

## REBECCA BLUESTONE

“Working with color ultimately becomes about non-color; it takes you to that place where color really begins.”

BY HOLLIS WALKER

A medieval Italian mathematician and businessman, Leonardo of Pisa, was postulating the reproduction rate of rabbits when he defined, in 1202, what is known as the Fibonacci sequence. Beginning with the numbers zero and one, he created a list in which each new number is the sum of the previous two numbers: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, and so on. The ratio between each pair of numbers hovers around 1:1.618, that “magical” number called the Golden Mean.

The Fibonacci sequence and the Golden Mean appear in rates and patterns of growth throughout nature—in the spiral of a nautilus shell, the whorls on a sunflower head—and have long fascinated not just scientists, but also philosophers and artists. The ancient Greek and Egyptian architects hewed to the Golden Mean—also known as the Divine Proportion—in designing their buildings, and artists including Leonardo da Vinci and Georges Seurat applied it to their work.

The weaver Rebecca Bluestone has been exploring the Fibonacci sequence in her designs since 1993. It reveals itself in her masterful tapestries in deceptively simple ways, such as the repetition of squares grouped together in numbers following sequence. Perhaps only a mathematician would immediately recognize this; nonetheless, all of Bluestone’s designs evoke a sense of order, calm and harmony, whether you know your magic numbers or not.

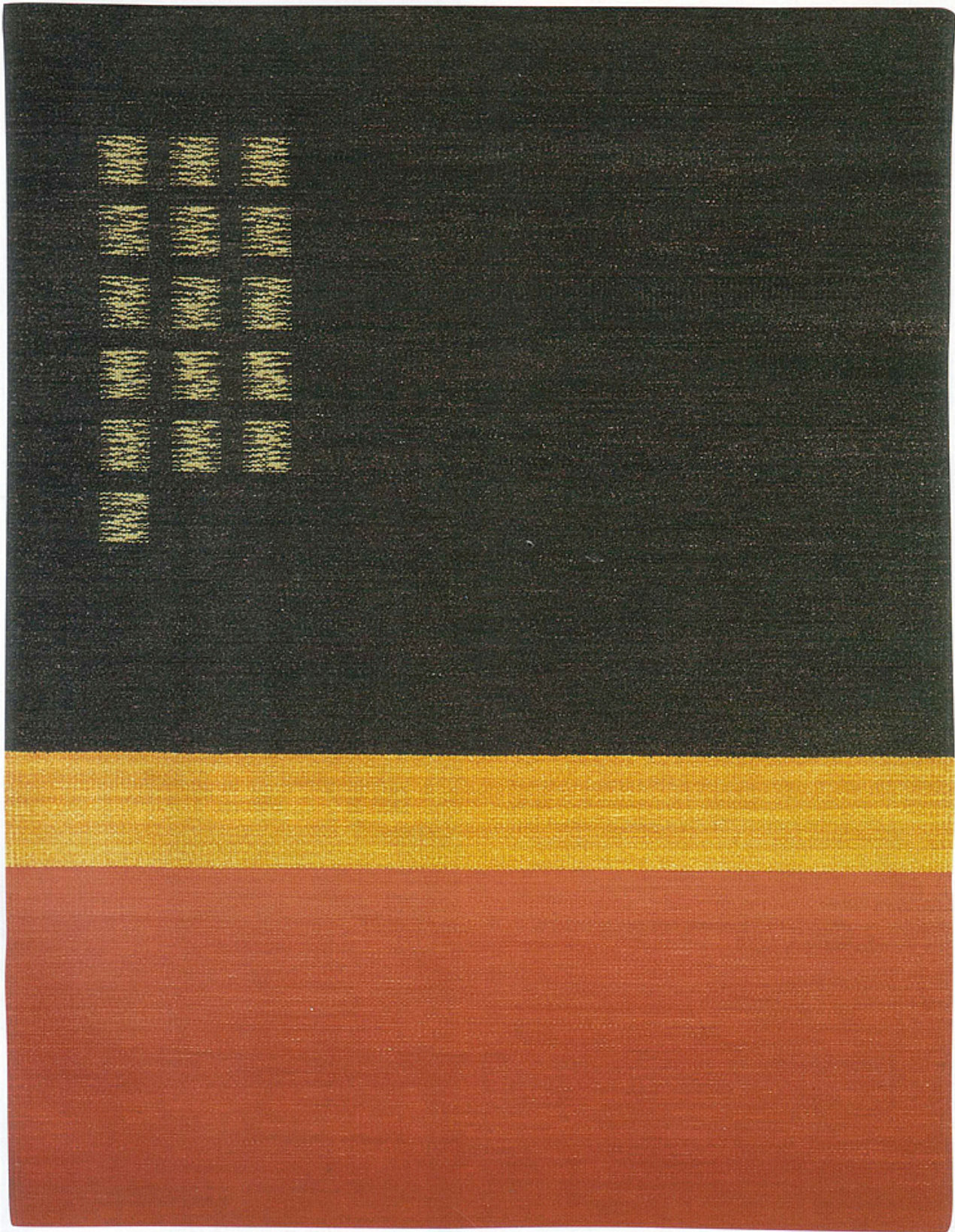
“Weaving is logical, and it is mathematical,” Bluestone says. “I was always good at math.” When she “discovered” Fibonacci’s ideas, she already had been consciously practicing applied mathematics in her Santa Fe, New Mexico, studio. After taking a three-day workshop in yarn dyeing in 1988, she found that she could use the mathematically precise formulas she had learned to create—and re-create—an infinite number of colors based on just 10 aniline dyes. She measures her dyes by the milliliter and keeps careful track of her recipes.

