

# Glen Kaufman: An Art Odyssey

by Rhonda Brown



Figure 1. Gallery view of  
*Glen Kaufman: Elegant  
Eloquence* 2023 installation  
at browngrotta arts.

**T**he career of noted weaver and educator Glen Kaufman (1932–2020) was a journey in the truest sense. His work, created over a period that spanned more than fifty years, reflected a myriad of influences and innovations. It carried him from childhood and college in Wisconsin to community art classes while serving in the military in Ohio, to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, a Fulbright in Denmark, a year at Dorothy Liebes’ design studio in New York, back to Cranbrook as an educator, to the University of Georgia to run a fiber program, study trips to the United Kingdom, and ultimately, management of a study abroad program that enabled him to spend half of each year teaching in Japan. “It’s just a kind of continuum of incredible events that were completely unplanned for,” Kaufman told Josephine Shea in an oral interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian.<sup>1</sup>

Each experience as student, worker, educator, exhibitor, and juror inspired art experiments with new materials, techniques, and iconography. In October 2023, browngrotta arts celebrated the expanse of Kaufman’s remarkable oeuvre in *Glen Kaufman: Elegant Eloquence*, with an exhibition (**Figure 1**) and a catalog, *Glen Kaufman: 1960 - 2010*, that featured more than sixty-five works by Kaufman.

Kaufman's work gained national recognition early in his career. He finished his MFA in 1959. In 1960, his work *Window Hanging* (**Figure 2**) was included in *The Designer-Craftsmen USA* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, followed by inclusion in the Museum's *The Young Americans 1962*. *Window Hanging*, made in Denmark, used mono-filament warp featuring an inlay technique with sections, some transparent and some opaque. Kaufman described it as "very Scandinavian geometric." His studies at Cranbrook followed a tradition of creating architecture, design, and furnishings in alignment. Kaufman described the process as, "You're going to learn to weave upholstery. You're going to learn to weave casement cloth, and you're going to learn to weave rugs ..." However, there was no study of tapestry. Working in Liebes' studio after graduation, his time was spent on rug design and creating pillow tops.

It was in Scandinavia where Kaufman was exposed to working with fabric dyes rather than heavy pigments. He found what he described as "a different kind of brilliance and hand." When he returned to Cranbrook to run the fiber program, he was open to a wide range of historic and contemporary methods for producing fabrics both on and off the loom.<sup>2</sup> A student, Meda Parker Johnston, approached Kaufman about developing a screen-printing program. Kaufman was supportive. She completed the research and as the program grew, she noted that there were no resources available. Would Kaufman write a book with her? He agreed. Johnston completed the technical sections while Kaufman compiled the history, curating an exhibition of historical textiles at Cranbrook along the way. The result was *Design on Fabrics*, published in two editions by Van Nostrand Reinhold in New York.

In addition to the book debut, 1967 was a banner exhibition year for Kaufman. His work was the subject of one-person exhibitions at Ithaca College Museum of Art in New York and Museum West in San Francisco. *The Weavings of Glen Kaufman* debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Craft, featuring macramé (**Figure 3**) and double weaves. It was also the year Kaufman left Cranbrook and moved with his family to the University of Georgia in Athens as Associate Professor of Art and Area Chair, Fabric Design Program. After arriving in Georgia, Kaufman "transitioned" to plastics. This was a

**Figure 2.**  
*Window Hanging*,  
1960. Cotton, linen,  
plastic, wool. 90 x  
37 x .5 inches.



**Figure 3.** *Experimental Panel*,  
1960s. Linen macramé.  
23 x 17 x 2.5 inches.





Figure 4. *Cloak*, 1974. Weft twining, vinyl propylene on plexiglass form. 78 x 28 x 14 inches.

time Kaufman recalled, “when *plastic* was not a good word, but I felt they had great potential.” He created a major installation in the main gallery at the University of Georgia. “It was early installation art, when installation art didn’t have a name, and I worked with all these various kinds of plastics—clear plastic film and black plastic film, and some of them based on traditional Japanese raincoat forms” (Figure 4). He continued to create works of plastic throughout the ’70s. One of his vinyl and polypropylene pieces was published in the seminal book *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971). Other works in this series were published in *Art Fabric: Mainstream*, also by Larsen and Constantine (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), where the authors noted that the “heroic proportions” of the oversized cloaks of polyethylene Kaufman fashioned “suggest that they must have been crafted for science fiction creatures.”

