



Four Corners Triptych at the U.S. Federal Courthouse in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Tapestry; silk, dyes, cotton; each piece, 48 by 144 inches. Photograph by Robert Reck.



Rebecca Bluestone's Visual Language

by Gussie Fautleroy

Southwestern tapestry weaver Rebecca Bluestone sometimes says she has only had one idea in her artistic career, and she has spent the past twenty years moving closer and closer to that idea.

An intuitive look at her work reveals a sense of this, with minimal yet dramatic geometric imagery, exquisite gradations of color, and a feeling of gentle, precise beauty evolving through gradual design variations over the years. So it comes as little surprise that at the core of Bluestone's "one idea" is the expression of something unchanging and delicately subtle—something for which there are no adequate words.

"It has to do with finding that contemplative space and accessing and exploring a more unconscious part of the self—that part of the self that other animals don't have. I'm trying to find a visual language for that," Bluestone explains, sitting in her neatly organized studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with the quiet sound of water spilling over a small rock fountain in the garden outside. "I think verbal language is a wonderful thing, but it's extremely limited and only expresses a very small part of who we are. So I speak visually about those things we can't talk about."

One key to refining this visual language, of course, is a constant development of ability and technique, allowing the thinking, decision-making mind to play its role, but

then stepping back and making room for a creative flow when the artist is weaving. Bluestone's journey to this point began in 1984, with her first introduction to the loom.

After earning a degree in humanities from Oklahoma State University, she had been working odd jobs in Camden, Maine, when she answered an ad for handling packaging and shipping at Nancy Lubin's Western Maine Weavers studio. Feeling immediately at home at the loom, she practiced four-harness weaving under Lubin's tutelage for two years until the next, and pivotal, milestone in her career—a weaving class in Santa Fe with Hopi weaver Ramona Sakiestewa.

In Santa Fe Bluestone gained the mentorship of Sakiestewa and the inspiration of Southwestern weaving traditions, particularly Navajo and Hopi/Pueblo. She also met her future husband, classical guitarist Robert Bluestone, and found a new home. In a steady evolution of her work since then, she has gone from working with wool, to wool and silk, then to exclusively silk fibers and metallic thread. All along, however, she has remained with the weft-faced weaving technique, using cotton warp threads that become entirely covered by the tapestry's design.

Walking to her loom and sit-

ting down, Bluestone takes off her shoes and weaves a few strands of the piece in progress. She explains that in Southwestern tapestry, the design is finger-manipulated during the weaving process, rather than having been set up beforehand through the threading of the loom. It is a technique that cannot be reproduced on a machine loom, since the artist is literally creating the design as she works.

Yet Bluestone, a prolific weaver, has dedicated so much time to her discipline that these days she weaves with creativity and intention, but without the need for much thought to technique. As a result, as she weaves, her mind often moves from the current piece to future designs. After an idea's initial gestation, she gives it form through precise scale drawings on graph paper—almost always in black and white.

"I usually don't do color drawings, except to be used for presentation. I can see the colors in my mind," she notes. "Then part of the fun for me—as I weave the piece—is seeing the colors come together."

And the colors in her work, while having become somewhat more muted in recent years, reveal a complex interplay of light, texture, and subtle variations in hue that follow from the weaver's singular method of hand-dyeing and using silk. For each color, which may total as many as thirty for one tapestry, Bluestone uses three different types of silk thread, each having its own natural color, texture, and chemical makeup. As a result, the same blue, light-fast aniline dye, for example, applied to the three types of silk, creates three distinct shades of blue with three sets of light-reflecting properties.

Bluestone weaves with three strands at a time, one of each type of silk. Thus different strands emerge randomly on each row of the tapestry's surface. It is a technique, she observes, that "...allows me to work with the yarns in a very painterly kind of way, and creates a surface that is very alive."

