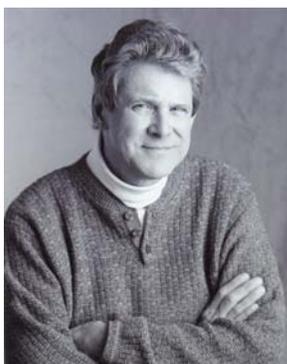


P O R T R A I T

Stephen Beal

CATHERINE AMOROSO LESLIE

A fiber artist and poet, Stephen Beal was raised in Evanston, Illinois, where he lived until moving to Colorado in 1996. He was educated at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and Exeter College, Oxford, England. His first collection of poetry, *The Very Stuff: Poems on Color, Thread, and the Habits of Women* (Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1996), received the 1997 poetry award from the Colorado Center for the Book. His second collection, *Suddenly Speaking Babylonian*, has



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Photograph by Joe Coca.

just been published by Hanging Loose Press in Brooklyn, New York.

Stephen Beal's needlepoint canvases have been exhibited around the world for more than twenty years and figure in numerous private collections. His current work may be seen at Thirteen Moons Gallery (www.thirteenmoonsgallery.com) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A recent canvas, *Last Light on I-25*, appears in *Fiberarts Design Book 7* (Asheville, North Carolina: Lark Books, 2004).

Catherine Leslie: What is your idea of perfect needlework happiness?

Stephen Beal: Stitching in my easy chair with the sun coming in the south windows.

CL: What is your greatest fear when doing needlework?

SB: That I'll cut the canvas while I'm pulling out stitches. I did so just yesterday, but fortunately it was a very small cut that I was able to mend.

CL: Which historical needleworker do you most identify with?

SB: Any guy who has encountered negative reactions because he stitches. I started doing needlepoint in 1972, and I got a lot of sideways looks until around 1990. You should have seen the guys at my college reunion in 1985. What is Beal up to now? was their look. I'm happy to say that I've subsequently sold both the canvases I was working on that weekend, one to Camille and Alex Cook of Friends of Fiber Art International. And my college roommate and his wife have bought six pieces over the last three years. They're big fans. Some things do change.

CL: Which living needleworker do you most admire?

SB: I admire Shay Pendray's skill and the wit and style of fiber artists Renie Adams, Tom Lundberg, and Darrel Morris. The fiber artist I most admire is the basket maker John Garrett. His wall hangings of linked metal circles—he calls them curtains—really inspire me. They're so repetitive, and so alluring. I've always loved repetition, and it's one feature of needlepoint that first attracted me. I don't at all mind doing the same thing over and over. Recently I've been doing canvases of multiple portraits, many of them the same portrait. One example recently sold by Thirteen Moons is *Seven Sir Thomas Mores, Two Andy Warhols*.

CL: Which stitches do you most overuse?

SB: I don't overuse any stitches because I use so few. I use basket weave stitch whenever I can because it biases the canvas less than continental stitch. For detail I use a lot of backstitch, sometimes overstitching. Reverse basket weave is handy for suggesting stones or bricks be-

cause the stitch makes neat edges all around.

CL: What is your greatest extravagance in needlework?

SB: Dreams. Another reason I love the repetitiveness of needlepoint is the opportunity it gives me to let my mind go. A lot of my poetry starts coming through when I'm filling in background or stitching a border.

CL: What is your current state of mind in terms of your needlework?

SB: I've got more ideas for canvases than I have time for. And, right now, a lot of filling in to do. I've just completed the central portraits for a series based on the life of the nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert. I still have all the borders to do, but I've been so inspired to try new combinations of Flaubertian figures—his Egyptian mistress, his Parisian mistress, his heroine Madame Bovary, his stuffed parrot, the sphinx—that I've been saving the borders till later. Later will come during an uninspired period.

CL: Which needlework talent would you most like to have?

SB: I'd like to feel confident doing freehand embroidery. Machine embroidery is another skill I'd like to have. I'm completely self-taught, have never studied textile art, and the older I get, the more I miss the opportunities that majoring in textile arts would have afforded. There was no such major at Williams in the 1950s; there wasn't even studio art.

CL: What do you consider your greatest achievement in your needlework?

SB: Continuing to please others with my work, continuing to be challenged by that work.

CL: What is your most treasured needlework possession?

