

Up from Owens Valley I, detail, 1974

we went hiking in the mountains. You go up from the valley which is just to the east of the High Sierras and just to the west of Death Valley, and from this valley (which has been drained to send all the water to Los Angeles, so it's now a desert) you go up to these sheer needle cliffs. I'd never seen anything like it—12,000-13,000 feet. And they are just straight massive things. At the bottom there was a reflection in the pool so you could see the cliff double. These pieces are the cliffs, the walls; I did them on that very large loom, the 15-foot one.

EJ: *Up from Owens Valley*, with its maze of colored threads winding in and out, is like a big Pollock painting. He too was influenced by the Western space.

EM: Yes, it's probably that quality as much as the lines which suggests Pollock to you. Another of my pieces, the one called *Before the Dawn Wind Rises*, I think about as a desertscape.

EJ: Do you choose certain kinds of yarn to express particular things?

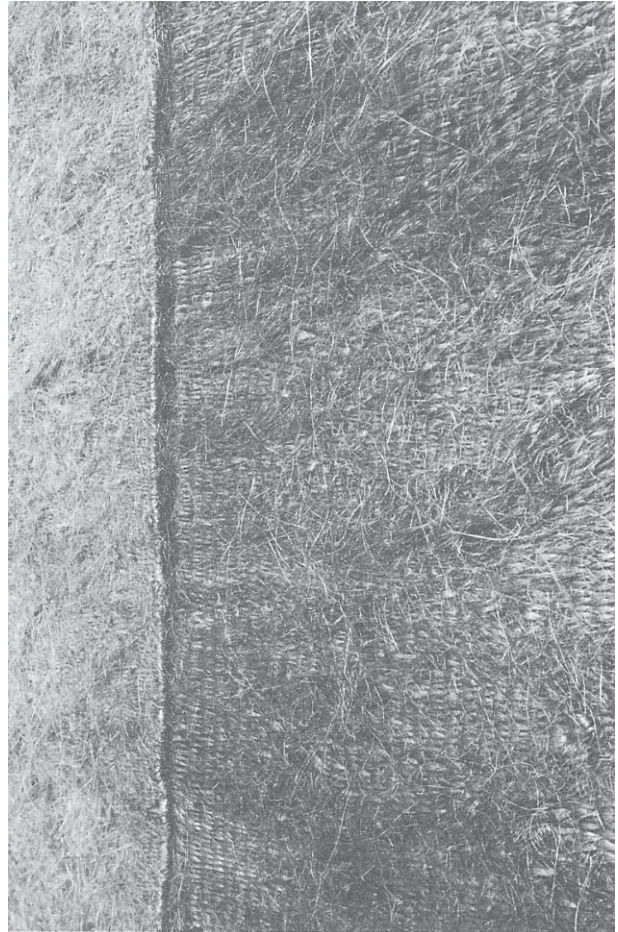
EM: The dawn wind in the desert is very thin, ephemeral. There's just this very short period of time when the sun is coming up and the wind has risen; it's a very fragile thing. The colors are like this and you can see how fragile this material is.

EJ: Almost gossamer-like.

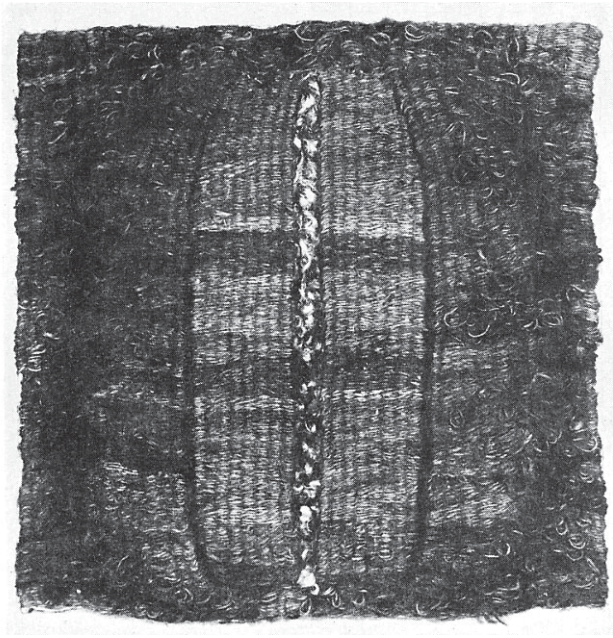
EM: It gives this sort of floating, almost ethereal quality. I think the material always has a lot to say about what the piece says.

EJ: Then, that is after you've finished it, you decide what it's expressing?

EM: Well, sometimes I make it and then it tells me what it was that I've done. I might be working along, more or less not thinking, and then I look at it and I think what is it that I've said to myself,



Before the Dawn Wind Rises, detail, 1973



That the Wind Should Not Blow on the Earth, 1974

what am I saying? And this is how I started weaving: I did quite a few pieces and then I lined them all up and said, what am I talking about?

EJ: I suppose it's the same way with a sculptor or a painter. It's the same with anybody, obviously, unless they set out to make a programmed thing, which you don't.

EM: Right—my pieces are more evocative than narrative. I find that I'm generally very consistent in

talking about relationships, as well as landscape and "figure" in landscape. The interesting thing to me is that I started out by being environmental—by being in the surround or field idiom—as in these pieces which are 14 feet long. You can't see them all at one glance and there is no particular figure in them. Then I moved to pieces which were much more figured, like *That the Wind Should Not Blow on the Earth*. That started out because I wanted to do something more sculptural. I had done a lot of very flat pieces and I was interested in the problem of how to get shape in fiber. I thought at this point that you had to do it with knots, keeping the shape out so that it wouldn't completely collapse. (It turned out that you can do other things.) Then I tried to make it several layers because that was an intriguing problem. They all go together, then divide. You work on two layers at once and just to make this a tour de force, I decided to make it three.

EJ: Isn't this piece connected with the commission you received last year to design and submit works for the Ohio State Office Building in Columbus?

EM: Yes, I had done some of these slit pieces for that Ohio thing, and I was interested in opening up the pieces because a lot of my things had been planar and there were slits *between* them, but each piece didn't have any opening in itself. One of the things that I was concerned with in the Ohio piece was that if you went down that hall surrounded by elevators on each side and you came toward this huge weaving and there was no opening, it would loom at you—where could you go visually, where could you hide? I wanted to make something that wouldn't be a frightening thing, but sort of an opening, a wel-

coming. So you see I was working with the problem of opening pieces up and giving some place to go, a sort of visual shelter in a way, something to explore behind in there; so I just decided that I would make it actually, physically there. I was rather pleased with it as it came out. I'd never done anything like that. Then after I looked at it, the name, *That The Wind Should Not Blow on the Earth*, came to me as the stillness, the contained-ness, the sort of breath-holding feeling that this has—this oval shape, kept inside the square.

EJ: When and how do you title your pieces? Do you have a specific expressive intent in most of them, or are they often engendered less explicitly than the two California landscapes (*Up from Owens Valley and Before the Dawn Wind Rises*)?

EM: Sometimes I know before I start what I am going to do, and what the name will be. Some of the pieces I do and then I read through an ancient copy of the King James Bible and I find names. I try them out until I find names that seem right for them.

EJ: When did you name the one we've just been talking about, *That the Wind Should Not Blow on the Earth*? Afterwards?

