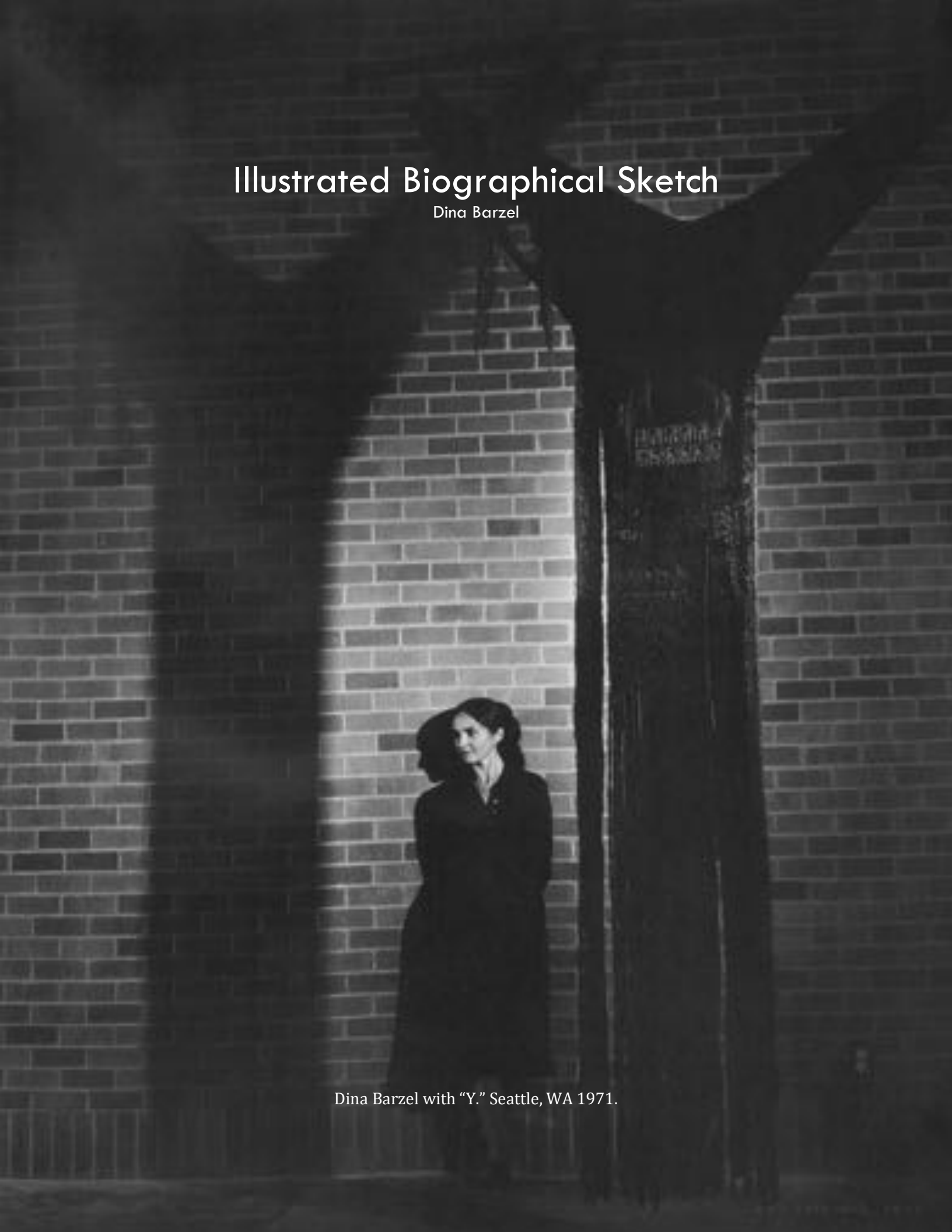


Illustrated Biographical Sketch

Dina Barzel



Dina Barzel with "Y." Seattle, WA 1971.

Fiber artist Dina Barzel (1931–2019) based this biographical sketch on a talk she gave at the Bellevue Arts Museum in 2008.

Cover photograph by Steven Cheung.

I was born and spent my childhood in Iara, a village in the Western Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania, Romania. Remembering, I see the haystacks dotting the landscape; they are built around branches protruding on top. They loom over me.



Iara, 1991



Iara, 1991



Iara, 1991

I don't know if I was told stories about them, or made them up myself, but I pretended they had magic powers, and the magic was in the sticks "growing" out of them. The branches keep turning up in my work.

I went back there in 1991. The haystacks, still made the same way, seem untouched by time.

I remember making my own to play with from sticks and dry grass, bits of cloth, string, sand, mud.

We had a wealth of things to play with, clay from the potter, empty spools and used matchsticks which we made into wagons, leftover string and bits of cloth, things you found. I was happily busy making things, dolls and whatever they needed, pots and clothes and tools for sustenance.

In this photo, I was told later, I am so engrossed in what I am doing I could not be bothered to look at the camera. I spent my life in this position, using my fingers the same way.



With local townsmen, Iara, Romania, c. 1936.

From a very early age I was taught the textile crafts that all girls had to learn. The work had to be done well and what I made had to be usable. If I made a mistake I had to undo it and redo it until I got it right—and not waste the thread. I loved it all and so I got to do it all the time. I remember well my first finished stitchery; my family used it for years. I was seven years old.

