

A Language of Simple Twists

by
Valerie Constantino



Book of Durrow, Matthew Symbol, 7th Century
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*...the center of myself where I stand
as a holy spider on the major threads of my soul
and with which I will weave at the crossways a few lace
which I guess already exist in the heart of Beauty... (1)*

Stephane Mallarmé

*To study the Buddha Dharma is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. (2)*

- Eihei Dogen



Pregnant in the backyard, Cambridge, MA, 1972

Sheila Hicks (American, b. 1934), *Ephemera Bundle*, 1975

Wrapping, silk; 33.7 x 27.0 x 11.5 cm.

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mildred Constantine 1992.250



We seem to have the capacity to live through a strong dose of life, reflecting little, paying less attention. Reactionary in that we just respond or not, to isolated events as they unfold. I left my childhood home when I was relatively unformed, then married in Berkeley, California. We moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts where our son was born. He was radiant and sweet, and I loved him. And he presented me with a critical challenge: what to do with the self that was mine, apart from these imprecise details. I gave birth to a wee baby boy and he introduced me to *another*, less familiar aspect of myself. I cared for him and was at once moved to do some *thing*. I scrutinized my marginal position while changing the baby's diapers. I ground organic produce in the baby mill. I rocked the baby to sleep, while singing tender songs to him. And I wondered if there

might be anything of consequence for me to do beyond those rooms. Out of the momentous occasion of birth, came the profound desire to write myself in. In lieu of the ephemeral, I sought perpetuity. What is a beginning then, if not an affirmation of an inevitable end?

This then was the curious moment in which I began to interpret the language of textile. Through a world of potentialities and links to a remote past, I gathered a thread to an inner life. But it would be quite some time before I would comprehend its ciphers.

At that time, my friend and neighbor Jo Anne Berke provided the connecting element. She was a weaver, a fiber artist. During my drawn-out pregnancy, she gained too many empathetic pounds owing to our shared afternoon teas and my penchant for baking. I studied her books, and saw for the first time, reproductions of sculptures made from fibers: machine and hand-spun yarns, colored threads, fabrics of different plant and animal substances, rope of varying scales, natural and scientifically produced malleable materials. Here, in the unforgiving swelter of our east-coast summer, I studied the classic woven compositions of Anni Albers, the dimensional forms of Lenore Tawney and Kay Sekimachi, Sheila Hicks' and Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's conceptual exploitations, the structural investigations of Ed Rossbach and Mariyo Yagi, and the substantive constructions of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Claire Zeisler, Ritzi and Peter Jacobi, and Francoise Grossen. These are noteworthy works of art: their intricate methodologies and energetic materialities, evocative and eternal.



Jo Anne Berke, *Rapunzel*, 1970
courtesy of the artist



Marriage of Carmellina Milo to Pietro Constantino
Brooklyn, New York, c. 1890

Grandma Belize as we called her, came from Italy when she was fourteen years old, from Castellamare di Stabia, a village south of Naples. She worked in the New York City garment center for \$2.00 a week. When I was about eight or nine years old, she took out her stainless steel crochet hooks and taught me how to use them. I loved the cool shine of those hooks, and even more, the enigmatic way I could, by slipping a hook through a loop of thread, create a thing of beauty and use. I was exhilarated by this process, and felt as though I had learned a secret language. – VC, journal

