THE STITCH AS ART OBJECT

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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

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Chapter 1 discusses how the concept of the stitch as art object evolved. The question in the statement of problems concerned the use of design principles on the stitch and the perception of the stitch by the viewer.

Chapter 2 discusses the various processes involved in creating the works to answer the proposed questions, and discusses the use of literalism in the concept of the works.

Chapter 3 discusses what was learned from the experience.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Originally, I considered myself a ceramic artist; later I became enamored with fibers and involved myself with the weaving process. There were a number of reasons for this decision. First, I enjoyed the challenge of creating beautiful fabrics through the use of individual yarns; second, I enjoyed the potential of the immense variety of patterning possible; third, I enjoyed the richness of colors in the yarns available to the weaver. Eventually, my art transformed from considering issues of three-dimensional form in clay to weaving two-dimensional fabric. As I learned more about weaving I felt the need to incorporate three-dimensional form into my creative efforts but encountered many challenges. In analyzing what I loved about weaving, I found that I regarded the yarns used in the weaving process to be an ideal matrix for the aesthetic of my work. A matrix is defined as: Something that constitutes the place or point from which something else originates. Weaving is about transformation. Yarn became the matrix in transforming itself, through the manipulation of the weaver, into the resulting fabric, while keeping its identity as yarn. This process was not only intriguing to me but was also important to the fulfillment of my artistic sensibilities.

In order to communicate this transformation process to my viewers in a dramatic way I decided to change the scale of my work through the use of larger yarns. Traditionally an accomplished weaver uses fine yarns and complex patterns in the construction of a work. I, on the other hand, used large or thicker yarns of traditional as well as non-traditional materials. I also used much simpler patterns than is customary to make the interlacement of warp and weft more apparent. But in spite of this effort, the
I felt the need to show the weaving process, not only as a way to create flat textiles, but also as a way to create form in space. This certainly is a sensibility left over from my involvement with ceramic form. In order to achieve my objective I resorted to the use of the stitch, which is a sewing method using yarn/thread to escape the flat plane of the fabric creating a three-dimensional form of some configuration. Sewing and weaving are parallel, in that both use positive and negative elements to create flat planes or dimensional planes of structure such as a three-dimensional item like a garment. This is accomplished through the use of the stitch. In creating my work, I used the stitch in creating the dimensional aspects of the work and also used the wall as the plane or pseudo-fabric. The result was that the stitched form appearing to penetrate the wall. The act of the stitch appearing to go through the wall helped to signify the stitch, thus creating a woven three-dimensional object that especially related to the material from which it was created.

Statement of the Problem

My primary objective in this project was to create and refine the stitch/object in various ways to show the many possibilities for three-dimensional form. In addressing the issues of refinement, I attempted to answer the following questions.

1. How did the placement, size and number of stitches affect the dimensional aspect of the composition of the works I created?

2. Was the stitched form perceived to be simply a stitch?

Methodology

I created a body of work, kept a journal, and wrote a descriptive paper recording
my findings and also installed an exhibition of the work produced during the process of this problem in lieu of thesis. Traditional and non-traditional weaving materials were used.
In accordance with the dictates of my committee, six works were created with varying degrees of success. However, success in this case had an extra quantifier. In addition to design, concept, materials and craftsmanship, the art had to answer the questions in the thesis proposal.

During the process of creating these pieces, they all seemed to become perfect gems. The unity of thought and execution was absolute. Upon completion of the pieces, I looked at them objectively realizing that some of my art was less successful, while some was quite successful. I will discuss three of the six pieces: Two of the most successful pieces and one unsuccessful piece. I will compare and contrast the works against each other and the proposal. I chose three works entitled *Running Stitch*, *Satin Stitch* and *Nest Pas* (see accompanying CD-ROM), as these three best exemplify the success and failure of the works in question. As stated in my proposal my work addresses the stitch. The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary\(^1\) defines the word stitch as: One complete movement of a threaded needle through a fabric or material such as to leave behind a single loop or a portion of thread as in sewing or closing a wound. The definition is excellent, but I was concerned with the illusion of the stitch and with what ratio of length to width would identify it as a stitch to the viewer. I previously worked out a few of the problems: a) the minimum number of stitches to use was three, b) there must be an odd number of stitches, and c) the negative space between the stitches could be as short as half the length of the stitch, but is dependent

\(^1\) Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, Random House Inc. 2001.
upon the size of the wall, the space and the stitches.