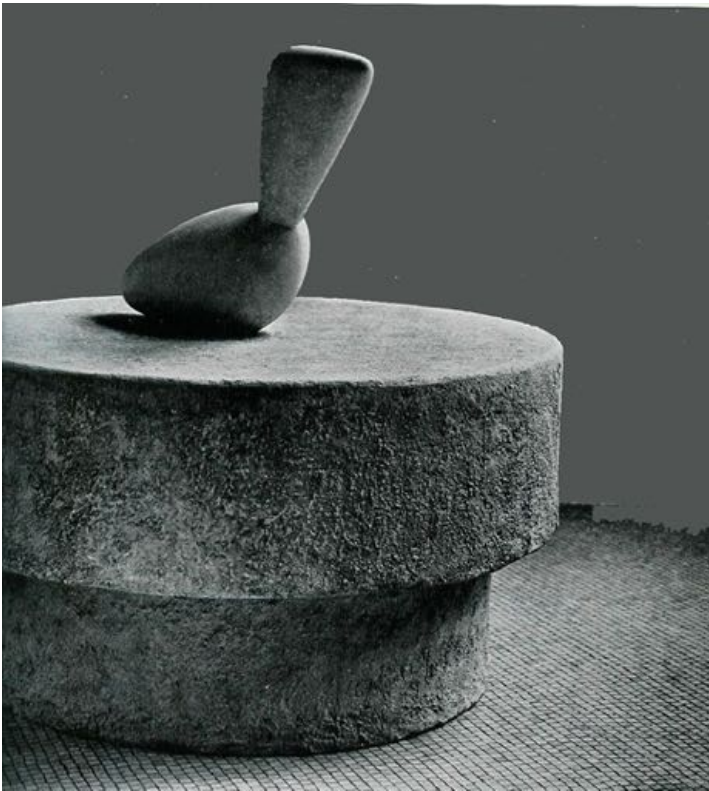
While still in high school I was apprenticed to a seamstress where I delighted in fine stitchery. At sixteen I was an accredited seamstress myself and was able to go back to school.

Those were difficult years in Europe; I was lucky to stay with my family. We moved around a lot until in 1950 we settled in Israel where my family still lives. There, I studied architectural drafting and I worked as an architectural draftsman while I completed high school and all through college. Then I met Yoram, my husband, and in 1958, after he got a scholarship to the University of Chicago, we moved to the U.S. We stayed.

In Chicago, for the first time in my life, great art was within my reach. I spent a lot of time at the Art Institute of Chicago.

When I first saw “Leda” by Brancusi I burst into tears. The massive stones, were they ordinary millstones like the ones in the flour mill in our village? And the graceful bird, the way it stood, on *that* stone.

The El Grecos, with their taller than life figures, kept me captive for days and days.



Constantin Brancusi, “Leda” (c. 1920).



El Greco, “John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist” (1600 – 1610).

I was going to be an artist.

I bought cheap remnants from fabric stores and made collages from bits of fabric, string, and paper. When we moved to Seattle in 1961 I left them in our apartment on the walls.

By that time we had a baby and soon after we had another. I enrolled in evening classes at the University of Washington, studied drawing and design and made pictorial wall hangings using a punch hook.

When our third child was born I decided to go to art school.

For two years I studied art full time, at the Factory of Visual Art in Seattle, and at the Camden Institute in London, where Yoram was on a sabbatical. In Seattle I took weaving and painting, in London wood carving, metalwork, and more weaving.

While in Europe we traveled and spent most of our time in museums and galleries. West African sculpture and Brancusi's studio, preserved in Paris, made an especially profound impression on me.



Constantin Brancusi
"Torso of a Young Girl" (c. 1923).



Constantin Brancusi, "Cup."



Dogon Toguna Post.

But what made me drop everything and start making art full time was seeing the work of the great fiber artists of the 60's and 70's at the Swiss Biennale and in galleries everywhere.

Yoram photographed this work by Magdalena Abakanowicz of Poland at the Camden Public Library in London.

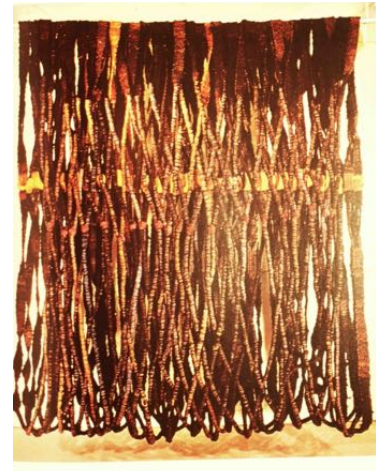


Magdalena Abakanowicz, "Red Abakan" (1969). Camden Public Library, London, c. 1971.

Many others, Olga de Amaral of Colombia, Jagoda Buic of Yugoslavia, Claire Zeisler and Sheila Hicks of the U.S., and foremost Lenore Tawney, to mention just a few.



With Jagoda Buic, "Fallen Angel" (1969).



Olga de Amaral, Detail (1970).

I thought: I know how to work with fibers.

I just started working. I knew what to do and how to do it and when I didn't, I found someone to teach me and I learned fast. The work just poured out of me and I never stopped.

The first mature piece I finished to my satisfaction is in the shape of a Toguna post. The Toguna is the men's house in the Dogon tribe of West African hill dwellers. The post holds the beams and has spiritual powers.



"Y" (1971). 132" x 72" x 4." Front View. Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1973.



"Y" (1971). 132" x 72" x 4." Front View. Photograph by Steven Cheung.

I searched out and found an abundance of fibers, wool fleeces in a great variety of natural colors, alpaca, horsehair, flax, raw silk. Most were familiar to me, but in the past I always had to use them properly as I had been taught. Now, there were no more rules: I spun the wool on a drop spindle in chunky ropes, or hair thin, evenly or unevenly, any way I pleased. I was under the spell of the fiber; it gave me all the guidance I needed. This continued to be so with other materials as I learned to use them. Just working with materials still keeps me glued to my work.

The loom was too rigid and limiting so I fashioned my own version of a warp-weighted loom, which was built for me, and which I still use. I hung my warp on some support, which became part of the work. I made clay doughnuts to weigh the warp down, and I wove across. This method allowed me great flexibility in shaping the work as it developed, seeing it vertically, adding to it, wrapping it around itself. The work existed in three-dimensional space even though it was basically flat.

I delighted in each aspect of the work, carved a ring when I needed one, covered my weights in wool just for the pleasure of it, and sometimes I left them in the finished piece.

The first time my work was shown in an exhibition was in 1971 at the Tacoma Art Museum. It received first prize in weaving, and the following year in another group show I won a solo exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle.

