

Claire Park: Chromatic Meditations

To call Claire Campbell Park's art merely weaving does not do her stunningly beautiful and meticulously constructed works justice. Park is an artist whose material of choice is fine linen, woven in methodically pulsating, subtle shifts of color. Involved with fiber practices since the early 1970s, a time when the medium underwent a significant revival if not revolution, Park has long transcended the focus on method to address concept and the formal qualities of color and texture. Her precision technique is a means to an end, a process in service to an idea rather than the act of weaving itself with all its domestic and utilitarian connotations.

Park's chromatic meditations, with their focus on form rather than function, challenge early twentieth-century textile traditions centered around the Bauhaus School of Design, founded by Walter Gropius in 1919 in Weimar, Germany. Gropius encouraged women artists to focus on weaving rather than painting, sculpture, and architecture, which he believed to be male-dominated enterprises.

One of the principal women artists of the Bauhaus, Anni Albers (1899–1994), believed that color was third in importance to the composition of weaving and posed a threat to the structural and textural integrity of a textile. To Albers, too much focus on color could move the medium into the realm of painting.¹ On the contrary, in Park's works, color is the primary vehicle for a deeper sensory and haptic experience. As such, her work is more aligned with Joseph Albers (1888–1976) whose groundbreaking book, *Interaction of Color*, 1963, explored the acts of observation and articulation, and the dichotomy between seeing color and feeling the relationships among colors.²

Park, a native Tucsonan, began to study fiber arts during her sophomore year at Scripps College, where she studied under soon-to-be noted fiber artist Neda Alhilai (b. 1938). At first, Park experimented with the gamut of revived techniques, including weaving, coiling, sculptural basketry, crochet, and mixed media. Her work was emblematic of the apex of the fiber arts movement of the 1970s when the focus was on materials and process.

After graduation from UCLA in 1978, Park began to exhibit, lecture, and teach about fiber arts throughout the world. On her artistic journey, Park sought to express a more profound engagement with art through the meditative qualities of textures and forms and emphasized aesthetic principles over fetishizing materials and the novelty of the medium. For example, between 1979 and 1986, she created a series entitled "Ryoan-ji," inspired by the books *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty* by Soetsu Yanagi and *Zen and Japanese Culture* by D. T. Suzuki. Evocative of the "dry landscape" Zen temple garden designs located in Kyoto, Japan, Park constructed works made from wrapped waxed cotton around metal rods in homage to the Japanese aesthetic concept of *wabi-sabi*, a belief that applauds the transient and imperfect.

While many emerging fiber artists in the 1970s made statements about fibers as symbolic of the confines of domesticity and the repetitive tasks associated with it, Park avoided a critique of the medium to concentrate on the optical interplay between horizontal, subtly graduated bands of colors in finely woven linen rectangular works. She also included paper in her repertoire, slicing the paper into ultra-thin strips and plating them by hand. Such pristine works embrace the meditative aspects of weaving and the simplicity of form while moving beyond the process to say something more.

Appearing effortless by its singular emphasis on precision and color play, Park's work requires almost obsessive attention to detail which requires concentration and ability to negotiate myriad numbers, repetitions, and colors. Such focus recalls the "10,000-hours of practice rule," made popular by writer Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*, based on research by psychologist Anders Ericsson. Suggesting that people only become masters at complex things after they have accrued 10,000 hours of practice, this concept recalls Park's intricate layers of colors and the precision in which they are built. However, the meditative act of weaving and the intensity of vision in which Park engages is also the result of pure talent and aesthetic awareness.

In 2009, reinforcing her interest in mindfulness and the act of creating, Park authored *Creating with Reverence: Art, Diversity, Culture and Soul*, a book that reflects on the work of several international and leading contemporary artists and the spiritual connections their art shares. To Park, her work intends to manifest "a sense of reverence, dignity, peace, and faith in a world where these are easily lost, without dismissing the realities and severity of our struggles." To obtain that goal, she follows in the footsteps of modernist artists who have used abstraction and the interaction of color and light to express the notion of art for art's sake, unfettered with content.

To Park, one of her greatest aims through her art is to create a spiritual core that brings people together rather than divide them. One of the greatest influences on Park's work is the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, and the artist's ability to move people to tears through pure color abstraction. Park sincerely believes in beauty. In her case, it is not the kind of superficial beauty that Kant suggests lies in the realm of feminine preoccupations, but the profound kind that reflects on ways to transcend earthly concerns, bringing us closer to the spiritual, moving us to tears.

-Julie Sasse, PhD, Chief Curator, Tucson Museum of Art

¹ Anni Albers, *Anni Albers: On Weaving* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 76.

² Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963).