EM: Yes. It comes from Revelations; the angels are coming out with their trumpets and they're proclaiming that the wind shall not blow on the earth. It's at the end of time. The Four Corners in the Indian country is in a way the prefiguring of the end of time. It's got the four corners and it's got the big circle of the earth and it's got the opening which could be from all these tales of creation, of how the earth opened and the Indians came out. This is one of the tales, they climbed out, or creation in the sense of birthing,

or creation in the sense of opening oneself out and exposing oneself, so that all those things go together in the circle of the world, or the creating female.

EJ: When you come up to Oberlin for your exhibition, I'd like to show you how Oldenburg's *Three-Way Plug* has something of a comparable hidden, "female" quality. Do you think about art history much anymore at all?

EM: I live with an art historian!

EJ: What field were you particularly interested in?

EM: Medieval. I really was very interested in symbolism and iconography; I guess "iconology" covers it better.

EJ: Do you feel that your teaching last year, your year away, was a period of concentration for you or did you devote too much time to teaching?

EM: It was definitely a time of concentration, but I did devote a great deal of time to teaching (weaving and three-dimensional design). I don't think it was a question of too much because I learned an enormous amount. I think I would be a poorer weaver if I had not done that.

EJ: Did you have time to do your own work?

EM: Yes. I had time to do my own work because I didn't have a family to take care of; all the time that I ordinarily spend on four children, four puppies, four birds (16 it was at one time), I had to spend on my own work. I had enormously more free time than I was used to having. But I think what happened partly was because art has always been for me—even when I was in graduate school as an art historian—not purely aesthetic, but a means of understanding people. When I was working with students and helping arrange situations so that they could, by means of the work they were doing, understand themselves and their own

concerns better, that was very exciting. I work best with interaction. I certainly wouldn't do any of the weaving that I do without my husband.

EJ: You mean he helps you in terms of ideas? I know he helps build looms.

EM: He helps build looms, but the things that I weave about are things really that have to do with our relationship. I'm often weaving about relationships and the one that's most important in my life is the one with my husband. You translate relationships between people into relationships between shapes, between colors, between adjacent forms and things of that sort. It is a metaphor. When you're working with students you find out what does or does not work a lot faster. This development of visual metaphor is of very considerable interest to me. One of the reasons I'm taking psychology courses now is that I'm interested in exploring what are the visual metaphors that will really hold up, what are their archetypes.

EJ: Can you clarify a little what you expect psychology to do for you?

EM: If you are trying to talk in your art visually about feelings of great joy, for example, what shapes do you choose? Why? Will your expression be able to be read by another person? Can you communicate through these shapes? If so, why? Is there a basic vocabulary of shapes that says things universally? I don't know the answers. Psychology, once you get through all the falderal, is also about understanding the individual person. This is what I'm very interested in doing. Not mankind from the point of view of society, but individual relationships between people. A lot of my works are separate pieces put together, as in separate individuals, segments, which put together make a whole; and I'm part of a family of six people

and together we are very much of a one. Take away one of us and we're not right. Take one of the panels away from *Before the Dawn Wind Rises* and it's not right. Also, when you weave you put individual, pliable, small elements together and form them into a larger whole, just the way you do with a family or with society. That's one of the reasons that I like materials that have been used, because they're all different. I don't like standardized things. Look at my children; they're obviously different.

EJ: Could I ask how you came to adopt Jonathan and Abigail?

EM: Well, we already had two children and it just wasn't the right number. We always felt that we wanted more, and the world was full of blonde-blue-eyed children such as we could produce. But there were a lot of children around who needed homes; so we went down to the adoption agency and said who are the children at this point who most need homes and they said mixed race children are practically impossible to place. So we said fine, then we'll take them. Again, it's a very visual, tangible metaphor of family love—one you could see. Children are members of a family no matter what color. Each is your child.

EJ: It's extraordinary how you all work together—that was so marvelous, the way the children cooked dinner tonight. Does that piece over the sofa which you call *In the Shadow of Peter* allude to your son Peter as well as to the Biblical figure?

EM: Yes, my son Peter is also a square, unassuming kind of person, a little bit rough and blocky. The title comes from Acts where Peter goes out and the people who followed him put sick people in his shadow to be healed. And it's the rounded sides, Peter being the rock upon which the church

was founded, Peter being a rocky kind of person; my father is Peter, and Peter my son is a rocky sort of person.

EJ: It's very rich and subtle in color.

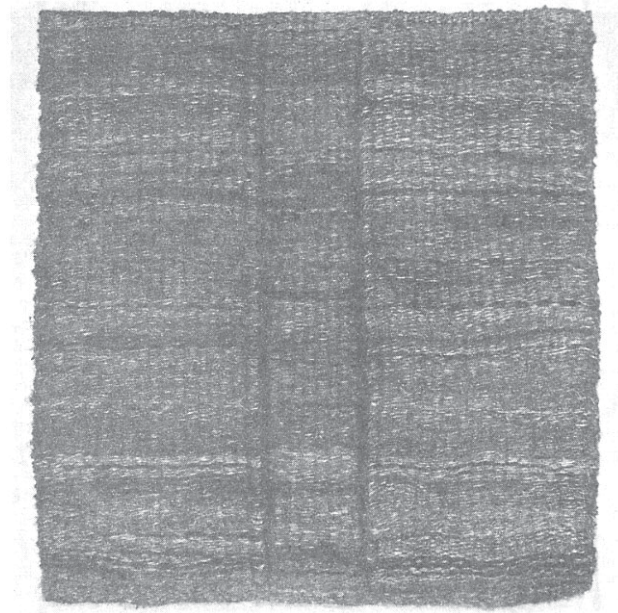
EM: And you have to look very closely to see the colors. The front layer slides over the back and there is a space in there; you're not too likely to put your hand in, but it is there. The layers sort of slither over each other the way a shadow slithers, and there's some sort of contact between the one in the front and the one in back—the way a shadow has some sort of contact with you—but they're not exactly the same thing.

EJ: *And Eleazar Died and Had No Sons* is also the figure in a field type.

EM: Yes, the figure is becoming much more important but it's still supported by the field; it's limited by it, too. Then I moved to the one out there in the garage which is probably as far as I can go in that direction. There the figure is all by itself without a field.

EJ: Yes, departing from the rectangular format, you have eliminated the field, and figure and format are identified, as they are, for example, in Jasper Johns' *Three Flags*. Why are you calling this piece *Malachi*?