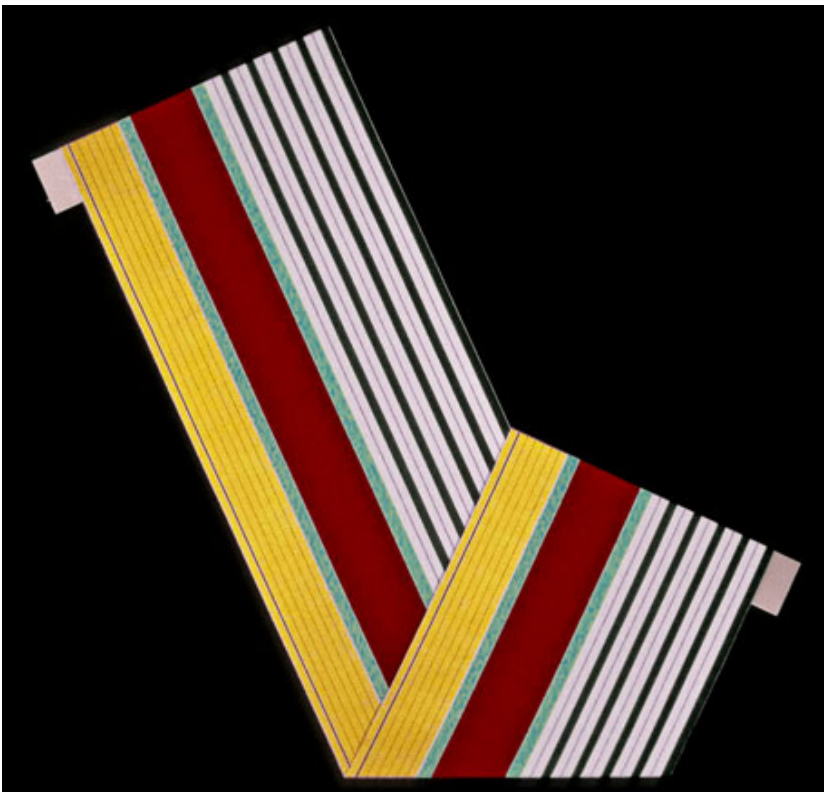
Legends of prehistory describe the activities of goddesses who spin and weave into existence, then sever and end the lives of mortals. These stories identify thread as procreative, alterative and intentional. The Hopi *Spider Woman*, also known as *Thinking Woman* exemplifies the capacity to self-actualize through such modest means. Like a revelation the substance

that spins the web for her home and her nourishment materializes, as she asserts unequivocally, *I am here*. Similarly, through the practice of crochet, as it gradually takes shape, I learned that I too could add my voice to that venerable chorus.

Out of a desire to create order from chaos, basic fiber constructions such as bundles and knots offer a specialized semiotic system. In ancient Japan, a bundle of grass knotted around a bamboo shoot designated land occupation and conveyed romantic devotion to one's lover. To circumambulate a Shinto site with rope is to call it sacred. (3) Knotted bits of string, *quipu* of the Peruvian *Inka* were used to record statistics and perhaps too, poems, legends and other local histories. (4)

Letters of interlaced lines resembling essential textile forms, carved into stone or inked onto sheets of animal hide, converge as written languages. The writing of history begins with those two crossed lines, the essential structure of the woven cloth. Artist Warren Seelig writes:

Once understood, the structural language of cloth becomes a way of thinking: it is a language of mathematical systems and a uniform alphabet of symbols which describes the movement of line, formation of pattern, and construction of fabric surface. (5)



Warren Seelig, *Aruba*, 1983
courtesy of the artist

Following my divorce in 1974, I moved with my young son to Vermont. I continued to weave and crochet, responding mostly to color and the sumptuousness of specific fibers and textiles. Questions of art in relation to craft did not consume me at that time as it did students and faculty in universities. I made useful things, and I also made what I thought of as experimental tapestries and sculptural forms as I was inclined. My inventions took place in the absence of academic constraints or discourse, or any particular degree of self-consciousness.

Together with my friend and collaborator in textile, Aasta Torsen, I embarked upon the opening of small shop in Londonderry, Vermont. We sold imported and handmade yarns for knitters, crocheters and weavers like ourselves. We collected local plants and dyed our own hand-spun yarns. We offered workshops, and found that we attracted a steady clientele of mostly women in search of refuge. Like the communal pounding of Hawaiian kapa cloth or the scraping of buffalo hides on the North American plains, we often worked together in circles on the floor of our shop after hours, experiencing the force of our collective rhythms and camaraderie. It was exhilarating if not exactly lucrative.

