

Patterns from the *Spirit Suite* collection

PHILOMELA

Textile as Resistance

by Bonnie Saland

The textile entity “Philomela” was envisioned, in response to the re-experiencing of patriarchal tyranny in the relatively privileged format of a formal MFA program. The name comes from Greek myth, which tells us of an innocent, captured, and repeatedly raped, by a barbarian and powerful brother-in-law. Her captor renders her voiceless by cutting out her tongue, and Philomela resorts to alerting her sister (Procne) to her situation by weaving and delivering a tapestry telling her story.

This myth, like so many others, represents the patriarchal bias of its respective originating culture. Both Philomela and her sister ultimately respond to their trauma through vengeance—murdering and offering the perpetrator’s son up for his dinner. This, of course, punishes all involved, as the victim/boy is both Philomela’s nephew and Procne’s son. The myth closes with the gods rendering all major players as birds, Philomela in particular as the swallow.

Archetypally, this tale references that which can’t be swallowed and the potentiality for turning that experience into creative function. Women throughout the centuries have rewritten stories of abuse and constriction with textile offerings. In doing so, there is a holy new beginning—a rewriting of mythology in a language where female, abuse, fragmentation and disorganization are not channeled into revenge and chaos but continued creativity, and a higher order of development. Akin to Hayek’s film “Frida”, Kahlo’s own surrealist masterpieces illuminating her inner world, and Beyoncé’s genius reinterpretation of infidelity in “Lemonade”), Philomela assembles her resources and translates her suffering into the motivational fuel to make something of beauty and integrity.

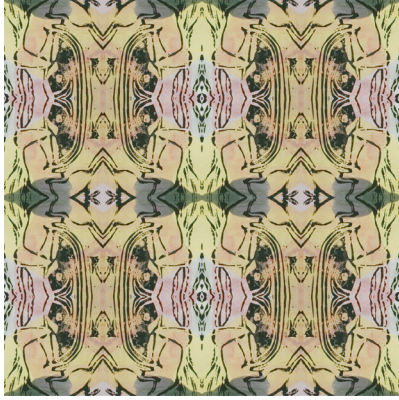


Sea Fruit 1 and 2 — 2009
Silkscreen with gouache and collage
29" x 22"



My own transformative process began with an accident shattering my left leg and foot, the launch of two grown children, financial disruption that precipitated the sale of my family home (and with it, a desire to take my creative practice outside the domestic realm), and a lingering childhood dream of myself as artist and attending art school. Entering a formal MFA program involved professional movement from containing object /authority (as analyst) to subject/novice (as MFA student). Likewise, it required movement from the contemporary Los Angeles psychoanalytic community (dominated by the strictures of relational and inter-subjective theory where Martin Buber's "I-Thou" construct is sacrosanct) (Buber, 1958), to an art world dominated by considerations of aesthetic criticality. My personal history and predisposition, professional experience as both union representative and psychoanalyst, informed a rough sail through a formal MFA program that referenced both the authoritarian nature of the institutions of the public art world hierarchy and (at times) the educational posture of breaking a student down to facilitate increased opportunity for absorption and a finished experience that is both stronger and more unique than an original state. Imagery produced reflected this struggle.

My art making process remains fairly consistent. Color, method, and material choice is intuitive, yet incorporates formal training as process unfolds. Meaning, both as it relates to narrative and choice of methodology, most often is revealed to me after a piece is finished. Images germinate in journal or fine art print (some combination of wood or linoleum cut, etching or monotype) with subject matter taken from the personal and collective unconscious, and/or figurative, geographic or literary prompts. These images are re-configured as paintings, prints, collages, digital forms, and textiles. My own body of work thus becomes a personal reference library, an archive of imagery—or personal visual language, to be utilized in various reiterations. The images on this page show the original *Sea Fruit* monotypes. Sections are pulled out, digitally manipulated and printed in textile-patterned format (*Sea Fruit* patterns, next page). Finally, in (*The Sea Inside*) the pattern is reproduced in paper format, and used as ground.