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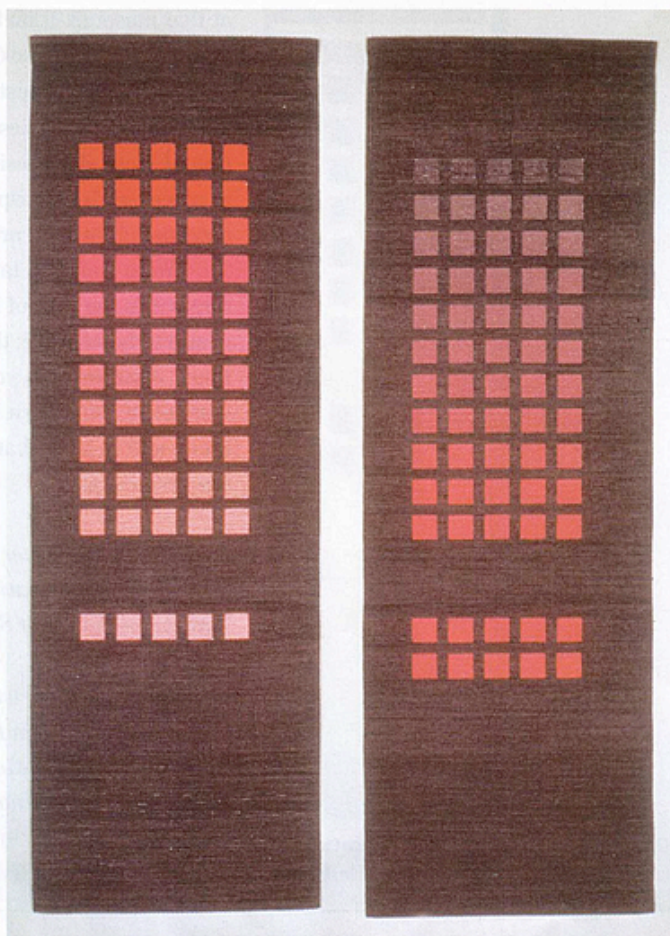


Quartet/2. Tapestry; silk, dyes, cotton; 70 by 114 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.

Orderliness is inherent in the art of weaving and especially in the calm balance of Bluestone's imagery, which invariably contains patterns based on a mathematical sequence known as the Fibonacci progression. It is a set of numbers also called the golden mean, which is found throughout nature and tends to evoke a sense of equilibrium without the need for symmetry. Yet the artist's life took a dramatic turn away from order a few years ago, when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and went through a tumultuous and difficult period of treatment and recovery.

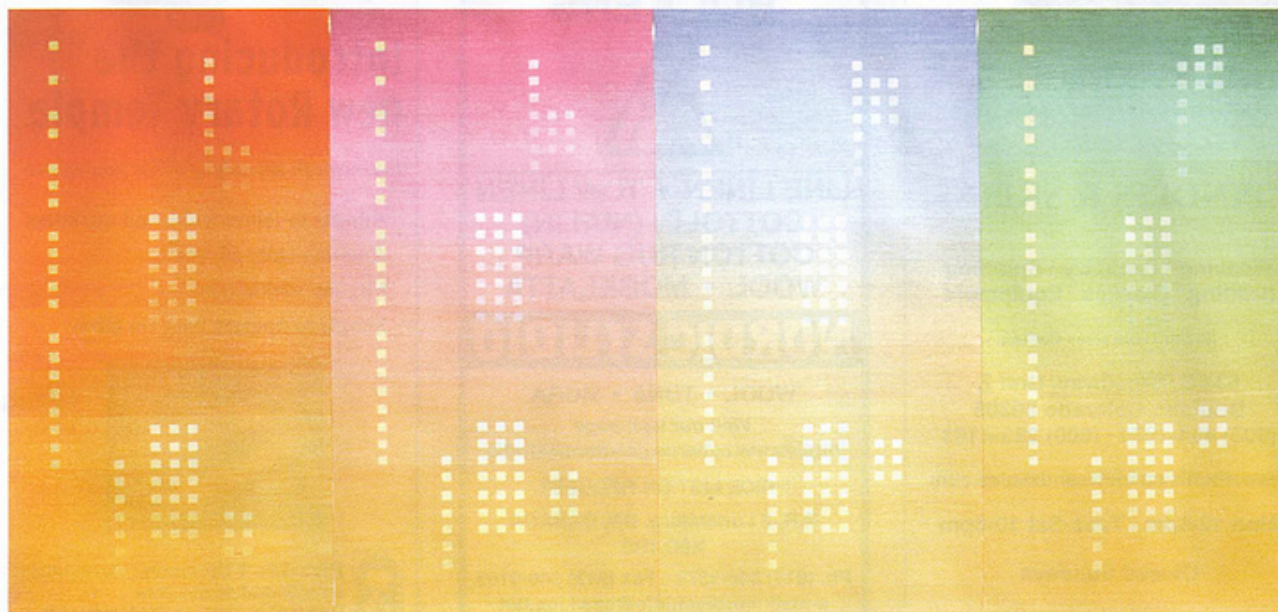
Coming out the other side, the artist says, brought a new perspective on what is of ultimate value in her life. "It made me realize I had no place to get to. There is no end of the game, where you come to a wall and say, 'Oh, now I've done everything I wanted to do and now I can die.' It's just a process and some [people] keep going longer than others," she reflects. "A certain amount of the accomplishment-part of it fell away. When you're debilitated by disease, the only thing that matters, that brings comfort to your soul, is your spirit and a connection with other people."

