

LETTING GO: MOVING FORWARD WITH SARAH HASKELL

BY JANET MENDELSON

The horrific events of September 11, 2001, compelled Maine fiber artist Sarah Haskell to step outside her studio and into the larger world.

“For well over a decade, images of the house and the concept of home had been fundamental in my work,” says Haskell. “While raising my family, my solo work supported my explorations of motherhood and family.” Since graduating with a BFA in textile design from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1976, she has been digging into these personal connections, working with hand-dyed materials and traditional textile techniques. Then Haskell’s creative vision shifted.

“I didn’t know anyone killed on 9/11, but I needed to do something to understand its enormity,” she says.

To process collective grief, she began to design her first community art project. *Each One: The Button Project, a 9/11 Memorial* (2001–02) used 3,116 buttons donated by hundreds of individuals to represent the lives lost. Button donors sent accompanying letters of grief. Everyone’s heart was aching.

“It was like a lightbulb switched on in my work,” she says. “*The Button Project* taught me that when I can tap into a stream of longing or aversion that’s in myself, I’m really tapping into something universal. A common thread.” The project was purchased by the City of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and currently is on exhibit in a long-term loan to the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York.

Haskell has studied at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts multiple times. For decades, she taught or has been an artist-in-residence at schools, universities, and health centers throughout New England. She is grounded in the seacoast community of artists, musicians, and writers near her home and studio in York, Maine. A swimmer and avid sailor, she and her husband spend a month every summer on their boat. She says she cannot escape the magnetic pull of the ocean, which appears regularly in her work.



TAMMY BYRON, PORTSMOUTH, NH

*Thread is the
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LEFT: **Unhinged #2**; 2015; hand dyed, brocade woven linen, rayon, spun paper, buttons, beads; 40 x 48 in.

CENTER: Haskell at her loom

RIGHT: **Each One: The Button Project, a 9/11 Memorial**; 2002; hand dyed linen, rayon, donated buttons; top mounted on plywood shape, free hanging and weighted at bottom with stainless steel chain; hand woven and sewn; 9 ft. 10 in. x 4 ft. 2 in.

But since *The Button Project*, parallel to her studio practice, she has focused on projects that engage diverse groups of people—artists, school children, neighbors, and strangers—in creative and transformative dialogue.

“Thread is the medium with which I build my work,” says Haskell. Her hand-dyed and hand-woven linen becomes the ground weave or foundation cloth for brocade or embroidery that she works on the surface with brilliantly dyed rayon thread. At times, she draws or writes on kozo (mulberry) paper or incorporates text provided by project participants. She hand spins the paper into thread using a Japanese technique called shifu that gives it a nubby, seed-like texture. As she weaves or embroiders the paper thread into the foundation fabric, Haskell literally weaves text into textile.

“I like the mystery of the idea of hidden text,” she says. “You can’t read it. I believe there’s a form of energy you put into the act of writing that gets embedded into the cloth. As an artist, I just have to get out of the way so it flows.”

For her *Family of Language* series, she invented a language using personal symbols embroidered on brocade to express her dream of moving near the ocean. A series on antique linen, *Now: Letters by Hand*, employs 26 embroidered letters and a hand touching a flame, water, falling snow, or autumn leaves, inspired by American Sign Language hand gestures. *HELP*, another embroidered series, is her response to the refugee crisis and to global warming.

With each piece, Haskell searches for what we have in common and what defines our differences. With *Mandala Community Weaving* she led workshops that relied on many helping hands and introduced the nature of impermanence by showing participants how Tibetan Buddhist monks make intricate mandalas with colored sand, then sweep them away into water. *Woven Voices: Messages from the Heart* (2007–12) was her four-year global peace project inspired by Tibetan prayer flags, Shinto paper prayers, and the Buddhist concept of witnessing the passage of time.



SANDY AGRAFIOTIS

RIGHT: **Sinking House #1**; 2016; hand dyed, brocade woven linen, rayon, spun paper, buttons; 40 x 48 in.

BELOW: **Unhinged #1**; 2015; hand dyed, brocade woven linen, rayon, buttons, beads; 40 x 48 in.



ANDREW EDGAR, PORTSMOUTH, NH

“With *Woven Voices*, the projects became bigger than me and began to fit my emerging spirituality,” says Haskell. About that time, she received a Masters of Art and Healing from Wisdom University in San Francisco, and went to Africa with her brother. Three months later, in Maine, his accidental death ripped her apart.

“My brother’s body began appearing in my work, often in a house,” says Haskell. “The theme of impermanence, which had been building, became central.”

Two series from that period, *What you will* and *Unhinged*, explored the idea that where once there was a body, there now is space, a dotted outline, a shell. In these works, house and home serve as shelter. In *Sinking Houses #1* and *#2*, she abandoned both house and body, placing both underwater. These latter works are in the *2018 Biennial Members Exhibition* at the Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts, until October 7.

A six-panel series, *The Secrets of the Infinite*, goes further. The human form becomes a container (a home) itself. Stillness becomes a vessel for limitless possibilities.

Since RISD, Haskell has worked on a Macomber Loom. She helped the Maine manufacturer develop its computerized system. Recently, as her work changed, she simplified the loom’s construction. She

had a whole new set of harnesses built, lighter in weight; removed the dobby system and electronics; and disconnected her laptop. “I changed the loom to fit my work, not the other way around.” She let go of her old way of working. She also let go of teaching.

Well Used, Well Loved (2015–2017), her latest project, began when she turned 65 by looking at the parallels between her work and her life. “I was trying to stave off the aging process and simultaneously trying to preserve my work,” she says. “I wanted to pose the question to others, to ask how they deal with growing older.” She stopped dyeing her hair. She no longer frames her work. She began deliberately aging her materials.

For *Well Used, Well Loved*, eight households from England to Oregon were given one of her woven linen dishtowels to use any way they wished. She sent regular prompts for reflective writing or drawing in handmade journals she provided. Another group



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ABOVE: **Well Used, Well Loved**; 2017; hand dyed, woven linen, spun paper (shifu), embroidery floss. 72 x 144 in. (side panels each 72 x 24 in., center panels each 72 x 40 in.)

RIGHT: **Secrets of the Infinite**; 2017; indigo dyed, woven linen, embroidery floss; 15 x 28 in.

BACKGROUND: **Well Used, Well Loved** (detail of spun paper brocade woven in side panel)



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of 38 households wrote or drew on kozo paper in response to her prompts. Later, with video or studio instruction, she taught the second group to spin their paper into thread. They shared images and stories on a Facebook group page. This summer, all eight journals and used towels accompanied *Well Used, Well Loved* at the George Marshall Store Gallery, York, Maine. It is a 12-foot wide work in four panels. Everyone’s words on kozo paper became shifu spun threads as weft, which she wove into the work’s two side panels. One voice from many lives.

“As a textile artist, I am conscious of working with materials that are subject to change from light, humidity, abrasion, and temperature,” says Haskell, who deliberately weathered and aged her handmade linen by hanging it on clothesline outdoors throughout the Maine winter. “I find this intentional abuse and breaking down of my ‘precious’ fabrics confronts my own attachment to permanence and my futile attempts to stop the aging process within my own body.”

This autumn, Haskell will be an artist-in-residence on Monhegan Island, Maine. There she will pursue the idea of bodies in space, floating, untethered, as Matisse, Rockwell, Kent, and others have done before her. It is as if all the letting go, the pull of water, the deliberate aging and weathering of her materials, have converged to free her for the next chapter of her storytelling.

To see more of Haskell’s work visit her site at www.sarahhaskell.com.

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