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MANIFESTATIONS OF THE INDIGO SPIRIT  
SHIBORI WORKS OF RICHARD FULLER

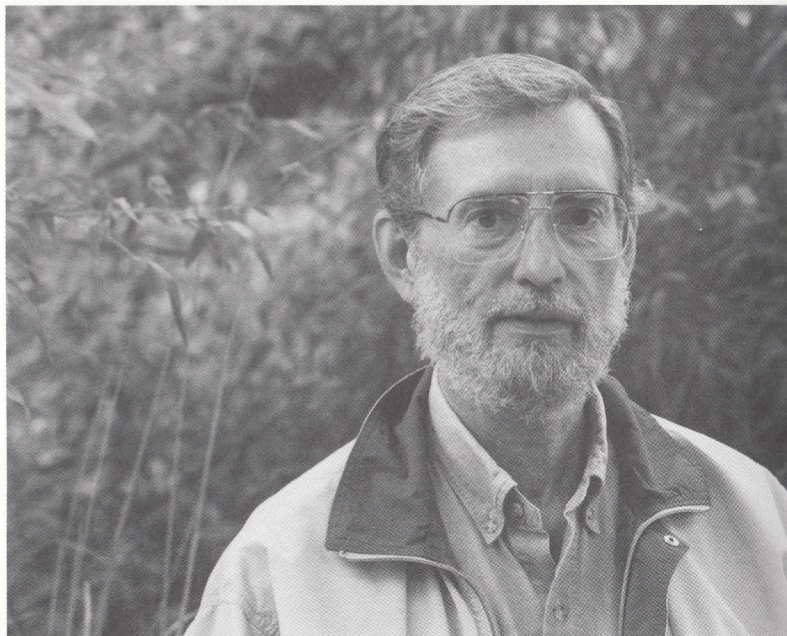
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EXHIBITION CURATED BY  
STANLEY I GRAND

ESSAYS BY  
STANLEY I GRAND  
RICHARD FULLER

OCTOBER 24 – DECEMBER 15, 1999  
SORDONI ART GALLERY, WILKES UNIVERSITY  
WILKES-BARRE, PENNSYLVANIA





*Photo: Stanley I Grand*

# RICHARD FULLER: SHIBORI RITUALS

Stanley I Grand

**I**N 1984, while on sabbatical leave from the Art Department at Wilkes College, Richard Fuller went to Japan to learn the art of shibori. There, under the tutelage of master textile artist and dyer Hiroyuki Shindo, he studied the fundamentals of shibori, which involves resist-dyeing textiles so as to create patterns. Fuller has described the process as follows:

Shibori comes from the Japanese verb root *shiboru*, “to wring, squeeze or press”—words that emphasize the action or process of manipulating cloth. In shibori the cloth is first shaped and secured with thread before being immersed in the dye. The cloth is then removed from the vat and allowed to oxidize in the air. This cycle is repeated until the desired shade is attained. Once the dyeing is complete, the cloth is untied and returned to its original two-dimensional shape. The cloth sensitively records both the shape and the pressure exerted by the threads during the exposure to the dye; the “memory” of the shape remains imprinted in the cloth. The emphasis on tying the cloth and manual manipulation distinguishes shibori from the wax-resist and clamping processes, both of which are also practiced in Japan.

Although ancient, the origin of shibori is somewhat obscure; and scholars disagree as to whether the technique is indigenous to Japan or came originally from the mainland. The earliest surviving pieces of shibori are in Japan, but we cannot say with certainty where they were made. What is certain, however, is that the character for shibori (絞) is of Chinese origin.

Long a staple of the traditional decorative arts in Japan, shibori is mentioned in *Man'yōshū*, an eighth-century anthology of poems that includes this couplet:

*When I was a child with hair down to my shoulders  
I wore a sleeved robe of shibori cloth.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, the demand for shibori cloth garments, including kimonos, remained relatively constant until the present century when it fell victim to the many changes that occurred in Japanese society after the end of World War II. By the late 1970s, interest in shibori had for all practical purposes ceased. In other words, when Fuller went to learn the craft it was practically a dead art whose practice was maintained by Shindo and a few others. Since then, however, shibori has enjoyed a revival of interest.

