



Fragment With Black and White Top Piece, 2000, mulberry, wood, mixed media.  
26" x 25" x 1". All photographs by E. G. Schempf, except where noted.

## Drawing with Mulberry

*Jennie Frederick*

I have always been drawn to the layering inherent in the work of such artists as Eva Hesse, Martin Puryear, Ritzi Jacobi, and Nance O'Banion. Even in nature, layering—of grass, nests, banyan roots, and other natural structures—visually intrigues me. Joan Livingston introduced me to the notion of multiple element construction as a structural means while I was in undergraduate school at the Kansas City Art Institute. Using this concept to achieve structure has remained central to my way of working.

While apprenticing at Twinrocker in the early 1980s, I specialized in transparency. This pursuit was influenced by a short apprenticeship with Douglass Howell in 1978, which led me to do research at the Institute of Paper Chemistry, then in Appleton, Wisconsin. From old patents housed there I learned techniques for making transparent papers, which I used in my own work. This investigation led to a series of works in which I interleaved paper pulp with layers of glass to develop structure.

A few years later I began casting to create structural form. I made large molds using up to five hundred pounds of plaster. I also made multi-part molds for free-standing paper sculptures. Many of my cast pieces consisted of linear elements. Sometimes I even cast three-dimensional lines and then re-embedded them, using a deckle box as big as four feet by eight feet. I have always pushed my materials and tried to develop new ways of working that challenge me technically.

The content of my recent work has been strongly affected by several events from the past few years. I built a studio on eighteen acres of wooded land my family had inherited. Being surrounded by the linear layers of trees has greatly influenced my work. Another event caused a major shift for me both personally and professionally. In 1993 my boyfriend, John Meighen, who had been my best friend for twenty-four years, was shot in the head and killed during a car-jacking attempt in Albuquerque. Following this tragic loss, my imagery and color schemes shifted. Images of turmoil and violence began to emerge, juxtaposed with images of nature. After years spent healing and learning to live beyond the violence, I once again turned to my work for personal growth.

A third significant event was my visit to San Pablito, Mexico, in 1997. I had wanted to travel to San Pablito since about 1981 when I was at Twinrocker, working with



Xotenco's wife making white amate, San Pablito, 1997. Photograph by the author.



Double Edged, 1997, cast and pigmented cotton pulp, wood, mixed media. 27" x 38" x 13".

Howard and Kathryn Clark. Friends of the Clarks had traveled to the village and brought back two handmade books produced there. I was enamored by stories of their experiences.

Three years after John was murdered, I mentioned my interest in pursuing a research trip to Mexico to the instructional dean at Maple Woods College, where I am the Art Department coordinator and on the art faculty. He suggested that I apply for a grant from the college. In my application I presented multiple goals: to fill the existing gap in the school's slide library, which only had about twenty-five usable slides on this broad area; to study first-hand the people, arts, and crafts of Mexico, and its history and archaeology; to learn about and document traditional art and craft techniques practiced in Mexico, with an emphasis on *amate* bark paper; and to foster empathy, enthusiasm, and respect for the people of Mexico, especially the traditional artisans, whose art has important cultural contexts. I was awarded the grant and traveled to San Pablito and elsewhere in Mexico in the summer of 1997 with a friend and former student, Judi Ross.

One of my goals was to try to locate in San Pablito some of the books made there, which I had since read about.<sup>1</sup> To reach San Pablito, we first took a bus to Pahuatlan. The scenery gradually became more beautiful as we wound around the mountain roads. When the bus arrived at our hotel, Judi said, "Look!" There stood an Otomi woman from San Pablito. She was

