

On Creativity During the Pandemic

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Weaving imagery using continuous-weft weaving has been my obsession for more than a decade. The weave structure I primarily use is split-shed tied beiderwand (extended summer and winter). I chose this structure because it was the best way to showcase my designs. It allows me to achieve good detail and color blending using only two pattern wefts (Figure 1).

My design process for these pieces is quite time-consuming as I am combining two images. I break the photos down into three-tone drawings, use transparent overlays, draw, copy, paste, erase, re-draw, and eventually distill it down into a four-color design — though the drawing has just three tones, one of the four colors in the actual weaving is a blend of two (Figure 2). By the time the drawing has been enlarged and transferred to a cartoon, the bulk of the design work has been done and it's just a matter of choosing weft colors and following the cartoon as I weave. Of course, there are a multitude of minor decisions to be made while weaving.

In 2018, I decided to take time out of creating art to discover and sample all of the split-shed structures that can be woven using four shafts. This turned into an eighteen-month odyssey which



Figure 1. From the tied beiderwand series, a portrait of David Bowie and images from ancient Wari tapestry

culminated in a book, *The Technique of Split-shed Weaving* (see Resource). While researching, I realized that there were many different structures that shared the same threading.

I wanted to design a piece that combined two quite different-looking structures: lampas and pique. In this case, I was creating with particular structures in mind and designed a piece that would highlight them. The piece is based on the Johnny Cash song, "Folsom Prison Blues" (Figure 3). Oddly, I was drawing this design as the pandemic was ramping up in the United States. As I worked on the project, I was thinking of hashmarks (counting off the days) as the language of waiting. By the time the piece was completed, we were in lockdown.

Next, I wanted to use the recycled silk yarn in my stash. This yarn is quite variegated in both size and color. I knew that any design would have to be simple



Figure 2. Collage of some of the creative process involved in the Bowie piece shown in Figure 1

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Figure 4. Source and resource: a rich stash of embroidery floss

weft, combining two colors of weft in each split-shed row. This allowed me to combine the wefts to create areas of blended colors. With only two wefts, I can create four color areas across the warp:

- Color A
- Color B
- Colors A and B combined
- A warp-dominant area where both wefts appear on the back of the cloth

I wove four pieces, each with a different weave structure. I pre-wound the wefts, knotting the nine-yard



increments together so that I could avoid having to get up and choose another color after every half-inch woven. I applied Saori philosophy, letting the design flow as I advanced. It's always a thrill, observing how the two wefts combine to create another color. In some pieces, I left the knots in the weft. In others, I cut the knots and overlapped the wefts.

But I still had an enormous hoard of embroidery floss. For the next piece, I decided to explore color and weave with a split-shed waffle and plain weave combination. I designed a cartoon based on ripples in water. The warp has 37 colors of floss. Areas of plain weave have more build-up because they are denser. I was interested in the color effects as well as what would happen when the fabric was wet-finished. Because the two structures have different percentages of shrink-up, the plain weave areas pucker and ripple.



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Figure 3a. Waiting, woven using a split shed in lampas and pique

to show off the yarn. I decided to forgo using a cartoon and weave using Saori philosophy, but with a split shed. The pattern is a combination of straight and broken twill. I had no preconceived idea of what I wanted it to look like. I just started weaving and let the design evolve as I wove. It was a fun one-shuttle fabric to weave.

Now it was time to tackle an undertaking that I had delayed for over twenty years — sorting a garbage bag full of embroidery floss that I had bought in bulk when Woolworth's closed. (Yes, I'm dating myself.) This task consumed two days. At the end, I felt like that kid with the biggest box of crayons (Figure 4). But how best to use it?

There are over a dozen structures that can be woven using a straight threading on four shafts. I decided to thread the loom straight-draw with a solid-colored warp and to use the embroidery floss as

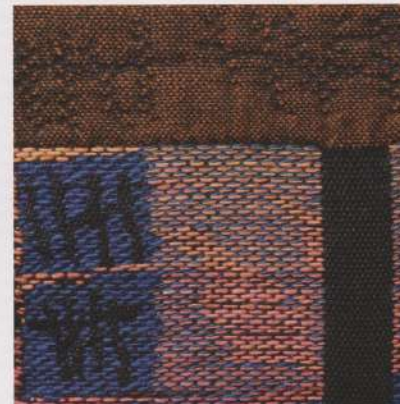


Figure 3b. Waiting, detail

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What this all means

As you can see, I have described several different approaches to weaving. But what do all these creative processes have in common? Not much, other than they were created by me and use a split shed. But which process is the best? Which is the most creative? Which one can best represent the weaver's inner soul?

The answer is all of them and none of them. There is no divine secret to creativity, no 12-step program, no textbook philosophy to follow. A process that works well for one weaver may not inspire another. I have seen the term "weave from the heart" applied to one type of weaving, but aren't we all weaving from the heart? Creativity can lie in choosing a structure and colors that appeal to you, in losing yourself to the rhythm of weaving a pattern. Certainly, valuing good craftsmanship does not make one's work less expressive, nor does creating your design as you weave instead of pre-planning make it more expressive. In fact, I consider my pre-designed art just as expressive if not more so

because of the forethought, consideration, meaning, and symbolism that goes into it.

I realize that I am approaching this from an artist's perspective, but I think that it's important for us to step back from this thing we call weaving and appreciate that, in the world of self-expression, there are myriad creative philosophies to choose from. Open yourself to trying new techniques and learning new methods. Selecting the ones that inspire you and applying them to your work is what will make it unique and personal.

What's next for me? Maybe some split-shed weaving for pique pillows or Bronson lace valances, or maybe more wall art. Stay tuned.



Resource

Silver, Deborah. *The Technique of Split-shed Weaving*. Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Windjammer Adventure Publishing, 2019. Available from many weaving suppliers and from the author's website: deborahsilverstudio.com

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