Fuller's interest in textile design is in part an outgrowth of his background in the New York advertising world, where between 1956 and 1965, he was Art Director at Gardner Advertising. His experiences there gave him a solid grounding in two-dimensional design, which he brought to Wilkes in 1969. The major stimulus for his interest in textile design, however, came four years later. After losing all his possessions to the Susquehanna River flood of 1972, Fuller volunteered for a year of missionary work and was assigned to the Schutz American School in Alexandria, Egypt, where he became fascinated with “the aesthetic potential of local dyes.” He has observed that “Exposure to Egyptian textiles and the great traditions of resist-dyed fabrics in the Middle East stimulated me to develop and enhance my visual vocabulary in this medium.” Returning to Wilkes-Barre, he spent the next nine years investigating the possibilities of batik while also taking courses in textiles at The Pennsylvania State University (1976) and Parsons School of Design (1982–83). After his trip to Japan, he decided that shibori would be his primary medium and has explored its aesthetic possibilities ever since.

*Eight Paper Sacks in an Indigo Box* (1984, Figure 1) is one of the first pieces completed after Fuller's return from Japan. It consists of two halves of a small box covered in shibori and placed on a base of unpolished rice, which evokes the raked



sand in a Japanese rock garden. In the bottom section of the box, Fuller has placed eight elegantly formed paper sacks that have been carefully stitched along their edges and secured with knotted purple strings. Side by side, in two rows, their bright cadmium red light contrasts with the deep rich indigo of the box. The overall effect is of a ceremonial offering of an ideal box, an impression furthered by the fact that the lid cannot be employed without crushing the paper sacks. What seems to be important is the ritual presentation, or rather the effort and care—note the mitered corners—that went into the preparation.

Fuller has often taken a concept and explored it from various angles while maintaining a set of self-imposed limitations. In 1990 he began a number of pattern pieces of which *Tehón Series 4* (Figure 2) is representative. The “Tehón” or pattern in this work consists of three horizontal bands. The upper and lower bands are nearly identical and suggest rippling waves. The center panel contains an abstract arrangement of regular geometric shapes, primarily triangles, forming patterns of light and dark that recall the jagged edges created when great masses of ice collide and buckle on wintry northern lakes. Water fluid, water solid, water moving, water frozen: icy crystalline patterns held motionless between two rivers.

Along with the *series* (think of Monet’s cathedrals or Warhol’s personalities), another quintessential element of modernist art is the *grid* (Sol LeWitt’s pristine white sculptures). Fuller’s *Indigo Grid Series 6* (1995, Figure 3) contains thirty-six squares of shibori-dyed paper arranged to form a square. Some of the smaller squares contain pieces of dyed paper stitched together. He has allowed a slight looseness to enter the composition: threads now extend beyond the paper instead of being cut flush with the surface. Also new is Fuller’s incorporation of photographs (or, more precisely, fragments of photographs) of rural Japan that he has cut into thin bands. Like the strip of cloth on the lid of *Eight Paper Sacks in an Indigo Box*, these photographic relics bisect the indigo squares.

Whereas in *Indigo Grid Series 6*, Fuller created a tension by contrasting the static grid with a circular movement

