

VERNAL BOGREN SWIFT: AFTER SHOCKS

Vernal Bogren Swift is a batik-maker. Her choice of art forms, her fascination with pattern, and her receptivity to the myths of many cultures originated in Africa. She explores the relationship of geology and perception and incorporates iron-rust from the earth to strengthen this message. Living and working part of the year in Bovey, Minnesota, and part time in Haida Gwaii, an island off the coast of northwest Canada, Ms. Bogren Swift has been deeply influenced by the way people see things depending on where they live. For example, on the Island, one thinks “earthquake!” each time there is a ground shudder. In northern Minnesota, ground quake means active mining/blasting and the mind thinks of the activity as akin to “thunder.” Evidence is that our thoughts are created from the place where we have landed.

A graduate of the Cranbrook Academy of Art (MFA, 1996) in Bloomfield, Michigan, she received a Bush Foundation Artist Fellowship in 1998 and a Jerome Foundation Travel and Study Grant in 1999 for an Australian trip to visit Shark Bay where ancient stromatolites, considered to be the “mother of iron ore,” are still found. The National Art Gallery and the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C; Haida Gwaii Museum, Skidegate, British Columbia, Canada; and the North Dakota Museum of Art have collected her work. She writes:

I will tell you about one of the stories in this exhibition.

It is called Housewives and Woodpeckers. The work is a textile, made of cotton cloth on which hot wax is applied with a special pen (tjanting) to areas on the cloth defined by a pencil drawing. Waxing creates areas that resist dye. The waxed cloth is submerged briefly in vats of natural dye and hung to dry in the air and sun. Repeatedly, the cloth is waxed, dyed and dried. Finally, a five-minute bath in boiling water and lye soap removes the wax and sets the dyes. The end result is batik cloth.

Here is the background for the batik I am describing:

*I live part time on an island called Haida Gwaii, off the northwest coast of Canada. Thousands of years ago, the seas were lower. Ice was thick, but in some places refugiums resisted the ice and in those places there was green grass. The Haida say that woodpeckers lived in these grassy shelters. They say woodpeckers taught the people to pick grass seed and pound the seed to flour for bread.**

“If you are hungry, look to your teachers!”

Haida Stories like this have been meticulously passed down for thousands of years. They are precious community property. I myself come from a line of people who settled only a couple of hundred years ago in the Ozark Hills of Missouri. My people are masters of the very short story. Often the story is just a one line strange warning. Here is one: ‘Don't let a pregnant women see a dead bird or her baby will have a bird face.’

Ozark stories are related to British and German folktales. My favorite has always been the one about the woman turned into a red headed woodpecker because a man got very angry with her. He got so mad he turned her into a woodpecker! In the multiple versions, the story is that she was not generous with her bread.

“Now you will have to hold on tight and peck hard for every bite!”

I did not care for that ending. The way I would have the story go is that this woman had reasons for her caution. She had children and no husband. Or she had children and a husband who could not work. Whatever. The woman made bread every day for her children. When a goblin came to her door and asked for bread, she gave him bread. Every day after, the goblin returned and asked for bread. But he was testing the woman. He used magic to increase the size of the loaf of bread she prepared for him. But she never gave that larger loaf to him. It always went to her children and he got the smaller loaf. The goblin worked himself into a fury because the woman made her own decisions about her wealth. So he punished her and she had to fly off and live like a woodpecker. Because woodpeckers are known to be good teachers of how to get food and because woodpeckers share food with mortals, all is well in the end.

I turned Woodpecker Woman into a teacher, even as Woodpecker Bird is a teacher. One has only to believe it.

* Refugiums are areas of relatively unaltered climate that are inhabited by plants and animals during a period of continental climatic change (as glaciations) and remain as a center of relict forms from which a new dispersion and speciation may take place after climatic readjustment. Relict forms are surviving species of an otherwise extinct group of organisms; also: a remnant of a formerly widespread species that persists in an isolated area