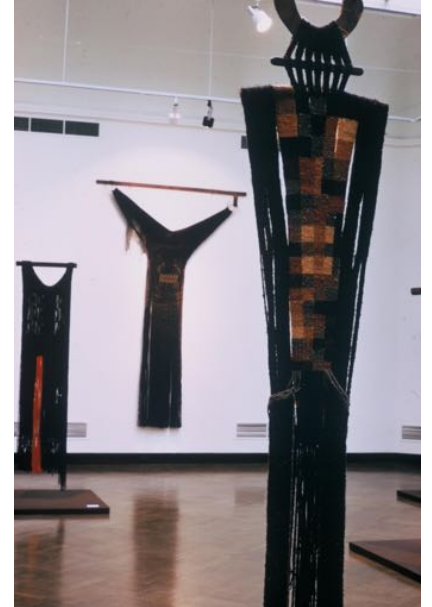
These are installation shots from the show at the Henry gallery in 1973. Most pieces hang from the ceiling with space around them. While they are basically flat, they are meant to be viewed in the round.



With "Medicine Man" (1973), "Guard" (1973), and "Veil" (1972) (L to R).



"Bride," "Guard," and "Queen" (1973) (L to R).
Back view.



"Y" (1971), "Veil" (1972), and "Queen" (1973)
(back to front).

“Guard” at fourteen feet tall was the main work in that show. In it I started using artifacts, things that had a former use. The heads are two halves of an Ethiopian food container with the bottom cut away. The arm pieces are African looms.



Head of “Guard” (1973).



Arm piece of “Guard.”



“Medicine Man” (1972). 96” x 24” x 6.”



“Medicine Man” (1972). Bottom detail.



"Guard" (1973). 162" x 96" x 6." Front View. Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA. (With Steven Cheung in foreground.)



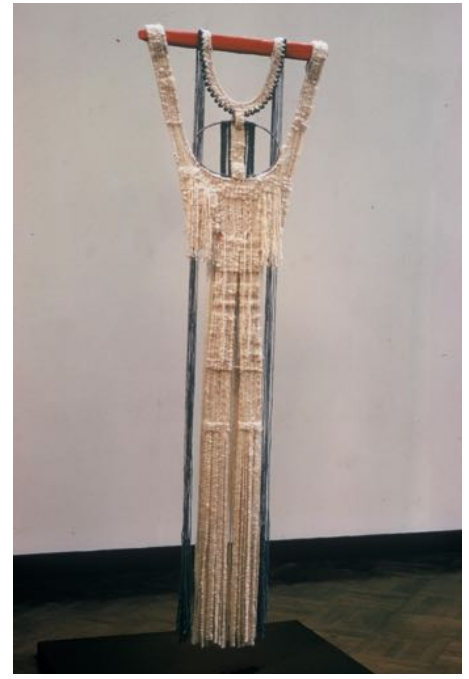
"Woman" (1974). 96" x 48" x 6." Front View.



"Veil" (1972)
84" x 24" x 2." Front View.
Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1973.



"Queen" (1973).
96" x 12" x 1." Front View.
Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1973.



"Bride" (1973).
96" x 24" x 2." Front View.
Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1973.

To make my work more three dimensional I learned basketry in various workshops, but mostly from an American Indian master weaver, who taught me coiling and twining and stripping the bark from cedar. Those skills became essential later, for constructing a variety of forms.



"Woman" (1974).
96" x 48" x 6." Front View.



"Woman" (1974). Detail.



"Mushroom" (1976).
96" x 60" x 20." Side View.

The “head” of “Woman” is a twined basket, the circular opening is coiled. The tops of “Mushroom” and the “head” of “Witch” are twined baskets; the things creeping up the sides of “Witch” are crocheted baskets.



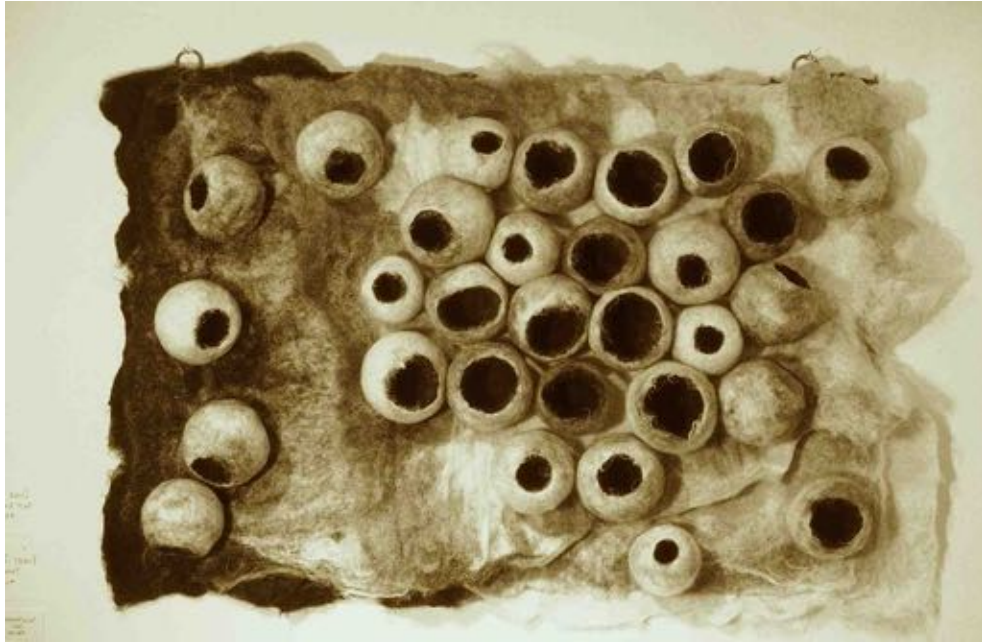
“Witch” (1977). 180" x 48" x 12." Front View.

In 1974 we spent a year in California, where I discovered natural dyeing. I dyed the fleece for “Mushroom” with Silver Dollar Eucalyptus.