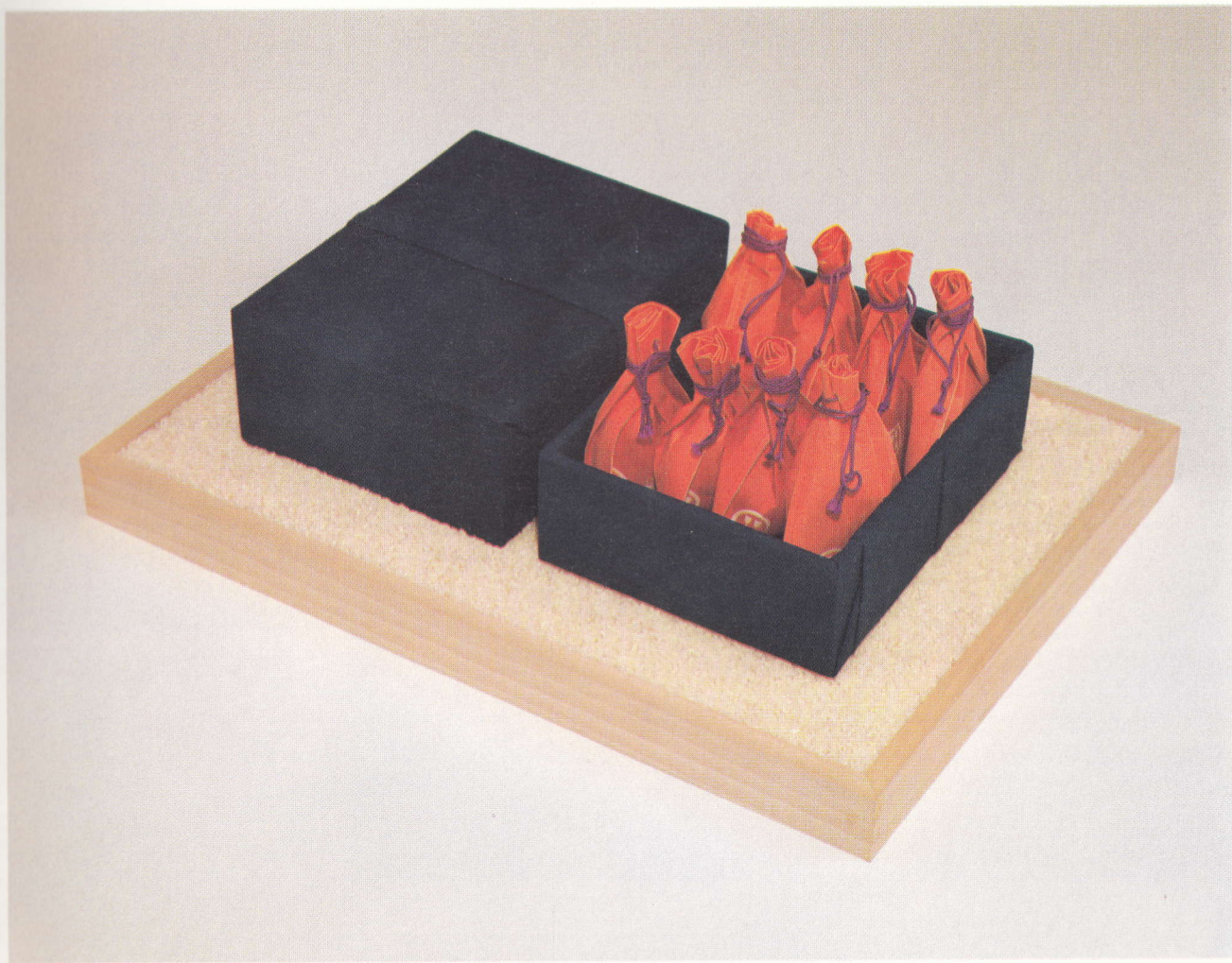
caused by tonal shifts; in *90/225* (1998, Figure 4) he contradicted the inherent flatness of the grid by raising some of his color squares off the surface. The grid itself is subtly delineated by embossed lines that divide the ground into 225 squares (15 on a side). The title simply indicates the number of units covered. In these most recent works, Fuller has continued to make shibori expressive of his own sensibilities by substituting photographs of dyed cloth for the original and introducing readymade objects like toy clothespins.

Several factors distinguish Fuller’s art from traditional Japanese processes. Most obviously, he does not use the dyed cloth to create garments or wall hangings. Rather, he uses shibori as a beginning, as a color palette, to create collages, grids, or boxes. These he designs according to Western, rather than Oriental, conventions.

The content, as opposed to the design, combines the two traditions. The spiritual component seems to evoke traditional Japanese values: the tea ceremony, the Zen of arranging. Fuller’s work has a ritual quality. Objects or patterns are delicately arranged. The boxes are microcosms of order. Randomness and expressionism have been banished. His cool, indigo compositions bespeak a cerebral, unemotional aesthetic.