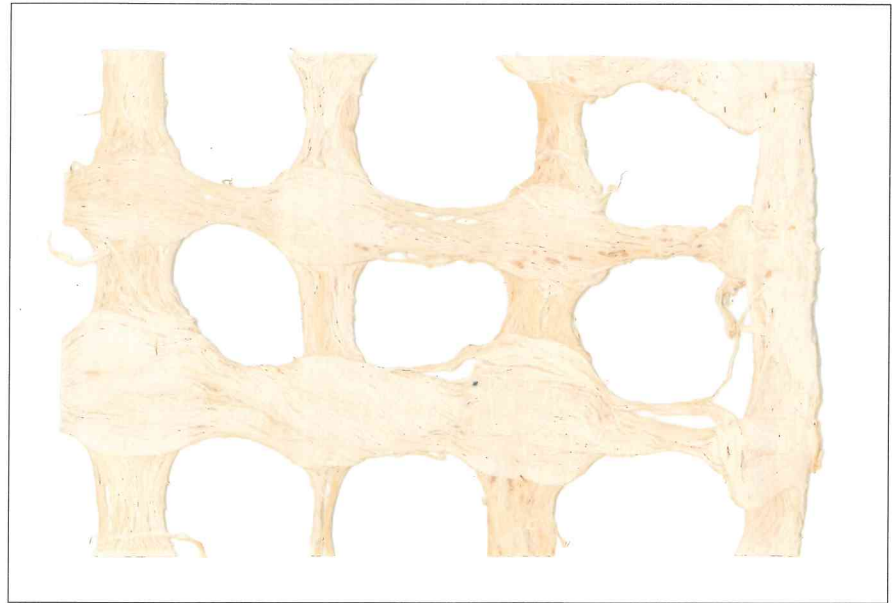
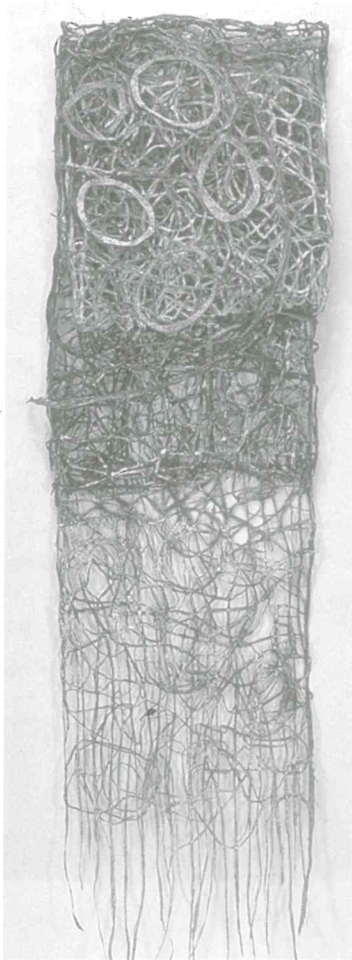
holding two of the books I had sought, on the history of cures and ceremonies in San Pablito. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was as if she knew we would be coming at precisely that time.

In Pahuatlan, we discovered *Tlapalcalli*, a shop specializing in *papel amatl*, where we found many cut paper images. The owner of the shop, Rafael Lechuga, had cut them. I was drawn to a particular paper he had hanging in his studio. It was an open-weave paper that looked very lacy. I had never seen paper like this before, despite my previous familiarity with *amate*. The papers had different colors: white, made of mulberry; brown, possibly from ficus; and striped, made of alternating colors of the two fibers.

We were in Pahuatlan on market day. A small group of Otomi greeted us at our hotel, as they did every morning, with books and embroidery for us to look at and perhaps buy. They were also selling at the market. We befriended Cecilio, a little boy from San Pablito, who was about nine years old and had a warm, friendly smile. We told him we were coming to San Pablito.

A hired driver took us the thirty-minute drive from Pahuatlan to San Pablito. The road wound through the dense tropical vegetation of castor bean and banana plants. I could see the village and church in the distance. My anticipation grew. This was a spiritual journey for me, affecting me at the very core of my being. Before John died, we had often talked about going to Mexico together.





*Open weave amate made by papermakers Ricardo de la Loma and Juana Judith Hernandez, and their daughter, Gabriela de la Loma Hernandez, of San Pablito, Mexico. The fiber is mulberry, which has been steamed, stripped, cleaned, laid out in a grid pattern, and pounded with a lava stone beater on a board. The author thanks Rafael Lechuga for his assistance in obtaining these samples. Original sheet size c. 24" x 16".*

*Fragment, 1999, kozo, mixed media. 76" x 24" x 3".*

Our driver let us out next to the church, at the center of town. To our surprise, there was Cecilio! He had been waiting all morning for us. As we got out of the car, I could hear beating. It sounded as though the whole town was making paper!

Cecilio took us by the hand to a papermaker's house. I had a man there write his name for us: T. Eurado Leobardo Espirito Rocha. They had a little gallery area in the house, with items for sale, including one large piece with twenty-five cut paper spirits on it.

I heard steady beating and looked out the window. The hair stood straight up on my arms. The family was seated outside, making dark *amate* paper, three sheets on a long board. The scene was just as I had envisioned it in my mind for almost seventeen years. Time stood still. Judi and I observed and photographed the papermakers. Inside we saw several lava stone beaters on the floor.

When we left we instinctively followed the sounds of the beating. After a few steps we came to the entry to a small outdoor courtyard. I looked in and saw an elderly couple sitting side by side, making white *amate* together. I felt they had been making paper together for thousands of years. Their daughter came out to greet us and told us her father's name: Enrique Xotenco.

