

Judith James

(b. 1948, Fall River, Massachusetts; d. 2015, Lincoln, Nebraska)

“I think of my work as ‘moments of awareness’ in two senses: awareness of idiosyncrasies in the landscape at large, and the unpredictable and serendipitous effects that my fabrics reveal as I pull character from them through processes like dyeing and discharge. The fabrics reveal the same kinds of weathered and abraded textures that mark rural topography.

I create groupings of manipulated fabrics and then join and layer them so that compositions build naturally and organically, each fabric responding to its foundation and the foundation, in turn, adjusting to the overlay. Often, foundation surfaces are delineated by grids, sometimes wide sometimes narrow, and these mark off the surfaces of my works as pastures and farmland mark off the rural landscape. Thread makes its way tentatively through these fabrics and these grids, marking pathways not unlike the meanderings of grazing stock or random progress of a creek or stream.

I am interested in the tension created between the natural topography of a place and the manmade modulations that alter it in the name of agriculture and rural and urban development. I’ve tried to bring some of that tension into my work. I play with edges and boundaries, bringing multiple terrains together, similar to how cultivated and uncultivated terrains, and their respective patterns of growth, appear when viewed from 5,000 or 10,000 or 20,000 feet up.

There’s sometimes a suggestion of mapping in my work. And in the way that some of my works seem to unfold, a recurring reference to book forms and folio spreads. Their stitches and

marks aren't legible in the way that type is, but they allude to forms and figures that might be readable in some other context.

These pieces use centuries-old Japanese 'shibori' processes as well as African resist dyeing methods used to create 'adire' and other cloths. I experiment with different ways of folding and stitching the fabric in response to what's happening in the dyeing and discharge baths. These experiments often lead to unexpected and one-of-a-kind effects that I can't ever duplicate in quite the same way. In this sense, the works are partly accidental, partly intentional.

One feature of these discharged fabrics is the after-image of the stitched line that held the folded or pleated fabric before it went into the discharge solution. I especially enjoy these 'ghost' lines. The additional hand embroidery and stitching that I work into and through the fabrics after they've dried plays off, or with, these faint traces in a kind of quiet dialogue.

I mount my works in shallow, open boxes where they are suspended just out from the wooden surround. I feel that fabric needs to be seen without the interference of a glass plane and the resulting diminishment of its saturation. This is especially important with whatever remains of the black fabric itself. This black seems to me to be at its fullest when seen without the intervention of a protective layer of glass.

The stitched resist dyeing techniques that I've been using often produce soft, slightly out-of-focus effects. These sometimes result in a kind of luminosity, or a kind of hazy glow, that suggest to me the first light of dawn or the waning light of late afternoon. This kind of light lowers visibility and softens the landscape. There's an intimacy to even the broadest landscape in these moments. For me this connects with the intimacy of the processes and materials I use in creating these textile constructions. Throughout their making I have moments of awareness of

their strength and their fragility, of their responsiveness and their resistance to those manipulation processes, and of my flip-flopping roles as both the maker and recipient of their own spontaneous and often accidental metamorphoses.

Fabric has been my means of expression ever since I was a young child. I made it the focus of my professional life for nearly twenty-five years, and now it's the focus of my creative life. It interacts with all of my senses. It's not only its tactile appeal that entices me to return again and again, but the magic that it promises, and the many moments of awareness that it brings."

– Judith James, 2006