

Structure and Surface – Notes from June 19th

Tuesday, June 19, 2012

Susie Brandt/Littlewood & Sons

Susie is an artist from Baltimore. She attended Philadelphia College of the Arts for her undergrad degree and taught for five years at University of the Arts before moving to Baltimore.

Susie conducted a site visit to Littlewood, where she visited the dye facility. Littlewood has been in operation since 1869, and continues to be owned by the same family. They do raw stock dyeing, where they dye fiber prior to turning it into yarn. They dye natural fibers as well as acrylic and polyester, which requires extremely high temperatures. They are looking into using natural dyes. They do the dyeing under pressure and steam in large vats. Met Bill Cook, who mixes the dyes and does dye sampling. Many recipes are possible, and he looks for the least expensive one. They are currently doing a lot of work dyeing fibers for paint rollers. There is a big market for the military and re-enactor industries. Philly only has about three major dye companies now.

Susie has been interested in all things textile for as long as she can remember. She is especially interested in process, which informs her work. She comes from a family of engineers, and her family was in the ski business. She is interested in materials, connecting disparate things, and making poetic associations. She's been working on tadding recently, and showed us a tadded alphabet because tadding always reminded her of cursive.

Kelly Cobb/Bentley Robe Co.

Kelly Cobb collaborated with 128 people at the ICA to create a suit out of materials only found within a certain radius of Philadelphia. She described this as a game-changer. She likes developing events.

Recently, she got back from Guatemala. She is working on a grant funded program with a couple of local university to trace the denim supply chain using mapping technology. They are also learning how to make jeans, including the vintage look. Refers to it as engineered memory. This process inspired her to make sculpture.

Kelly is the first Cobb not to be working in a factory textile setting. Her home community was devastated by the closure of a mill in 1985.

Reverend Bentley worked with Reverend Leon Sullivan and they started little factories in their churches because black people had been shut out of the industry. Company started in the 1940s. They do a lot of choir robes, graduation robes, and other religious robes. People come in and bring pictures or describe things, and then the company puts them together. Very customized – in fact, recently, a priest made them commit to never make the pattern he requested again. When large

orders come in, Bentley brings in a team of consulting people, gives them the timeline, and offers bonuses for each part of the process. They are used to orders that require her to differentiate church hierarchies through apparel. A challenge is that they purchase a lot of fabric and work from New York, and have to make the trip a lot to oversee the work. Want to expand, want to update their machinery.

Julie Lorch/Clemson Winding

Julie brought the first thing she engineered that actually worked. It's a mini-engine that is hand-machined. She designed some but not all of the parts. Learned a lot about the importance of precision. Julie is also a writer.

Clemson Winding winds yarn that comes in industrial bulk, un-dyed, into very specific patterns. They work with nine dye houses, six in Philly. They do cones and tubes, and twists that handcrafters prefer. They do a lot of work with the Amish, who have very specific needs for their handlooms.

Amy Orr/Humphrys Textile and Cover Sports

Amy is a long-term Philadelphian. When she began to imagine the project she was thinking about all these different spots and the network. Now that she's getting to know the manufacturer, her mind is moving in different direction. She quit a tenured teaching job five years ago at Rosemont to focus on her artwork, but now adjuncts. She tends to get herself caught up in projects (director of Fiber Philadelphia, for example). Works in post-consumer materials – discarded chicken bones, crack vials, and credit cards that she finds in West Philly, for example. She is focusing on credit cards right now, seeing her role as making discarded materials into something beautiful. Cards aren't recyclable and they can't be heated. They have metallic strips in them. These characteristics limit the way they can be re-purposed.

Humphrys is a family business. There were two brothers who founded the business in 1874. In 1948, a descendent bought it and continued manufacturing industrial purposes; he sold the flag-making portion, which kept the name (so now there's a Humphrys flags). It's morphed into a lot of different things, but still focuses on industrial products. In 1991, a current owner bought Cover Sports, which focuses on the athletic industry and has been a really booming side of their sales. They don't manufacture fabrics; rather they create the final products. They work with the Phillies. Another big part of their business is windscreens. Something they are noticing is that logos are increasingly common customized requests, which they are able to respond to.