During our short run we befriended our competition: a sun-filled space in a neighboring town run by Signe Mitchell, a weaver, born and educated in Sweden. Signe's shop was more successful than ours, but the demands of running the business conflicted with the needs of her family. Having reached the decision to close our shop, Aasta had a brilliant idea, which we then proposed to Signe: we offered to cover her store hours in exchange for any sales of our own handmades and evening workshops. Signe agreed to give it a try and so another congenial enterprise was put into motion. That gratifying arrangements such as this may evolve, where everyone fulfills their potential, and receives for their efforts much by way of admiration, yet little by way of compensation, is but one of the great quandaries of the creative life!

God dwells among the pots and pans. (6)

- St. Teresa of Avila

The Manchester shop eventually went the way of its Londonderry counterpart, but not without success of another sort. As a neophyte weaver, my relationship with Signe Mitchell was one of special importance. Signe's professional training bestowed upon her genuine authenticity. Our relationship had not been established as one of teacher-student, yet given her expertise she could not help but glance at times upon my dubious technique. I tried my best to ignore her, insisting to myself that our differences were conceptual. I had no interest in table runners and placemats, I thought, as I became increasingly focused on locating and nurturing my subjective voice. I had not actually become an elitist, but it was in this context that the now exhausted *art - craft* debate entered my consciousness. The work, I thought, ought to be about something other than formal concerns. Despite my naiveté, I owe a debt to Signe for her tireless emphasis on technical proficiency. It is of course the attention to every detail, which supports the integrity of a work of art. Details impart subtleties: inflections of tone and syntax of words, the precision of an edge and the strength of a stitch. Signe was unpretentious in her knowledge, and through the force and merit of her ways, I eventually and sensibly came to accept her counsel.

I continued through those years to experiment with woven and other textile forms and with unconventional (for that time) materials such as monofilament, glass, metallics and found organic matter. Yet I grew frustrated in my desire to voice an evocative note. That I did not know how to execute or connect my developing ideas had finally dawned upon me. I needed an education.

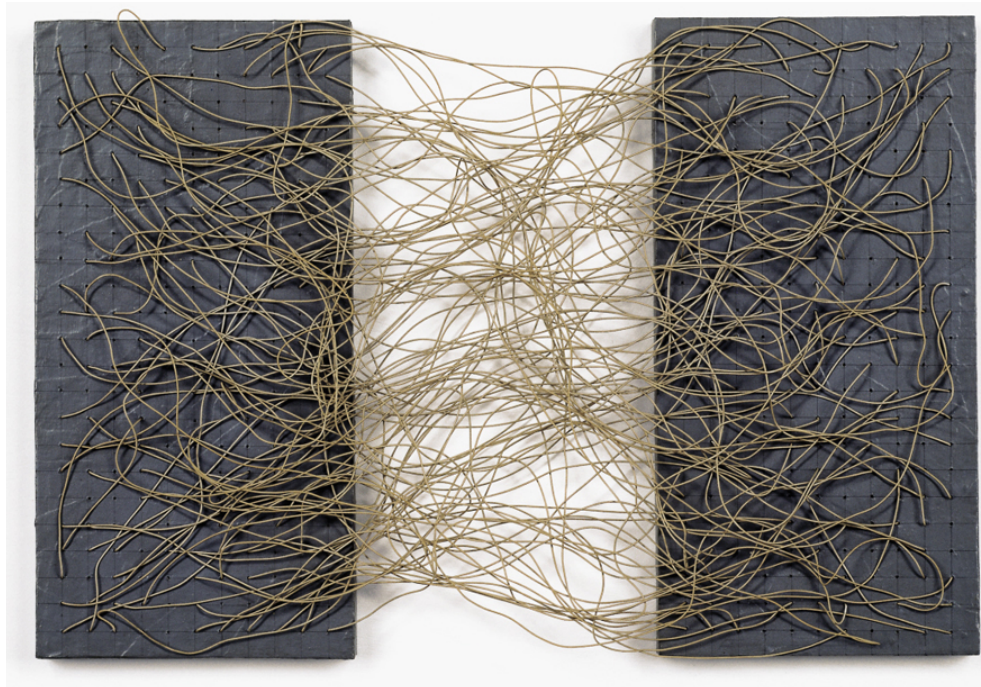
The Banff Centre, School of Fine Arts is situated amidst the drama of the Canadian Rocky Mountains. In 1982 I made my first sojourn to participate in a three-week workshop with Warren Seelig, the then Head of the Fibers Department at the Philadelphia College of Art in Pennsylvania (since renamed The University of the Arts). Warren had studied at The Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, and with Gerhardt Knoedel at The Cranbrook Academy of Design in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. His erudite lectures and critiques compelled me to read, read, read. His teaching style was fascinating, fierce and actually quite frightening in contrast to the reproachful, yet tender eye of Signe Mitchell.

