

My Hands Are Listening: Thoughts on Transforming Paper into Textile

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Do It Over, 2008, 4½ x 5¼ x 2½ inches, typewritten sestina on kozo paper,
knitted kozo paper, thread, cloth, amastl.
All photos by Stefan Hagen and courtesy of the author.

When you weave a long time, your hands get very strong. They are the boss—more or less. And they control your work, without you even thinking about it sometimes. They are the whole key. Your hands are the key to your whole personality. And your baskets—your baskets can tell you how your hands are.—Julia Parker'

In late 2016, I took a weaving class at a fiber arts studio with a huge expanse of wooden floors that supported over twenty looms. An overwhelming feeling rushed over me, saying I should get a second MFA in textiles. Within 24 hours, a second wave of practicality reminded me that I was already on the right path, even if I could not always see it. Each of my paper adventures—knitting books, weaving baskets, sewing dresses—began unconsciously. Often it felt like I was backing into darkness, only to find riches once I turned around and saw the world I had entered. If I had known the road from the start, I would have been too intimidated to even begin.

When I was a child, I was mesmerized as I watched my mother knit a soft beaded sweater. The next miracle that she made with a single hook was a rug that depicted a lighthouse. She hopped from one thing to another in her few hours away from the demands of her job, raising a family, and maintaining a home. This is not a story of family traditions passed down through generations; needlework was my mother's way to relax by keeping her hands busy.

She never taught me to knit but I wanted to make that sweater, so I walked next door to the library and found books on knitting. Awkwardly I followed diagrams to learn how to cast on, knit, purl, increase, decrease, and bind off. That is still about all I can do. But discovering the ability to search outside of my known world to learn how to do something has made everything else possible.



Paper Shoe, 2013, 9 x 3½ x 2¾ inches, corded and twined hanji.

Like any other teenager, I considered different futures and eventually settled on becoming a classical violinist. This meant regular lessons, practice, instrument upkeep, ensemble rehearsals, concerts, and travel. Most importantly, it demanded intense attention to hear and see exactly what my teacher was demonstrating, to mimic the precise bend of a knuckle or placement of a finger pad. The wonderful and terrible part of learning an instrument is that you can hear exactly when you have gone wrong. Wonderful because you have instant feedback to attempt a fix. Terrible because it sounds bad, which is why many people quit before getting halfway decent.

Several months before I completed my MFA, I interned with the artist Robbin Ami Silverberg. I wanted to witness the life of a woman artist in our field, and she happened to be preparing an installation about women's work. She had gathered proverbs from around the world about what women are expected to do and be, and printed them onto handmade paper that she cut into strips to wind onto antique bobbins. To help her prepare the work, I carefully sliced between the lines of text to transform each sheet of paper into one long strand. During breaks, she showed me generous mailings she received from Asao Shimura in the Philippines sharing his immense knowledge, my first exposure to woven paper cloth.

Back at school, I used offcuts from my thesis installation to experiment with paper thread. The mostly two-hour-beaten abaca paper was hard and rough on my fingers; I would dampen the paper to soften it but the strands dried hard. I got tired of spinning between thumb and index finger, and rubbing between my palms felt



Midnight Gourd, 2015, 10¼ inches x 4-inch diameter at base, indigo, persimmon, and walnut dyes on corded and twined hanji.

awkward, so I started to roll the flat paper strips against my thigh. After graduation, I assisted Andrea Peterson's paper class at Ox-Bow where we made large kozo paper. The following week, I sliced the 2 x 3-foot sheets to roll against my thigh, making huge hanks of paper yarn.

In Nebraska at a three-month residency at Art Farm in 2006, I began to knit paper. The first square hurt my hands so much that I vowed never to do it again. But after a week or two, pressured by the omnipresent piles of paper yarn, I tried again, adjusting my tension to accommodate this non-elastic material. My hands stopped cramping once I switched to looser purled stitches. The small pieces grew into a pile, and soon I had pages to make an accordion book. I wrote about keeping my hands busy to survive a broken friendship, and this poem was sewn into *Knit Sestina* (2006). The pages were full of holes that spoke to things left unsaid and misunderstandings that never had closure. They demanded a reading between and through their lines. So many hidden stories emerged, and I rushed to knit soft places for them to land.

If I consider my attempts to bridge performance and book arts, I see threads everywhere. Most of my performances involved my violin, handmade paper, and thread. The final one used *only* paper thread. When I was knitting paper in Nebraska, I made a halter top that I stretched unwittingly years later in a washing attempt. After failed alterations, I ripped it out, dyed it with cochineal, and turned it into a knitted book (*Sisters*, 2011) and a twined book (*What's a Conscience?*, 2012). It's hard for me to leave things alone.



Flying Duck 1, 2016, 10½ x 7½ x 2½ inches, corded and twined hanji, natural dyes.

