

Molly Dilworth, Cedar Crest College, January 2014

In *The Discoverers* historian Daniel J. Boorstin states that "the ability to come home again was essential if people were to enrich, embellish and enlighten themselves from far-off places . . . Seafaring ventures, and even their one-way success, were themselves of small consequence and left little record in history. Getting there was not enough. The internourishment of the peoples of the earth required the ability to get back, to return to the voyaging source and transform the stay-at-homes by the commodities and the knowledge that the voyagers had found. . . . [A]cts and accidents that produced no feedback spoke only to the wind." Molly Dilworth is the kind of explorer that Boorstin had in mind. Undaunted by the expanse of scholarship on commerce and current trends in global trade, she uses other people's writing like painter's use paint; a short list of recent titles includes: *The American Crucible: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the Americas* (Robert Blackburn); *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Marc Levinson); *Ninety percent of Everything: Inside Shipping, the Invisible Industry That Puts Clothes on Your Back, Gas*

in Your Car, and Food on Your Plate (Rose George); and, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (George Packer).

Listening to the news on the radio as she weaves, sews, knits or paints, Molly says that "keeping my hands busy focuses my restless mind." Meditating on the checkered past of trade and keeping up with current events are folded into her handiwork, work that reminds me of sailors' crafts and the myriad functional and beautiful knots, braids, and hitches they invented during long voyages at sea. Her work is baffling, fragmentary, and maps a zigzag course of wholehearted attempts—some succeed and some fail—yet she continues unperturbed. "I feel like I'm communicating with other eras," she says. "Something that looked old or historical comes alive when I start looking at how it was made—pictorial or compositional decisions—it's suddenly a record of problem solving."

Time to brood is essential to her process, and she intuitively decides what to keep and what to discard. Working with an open, mutable plan and no preferred audience in mind, she references historically valuable commodities, presently she's focused on slaves and textiles. Her Cedar Crest College show, *International Sign Language*, collects humble objects made from retired sails, braided rope and cord,

recycled French metallic thread (and the spools the thread came on), flexible poles, styrofoam balls, and odd bits of packaging. She's compelled to use and reuse any material she stumbles upon, but she's most drawn to string and rope, which allow her to wrap objects and span distances. Global navigation, mapping with longitude and latitude, and connecting disparate places seems central; and this show links the Hudson River, the Caribbean, and Latin America through slavery. She designs large-scale, public paintings that use national flag and African fabric designs, incorporating their patterned systems of identification. I'm reminded of The International Maritime Signal Flag system that allowed nineteenth century sailors to communicate short messages and warnings.

Dilworth's colorful, oddball, retro-tech sculptures fly in the face of the omnipotent and omnipresent powers of modern technology. Through instant access, connection to a bottomless sea of information, and with an illusion of intimacy, today, social media, phone and computer companies seem more powerful than nations. Dilworth says she was listening to an NPR report on the recent US government shutdown when she was wrapping a pole broken because of excessive layers of wrapping. A thought crossed her mind, "Fixing breaks it": or

the more we try to patch things up, the more we break them. The thought connected what she was making in her hands with how power structures can go wrong, and exactly there, in that moment, the concrete and abstract were bound together.

Scraping and painting ships; polishing metalwork; sewing, patching and mending sails; mending tackle; polishing decks and generally keeping house like a sailor, Dilworth listens and thinks as she works, her mind plumbing history's depths, her hands translating the effort into sailor's crafts. Just as it was rare that a voyage returned with gold, slaves, silk, spices or the knowledge of a new world, so is it rare for an artist to return laden with the difficult truths and unearthed stories many would prefer to leave buried.

1. *The Discoverers*. Daniel J. Boorstin. Random House. 1983. p. 158.