SB: A watercolor of my Grandmother Beal reclining on a divan in New Orleans in 1898. She's stitching a red-and-white cloth. Her little finger is arched just so as she pulls the thread. Grandmother was educated by Ursuline nuns in New Orleans, and she could do exquisite needlework. But she hated it. The only reason she is stitching in the portrait is to hide the fact that she is carrying my uncle. In 1898, in New Orleans, a proper lady did not show herself *enceinte*.

CL: What do you regard as the lowest depth of needlework misery?

SB: As I say, cutting the canvas when I'm removing stitches. A year and a half ago, I had to abandon a major canvas because the hole I cut was too big to repair. It was a happy accident, however, because I realized that I wanted to punch up the colors. That's the second needlework misery for me. The wrong colors.

CL: What is your favorite part of your work?

SB: Picking the right colors. I got started doing needlepoint because I wanted a paisley pillow to tie together some burgundy and burnt orange in my living room. I was blown away when I entered the needlepoint store and beheld one whole wall of Paternayan yarn. Shortly thereafter, I graduated to DMC embroidery floss, and each poem in my first collection, *The Very Stuff*, is inspired by a shade of that floss (see "The Very Stuff," *PieceWork*, January/February 1995). I can think in the numbers. This afternoon I noticed a little piece of 315 on the floor. Of course, I had to hold it up to the DMC color chart to ascertain that it was 315. It was.

CL: What is the quality you most admire in a needleworker?

SB: Willingness to change, grow, learn.

CL: What do you value most in your needlework friends?

SB: Wit and wisdom and a devil-may-care attitude.

CL: If you could change one thing about your needlework, what would it be?

SB: I would be freer, design directly on the canvas the way my fellow needlepoint artist D. R. Wagner does. But I'm still an uptight control freak who graphs out every stitch.

CL: What is it that you most dislike about your needlework?

SB: The uptightness. But I really am getting away from that. The other day, I had an idea for a canvas that I sketched out on a lined yellow pad. It was the first paper handy. Oh gosh, I said to myself, you've got to refine this sketch, and get the perspective right, and make the figures proportional. I'm very happy to say that I came to my senses. I'm going to stitch the canvas exactly as I drew it. One of my favorite canvases, *Dancing Popes*, comes from a sketch I did in Paris in 1999. A tiny scrap of paper that I took to Kinko's when I got home and had blown up and up and up. I used the grouping of the five figures, their interaction and overlapping, exactly as I had in the—what?—three-second sketch. It's taken me a long time to appreciate, and try to capture in what is a very strict medium,

the charm of spontaneity.

CL: How would you like to be remembered?

SB: As someone who had fun. In needlework. In poetry. My second collection, *Suddenly Speaking Babylonian*, has just come out. When I inscribe it, I often write, "Let the good times roll."

CL: What is the most marked characteristic of your needlework?

SB: Color. Fun.

CL: If you could choose to do any needlework project, what would it be?

SB: Since I moved to Colorado in 1996, I have wanted to knit the Rockies. Great big, free-standing hunks of purple/gray/blue knitted construction. With white frosting. But first I have to learn to knit.

CL: What do you most deplore in needlework?

SB: Lack of challenge.

CL: What is your greatest regret in needlework?

SB: Not having majored in textile arts. I majored in English, did graduate work in English, taught college English. All that time, I searched for creative expression. In carving and printing linoleum blocks. That's the only art training I've had, two junior-high summers at a studio in my hometown of Evanston, Illinois. I had a really stodgy life till the needlepoint

and poetry set me free.

CL: What do you consider the most overrated needlework stitch or technique?

SB: In terms of needlepoint, which is all I can speak for, too many decorative stitches purely for their own sake.

CL: When and where were you happiest doing needlework?

SB: It hasn't stopped.

CL: What is the greatest love of your needlework life?

SB: [DMC color] 817. In the 1970s, I used a lot of pastels and Magritte blues and browns and brick reds. Then, in 1984, I did a canvas called *The Railway Bridge at Chang-Sa*. It's a tiny central image of a bridge against a pale green sky, and it's surrounded by big hunks of tapestry patterned in dragons and peonies. The tapestry colors are yellows and corals and 817. 817 is a rich, rich red, just a little on the blue side. Now, I have to say, I use more 498 than 817. Just a little darker, 498 is. More, perhaps, mature.

CL: Who are your heroes in needlework?

SB: All the guys who said, So what?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. *Catherine Amoroso Leslie* is an assistant professor in the School of Fashion Design and Merchandising at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.