In fabricating or appreciating an object, the maker/viewer in effect becomes the material that he or she perceives. There occurs an empathetic connectivity between material object and the *kinesthetic* body of the viewer; the body that moves toward the material, touches its surface, maybe picks it up, assessing its physicality. In the instance of fabric, this relationship may become an intimate one as our familiarity with cloth causes a recognition of the cloth not only as a covering but also as a metaphorical body. One does not become the other, but recognizes (an)other materiality. The simultaneous embodiment of material presences indicates a perpetually unfolding, expanding wholeness. Each cloth work in the exhibition (*in*)*material beauty* represents my personal contemplation of this principle. It is conceptually significant that you are able to see each work through another. The translucency of the cloth in each piece resists distinction and separateness as it blurs with the air around it and blends with other cloth in the space. In a sense, the relationship between the pieces becomes a literal model for simultaneous embodiment. The simultaneity of material presences, reveals infinite complexity hidden in that which appears, at least initially, simple. The opportunity for a simultaneity of outcomes or truths is recovered only by a willed cultivation of “nonknowingness”.<sup>64</sup> The space between fibres, the breath of cloth, is metaphorical for this perceptual space of nonknowing. The thing is itself, but it may also be something else, even yourself - at the same time.

Material presents us with a set of pre-existing conditions, and these conditions determine the particular character or quality of a given material. The materials we will use are sometimes historical and familiar, many with prescribed techniques for manipulation, or even specific “suitable” forms. From the outset, it may be helpful to consider abandoning these forms, and cultivate a receptive rather than an expressive approach, taking our cues not from convention, but from the material itself, selecting and enacting processes that may elucidate the inherent qualities of the material in question. Of course it would be useless to claim it possible for someone to forget what has come before, but it is compelling to consider what might be possible

when we adopt an attitude of reception in relationship to material. Working with cloth, thread or fibres, cultivating receptivity becomes particularly difficult as one is faced with receiving an already receptive material. There is a softness to the medium that makes it infinitely malleable. Restraint an essential state of mind in order to divine what is appropriate or inappropriate for a particular fibrous material. If the artist is able to respond to a material with sensitivity, a certain logical manipulation is revealed. Louis Kahn has correctly said, “It is important that you honor the material you use.”<sup>65</sup> Material provides an important narrative structure for the work, for both form and content may be precipitated from the artist’s conversation with material. Anni Albers writes that, “...material is a means of communication. That listening to it, not dominating it makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive.”<sup>66</sup> Reception of the character of a material can only be achieved by listening. “What does it want?” the weaver asks, in effect becoming the material him or herself. Expansion of self into material or, more poetically, absorbing the material into the self, decisions are made within the logic of material, but also intuitively, rooted in the memory of past experiences with other materials. This approach does not confer an artificial animism or spirit upon material, but recognizes and maintains that although material is malleable, it is certainly not mute.

There are many opportunities within textile processes to engage with material in just this way. As I gain experience with spinning, weaving and dyeing, I find that I am able to surrender more and more control over the resulting cloth; allowing each material to twist, fall or colour as it wants. It is my intention to reveal more about a material than my thoughts about that material.<sup>67</sup> My personal acceptance of this approach and its development in my studio practice has been greatly inspired and affected by my work with naturally-sourced dyes. From the beginning, I have been fascinated with the idea that a plant dye, gently extracted at a particular place and season, may produce a colour subtly different than any other colour produced at any other time. In addition, unless the source of natural material is particularly consistent, it may be impossible to repeat this colour exactly. For this reason, I endeavor to select the source of colour rather than the specific colour of a particular dye project. This is the difference between deciding that one will use marigold flowers to colour silk threads instead of choosing a particular yellow shade. The colours produced with naturally-sourced dyes like madder root, marigold flowers or pine cones<sup>68</sup> possess a particular resonance difficult to achieve with synthetic dye processes. In my work,

natural colours are an emotional and spiritual counterpart to the structured arrangement of threads in woven cloth. Sometimes saturated, sometimes barely there, colour glows between the widely spaced threads of the translucent cloth, changing with the light at different times of day. I am intrigued with the transformative power of the dye process, and consequently with capturing gradations between light and dark, pale or saturated. The ephemerality of a gradual colour change is a subtle clue to that allows me to communicate my fascination with the transformation that occurs during dyeing, embedding evidence of this activity within the cloth itself.

