**Confluence: Beyond Surface**

*by Pat Hickman*

An edited excerpt from Pat Hickman’s keynote address delivered June 9, 2011, at the Surface Design Association’s Confluence conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

“Confluence: Beyond Surface” addresses where we are in our field at this moment in time. Surface in art is like surface in water. What it reveals to us—movement, pattern, color, texture—is inseparable from invisible depths. By plumbing those depths, what comes to light is richer, touches more intensely, strikes more fundamental chords. Whether it is a confluence of streams flowing together to become one or a river that flows both ways where it meets the ocean, these minglings, advances, and retreats are useful notions to bring to the making and viewing of art. When trees fall into the water, over decades they decay, eventually disappear—what is lost is not lost. What remains is the cross-grained, pitch-hardened core formed where the branch joined the trunk. I cover these wooden forms, which still have the tree in them, making and viewing of art.

During a Textile History class in Berkeley, California, at Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts, I gave the assignment to simulate a sampler; wanting students to consider what they had to say. Lillian Elliott was sitting in on that class. She stamped small “x’s” on her sampler: “What do I have to say? What do I have to say that matters? If I say it in cross-stitch, who listens?”

What do each of us have to say? What matters? Who listens? How do we measure success in our art-making? Who is the audience? How do we know what we’ve said visually communicates?

So where are we in this field?

In looking back, I’m also looking forward. Almost twenty years ago Harriet Nathan interviewed Ed Rossbach for an oral history series at the University of California, Berkeley. She asked about the future of fiber art. Rossbach predicted that fiber art “is going to be absorbed into painting and sculpture and there’s going to be a whole own exploration.” She acknowledged her love of historic textiles, which fed her visual metaphors with these river teeth, the last part of the body to let go. For me, the source of ideas can exist within the materials; materials lead to meaning.

In a larger context. In the past twenty to thirty years, the boundaries between high and low art and medium-specific recognition have blurred. We have the freedom to transcend materials and tradition, giving credit where it is due.

Some of the best critics in *The New York Times* are covering more than the hierarchial fine art painting and sculpture shows. A small, out of the way exhibit in Brooklyn, New York, Art/Text from Ward Mintz, head of the Coby Foundation, was reviewed by art critic Holland Cotter. The exhibition [at FiveMyles] included the work of nine women artists exploring with needle and thread. Cotter wrote of the “ever-expanding sameness of the art world universe,” where boundaries have blurred if not disappeared. He implied the democratization of media.

*The New York Times* recently ran a full-page article on Sheila Hicks’s 50-year retrospective at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, showing small studies alongside monumental sculptural works. Sheila Hicks claimed the freedom to be who she wanted to be, exploring the presence of cloth in every facet of human existence from birth until death. She acknowledges her love of historic textiles, which fed her own exploration.

At the Park Avenue Armory [last] spring, there was the largest textile exhibition ever held in New York City. Entitled *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*, it presented 651 quilts from the personal collection of Joanna Rose. It was shown for her 80th birthday as a gift to the people of New York. The quilts were vertically suspended, like playing cards tossed into the air. Viewers came by the thousands. I saw one old man, with his cane held high, pointing at his favorites.

Sculptor Louise Bourgeois, speaking of her fabric works of the last decade says, “sewing is my attempt to keep things
Our field has outgrown some of its names. Artists in other fields have appropriated our materials and techniques. Sheila Hicks doesn’t use the word “fiber” in describing what she does, despite her use of fibrous materials. We’ve struggled with what to call ourselves—makers (most of all), weavers, dyers, printmakers, knitters, spinners, quilters, surface designers, basketmakers, fiber sculptors, textile artists, fiber artists, mixed media artists working in the fiber medium. It’s hard to let go of these (perhaps?) limiting terms, not to mention both directions, accepting that we are artists, trying to express visually what we have to say. Artists. Most of all, what does it mean to be a maker? Passionately plumbing the depths and bringing to the surface, answering: What do I have to say, what do I have to say that matters, if I say it in whatever technique or material, who listens? The key is to keep working, being with our own work, seeing where it will take us and sticking to who we are as makers. The meaning of work comes in the work itself. This is a time of change, of uncertainty—of curiosity and imagination, pursuing the unknown. I go and play, “and in the whirling” … see what might happen.
