

Interviewee: ELIZABETH SCHMITT JENNERJAHN
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
Location: Sedona, Arizona
Date: March 15, 2002
Media: DV Cassette 1
Interview no.: 331
Transcription: Ellen Dissanayake, May 9, 2002; corrected by Mary Emma Harris,
July 2004. Converted from Word
Perfect by MEH, November 2015.

[BEGINNING DV CASSETTE]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. We're going to talk about various things that you created at Black Mountain College, and so can you tell me about this weaving?

EJ: This weaving was done on a small table loom in the class with Anni Albers or Trude Guermonprez. And I had taken a seminar [INTERRUPTION]. This weaving was done at Black Mountain College under the direction or tutelage of Anni Albers or Trude Guermonprez. But Anni was very interested in the Peruvian type of weaving and had gone to that area of the world many times to study that. I took a seminar with Trude, I believe, that was three hours a week of intense study of a Peruvian book of weaving. I think I may have a copy of that somewhere. This went in depth, page after page, to the intricacies and the beauty of what they did, and so of course I was interested in trying that myself.

And I believe this was a first attempt. And the big point of it is that the separations in color are made not by the interlocking stitches, as is usual in French tapestry, but they make a clear break – so that means there's a slit, and all these areas have this slit. So here, the warp is here and so there is no separation at this point, but all the vertical places have this slit, and that of course dovetailed in or was amenable to the kind of thinking that Anni used in her – in her work. And, you know, it was part of the Albers kind of way of thinking. So, I suppose this kind of subtle relationship and the gradation of these colors was all part of what I had gathered from there.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This is another weaving done under – I have a feeling this was done more under Anni. I seem to remember that, and it is again the Peruvian weaving method. This is much more labor-intensive than – The first one was kind of a trial run, and this was a great deal of effort. The warp is this way, so it's on, you know – I knew it was going to end up this way, but I wove it this way. It's very tightly – It's a real tapestry, very tightly, tightly packed. Again I used the whole – what I learned from Anni, what I learned from Albers. It's all just completely coming out of what was – what was done there. The interlocking, the moving in, say, of the blue into the black, and here, the overlapping here of the blue over the black, and the continual overlapping and

interweaving which was, you know, from Albers classes. Then the little bit of subtle lines here. I can just, just feel, you know, how that came out of the atmosphere of the time. Then in terms of color, the little bit of pink and red on the sides which spark it up. It's just completely out of that whole period of time.

MEH: And this would be French technique?

EJ: No, this is Peruvian technique. This is Peruvian, yes, because the, the slits in this case go here.

MEH: They're horizontal.

EJ: Right, because the piece was woven in that direction. Now all these are slits, so the slits are from maybe about a third of an inch long, with then a little, one little stitch, a little fastener stitch, coming up there. Oh, here you can see. You can see the fastener stitches. Because after a length of time you can't have too long a slit, because you don't have any structural integrity. So – It was a lot to analyze and figure out. This piece took a great deal [LAUGHS] of study, and I'm sure I had a lot of help on it.

MEH: You were telling me about the backing?

EJ: Oh, the backing is antique silk from my father's interior decorating stained glass studio in Milwaukee. And it's holding up very well. So, later – in later years, when we lived in Garden City, I think, I sewed it on and Pete put that on the top. And all wool.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: I think this is a piece that was woven at Black Mountain, probably not by me because it looked as if it was made on a very wide loom, I don't believe I worked on a loom that big. It's probably a piece that someone was good enough to give me. It's the kind of study that Anni would have, you know, appreciated. She was so big on structure and the design coming out of the structure. So it's a nice upholstery fabric.

This is a piece of upholstery fabric that I made under Anni Albers, and I had taken a class with her, I think it was a three-hour class every week, on design. She started with a requirement that someone wanted, say, for instance, upholstery for a certain couch in a certain state in a certain climate for certain people. Then you would range through all the possibilities of what could be done and gradually come down to the perfect solution. This must have been that kind of thing. This was my solution for a piece of upholstery fabric, and all of these were the tests in the beginning.

Here is the final piece, and this is the reverse piece. It could be really used either way, but I never made anything with it – always wanted to, always planned to. But it's very, very sturdy, very, very good piece of upholstery fabric. And using all of the kind of thinking from Anni.

MEH: For example – What do you mean by "all of the kind of thinking of Anni."