In 1973, Kaufman utilized university development funds to travel to the United Kingdom (where he would travel again to study in 1976). He became intrigued by looping, one of the earliest fiber techniques. A single-element technique, it is a precursor to knitting and crochet. Kaufman observed that anywhere there is a Neolithic culture—Peru, Swiss lake dwellings, natives in New Guinea—looping is often on the ladder to more complicated techniques, including weaving. “I did a couple of gloves out of looping. One was ... four fingers in the victory sign, red, with ruffles around the bottom. Another one was a mitten with two thumbs.” He sent works from the glove series to the first *International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles* at the British Crafts Centre in London, organized by a friend and well-known British weaver, Ann Sutton. That set him on “a glove trip that lasted eight or ten years, in which glove was object.” Later Kaufman used found gloves and mixed media and embellished them in a wide variety of ways (Figure 5). He also created images of gloves, rendered in *shibori*, a Japanese-stitch technique. The gloves were shown extensively—in the United States, Japan, Europe, Australia, and the United Kingdom, including at the Royal College of Art.

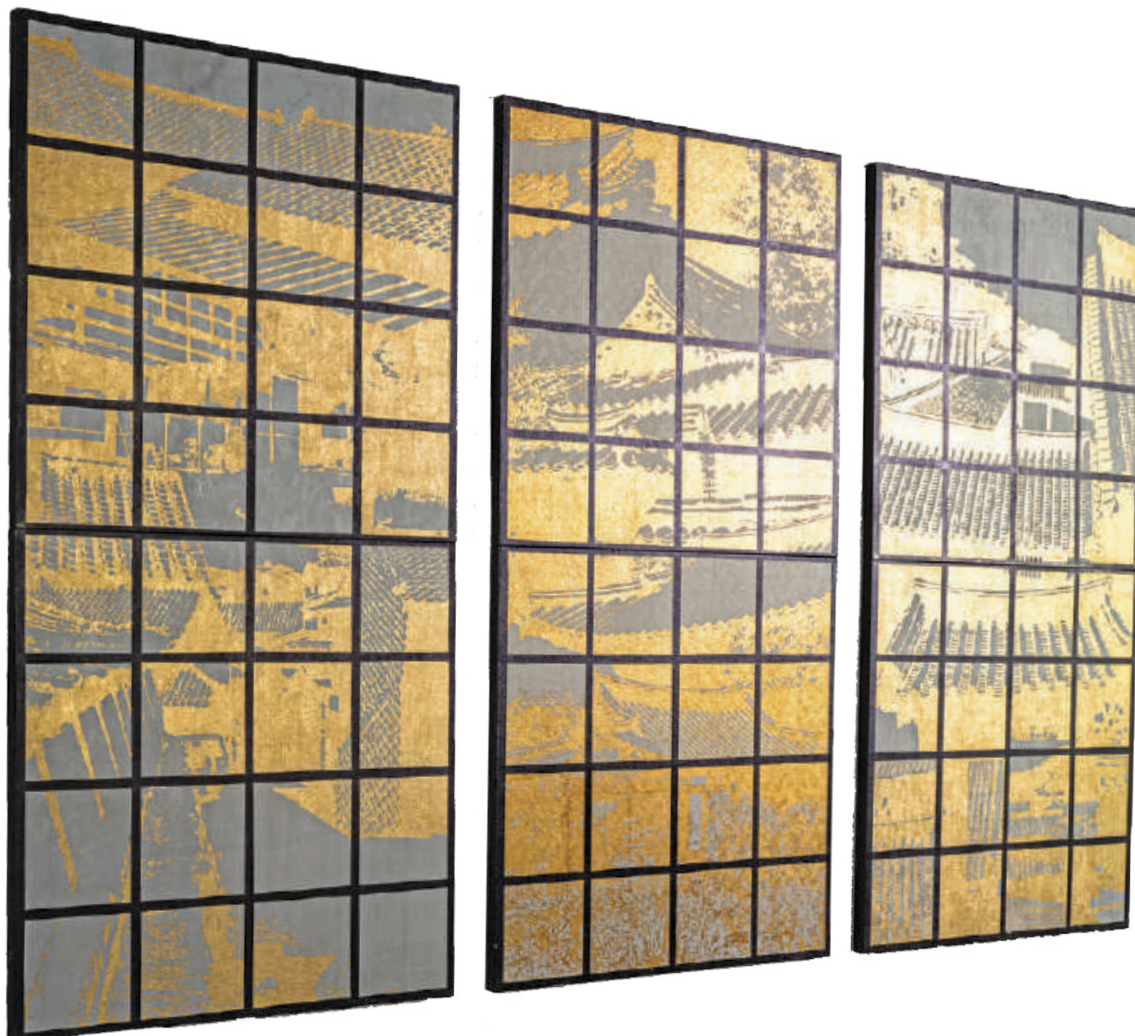


Figure 5. *Glove Mosaic V*, 1981. Nylon. 34 x 47 x 2.5 inches.