When learning a new language, there are the basic words and phrases that we may recall. We learn to ask directions for example, or the price of a loaf of bread. If we stick with it, if we are lucky enough to live in proximity to speakers of this language, we may in time begin to express an abstract idea or relay a personal anecdote. And after even more time and further study, we begin to dream in this second language, and it becomes much like our language of origin. I was still in the early phases of this process, memorizing bits and pieces of information, attempting to assimilate. But I was entirely sure that I would eventually dream myself into this world.

I read about the evolution of modern culture, expressed through European and American art history: the painterly explorations of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cezanne, the surrealist dispositions of Rene Magritte and Max Ernst, the confrontations of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, the daring of Jackson Pollack, the exquisite materiality of Eva Hesse, the meditations of Mark Rothko and Agnes Martin. I took all of it in, unraveling its meanings, while audaciously connecting myself to its core. Out of the visual acumen of Impressionism, through the hyper-dimensionality of Cubism, the Surrealist's otherworld, Dada's ironies, Conceptualism's adroit provocations, I pondered a plausible position of my own.



Worktable in the Fibers Studio
The Banff Centre, 1981



All at once then, the anatomy of textile was revealed. Not merely a two-dimensional surface, a square of cloth was now a flexible, responsive, three-dimensional figure. The textile itself held meaning, beyond its composition and making, beyond the lure of its grace. It was a mathematical and scientific innovation, offering itself up to an endless play of geometric configurations and physical kinesthesia.

Eva Hesse, *Metronomic Irregularity*, 1966
 Photo: Ed Restle, Museum Wiesbaden
 © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

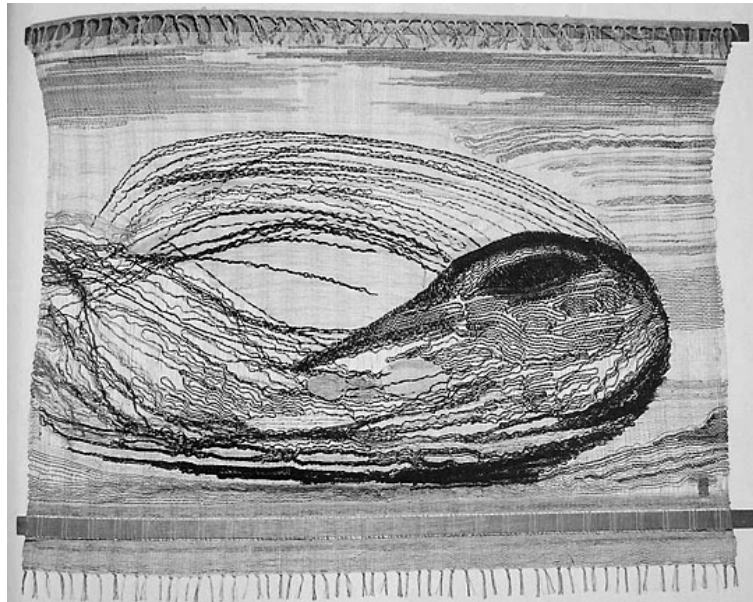
*A vision of theoretical physics as a vehicle for the
 deepest inquiry into nature... the use of mathematics to further one's
 understanding of the nature of space, time and matter. (7)*

- Evelyn Fox Keller

The phenomenon of textile is an interactive nexus of singular and cumulative lines of thread, a carrier of ambient energy. In the early morning fog-dense forests of a New England state, I'd witnessed the effects of light upon material and atmospheric elements; filaments of light rising off dew soaked moss, crossing amid aqueous mists. Similarly, the dynamics of textile is like an illuminated manuscript, a mimetic projection of barely discernible specks and traces merging with evanescent light, flashing in hyper-dimensional space.