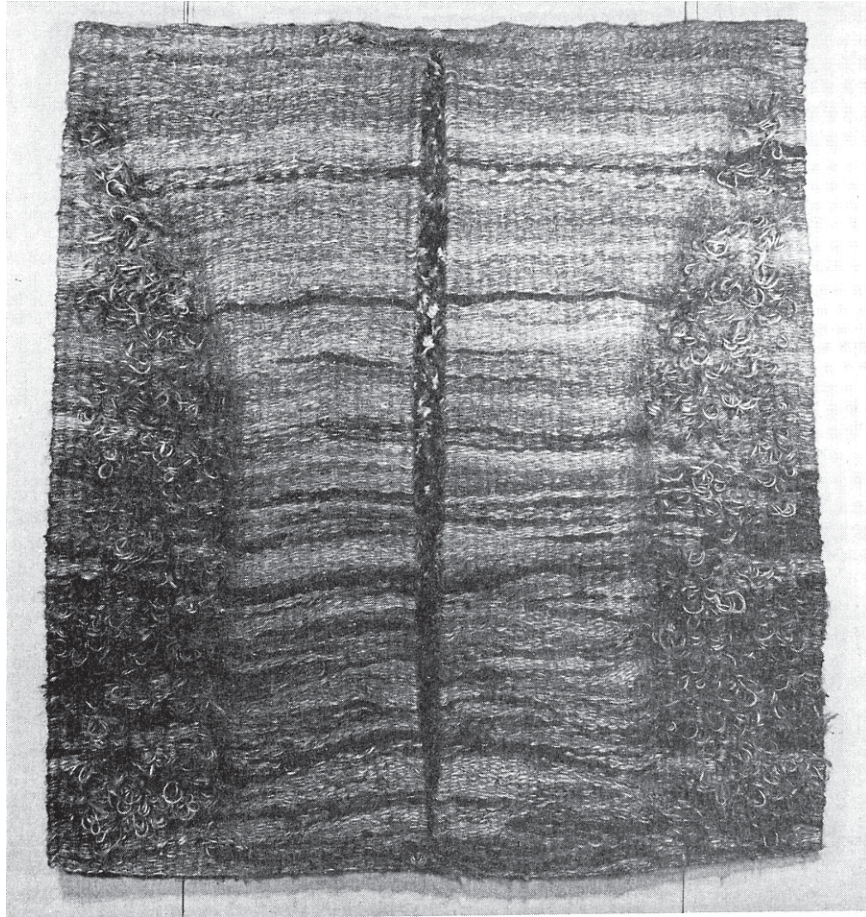
EM: Malachi is the Prophet. It is an extension of the visual and iconographic character of *That the Wind Should Not Blow*—it is the crucifix and the praying figure, and the embracing figure, saying come to me, come to me. It's also hugging you when I see you—I'm so glad to see you—that I come at you with my arms open. And, being larger than life size, this human shape becomes prophetic. The slits originally started out partly because of the Ohio piece and, of course, slits are natural to weaving.



In the Shadow of Peter, 1974

EJ: Did you start that idea of the slit because they had asked for it?

EM: No. I made it because they mentioned that they wanted to see the wall. So I picked that up, and then I started to work more with the slit idea and I wanted to make a strong shape and start getting into sculptural forms; and the best way I could figure was to make it with knots behind it which would keep the shape solid. Then I discovered that I didn't need these knots to keep the shape—that if I wove a certain way I could keep it, so



And Eleazar Died and Had No Sons, 1974

that these are really the same kind of shapes, but they're opening up a lot more. So, it's still the same crucifixion figure, the same opening figure, the same welcoming figure—you know my boys run around all summer without their shirts, and Jonathan's chest, his torso, is exactly like this, the same as Egyptian reliefs or the early Greek youth. But it's not closed anymore, it's open and welcoming.

EJ: In *Malachi* you don't feel a tension between the two sides because of the separation between them?

EM: Yes, I suppose so. I think that probably there's always in weaving a tension, not just aesthetically, but physically built in because weaving is done under tension.

EJ: How so?

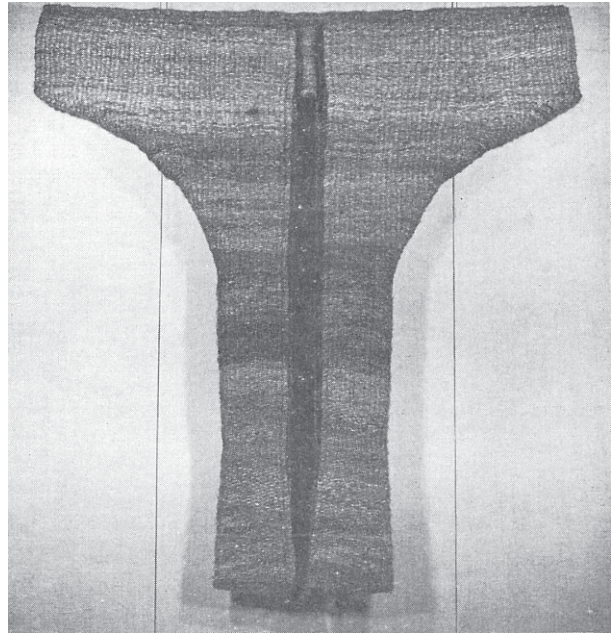
EM: Because of the way the warp is set up. It's pulled so that the warp threads, which are the vertical strings, stay in position. Physically.

EJ: Two forces in tension.

EM: Yes. You get this kind of thing built into the product, but then you also get this visual opposition of the two halves—will they stay together or won't they? I'm eager to see this once I get the ends off. I think it's going to be pretty good; I have my fingers crossed!

EJ: You spoke of wanting to become more sculptural. Do you tend to think more in terms of two-dimensionality or three-dimensionality?

EM: I think naturally much more two-dimensionally, but I'm working towards three. I find right now that architecture interests me more than sculpture or painting. The Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth by Kahn, for instance, is a real delight. The shapes and the spaces are large and clear, and that beautiful classic severity is combined with a curious

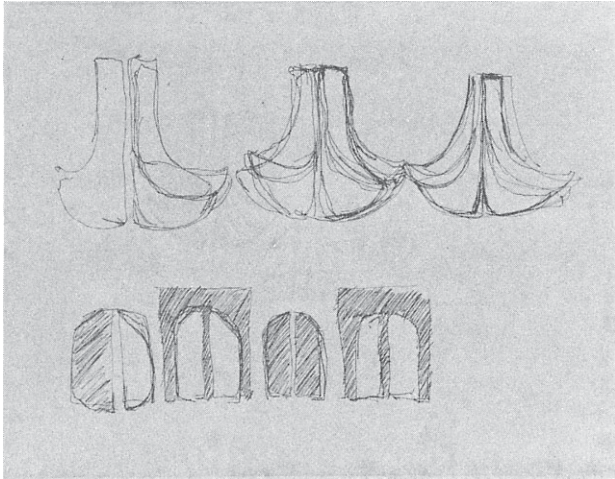


Malachi, 1975

romantic flavor. While I started very strongly in one direction, I'm moving in another. Whether it lasts or not is another question. But by nature, I would say I think in two dimensions.

EJ: Couldn't that basic predilection spring, partly at least, from your respect for architecture? Do you feel that fiber works should hold the wall and not interfere with the wall?

