CREATIVE PROCESS | BY SALLY HANSSELL

Weaving with Kudzu, Nature’s Abundant Gift

SOUTHERNERS VIEW KUDZU as a scourge of biblical proportion. Introduced in the United States in 1876, the invasive Asian vine wreaks havoc on millions of acres, smothering forests and fields by blocking out sunlight with its rampant tendrils.

Junco Sato Pollack, an environmentally minded Georgia artist, offers a different perspective. She sees kudzu as “nature’s abundant gift.” Since 2008 Pollack has been harvesting, processing, and weaving kudzu to create elegant placemats and table runners that showcase the potential of the out-of-control vine.

“Southerners hate kudzu, but I see it simply as a biological resource,” she says. “Rather than eradicating kudzu, which would be a very difficult endeavor, why don’t we work with it and see what we can do? That’s a creative endeavor.”

“With long, shiny fibers resembling raw silk, kudzu has lent itself to weaving since Neolithic times. It is the world’s oldest extant woven fiber, with fabric fragments carbon dated to 3600 B.C. found in China,” says Pollack. In Japan, where Pollack was born and raised, kudzu was woven into noblemen’s hunting trousers during the Heian period (794–1185) and transformed into Samurai warrior attire in the seventeenth century.

Pollack teaches in Atlanta at Georgia State University’s Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design as an associate professor of art and is head of the textiles program. In Kyoto, Japan, she trained in weaving, dyeing, and sericulture under master weaver Tsuguo Odani, a disciple of Yanaï Soetsu (1889–1961), who is widely regarded as the William Morris of Japan and founded the nation’s folk craft (mingei) movement.

When not busy with her day job, Pollack immerses herself in kudzu weaving in her eco-friendly studio in the north Georgia town of Lakemont. Her process begins with cutting 10-foot strands of mature kudzu and coiling them into bundles.

Modifying ancient techniques, she boils the vines in a rice cooker and then ferments them in a laundry tub. When the fibers become soft enough, she separates the silky filaments from the reedy pith.

In summer, she treks into the nearby scenic Tallulah Gorge to soak the cooked vines in river currents. “It is very relaxing and healing. I think it is appropriate, too, to process this archaic fiber in the Ice Age rock formation,” she says. After they are sun bleached, the thin filaments are knotted together at the ends to make a continuous fiber ready for the shuttle.

Working on a four-harness loom, Pollack combines kudzu with other natu-
ral fibers. She uses a kudzu and linen weft and a silk and linen warp. Currently on the loom, her third series of table settings is enlivened by geometric float designs inspired by Okinawan textiles. The silk was spun by silkworms that Pollack herself raised during the 1980s when she was engaged with silk weaving, shibori, and silk sculpture. She dyed the silk in various shades of pink with safflower petals, a dye that was favored by nobility in the Heian period.

The process has a “mind-boggling” slowness, Pollack readily admits. But by exhibiting these gorgeous works and leading local kudzu weaving workshops, she hopes to encourage sustainability and expand the dialogue about the “gold” in the backyard.

The artist’s website is www.juncosatopollack.com. To learn more about this sustainable material and technique, visit www.kudzuweaving.com.