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### The Fabric of Life

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The Fabric of Life

By

Jane A. Pichette

A Thesis submitted in fulfillment

Of the requirements for the

Master of Studio Art

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE FABRIC OF LIFE:**

Fiber Sculpture inspired by the topic

of

Mother and Child

By

Jane A. Pichette

## Abstract

My plan of study included a variety of courses that I hoped would strengthen me as an artist. Being able demonstrate strong art skills is important to me as a middle school art teacher. Developing and maintaining good technique takes lots of practice.

It was also important to me to create sculpture that is unique and has personal meaning. I have tried to reach beyond my capabilities to learn new techniques to apply to my sculpture—learning from my mistakes. I have looked to and learned from artists past and present to influence and enhance my artwork.

The fiber sculpture I created throughout my graduate studies demonstrates a professional understanding of materials, interesting form and design, as well as a unique point of view of the topic of mother and child.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the Individualized Master of Arts  
In  
The Departments of Arts and Sciences  
Rhode Island College  
2009

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When I was planning to return to school to work on my master's degree, I looked back to my undergraduate studies to find a point of success that I could build on. As an undergraduate student, fabric was my choice of materials. The artwork pictured on page 14 (Photo 1) is a sewn and stuffed piece I created in 2-D synthesis.

In the fabric store, they sell small, folded squares of fabric called "fat quarters" that are grouped together for quilt-making. I love to comb through the different squares to try to put together an interesting combination of colors and patterns for a project. Fabric offers a multitude of color, pattern and both implied and actual texture. Finding different materials to use in a sculpture is one of my favorite parts of the artistic process.

Fabric is also a material that can easily be manipulated with needle and thread or a sewing machine-both of which I easy access to and have experience using. It is important to me that I have the tools to work with that are readily available.

As a girl, my mother sewed a few things for me. My first communion dress was very simple, but I can remember the circle pattern on the white, polyester fabric and the ribbon that surrounded my waist. In fifth grade, she made me a pilgrim dress and bonnet for the skit my class was performing for Thanksgiving. I can remember the stiff gray fabric of the dress and the contrasting clean, white cuffs and bonnet. (I was the best looking pilgrim.) My mom learned to sew from my grandmother. I didn't really start to sew until I was going to be a mother myself. I made some clothes for my children and lots of Halloween costumes. This information is important so that it is apparent that creating things with fabric is a part of my heritage. I always had this sense that making things would help me to be a good mother.

I find that people often will remember what they wore on special occasions. There is something intimate and tactile about cloth. The title of my plan of study is “The Fabric of Life” because of the passion I have for the abundance of color, pattern and texture that fibers offer but also the way it can connect me to what I feel is important—my family.

In this paper, I am going to show pictures of some pieces that will not be in my thesis exhibition. Each of these pieces is an important part of the growth of ideas that will be presented in my final body of work. To understand where I am now, it is helpful to see the trial and error along the way.

If there is a down-side to using fabric, it is that it is not seen by many to be a material that could be fine art. There are no great masters who created quilts, needlepoint or baskets. It was sometimes difficult for me to be in an upper-level sculpture class, sewing with thread and needle, while other students were bending metal and firing up their torches. At first I did try to use welded wire to construct some of my pieces. My idea was to weld looms that I could weave on. Eventually, I changed to reed because I felt that I could not achieve a professional-level of craftsmanship using wire.

I feel I have been successful in developing complex, sculptural forms from materials that might otherwise be considered craft. Some art is somewhat haughty. When people go to a museum, there is no touching and if you get too close, someone reminds you to step back. I like the idea of making sculpture that people want to touch. It is approachable.

When I first started thinking of a topic for my sculpture, human anatomy was my inspiration. Medical journals were the source of sketches for shapes of bones and internal organs that I developed into sculptural forms. See Photo No. 2.

The combination sewn pieces with the woven wire parts are harmonious in this piece. This sculpture blends a velour maroon fabric; a smooth, patterned fabric; yarn and vinyl. The yarn is woven on wire looms that I welded with metal

wire. I like using vinyl pieces in my artwork because of its flesh-like properties. There is a strange and interesting disconnect between the materials used in this relief that are neat and well-matched in contrast to shapes that in reality are gruesome.

I continued to work with fiber materials; however, changed the subject matter of my artwork. Although the materials were working successfully in my pieces, the artwork I was creating was not personal. Part of what I think is meaningful art is the fact that the artist has shared a part of who they are with the viewer. After much contemplation, I decided that the topic of mother and child would be a subject that I could relate to on a personal level. There are so many artists who have explored this topic. Michaelangelo's Pieta was the inspiration for the artwork pictured in Photo 3. To capture the gesture of Mary slumping over Jesus' lifeless body was the goal of this sculpture. The Pieta has sweeping points and lines that draw your eye from Jesus back up to Mary. I tried to imitate the shapes and lines in my artwork.

There is a successful melding of the wire and fabric shapes in this piece. My father-in-law is an upholsterer. He helped me to use a special sewing machine attachment that put the lines of welting in the middle of the fabric. I think the linear elements--the striped fabric, the lines of the sewn green fabric and the lines of the wire piece in the center all work together to move the viewer's eyes around the form.