EM: Yes, though some of them become walls themselves. They are the wall. But I'm trying to get



Sketchbook page (study for *Malachi*), 1974

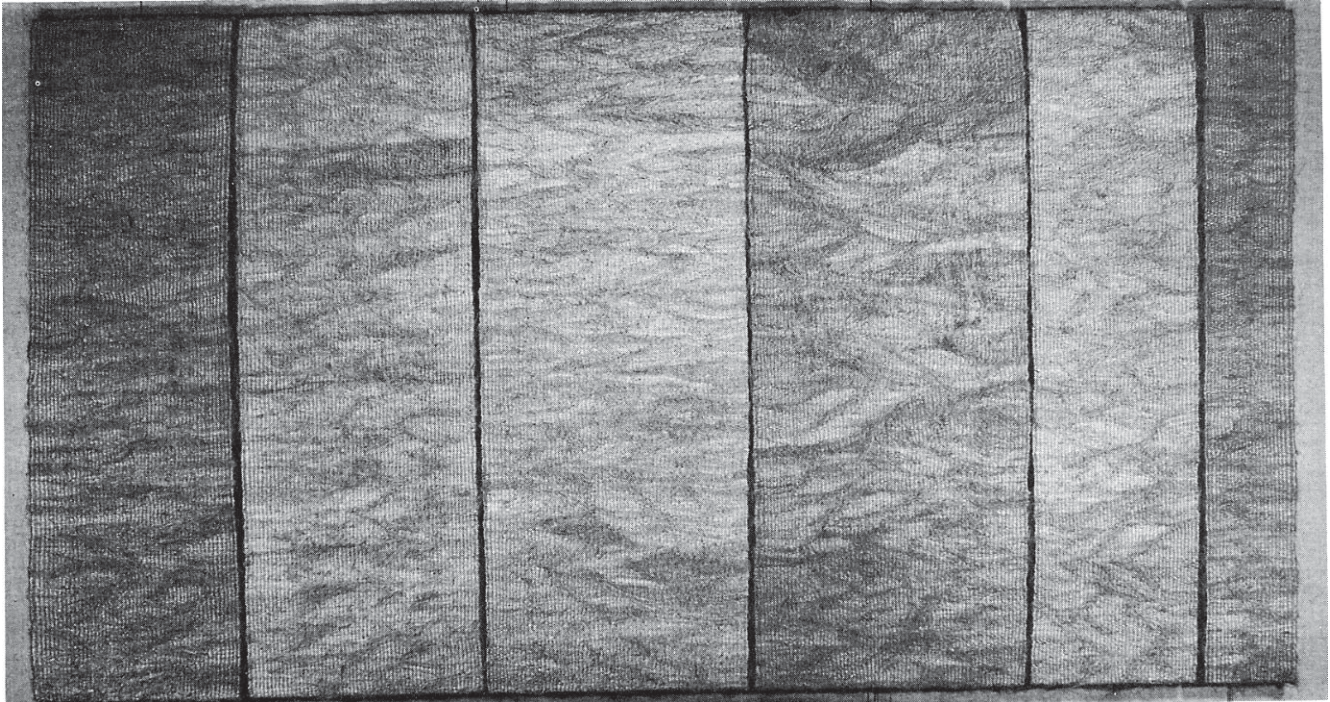
more of a sense of three dimensions. However, I think that the most I shall ever do that way is relief.

- EJ: You're not going to go into free standing sculptures?
- EM: I have a feeling that one should not play false to one's material. And if you need an armature then you should do something which properly has an armature. If you want it to be free standing then go into a material which will stand. That's a real purist attitude.
- EJ: But isn't it possible that exceeding the usual limitations of the medium, i.e., subverting expectations, is as deliberate a goal for many contem-

porary artists as "truth to material" was for an older generation?

- EM: Very probably. I'm sure I'm terribly old-fashioned in everything.
- EJ: Well, I don't think that working in Ohio while your husband and four children were living in Texas (except for the short time you had each child with you separately up north) sounds very old-fashioned!
- EM: It's interesting that my moving from field to figure in my work mirrors in a way my having moved from mother of four children, from being totally a member of a group, to being somebody who flew back and forth, commuting from Texas to Ohio.
- EJ: So you were a distinct entity, a separate one.
- EM: Yes, I was becoming much more an individual person (not that I had ever had problems being wishy-washy).
- EJ: Do you think that the women's movement helped you make the decision to do that, to take that year away from your family for your own work?
- EM: I think that's a very hard question to answer because it implies there are models, other people doing that kind of thing. And I'm fortunately, or unfortunately, old enough so that there are no models my age; nobody I know has done this. You know, I'll be 40 on my next birthday. I don't know anybody who has done the things that I'm doing.
- EJ: I certainly don't know anybody who is doing the things that you're doing (besides everything else, taking courses in psychology and algebra!); but I do know women of 40 and 50 who are working and commuting, although not from such a distance as Texas to Ohio.

- EM: It's sort of one thing to do it at small distances, and that doesn't faze me, but the very long distance—that was something to decide.
- EJ: I do know a woman who taught art history at Wellesley while her husband taught English literature at Oberlin; and that was a long time ago, before there was any such thing as Women's Lib. I just wondered whether you felt the women's movement has been of some use to you personally?
- EM: That's an interesting question and I would like to be able to say yes because I'm pro the women's movement; but I'm not too sure whether I can actually say yes or not.
- EJ: I feel, as I go around and look at contemporary art quite a good deal, that the women's movement has been a very great, really freeing kind of a force for women artists. They've certainly become much more courageous, they dare much more to do big things and to stand up on their own and as a consequence—there is no question in my mind—the majority of good artists now are women.
- EM: That's fascinating.
- EJ: In sculpture, painting, conceptual art, dancing, everything, you find a great many extraordinarily fine women artists.
- EM: I think that if I found a job that was appropriate (I know of only three weaving jobs available now in the whole country), I would very likely take it. Even though I'm always very conscious of all the children. I hear them and I know where they are all the time. It is the same when I'm away; when I was in Ohio my day was run in a way by: this is what's happening—the children are home or are not home, David is home taking care of them or he is not there.
- EJ: While you were in Ohio, it was not only the teaching that was valuable for you; but the Ohio Office Building commission also seems to have been useful because it furthered the direction your work was taking toward a more sculptural character.
- EM: Yes, I learned a great deal from it, but apparently they did not like the sculptural aspect; they liked flatter pieces. However, as far as I was concerned, a lot of pieces that I've done since have grown out of it.
- EJ: It seems to me that a great many architects nowadays would prefer to have fiber works rather than paintings or sculptures hanging on the wall. Why is that, do you think?
- EM: I don't think that's surprising because so much architecture now is so vast and in a sense impersonal and, as we were saying before, textiles have built into them the emotional message that comes from sheltering and caring, from the time that you were wrapped in your first baby blanket, and the fact that you have hair that you comb every day, and the nomadic idea of tents. If you're in the vastness of a concrete space, it's sort of like the steppes of Afghanistan, or something like that, and your textile shelter, your tent, helps to make things liveable. So fabrics have an emotional content which painting doesn't. Painting is in a way much more intellectual, not appealing so directly to the senses, I think.
- EJ: You have color in painting.
- EM: Right, but you can't feel it with your fingers. You can't literally feel it. You can't go up and put it around you like a coat; and you can with textiles. Even if you don't do it, you have the feeling that you could.
- EJ: The human contact is more direct.



Before the Dawn Wind Rises, 1973

EM: I think so. I'm not sure one could prove this psychologically. But I suspect that this is so. They did some experiments with newborn infants to see which cried more, longer, less. They wrapped some in plain cotton blankets with no nap at all, and others in fur blankets. They found no difference in the length of crying between males and

females, but they found that the babies who were wrapped in the fur stopped sooner. They were much happier. This built-in response is an advantage to the fiber artist.

EJ: I am curious about the emotional response that *Beatus Vir* elicits—what does it signify for you and how did you come to do it?

EM: I was still thinking and working in that series of pieces composed of individual strips, each one of which was different, but coming together to form a coherent whole—the total being a lot stronger than any one of the pieces.

