

REBECCA BLUESTONE

Precision & Passion

BY ADELE WOLFF BASSETT



Four Corners Rug, hand-dyed wool on linen warp, tapestry, 96" x 96". Commission for a private residence. Photo by Lea Babcock.

IT'S NO SURPRISE that Rebecca Bluestone's white-walled studio is as neat and precise as one of her tapestries. "I have to have things a certain way to be able to work," she explains.

The refusal to settle for less also explains Bluestone's success. She took years to find her way to weaving and then persisted in developing the colors, combinations of fibers, and careful techniques that make her tapestries appear luminous, almost ethereal. These "geometric landscapes" that offer a balance between "formal structural design

and emotional response to color" feel and hang like fine fabric. Their simple structured designs, which shimmer and glitter in beautiful gradations of color, are as compelling as the finest example of fine art.

Bluestone's inspirations have ranged from the shifting colors of the landscape just outside her studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to musical notation to the six-line I Ching hexagram to Fibonacci numerical progressions. But the energy that fires her creative spirit and allows her to produce as many as thirty tapestries a year

derives from the physical satisfaction of weaving. Its "contemplative repetition" allows her to tap her intuition and communicate visually. Even now, after more than a decade of tapestry weaving, Bluestone admits that her thirst for weaving is as insatiable as that of someone in the desert who has had only a few drops of water.

Before she discovered tapestry weaving, Bluestone spent considerable time wandering in a kind of creative desert. While growing up outside Tulsa, Oklahoma, she almost obsessively made things with her

hands, including, she says, thousands of stretchy-loop pot holders. When she demonstrated a lack of skill in illustration, she was told she had no artistic talent. Majoring in humanities at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, she explored the artistic expression of other cultures yet couldn't identify herself as an artist. "I always felt I had things to express but no way to do it," she explains.

After a short stint as a paralegal and a year in graduate school studying social work, Bluestone spent the next six years doing odd jobs and vowing not to sell her soul for something less than her life's work. In 1984, having quit a job as a waitress in Camden, Maine, she agreed to handle packaging and shipping for Nancy Lubin's production studio, Western Maine Weavers, provided that Lubin teach her to weave. "As soon as I started, I knew I wanted to do weft-faced weaving because I saw it as a form for expression."

In 1986, a weaving class taught by the Hopi weaver Ramona Sakiestewa brought Bluestone to Santa Fe. Within a week, she'd met her husband-to-be, the classical guitarist Robert Bluestone, and Santa Fe became home.

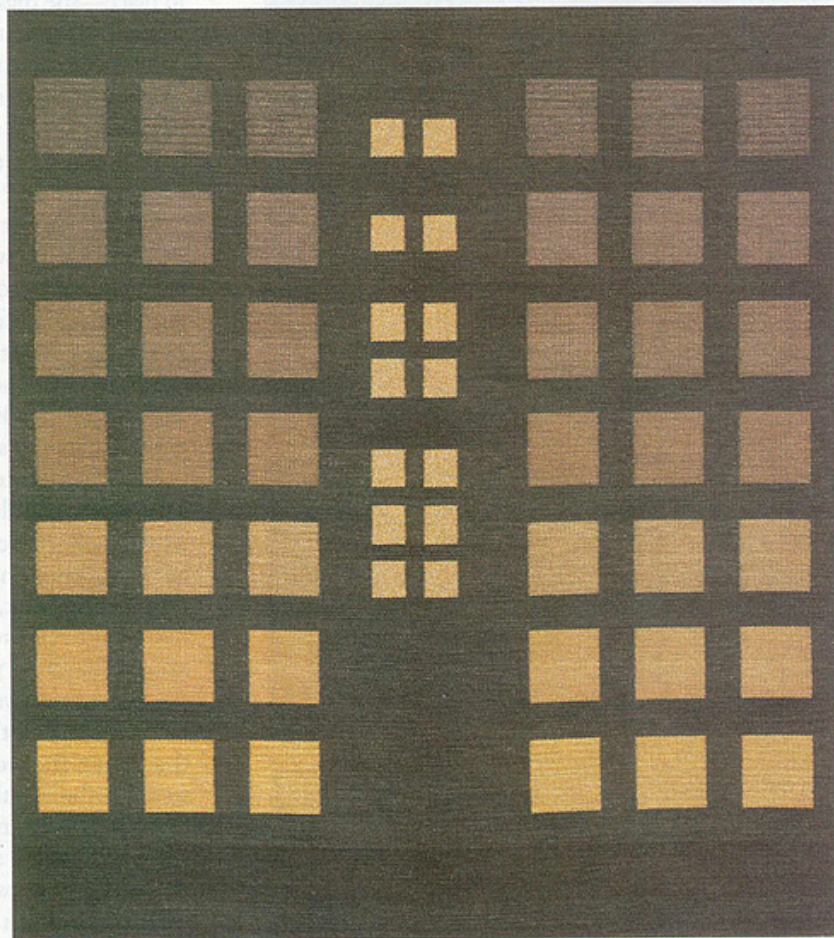
Bluestone began to weave on her own and worked briefly for another production weaving studio before offering to help Sakiestewa in exchange for more exposure to her craft. She was hired to do pressing and finishing and gradually began to weave some of Sakiestewa's designs, moving to a full-time position. "I'd work forty hours a week for Ramona and then go home and work on my own tapestries," she says. In 1989, some of Bluestone's tapestries were exhibited at Rachel Brown's Weaving/Southwest Gallery in Taos. It was the first step in her rapid climb to recognition in the nineties.

