

LOOMING LARGE

Santa Fe fiber artist
Rebecca Bluestone
relies on intuition and
intellect in weaving
her abstract tapestries
By Devon Jackson

JUST WHEN IT SEEMS as if words like *destiny* and *fate* couldn't ring any more hollow, along comes an artist like Rebecca Bluestone. How else to explain this middle daughter of a ranch hand raised in

very rural Broken Arrow, OK; this now-50-year-old woman who as a child was told she had no drawing skills, ergo, no artistic skills; this Oklahoma State University humanities major who knew only Remington and cowboy art until college, who'd never even seen modern art in person until after her OSU cowboy days? Bluestone then languished for years on the coast of Maine waiting tables for a living, quit that job in 1984 to help out a local weaver with her packing and shipping, asked the woman to show her how to weave and realized in that very first moment at that woman's loom that this, this weaving, *This is what I've been put here to do, this is my calling*—only to end up back in Oklahoma not two years later attending to her dying mother, and then to decide, on a whim,

really, after her mother's death, at age 32 and with no artistic legacy or precedent or license to inspire her at all, *What the hell, OK, I'll go out to Santa Fe for that two-week weaving class* (with legendary Hopi weaver Ramona Sakiestewa). During her very first week of class, in those very first days in Santa Fe in fact, she not only met the man, Robert Bluestone, who was her soulmate and who would soon become her husband but also realized with even more finality that Santa Fe was where

she'd stay and weaving was where she'd make her mark.

It's not that Bluestone never knew she had such artistic possibilities within her—"I think I've known since I was 5 that I really wanted to be an artist, and an abstract artist at that," she

LEFT: UNTITLED #87, SILK/DYES/
METALLIC THREAD/COTTON WARP, 49 X 39.
RIGHT: UNTITLED #80, SILK/DYES/COTTON WARP, 62 X 16.

ARTWORK PHOTOS BY HERB LOTZ AND COURTESY GERALD PETERS GALLERY



muses—it's just that she lacked the support, the encouragement, the background to fulfill that desire. "I knew I had something to offer," she surmises from within her well-organized, brightly lit studio in the back canyons of Santa Fe, "but I couldn't find a way to do it." Now that she's found it, though, she's

on the verge of revolutionizing—no, really, revolutionizing—this long-disdained medium.

Often shunted aside as more craft than art, as women's work, as the red-haired stepchild of painting, weaving has only recently begun to assert itself as an art form as legitimate and expressive as any other.

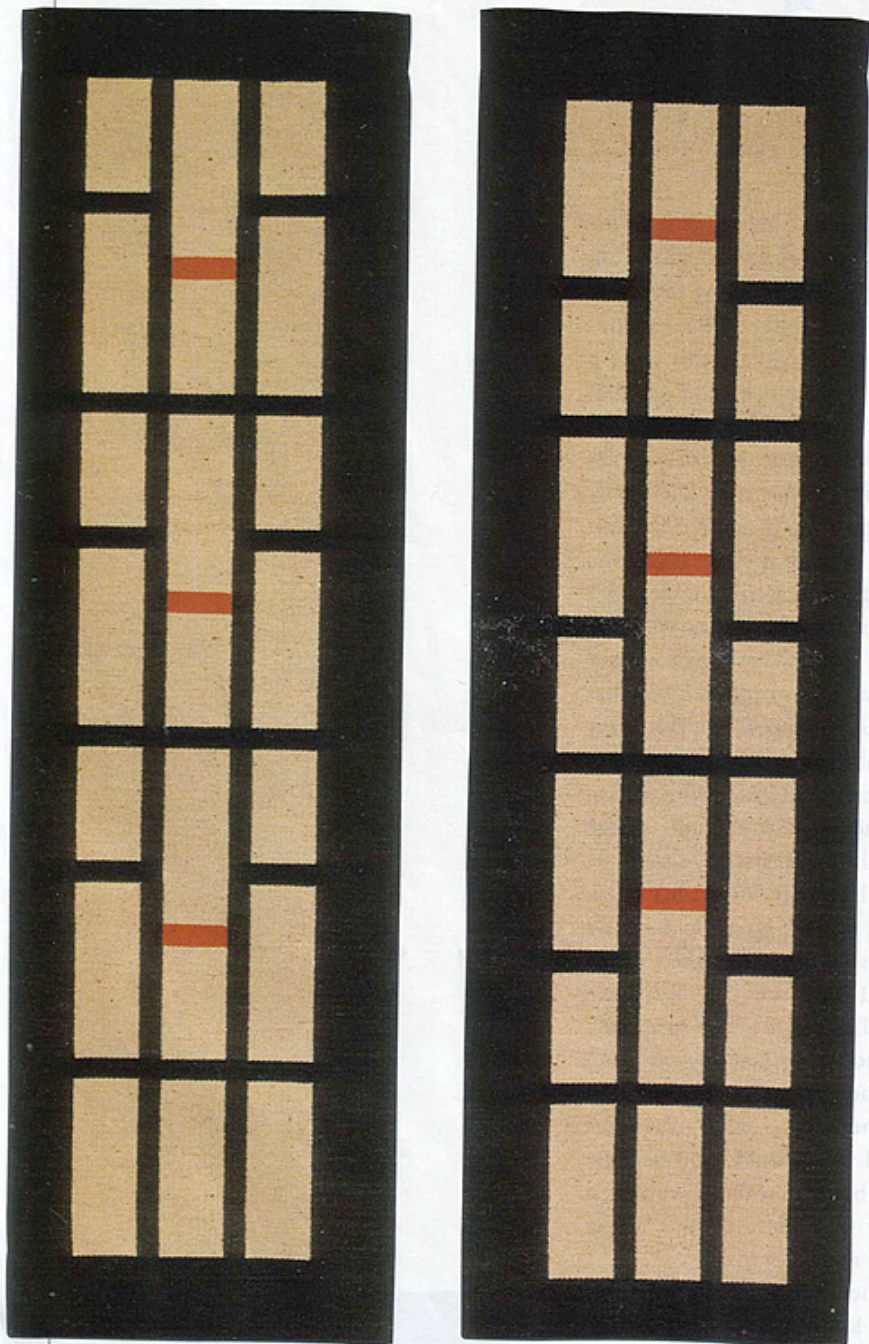
While Bluestone might not think of herself as revolutionary, her abstract tapestries—intense geometric shapes emblazoned on bold fields of color,

