with the flow, against the grain

Keiko Amenomori-Schmeisser
synthesizing nature and technology: 
towards a universal visual syntax

Keiko Amenomori-Schmeisser’s life experience has provided her with a unique mix of Eastern and Western influences. Her father, a Japanese businessman in the textile trade, sold fine cotton yams and man-made fibers produced in Japan to lace-making countries, such as Switzerland and Belgium. Her childhood and early adulthood were divided between Japan and Germany. She grew up with a keen interest in textiles – a love of the fine, old textiles as well as the newer contemporary cloth and colors. Living and working in Australia since the late 1970s, she continues to explore textile as a primary medium finding expression in a unique hybrid of organic forms and man-made elements.

She began Japanese calligraphy lessons at age 11, after spending her primary school years in Germany. The strict positioning of strokes and dots of a character, the careful, decisive flow of energy in the writing, the importance of negative space and the necessary balance and tension between black and white were all incorporated into her basic design sense. Her ongoing fascination with calligraphy gives her work a strong basis in composition and design with a universal visual syntax.

In the early 1970s, she taught herself katsuzome, paste-resist stencil dyeing, using natural dyes. In Japan, where the Western dichotomy between craft and art does not exist, katsuzome is considered a legitimate art form that uses textile as its media. In fact stencil and paste-resist technique, like printmaking, provides a framework of requirements and limitations that strengthen the artistry and creative interpretation of images.

Amenomori returned to Germany in 1974–78 to study at the Academy of Fine Art in Hamburg. Since textile work in craft form was not encouraged, she majored in industrial textile design, which she continues to practice. While interning at a commercial printer where large panels were printed, she realized the potential of working with a series of large-scale prints. Individualizing each panel by adding painting to the printed image. Her creative exploration of textile art continued in Australia, where she moved with her husband in 1978. She received her first major commission in 1988 – a series of 22 large screen-printed partitions to create spaces of different sizes in the reception hall of Australia’s new Parliament House.

She assisted internationally recognized Japanese fiber artist Hiroyuki Shindo in 1995 at a workshop where he gave on natural indigo dyeing and shibori where she became fascinated by the process of shaped-resist and its diverse forms. Inspired by the innovative techniques and the perseverance of traditional Japanese craftspeople, she began to incorporate shibori techniques into her work. From the beginning she favored natural fibers, like linen with its crispness, weight, and rather coarse weave. She began drawing on white linen cloth as on a canvas, translating the energy of the hand-drawn lines into the stitching process for shibori. She uses shibori to create a textural plane, and at times sculptural objects that have their roots as much in Japanese tradition as in contemporary art and design. To produce the pattern and texture she envisions, she varies the stitch, changes the direction of the stitching, and uses different thicknesses of thread.

Much of her work originates from the soft edge of shibori. The cloth’s rigidity, which allows rather than dyes it, she says, to make the creases and wrinkles an integral part of the work.

Amenomori-Schmeisser has exhibited work under the auspice of the National Federation in 2001. Her under the themes of People of traditional textile art in Japan. She has since digitally printed images of the scanned fabric design on textile. In the hands of the hand-manipulated textile work, which continues to exhibit a labor-intensive nature.

The strength of imagery in her work is strongly influenced by her concrete, the subjective aspect material and the physical realization of ideas.

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President, Shibori Network
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Much of her work originates from observations and sketches of the natural landscape and its elements, for example, ripples inspired by the texture of a small plant detail or a bird’s-eye view of the central Australian landscape. She combines shibori and paint to create works that have both the crispness of a screen print and the soft edge of shibori. The fabric paints add to the structure and colour range of her work and give the cloth rigidity, which allows three-dimensional shaping. Sometimes, painting all over the shibori-tied surface rather than dyeing it, she shapes the textured cloth into an object that demands a space around itself. The shadows in the wrinkled and hardened surfaces, reminiscent of chiseled carved wood, enhance the sculptural quality of the work.

Amemori-Schneisser has undertaken numerous commissions from Australian governmental bodies, and her work has been exhibited frequently in Australia and Japan, and also in Chile and the U.K. For the Centenary of Federation in 2003, the Australian House of Representative commissioned her to create four large banners under the themes of People, Land, Law, and Future. For the theme of People, her design incorporated a myriad of traditional textile patterns embodying Australian racial diversity. The 7.5 metre-long and 1 metre-wide panels were digitally printed with her original design enlarged by 20. Her digital prints, which include the image of the scanned fabric’s texture, are magnified and printed on the actual cloth, creating a new dimension in design on textile. In these large-scale digital printings she experiments with color and pattern using her hand-manipulated textile and photographed objects altered and flattened by scanning and printing. She continues to use a laborious hand process of shibori and masterful hand painting.

The strength of imagery and clarity of design in her work transcend specific regional idioms. In her artistic journey she successfully ties her work to a world of perceived reality, encompassing the abstract and the concrete, the subjective and the objective and alined by an acute sense of balance between the tactile material and the physical requirements and limitations inherent in the processes.

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