EJ: Like the *Dawn Wind* work?

EM: Yes, but the technique in *Beatus Vir* is very different. It is used in the Indian country by the Hopis for making belts; it is not used in very many places because it is very time-consuming. You can only do as much as you can get on your hand to hold. It's done in very primitive areas. It's a personal adornment really, you wouldn't make a wall of it.

EJ: The twining technique you mean?

EM: Yes, I was thinking of the Hopis who use it and how they live on peninsulas, high cliffs, which are like islands in the desert sea. They're very isolated, a very proud isolated people. I was thinking of them and of all the other proud people who had had hard times, for whom life had not been easy, but who still had held on to what they believed was right and who went in their own direction. These are paths in a way; the meandering back and forth reminds me of the paths in the Indian country that you follow up the cliffs to get to where these people live. And I thought of blessed is the man who walketh uprightly in the ways of the Lord.

EJ: How do you emphasize or reconcile that feeling with the looseness and the flexibility of the piece?

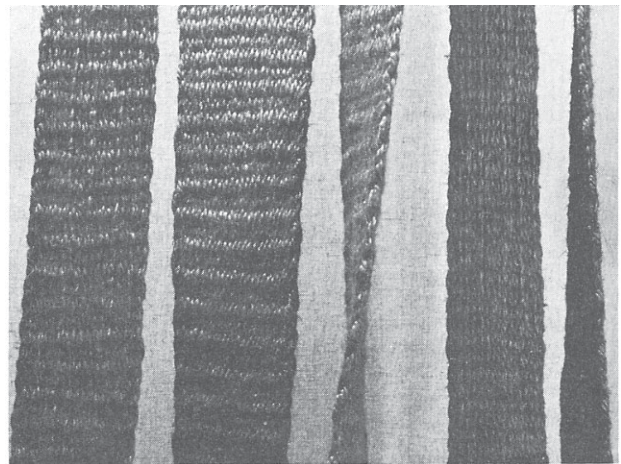
EM: The individual pieces all hang together and while they change when you bump into them and while they have these nice slits in between them and these spaces also change, still they don't go sideways or up there. They bend with the winds and the things that happen to them; but they still

keep going in the same direction. They hold true to their upright course.

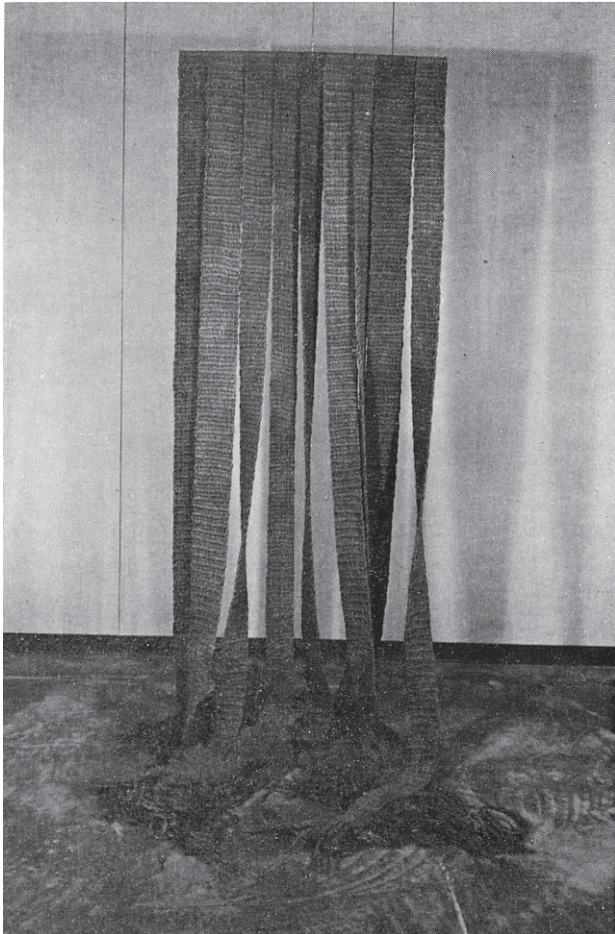
EJ: Like an ocean wave, it's still strong even when the spray breaks and curls.

EM: It doesn't go against its principles. This is really what I was thinking of, of people who were having difficulties, when other people disapproved of what they were doing, of their whole way of life, but they have held on to their principles in spite of everything.

EJ: Look at poplar trees; they're tall and straight like that, but still they have on the top that kind of swaying movement which this has on the bottom. Kind of an analogy upside down. And your piece also makes me think of Bob Morris' hanging felt sculptures. Do you like them?



Beatus Vir, detail, 1972



Beatus Vir, 1972

EM: They are fascinating to me because I saw one of them after I had done the *Beatus Vir* which is not totally dissimilar; I had never seen any before.

EJ: There are of course many differences, including the basic one that for you "process" is not just an element of style or form, but a fundamental principle. You had to *make* it from the beginning, not just cut it from purchased, machine-made material.

EM: I don't like using pre-made materials and having them sag around too much, because I really prefer things with a bit more upstanding, like backbone. I really prefer that kind of thing. I get irritated at people who don't stand up for themselves.

EJ: That's nice.

EM: No it's not, it's very bad.

EJ: That's the way you are. It reflects yourself and your own ideas. You were saying that weaving certainly is not your whole life. In other words, for you the medium definitely is not the message, although the medium is how you present your ideas and feelings.

EM: I don't know if that's right because I couldn't do it in stone for instance; I need something that I can manage, that's pliable, that's cooperative, so I can build together a large piece out of small separate individual entities. I don't take away from something larger. For all my saying that I like backbone, I actually do prefer something which is pliable to a point.

EJ: Both you want. You want that kind of contradiction.

EM: That's probably true. The tension between the two is probably quite important to the things that I'm working with. I don't think that I really could work in another medium very well. I think

that I fit fibers well. The tactile sense is important to me, and the directness; I don't like tools in between me and what I'm working with. I've done some prints, for instance, but I don't think I would be so good at that in the end. I'd have a good time doing it, but I don't think I'm called to it.

EJ: I feel that having talked with you I understand a little of what you are expressing or wanting to express in your work, and those multiple levels of meaning that it has for you and which you can communicate through it. You've answered me that there's no other art form, right now anyway, in which you feel that you could say the same thing in the same way and be the same kind of artist that you are; but is there any way in which you could communicate your ideas and feelings about the relationship between people, and people in their environment, in something totally outside of art? You mentioned something briefly about having thought of going into law. But do you feel that you could say the same thing in something other than in an art form?

EM: Yes. I'm sure that I probably could. But with the caveat that, because doing things with my hands is important to me—is part of me—whatever else I did I am quite sure that I would keep on making objects, making art pieces, perhaps not as a primary focus, but certainly as a concordant. My father is a lawyer. When he comes home he goes down to the basement and he turns bowls. So that this working with both your head and your hands is not an unusual tradition for me. At the same time, I was trained in straight academic matters (Holyoke, Radcliffe) so that working with your hands was almost, to put it nicely, a slight come-down. This is not what one is sup-

posed to do. However, I think people who work in law or medicine or politics or psychology are all doing exactly what artists are doing. They're talking in terms which are right to them about their views of the universe, of how to organize things so that people can have a better situation, of how to understand other people in the terms in which they understand themselves. Lawyers tend to be people who like a certain kind of stability and order, who feel right that way and who are working to achieve a standard of truth that you can base things on; and artists have a standard of truth, too. There are really all kinds of metaphors. You act out your own.

