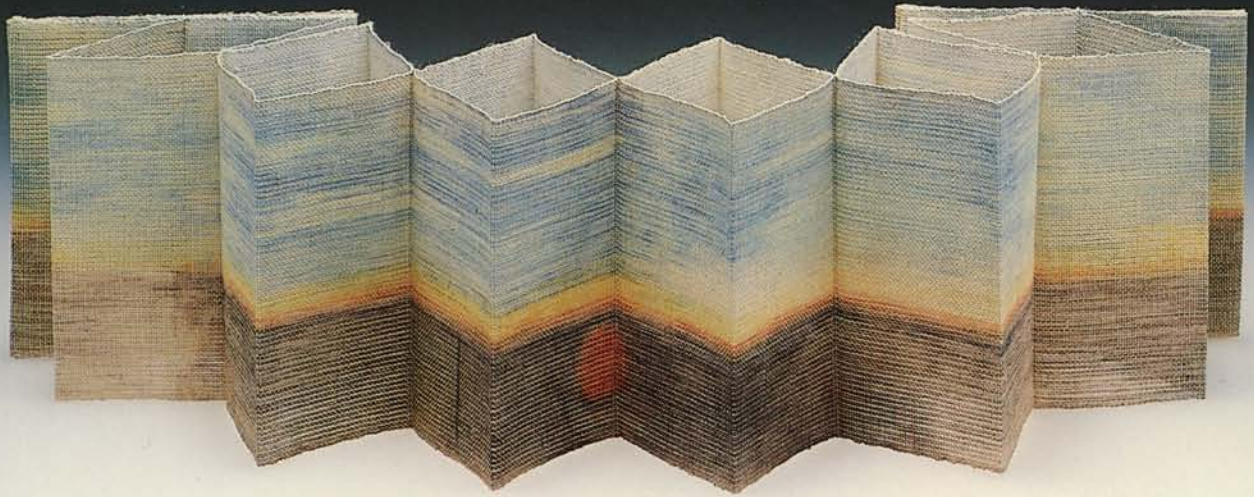


AMERICAN craft

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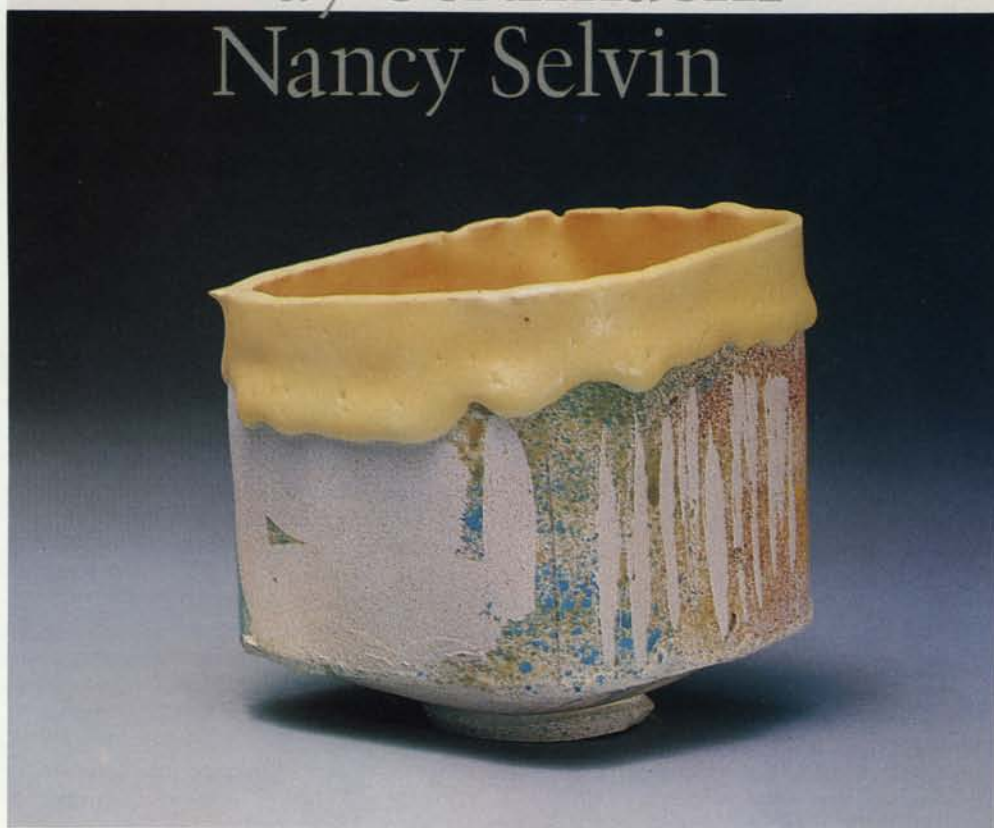