My previous artworks concerning the stitch were made with yarn and insulated wire. While these pieces were definitely woven, they were hard to form and to read as stitches. I created big fuzzy worms of various colors. A viewer could tell it was a stitch if I were there to explain it or if I put stitch in the title, but the weaving portion of the process became insignificant. I realized I had to get rid of the color, as the pieces really were not about color, thus, color only served as a deterrent from viewing the woven structure. Having made the decision to eliminate color I was left with white or clear. I decided not to use white because my weaving would look like cheesecloth or cotton balls. White can be very flat, and if a white piece were put on a white wall the positive and negative space would be inverted so the holes would be apparent, rather than the weaving. Therefore, I chose clear or translucent because it was colorless but reflective, and the positive space remained positive allowing it to be seen as a whole.

Finally, I had conceived my great vision in its final state; then I attempted to bring my great vision from the mental plane of existence to the physical. However, I am an artist and that is part of my job description. I chose fishing line and plexiglas as my materials for the piece *Running Stitch*. I had worked with fishing line before and it is translucent, refractory, and very resilient. It also stands up well to much manipulation, unlike copper wire, which has a memory and if over-manipulated will break, while fishing line does not break. I knew I needed a good foundation that would interact well with the fishing line. I used painted cardboard in a maquette but the opacity of the paint clashed with the line. I needed something as firm as wood or heavy cardboard but not opaque. I decided to use frosted plexiglas. It was the only material that met all of the criteria. After
deciding on the materials to be used, it was time to choose the proportion, size, and
scale of the stitches. I approached the size mathematically by enlarging a machine
stitch, but the length became too disproportionate. Therefore, I approximated, resulting
in a ratio of 3:1 length to height in making a machine made stitch. The size stitch
chosen depended on the number of stitches so I chose the number five. Why five? It is
an odd number, which means that when a person views the piece it cannot be
separated as easily and the whole piece will be more visible. It was also one of the
lowest numbers of stitches that was still readable as a stitch. In addition, if I only had
five stitches to make I could make them big, and that was my original intention. I could
have made it infinitely long but I would have needed an infinite amount of wall space,
therefore the viewer would have to be too far away to see it in its entirety. I chose five In
order to keep the size I wanted and keep the space a reasonable size. I chose the size
of 8” x 22” because it was closest to the 3:1 ratio I was seeking and I could get 10
pieces of that size from one sheet of plexiglas. I purchased 10 pieces of plexiglas
because I was originally going to glue the woven fishing line to the backside of it, then
putting it on a backing piece of plexiglas so I could obtain some dimensional quality
from the line and have a nice smooth clean edge. I chose 200lb. fishing line because of
its size. Fishing line is hard to tie on to a loom, very easy to tangle and very hard to
weave because it is very resistant to manipulation. Nevertheless, it came out really well
and was worth all the effort. Everything was wonderful. I had everything figured out and
felt that I was master of all I surveyed until I tried gluing the fishing line to the plexiglas.

In my proposal, I stated that I was a ceramic artist, but ceramics spoil you. If you
need to attach two pieces of ceramics together all you have to do is make sure they are
wet enough to still attach, pushing them together, and a brand new piece is born. Unfortunately, in the world of plastics this joining is not so simple. I used super glue on the plexiglas and line but it did not work so I tried hot glue, which attached them together, but when I tried bending them around the edge to attach to the other side they would come apart. Regular epoxy did not work nor did special plastic epoxy, special plastic super glue or plexiglas cement. Sanding the pieces to achieve a better hold did not work nor did clamping the pieces together. I even tried heating the fishing line in order to make it hold the bent shape (plexiglas is bent by using heat). I ended up with singed fishing line that still didn’t bend well. I called the customer service department at the company that markets fishing line, Bass Pro Shops\textsuperscript{2} and was told super glue might work. When I told them it didn’t work they didn’t say much after that, but I double-checked by gluing fishing line to fishing line but alas, it still didn’t work. A friend did some research about plastics for me and found out that some plastics are just not glue able. The way to test for plastic glue ability is to soak the plastic in acetone and if it erodes it is glue able. I cut pieces of line both four inches long and sanded one of them to open it up. I placed them in a glass bowl and covered them in pure acetone overnight. When I came back, the acetone had evaporated and the fishing line had some residue on it but otherwise was just fine. At this point my frustration level had achieved Himalayan heights. The only feasible option was to drill holes and insert the ends of the fishing line into the plexiglas. I was fearful at first of the holes being really obvious but after testing it found that the holes worked even better than my original plan. I drilled holes big enough to insert two ends per hole. If I entered one per hole it would start to look perforated, as each stitch had 84 holes. I made five stitches, which is

