

AMERICAN craft

JUNE/JULY 1980 \$3.75





Woven Form, rayon, color blended, eccentric weft, 54" x 54" (1979).

LIA COOK:

ON THE LOOM
OF
CONTRADICTION

TEXT BY JAN JANEIRO
 PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCHOPPLEIN STUDIO

In creation there is not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only progress and continuation but also impediment and limitation....

—Karl Barth

Textile artist Lia Cook, who maintains a studio in Berkeley, CA, first came to prominence in 1973 when she participated in the Sixth International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland. Since that time, she has exhibited widely both nationally and internationally, executed numerous major commissions and is currently associate professor in the Textile Arts Program at California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. Within the textile community, her impeccable craftsmanship and precision of technique have helped stimulate the movement away from simple weave structures toward a more refined textile surface utilizing multiple-harness weaves. Most recently she had a major show at San Jose Museum of Art, CA (March 1–April 10), and later this year will exhibit with fiber artist Neda Al-Hilali at the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (August 15–March 1, 1981).

Contradiction informs almost every aspect of Cook's work. A mechanized, predetermined process becomes direct, immediate, intuitive; the limitation of using a single material is broken by processes that transform that material and stretch its capabilities; a precise, straight-lined image is created by increments of rounded weft sections; visual illusions of spatial dimensionality are created on a flat, woven plane. Contradiction integrates extremes to create work that evades either formalism or spontaneity. Rather, Cook makes a conscious effort to create a balance between a systematized process and a freedom to respond directly in the work.

Utilizing complex weaving drafts, Cook programs her 20-harness dobby loom to produce complicated structural designs in heavy industrial white viscose rayon. The different drafts are related by the quality of their dimensional relief, which suggests the basic interlacement system common to all woven structure. Within these imposed limitations—a programmed weave on a mechanized loom, the use of a single fiber—there is no "romanticizing of the

Jan Janeiro, a weaver, lives in Oakland, CA.

hand process," no unplanned development, no unpredictable results.

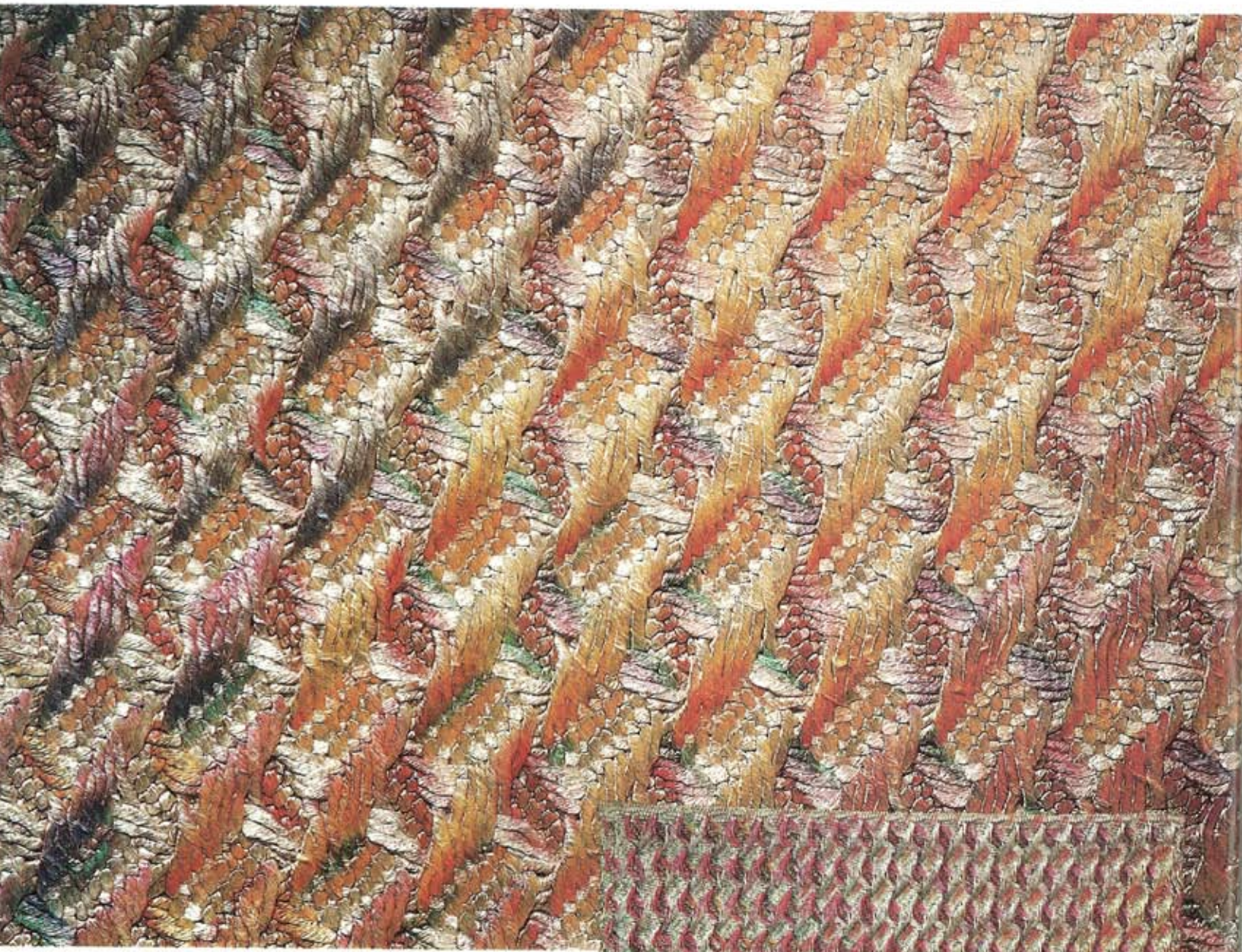
After weaving, the fabric is washed, pressed and hammered while still wet and then blocked out to dry. Initially, the pressing was all done by hand with rolling pins and assorted sizes and shapes of hammers and mallets. Now, working on larger pieces made from heavier rayon plied especially for her, Cook has the pressing done by industrial presses. Only after completion of the series of controlled processes, does direct, concentrated involvement with the surface begin.