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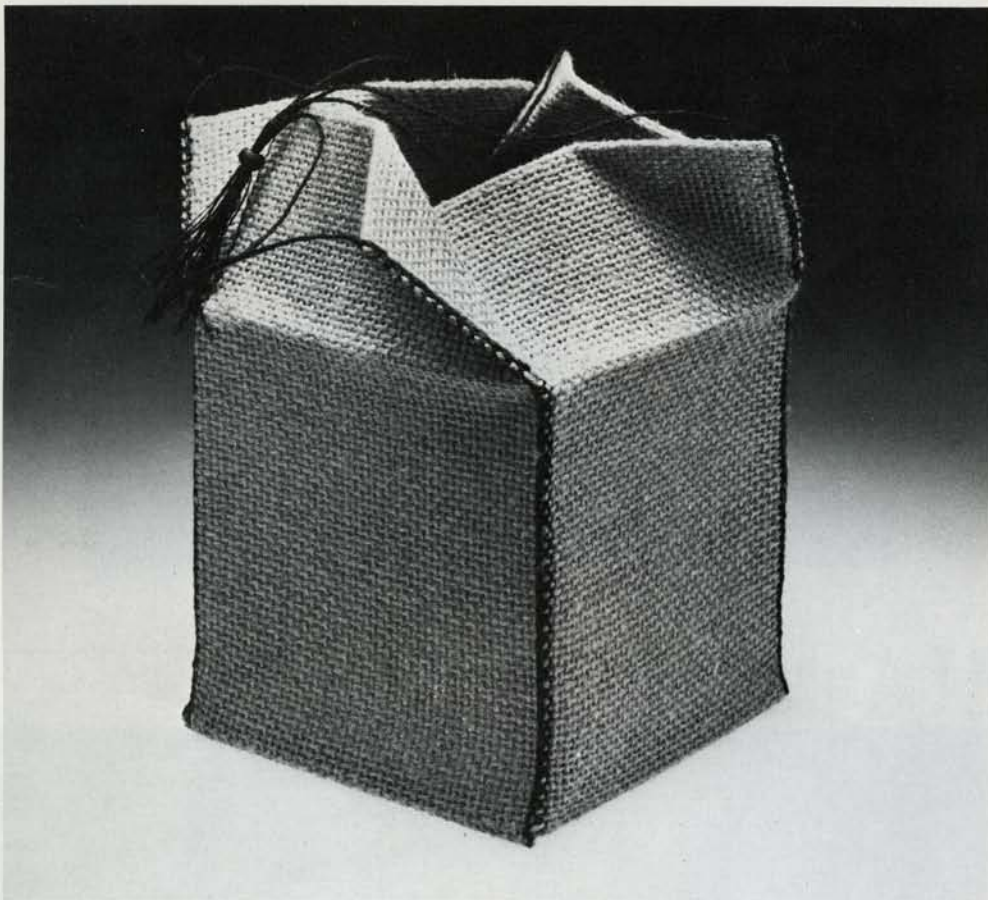
PARALLEL VIEWS

Kay Sekimachi
Nancy Selvin



TOP AND BOTTOM: *100 Views of Fuji #4*, 1981, book, linen double weave with transfer printing, 4½" x 4½" x ½" (closed), by Kay Sekimachi; teabowl, 1981, earthenware with underglazes and low-fired glaze, handbuilt, 4" x 3½" x 3½", by Nancy Selvin.

