Nancy Hemenway

Nancy Hemenway's studio is a quiet place nestled on the third floor of her home in Georgetown. In it are shelves of wool, neatly arranged by type and color, and several large tables pushed together so she can spread the ever-larger pieces of cloth she works on to their full extent. She will spend hundreds of hours at these tables working on a given piece, each one representing the residue of long-stored images and emotions. It is slow labor that calls for more than craft skill, though there is that, of course. (She wouldn't be making these things if she did not love to sew.) These long patient hours are absolutely essential to Hemenway's art; a viewer senses this while looking at one of the finished works. As much as they are collages of sensuous materials, they are accretions of feelings, patiently repossessed and put into form during those intense, isolated days spent in the studio.

Time spent outside the studio also is an important part of the creative process. By nature a reflective, observant person, Hemenway has said that hardly a day goes by that she does not gather some fresh impression from nature to be turned over in the mind and, perhaps, eventually turned to some specific use in her art. Sometimes this happens by chance, more often by design. She is addicted to nature walks, and on weekends frequently heads toward the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, scarcely an hour's time from downtown Washington. As often as not, she returns with something, an old and oddly shaped branch, perhaps, that will take its place in a window of her studio, a stimulant and a challenge. She recalls spending intense hours perched on a rock in coastal Maine, absorbing the feel of the place, its light and air, and most importantly studying the infinite nuances of rock lichen, its color, the way it attaches itself, its endless twistings and turnings. From a week spent visiting a friend living near the beaches of North Carolina, she returned with images of the sea in her mind (and snapshots that work as reminders, somewhat as sketches might).

Facing page: Detail from *Mangrove* (cat. no. 23)

Characteristically, it is not the large prospect that she brings back, not the grand view of the seascape painter, but specific visual details: how the water behaves, the fleeting translucent patterns it makes in those moments at the very edge where land and water meet and the wave plays out its force. This, she thinks, will make a piece someday. So, too, an impression gathered closer at hand. Watching the fall of rain occupied her for an entire afternoon in the garden in back of her house. Here again, it was the meeting place, the specific point of contact, that earned her attention: drops of water spattering forcefully onto flagstones. Here again, the specific detail: rain does not fall straight, as in the Japanese-inspired illustrator's shorthand. The fact of the matter is more complex.

Painstaking observation of specific visual facts; careful nurturing of authentic personal experiences; skilled translation of these visual and emotional impressions into new tactile forms—these are the essential facets of Nancy Hemenway's art-making. It is a skilled, poetic enterprise that produces the evocative resonances we can find in these unusual tapestries. They are, as Steiglitz said of certain of his photographs, "equivalents" for states of mind and strong emotional experiences, and through them the viewer can participate in these experiences. Hemenway's equivalents, of course, are conditioned in special ways by the rich variety of ways she works these materials to enhance and intensify their already substantial appeal.

Hemenway learned to sew at age six, taught by her grandmother. Sewing came effortlessly to her, and she remembers it with pleasure, even when it was only making or repairing clothing for her children. She was born in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, and grew up on a farm in Foxboro, Massachusetts, summering always in Maine. Her father, an architect, and her mother, a watercolorist, provided a sympathetic, creative ambience for a sensitive girl to grow up in with her brothers and sister. Hemenway's main creative love as a youngster was not the visual arts but music. At age sixteen she was granted a scholarship to Wheaton College, and after earning a bachelor's degree there in 1941, she studied composition for a year at Harvard with flutist Walter Piston. Though she was not to pursue a musical career, the impact of this early absorption has been lasting, and is observable in the strong rhythmic underpinning of her mature work.

Music was her first disciplined artistic endeavor, but there are many earlier, less self-conscious experiences of childhood that she now consciously exploits in her art. One is that early competence in stitchery. Another is an ingrained love of nature, and another is the ability and the desire to be alone—a counterpoint, it should be said, to her easy gregariousness. At the farm in Foxboro when she was growing up and during the yearly "months in Maine" (as she fondly recalls them) Hemenway enjoyed a pleasant day-to-day familiarity with plants and animals and the out-of-doors, and even then she was a good walker.