EJ: Do you think it's easier for a painter to communicate his ideas about the world, using the painting as a metaphor, than it is for a weaver? Do you think it's more difficult for other people to understand what you are communicating?

EM: I don't know. Because the people that I mostly talk with are people who are used to understanding this kind of language.

EJ: You mean art historians and artists?

EM: Well, people who are used to visual things are used to this kind of communication. I'm really not the best person to answer whether it's easier for a fiber person or a painter because my language is not paint and it's obviously easier for me to work in fibers.

EJ: I was wondering whether it's easier for people to understand what you're saying.

EM: I just don't have an answer for that, because I'm working with an already pre-selected part of the population when I talk to people about whether they get a message. For instance, the *Dawn Wind* piece that's in the ironing room is successful in that kind of term, because people get this sort

of sustained feeling of holding your breath before the morning comes, very, very easily. It gets across.

EJ: Do you think there's less snobbery on the part of art historians and art-minded people toward the utilitarian arts; is there less tendency nowadays to separate them from the so-called "fine arts"?

EM: No.

EJ: That battle is not over?

EM: I thought it was, but, unfortunately, in lots of places fiber isn't a serious art. I found myself coming around to the side, believe it or not, that I'm willing to fight the battle of art versus craft. Much to my surprise, because I didn't think that that was anything that needed fighting over anymore. But you really do get relegated to craft shows, you do get relegated to the minor arts; and, if you want to sell, you have to be very lucky and get into one of these places, corporations, for instance, or you sell at hand-thrown pot prices, you know, \$6.00 for a nice vase, come and buy. So that you really are still encountering this "art versus craft" feeling.

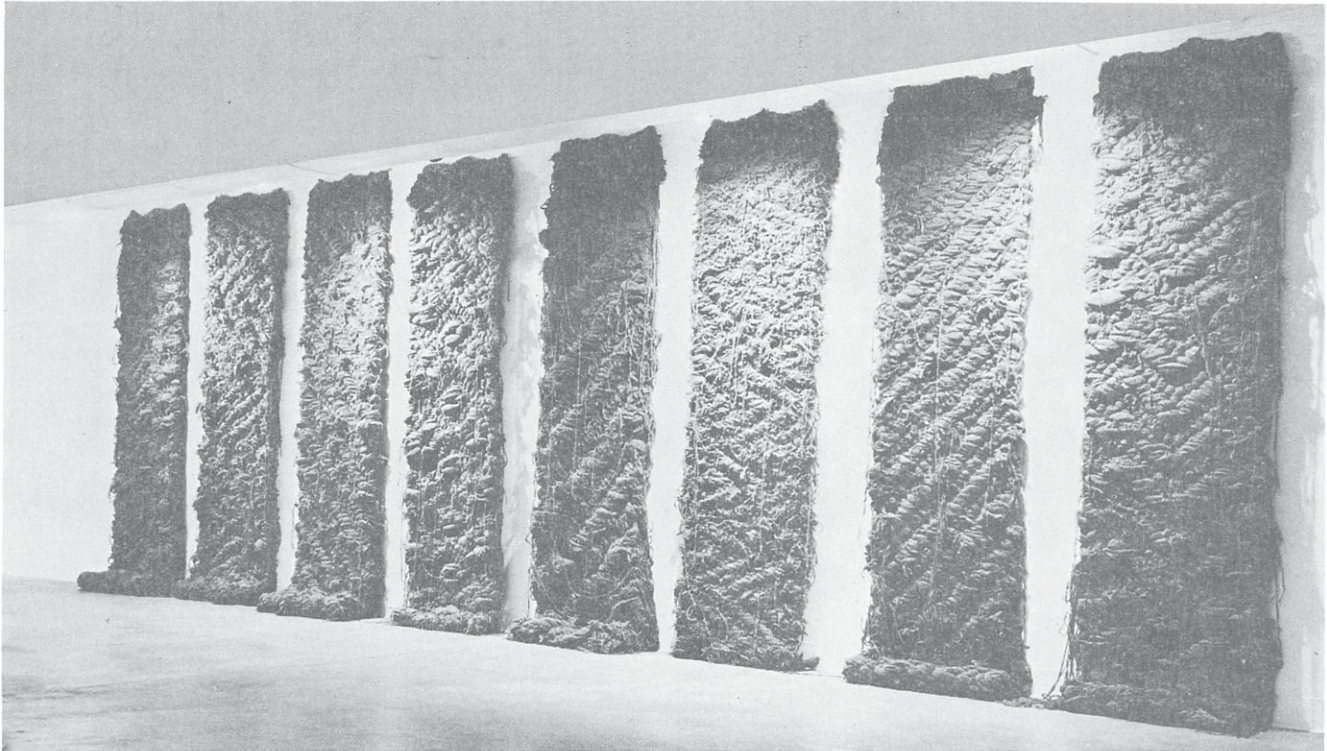
EJ: That's terrible; one of the main reasons that we wanted to have this exhibition was to dispel any such notion that might be lurking around Oberlin. To put the shoe on the other foot, I wonder if you'd mind saying a word or two about the way in which you feel that you use your study of art history, if you do, in your own work?

EM: I think there's no question that it's a very definite influence having spent all those years just learning all those thousands and thousands of slides. They're in my repertoire of mental visions in a way, not that I use them all the time, but weaving is a very slow process and you have lots of

time to think. The *Lachrymae* panels were woven during Lent 1973. It was a time when the Vietnam war was finally winding to a close but was still a source of much bitterness. A radio station in Los Angeles played a long series of Greek drama, lengthy eyewitness accounts of war atrocities, Spanish civil war poetry; and as I wove I thought of all the women who had been through so much, had lived to see their children, their husbands, their whole lives destroyed for senseless reasons, and who yet stood, who lasted, who provided what shelter and love and sustenance there was left to those who were left. I thought of the mourning figures in Burgundian Renaissance tomb sculpture, figures heavily swathed in fabric, surrounding, enfolding, carrying the dead on their shoulders. I thought of the columns of Durham Cathedral decorated with twill-like designs, as are the *Lachrymae* panels: Durham cold, chill, dark, and where I first heard of the concept of sanctuary—no matter what crime committed, a fugitive was safe upon reaching the shelter of the church. I thought of the ruined Greek temples that once had been centers of rejoicing, games, processions, offerings—and when I actually saw them, in ruins, I felt that there has never been anything more exciting than what remains. When the whole *Lachrymae* piece is set up, there is an affinity between it and such ideas that I've stored away. Eventually they come out as something.

EJ: And then you recognize them.

EM: That's interesting, the recognizing. Because when Peter and Rebecca were born I recognized them. I knew them the instant they were born. When Jonathan came to us, he was only five days old, but it took me months to really know him—not



Lachrymae, 1973

just taking care of him and handling him and knowing what his needs were—but really to know him. Abigail came to us when she was a year and four months, so she was basically fully formed. She was a firm creature who had her

own set patterns; and it took a very long time to get to know her. So, when you start with these ideas long enough ago you recognize them.
EJ: They're your family; they're as much a part of yourself as the adopted children and even as



Merrill family, Arlington, Texas, 1975. From left to right: Eleanor, Rebecca, David, Abigail, Jonathan, and Peter.

much as Rebecca and Peter are. When you were a child, did you have any of the kind of visual experience that your children do?