Using disparate vocabularies but taking parallel paths, Kay Sekimachi and Nancy Selvin explore versions of Japanese tradition and the concerns of form, function and aesthetics. Though friends for more than a decade, the artists have never collaborated in their work. Yet their objects—fiber boxes and books by Sekimachi and ceramic bowls and a teapot by Selvin—exhibited at the California Crafts Museum in the Palo Alto Cultural Center (January 12-February 21), revealed many similarities. Both artists are primarily concerned with form and structure. Their works appear simple but, in fact, are the result of complex techniques. They refer to the East, to function and to common household objects. Most of the 22 pieces on exhibit were fragile container shapes with painterly surfaces.



"Parallel Views" was a quiet and contemplative exhibition, its components enticing, complex and varied, despite their similarities. In Sekimachi's work softly-hued images of sunsets, mountains and waves adorn tightly woven books with four-sided "pages"; pleasing, soft fabric boxes allude to the common collapsible brown cardboard box. Selvin's delicate earthenware forms compete with intensely colored glazes; her five-sided teabowls take part in formal, rhythmic compositions on trays.

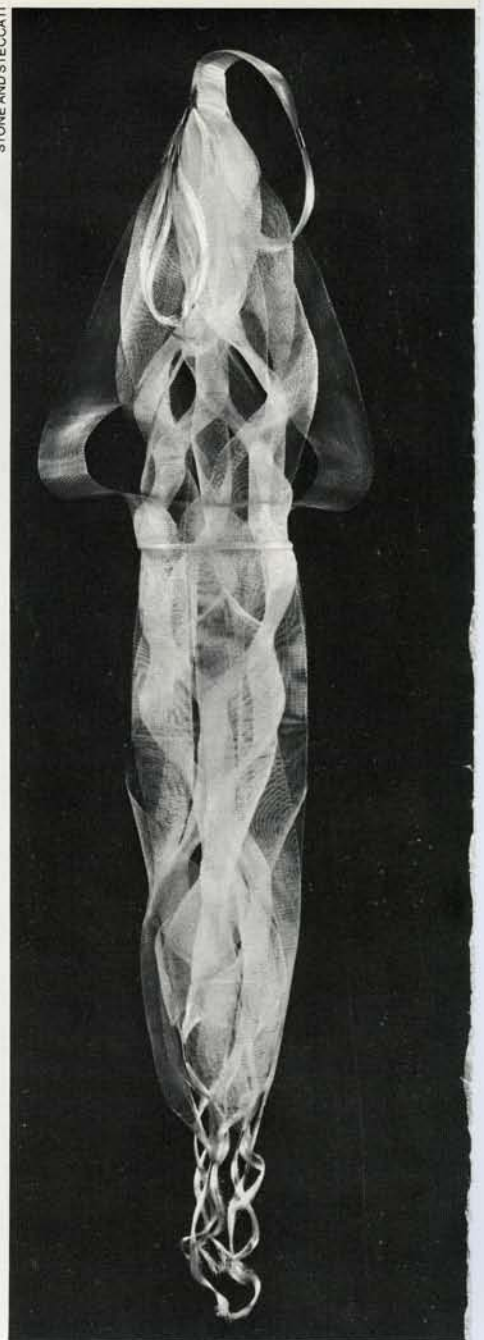
In order to examine the fortuitous compatibility of the exhibited works of Sekimachi and Selvin, it is helpful to know something of their individual development. Nearly 30 years ago, Sekimachi dropped out of the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and with her last \$150 bought a loom. She has not stopped weaving since. She started out making two-dimensional wall pieces and clothing. In 1963 she began to experiment. After completing a series of hanging, two-dimensional room dividers, she began to make three-dimensional nylon monofilament hangings. With these, her work moved off the wall and sculpture became her calling. These large, vertical configurations of monofilament are diaphanous and dreamy. The fiber catches the light as the pieces twirl gently in space. The forms—woven in one piece without any machine stitching—are complex, smooth movements of narrow widths of fabric. Sekimachi had begun to extend the medium beyond its tradition; these hanging, airy sculptures pioneered new directions in weaving.