EJ: Oh. You can see the structure – the whole structure of the weaving is completely visible. It's part of the design. The reverse side, again, it shows the structure of not having this nubby black, and whichever side you choose, you use the part having to do with the construction and the way the threads went.

So it's – I guess it's such a natural way of thinking for me that I can't really express it.

MEH: We're on.

EJ: There are all pieces that Anni got me when she went down to Peru. She and Albers enjoyed doing that in the summers or on sabbaticals. They believed that that's where the real vitality of the hemisphere was – what had happened there and the influences from there. I gave her a small amount of money to get me some pieces, and these weren't to be anything – collection pieces – they were just to be nice pieces that perhaps I could use. She was collecting pieces for the Harriett Engelhardt Collection and so she did – This kind of was fun for her. So I used this for a while, and I didn't – never used anything like that. This piece must have a use, but I don't know what in the world it was. Something going around the waist. This is the back side of that, and it is reversed on that side.

This piece is a bag,
and it is a double
weave. There is no
doubt about it. It's
a double weave and
the inside is very
different from the
outside, so I think
she was very proud
of this piece, that she
had found it. It's a
bag. And I even did
use it for awhile. It's gorgeous. It's a very fine, fine thread, and very elaborate
work, and it has a moth hole. So,
it again is the kind of design that
Anni liked so much and that she
and Albers found so nourishing.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This is a mask, a protection from
the weather, I guess. I'm not positive that Anni brought it but because of the
interesting beard, which does seem unique, it could have been something that
she brought. And, again, it was – I never used it, but it is knitted. It must a

contemporary piece, say, that she got in Peru if, in fact, she brought it from Peru.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: These are watercolors done in Albers' painting class, and I think it was so interesting that his painting class did not teach you to make paintings like his. His color studies – in his color class, could do that if you would transform that into oil painting, but this is a basic fundamental Cézanne painting class, which I think is just infinitely valuable. The whole thing that Cézanne did, he treated all nature in terms of geometric shapes – you know, cubes, cylinders, spheres. So these are the pitchers from the dining hall, the aluminum pitchers that all the milk and the water was in. I know that Albers, he would teach it, showing, speaking about the wonderful, the wonderful shape, the wonderful curve, and the shine of the metal. In order to create this contour, you did it – there was no lines done at all to create these. It was a contour. It was an edge. And this part of the shape of the pitcher you painted by having the black on the outside, and here it was on the inside, and all three-dimensional objects, in nature, everywhere, exhibit this kind of characteristic but are often not noticed. And all

kinds of black and white, all Renaissance painting is based on this. The fact then that he used umbrellas because they had exhibited these characteristics with light and dark on what you wouldn't think of as a three-dimensional object. And he enjoyed the fact, he liked curves very, very much -- on people and on pitchers. I know he would go into the whole big thing of how wonderful these curves were, and the shine of the metal, and the fact that this comes forward and this goes back, all fundamental matters in painting -- whatever kind of painting you do. And then here the fact that the umbrella is painted by -- here. That forms the outer contour of the pitcher, and here the inside of the pitcher forms the contour of the edge. The edge here is clear here and then at this point, in order to see it, you paint inside the top and outside at the bottom. And then the-- I have found, because I've tried to teach this in recent years, it's very difficult. I could not reproduce that now. And there is an extreme amount of control, I have found, in -- you know, decades later -- in painting and getting that darkness there to fade out gently and then to merge a little bit with the yellow. And then here, the fact that there's nothing there, and that brings the sparkle of the white. So this is an approach to painting that I don't comprehend why it is not used in American education, American art education. It's fundamental and valuable.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This is a
rubber plant,
and as I see it
now I'm not
sure – maybe
the whole plant was put on its side. Maybe the whole pot was. This looks like
the shape of a pot and these are all the leaves of the rubber plant. But here
again, Albers, he so enjoyed the color, and so he was trying to get the shape of
the leaves, the way the leaf took the light and the dark, and the dark inside or
outside forming the leaf, but also he really would get very excruciatingly excited
about the blue and then the orange in back of it. I don't know whether we all
did those colors, but whatever the colors were, he enjoyed it tremendously.
There is quite a sense of the ground that's different from up above. Again,
fundamental painting– this painting thing that you would teach in any ordinary
still life, except this has a vitality, and it moves all over the way the great still
lives of Cézanne did. These are little, look like leaves from another plant, and
they're so playful. I'm just, I'm [LAUGHS] I'm amazed that I ever did it, but I
know it is because of the excitement that Albers generated in teaching a class,
his enthusiasm for the shine of the rubber plant leaf and for whatever hint of
color there was back there, and I'm sure the playfulness of those leaves. So he,
he wasn't– One might think he only dealt intellectually with design, but he did
not. He dealt with the vigor and the life of color, and the shine, and thrust
forward and moving back, all the features that you see when you just open your
eyes and look at anything.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This, again, is a study from an Albers painting class – watercolor– and we were looking right at this bowl of fruit and here was either pillows or cloth. He could get so much dynamism out of a folded piece of cloth, or we often had classes where he would just have a piece of brown construction paper that would be folded in ways and tacked to a board, so that we could see the moving forward and moving back, and how the light and shade played on that. by doing that, and thinking about the light and shade of everything, you weren't thinking about the composition. In Milwaukee they always taught composition, which was dead as doornails. In this, we really didn't think about composition, at all. I think it's a fantastic composition. Then the vitality of having the fruit colors and then the cloth or pillow covers and then the background so that you got the balance in a painting by not going at it directly, the way– He never talked about balance or composition, and I think it's fantastically balanced.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This must be a