I grew up in a time and place when being of Korean descent was to be invisible. "Korean" only registered as a war that killed countless American soldiers and arbitrarily tore a country in half. "Are you Chinese? Japanese? What else could you be?" was a common refrain. When I learned about paper technology beginning in China, moving through Korea, and landing in Japan, the two poles emerged again: China was first, Japan was best. Though I relished Lynn Amlie's and Dorothy Field's scholarship on hanji, I wanted to know more.

Determined to learn hanji sheet formation on a yearlong Fulbright grant, I arrived in Korea with that singular goal. Quickly I realized that I had to learn the breadth of hanji culture to support a real understanding of the paper. I found teachers who helped me transform paper so that it draped like fabric, fused to itself like felt, absorbed ink from a brush, took on the colors of Korean flora, and twisted and twined into baskets. Some of these practices I began unwillingly, unable at first to discern where they could take me. I eventually embraced everything with the regret that I did not have time to learn it all, because it was time to go home.

Time alone is vital to learning anything. One summer, I lived in a converted chicken coop at a music school where I had to practice for five hours daily. In the conservatory at Oberlin College, we locked ourselves into tiny practice rooms that soon stank of the 99-percent perspiration it takes to make transcendent music. Long stretches of solo time were mandatory when I was figuring out how to knit, spin, cord, and make paper. In the classroom, I get my students started and then walk away to give them space to practice.

Jang Seong-woo, my hanji teacher, first showed me how to twist and ply two strips of hanji into cord. It took a week to get the hang of it. After he taught me to make a gourd and simple basket, he insisted I learn from *jiseung* master Na Seo-hwan. Mr. Na had been cording and twining paper since he was a child, but was not trained to teach, and common exhortations were "No! Stop!" "Not like that!" "Watch me!" All lessons were in Korean with "twist" and "rope" being the extent of our specialized vocabulary. To describe it to English speakers I called it "paper weaving" because that was how it felt.²

Not until I returned to the US did I realize what I was doing. After I gave a lecture complete with *jiseung* objects, *shifu* artist Velma Bolyard suggested that I present at basketry conferences. After teaching my first hanji class, Judy Dominic kindly offered, "There are a lot of words to explain what you are doing, which I'm happy to share with you." She sent me basic terms, diagrams, and links to a basketry website. I understood that I was not weaving paper into cloth, but I had no idea that I was making baskets. That connection with a deep, worldwide lineage of makers—with their own language and grammar of basketry—freed me to grow from making vessels to shoes to ducks that fly.

My mother had three Korean baskets full of thread, bobbins, pins, needles, chalk, scissors, and buttons. I loved to open them and smell the straw, impatient to learn how to use their contents, unaware that I would learn someday how those baskets were made. Decades later, my mother sold her old Singer for a pittance. Crestfallen, I said it was all I had hoped for as an inheritance. She quickly



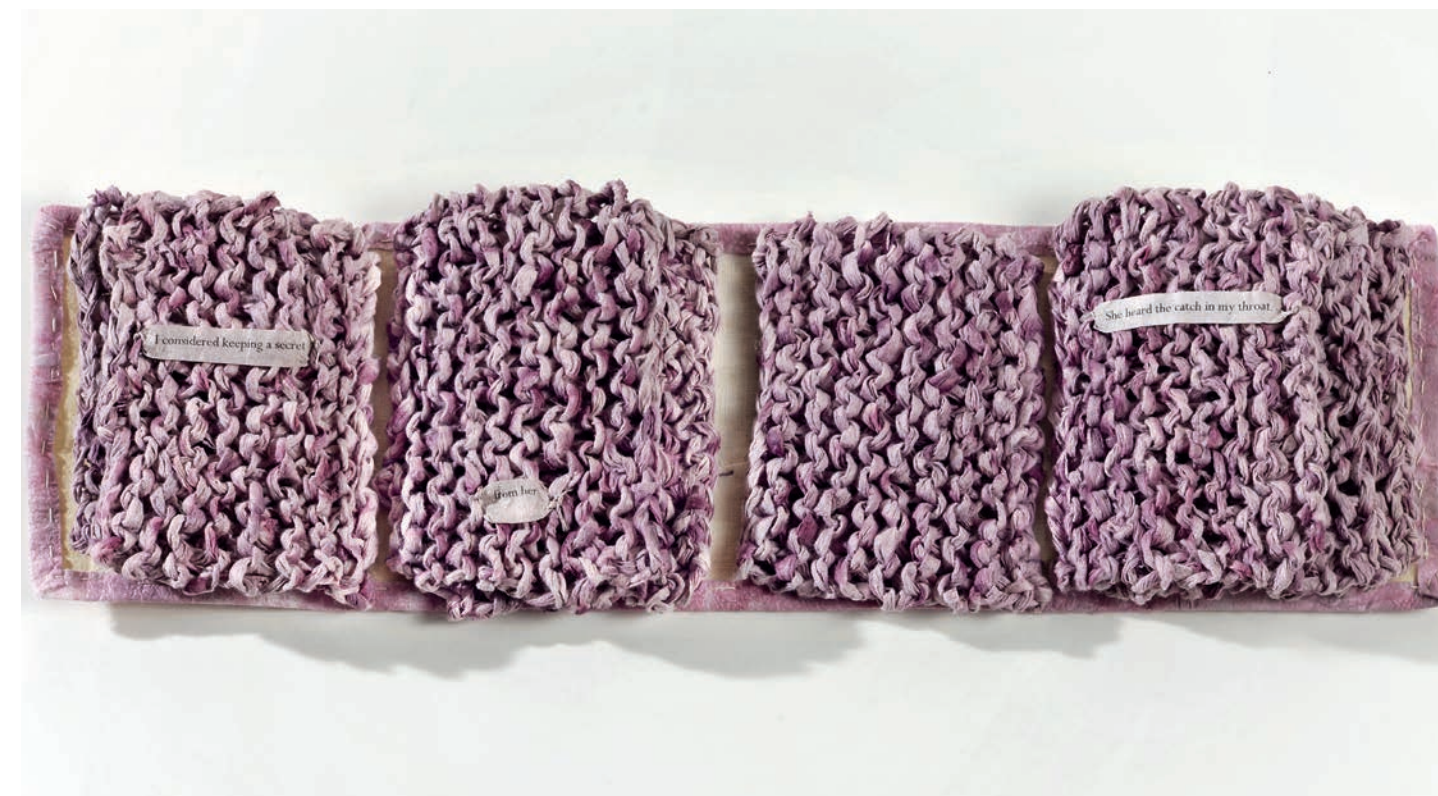
got the machine back and I insisted she keep it because no home feels complete without a sewing machine.