Following the monofilament period, she began to work on a series of narrow, flowing vertical forms which she aptly called *Kawa*, or *Rivers*. Card-woven in the round, these rhythmic, suspended tubes twist around and curl in on themselves, revealing enticing recesses in their thickly woven lengths.

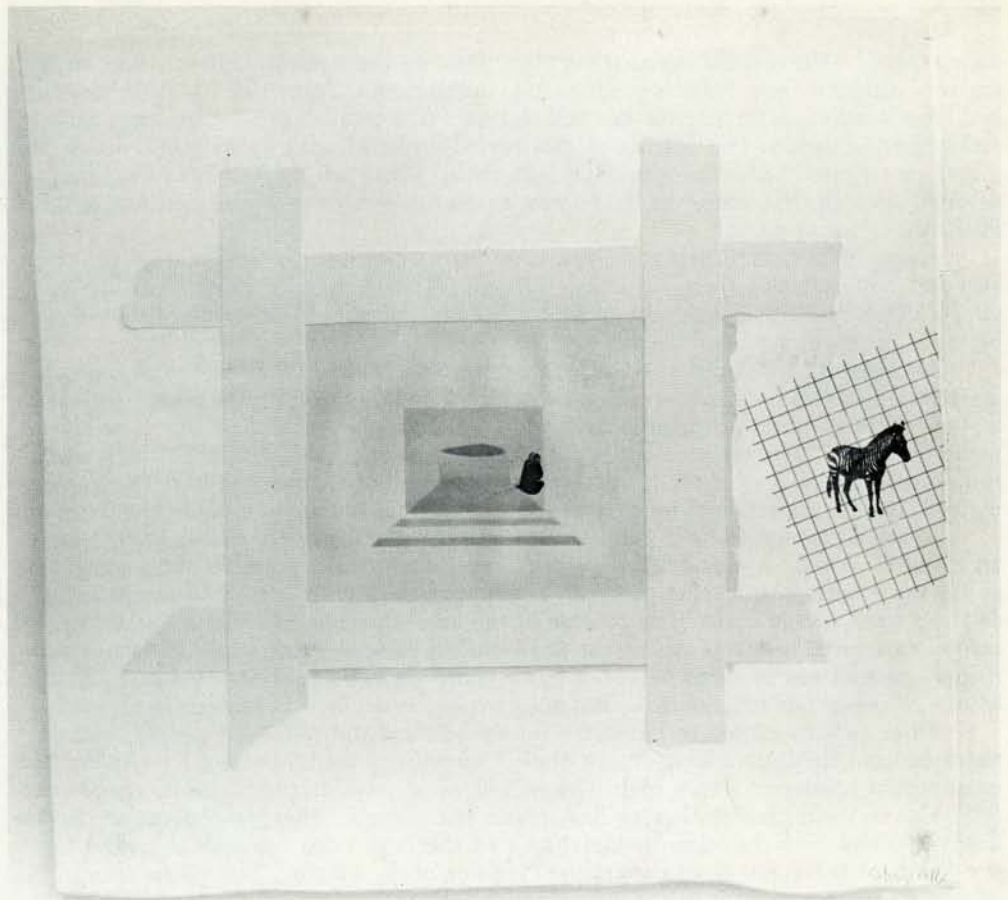
For Sekimachi, an invitation to participate in the 1974 "International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles" at the British Crafts Centre in London opened the door to small-scale work in the form of boxes and baskets. The nesting boxes of that year, made on a 12-harness loom with six layers woven simultaneously, are of natural-colored linen with black accents. The body of the box was made with a single continuous weft, and other multilayered weaving techniques were used for the top and bottom flaps.