more

developed

painting of that

rubber plant, and so here the rubber plant is standing in a more conventional

way. But the fact that in the other painting it was on its side – you usually don't

see a still life with a plant on its side. [LAUGHS] But here, again, here there is

the rubber plant and the leaves are created– well here, this is all inside, inside,

but then up here, the leaf is created by the paint outside. Here with the pot, in

the shadow base of the pot, the edge of the pot you see by painting on the

outside, and then here it's painting on the inside. That's characteristic all over.

And you get the whole structure of the nodes of the stem of the rubber plant in

this lovely little whatever different kind of plant– It was a different kind of plant

than a person would recognize if they knew that kind of plant, but it also is a

totally different kind of form, so there's rounded playful forms go against these

long rubber plant leaves. Then it must be that he– the fact that there's orange

used in the back that played against the black and blue of the base. I mean

that must have been something that he built up. I don't remember it, but it's

absolutely delightful. The fact that I did it – I was just, I wasn't inventing this. I

was under the spell of Albers building up the wonder and the glory of the rubber

plant, and the shape of the pot, and the leaves, and the stem, and this other– I

mean, he got all excited about every feature of whatever there was and you just

couldn't help but be drawn
into that. And little did I
know that I would be
learning with the most
fundamental painting class
I ever could be in.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This is the fabric that Ruth
Asawa printed, using Black
Mountain laundry stamps.
Now I see the BMC. I don't know
what this form is, but it must have
been some kind of stamp that was
used in a standard way around the
place. And it's— As I look at it, I see
the M's reverse and the B's are
toward each other, and it's just a
wonderful overall piece. This must
have been given to me by Ruth. Then I allowed the show, based on I think it
was done when Mary Emma's book came out. So, that the curators framed it
and returned it to me framed, where it's a little crushed. I have a piece of yard
goods somewhere that was not used. I will try to find it.

This is a wall hanging I
did in the sixties. That's
what I did in the sixties.
And this has two different
kinds of antique silk from
my father's interior
decorating stained glass studio, and it's an old piece, I mean, it's a piece of
sample upholstery cloth. But I used, I can see doing it now, the connection with
Black Mountain – the folds, which Albers enjoyed so much, and the sense of
just cutting out these pieces and letting them flop there– that I haven't thought
of it before, because at that time I did it naturally. Now looking at it, after all
these years, I see that it just completely came from the experiences I had at
Black Mountain. I think this is all one piece of cloth that I just folded and let
drop, in and out. Then I just sewed it with the sewing machine. So I was very
free. I wasn't thinking of any rules about anything. I was just doing what made
sense.

MEH: Okay.

EJ: This is a wall hanging

“White Cup” I did in the

sixties, and again I can

so see that it uses what

I learned from Albers. I must have enjoyed — I took this piece of velvet, I let it

flop there however it flopped, I crushed it up as if it were in a *matiere* class,

and the same with this – just enjoying all the texture, and then of each of these

pieces and enjoying the color, and then sewing them down with the machine

and then having fun playing with the plain stitches up on the top. Very simple,

direct approach to, to what was in front of me and just playing with it in a simple

way.

MEH: Okay.

[END OF RECORDING]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]