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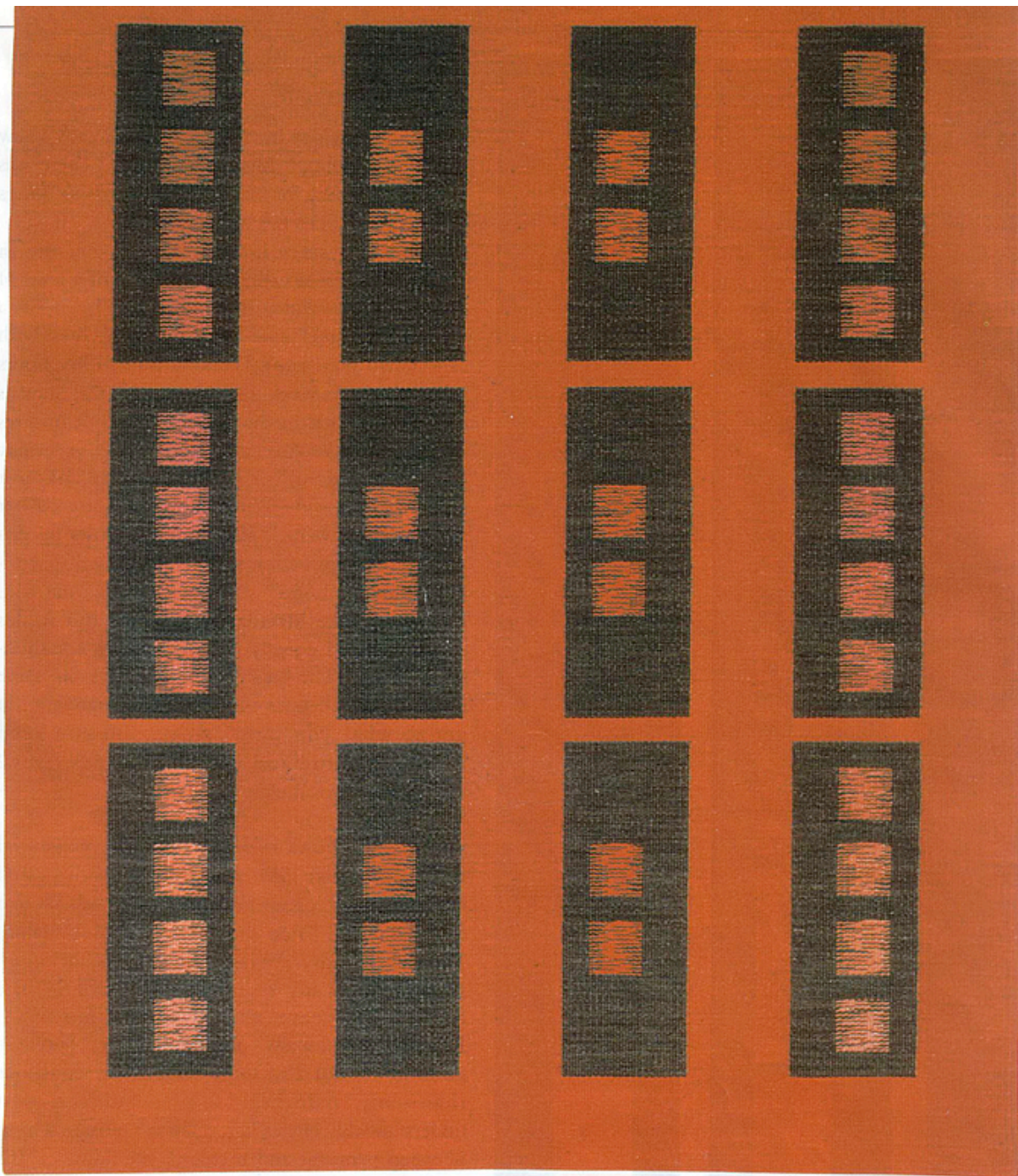
boxes somehow as incandescent and magical as Donald Judd's three-dimensional works and as existentially challenging as Mark Rothko's finest paintings—may well qualify as such.