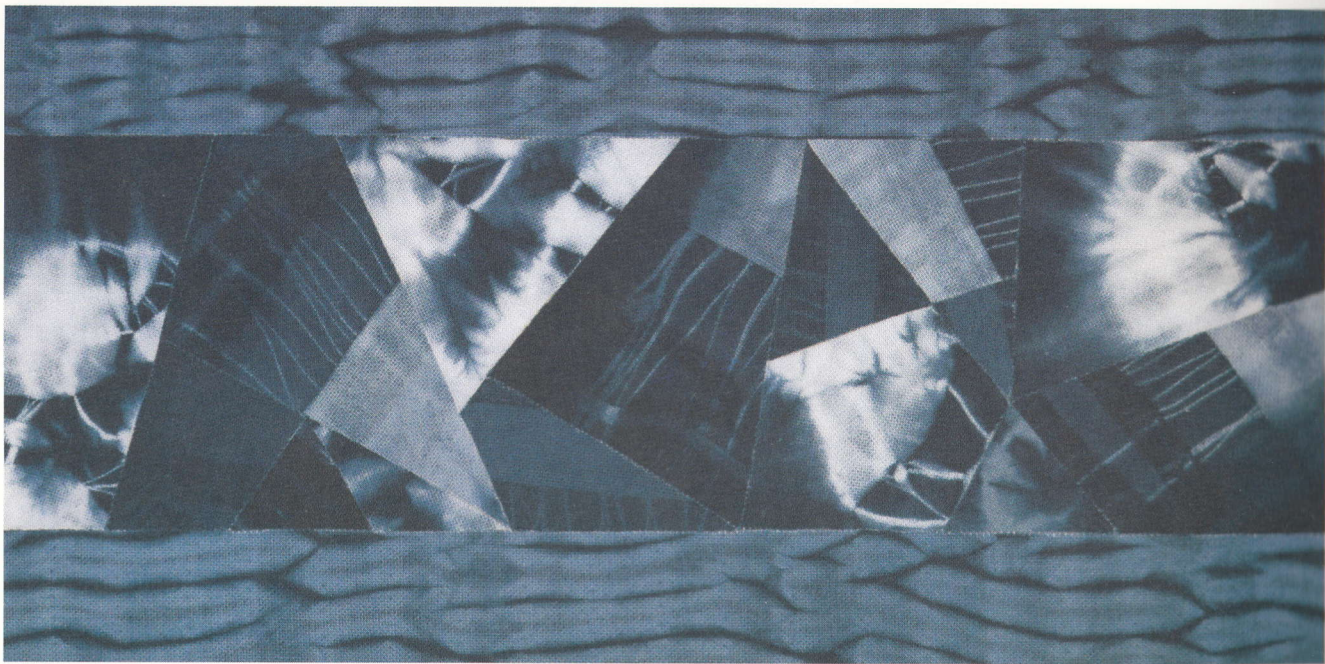
In his art, Fuller has created a controlled world, a refined parallel reality, beyond the accidents of life and the ravages of nature. He draws inspiration from nature, but nature humanized and beneficent, controlled and ordered, devoid of wilderness and unpredictability. Yet fundamentally, his is a reconstructing, affirmative, healing art. Doubtless the predilection for order existed in his art before the deluvian chaos. Now that element of order predominates: calamity changes, calamity confirms.

1. Quoted in Yoshiko Wada, Mary Kellogg Rice, and Jane Barton, *Shibori: The Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped Resist Dyeing* (Tokyo, 1983), 14.