These early boxes were the prototypes for the simplified "Hako" series, on view at CCM. The "Hako" forms are pleasing square shapes of coarse linen often closed with a black drawstring and bead, or a thin needle. They are meditative works which refer to Zen and Samurai traditions as well as to architecture. Austere little packages,

STONE AND STECCATI



RIGHT: White earthenware wall piece, 1976, slip-cast and slab-constructed, unglazed with airbrushed colors, 14"x15", by Selvin. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: *Hako #3*, 1981, box, natural and black linen, quadruple layered weave, continuous weft, 6½"x5"x5", by Sekimachi. RIGHT: *Amiyose III*, 1971, hanging, clear nylon monofilament, 65"x15"x14", by Sekimachi, collection of Mathews Center, Arizona State University, Tempe.



each cleverly made in one piece, they are monastic, mysterious and poetic.

Inspired by traditional folding screens and a tiny book/folding screen depicting a fairy tale—a worn childhood memento—as well as by her interest in artists' books, Sekimachi set out to "do something with the imagery of Japan" in book format. In 1980 she made her first book, which incorporated a painted turtle motif. Since that prototype, the book/screen format has become more complex and the imagery personal. The exhibited books (four and a half-inch-square), such as the "100 Views of Fuji" series, appear simpler than they are. The images of mountains, waves, sunsets or the moon were first painted on paper with dyes, then heat-transferred to the warp of the fabric. By the time the weaving was completed, the painterly image had become diffuse and soft, with an almost spectral presence.

Sekimachi acknowledges a debt to folk art, and one look at the bits of Peruvian and Guatemalan fabrics, Bolivian cocoa bags, nested straw baskets and painted wood dolls around her light-filled Berkeley studio confirms this. The influences on her have been diverse: Japanese *haniwa* figures (ca. 400 A.D.); Mongolian rope making; Kurosawa films; and even certain turned wood bowls with deeply textured, rolling-grain patterns which, she says, resemble ocean waves.

Unlike Sekimachi, who chose to work alone and did not come out of any particular regional school, Selvin came of age during the emergence of the California clay movement. While living in Iowa in 1966, she saw an advertisement that changed the course of her life: "Five ceramic lessons for \$5." She signed up. While her classmates drew little roses on whiteware dishes, she painted brown and green barklike grounds on plates. Soon after, Selvin moved west to California and enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley.

Her teachers were Peter Voulkos and Ron Nagle. Selvin says that at that time "there was not much going on in clay." There was not even a literature. Glenn Nelson's *Ceramics: A Potter's Handbook* (1966) and Daniel Rhodes's *Clay and Glazes for the Potter* (1957) were the only available texts. She studied the work of Ken Price and John Mason, pored over slides of Japanese ceramics, not those of Kanjiro Kawai or Shoji Hamada, but of the earliest potters. The way that these early artists handled clay—their attitude and their verve—deeply affected her development. Selvin says that she assiduously studied Japanese pottery because Voulkos regarded the contemporary ceramics world as "uninteresting" by comparison.

Using a white earthenware body and handbuilding techniques—she still does not

own a wheel—she started out making cups. Despite their thick, hollow walls, these are very different from Nagle's precisionist, angular ones. From 1969 to 1972, her cups had large handles, painterly finishes and trompe l'oeil details such as stitching, folding and gathering effects. Her teapots of this period, finished with china paint, decals and glaze, are "quilted" and, like the cups, humorous. There are no figurative elements in Selvin's work of that time, yet the lumpy, askew teapots have warm, anthropomorphic qualities.

From 1975 to 1978 Selvin moved away from "housewares" and started to create slip-cast and slab-constructed formal wall pieces with trompe l'oeil masking-tape effects. These wall pieces set the stage for the next period—cast teapots that seem to be made of taped, wrinkled square papers.