Since then, Bluestone's tapestries

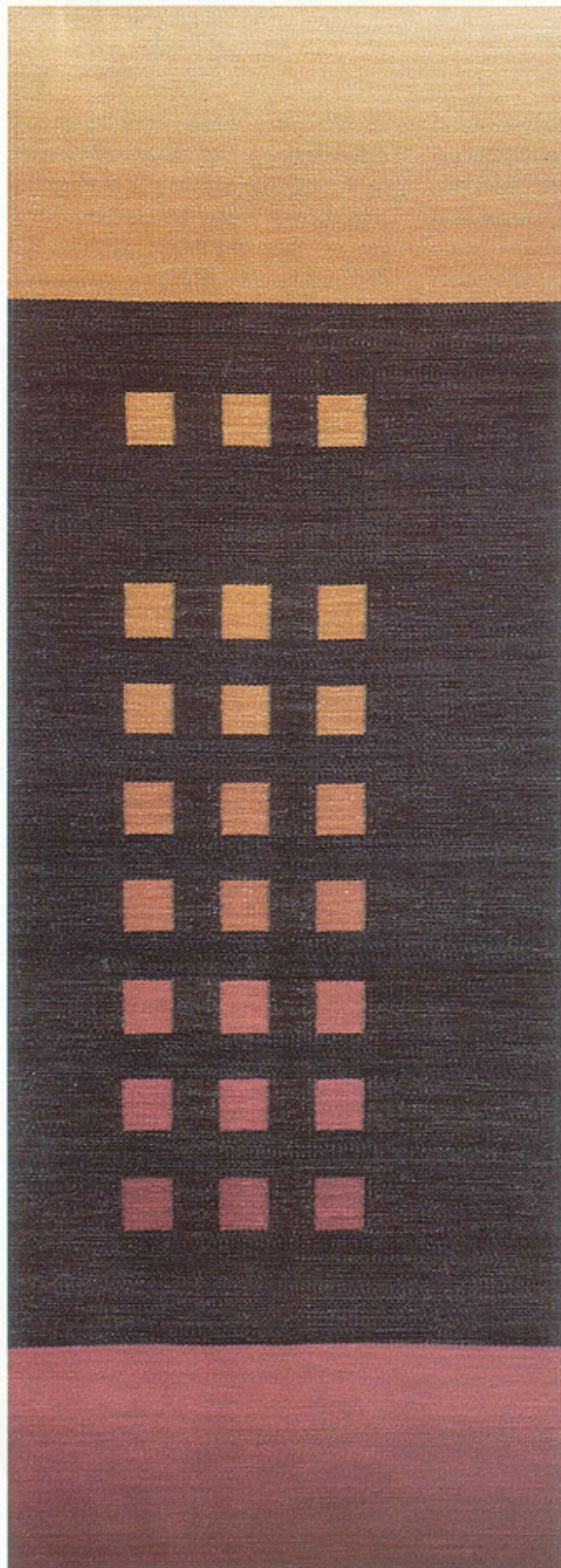
have appeared in nearly sixty solo and group exhibitions. They hang in corporate, public, and private collections throughout the United States and abroad. Three are scheduled to be hung in a new federal courthouse in Albuquerque. Despite her success, Bluestone remains determined to follow her own instincts. "There's a lot of discipline involved," she notes. "You have to remove your ego and not feel dependent on other people's opinions. . . . The goal isn't so much to be successful, as to be true to oneself."

To meet her own high standards, Bluestone strives for a perfect blend of design, color, fiber, and technique.