In my next piece (Photo 4), the theme of mother and child is still the topic of my artwork; however, I found inspiration from artist, Lee Bontecou.<sup>[i]</sup> Although she does not use maternal themes, her relief sculpture are made with metal and canvas.

The piece started with a rectangular frame and welded sections on which I could weave. Some of the negative spaces are filled with screen that I spray painted with gold paint.

Working within the constraint of a wire frame did not suit me. The sculpture pictured in Photo 5 is the where these ideas and materials led me. Wire

was used to create a loom that is flat on the back and rounded in the front. The contrasting yarn color emphasizes the shapes of wire tubes. I added layers of texture using frayed yarn and pieces of painted screen. The weave on this piece is done in a way that the wire shapes stand out. I borrowed the raised round shape of Bontecou's work for the front of this sculpture.

The first pieces I made from reed were small and sat on a tabletop. The sculpture in Photo 6 was the first reed piece I created. It does not have a wood base like the piece Photo 7. Sewn cones of felt and frayed yarn were added to give extra visual interest. I also added a reed that encircled the entire base. The base is set on its side to try to avoid having it look too much like a basket.

Inasmuch as I never used reed before, I found a lot of useful information from the book, Weaving Without a Loom.<sup>[iii]</sup> This text covered basic basketry processes, as well as some unconventional weaving ideas.

Photo 7 shows a basket-shaped sculpture that has many of the techniques I use in my thesis pieces. It includes sewn and stuffed felt shapes, along with areas that are thickly woven with yarn. Felt was a good material to use because the edges do not fray when you cut them. Other areas have a loose weave of off-white cotton yarn; some of the yarn is braided. The piece as a whole may not be hugely successful, but it was a good experiment with the possibilities of the materials.

Moving forward, I decided to change the format of my work to hang on the wall, in order to keep the artwork from looking too basket-like. This opened up the possibility of weaving above and below the wood surfaces as well. As my work has been progressing, I have increasingly been changing the shapes of the wood. The first wood pieces I used were semi-circles. Abstract shapes were cut to imitate the soft, rounded and curved forms of the human body.

The pieces are life-sized or larger so that they would have a human-like presence. The large size of the pieces also helps to pull the artwork from the basket to sculptural forms.

Reed in different sizes is difficult to find in local stores, so I ordered several sizes from an on-line site called “Baskets of Joy”. Reed is a natural and flexible material. It is more easily manipulated after it has been soaked in water for a short time.

My designs begin with an image of a mother and child. After drawing some shapes that are inspired from an image, I cut wood pieces that will coincide with the shapes of the drawing. I envision a wood support for the neck, the waist, the pelvis, sometimes the knees and finally the ankles. The final sculpture often does not look like the original drawing, because the materials do not bend and move the way I pictured in my original design. Although it is not usually in my nature to work this way, I like letting the materials effect the outcome of the piece.

The bending nature of the reed lends itself well to the topic. If you look at images of mothers with their children, there is often that bending forward or leaning over gesture that I try to translate from life to each piece. The weight of the wood tends to curve the reed forward to create that maternal body language.

The welting was a material that also suited my artwork well. I ordered many different widths of welting from an upholstering company. This material is very light cotton tied together with thin thread. I wanted to change the color of the welting for some of my projects, so I hung it on the clothesline outside and used a spray bottle to dye it. The material is so light that if tried to submerge it in the dye, it would have taken a long time to dry. Some of the dyed welting was machine-dried. The heat and air of the dryer softens the color and texture of the welting. Both powder and liquid Rit dye worked well to dye the welting. Several different methods were attempted to get the fabric to fit snugly on the welting. Hand-sewing each piece produced the best craftsmanship; however, it took quite a bit of time to execute. I had help from my husband and mother-in-law in coming up with a way to machine sew a pocket and pull the welting through. It is a 2-man process, but it saves a lot of time. This machine-sewn process also enabled

me to use vinyl tubes in my weaving. It was impossible for me to hand sew this material.

Yarn is another important part of many my pieces because it is not only a great weaving material, it also is useful in creating different textures. One of the techniques I use is to tie small strands of yarn around the reed and fray it to create a soft texture.

Color has been an important element of my sculpture. One of the first wall pieces that I made was mainly black and white. The shapes of this sculpture reflect the gesture of a mother holding a child. I was also trying to successfully combine sewn pieces with the woven. The big, dark gray leave shapes on this piece read more plant-like than human. The color palate on this piece was reworked to a soft brown. The brown shapes are made of burlap to imbue a more human quality into this piece. Since the experiment with black and white, I have been using a palate of skin-tones in all my sculpture. It is the easiest way to bring forth the human-like shapes that I aspire to in my artwork.

An image of a mother with her child resting on her hip was the inspiration for the piece shown in Photo 8. The leave shapes are placed to create a sense of wrapping and protecting.

In the relief shown in Photo 9, brown Rit dye was used to change the color of the wood, the reed and the welting. The shape of the wood in this piece was cut in an exaggerated manner to create an interesting inner crevice. The reed is layered inside of woven outer part. I used a combination of yarn and fabric-covered welting to weave on this piece.