She has reached back further than most of us, however, to cultivate the experiences of childhood. Children see things close-up and in detail, experiencing the part before the whole, and they respond directly to the sensuous aspects of the everyday environment. Their sense of touch is a primary guide. So it is with the recent tapestries of Hemenway, many of them enlargements of nature's details, seen close-up and experienced intimately. Reaching back to her childhood, she has recaptured something of a child's fresh awe in things, and it is no accident that a paramount appeal of the pliant materials she uses is their tactility, their preeminent touchability.

Hemenway's career in art was at first an intermittent affair. She married Robert Barton in Boston in the fall of 1942, and her first career was raising her family. After the war, Barton embarked on a Foreign Service career, and for the next two decades the family lived a peripatetic existence. In Madrid during the early fifties Hemenway studied art with the Spanish artist Pierre Mathieu, who taught her among other things to draw without lifting pen from paper, a technique that clearly is analogous to the linear skeins of threads we see in her recent tapestries. For three

years in the late fifties Hemenway attended classes at the Art Student's League in New York. After that, she painted portraits for a few years and at the same time managed to work in a master's degree in Spanish lyric poetry at Columbia University.

The pieces of her mature art began to fall in place almost by chance in 1966 when her husband was assigned to Bolivia by the State Department. Deeply impressed by this contact with Latin American culture and the evidences she saw of pre-Columbian culture, and taken with the brilliant handwoven wools of the Indians on the Bolivian altiplano, Hemenway began to "sew" her art. Before long, the walls of the Bartons' home in La Paz were filled with the tapestries she was making. After a visit to their home, the Bolivian minister of culture arranged a one-person exhibition of her tapestries at the two principal galleries of the Bolivian National Museum, a singular honor for the wife of a foreign diplomat. Many of these same works later were submitted by the Bolivian government to the Pan American Union in Washington, D.C., for a temporary show. To this day Hemenway remains the only North American artist to have exhibited there in the series of one-person shows organized by the member countries of the Organization of American States.

These early Hemenway tapestries are skillful adaptations of pre-Columbian motifs, taken at first quite directly from things she saw in Bolivia and gradually transformed, with ever-increasing degrees of poetic license, into a personal catalogue of images from the ancient cultures of the Americas. It was an index she continued to expand during a sojourn in Mexico later in the sixties. (In Mexico, too, she founded an embroidery school in a small village near Guadalajara. Young girls from the area are instructed in twenty-four basic stitches in an educational program Hemenway developed. They make patterns for pillow casings and other household items that find a market in department stores and specialty shops in the United States. The enterprise by now has become largely self-sustaining.) Iconographically and stylistically these earlier works, with their often brilliant colors and their dependence on ancient hieratic images, bear little resemblance to her recent work.

Hemenway's attitudes, however, were evolving in important ways during the years she was involved with pre-Columbian imagery. Her response toward the sources of her images, for instance, became increasingly personal; similarly, there was a noticeable movement away from static modes of composition and toward her current practices of rhythmic counterbalancing of elements. Most telling is the gradual change in her attitude toward her materials. She has moved away from her initial rainbow array of brilliant hues toward the softer whites, blacks and grays, as well as the earthbound oranges, greens, tans and browns that characterize most of her current work. This change in palette followed a change in subject matter, the newer hues reflecting her renewed concern with the subtler aspects of the out-of-doors. It also signaled a deepening of the artist's respect for the nature of her materials. Just as the early brilliance relied heavily on synthetically dyed yarns, the newer tapestries were made almost exclusively with fabrics or yarns in their natural states, untouched by any machine more sophisticated than the spinning wheel or the handloom.

Overleaf: Detail from *Winter Weave* (cat. no. 18)

The energy and ingenuity of Hemenway's worldwide one-woman apparatus for collecting wools is a source of some amazement. She keeps up a complicated network of contacts in the gathering of these unusual art materials, many of them not commercially available in the United States. There are less than a half-dozen shades of Bolivian alpaca conveniently obtainable here, for example, but in Nancy Hemenway's studio there are close to twenty. From Bolivia, too, she gets the beautiful woven bayeta fabrics from which she derived the copyrighted name—Bayetage—she has applied to her complex process. But Bolivia is barely the beginning of Hemenway's global sourcebook: there are exquisite organdies from Switzerland, handwoven Kilkenny wools from Ireland, velvets from France, the occasional batiks from Ghana or Indonesia, lamb's wool from Guatemala, mohair from the Transvaal in South Africa, and heavy, lumpy karakul yarns—the very quintessence of tactility—from a farm in the isolated reaches of South-West Africa. This rich assortment of fabrics and yarns is the armature of Hemenway's art. In any given piece she is likely to use from six to a dozen varieties of stitches—some of which have no names in the conventional sewing manuals—and a dozen or more different materials.

