

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Glen Kaufman

The following text is an interview summary by Tom Spleth from a conversation in May 2007 on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

Artists do what they do because that is what they are about - creation. Whether in slow times, productive times, or times in between, it is what we do. Glen's early and mid-career motivations for working varied within the academic environment with extended periods devoted to a single concept or theme, although after so many years of working in this "serial

mode" the work of the last five years has taken a variety of new directions motivated by a new urge for experimentation.



*Glen Kaufman- Kaunakes II: The Ghosts of Mesopotamia
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

All of these things are important. One cannot separate the craft or media from what he does. History interests him as a teacher who has developed fabric history courses that examine the developments from the Stone Age to the present so that his students have some sense of where they are coming from. Currently his work is informed by the history of the garment in diverse contexts.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Utility is not a concern at all. The current work is un-wearable. Their appearance and size refers to garment but the viewer is not invited to put them on, which would be impossible in any case. This work is a revisit to materials, ideas, and

work he did earlier in the 70's. This is his first revisit to past work. He is more concerned now with sculptural aspects of fiber materials and a continuation of his focus on "garment as object."

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

Between 1983 and 1999, the semester system at the University of Georgia in Athens allowed him to live and work in Japan six months out of each year. He enjoyed the Japanese culture and travel through the country. While there he spent a lot of time in the studio, basically in isolation. Over the years there he has had students as studio assistants. In one case the experience was quite fantastic. The assistant seemed to anticipate his needs and contributed effectively to the studio experience. That was the high point of a collaborative situation. Now he basically works alone. In the years when he worked in Japan, he convinced himself that he had to be in Japan to be productive, but exhibition demands proved otherwise, providing essential materials were brought from Japan. At the present time he works in the North Georgia Mountains and, while his work is not about the mountain landscape by any means, the mountains are a source of spiritual fulfillment.

What does "mastery" mean to you?

Currently, this is a constant battle with students. He attempts to convey what craft is, what craftsmanship means, and what fine craft is. This part of teaching is more difficult than it was fifteen years ago. Now, students are willing to accept mistakes and ineptitude and claim that it is part of their individual expression. Mastery is being able to apply oneself with confidence and convey the idea that the work is well made. It includes doing the best one can. His current work, however, is quick and fast as opposed to the labor-intensive work he did at other times in his career.

He would like to add that mastery should apply to one's total effort. The old mantra of "process, materials, and concept" applies here as well. We must be masters of all of these for true success.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

He was born and raised in Wisconsin and studied, worked and lived in Michigan, Denmark and New York City. He moved to Georgia 40 years ago.

If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

The job at the University of Georgia brought him to the South. He was reluctant in the late 60's to move into an environment in turmoil since he had a son entering school, but all has worked out very well. It is well known that an outsider can never be a "true" Georgian or Southerner. Athens, however, is a city of transplants who create a dynamic vibrancy.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

For him, work does involve a strong sense of place and the locations that have been influential for him are places where he has lived or traveled: Japan, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Wisconsin, New York and lastly, Georgia, all of which were important in earlier work that incorporated photographic images. So, place has been important as a reference. The Georgia Mountains now provide a spiritual boost, but specific application to current work is not obvious. His earlier work was very specific about place, photographically.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

With certain indigenous craftsmen and women, like quilt makers and traditional potters, local identity survives, but in the larger picture, it does not. Contemporary craftsmen travel and communicate in many ways. There is not a strong sense of a regional identity. The global village pervades the art world today.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Yes, he is an innovator. He worked with plastic materials in the late 60's when people really disdained such materials. Years later, after he moved on to other materials and concepts, he participated in an exhibition organized in Alaska that was centered on manmade materials. In the 1980's, he was among the first to use the combination of photographic processes, screen printing and metal leaf application. He utilized traditional Japanese techniques and made them work expressively. There, he employed *surihaku*, which is the application of gold and silver leaf to fabric. He did that work consistently in Japan where people there are familiar with this process. At that time this process was not used for fiber art but used exclusively for the ornamentation of kimono and obi. However, in recent years metal leaf application has become more common among Japanese artists and elsewhere.

How is your work evolving?

In recent years he is jumping all over the place. From work that very clearly hung on the wall to recent work that includes fabric, video, installation, dance and

performance (not his own performance, but the utilization of performers in the work). He has gone from the flat wall pieces to work with specific imagery to installation work that is more abstract and collaborative. He completed a large installation work for an international textile triennial in Poland in 2006.