Averse to the East Coast's pictorial predilection and drawn more toward the Hispanic and Native American influences and techniques of the Southwest, Bluestone manages to blend the headiness of the former with the naturalness of the latter. "I see things abstractly, and New Mexico is this abstract geometric landscape, just like my mental landscape," explains Bluestone, tall and slim and as personable and grounded as she is graceful and smart. "A lot of people think my work is very intellectual, but to me it's intuitive. It's a suspension of my intellect."

Aside from their beauty, what also makes her tapestries so appealing is her subtle use of the Fibonacci sequence. More popular now thanks to Dan Brown's enormously popular novel *The Da Vinci Code*, it is a series of numbers (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 ...) in which each new number is the sum of the previous two. "It's a



DIPTYCH #2, SILK/DYES/COTTON WARP, 60 X 42.
OPPOSITE PAGE: UNTITLED #56, SILK/DYES/COTTON WARP, 50 X 39.

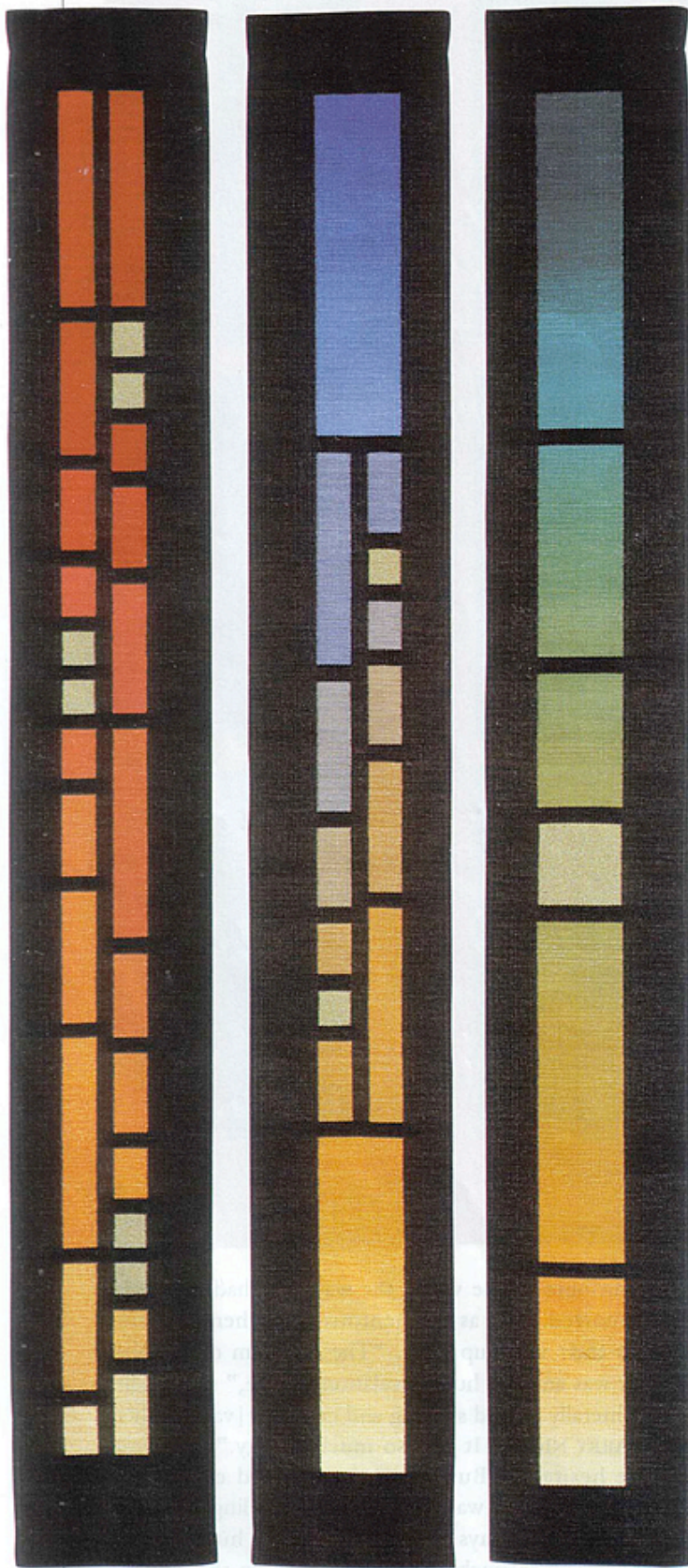


universal organizing principle, an innate relationship we have with nature,” Bluestone explains. “We don’t know the pattern, but it makes sense. And people sometimes pick up on this pattern in my work—they see these hallways of interconnection. So there’s something about pattern that’s very powerful for us and takes us to this contemplative state.”

Van Gogh, Rothko, Mondrian. In college, seeing these artists’ works changed Bluestone’s life. “I realized suddenly,” she marvels, “there were all these people speaking visually about what I’d been thinking all those years.” She knew she needed to