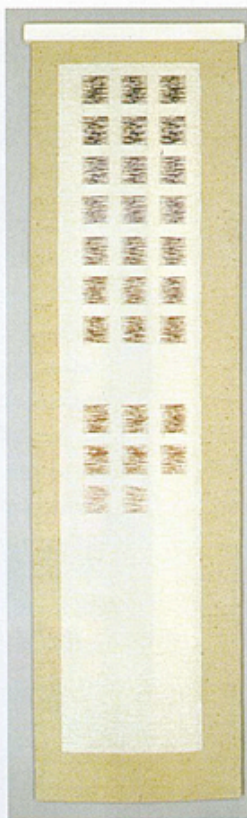
Paradoxically but not surprisingly, as Bluestone's need for outward accomplishment has diminished, her art increasingly has been embraced by both the weaving and the general art world. Added to a long list of works in public and private collections and twenty years of exhibitions, her first solo show at the prestigious Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe takes place this fall, running through November 1st. As well, her tapestry, *Sanctuary Triptych I*, has been purchased by the Museum of Arts & Design (formerly the American Craft Museum) in New York, and will be on display when the museum's new building opens in 2006. Bluestone's recent solo exhibition at the Denver Art Museum, *Woven Harmony: The Tapestries of Rebecca Bluestone*, a twelve-year overview curated by Dr. Alice Zrebiec, was Bluestone's first solo museum exhibition and the first show for a living solo contemporary fiber artist



Untitled/51 & 52. Tapestry; silk, dyes, cotton; each piece, 70 by 24 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.

Four Corners Quartet. Tapestry; silk, wool, dyes, metallic thread; each piece, 66 by 35 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.





Untitled/77. Tapestry; silk, dyes, cotton; 60 by 18 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.

at that museum. It included pieces from four series of work—*Journey*, *Hexagram*, *New Music* and *Four Corners*, as well as new works not shown previously.

These days Bluestone also finds herself using her art and related speaking and teaching opportunities as a vehicle for a connection with people and a communication of ideas she considers important for us all. With her husband she often speaks at places such as hospitals, senior centers, and alternative schools where students considered “at risk” are among her audience.

“What I always talk about, and what I’ll talk about at the [Convergence] conference, is the idea of how we access our creativity,” she explains. “If you have the desire to be creative, then you have something to give in that way. I tell people, you know what engages you, and if you pursue these things with discipline and focus, wonderful things can happen. No one tells people they have all these gifts inside them, and to trust that. The things that are easiest and most comfortable to us are our greatest gifts.”

Santa Fe-based writer Gussie Fauntleroy contributes regularly to national, regional, and local publications. She is the author of Roxanne Swentzell: ExtraOrdinary People, on the art of Santa Clara Pueblo ceramic artist Roxanne Swentzell.

Rebecca Bluestone will deliver a keynote speech at the Closing Ceremony at Convergence 2004 in Denver, Intuition and the Process of Making Art. She will lead a preconference studio class, Career Management: A Workshop for the Professional Artist, and a seminar of the same subject. She will also present a seminar, Tapestry—Weaving in the Southwest: A Conversation with Rebecca Bluestone, James Koehler and Irvine Trujillo.