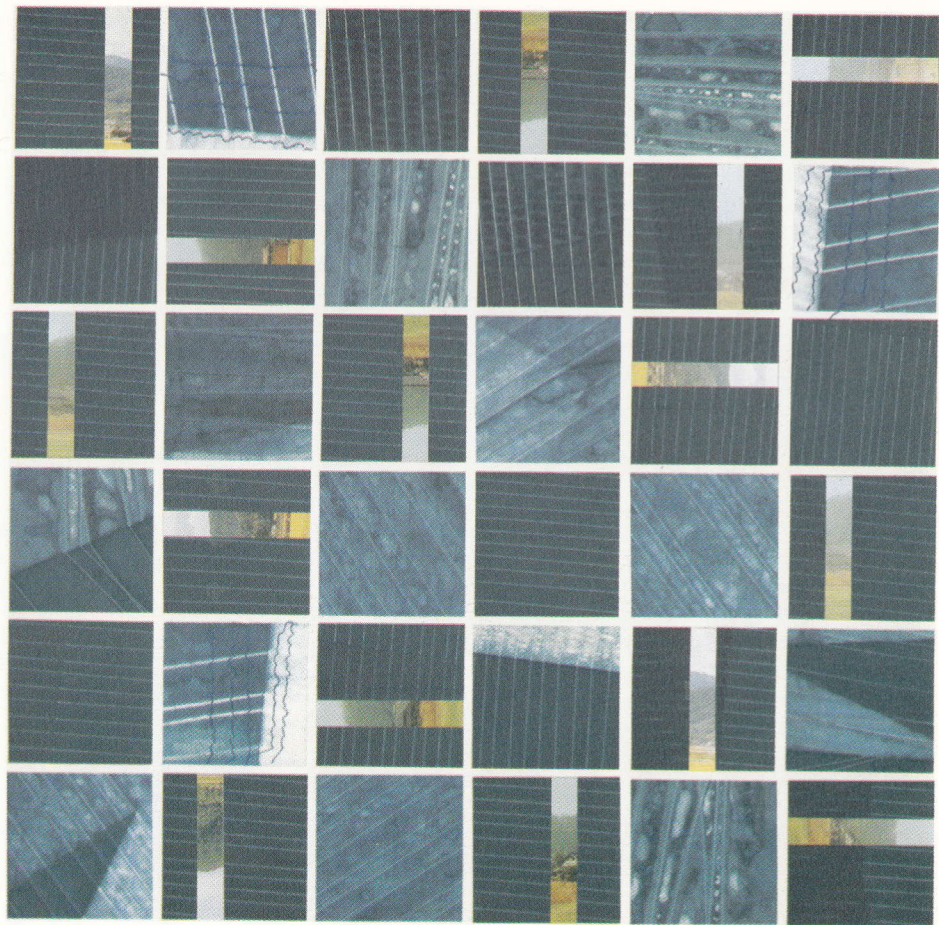
*Eight Paper Sacks in an Indigo Box*  
1984





*Tehón Series 4*  
1990





*Indigo Grid Series 6*  
1995



90/225  
1998



# MANIFESTATIONS OF THE INDIGO SPIRIT

*Richard Fuller*

**T**HE WORK in this exhibition reflects my interest in the beauty of pattern, a refined sensitivity to nature, and a deep respect for the Japanese dye-resist process called shibori. When I returned from my first trip to Japan in 1984, I discovered that living in Japan changed my views about teaching and set me on a new course regarding the future of my aesthetic development. Much of what I had read about the Japanese culture and Zen philosophy suddenly became a vital part of my everyday experience. I found myself in an environment in which the notion of the inseparable link between nature and man became more clearly defined.

While working with the indigo dyer, Hiroyuki Shindo, I perceived the profound forces of nature which surrounded me in Miyama, a little farming village in the mountains of Northern Kyoto. Nature, the origin of all life, was a source of inspiration for my creative work. The patterns in my work do not copy nature, but are intuitively derived through my interpretation of the essence of natural form. For me, beautiful patterns symbolize nature, and are manifest during the dyeing process.

Shindo often spoke of the God of indigo (*Aizen Shin*) in relation to his work. Bottles of sake, which were introduced into his indigo vats, were taken to the village shrine to be blessed by the Buddhist priests. The God of indigo protected the studio, and the sake was one ingredient, among others, that allowed the cloth to receive a deep indigo hue with subtle variations of light and dark. My journal references of that time suggest that an ever-present “spirit” prevailed in Shindo’s studio. It may be said that the “indigo spirit” is the mysterious energy that gives life to the work.

The beauty found in these indigo patterns, not unlike the beauty found in nature, requires time to appreciate. It is my desire that you view my work as you would a flower slowly opening its petals for the first time. Allow yourself to be drawn into the alluring color of indigo, the natural qualities of paper and cloth, and the beautiful patterns—all of which have inspired me to explore the essence of nature while honoring a dye-resist process rooted in Japanese tradition.

# CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width precedes depth.  
Unless otherwise indicated, works are courtesy of the artist.