contribute to the world the way they had. Still, she demurred. Just as momentous was when she later saw their work up close. “The Museum of Modern Art was another huge revelation for me,” she recalls. “I literally started shaking and crying at [van Gogh’s] *STARRY NIGHT*. It had so much energy.” And still, she hesitated. But when she realized even more clearly that her waitressing job was killing her soul, “I quit,” she says. “And I learned a huge lesson: When you’re stuck you have to open up the void for the next thing to come in.”

That next thing was the loom. In 1984, as soon



SANCTUARY TRIPTYCH 1, SILK/DYES/METALLIC THREAD, 90 X 48. COLLECTION OF MUSEUM OF ARTS & DESIGN. OPPOSITE PAGE: SILK JOURNEY/23-2, SILK/DYES, 60 X 40.

as she sat down at it, "It was like I already knew what I was doing," Bluestone recalls. "There was suddenly this way for me to talk about these things I've always tried to talk about."

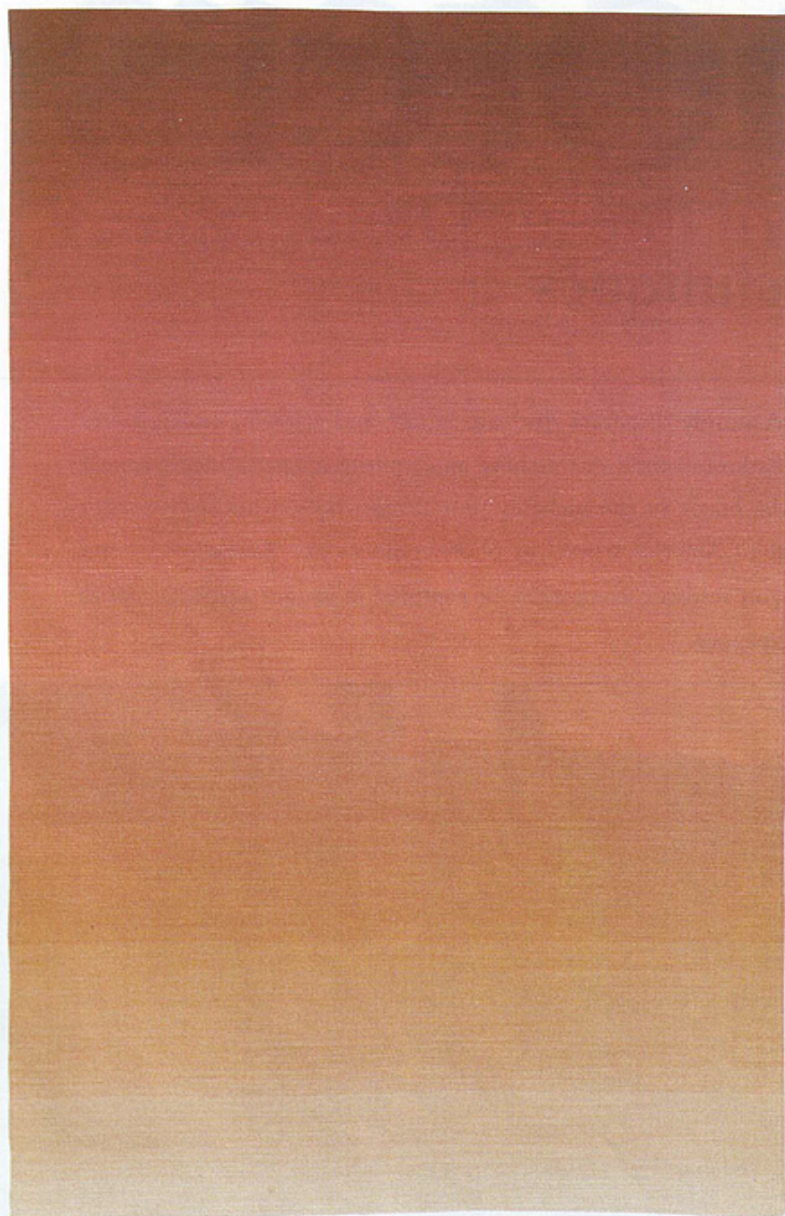
And ever since helping her mother die in 1986, an experience that relieved her of a kind of emotional obstacle, Bluestone has been on a creative tear (interrupted only by a scary bout with cancer two years ago). Working four to five hours a day, six days a week, sometimes with Cat Stevens or classical music in the background—"It inspires me visually, it evokes colors and shapes, especially Baroque music," says Bluestone of her synaesthetic mojo—Bluestone hasn't altered her approach one warp. "My creativity grows by this continuous exploration in a very confined space—but to me it's huge," she says, pointing out, too, that artists like Mondrian, Rothko, and Agnes Martin worked equally well within this confined-huge space. "The concept for me stays the same but the work changes—it takes that progression to get to what you want to say, and you keep refining it more and more," she adds. How? "Because my vocabulary gets better."

