

Catharine Ellis

After 30 years of juggling my own studio work with full-time teaching, I retired from teaching in western North Carolina eight years ago. I anticipated uninterrupted time in the studio but have been surprised at how much the learning, research, and teaching have continued.

My work has integrated weaving and dyeing, primarily through the use of woven shibori resist on both hand and industrially woven jacquard fabrics. When fabric construction is combined with resist and dyeing, the opportunities to layer color and pattern are limitless.

At the 7th International Shibori Symposium in France (2008), I met natural-dye expert Michel Garcia, who started me on an in-depth study of natural colorants that continues to this day. Natural dyes have now completely replaced all the chemical dyes I was using prior to this trip. In 2011, I was invited by Charlotte Kwon (founder of Maiwa) to teach woven shibori in West Bengal, India. Maiwa hosted a master natural dye class with Michel Garcia, and I was asked to work with the weavers in the group. The artisans I met



ABOVE: CATHARINE ELLIS *Sea Star Collection* Detail of cotton bolts, woven shibori, dyed with alum and ferrous mordants, indigo, lac, weld, and osage, 2013. Photo by artist.

BELOW: CATHARINE ELLIS *Shape of Color* Jacquard woven shibori, cotton, alum and ferrous mordants, dyed with madder, cochineal, pomegranate, weld, and indigo, 40" x 54", 2014. Detail **TOP LEFT**. Photos Tim Barnwell.



through this experience inspired me to continue my own investigation of dyeing. My studio practice now includes growing some of my own dye plants, which gives me a greater understanding of natural color.

When I learn new information, I am compelled to teach. When I teach, my understanding deepens. The cycle of learning and teaching has provided me with opportunities to travel and connect with other artists and ideas throughout the world. My work continues to expand and evolve in ways that I never anticipated.

In Guatemala, I worked with the nonprofit organization Mayan Hands to introduce natural dyeing to a group of women from a small weaving village. The goal—teaching skills that could improve



LEFT: CATHARINE ELLIS teaching a natural dye workshop in San Rafael, Guatemala, sponsored by Mayan Hands in 2013. Photo: Deborah Chandler.

RIGHT TOP: Detail of weavers gathering woven shibori in West Bengal, India, during the Maiwa master weavers class in 2011.

RIGHT BOTTOM: Weaver and dyer Shamji Vishram Vanker examining woven shibori during the 2011 Maiwa class in West Bengal, India.

BELOW: CATHARINE ELLIS *Tubu Variation* Detail, wool, cotton, woven shibori, dyed with indigo and madder, 2015. Photos: Catharine Ellis.



their economic life—required that I learn an alternative mordant process that was effective and suitable in this isolated setting. I now use this mordanting process in my own work.

Collaborative teaching has expanded my vision. Working with Danish textile chemist and engineer Joy Boutrup brought a greater depth to my understanding of the science of applying natural colors. Co-teaching classes about color, words, and natural dye with Debra Frasier (author and illustrator of children's books) has affected the way I see the larger concepts of my own textiles.

Last year, while attending the 9th World Shibori Symposium in China, I learned about *tubu cloth* (local cotton cloth) woven in various color and weave patterns. Since returning home, I have re-interpreted those patterns in combinations of wool, cotton, and silk, using differential dye effects with natural colorants. A visit to an animal market in western China, where most of the wool was not white but various shades of grey and brown, started me thinking about the natural colors of fibers and how they are affected by dye.

As I travel to a new place or immerse myself in a new project, I never know what I will learn or what new knowledge will find its way into my work. My senses are wide open to new ideas and possibilities.

Natural dyeing advocate, educator, and artist Catharine Ellis will be a featured speaker at Made/Aware: Socially Engaged Practices SDA Craft + Concept Intensive 2015 at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee (October 8-11, 2015). To view the complete program and register, visit surfacedesign.org/conference-2015. www.ellistextiles.com

To learn more about Charlotte Kwon and Maiwa, turn to page38.