- 1 *Eight Paper Sacks in an Indigo Box*, 1984  
foamcore, indigo dyed cotton, paper, rice  
7 × 18½ × 13½
- 2 *Five Indigo Boxes*, 1984  
foamcore, indigo dyed cotton, rice, wood  
4 × 20 × 12
- 3 *Four Wrapped Boxes*, 1984  
foamcore, indigo dyed cotton  
32 × 8 × 2½
- 4 *Flower Box 1*, 1988  
wood, indigo dyed cotton, thread  
5½ × 6½ × 6½
- 5 *Untitled Collage 1*, 1989  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5  
Collection of  
Dr. and Mrs. Stuart Richardson
- 6 *Untitled Collage 2*, 1989  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 7 *Untitled Collage 3*, 1989  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 8 *Untitled Collage 4*, 1989  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 9 *Untitled Collage 5*, 1989  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 10 *Untitled Collage 6*, 1989  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5  
Collection of  
Dr. Robert W. Bohlander
- 11 *Untitled Collage 7*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 12 *Untitled Collage 8*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 13 *Untitled Collage 11*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 14 *Untitled Collage 12*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 5
- 15 *Tehón Series 1*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 10
- 16 *Tehón Series 2*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 10
- 17 *Tehón Series 3*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 10
- 18 *Tehón Series 4*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 10
- 19 *Tehón Series 5*, 1990  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori)  
5 × 10  
Collection of  
Dr. Darlene Miller-Lanning
- 20 *Rainforest*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori)  
23½ × 89
- 21 *Untitled Collage 1*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
11 × 14
- 22 *Untitled Collage 2*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
11 × 14
- 23 *Untitled Collage 4*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
14 × 11
- 24 *Untitled Collage 5*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
14 × 11
- 25 *Untitled Collage 6*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
14 × 11
- 26 *Untitled Collage 7*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
14 × 11
- 27 *Untitled Collage 8*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
11 × 14



- 28 *Untitled Collage 10*, 1992  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
11 × 14
- 29 *Untitled*, 1993  
indigo dyed paper (arashi shibori), batik  
18 × 24½
- 30 *Untitled*, 1993  
indigo dyed paper (shibori),  
handmade paper  
4½ × 20¼
- 31 *Indigo Box 1*, 1994  
indigo dyed thread (shibori), glass, wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 32 *Indigo Box 2*, 1994  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori), rice, glass,  
wood  
7 × 7 × 2½  
Collection of Mr. Herbert B. Simon
- 33 *Indigo Box 3*, 1994  
indigo dyed cotton (shibori), glass, wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 34 *Indigo Box 4*, 1994  
indigo dyed paper (shibori), rice, glass,  
wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 35 *Indigo Box 5*, 1994  
indigo dyed paper (shibori), glass, wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 36 *Indigo Box 6*, 1994  
indigo dyed thread, rice, glass, wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 37 *Indigo Box 7*, 1994  
indigo dyed wood (clothespins), glass,  
wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 38 *Indigo Box 8*, 1994  
indigo dyed handmade paper, rice,  
glass, wood  
7 × 7 × 2½
- 39 *Indigo Grid Series 1*, 1995  
indigo dyed paper, batik  
12½ × 12½  
Collection of  
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Chance
- 40 *Indigo Grid Series 2*, 1995  
indigo dyed paper, batik  
12½ × 12½  
Collection of  
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Chance
- 41 *Indigo Grid Series 3*, 1995  
indigo dyed paper, photography  
12½ × 12½
- 42 *Indigo Grid Series 4*, 1995  
indigo dyed paper, photography  
12½ × 12½
- 43 *Indigo Grid Series 5*, 1995  
indigo dyed paper, photography  
12½ × 12½
- 44 *Indigo Grid Series 6*, 1995  
indigo dyed paper, photography  
12½ × 12½
- 45 *Indigo Grid Series 7*, 1996  
indigo dyed paper, batik  
12½ × 12½
- 46 *Indigo Grid Series 8*, 1996  
indigo dyed paper, batik, thread  
12½ × 12½  
Collection of Ms. Laura Moses
- 47 67/225, 1998  
procion dyed paper, foamcore  
15 × 15
- 48 67/225, 1998  
procion dyed paper, foamcore, acetate,  
color Xerox  
15 × 15
- 49 73/225, 1998  
photography, foamcore, paper, wood,  
thread  
15 × 15
- 50 82/225, 1998  
photography, foamcore, paper, thread  
15 × 15
- 51 90/225, 1998  
photography, foamcore, acetate, wood,  
thread  
15 × 15
- 52 92/225, 1998  
photography, foamcore, wood, thread  
15 × 15

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