Top: Philomela Sea Fruit patterns; Bottom: *The Sea Inside*, 2012, Linocut on digital paper with gouache, 42" x 42"



The Pagan In Me
Mixed media
18" x 23.5"

The text below appears in an original portfolio of hand made paper titled "The Pagan in Me" completed during my first residency session in the MFA program. The image and text in the piece document movement from disoriented student, to the articulation of position and visual language through the Philomela conceptualization.

It comes to us from myth. Sons and daughters

of Athena. Sprung whole from the head of Zeus.

Claiming his power. Thundering in tones of re-

quirement and demand the father's voice. "THIS

IS THE ART WORLD! Give me the answers. What

is your thinking? What makes art good? Do it like

Andy. CRITIQUE! CRITIQUE! CRITIQUE!" Where are

our mothers? Demeter's mysteries? She who might

whisper: "give her the space. Illuminate. Inspire her.

Arachne's web will hold us. Virginia reminds us that

artists after all are solitary beings. Louise remem-

bers the girl trying to understand herself. Ganon

translates the Greeks.

Greek mythology tells the tale of Philomela, maiden daughter to a

king of Athens and sister to Procne, the wife of Tereus, a Thracian

king. Treacherous Tereus takes Philomela from her willing father,

alleging that he will reunite the two sisters to their great mutual

pleasure. Instead, Tereus rapes Philomela, cuts out her tongue to

ensure her silence and locks her away. Philomela, resourceful and

gifted at the loom, weaves her sordid tale into a piece of cloth, giving

it to a trusted vassal to deliver to her sister Procne. The sisters unite

and the now mad Procne takes revenge on Tereus who gives chase

to both women. The gods take pity on the sisters, turning them into

birds that they might fly to safety. Procne becomes a nightingale

weeping her sorrow each night. But Philomela, forever silenced and

deprived of her loom, is turned into the voiceless swallow.

Silent no longer, Philomela presents nine suites of inspired and exotic

textiles, all derived from original works of art. The designs shout

and whisper, juxtaposing figural and abstract forms, pattern, dreams,

and archetypal images of the feminine—textiles balancing on the

wavering line between order and chaos that is art.

The extrapolation from original work into textiles completes a journey

from source to repatriated art alive with experimentation in scale,

palette and texture. Equally informed by exotic travel and introspection,

embodied in each suite is the gratification of the return home—

the pleasure in clothing the body and feathering the nest with tales

told in textile.

Philomela speaks.



No Trace Left, 2012
Textiles, thread, pencil and ink on paper
57" x 134"

"No Trace Left" is a compilation piece composed of patterns produced over the two-year period of the MFA program that anchored my thesis show. It both articulated my awareness that within a frame of constant criticism my own imagery became abstracted to the point of leaving no trace of my own unconscious or personal material, and provided me with an archive of work with which I launched my company.



Rock Hard, Mixed media on paper
Three parts, each 39" x 23"



Pattern from the *Rock Hard* collection

Of late, ensconced in the enterprise of my own (with the profound support of many talented and skilled collaborators) making, I am once again free to articulate a personal narrative. The "Rock Hard" collection, released in 2018, comes from a creative journal of the same title, and reflects this inclination.

I take comfort that the capitulation to an archaic, barbaric and phallogenic premise that locked in a world of impotent bullies the best women can do is be stifled or get angry is negated by the history of textile, world wide, from Bombay to Gees Bend. For centuries, women have channeled their energy through weaving, stitching, folding and offering cloth as a way to tell their stories, in a text that simultaneously serves aestheticity and function. Energy redirected into creativity, life and growth provides a rewrite of ownership and mastery as next chapter. Women have long proved themselves expert at the task.

Bonnie Saland is a practicing psychoanalyst and principal of Philomela a textile Company based in Pasadena and the Sea Ranch, CA.