In 1975 I took a workshop in felt making just to see. Felt, a most ancient technique, was widely used in my village for boots, hats, winter wear, heavy blankets. But it was made in another village and I never knew how.

Making felt opened for me a whole new way of making three-dimensional work and of using color without the rigid constraints of weaving. Moreover, it’s much faster than basketry or weaving and it gave me way more opportunity to shape my work. And yet, I kept returning to the simplest container shape, a bowl, that could hold, or could face you, or close upon itself, or fall apart.

I combined felt with weaving for free-standing and wall pieces.



“Bee Hive” (1976). 28" x 44" x 8." Front View.



“Bee Hive” (1976). Detail.



"Blue Mushrooms" (1978).
33" x 44" x 6." Front View.



"Blue Mushrooms" (1978). Detail.



"Bowl and Little Bowls" (1979).
11" x 34" x 34." Front View.



"Red Wings" (1980).
26" x 32" x 20." Side view.



"Carried" (1980).
24" x 48" x 24." Side View.



"Green Egg" (1984).
18" x 28" x 16." Front View.



"Green Egg" (1984). 18" x 28" x 16." Front View.



"Shakhris' (1983).
126" x 72" x 2." Front View.



"Shakhris" (1983). Detail.



With "Couple" (1984-1990).
240" x 96" x 18." Front View.



With "Couple" (1984-1990). Detail.

"Couple" at nineteen feet tall is my largest work. I made it as tall as I could in my studio. I used the rawest materials and the simplest tools. I chose the sheep for the fleece on a farm nearby, washed it, dyed it, felted it by hand in small pieces. I dyed and spun fine thread for stitching the pieces together with a needle.



"Couple" (1984-1990). 240" x 96" x 18." Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA, 2008.
L to R: Yoram Barzel, Aviva Barzel, Dina Barzel, Uri Barzel.



"Shakhris" (1983). 126" x 72" x 2." Front View.

It took six years to finish, after which I was exhausted. More than that, I injured my back and using my fingers became difficult. I had to give up both weaving and felt making, at least for the time being.



In the studio, c. 1988.



"Young Woman" (1989).
64" x 22" x 9.5." Front view.

I made paper from flax, still a felting process but much easier on the back and hands. "Young Woman" is made of narrow strips of felted flax paper. To make a bowl I learned to use fiberglass cloth: the basket and egg she balances on her head are made of fiberglass cloth.

Fiberglass cloth became my new material. It lends itself easily to three-dimensional forms and with proper curing it can preserve its woven structure, which I ripped and gouged. It is also very stable. Unfortunately the fumes are very toxic.

I made more "Women," their heads fiberglass bowls, their bodies made of branches. They had wheels, seemed to be going somewhere.



"Woman with Axe" (1989). 34" x 17" x 9." Side view.



"Woman with Sword #2" (1991).
68" x 25" x 12." Side view.

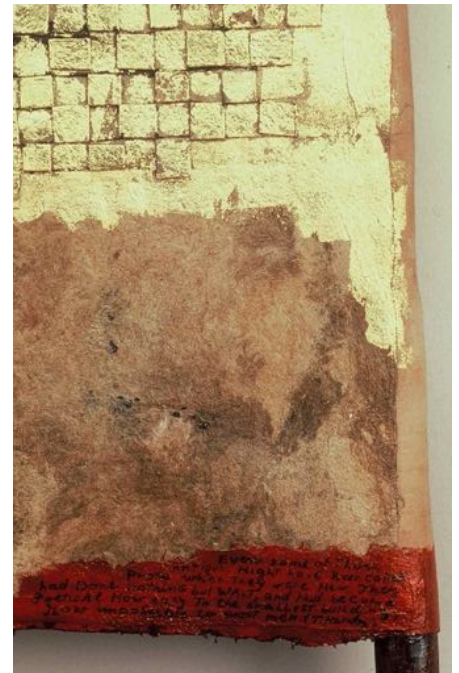
I also used distressed wood, made gates, doors, and walls.



"Village Gate" (1988).
43" x 18" x 3.5." Back view.



"Old Wall" (1990).
38" x 18" x 2.5." Front view.



"Old Wall" (1990). Detail.



"This is the Gate" (1988).
39" x 22.5" x 8." Front view.



"Canti del Capricorno" (1990).
82" x 30" x 18.5." Front view.



"Black Guitar" (1993).
83" x 36" x 12." Front view.



"This is the Gate" (1988). 39" x 22.5" x 8." Side view.

In 1991 my brother, sister, and I went back to the village of our youth, fifty years after we had left it. This was just after the revolution; food was scarce. The village was amazingly unchanged, a place that history had forgotten, a dirt road led to it still, there was no plumbing.

There was a wonderful aroma of freshly baked bread coming from the yard of our old house. A small crowd gathered and we were told that a bakery had been built there some years ago. The baker opened the gate:

“What happened to the house that was here?”

“What house?” The baker, a man of about thirty, looked puzzled. “There was never a house here.” And then we saw it: a dilapidated ruin, with the roof still on and the door shut.

“What is this?”

“Oh,” he said, “this is the old bakery.”

He pushed the door open and motioned us in. It was a gutted ruin, pitch black. It turned out that his father had built a bakery in our old house with the fire pit in the living room. Some years earlier there had been a fire inside, so they shut the door and built a new bakery behind the house.

With great excitement, my brother and I pointed at the same time to a little horizontal window near the ceiling: “There is the window!”

With its three panes intact, the window, a peculiar feature of that room, was aglow with the July sunshine, despite the grime and the soot. We got a tour of the new modern bakery and each of us was given a whole loaf of fragrant fresh bread. It was delicious.

The three-paned window turned up in my work, obvious, undisguised.



“The Old Bakery” (1992).
85" x 19" x 19." Front view.



“The Old Bakery” (1992). Detail.



“Haystack” (1992).
85" x 45" x 26." Front View.



"Haystack" (1992).
Detail.