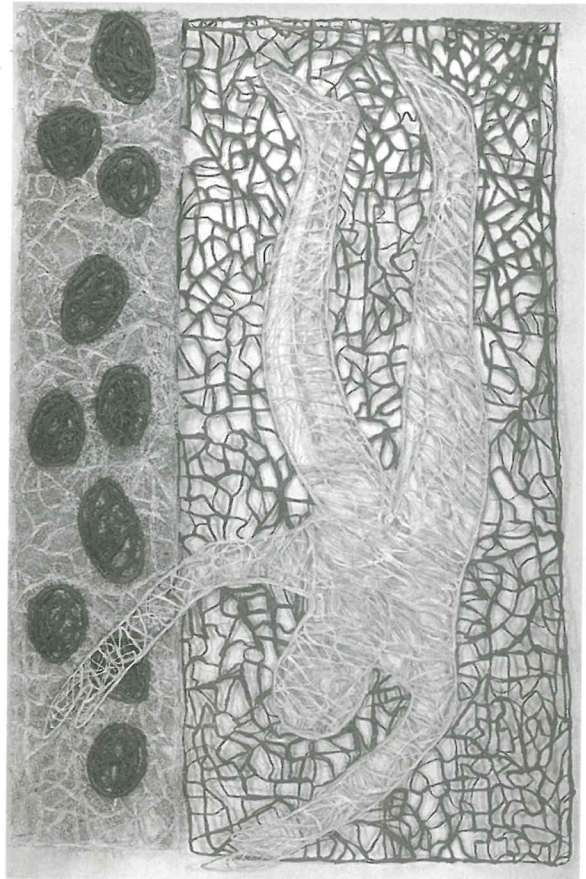
The Xotencos had been making five sheets of white *amate* on a board. Suddenly I noticed behind them, drying, the open-weave paper I had seen in Rafael Lechuga's shop. The paper was beginning to pull away from the board as it dried. I was taken by the linear similarity of this paper to my own work and felt almost a kinship.

My thoughts were suddenly taken away by the sound of a heavy machine or truck. We looked out and a large lorry full of soldiers with helmets and machine guns rumbled through town. The couple kept beating, suggesting this was a frequent part of the landscape. I realized that the army makes appearances to try to intimidate the Indians.

We saw an orange peel lying on top of a piece of the freshly made *amate*. I wondered for a moment if we had left remnants of our afternoon snack there, but then realized that the sheets are given a final burnishing with the outside of the peel, after they are formed. The peel is smoother than the lava stone and perhaps the oil in it



Parcel with Red Stripe, 2000, mulberry, wood, mixed media. 19" x 8½" x 1½".



Yellow Figure with Red, 1999, kozo and grass. 72" x 44".

helps tamp down any stray fibers. We observed most of the papermakers in San Pablito using orange peel.

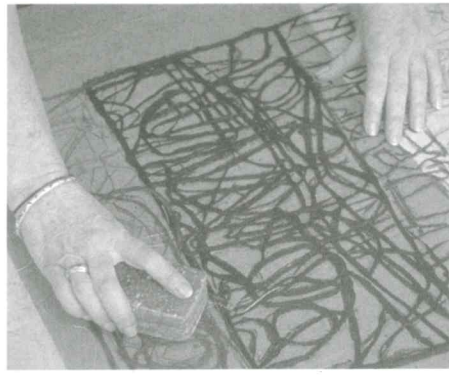
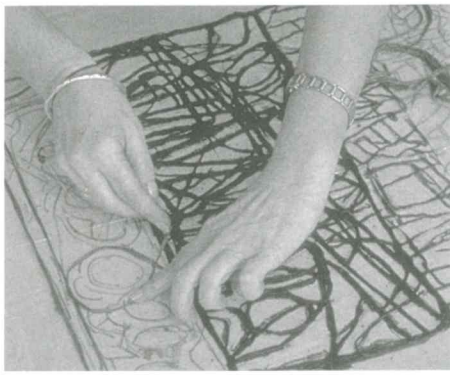
The process for making the open-weave paper is identical to forming plain sheets but the usual substructure, the fiber that is laid out at right angles in a grid pattern, is the end product.<sup>2</sup> No fiber is used to fill in the negative spaces, to make a complete, solid sheet of *papel amate*. I was reminded of work that I had seen, by Dona Camila Hernandez, in *Witchcraft and Pre-Columbian Paper*.<sup>3</sup> Dona Camila's paper pieces were inlaid with drawn mulberry animals.