The 1980s reflected what Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, the authors of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*, call “[t]he most lasting and preeminent phase of Kaufman’s work,” one that was linked to Japan. Starting in 1984, for fourteen consecutive years, he spent six months in Kyoto, leading a study-abroad program for the University of Georgia and completing his own work. There he developed what Koplos and Metcalf call “a complex concept,” weaving a twill pattern in silk cloth, composing collages of photo imagery and silk screening those images onto the cloth, and then abstracting the imagery further by applying metal leaf. The images were often architectural, incorporating a grid that recalls Eastern shoji screens or Western windowpanes (**Figure 6**). This series included images of other locations such as the United States, India, and Malaysia (**Figure 7**). “I’ve always felt that architecture was the one thing I could draw out from each of these cultures that would express my being there,” Kaufman said. “Travel and the study of history, rather than art movements or individuals, I think, have been the strongest influences on my work. Not that I feel that I’m doing something absolutely unique that no one else has ever done—although I do think that when I began using ... photography,



**Figure 6.** *Endangered Cities-Fracture I-IV*, 1996. Woven cotton twill, silver leaf, screen print, impressed metal leaf. 27.25 x 27.25 x 2.5 inches.



**Figure 7.** *Yoshikawa, Noto*, 1990. Silk damask, silver leaf; screenprint, impressed metal leaf. 48 x 24 x 1 inches.





Figure 8. *Prayer Rug III*, 1983. Cotton and silk.  
18 x 15 x 2.5 inches.

photo silk screen, metal-leaf application—[that] was a unique use of those materials.”

In the '80s, Kaufman also created a series of pile-woven prayer rugs. All were woven of natural-dyed silk using various plant materials. In this series, Kaufman used the McDonald's arch as the *mihrab* [niche indicating Mecca], an image normally essential in prayer rugs (**Figure 8**). Typically rendered as a single point, Kaufman thought Americans' devotion to McDonald's justified a double arch. “[I]t just intrigued me, this idea of really fine knotted work,” the artist said.

A focus on garment uses, historic and contemporary, followed. It began with Japanese patchwork and a desire to create his own interpretation. This led to projects involving jeans, which he saw as an “iconic garment around the world.” He deconstructed jeans, patched denim jackets with Japanese fabrics, and created a sculpture of free-standing jeans in various configurations. In the 2010s, when the last of his work was created, Kaufman turned to Japanese kimonos, creating collages combining his impressive collection of fabrics and found objects (**Figure 9**). Kaufman's interest was in how garments influence the ways we think about culture.

Kaufman's travels made all our lives richer. He embraced the rich and varied history of textiles from around the world which “gave his work a gravitas that emerged even when he used nontraditional

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materials and approaches,” observed Ashley Callahan, in her essay for the catalog *Glen Kaufman: 1960 – 2010*.<sup>3</sup> The fiber field has benefited greatly from his curiosity and his creativity in transforming his discoveries into art.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Glen Kaufman in this article are from the [Oral history interview with Glen Kaufman](#), 2008 January 22-February 23. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a wide-ranging interview with Josephine Shea, to whom this author is indebted. ([aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-glen-kaufman-16155](http://aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-glen-kaufman-16155))

<sup>2</sup> Lindsay, Jennifer L., “Mary Walker Phillips and the Knit Revolution of the 1960s,” citing an Interview of Glen F. Kaufman by Jennifer Lindsay, Athens, GA, February 23-24, 2009. Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings. 710 (2012). [digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/710](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/710)

<sup>3</sup> Ashley Callahan, “Eloquence and Elegance: the Art of Glen Kaufman,” in *Glen Kaufman: 1960 – 2010*, p. 21 (browngrotta arts, Wilton, CT 2023)

*Representing many of the artists who have helped define modern fiber art since the 1950s, browngrotta arts reflects the aesthetic and advocacy of its co-curators, husband-and-wife team, Tom Grotta and Rhonda Brown. [browngrotta.com](http://browngrotta.com)*

*Photography by Tom Grotta.*



Figure 9. *Kimono Suite*, 2010.  
Mixed media/ washi, fabric collage.  
18.5 x 15.25 x 2.5 inches.