\textsuperscript{2} Bass Pro Copyright © 2002-2003 Sporting-Depot.com. All rights reserved.
420 holes. If I continued using this process and these materials to create art, I decided that I would have to invest in a drill press. The holes also helped me solve a dimensional problem. Stitches are flatter on the ends than in the middle because of the stitch intersecting the plane of fabric. The main reason I wanted to wrap the woven line around the plexiglas was to create a flat end. With the fishing line going through the holes, all I had to do was pull more on the ends at each long edge achieving the flatness I was looking for. The fishing line was actually helpful in this instance. The same resilience that gave me problems in weaving kept the ends in place. After trimming the back I filled all of the holes with low temperature hot glue to keep them in place. The piece actually ended up better than I had envisioned. As an added bonus, it answered the questions in the thesis proposal. I previously stated I used five stitches and this held the piece together creating enough length to see the continuity of the stitches. The 3:1 ratio kept the stitches elongated enough to really look like a stitch plus the placement of end to end was much easier to read. In addition to providing dimension, the weaving on the stitches created a sense of action for the weaving accentuating the horizontal lines, defining the transition between positive and negative space, therefore making the sewing aspect of the stitch visible. In my previous works I realized that the stitches were different sizes and had to be perceived as a group of stitches to be successful. *Running Stitch* was successful because the individual stitches stood by themselves as art objects.

The second successful piece created is called *Satin Stitch*. This piece answered the questions in the proposal, but in an almost polar-opposite way than *Running Stitch*. Luckily it was a little bit easier to create in that I had previously worked with plastic trash.
bags and grocery bags as weaving material. What I really enjoyed about using these bags was their adaptability. They looked puffy and textural or in a close warp became rigid. This piece is the opposite of *Running Stitch* in that I knew my materials, but needed a stitch to fit it, whereas in *Running Stitch* I had the stitch but needed the right materials. After achieving the proper size I realized I needed to weave this into a tube shape so it would look more dimensional when manipulated. I wove a large tube then waited for the little light bulb above my head to light up with a wonderful idea. I went through a variety of stitches before finally deciding on the satin stitch. I realized that I liked this material because it created a lot of mass, and the satin stitch, better than any other would give me mass, plus the fact that it is one of the most widely used stitches. Virtually all machine embroidery is satin stitch. I used the two different types of bags for two reasons: 1) expediency - In order to weave a plastic grocery bag one has to make a slit down each side and cut the handles to get the bag to lie flat in order to have a more consistent weave. This resulted in a weft of approximately 26 inches. There was considerable work involved in getting the bags ready. The garbage bags (13 gallon kitchen variety) are 72 inches long with the sides slit and laid out end to end. 2) Aesthetics - A piece that is all white would lose the separateness of the stitches, the same as if it were all variegated. This piece was much easier to create than *Running Stitch*, but while *Running Stitch* was easy to display, *Satin Stitch* had some problems. The stitches had no stiffness and could not be hung under their own weight or they would become distorted; therefore I hot glued it to the gallery wall. On specific projects hot glue solved a myriad of problems. The piece was then hot glued to a piece of plywood making it much easier to display on the walls.
I previously mentioned that it answered my thesis questions and will now explain how. The satin stitch is a single unit that cannot be broken down as the running stitch can. I placed the three stitches slightly overlapping so the stitches would be more dimensional. The three stitches created a work that was easier to read visually because of its size, 3’ X 3’. It was also easier to draw parallels between the weaving and the stitches. By using plastic bags, each line of weaving displayed qualities of the satin stitch: mass, puffiness, and sheen. The size of the work enabled the viewer to see the intricacies of the weaving grasping the texture and weight of the piece without being overwhelmed. When the piece was displayed many viewers saw it as a painting or a low relief sculpture. When they read the title it was then that they realized it was a stitch. I was actually very pleased with this. The work didn’t have to be perceived as a stitch to be successful.