EM: From the very beginning I can remember deciding that I would read through the whole library, but I excepted to myself very consciously all those books which were not printed on nice paper.

EJ: Was this in your father's library or in a public library?

EM: Public library. I was going to read starting through the door as you went to the left, and circling through the whole library. But if the paper was the kind that made my fingernails hurt when I looked at it or if the print was ugly, I knew that that was one I wouldn't read because I couldn't possibly be expected to read an ugly book. And this really still holds. In my algebra course, it was necessary, in order for me to be mentally able to take that course, to have a nice pencil, because how could you possibly do algebra with an unpleasant pencil!

EJ: So you've always had this tactile as well as visual sense and it's been a very dominating one?

EM: My grandmother, who is an Oberlin graduate, took my mother to all sorts of museums when she was little. I don't think my mother appreciated it, but she did the same thing for us, so that when I was very young we went to the Boston Museum and I took art lessons there. So I've had art as long as I can remember; I've always done something with it.

EJ: When you go to museums now, as a mature person and your own artist, where do you tend to get drawn mostly; what areas do you spend most time with?

EM: The things that I tend to like are the beginnings

of things, where people are exploring, where they're discovering new ways of expressing things: early Romanesque, archaic Greek, Egyptian reliefs, early Renaissance. I like things before they get into the flowery stage. I like them when they're a little bit on the chaste and a little bit on the hard side. It's probably something which goes with my liking of the Western landscape, where everything which isn't essential isn't there. You go through the Indian country, the Four Corners, and it has been stripped away of all the things you just don't have to have.

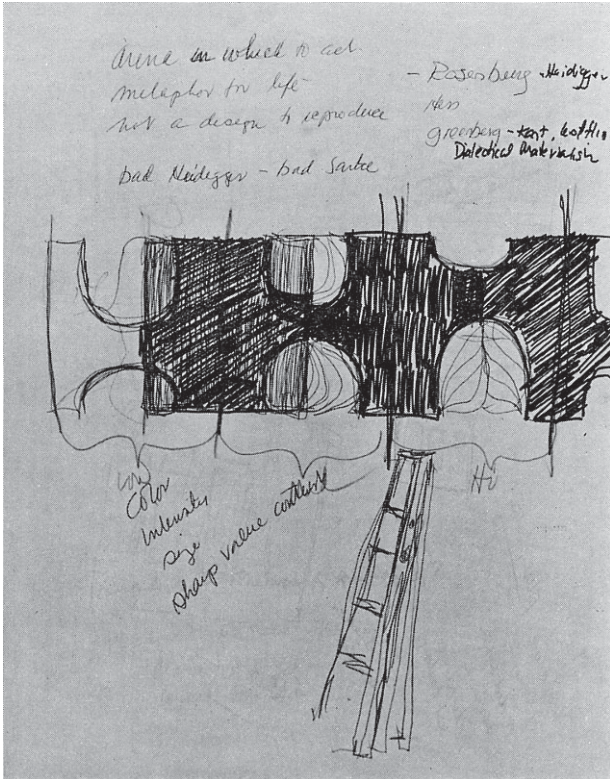
EJ: Since you concentrated in your art historical studies in the medieval period, I wondered if you have any special affinity for medieval minor arts?

EM: I don't think so. At one point I would have. Now what I look at and am much more impressed by are large environmental pieces where you get the sense of surround which is very important to me.

EJ: When you say "surround" I want to be sure I understand that. You mean the space which the work seems to occupy and command outside of itself? Can we talk about a specific thing in that connection?

EM: I think I've become more interested, for instance, in architecture which does surround you physically, which has a commanding presence and which affects (just the way the architects hope it will) how you feel about things and how you tend to organize yourself. What do you do in the Kimbell Museum? You do what is proper and appropriate—it directs you. But the things which have been of influence to me as an artist have not been in museums, not been anything that's going on in the art world. They've been trips that we've taken across this country.

EJ: You mean the nature and the total environment?



Sketchbook page, 1974

EM: Having lived in the West since 1963 while still having family on the East Coast, we've done a lot of traveling across the land. The enormous sweep of the country, the vastness of the Western

plains and the openness, and the caves in the Four Corners Indian area have been very important for me.

EJ: Do you feel that the qualities in your work that are Western are its openness and expansiveness and its freedom in the use of materials?

EM: I think so. With that I also have a discipline which is more the product of an Eastern girl's seven college kind of academic approach. You know, the Radcliffe M.A. You never quite get over having gone that route. When you put the two together it makes an interesting combination. Standing on the outside talking about it, it is sort of interesting.

EJ: And where does Ohio come in? You were born in Cleveland, I believe?

EM: Yes. I left when I was four years old; but we went back for vacation and spent time, and Ohio was like the land where one came from. It was one's ancestral territory; one's grandparents had grown up in that area.

EJ: I thought your family was from around Boston?

EM: Originally they were. Edward Winslow was on the Mayflower or whatever; however, they were staunch Congregational missionaries and they went out to the unknown Western territory and missionized, so that, then, became home. But for years and years and years they had lived in the East. And then we went back to Boston.

EJ: Could I ask how you got started on weaving?

EM: I'd always been interested in doing things with my hands. I knit through all my classes at Mt. Holyoke because I think and concentrate better when my hands are working. It just happens to be so. And when we were in New Haven while David was in graduate school, we had neighbors who had a loom and I thought that was very interesting.

Then when we went to Washington state, which is where they had come from, we were in the same place where the wife had learned to weave; so I thought well, I'll be home, not working—and I really would like to try this. I took weaving lessons at the University of Washington, but they were very traditional, the place mat type with small patterns and very fine threads. While I enjoyed the process, it wasn't exactly what I was beginning to find out that I was interested in doing. At that point we'd got two extra children in six months; we then had four and the oldest was five. So I stopped weaving. I just didn't have any time to do anything but run after children. Then we moved to California and at the point where the children were old enough for me to have any free time at all, I was interested in going back to school and I was looking for something I could do that would fit in with family and I could manage it and still see the children, and not go a thousand miles away and not return. This was at the time when Neda al Hilali came to Scripps College to teach knotting. She started teaching there in the fall of 1972 and she was also on the graduate school faculty at Claremont, so that when we returned from the East in late September, one day later I decided I would go to graduate school. And did.

EJ: What were the other alternatives that you considered?

EM: Well, I thought, because I already had a Master's degree in art history, that I could go to U.C.L.A. and finish my Doctor's degree in art history; I thought of going to law school because I had been thinking of this in Washington state. I've always been interested in the problems of inner cities, and I'm a really good battler; I'm good at fight-

ing for things, so working in poverty programs or that kind of thing would be something I would be good at doing. But all of these were 45 miles away on the other side of Los Angeles from us. The traffic situation and the class situation would have meant that I just would never have seen my children, who at this point were about 3 to 8, and it really seemed too much of a sacrifice. It was just too hard on everybody concerned, so then I looked around to see what was happening in Claremont that I could do. So I really didn't go into fibers knowing beforehand that this was what I wanted to do, and I didn't go into it because I felt I was going to have a job. I thought it was going to be fun to do. I did it just because I wanted to do it.