Yet it is important to Bluestone to maintain a balance between the logical, orderly aspect of her designs and their intuitive, unconscious underpinnings. “I am always trying to find the perfect marriage of process and content,” she says. “It seems to me that where a lot of art fails is when people are trying to say something with materials and techniques that are foreign to the content.”

In the estimation of Alice Zrebiec, curator of textile art at the Denver Art Museum, Bluestone has succeeded in unifying the various aspects of her work. “Her technique, concept and creativity are equally complementary,” Zrebiec says. “I see her work as being very complete.” Bluestone is the first contemporary fiber artist Zrebiec has selected to show in a series of exhibits she has been mounting at the museum for five years. “Woven Harmony: The Tapestries of Rebecca Bluestone,” a 12-year retrospective, includes 14 weavings, among them two triptychs. Bluestone’s first solo museum show (June 15–November 10), it includes examples from five bodies of work.

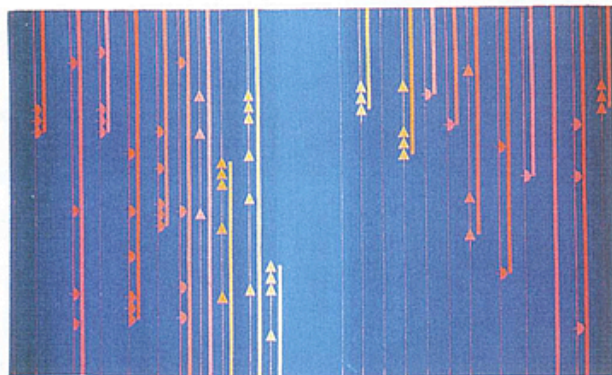
Bluestone has been weaving since 1984, beginning as an apprentice to Nancy Lubin at Western Maine Weavers in Camden. In 1986, she went home to Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, to care for her sick mother. After her death Bluestone treated herself to a workshop in Santa Fe, taught by the Hopi weaver Ramona Sakiestewa. In that one week, she met her husband-to-be, the guitarist Robert Bluestone, and talked herself into a job in Sakiestewa’s studio. Within months, her teacher was encouraging her to do her own designs.





*Untitled/86, 2001, silk, dyes, metallic thread, cotton warp, 50 by 40 inches, photo/Herb Lotz.*





During the decade she worked for Sakiestewa, Bluestone created her weavings at home in the evenings and on weekends. Since 1996 she has been weaving independently. She weaves in weft-faced style using finger manipulation and her unique blend of Navajo, Pueblo Indian and Spanish tapestry techniques. She weaves with three strands, making one row at a time, for approximately 32 rows to the inch. She uses primary and secondary dyes to create her colors, eschewing black as a toner. She uses only a variety of textured silk threads and metallic threads, though in the past she also wove with wool. She conceives her designs, transferring them to graph paper with pencil, but she doesn't color the designs. "I see the colors in my head." During her time at the loom—the process is now so familiar, she works from what she calls "muscle memory"—she thinks about her projects to come.

When seen as a group, each of Bluestone's bodies of work seems to have evolved naturally. The *Hexagram* series, begun in 1991, represents the symbols of the Chinese oracle the I Ching on backgrounds of vertical color progressions. Her *New Music* series, also begun in 1991, repeats the color progression of the *Hexagrams*—the background colors shift from darkest at the works' edge to lightest in their center, while the patterns, reminiscent of musical notes, progress in value toward the center. In the *Four Corners* series, Bluestone first explored the Fibonacci sequence, still using color progression as her template, and the Four Corners region of the Southwest as her inspiration.