During those weeks at The Banff Centre, Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, a designer of large-scale architectural tapestries, an established groundbreaker in the field, and the Head of the Fibers Department, invited several of us for a nine-month studio program.

The implications of Mariette's offer were irresistible and life changing. I longed for an artistic community and the time and space to work. I'd been apart from my son for a seemingly endless three weeks, but now I found myself contemplating a much longer separation. And I allowed myself to wonder if he might just actually like to go and live with his father in Hawaii for that extended period of time?



Lenore Tawney, *Lost and Proud*, 1957
© Lenore G. Tawney Foundation

Risk is often accompanied by loss, and my aptitude for measuring potential gains against that which may be sacrificed has never been particularly acute. After having lived apart from his father for so long, my son didn't really seem to mind the

notion of living with him in the tropics. And what could be bad, I reasoned? He'd contended with six hard Vermont winters with unpredictable sources of heat and no running water. The stone cold out-house was no longer a novelty and I imagined his delight in the year-round nurturing warmth of the Pacific Ocean. And wouldn't this give dad a chance to contribute real time and attention? Yes, there certainly seemed to be several acceptable reasons to follow this labyrinthine thread that appeared before me.

Nets of threads illustrate our planned and chance crossings, our attachments and the empty spaces in between. And like the voids of a web, the rests and silences between words and sentences hold meaning and matter as a net or the text intends. What remained unsaid at that time was that our son would not get what he wanted and probably needed most. His needs were not deliberately ignored, but they were relegated to the realm of the impossible. The dream of harmonious union is hardly a given, yet its absence can come as a shock and loss to a young heart. My ex-husband and I took it one step further by inserting six thousands miles between us. In order to be with the one, our child had to sublimate his need to be close to the other. And although I was aware that my life, and therefore his life with me, had become complicated and unsettling, I might yet have been someone who might have been missed by a young, still vulnerable, boy-child.

The studio program at The Banff Centre did not disappoint. It was packed with artists, the recognized elite and the aspiring throng. Relationships at the centre were forged around mutual interests and claustrophobic proximity. We lived, ate, slept and worked in close quarters, observing each other's work in progress. Such an existence can be, and I speak for myself here, as intimate and revealing as consensual nudity. Likewise, it was also thrilling to be around others who understood my moods and longings. We went beyond the superficiality of our quirks, emerging as whole and vulnerable people, with real-life histories and undermining fears.

With Calgary the closest cosmopolitan center within reach, Banff felt to me, a native New Yorker, especially remote. The spectacular mountainous backdrop did not provide grand inspiration as one might expect, but rather a sense of unrest, as

if having slid into the belly of the earth. Too, Alberta is a British province, which served up just enough dignity to provoke a robust sense of anarchy. Allow me to illustrate:

Prince Philip of Wales had been invited by the centre to officiate in the inauguration of its architectural award-winning private studios. He was to be flown in by helicopter that morning. The place was all a-flutter. Yet I for one, an American artist, could not comprehend all the fuss. The notion of a privileged monarchy was just too last century.

That morning, we were thoroughly coached, told what to wear, what to say, what *not* to say, *and* how precisely, to shake hands with a prince. For example: one never offers one's hand to a royal. One waits for His Highness to offer his hand to you. If and when he does so, you grasp it firmly, yet gently. You may then proceed to shake his hand, but emphatically without vigor. Those of us who occupied the studios were just to be prepared, should Prince Philip choose to grace us with his presence.