EJ: You wanted to do *something*, in other words.

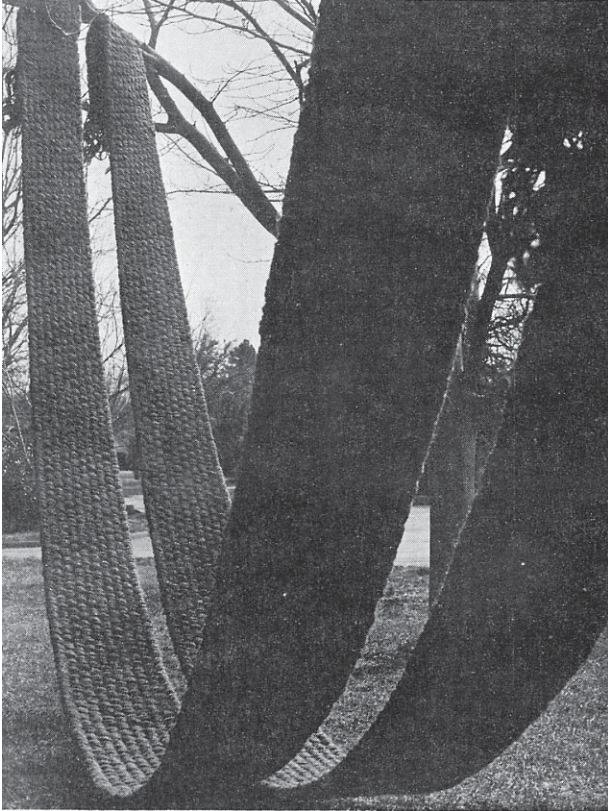
EM: Yes, and this was something that I knew already I had an interest in. I had a 12 harness 48" loom sitting in my dining room, which I hadn't done much with because as soon as I got it, we had this great influx of children and I just didn't have any time. I had always done a lot of sewing. I'd done a lot of banners and things of that sort.

EJ: For what?

EM: Well, I made a lot of them for church. We'd gone to an Episcopal church, a high church which has a lot of feasts and fasts. So I did a great many very large things, altar frontals, big flags and special things for special feast days, most of which I left in California with the church. So I was moving in that direction and I liked doing that kind of thing.

EJ: Do you feel that scale is an extremely important element in your work?

EM: Scale is important to me. I prefer to have things where I and it are very definitely related one to



Double of the Second Class, 1973

one, so that it's I/Thou and not me and it, "it" being something very small and very precious, but more sort of roustabouty like my family.

EJ: But there's a kind of grandeur about your scale; it's a little larger than human.

EM: That's the landscape quality; I'd like it to be slightly bigger than you can really see. I think that's without question the influence of the West again; this enormously beautiful distance just stretches on. In fact I'm sure that's what it is.

EJ: Your work also has a kind of density.

EM: Yes, my weaving, for instance, is very solid. I have a natural bias towards solid.

EJ: And that solid character is not just in the materials used.

EM: I don't think that the material by itself is the thing that's important. Because you can do beautiful things with things that other people have considered junk and you can make trivial things with beautiful materials. I find that trivia are trivia no matter whether it's prizes you win at a local county fair in the fat stock show or for using a B-B gun—something like that, or whether you make it in fiber. It's still miscellaneous or ephemeral and of no interest to me because I have more of a sense of the continuity of history and of mankind; and if I'm going to devote my time to something, I'd rather do it in something that I consider significant.

Arlington, Texas, January 29-30, 1975

Recorded and edited by Ellen H. Johnson

BIOGRAPHICAL CHRONOLOGY

1935 Born Eleanor Coogan in Cleveland, Ohio, May 8

Degrees

1957 B.A. with Distinction in General Studies, Mount Holyoke College, Junior Year in France, University of Paris and Ecole du Louvre

1959 M.A. in Fine Arts, Radcliffe College (Joseph A. Skinner Fellowship from Mount Holyoke, 1957-58)

1973 M.F.A. in Fiber, Claremont Graduate School

Additional Studies

1953, 1956, 1963 Summer travel and study in Europe

1964-66 Courses in drawing, design and weaving, University of Washington, Seattle

1970 Summer travel and study in Europe

1973 Courses in sheep raising, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

1975 Courses in developmental psychology, University of Texas at Arlington

Family

1958 Married David Oliver Merrill (B.A. 1955 and M.A. 1960, Yale; Ph.D. 1965, Yale, in art history)

Children

Peter Nathaniel, b. January 5, 1961
Rebecca, b. February 25, 1963
Abigail, b. April 26, 1965
Jonathan Nicholas, b. January 2, 1966

Positions Held

- 1959-61 Research Assistant and Secretary to the Assistant Director, Yale University Art Gallery
- 1962-63 Assistant to Andrew C. Ritchie, Director, The Ford Foundation Study of the Fine Arts in Higher Education
- 1973-74 Instructor, School of Art, Ohio University, Athens

One-person Exhibitions

- 1973 M.F.A. Exhibition, Relationships in Fiber, Libra Gallery, Claremont Graduate School
- 1974 University of Texas at Arlington

Group Exhibitions

- 1972 Los Angeles County Fair
- 1973 Fiberworks Invitational, Lang Art Galley, Claremont
New Faculty, Ohio University, Athens
Weavings, Fine & Folk Art Gallery, Athens, Ohio
- 1974 Ohio University Faculty, Willoughby, Ohio
Ohio University Faculty, Lake Erie College, Painesville, Ohio
May Show, Cleveland Museum of Art
Ancient Techniques/Contemporary Interpretations, ADI Gallery, San Francisco, California
Structural Fiber Forms, TransAmerica Pyramid, San Francisco, California
16th Texas Crafts Exhibition, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (Honorable Mention)
Modern Textile Arts in the Church, Chaffey College, Alta Loma, California
Christmas Invitational Exhibition, Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas
- 1975 2nd Annual Crafts Invitational, Austin College, Sherman, Texas
Southwest Tarrant County Annual, Fort Worth Art Museum

CATALOGUE

Height precedes width
All works are loaned by the artist

- | | Illustrations |
|--|---------------|
| 1. <i>Beatus Vir</i> 1972
Jute twining
9 strips, each 130" long, varying in width from 3½" to 5½" | pp. 23, 24 |
| 2. <i>Double of the Second Class</i> 1973
Sisal warp and weft
2 strips, each 360" x 12" | p. 32 |
| 3. <i>Before the Dawn Wind Rises</i> 1973
Jute warp, sisal weft
6 panels, total 90" x 167" | pp. 13, 22 |
| 4. <i>Lachrymae</i> 1973
Jute warp and weft
8 panels, each approximately 120" x 39" | pp. 9, 27 |
| 5. <i>Up from Owens Valley I</i> 1974
Jute warp, cotton weft
Approximately 84" x 180" | pp. 11, 12 |
| 6. <i>That the Wind Should Not Blow on the Earth</i> 1974
Jute warp, manila weft and knots
48" x 48" | cover, p. 14 |
| 7. <i>In the Shadow of Peter</i> 1974
Manila warp and weft
51" x 48" | p. 17 |

Photographs on pp. 6, 9, 20, 27, 28, 30, 32 by David Merrill; photographs on pp. 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24 by Michael Duskocil



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