The impermanence of cloth is metaphoric of the passage of time and the natural process of growth in its methodical construction; and decay in its inevitable deterioration. The aggregation of material and labour over time in textile processes parallels the incremental character of time itself. I will often incorporate simple, measured ikat patterning into my work to draw attention to the single thread and consequently to the single intersection of process and time in which the thread was integrated into the whole cloth. The repetitive processes of spinning and handweaving have a unique analogous relationship to time. Each thread embodies a single action repeated hundreds or even thousands of times with an imperceptible variation that adds to the complexity of the whole. The placement of the shuttle across the warp threads followed by the rhythmic motion of the beater is a familiar gesture for the weaver. An understanding of tension, structure and even the history of textiles is held within the weaver's hands. Each mindful gesture is a bodily communication of this understanding. It is a material narrative that communicates a tacit knowledge "...acquired through experience...that enables you to do things as distinct from talking or writing about them."<sup>69</sup> Tapestry artist Jane Kidd, in conversation with writer Amy Gogarty describes such moment when working on her latest series of tapestries entitled "Handwork". While replicating a section of an ancient French tapestry, Kidd discovered an area of pattern that was mismatched. She experienced a "shock of recognition" in the discovery and felt an immediate empathy for a fellow artisan engaged in the arduous and demanding task of her craft.<sup>70</sup> Connected through time to the hand of the original maker - she experienced a kind of memory of the hand. The resulting cloth "...is the written or sealed impression of a thing sought out, it is the shaped result of inquiry and *bodily expression of thought.*" [italics mine]<sup>71</sup> As in the vocal expression of language, weaving may be said to contain breath. When practiced with care and mindfulness, the weaving process generates a cumulative

material presencing of the weaver in the woven cloth through the gestural embodiment of thinking. In my own work, the production of cloth has become a meditative practice focused on the contemplation of cloth itself, where the mindful application of process enacted through an interval of time, produces a revolving, alchemic space for the metaphorical transmutation of material presence between cloth and the body.

*immaterial beauty: an exhibition*

*exhale. softly*  
*across the room cloth responds.*  
*breathing in then out.*

*(im)material beauty* is an exhibition of handwoven cloth focused on the liminal spaces of perception and the silent, yet eloquent material presence of cloth. The cloth elements assembled in the gallery are a map of internal and external spaces; the space between fibres and the space between the material object and ourselves. The translucency of the cloth, paired with the subtlety of patterning interferes with the visual apprehension of surface. The marks on the cloth are subtle and nuanced, approaching the minimal requirements for recognition of pattern. An instance of disorder, comprised of a subtle vibration within an ordered structure, foregrounds the act of perception, and our visual reflex to recognize repetition or to complete a form. The limitless, all over patterning is not applied onto, but appears to be absorbed and dissolved into form. Translucency mediates our vision.

The cloth in this room contains nearly as much air as fibre. Fragile and ephemeral, air and light pass through them (we) as breath. They are not about absence, removal or a paring down to the essential. It is about presence, yours, mine and the somnolent tissue of cloth. We are all three breathing. The accumulation of my own breath in these works is mingled with yours as you consider each panel of cloth. The arrangement of cloth in the gallery creates a temporary architecture of breath. Approach and cloth will sway, negotiating the currents of air pushed through it by your body. It acknowledges your body and its own. Silently. The subtle intimacy of this small movement (moment) as the cloth sways toward you is magnified by an impulse to touch. Masses and masses of other cloth(es) in your personal history mitigate this encounter and amplify the tactility of the experience. You may look through any cloth to see its companion(s). Our perception of cloth is a social function of communal memory and an intimate and cumulative material presencing. This cloth like all the rest you have known (worn) is familiar. Here is a place to sit and a space for contemplation. You have read (felt) this somewhere before.