During a lecture in eleventh-grade English class, a friend nudged me to show a treasure in her lap: she had played with a sheet of copy paper during boring classes until it looked and felt like a tissue. Tiny, soft, transformed.

In 2008, Kim Kyung taught me *joomchi*, and my first project was to create a pattern with colored hanji onto six sheets of white hanji. She told me how to iron them and insisted that I back them with interfacing, sew them into a garment, find a famous person to model the garment, and give her a photograph of the session. I never got past ironing and left the sheets with my aunt, who promised to return them to Ms. Kim as an apology for failing to complete her directives.

In 2014, I was living with my aunt in Seoul when she left for a trip, leaving items strewn in the house after a packing frenzy. I recognized a box; inside were six pieces of *joomchi*-ed hanji. I had already visited Ms. Kim on Jeju Island where she had relocated, and her dementia was so severe that she had no recollection of my aunt, my aunt's late mother (who had been Ms. Kim's student), or me. Reunited with these samples, I wanted to make good on the project. I ironed on interfacing, found a pattern, and made a dress that I could wear, skipping the celebrity model.

My previous paper dresses carried content based on ancient nomadic artifacts in a way that indicated portability, the idea of traveling with only the shirt on your back. I knitted those offcuts into scarves, but these painstakingly lined offcuts deserved more. A pattern for a child's dress yielded a lovely garment, but more offcuts. A doll's dress came next. After exhausting the original material, I raided my stashes of dyed hanji, scraps, and old artwork, practicing patterns



Sisters, 2011, 5 x 8 x 1½ inches closed, 17 inches wide open, inkjet on hanji, cochineal dye on knitted handmade mulberry paper, linen, thread.
FACING PAGE: All There, 2016, 11 x 11½ inches, dye on handmade mulberry paper, thread.

and making my own. Every week, I visited friends who had sewing machines. At home, I hand stitched and glued pieces together. These dresses usually stood on their own, activating different aspects of my own history and personality. Just as making artist books provided a way to combine disparate media into a satisfying container and concept, making garments combined my newer skills—papermaking, thread making, surface design, natural dyeing, paper and bark manipulation—into another time-tested form that renews itself in willing hands.

To this day, I use the same tools, turning to books and teachers, practicing for hours, and letting my hands listen to paper to hear what it wants to become. Each time I learn a technique, I have a new language to start conversations that turn on the lights, illuminating history in one corner, chemistry in the next, women's work that crosses all cultures in another room, and deep human longing to converge with the rest of the world. Every lesson comes when needed, even if rewards arrive much later. Without my violin teachers, I never would have understood my hanji teachers. By embracing what so many artists are taught to shun—domestic work, craft, and utility—I find vast troves of wisdom in paper as textile.

NOTES

1. Deborah Valoma, *Scrape the Willow Until It Sings: The Words and Work of Basket Maker Julia Parker* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013), 178.
2. In my early efforts to explain *joomchi* I called it "paper felting" because it was the most efficient way to convey the idea, even if it was not true felting with animal wool.