The piece Nest Pas was somewhat experimental. Since I had experience with embroidery the scale used was much larger. I embroidered the word Nest Pas onto canvas using cotton twine; the stitch I used was the French knot and the word Nest Pas means not in French. The piece was not unduly arduous to make; however, in order to make the words look good I had to stretch the canvas before embroidering it. The work is 3’ x 3’. While the work was easy to embroider, I started to imagine how a harpist must feel because I had to sit in a chair straddling the painting with one end braced on my left chest and shoulder in order to stitch it successfully. Things went well until I got to the middle of the painting because I ran out of arm room. Since I am left handed I wanted to maintain the position I was working in. My left hand was behind the painting, therefore, I could easily move it to do most of the work. I decided to flip the painting upside down,
and while this worked; the letters were not being formed well so I had to take them out. I finally decided to change hands and have my right hand do most of the work. The letters looked good but it took twice as long and I was doing less than half of what I had done previously. While this wasn’t intrinsic to the artwork it allowed for visual perception and handedness. This work wasn’t successful for the following reasons: in the first two pieces the literalism with regard to the stitch was eliminated, becoming more about design. The stitch was just the structure for the work created. While this piece is interesting and amusing, it didn’t begin to address the questions proposed in the thesis. The piece didn’t use the concept of the stitch to show viewers the parallels between weaving and stitches; instead it used stitches as an illustrative tool. I deluded myself into thinking by using an embroidery stitch on canvas and doing it on a large scale, it would work. I was wrong. I substituted amusing puns for conceptual design. I enjoyed making this piece but I came to the conclusion that the stitch that was not conducive to my thesis. Now that I have described the detail of making the three artworks, I will explain why I made them.

The stitch is a universal object. It is so prevalent in every culture and so necessary in everyday life that it has become a non-visible/non-entity. After teaching weaving and embroidery, I had to focus on and analyze the stitch for function and ornamentation. I began to see the stitch in a different way by noticing the tension and binding when the stitch entered and exited the fabric. The stitch is a transformative entity just like weaving. While one stitch or one line of interlacement on the loom is nothing, if enough are put enough together transformations will occur. Yarn is transformed into fabric and with stitches fabric can become almost anything. It finally
came to me that I was interested in the transformation that happens in weaving and stitching.

Ceramics are transformative but the transforming process is chemical. In using ceramics I could alter the object by using different clays but it was always clay. Once it was reassuring, but eventually became very restrictive. When I started to weave the process of transformation began again. I assumed it was due to my fascination with new materials and processes. As I progressed, I achieved technical proficiency and looked at weaving as a concept rather than just a skill. In looking at weaving as an idea and not the format to express an idea, it allowed me to challenge how weaving is perceived in the art world.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

In describing my works for this thesis there seemed to be nothing but trial and frustration, it was because I experimented with materials in my thesis along with the expansion of concept. The concept of the stitch as an art object had just formed in my mind and I wanted to see how far I could go with that idea, as I am an experimenter. I have a need to try out new materials, try different processes or use non-traditional materials in my artwork. With experimentation came frustration, perseverance, and eventually success.

The works created were all successful in that I personally learned from all of them, especially in the area of continuity of an idea. I do not create series work; rather I usually go from one idea to the other. The belief in this idea forced me to develop greater continuity and better design. I had multiple pieces to address my fundamental concept therefore, several different aspects of the idea were highlighted and I did not cram everything into one piece causing the concept to become muddled.

How my pieces related to my thesis had a much lower success rate. Out of the six pieces I made only two that really answered the questions. I made one good piece that answered the thesis questions and two that did not, then I made one that did and two that did not. It was literally one step forward and two steps back. This time I didn’t mind. I used to become very angry at work that didn’t turnout and would rip it up or break it. Now I look at failed pieces as rest stops and a signal to slow down, stand away from what I am doing and become an impartial observer. In retrospect, I enjoyed my thesis project immensely; I made progress in my artwork and how I perceive myself as
an artist. I created a body of work that I am proud of and developed the concept of the stitch as an art object that I will use in future work.

The success of my thesis is dependent upon how the information is perceived because a thesis is an experiment with very defined limits. An experiment can be deemed a failure from merely looking at data, but no experiment is a failure if the experimenter learns from ones mistakes.