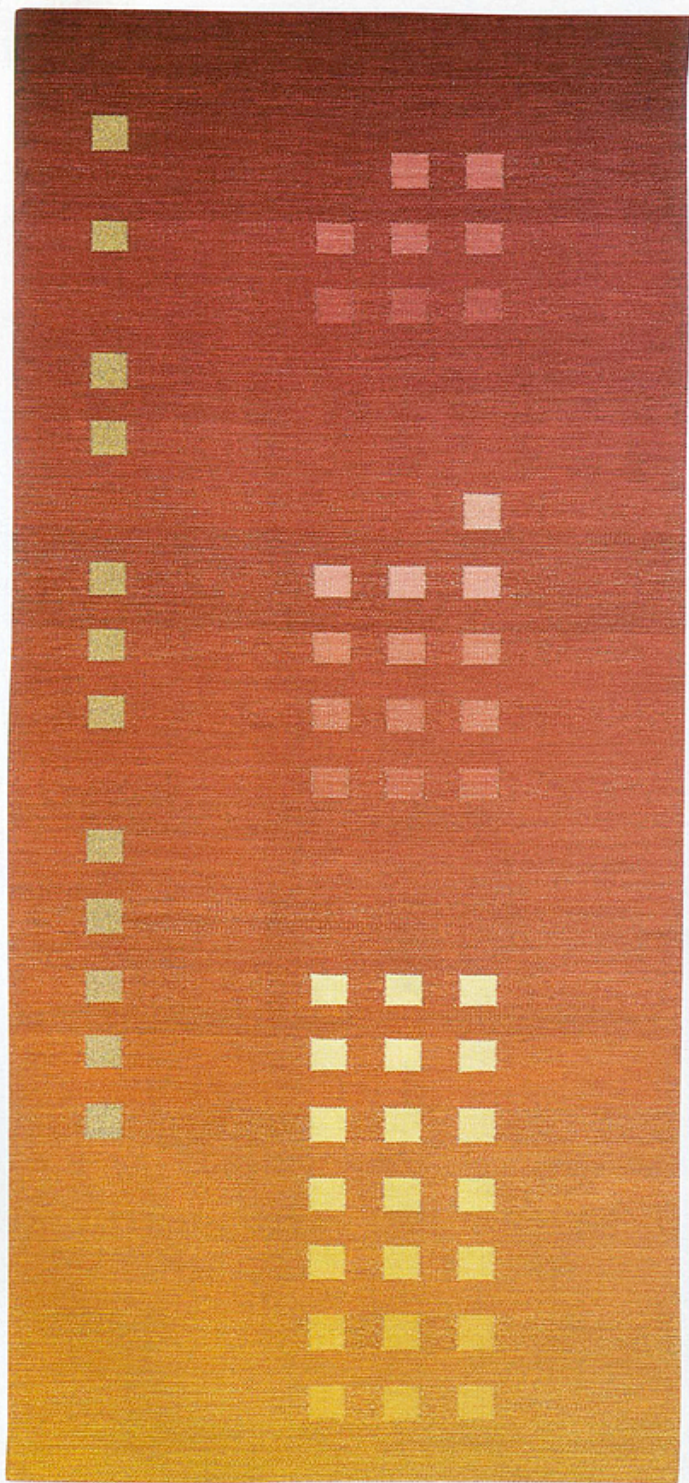
Beginning with that series, Bluestone's work has become markedly more simple and elegant in design, though perhaps more complex intellectually. Not coincidentally, since 1998 she has ceased giving titles to the work, finding them "constraining." In her works of 2001 and 2002, Bluestone has turned to using color in horizontal rectangles, exploring subtle progressions of hue within those blocks, and presenting black more prominently. Her repeating squares are done in gold metallic thread that is hatched, so the squares appear to be deconstructing. Bluestone's latest weavings are more painterly. They allude to the color field painters (Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman are among her favorite artists, as is the grande dame of grid, Agnes Martin), and De Stijl artists Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian.

Recently Bluestone has introduced natural, undyed silks in her designs. She continues to explore repeating grids in color progressions, but her palette is muted, softer. "Over the years, working with color ultimately becomes about non-color; it takes you to that place where color really begins," she says. The new weavings are even more contemplative, more related to natural cycles, than in the past.

Last year Bluestone was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and underwent surgery and six months of chemotherapy. Though she continued to weave during that period, she experienced much of it as if in a blackout. It has changed her perspective on her life and work. Today she spends only four or six hours a day at the loom, instead of her previous eight. She is less ambitious and more interested in making a contribution. Her illness has forced her to make peace with time. "There is just no place to get to," Rebecca Bluestone says. "I am here, right now." ■

*Hollis Walker, a freelance writer and editor based in Santa Fe, writes on the arts for the Wall Street Journal, Art & Antiques and other publications.*





ABOVE AND LEFT: *Triptych/2*, 2001, silk, dyes, metallic thread, cotton warp, 45 by 48 inches; *Four Corners/4*, 1994, silk, wool, dyes, metallic thread, cotton warp, 76 by 35 inches, photos/Herb Lotz. OPPOSITE PAGE: *New Music/6*, 1993, wool, dyes, cotton warp, 48 by 80 inches, collection of Jack and June Smith, photo/Jack Parsons.