First, the weave is further transformed by hammering down areas of the structure, intensifying the light-reflective qualities in the rayon by smoothing, pressing, by defining or eliminating areas of the structural relief. Then, with brush and watered-down paints and pigments she further alters the surface. Using both juxtaposition and overlay of primary colors she weds the color areas to the structure.

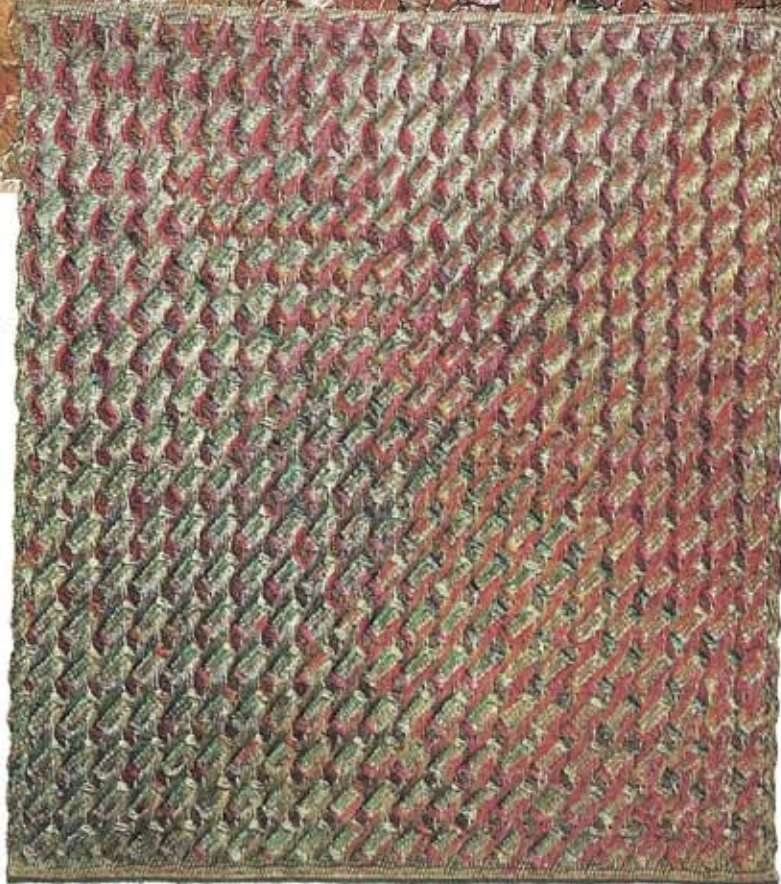
"Structure" recurs constantly in Cook's conversation. She speaks of her imagery as "self-referential"—the image *on* the woven cloth referring to the interlacement system, the structure *of* woven cloth. In *Luminescence* (cover two), the complicated, repetitive structure is transformed and subverted by highlighting and defining certain movements and negating others. In this way the work states its identity as a textile rather than as a painting.

Why weave a surface to paint on? Why not just paint? Cook replies that "the painting is important, but only important as it relates to the weave structure. It is an extension of the textile, and not a movement away from it. Because the answers are not obvious, it demands more of the viewer, who sees more because he has to look more."

The controlled process, then, of creating the fabric structure becomes balanced by the immediacy of painting on that structure, of risking the outcome of the total piece by each application of painted color. "You can't undo anything you've put down. It's all part of you and you can't backtrack." And although the visual concerns remain the same, "each woven structure is like a new language" and must be approached afresh.



All of Lia Cook's recent bangings are woven on a 20-barness dobby loom, utilizing heavy industrial white viscose rayon, then washed, pressed and painted upon.
 Right and above: Charade, 48"x48" (1980); detail of same.
 Opposite page (above and below): Stepping Down, 20"x14" (1980); Laminae, 48"x48" (1980).



Although Cook characterizes herself as exploring and devising new forms of expression, then moving on, rather than perfecting them, the development of her work over the past seven years belies this. Rather, for her, each new process is so full of possibilities that she is unable to exhaust them all before her momentum carries her on to the next stage. And that "moving on" has been a very steady progression and maturation of idea and process. Her early work had a strong graphic quality. A sense of dynamic energy was created by the tension between diagonal planes of high-contrast colors and the parallel weft lines that were shaped from thick to thin, and which controlled the appearance of each color on the surface. The visually aggressive qualities of these earlier works has softened. The structure, both real and imagistic, has developed a complexity and greater intellectual interest; and a certain anonymity has been replaced by a distinctive personal mark, a signature expressive of the artist's structural and spatial concerns rather than with a more generalized and impersonal graphic imagery.

Color, too, has been softened—both by dropping high contrasts and by color mixing, as in *Woven Form*, a transitional piece that has a subtle movement of color within the warp structure. This development has replaced the earlier flat color with a depth-producing luminescence. The luminosity is echoed in the change of materials—from light-absorbing wools and cottons to the sheen and reflective qualities of rayon. As the woven surfaces become more refined, so the attempt to articulate intentions becomes more important, and the artist consciously explores the interior "why?". □

