



Dorothy Caldwell - Marking Time Story by Joe Lewis

In a 1983 article written about her for Canada's *Surfacing Journal* Dorothy Caldwell said that when she was nineteen she saw two exhibitions that made a deep impression on her: the 1971 exhibition "Abstract Design in American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and a Mark Rothko exhibition. The Whitney Museum show is now considered to have been instrumental in igniting the quilt renaissance of the 20th and 21st centuries. For Caldwell, the quilts, made by women who were untrained as artists, but with a sense of form, pattern and colour "were as exciting as any contemporary paintings" she had ever seen.

Caldwell studied painting at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. She often longed for a strong textile tradition to work in such as those found in Japan, India and Indonesia. She recognized this in quilting and found a surface treatment in the staining in Rothko's paintings, staining so light the weave of the canvas came through. Somewhere in this work was the key to what has become her signature of deep rich saturated colour from both dyeing and discharge, and the stitching that is so intense as to be an integral extension of the cloth on which she works.



Through testing a number of methods of resist dyeing she has come to prefer discharge, working from dark to light to remove rather than add colour. Her stitchery reveals itself like scratches, scarring a surface with subtle shading and motion, depicting the rural landscape in which she has lived for the last few decades.

Getting to this point in time, and being able to work in a fluid cohesive way, has been a journey. Moving to Canada in 1972, and seeing the World Craft Council 1974 exhibition "In Praise of Hands" that was mounted in conjunction with the WCC annual conference, she discovered the fabric work of Lenore Davis which was painted like a watercolour, stuffed and quilted. After a two year hiatus from painting she had found an approach to the surface which allowed the qualities of the fabric to remain.

She researched techniques, and visited artists working with textiles as art, and began to explore. Working with wax resist, Procion fibre reactive dyes, and using her own life as a source of imagery, she developed a shorthand of dancing figures that moved across a landscape-like surface. As the landscape came to the fore, produced in washes over lines of resist, the figures became more fractured - more line less form.

Improvising with tjanting tools, when those available for batik didn't work to her satisfaction, she created an ever finer line. Pieces of branches, and smaller sticks, stitched on to the surface, came to represent figures, while landscapes became topographical. The grid offered areas of opportunity to appliqué smaller textiles or insets of different treatments, gold leaf for example. More and more stitching began to appear and vat dyeing and over-dyeing gave a unique voice to her work.

By the mid 1980s, with large scale pieces such as *Landstat* being commissioned by Red Deer College, Canada, for the Red Deer Arts and Theatre Building, she had gained a level of skill that was appreciated and respected. With commissions, grants and her pieces being collected by individuals and institutions, she began to be in demand for workshops at textile arts events and conferences internationally.