I wore an appropriately unremarkable ensemble: a white linen blazer with black silk pants. I had moved into that particular studio just two days earlier and therefore had very little work to show. The neatly arranged and pinned article clippings on *superstrings* - the latest scientific *theory of everything* to date (c. 1985), and the microscopic images of structures of plant roots and blood cells, were to be the basis for much of the work that would follow. With my grandmother's espresso pot, spools of plastic filmstrip, scissors, and a stainless steel crochet hook on my worktable, I waited.

And then there came a knock at the door. The president of the Banff Centre, the architect who designed the studio with his wife, and Prince Philip himself, were all there. A crowd of about fifty had gathered on the path below. I invited my four guests into the studio and introduced myself. And there, extended towards me, was the celebrated, if not exuberant hand of Prince Philip of Wales, consort to Queen Elizabeth of England. And there, there was I now myself all a-flutter – wondering to myself: *what was it they said I'm to do with the imperial paw?*



With Prince Philip, et al, Banff, 1985

He addressed me then and was quite curious about my papers and pins, understanding too that I had only just begun. He was genuinely interested in *superstring theory*, and appreciated the possibility that everything might be made from infinitesimal vibrating loops. And then Prince Philip threw me a curve ball: he wanted to know why we couldn't call it *thread* instead of *string*? Although I had to wonder what physicist-originators of so-named theories might have to say, *string* really is so, well, pedestrian, I should imagine, for a prince. Then we all walked out onto the porch. And all the while, Prince Philip focused his attention on me and my strings - or *threads*, if you please. And in spite of my initial cheek, I had, yes I definitely had been impressed by his regal highness, his delicacy, his discretion. What must it be like to be born to the cultivation of such self-mastery? And I do not imagine that I of peasant stock shall ever be privileged to know.

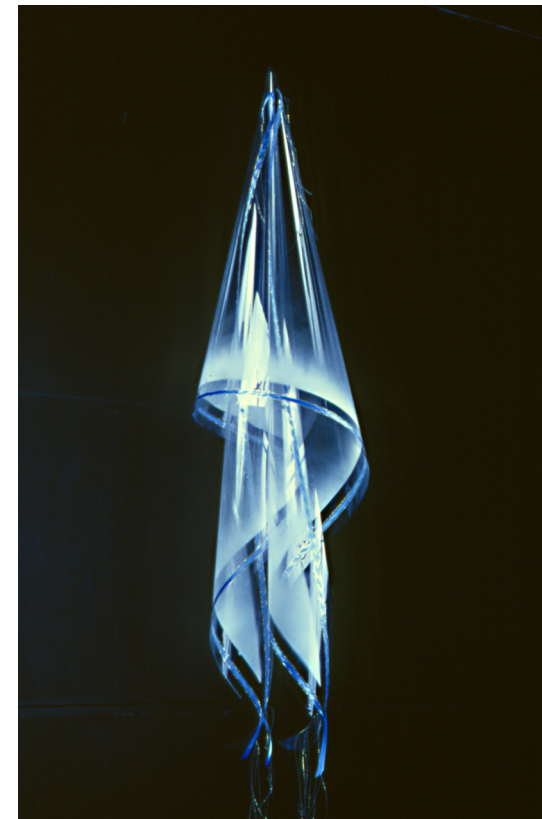
Artist's residencies are a luxury, providing creative and intellectual stimulation, camaraderie, and the time and space to consider the multifaceted language of art. Beyond the properties of materials and the experiments we subject them to,

beyond our ruminations upon the peculiar and inherent characteristics of natural phenomena, the language of art spins a web of things observed and imagined, even as they fluctuate in relation to each other.

The rarified machinations of language and art are of course imprecise, yet it is just this fluidity that tenders its poetics to us, its diviners. Through creative articulations then, we knit the complexities of our lives together, our leanings toward the mystical with the visceral births and deaths of our material selves.