With fingers you will see (write) a gentle proposal for another model for operating in this space (your own), traversing the nonknown territory of the (im)material.

*Whose-Weaving-Melted*  
**owáne pemustayko tikpuyewtisko**

Even when the coldest day that winter  
waited for her toes and face  
she carried two quill needles  
outside  
and tried to weave a blanket  
out of snow. She tried it that way.

.....

But when she pulled the blanket home  
on her sled and brought it inside  
to sleep under, it MELTED  
and ended up in soup broth.

Still she did not want to use  
the same things everyone else used for weaving.

So later, she gathered some  
of her family and friends outside  
and tried to weave together  
the cold breath steam  
you could SEE  
coming out of their noses and mouths  
into the air!  
She went quickly from one person to the other,  
QUICKLY trying to weave together  
the breaths you could see. It was taking  
a long time and no one could tell  
how it was going! Each piece of weaving-breath  
melted too, into the air, and stopped  
coming out altogether  
once everyone took their noses and mouths  
inside.

*Personal-Name-Origin-Stories*  
*told by Samuel Makidemewabe*  
*translated by Howard Norman*  
*Talking Leaves Issue, Panjandrum IV, edited by David Guss,*  
*San Francisco, 1975*  
*(Quoted in Precario/Precarious, edited by M. Catherine de Zegher,*  
*New Hampshire, 1997*

- 
- 1 Minh-Ha, "The Other Censorship" in When the Moon Waxes Red pp 234
  - 2 Silk stainless is used in the piece creased in the exhibition.
  - 3 Isabelle Frank gives a thorough account of the gradual separation of the arts into clearly defined categories in her introduction to the Theory of the Decorative Arts. pp 3-5
  - 4 Gaston Bachelard describes the challenge faced by the psychoanalyst encountering a poetic image and must "...untangle the skein of his interpretations." in his book Poetics of Space pp xx
  - 5 Vicuna, Quipoem pp q133
  - 6 Ibid. pp q136
  - 7 Arendt, Chapter I, "Appearance" in The Life of the Mind pp 23
  - 8 In his foreward to The Poetics of Space, Etienne Gilson describes Bachelard's distinction between two types of imagination in an earlier book entitled Water and Dreams. (L'eau et les rêves). I have intentionally excluded Bachelard's equation of the material imagination with the "primitive" as this term connotes a negative (colonial) hierarchical opposition of civility versus primitive. In this instance, I prefer to interpret Bachelard's meaning as a valuation of the primeval. pp ix
  - 9 Ibid. pp ix
  - 10 Martin, Writings pp 135, 136
  - 11 Ibid. pp 153
  - 12 Altering the term kinesthetic to kinæsthetic serves to expand its meaning to the bodily expression or appreciation of an aesthetic experience.
  - 13 In a recent lecture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, visiting textile scientist and educator, Joy Boutrop shared this succinct observation. October 27, 2004
  - 14 This idea developed in conversation with Naoko Furue in the Fall of 2004.
  - 15 Sandra Alfoldy, January 2005.
  - 16 Heather Thompson, "Dorothy Burnham, Textiles Archivist 1911 – 2004" Obituary in "The Globe and Mail" pp R10
  - 17 Burnham's books include: To Please the Caribou (1992) , Unlike the Lilies (1986) Cut My Cote (1973) and Keep Me Warm One Night (1972), written in collaboration with her husband Harold P. Burnham.
  - 18 Atwater, The Shuttlecraft Book of American Handweaving pp 6
  - 19 Burnham and Burnham, Keep Me Warm One Night pp 10
  - 20 Ibid. pp 37, 38