"Kadish" (1993).
34" x 5.5" x 18." Side view.



"Kadish" (1993).
34" x 5.5" x 18." Front view.

Happily, I regained the ability to work with fabric and that was terrific. I still used fiberglass for support, but covered it with woven cloth made of hemp, cotton, flax, silk and some new manmade fibers. I ripped, gouged, painted or dyed the fabric, stitched it, and adhered it to the fiberglass support.



"Book" (1995).
60" x 35" x 2.5." Front view.



"Book," 1995. Detail.



"Kadish" (1993). 34" x 5.5" x 18." Front view.



"Book" (1995). 60" x 35" x 2.5." Front view.



"French Doors" (1995).
86" x 35" x 3." Front view.



"Another Door" (1995).
68" x 24" x 2.5." Front view.



"Another Door" (1995).
Detail.



Installation at Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1995.



"Bride" (1995).
112" x 27" x 3." Front view.



"Bride" (1995).
Detail.



"Haystack" (1992).
85" x 45" x 26." Back view.



"Rocky Landscape" (1995).
54" x 46" x 3.5." Front view.



"Mask" (1995).
62" x 82" x 13." Front view.



"Rocky Landscape" (1995). 54" x 46" x 3.5." Front view.

I was eager to have some other way to make a container, besides using fiberglass, and I learned to work with clay. I studied with Lars Husby, Larry Halvorsen, Carol Gouthro, and Bob Fornell. I did not become a potter by a long shot, but I learned enough to make what I wanted. I made containers using the same molds I used for the "heads" of the "Women," and punched holes in them for "stitching" with wire.

I turned a "Woman" upside down, with the wheels on top, and it became a boat. It did not need wheels. I lined the boats with fabric and made them sails.

I made lots of boats.



"Boat #1" (1996). 16.5" x 14.5" x 9." Front view.



"Boat #3" (1997). 17" x 12" x 17." Front view.



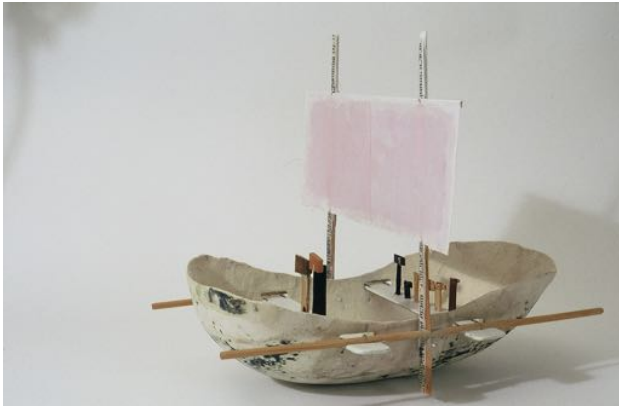
"Boat #2" (1997).
24" x 12" x 17." Side view.



"Boat #4" (1997).
18" x 16" x 9." Side view.



"Tamar's Boat" (1997).
25" x 16" x 9." Side view.



"Boat #3" (1997).
17" x 12" x 17." Side view.



"Boat #7" (1997).
14" x 17" x 21." Side view.



"Going Home" (1997).
12" x 16" x 20." Side view.



"Boat #10" (1998).
21" x 25" x 18." Side view.



"Sisters" (1998).
25" x 26" x 18." Side view.



"Funeral Boat" (1999).
21" x 25" x 18." Side view.



"Boat #3" (1996). 16.5" x 14.5" x 9." Front view.



"Boat #1" (1996). 16.5" x 14.5" x 9." Front view.



"Wedding Boat" (1999).
14.5" x 9" x 7." Front view.



"Heavy Load" (1999).
20" x 20" x 18." Front view.



"April Boat" (2000).
24" x 10" x 10." Front view.

I could use my fingers now quite well, and I became engrossed in making finer and subtler work, as if to make up for lost time.

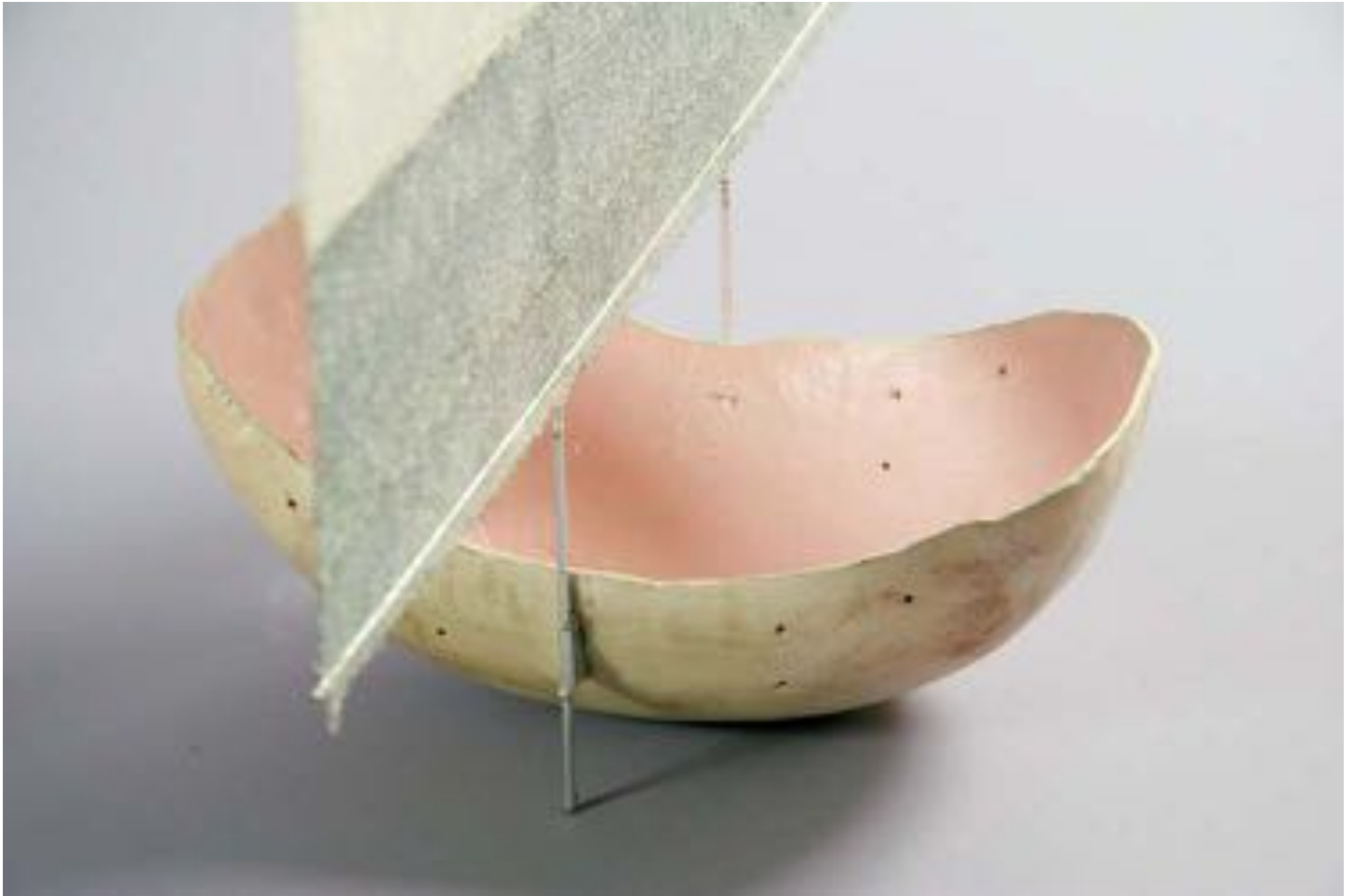
In "Boat #24" I used whisper-fine silver thread and woven metal mesh, letting in the light.