*...she who links,
she who holds together with thread...* (8)
- Mirella Bentivoglio

*In Eden, Females sleep the winter in soft silken veils
woven by their own hands to hide them in the darksome grave.
But Males immortal live renewed by Female deaths.* (9)
- William Blake



V. Constantino, 1981
Equated Invisible, Manifestly Seen
Photo: Nelson Vigneault

As a single mother separated from my child, with little support for my self-seeking ways, my progress and position had certainly been affected by social attitudes. Having experienced child support and custody battles, probes by property-owners and state and church authorities, as well as police officer's thick-skinned responses to reports of sexual assault, I perceived and internalized a general sense of isolation coupled with powerlessness. These and other social inequities and intricacies evolved into a parallel subtext to the creative process, not just for me, but for so many others of that and of, I am quite certain, all time.



*When Annie McPartland was sixteen
she sailed alone in steerage to the United States of America
from an Ireland ravaged by colonialism. As I recall,
she cast an immaculate aura in white Irish linen and lace.
She was numinous, like the white cloth that enfolded her,
as if without that casing, she would simply ascend
into some vast whiteness. I can stare at a white bed sheet
suspended from a clothesline; I can follow the twist of
white thread through a damask tablecloth set upon a
an old oak table. And through the vacancy of these stark
elements, realize a longed for state of quietude.
- VC, journal*

Anne McPartland, c. 1890

And all the while and even now, I am reaching back through time and matter. I am sorting and fixing the threads of an ancestral past to the present-in-progress. It is a story revealed through a vocabulary of materials and events, through the personal as political and the hand-wrought details of culture itself. The semiotic power of textile tells of private and public, time and place, ritual, convention and memory. I think of woolen blankets, lace curtains, silk nightgowns, satin vestments, cotton diapers, linen shrouds.

The allegorical thread leads me not as one might hope, out of the labyrinth. Has it happens, there really is no such egress. It renders instead an intricate complex of tangles and loops. And so it remains only to imagine a life and a self through a language of simple twists.

Notes

1. Mallarmé, Stéphane, from a letter to Théodore Aubanel,
<http://www.maulpoix.net/US/Mallarme.html>
2. Dogen, Eihei, **Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen**, pg. 70
3. Nitschke, Gunter, *Shime Binding / Unbinding*, **Architectural Design**, pg. 748
4. Quilter, Jeffrey, and Urton, Gary, Eds., **Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu**, pg. xvi
5. Seelig, Warren, **Recent Work: Ribbon Folds**, The Roberts Gallery, Oregon, pg. 1
6. St. Teresa of Avila. Unknown source
7. Keller, Evelyn Fox, from Ruddick, Sara and Daniels, Pamela, Keller, Eds, **Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work**, pg. 83
8. Bentivoglio, Mirella, **Fil-Sofia: el concepte del fil en la dona-artista**, pg. 1
9. Blake, William, from Nurmi, Martin K., **William Blake (Unbound)**, pg. 130

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Images

1. The Book of Durrow, Matthew Symbol, 7th Century
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2. Pregnant in the backyard, Cambridge, MA, 1972. Personal collection.

3. Sheila Hicks, *Ephemera Bundle*, 1975. Courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.
4. Jo Anne Berke, *Rapunzel*, 1970. Courtesy of Jo Anne Berke.
5. Grandmother's Wedding, Brooklyn, NY, c. 1890. Personal collection.
6. Warren Seelig, *Aruba*, 1983. Courtesy of Warren Seelig.
7. The Banff Centre, *Fibers Studio*. 1980. Personal collection.
8. Eva Hesse, *Metronomic Irregularity*, 1966. Courtesy of Museum Wiesbaden and the Estate of Eva Hesse, Hauser & Wirth.
9. Lenore Tawney, *Lost and Found*, 1957. Courtesy of The Lenore G. Tawney Foundation.
10. *Prince Philip, et al*, The Banff Centre, 1985. Personal collection.
11. Valerie Constantino, *Equated Invisibles, Manifestly Seen*, 1982. Photo credit: Nelson Vigneault.
12. Anne McPartland, c. 1890. Personal collection.