Each tapestry begins with a drawing in colored pencil. Her designs deliberately conform to the natural grid of warp and weft threads and enhance the properties of fiber, marrying medium and content to materials. Bluestone also meticulously dyes all her fibers using ten colors of acid dyes in carefully calculated gradations of shade. These she tracks on swatch cards, documenting the different ways that fine strands of wool and silk absorb and reflect the same hues. Then there's that absolutely perfect technique. "My eyes want everything to be neat, straight, and smooth—so perfect that you see only the weaving," she says.



Untitled/6, metallic and hand-dyed silk on cotton warp, tapestry, 52" x 47". Photo by Herbert Lotz.



Four Corners/30, hand-dyed silk on cotton warp, tapestry, 70" x 24". Photo by Herbert Lotz.

Bluestone has developed her own methods for achieving speed and precision. She accepts no excuses for the glitches that some tapestry weavers consider inevitable. To avoid having to adjust individual warp ends during weaving, she warps her 72-inch Cranbrook loom sectionally and meticulously ties on 1 inch at a time, adjusting until the tension is even. Instead of beginning with a row of twining, she ties double half hitches around each pair of warp threads, weaves 2 inches, and then ties another double half hitch around each individual warp thread. The row of single knots scores the fabric, providing a clean, precise edge for turning back the hem.

Bluestone uses a temple, and she bubbles by drawing her weft thread into a consistently sized triangle. She says that after years of practice her hands know when the bubble is the correct size.

For vertical lines between colors, Bluestone makes dovetail joins, skipping the common warp thread every half inch or so to keep them smooth. She feathers and overlaps the ends of wefts, drawing each one to the surface. After she's woven several rows—enough to hold the ends in place—she tugs them straight up and snips them off close to the surface so that they pull back into the fabric.