Shortly after returning home from Mexico, I looked at a pile of mulberry fiber left over from an Eastern Papermaking workshop I had taught that summer. I reflected back on the open-weave paper in San Pablito, and then to a series of drawings I had recently developed for very linear pieces. I had been experimenting with drawing with strips of plaster gauze on plastic. When this dried and hardened, I covered it with paper pulp and brayered color on. These pieces could then be layered to achieve structure. I wondered whether mulberry would work in place of the pulp-covered plaster gauze. I began experimenting and, after several unsuccessful attempts, I developed a process through a natural progression in my investigations, a process I refer to now as drawing with mulberry.

When I am ready to produce a piece, I put clear plastic over a drawing. I cook each pound of mulberry fiber (I use Thai kozo) for up to four hours, with two cups of soda ash dissolved in eight quarts of water. After four hours, I turn the fire off and leave the pot overnight, tightly covered. The following day I rinse the fiber until the water runs clear. I like the fiber soft as it is more pliable and easier to draw with. If it has not cooked enough the fiber will be resilient and will not stay in place. The fiber may be used whole, in wide bands, or separated, for thin lines.

Drawing with mulberry fiber is tedious and can take as long as eight hours for a single four foot by eight foot layer. I frequently add to the wet drawing other fibers that I brought back from Mexico, such as grass or sisal. I like the thinner linear texture this produces. When the drawing is complete, I use a sponge brush to apply thinned methyl cellulose on top. Historically the Otomi used a vegetable glue, *amatzauchtli*,





Demonstration of drawing with mulberry. Placing dyed mulberry fiber on plastic placed over a drawing, sponging methyl cellulose on top of drawn mulberry, rubbing and beating with lava stone beater.

obtained from the root of an orchid, *Epidendrum pastoris* Orchidaceae.<sup>4</sup> I do not need to use an adhesive, as some hydrogen bonding occurs between the fibers, but I like a rather stiff surface and structure; I believe the methyl cellulose adds that quality.

Next I place plastic or fiberglass screening on top of the mulberry drawing and rub back and forth with a lava stone beater that I brought back from San Pablito. Then I remove the screening and dab off any excess adhesive. I put a fan on the pieces to dry them, which takes several hours.

The pieces range from three to ten layers or more. I often brayer ink or gouache on the layers; I have always been drawn to heavily worked or evolved surfaces. When ready to assemble the work, I sew the pieces together, and incorporate devices that enable the pieces to hang three to six inches from the wall. This results in a shadow drawing on the wall.

The research I conducted for this trip has led me to wonderful discoveries. In a shop in Oaxaca I discovered a folded bark paper tunic at the bottom of a stack of clothing. I remembered reading that the ancient Mayan priests wore bark-cloth tunics, and that "the Lacandon of El Peten, in Guatemala, still use poncho-tunics of beaten bark cloth."<sup>5</sup> I also learned of the Lacandon in Naja and their use of bark paper headbands in their rituals.<sup>6</sup> This led me to an in-depth look at the use of bark paper in bloodletting ceremonies, as portrayed in Mayan art and symbology.<sup>7</sup> In turn, this has led me to a broader search into pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican textiles.

The past few years have been a time of healing, of introspection and discovery. Things have come together for me. I spent eight months on sabbatical coalescing some of this research. It has been an interesting journey and I feel that I have had guides. One thing keeps leading to another, and another, and another.

It was raining lightly our last night in Pahuatlan. Our window curtain was blowing as the banana bloom outside swayed in the cool moist air. I thought I heard something. They say *brujas* (spirits) can fly in the night. Alan and Pamela Sandstrom say "paper acted as a kind of messenger or go-between providing a medium of communication between the human and spirit worlds."<sup>8</sup> I know I felt a strong presence. I just hope it was a good one.

## Notes:

1. See: Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela E. Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico* (Normal and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986).
2. For a detailed description of the process see: Lilian Bell, *Papyrus, Tapa, Amate and Rice Paper* (McMinnville, Oregon: Liliaceae Press, 1983), 77-90; and Bodil Christensen and Samuel Marti, "Witchcraft and Pre-Columbian Paper," *Euroamericanas*, 1988, 14-20, 68-70. Also see articles by Carol Tyroler in *Hand Papermaking*: Winter 1994 and Summer 1996.
3. Christensen and Marti, 81, 84-85.
4. *Ibid.*, 72.
5. Victor Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Mayan Papermakers* (New York: Hacker, 1977), 50-72.
6. R. Jon McGee, *Ritual and Religion among the Lacandon Maya* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990).
7. See: Michael Coe, *The Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999), 126, fig. 69 [intel 25, Yaxchilan]; and Peter Schmidt, Mercedes de la Garza, and Enrique Nalda, eds., *Maya* (New York: Rizzoli Publ, 1998), 190 [intel 24, Yaxchilan]. Also see: Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings. Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. (Fort Worth, Texas: Kimball Art Museum, 1986).
8. Sandstrom and Sandstrom, 12.

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