"Boat #24" (2006). 36.5" x 29" x 9." Front view.



"Boat #24" (2006). 36.5" x 29" x 9." Side view.

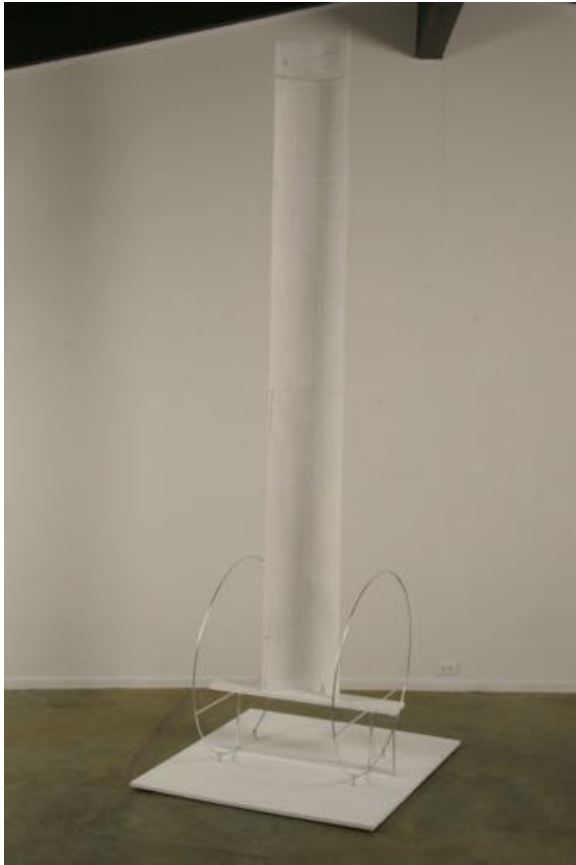


"Boat #24" (2006). Detail.

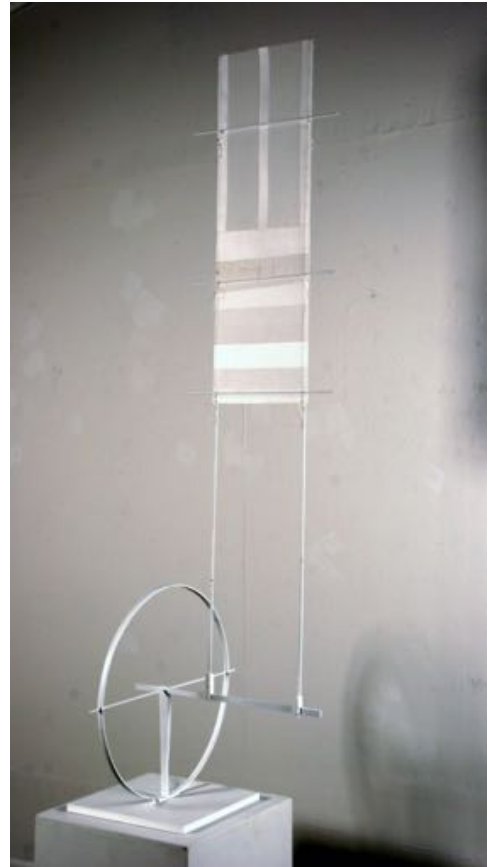


"Wedding Boat" (1999). Side view.

I saw the sturdiness, the strength of everything surrounding me, as made of fine thread, wrapped, knotted, tied, as many times as needed to hold the world together: trees, nests, webs, myself. "Raise the Rafters for the Bride," stitched with sewing thread, stands nine feet tall.



"Raise the Rafters for the Bride" (c. 2006).
124" x 44" x 44." Front view.