- 21 Ibid. 14
- 22 Ibid. pp 14
- 23 Ibid. pp 17
- 24 Frank, “The History of the Theory of Decorative Art” in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 9
- 25 Frank continues in this vein, writing “Morris’s blend of socialist utopianism and Ruskinian artistic idealism proved to be irresistible...” capturing his contemporaries “...disillusionment with a capitalist economy...[and]...spoke to their growing distaste for modern technology.” pp 10
- 26 Mingei means “art of the people.” Yanagi, “Introduction” in The Unknown Craftsman pp 94
- 27 Yanagi, “The Beauty of Irregularity” in The Unknown Craftsman pp 119–126
- 28 Unlike Yanagi who was a writer and collector, Morris was himself an active craftsman.
- 29 Revivals of the crafts usually occur in overlap, appearing in different regions at different times. The two “revivals” described in this paragraph are perhaps more accurately described as a complex blend of many more mini–revivals, but do, in a general way, reflect two distinct phases in the cyclical revival of the crafts in the twentieth century in North America and Europe.
- 30 First published in 1928.
- 31 First published in 1945.
- 32 Black, The Key to Weaving pp vii
- 33 For a thorough account of the rise of handicraft guilds in Canada, refer to Ellen Easton McLeod’s book, In Good Hands.
- 34 Labour conditions in textile mills, particularly in the garment manufacturing industry in poorer countries continue to inhibit the international development of fair and equitable working conditions. I have not included a discussion of this tragedy as it is not directly relevant to this discussion of my textile work. At the same time, I acknowledge that it is a very troubling aspect of cloth’s past and present that bears directly on our conceptual reading of cloth.
- 35 Martin, Writings pp 69
- 36 Also referred to as “the beauty of the imperfect and the beauty that deliberately rejects the perfect.” Yanagi pp 123
- 37 Yanagi “The Beauty of Irregularity” in The Unknown Craftsman pp 123, 124
- 38 Ibid. pp 130
- 39 Frank, “The History of the Theory of Decorative Art” in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 8
- 40 Ruskin, “The Lamp of Beauty” in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 42
- 41 Frank “The History of the Theory of Decorative Art” in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 8
- 42 Ruskin, “The Lamp of Beauty” in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 43

- 43 Ibid. pp 43
- 44 McEvelley, "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart" in Sticky Sublime pp 57
- 45 Ibid. pp 62
- 46 Ibid. pp 62
- 47 Ibid. pp 66
- 48 Ibid. pp 64
- 49 Martin, Writings pp 153
- 50 McEvelley's discussion of this development (pp 72) and the general development of the sublime and concepts of beauty are far more complex than I am able to relate in this context; but provide some fascinating insights into the history of these two terms.
- 51 Danto, "Beauty and Sublimity" in The Abuse of Beauty pp 159
- 52 Ibid pp 160
- 53 For emphasis, Danto repeats the end of Nabakov's quote "...amid the night of non-being." pp 160
- 54 Bachelard, "Intimate Immensity" in The Poetics of Space pp 183
- 55 Ibid. pp 199
- 56 Ibid. pp 202
- 57 Ibid. pp 193
- 58 Moritz, "On the Concept of Self-Sufficient Perfection" in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 34
- 59 Louis Kahn quoted in John Lobel's, Between Silence and Light pp 7
- 60 Barfield's book was published in 1981.
- 61 Thinking and perceiving are two examples that Barfield gives of things that cannot be divided. pp 12
- 62 Ibid. 13
- 63 Yanagi is of course referring to beauty, but his discussion is informed by the tenets of Buddhism and as such may be informative to a discussion of undifferentiation. pp130
- 64 Min-Ha, "The Other Censorship" in When the Moon Waxes Red pp 234
- 65 Louis Kahn quoted in John Lobel's Between Silence and Light pp 40
- 66 Albers, Selected Writings on Design pp 75

