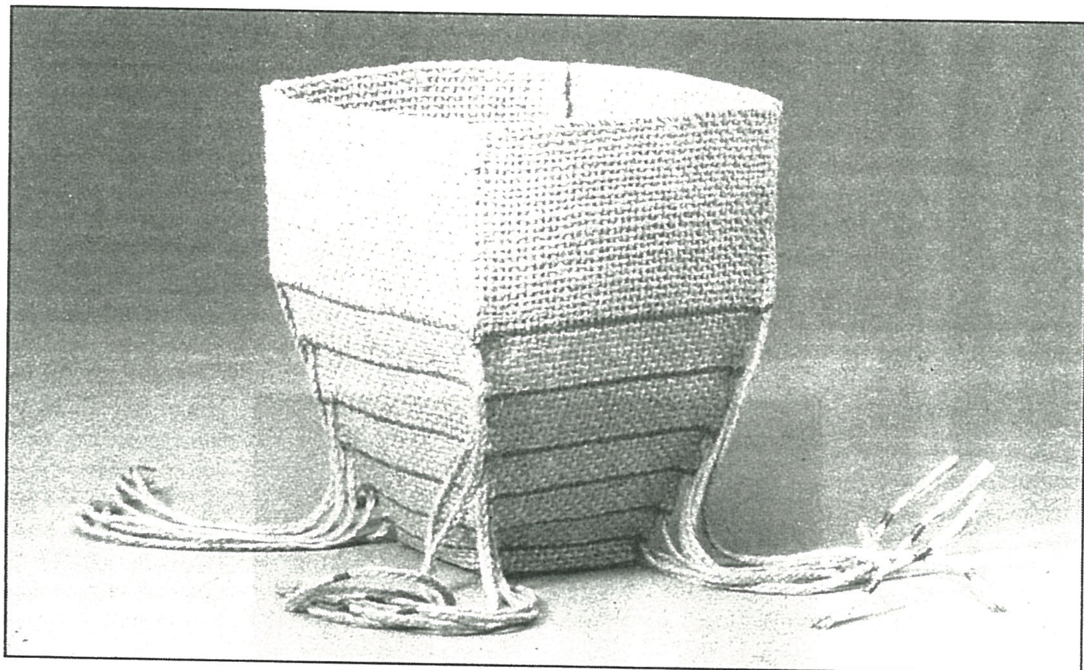
appears to be a photograph of mountainous rocks inside a taped plastic pillow bound with rope—nature spirits and plastic taped together to make a contemporary world—an uneasy place to sleep. Audrey Ng's untitled drawing hardly comes into form, and threatens to fly off its disregarded ground, prompting feelings of impermanence, as does Tom Marioni's *One Second Sculpture*.

Viewers are reminded repeatedly of a Japanese attitude toward crafts: "The crafts are not achievements of individuals, but of an entire society," just as the folk art (*Mingei*) tradition in Japan honors "an art born of a traditional culture and created by unknown craftspersons for daily use in the life of common people." Curatorial focus on *qualities* allows a full and natural embrace of fine art and craft that renders irrelevant hierarchical questions of high and low, East and West, "minority" and "mainstream." At the same time, the honoring of aesthetic and philosophical lineages reveals the painful disintegration of American culture, as well as the inadequacy of the star system as a means of producing enduring, nourishing traditions for society.

Asian Roots, Western Soil: Japanese Influences in American Culture through January 23 at the Berkeley Art Center, 1275 Walnut St., Berkeley.

Mary Hull Webster is a Bay Area painter, writer and teacher, and a contributing editor to *Artweek*.



Kay Sekimachi, *Basket with Brown Lines*, 1977, linen, 5" x 5" x 4-1/2".

A conversation with Kay Sekimachi

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Kay Sekimachi studied weaving with Trude Guermonprez, who passed on the Bauhaus ideal of integrating art and craft. Over her own long career as a fiber artist, Sekimachi also has introduced techniques from various cultures, such as Indian split-ply twining, into her work. She is best known, however, for a series of monofilament hangings woven in layers that open into sculptural shapes when they are taken off the loom.

Sekimachi cites Guermonprez, Paul Klee, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore among the artists who have been most influential in her work.

Artweek *Your Japanese heritage played a part in your attraction to weaving, of course.*

Kay Sekimachi In my mother's part of Japan, every farming household raised silkworms during silkworm season. I have a scarf that my mother made, starting from the cocoons themselves—she reeled the silk, wove the fabric, and then tie-dyed it. She used to say that her mother told her that to be a good weaver, you have to feel like a thread.

AW *What does a thread feel like?*

KS Long and patient. Weaving has to be completely planned. You plan the warp, make the warp, dress the loom and thread it, and then you can proceed with your weaving. I even make models for some of my work. When I first started studying with Trude Guermonprez, she introduced us to double weaves. I had a fascination with multiple layers, and found that one could do triple and quadruple weaves. In 1975, I finally got a loom with enough harnesses to weave a box that would come off the loom whole. That's when I started the series of nesting boxes.