LATELY, THE WORK EVOLVES out of the work (and the color, too). She starts out with a pencil drawing, and if it rubs her right, she moves on to a color drawing. Then she'll dye her silk by hand. Then she'll weave. "When I sit down at the loom, I don't make any changes at that point," she asserts. "I weave what I see in my head. Fortunately, it usually comes out better." Surely as good as—if not also more technically wondrous than—any painting. It's a subject that understandably chafes her. "There's a huge schism between painting and textiles," she admits. "It's exactly the same materials as painting, it just happens in a different order."

"I work in fiber because it's the medium I have a relationship with, but I'm drawn to abstract painting because it gives me a shift of perception, and a way of exploring who we are," she stresses. "What I respond to in abstract art is that it gets to those experiences and places in ourselves we absolutely have no words for. How we experience the world is so much more than what we can express verbally."

As for capturing the unique colors she sees in her head, she uses the metric system to mix her 12

basic colors of powdered pigment into as many other different colors as she wants. She favors gold and copper color ranges, because she likes them and can use them in different ways. "I respond very strongly



to color," she says, again alluding to the way synaesthetes like herself often equate certain colors with certain feelings. "It's a very powerful language. It's a wonderful metaphor—it's how we see the world. It looks like it has a solid substance of its own, but it's only a reflection of light on our retina. So it doesn't actually exist."

Definitely solid is her relationship and

collaboration with her guitarist husband Robert Bluestone. For the past several years, they've been touring various universities, senior centers, and hospitals (usually meeting with patients battling cancer) with a project they call "Woven Harmony." Her tapestries hang behind her husband on a stage while he plays guitar. "We're both trying to create an abstract language that's not using words," enthuses Bluestone, an admittedly introspective person who nevertheless relishes these trips outside her studio. "People get to experience two different art forms at the same time, which doesn't happen often enough. And just as often, too, people who appreciate art, or my art, but who never really listened to classical guitar, are exposed to that, and vice versa. It's contextual instead of me just putting my work up in an exhibition. It's about how we relate to each other and our work and to the world at large."

It also relates to the many deeper questions and issues Bluestone tussles with and raises in her tapestries. "I'm interested in our ability to be self-reflective, in that part of us that asks, What is it to be human?" says Bluestone. But to explore that artistically, "You have to know what works for your creativity," she continues, "because creativity is very specific to each person. So what really needs to be taught—to artists today, and to people—is how to know themselves and know what it is they're seeing."

Bluestone figured out who she was meant to be at just the right time, and now knows herself and trusts her vision. "It's about having an authentic and deepening experience," she says of why she's here, now. "And I'm successful because I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. Which, I hope, makes it useful to other people." □

Santa Fe-based Devon Jackson also writes for *Outside*, *Glamour*, and *Sports Illustrated*.