Piper Shepard/Wayne Mills

Piper Shepard is from Baltimore, but is always intrigued by how small the fiber/textile community is in terms of its network. She brought a panel from a large-scale, architectural installation. She has been interested in making large-scale cloth that intersects with architecture, particular around space division and ornament. Her practice is heavily informed by historic cloth, which she finds technically

astounding. A goal of her work is to bring cloths often relegated to archives back into the public sphere. The piece she brought had an interesting backstory – she knew who owned it (often lace patterns are anonymous), and it was designed for exhibition purposes and demonstrated proficiency. She thinks of her work as drawings in space, and using a reductive process she cuts away the background, leaving the producer’s hand. Her panels are hand-cut with an X-acto knife in thin muslin.

Wayne Mills was opened in 1910, and they’ve heard that when you exist that long you have to reinvent yourself many times. Started in tapestries, but as that went out of fashions, they started weaving fabrics. Then they got into the apparel trade, but that went offshores, so they moved into more industrial products. They create wide ribbons now that are mostly cotton. Many of the patterns/materials are customized to different pieces of machinery or contexts, such as ties for scrubs, protection for bike handlebars, parts of vacuums, etc. They use domestic cotton yarn, and sometimes work with dye-houses. They add a lot of value to inexpensive materials. They think part of the reason they still exist is because they don’t make an end product, but the parts for other products. They have several tenants in their buildings, including artists. They’ve had three record years in a row. Great customers.

Katherine Shozawa/Churchville Fabrics

Originally from Vancouver, BC. She moved to Philadelphia from Seattle two years ago. About ten years ago she grew interested in labor practices, garment workshops, and sweatshops. At the time, she was living above a hat factory in New York, and her studio was across the street from a garment shop where the lights always seemed to be on. From her studio she would look into this shop and see mostly Chinese immigrant women at work. At the same time, she experienced the destruction of 9/11. Informed by these experiences, she began to focus on an image of a rubble heap of a former internment shack in Canada occupied by Asians during World War II, and investigated her experience of this image through a labor-intensive process of art-making with textiles.

Churchville Fabrics primarily does antique auto upholstery – a very niche market with outposts all over the world. The owner has car books that go way back, and uses the samples in these to recreate the original designs. They are currently trying to re-create woven plastic that was used in pick-up trucks. They also create wool and cotton/wool felts for war re-enactors, and other industries. The mill’s equipment is from the 1960s, and was left by the former owners. They create patterns with dyes by using some fibers that take the colors, and others that don’t.

Final Thoughts

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Ken Finkle – “The answers are all in the room.” The question is how to pull it out, let it play out. Piper said drawing in space. What we’re doing here is drawing in time, playing with the dimension of time. It’s the connections across space, time, and place. A Temple prof of history said there is no new narrative for Philadelphia, the best we can do now is draw out meta-narratives. It’s about history, but it’s actually about the future.

Will McHale – This is one of those opportunities where the industry has a chance to get the story out there, beyond the tight-knit community that already knows.

Walter Licht – Very cheered by watching the traditions that are still here. In the Wayne Mill, you walk on these boards that were laid in 1890, and you are walking on the history (that has continued) of extraordinary production. Loves that machinery at Churchville Fabrics perseveres. Rebuilding, going back into our histories and we locate a sustainable future. He wonders how people who walk by abandoned factories know what happened there. This is a way to let them know.

Next Steps

The funding is for planning alone, not for implementation. This is an opportunity for Mural Arts to consider new ways to prepare for major, complex projects.

No single residency will be constructed the same. Judy and Katie will be available to help with unique structuring.

It may be that the projects that are proposed by the six artists are drawn directly from the experience of the residencies, or it may be drawn indirectly. They are permitted to look to a broader history as they develop their ideas as well.

During this period, artists will develop a proposal, prototypes, timelines, feasibility, and other logistics. They will work with Mural Arts staff to do this. We will use this material to apply for funding to implement. Projects do not have to be mural projects – they can be “off the wall,” temporary, or performance-based.

Ideas will be presented during the week of October 15.

Judy closed by encouraging the artists to avoid superficial romanticizations of the manufacturers and really dig deep.