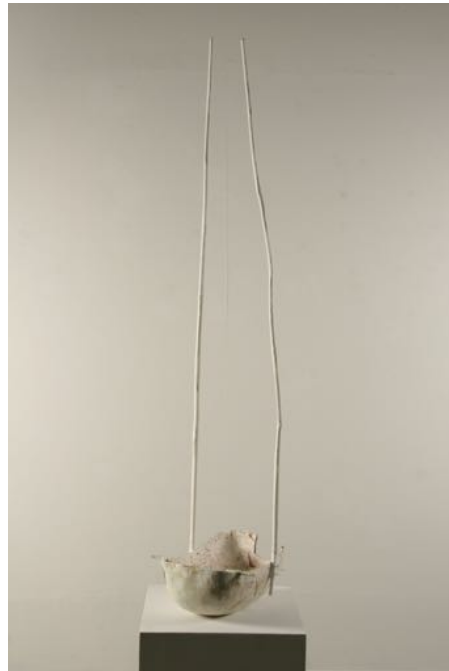
"Windows" (2006).
81" x 23" x 26.5." Front view.



Installation, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA, 2007.



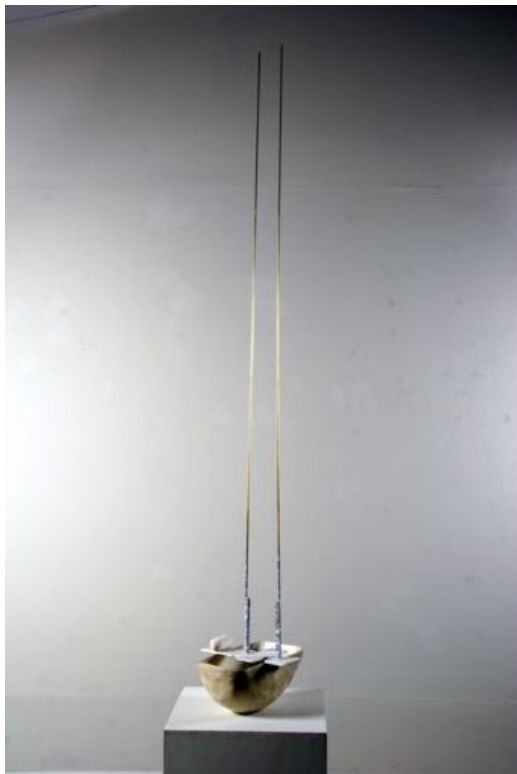
Studio, Bellevue, WA, 2006.



"2001" (2004).
73" x 15" x 18." Front view.



"White Crane" (2004).
Detail.



"Send an Angel Down" (2006).
87" x 14" x 15." Front view.



"Send an Angel Down" (2006).
Detail.



Studio, Bellevue, WA, 2006.

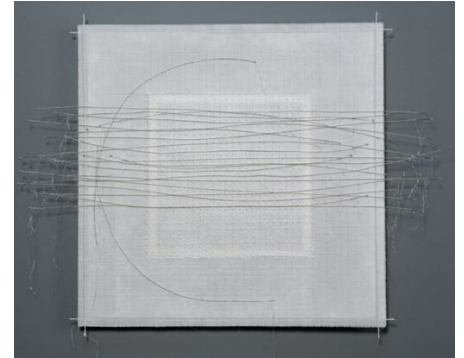
The work became transparent and quiet. I made pieces that stayed put and hung them on the wall.



"White Washed" (2006).
22" x 20" x 0.5." Front view.



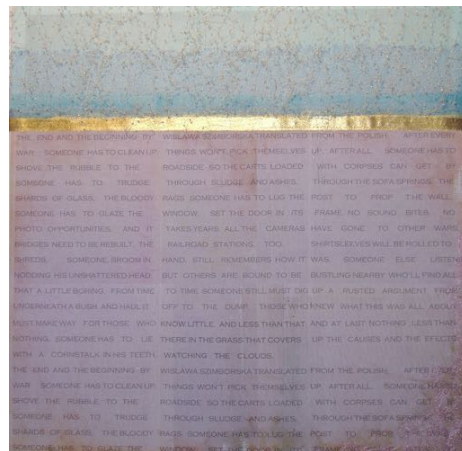
"Babies' Breath" (2006).
46" x 28" x 2." Front view.



"Numbers" (2006).
21" x 29" x 0.5." Front view.



"Falash Prayer Gongs" (2006).
54" x 15" x 2.5." Front view.



"After Each War/Watching the Clouds" (2007).
22" x 22" x 0.5." Detail.



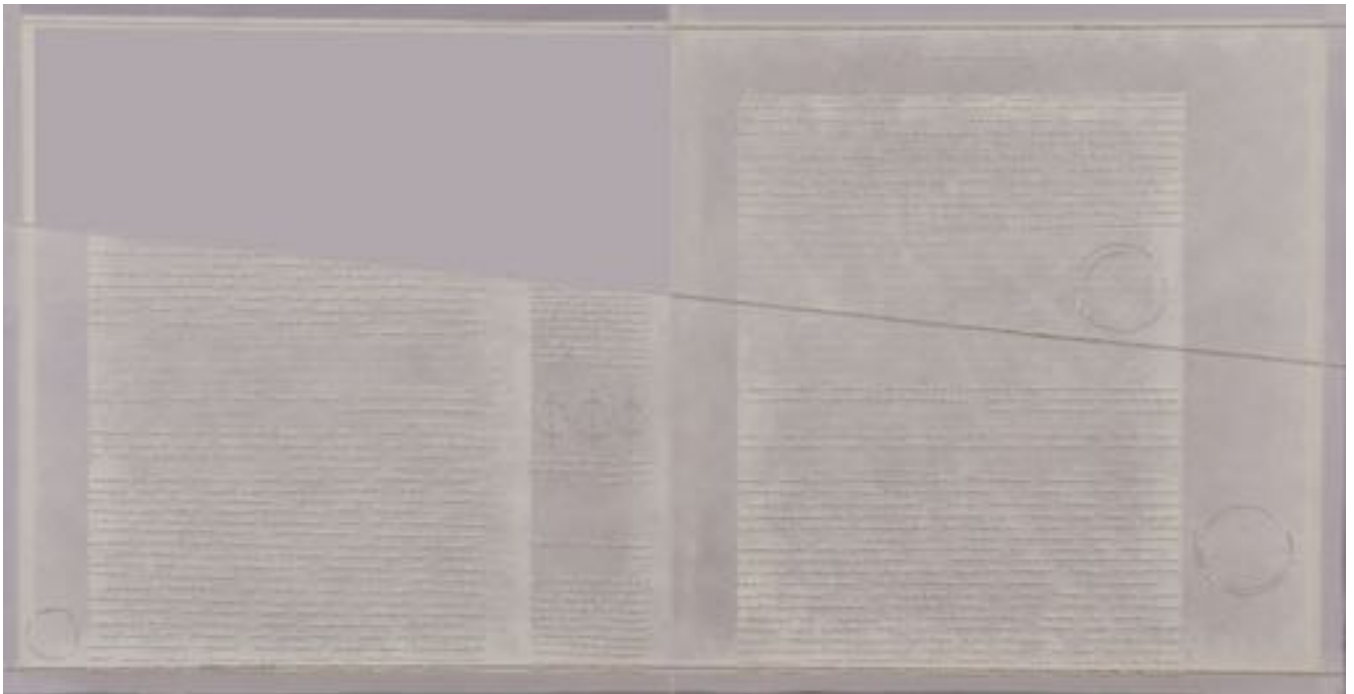
"Falasha Prayer Gongs" (2006). Detail.