In the work exhibited at CCM, the humor and trompe l'oeil techniques have disappeared and the art has become more formal and painterly. After a visit to Japan in 1979, Selvin started to make a new shape—"I took the handles off my cups and made teabowls." The early teabowls are chunky and four sided, with the thick shiny interior glaze oozing over the lip and down the side like buttery frosting. The glistening inside glaze contrasts pleasingly to the intense, matte-colored one on the exterior.

These squat bowls have been refined and the glazing of the latest ones, which are now five sided, is very delicate. Runny, translucent green glaze on the inside stops at the lip where shimmering glasslike beads surprisingly appear—evidence that the cup was fired upside down. The outside of the cup is composed of layers of airbrushed colors, variegated splatters and uncolored areas all created by multiple maskings and firings—sometimes as many as seven. "I consider myself a painter, a colorist," Selvin admits. Most of her process time, not surprisingly, is devoted to surface treatment.

Since Selvin wanted to "protect" the vessels and did not want people "to take them and put them on a knickknack shelf," she designed environments for them. The most recent bowls are set on highly lacquered wood trays accompanied by chopstick-like glass rods—formal studies in line, plane and volume. The components are neatly integrated and cleverly related—the shapes of the cups echo those of the trays and the finish of the trays is an extension of the painterly glazing. The elements can be moved on the trays, introducing a non-static dimension.

The work in "Parallel Views" revealed a serendipitous commonality. Both Sekimachi and Selvin acknowledge the Japanese influence on their art. Sekimachi came by this through personal heritage. She is a Japanese-American with a family tradition of weaving. Selvin's interest in Japan is acquired. The importance of form and the subservience of all other concerns to it, the austere, seemingly simple look and the references to rituals in their works—the almost ascetic boxes of Sekimachi and the tea sets of Selvin—are testimony to both artists' interest in Japanese tradition.

The simplicity and sparseness of the forms of each artist belie their technical complexity. The artists' methods require many steps, sophisticated planning and flawless implementation. Sekimachi weaves each book, with clever diamond-shaped folios, and each box in one continuous piece. Her complicated techniques and structures have won her recognition as "a weaver's weaver."

Selvin's small bowls are also deceptively simple. Rich surfaces are created by multi-fired layers of airbrushed glazes. In a peacock blue square teapot, which is pleasingly dwarfed by a silver wire handle, an incised line suggests the lid. A fold of paper-thin clay implies the spout. The coloration is rich and deep.

The bowls, teapot, boxes and books are all small-scale objects. The first three are functionless containers which ironically refer to utility. There is a strong presence to all the works, yet each suggests fragility and softness: Selvin's current palette is composed predominantly of gentle pastels and Sekimachi's material is soft to the touch, yielding.

"The form is complete in itself," Sekimachi says. Because her work is about form, color and texture are integral to it and are not achieved in a separate process. Although many of Selvin's pots have a distinctly haptic aspect, she does not apply texture; the tactility comes about as part of the process. She uses a fine-bodied clay and the glazes are silky and smooth, with no grit. The textural elements of delicate seams and a thin, quarter-size foot on each vessel tell of its humble handbuilding.

Although there has been no direct collaboration between the artists, there is an acknowledged relationship and that is their friendship. Taking circuitous routes, they have come to the same place. This small, successful show presented a juxtaposition of exquisite forms and a blending of concerns. "Parallel Views" was remarkable not only for the accomplishment of its works, but for its testimony of an unspoken collaboration—a 13-year subliminal exchange of ideas. □

Melinda Levine is the managing editor of Artweek and a free-lance arts writer.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: *Rainbow*, 1981, book, linen double weave with transfer printing, 4"x4"x20" (open), by Sekimachi, collection of Amaury Saint-Gilles. BOTTOM: Teapot with silver handle, 1981, porcelain with airbrushed underglazes, handbuilt, 10"x4"x4", by Selvin.