- <sup>67</sup> In The Life of the Mind, Hannah Arendt writes, “What becomes manifest when we speak about psychic experiences is never the experience itself but whatever we think about it when we reflect upon it.” This explanation is an eloquent description of the limits of linguistic expression that may be expanded by the material narrative. Chapter I, “Appearance” pp 31
- <sup>68</sup> All of these dyes are used in this exhibition in addition to cochineal, and lac which are insect-derived dyes.
- <sup>69</sup> Dormer, “Craft and the Turing Test for Practical Thinking” in The Culture of Craft pp 147
- <sup>70</sup> Gogarty, “Jane Kidd’s Handwork Series: Disciplinarity and the Reparative Impulse” pp 8
- <sup>71</sup> Ruskin, “The Lamp of Beauty” in The Theory of Decorative Art pp 42

## appendix one

descriptive list of works in the exhibition

### *orange pair*

Two panels of plain-woven wool, ikat-dyed with cochineal, madder root and marigold flowers. Supported on lightly curved bamboo rod and linen cord.

### *wind cloth*

Plain-woven panel with variable warp spacing. Warp is linen singles dyed with pine cones. Weft is handspun hemp singles. Supported on lightly curved bamboo rod and linen cord.

### *creased*

Small creased panel of plain-woven silk/stainless steel thread in white and black (synthetic dye). Supported on lightly curved bamboo rod and silk and stainless steel thread.

### *flashing*

Leno-woven raw silk dyed with marigold flowers. Patterned areas created with chemical/steam degumming process. Supported on lightly curved bamboo rod and linen cord.

### *banded*

Plain-woven, viscose-sized ramie with variable warp spacing. Weft dyed with lac. Supported on lightly curved bamboo rod and linen cord.

### *water cloth*

Plain-woven length. Warp is reeled silk. Weft is linen ikat dyed with birch and spruce bark. Supported on lightly curved bamboo rod and linen cord.

*The bench is made by Stefan Dumont from black walnut and maple.*

*The stone in the corner is from the collection of Nancy Price.*

*bibliography*

- Albers, Anni. *Selected Writings On Design*. Brenda Danilowitz (Ed.), New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 2000
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1977
- Atwater, Mary Miegs. *The Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand-Weaving*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Maria Jolas (Trans.) Boston: Beacon Press, 1964
- Barfield, Owen. *History, Guilt and Habit*. Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1981
- Black, Mary. *Key to Weaving*. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1945
- Burnham, Dorothy K. and Harold P. *Keep Me Warm One Night: Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972
- Danto, Arthur C. *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago and Lasalle, Illinois: Open Court, 2003.
- de Zegher, M Catherine (Ed.). *Precario/Precarious*. New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1997
- Dormer, Peter (Ed.). *The Culture of Craft*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997
- Gogarty, Amy. *Jane Kidd's Handwork Series: Disciplinarity and the Reparative Impulse*. Calgary, Alberta: Stride Gallery, 2003
- Frank, Isabelle (Ed.). *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings 1750-1940*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000
- Krauss, Rosalind E. "Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/" M. Catherine de Zegher (Ed.) *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20<sup>th</sup> century art - in of and from the feminine*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996
- Levin, David Michael. "Mudra: An Essay on Thinking". *Heidegger and Asian Thought*
- Lobel, John. *Between Silence and Light*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambala Publications Inc., 1979.
- Martin, Agnes. *Writings*. Herausgegeben von Dieter Schwarz (Ed.) Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1998
- McEvelley, Thomas. "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart". *Sticky Sublime*. Ed. Bill Beckley. New York: Allworth Press, 2001

- Minh Ha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red.: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1997
- Moritz, Karl Phillip. "On the Concept of Self-Sufficient Perfection." Isabelle Frank (Ed.). *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings 1750-1940*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000
- Ruskin, John. "The Lamp of Beauty." Isabelle Frank (Ed.). *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings 1750-1940*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000
- Thatcher Ulrich, Laurel. *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002
- Thompson, Heather . "Dorothy Burnham, Textiles Archivist 1911 - 2004" Obituary. Toronto: Globe and Mail, November 8, 2004
- Vicuna, Cecilia. *Quiipoem*. Esther Allen (Trans.) New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1997.
- Yanagi, Soetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1972