

LIZ
WHITNEY
QUISGARD

EMBELLISH

BAM Director Les Christensen talks with Liz Whitney Quisgard about her artwork
Autumn 2016

LC: You have been creating art for several decades. Was there a seminal experience or transformative moment when your work became what it is today?



LWQ: I can claim the longest possible continuous involvement with art. I started drawing at two-and-a-half and haven't stopped yet. I am now 87. For years my mother saved my first recognizable drawing done at age three. It was an open umbrella. At four I was given a set of pastels by which I discovered the mixing of colors. At seven I was given a set of oil paints. At 14 I did my first portrait commission – a full life-size painting of a six-year-old child with her toys. I was paid 100 bucks which was a respectable fee back in 1944.

My formal training began with three nights a week at MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art) where I did life drawing my entire time in high school. After that I was admitted to MICA day school as a junior and finished at age 19.

That strict and thorough training has never failed me though the various aesthetics have come and gone over the subsequent decades. During the 1950s I played with action painting then tight-knit geometry captured me and led me to what turned out to be the stylistic love of my life: Islamic rugs! At first I loved them for their own sakes. Soon I realized that the inventiveness of their imagery were qualities needed in my own work. That fascination soon broadened to include surface patterns of Mid-Eastern architecture.

I never imitated. I utilized. I'm not interested in the symbolism or story-telling of Eastern art. Only in the eye-dazzling, decorative aspect of it. And that is where I am today.

LC: Having been a part of the American art scene for all of these years, were there any particular artists or movements that inspired you or influenced the direction your work has taken?

LWQ: During my long life I've had many favorite artists. As I have developed they have changed. As a kid my first favorite was El Greco. I fell for his melodramatic treatment of the human form and his theatrical chiaroscuro, which still gives me a thrill.

Then as drama became less important and formal considerations emerged (shape, volume, line, color and texture) I found artists who expressed those qualities – Pollock, Nevelson, LeWitt and most of all, Antoni Gaudi. In all those cases my admiration has been from a distance. The exception was Morris Louis, who became the strongest in-person example of how



to be an artist: the total dedication, the ruthless seeking for success with the goal of influencing the flow of art history. On an intimate level we shared a two-and-a-half-year love affair. Then he died but will always be the love of my life.

I never imitated his semi-minimalist manner, reductive-form action painting. I was already on the broach of geometric patterning. So I am amused when it occurred to me that he would probably hate what I'm doing now.

With all of that when the final truth be known, I must declare that my favorite artist must be me. If one is supremely ambitious and is producing the most important possible work, it can't be called otherwise. If I didn't think my work had greatness, I would be doing something else that does.

Every serious artist for whom work is religion must be obsessed. Mere talent is a dime a dozen. Stubbornness, discipline and total dedication are necessary. Even they may not be sufficient. Add a bit of luck and success may happen.

LC: Your artist's statement clearly explains your philosophy about your work. Do you mind if we end with that?

LWQ: Perfect!

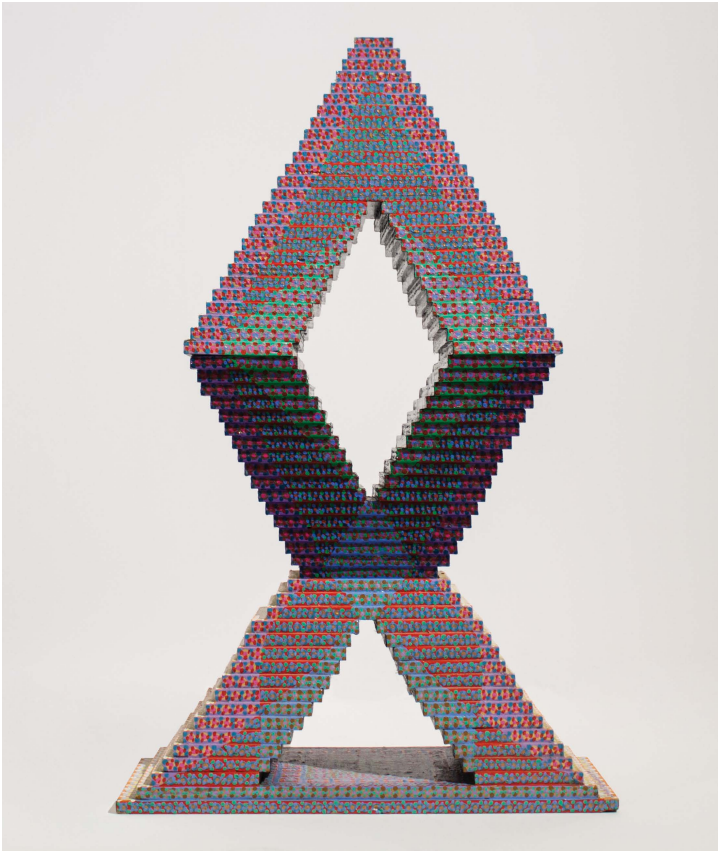
In my youthful, "truth-seeking" days, I wrote reams of justification for my work. Now that the work has matured,

and I, simultaneously, put less and less value on truth, words have become irrelevant. So, when called upon to explain what I do, I am inclined to say – "What you see is what you get."

Crouched in this flippant response is a firm conviction that the visual arts are exactly that – visual. No meanings. No preachments. No symbols. Politics; philosophy; the human condition; the environment and other causes about which people paint, perform and sculpt these days are subjects for discourse – best expressed with words. Attempts to transform them into pictorial images tend to become mere illustration – most often jejune.

My goal is to surprise and engage the mind by seducing the eye. Toward that end, I rely on pattern. The term "decorative" has been applied to my work – most often in a negative sense. But, that's okay with me, for some of the most important art is essentially decorative, Islamic rugs; Greek column capitals; Navajo textiles; Byzantine mosaics; baroque architectural embellishments...and so forth.

We all understand a row of triangles, a strip of squares, an arrangement of circles and swirls. No need to ask their meaning. They simply are what they are. They speak to us universally and without apology.



Front: *Scrambles*, 2016
yarn on buckram, dimensions variable

Interior left page: *Square #11*, 2005
yarn on buckram, 30 x 30 inches

Interior right page: *Wall Squares*, 2005 - 08
yarn on buckram, 30 x 30 inches each

Back top: *Diamond Tower*, 1993
acrylic on plywood, 29.5 x 18.5 x 8.25 inches

Back bottom: *Byzantine Series #3*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



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