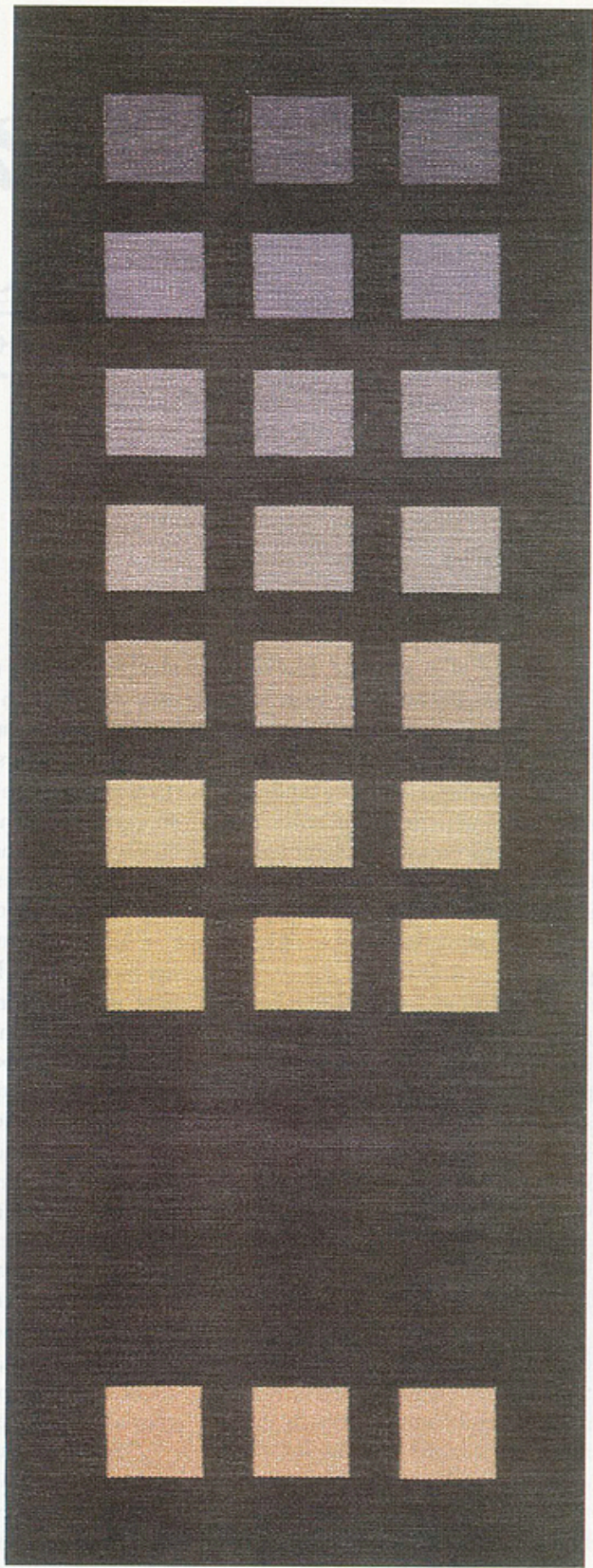
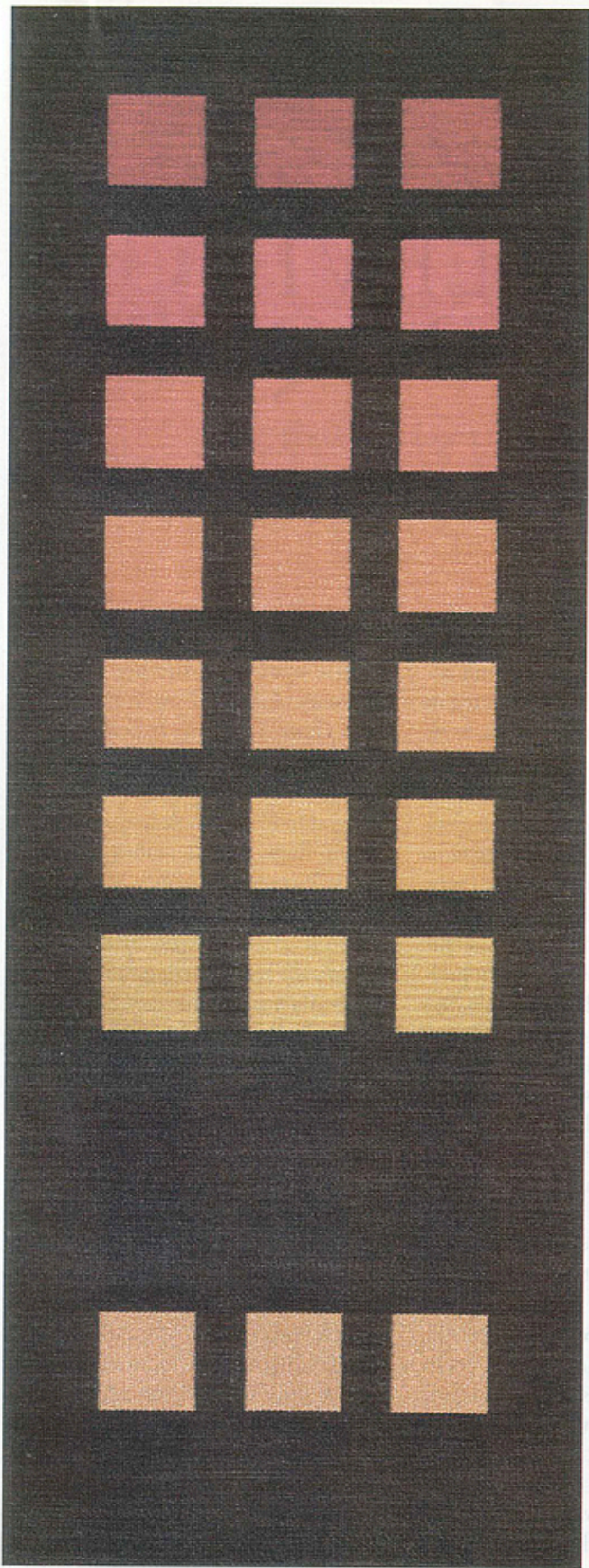
Bluestone finishes her tapestries with a wet pressing cloth and a hot steam iron. She notes, "I don't do any blocking because no amount of stretching and wetting and pulling will fix a tapestry that isn't woven straight or flat. I know because I've tried it, and it doesn't work."

In her earlier tapestries, Bluestone used bright colors, two-ply tapestry wool, and a sett of 6 ends per inch (e.p.i.), but then she discovered that 8 e.p.i. and thinner wool produced a finer surface and more subtle gradation of colors. In the early nineties, she introduced silk wefts and metallic threads for the richness, luminosity, and glitter they added to her work. Recently, she has been weaving almost exclusively with silk, including chenille and bouclés.

The switch to silk has been accompanied by a more subdued color palette ranging from green to copper along with black. "Black comes out of introspection, and I've been working on the internal world," Bluestone notes. From a notebook, she reads these words that she's copied from another source: "Black is the promise that you'll soon know something you did not know before."

Bluestone says that her current work is evolving on its own and for her, that requires faith. Even so, she's learned that when she trusts her intuitive side, other people respond to the visual results. And that's something she's eager to share: "Weaving is something we do for ourselves, but then we develop shoulds and ought-tos that take the joy out of it," she observes. "Give yourself permission to do what engages you." ♦

Adele Wolff Bassett of Castle Rock, Colorado, is a freelance writer and fledgling tapestry weaver.



Four Corners/36 (left) and *Four Corners/37* (right), hand-dyed silk on cotton warp, tapestry, 66" x 24" each. Photos by Herbert Lotz.