"New Growth" (2006), 46" x 35" x 1." Front view.



"New Growth" (2006). Detail.



"Book Interrupted" (2006), 31" x 46" x 0.5." Front view.

"Us" is made of sheer silk organza, stitched with fine silk. It has a silver wire growing out of it.



"Us" (2004). 54" x 36" x 18." Front view.



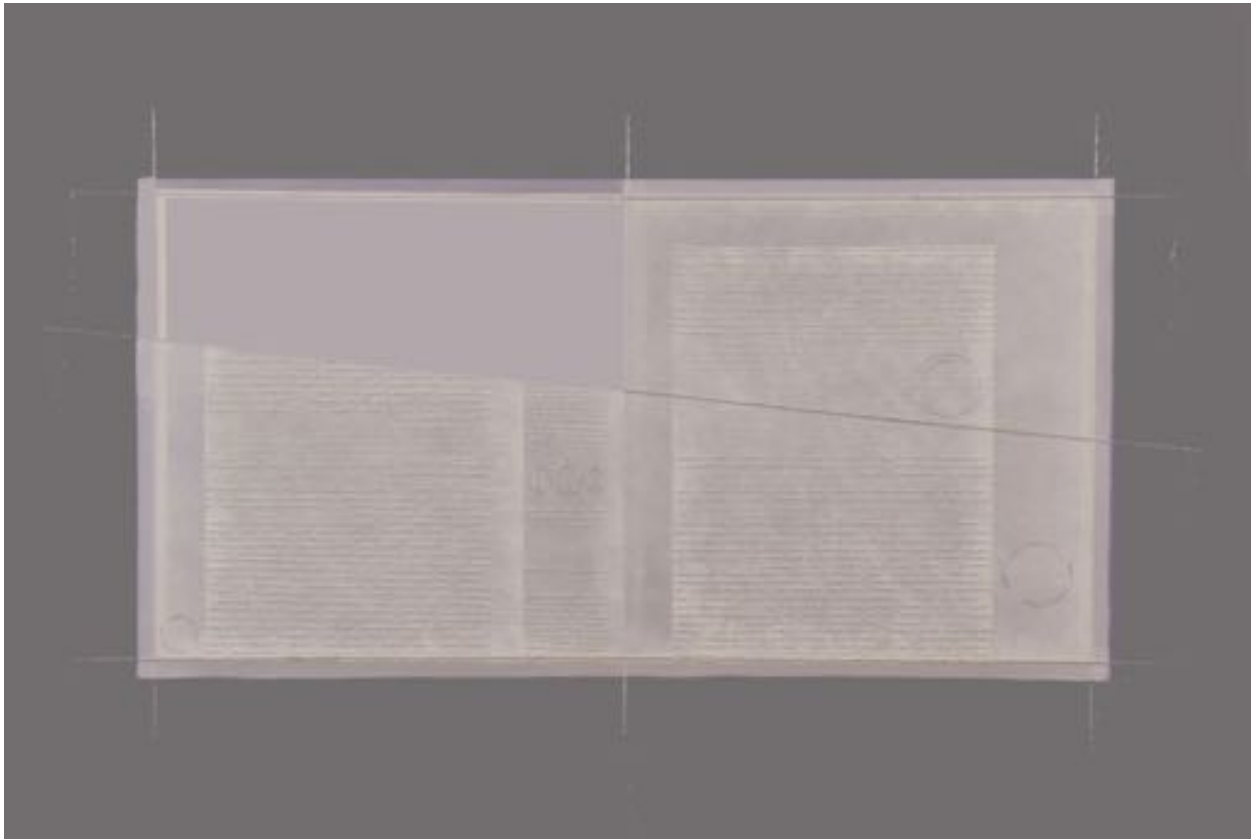
Installation, Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA, 2007.



"Us" (2004). 54" x 36" x 18." Front view.



"White Washed" (2006). 22" x 20" x 0.5." Front view.



"Book Interrupted" (2006). 31" x 46" x 0.5." Front view.

The past three years I have been working with raw un-spun silk, making silk paper. The work is three-dimensional; it mostly hangs on the wall. I am under a new spell, that of the silk thread reeled from cocoons. Its infinite delicacy belies its great strength.

I am learning.

--September 2008



"LIGHT!" (2009). 49" x 72" x 1." Front view.



"LIGHT!" (2009). Detail.



"Green Eyes" (2011). 24" x 36" x 12." Front view.



"Green Eyes" (2011). 24" x 36" x 12." Side view.



"Sea Nettle," Proposal (2011).



"Sea Nettle" (2012). 15' x 12' x 4.' Front view. Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA, 2012.



"Sea Nettle" (2012). Detail. Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA, 2012.



"Granary Door #1" (2013). 16" x 13" x 3." Front view.