Winter Weave, made in 1974, is one of the first of the recent series of tapestries on nature themes. It is a large picture that perhaps imitates landscape painting too closely, calling to mind a false set of expectations, but it is a key work in the artist's development. It contains nine trees cropped at the tops and arrayed across a horizontal field. The trunks are cut from sheets of Mexican lamb's wool or white alpaca sewn on a ground of beautiful, grayish Bolivian alpaca. The limbs are finer and of different texture and technique. The finest things about the piece, however, are the interpenetrating horizontal lines in a variety of stitches (chain stitch, running stitch, and a couched yarn spun extra tight by the artist herself). These gently curving lines, the artist's equivalent of a drifting fog in the woods, indicate something of the directness, the intense naïveté, of Hemenway's vision and attack. In later works she is more successful in aligning materials, techniques and feelings, but the method and the vision remain essentially the same. ("When I look at nature now," she says, "I'm always thinking, 'How can I get that in my medium.' ") Some evidence of Hemenway's progress can be judged by comparing *Winter Weave* to *Mangrove*, an impressive vertical hanging that also depicts trees. *Mangrove*, however, contains but three trees, and their interlocked diagonals are more compacted and more persuasive. In *Mangrove*, too, she includes an impacted and wonderfully textural gathering of roots in the lower portion of the piece, adding something to the composition and to the metaphor, as well.

An important aspect of recent Hemenway pieces is the way in which they can be read at a distance and close up. *Surge*, for instance, depicts an ocean wave as it crashes. The swirling energy of the various white and off-white yarns, played against a rich, regular grid of blacks and grays in Irish wool, leave no doubt about the subject matter of the "picture," no matter what distance the viewer reads it from. Nonetheless, depiction is not quite the precise word, for it is apparent that the subject matter is not so much the look of the wave as it is the wave's energy and its interior rhythm. This comes across more clearly the closer one gets to the image to

focus more intensely on the complex skeins of thread, each with its own palpable density and speed: the tightly spun South African mohair, curling in foamy ringlets; the thick karakul, curving like the wave's supple spine; the alpaca blacks, with their nearly limitless subtleties of shading; and then the thin Mexican yarns, which come as a gossamer surprise. It is a wave "stilled," as in a photograph, but it is also a wave in perpetual motion, something one can trace and feel.

In *Surge* Hemenway somewhat reduces the actual size from nature, and yet the result is an intensification of vision and feeling. She uses enlargement for similar effect in pieces dealing with smaller aspects of nature, such as rock lichen or cobwebs. *Orb* is a particularly fine example. Here, intermingling wools with Swiss organdy, she magnifies observed reality the better to capture the feel and texture of the thing. Here, the rhythmic energy is delicate and subtle, and here again the effect can be almost transfixing as one traces the intricate comings and goings of the separate lines. In larger works, such as the technical tour-de-force *Dandelions*, in which two large flowers are embroidered into a ground of superfine, translucent organdy (and thus must be readable from both sides), Hemenway aims to combine in one image the opposite characteristics that are the systole and diastole of her sensibility: delicacy and strength, boldness and tact, observation and imagination, outright elegance and homespun craft.

Hemenway's work is idiosyncratic. It reflects the revival of interest in crafts and fabric arts, and yet nourished itself and grew at great remove from these concerns. It reflects perhaps a broad renewal of interest in and concern for the natural environment, and yet for Hemenway this was nothing new. What was new, for her, was the discovery of a process of making art that put her back in touch with her own deeper intuitions about nature, life, and art. In her recent tapestries the most important thing is this imaginative correlation between nature and the artist's inner life, and it is something the viewer can begin to share when time is given to these rich, sensuous, strangely contemplative objects.

Benjamin Forgey

Mr. Forgey is the art critic for the Washington Star.