AW *Weaving those boxes must have been like solving a very difficult spatial puzzle.*

KS I love these puzzles. Working in three dimensions seemed natural to me. As a child, I made origami. It's just amazing that you can keep folding very simple shapes and not repeat two in the same way. I have a bag full of the paper models I made for the boxes, which led to other works. In 1977, relatives of mine who had an import-export business brought me reams of Japanese paper they had stashed away. I didn't want to cut that beautiful paper, so I folded the *Paper Columns*, which can be as much as nine feet high.

AW *In the years since you began weaving, the idea of what weaving can be has exploded. Can you talk a little about these changes?*

KS When I started to weave, we were doing so-called utilitarian fabric. Placemats, hand towels, curtain materials. Then I and others started doing tapestries, and in 1963 I did my first monofilament hanging, which was completely three dimensional. From that point on, weaving changed from flat to three-dimensional nonutilitarian things that were more sculptural. Recently weavers have started to weave fabrics again because a computer-driven loom that can weave complex patterns has been developed. It doesn't interest me, however, because its main purpose is to do repeated patterns.

AW *Your most recent works are small baskets using the split-ply twining technique. How did that series get started?*

KS Jack Larsen wrote the essay on my work for the catalog of the traveling show. He thought that one of my most successful works was a split-ply seagrass basket I had made many years ago. At the time that basket came so easily that it wasn't a challenge, so I left it.

AW *When you say it came easily, are you referring to the weaving technique or the piece as a whole?*

KS Seagrass is a stiff material and it's rather loosely plied. It lent itself to the split-ply technique, because you could pull the ply apart but it's still stiff enough to hold the shape. I made the basket very quickly and it was so easy I thought maybe that was enough. But Larsen reminded me of that piece, and I needed something portable that I could work on when we travel, so the new series began.

AW *Do you look for a certain resistance in your materials? Monofilament, for example, can't be the easiest fiber to weave.*

KS I love to solve problems. And I like to take a technique and see what I can do with it. My favorite material is linen. It was considered one of the harder materials to work with, cotton being the easiest. I love the texture and body of linen, and it can have a crispness which is necessary for doing shapes like the boxes.

Light is the other thing that draws me to certain materials. The monofilament pieces and the room dividers were meant to have light come through them. Even the ikat boxes are translucent. I love holding the paper bowls up to the light so you can see the patterns made by the little patches. I'm now using hornet's nest paper, which is absolutely beautiful. People send me hornets nests from all over the place. I take the nest apart in layers—it's amazing how strong it is. The overall color is determined by the area where the hornets were working. I've got some that are very dark gray and others that are sand color.

AW *In English we have these two words, "art" and "craft." What, for you, is the distinction?*

KS I don't think about that too much. If a piece is well-crafted, maybe it becomes a piece of art.

AW *So one could think of the word "craft" as describing the process of art?*

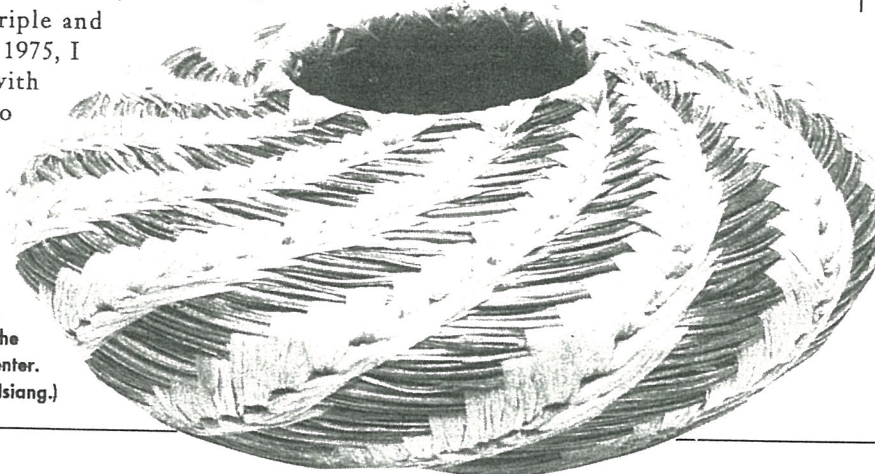
KS All I know is that if it's a beautiful piece of handwoven material, to me that's a work of art.

AW *When you call something "a work of art," what does that mean to you?*

KS Something that is right in every way. There's not one thread you can take away from it. It's complete.

AW *I've talked with other artists, for example ceramic sculptors, who feel that the utilitarian tradition of their medium has caused their work to be taken less seriously.*

KS It hasn't been a problem for me personally. It's something I don't think about. The paper bowls are so delicate that they're completely useless, but, as a friend of mine said, they're poetic.



Karen Kai, *Manju*, coiled basket, pine needles, sweetgrass and raffia, 1-1/2" x 3-1/2", at the Berkeley Art Center. (Photo: Bob Hsiang.)

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KALW-FM.