In each sculpture, the over-all shape is important, but also some details that the viewer will see only if they stop to look more closely. Even though this piece doesn't have the strong gestural shapes of some of my other sculptures, it has some beautiful layers that contribute to its success.

The sculpture pictured in Photo 10 was inspired by an abstract sculpture of a painting of a mother and child by Thom Evans that I found on-line.

Long pieces of reed wind through several pieces of wood in this sculpture. Weaving begins in the center of the work-in-progress, and I work my way out towards the ends. The top had an extra length of reed that I curved into a round shape and other end of the reed curved and ended near the top, so I wove the ends into the shapes in that area. The result is a pleasing flow of lines from top to bottom. I tried to create a separate reed piece to represent the child in this sculpture; however, I struggled to meld the two separate pieces together. It looked like one piece near another. This problem was resolved by adding rounded pieces of reed to the front of the main structure. Unfortunately, the lines of the reed read too much like a spinal cord. Frayed yarn added to enclose the shape completed the design—leaving a small area in the front open to see some detail inside. This area adds some complex layers and texture to the piece.

The sculpture pictured in Photo 11 was started with an image of a mother cradling her child between her arms and legs. I drew a sketch from the basic forms and wanted to incorporate the circle shape again as a symbol of the child. The circle shape nestled in the pocket of the large shape was the design I was going for. Again, the final sculpture is not what I originally envisioned; however, the nestling idea was successful achieved.

The gesture of holding a child inspired the piece shown in Photo 12. A new weaving material, plastic shopping bags, was used in this sculpture. The plastic bags have just the right color and texture to effectively blend in with the other materials.

The inspiration for my next piece (Photo 13) was an image of a mother seated on the floor with her knees bent and her child resting on her thighs. This piece also incorporates some new techniques. I used two different sizes of reed (a small width in the back and a wider width on the front). The reed travels through the wood in two different areas. The original drawing has the front reed shape curving from one piece of wood around to the next, but this did not work out in

reality. I fell in love with the orange, batiked fabric that appears in this piece. This fabric dictated the color scheme of this sculpture.

In the future, I hope to experiment more with dyeing my own fabric. Unfortunately, time did not permit me to do this. Early in my graduate studies, I tried to create my own felt. I loved the idea of being able to create my own complex texture and colors; however, my first attempts took a long time with poor results. When time is not a factor, I will definitely return to this process. Batik is also a technique that could enhance my artwork.

The artwork that I will present for my Thesis Project has achieved my goal of producing 3-D fiber sculpture that demonstrates a professional understanding of materials, interesting design and form, as well as a unique point of view of the topic of mother and child. I look forward to the possibilities that are yet to be explored using these materials.



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4

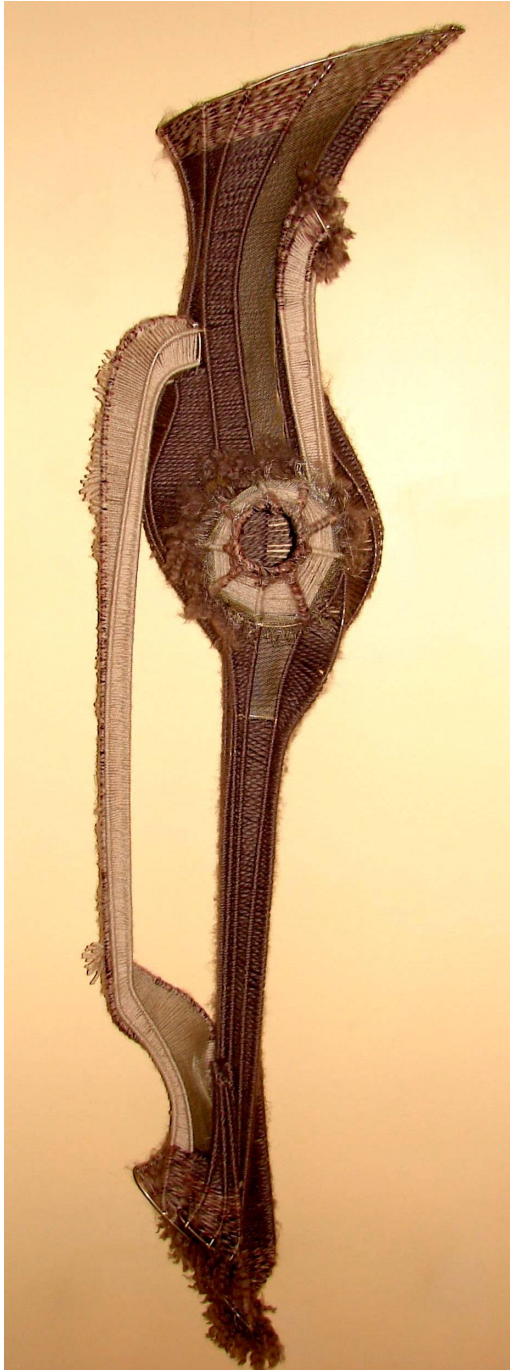


Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11





Photo 12



Photo 13

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