The recent activity that has captured him of late is a new approach for him as an artist. Before there were periods of time, a number of years, devoted to similar ideas—the first “plastic garment” period lasted about ten years, then there was a period in which he used gloves for their metaphorical messages followed by the “photo/metal leaf” period, which lasted the longest. Toward the end of each of these periods, something happens and he begins to stray away from the focus of his current work. The changes were never abrupt, but a new idea developed as the old one faded. One thing was exchanged for another as if handed off. It may be an indication of an ongoing maturation where he feels excitement and challenge with change. He admits to a bit of unease about the jumping around but he is not worrying about it. All kinds of different things are coming to the surface from his own history and he accepts and uses it all. As he grows older he talks about being less willful and more open to how things may unfold spontaneously.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

Locally, his colleagues and students are his community. He does not teach his specific techniques or concepts but rather his own viewpoint on the creative process. He is somewhat discrete about his own efforts so that students can develop their own direction and concepts without any visual influence from him. He maintains contact with some of his graduates and shares thoughts and engages in mutual critiques of new ideas and approaches.

He has a very strong community of peers in Japan where he has had more studio time and where he has been able to develop many friends and connections in the larger art world. Kyoto is a major center of fiber art activity with the constant exposure to new experiences. The Japanese scene is international in scope and he feels a strong sense of community in that broader context. In Georgia, he tends to get away from Athens and university life when he can. Lately he gets spiritual nourishment from the milieu of the North Georgia Mountains. His mountain home and studio is experienced more in solitude.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

As Glen continues to work and to interact with students, he feels that he fits that role, but it isn't something he thinks about a lot. Art has had different cultural roles at different times in human history and it will never die, so one's relationship to history is ever changing. One may hope that he is part of the

history of the development of the craft movement from the 1960's and he hopes that his personal history can be archived and that his work will be kept in private and public collections accessible to individuals or a larger audience.

How did you learn your craft?

When growing up, he would visit his mother's family in Chicago where he would spend time at the Art Institute and the Field Museum, the zoo and the aquarium. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in speech education. Afterward, he was involved in some theatrical productions, there, but by and large he was not at all involved in art. He was in ROTC when he was a student and as the Korean War ended, and he graduated, there was the expectation that he would serve in the military. He and his wife hoped that they would be assigned to an exciting and exotic foreign post, but he ended up serving out his time in Columbus, Ohio, a place well known to him since it was the home his wife's family and certainly not exotic.

Since there was free time from military duties he and his wife began taking evening courses at what turned out to be a very good community art center. So he experienced art in adult education. They did ceramics and while working in the ceramics studio, they kept hearing bumps and thumps from the floor above. The noise was people working on looms and he was drawn to the activity upstairs where he met a fantastic woman in her 60's who was the teacher. In her later years, she had dropped out of a conventional family life and had taken up sculpture and textiles. He was doing some ceramics, weaving and design work in Columbus, and this teacher, who was a graduate of Cranbrook Academy of Art, persuaded him to apply there for graduate school. He applied in the spirit of having nothing to lose and since she was writing a letter of recommendation for him, he sent in an application. He was accepted. He went there as a real beginner in the masters program and worked diligently in the studios learning much more about textile art. He had to work very hard to catch up and he learned a lot from the "old guard" studio masters there.

Immediately after graduating from Cranbrook, he went to Denmark on a Fulbright and was able to immerse himself in traditional weaving. In Denmark, he had the opportunity to develop refined skills and to learn about dyes used for printing, information that was not available in the United States at that time. He has never had a grand life plan but good things have happened to him, he has been in the right place at the right time, and people have believed in him. He lived in New York City for a year as a designer and he was invited to take over the Cranbrook textile program, where he introduced dyeing and screen-printing and opened up the program to new ideas including exploration of non-woven structures. It was here that the sense of sharing began.

Although it was paradise - he had a huge home, a great studio, and great students - he left Cranbrook for the University of Georgia because he was given the

opportunity to create the textile program from the beginning with generous funding from the state. While his Cranbrook students were international and he had been exposed to many techniques and good ideas, when he and his wife visited Athens, the dogwoods were blooming and they offered him a real salary, the opportunity to establish a fabric program, and release time for creative research and travel. To stay in Michigan meant devoting one's life to Cranbrook and he felt that the situation in Georgia offered greater opportunities. He set up a strong and diverse program including courses in the history of fabrics that were part of a broad undergraduate education in fabrics. He hopes that after forty years of devotion to this program, he will have had some impact.

Do you share your knowledge others—the next generation of artists?

That is the story of his life as an artist and educator.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?

Academia has played a huge role. The University of Georgia has one of the strongest craft programs in the country. There are others in the Southeast - in Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee. SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design) and a few other private institutions have made important contributions. The “alternative” venues have had a powerful impact in a different way. He is more familiar with Arrowmont, where he taught many years ago. The effect of these workshops, with so many accomplished visiting teachers, often has a significant impact on the students he knows who have participated in the either the Arrowmont or Penland programs.