

# IN CONVERSATION

## José Picayo: An Indirect Transfer of Knowledge

by Nomi Kleinman

When photographer **José Picayo** first met master weaver **Ethel Stein** in 1998, he didn't know anything about weaving, nor had any interest. He didn't see her again until 25 years later when a cancer scare caused him to retire from commercial photography and start all over as a weaver. By then Stein was in her mid-90s and had finished what would be her last artwork. Ethel Stein, a contemporary of **Lenore Tawney**, was well known for her groundbreaking use of the drawloom in fiber art. Her loom is now in the collection of **The Art Institute of Chicago**.

In a recent interview, Picayo remembers their unexpected relationship and the influence of Stein's work.<sup>1</sup> Remarks have been edited and condensed for clarity.

### Describe how your friendship with Ethel started.

I first met Ethel about 25 years ago, through her daughter-in-law. Ethel showed me her studio and the loom. I didn't think much about it other than I didn't understand it and didn't really have an interest in weaving. I was young and at the top of my career in photography. I was like, "What is that thing anyway?"

I didn't see her again until after I started weaving, when I asked her son to take me to visit her. By then she was around 95 and had finished her last piece. I would visit her once a week and bring her cupcakes. We would talk about my pieces, and I would pull books out of her shelf and show them to her. She had beautiful art books. My time with her was about [the] moment. I was able to look at her work, drafts, inspirations, and other people's work such as Lenore Tawney and **James Bassler**. Sometimes she would give me things, like the lingos which are the weights for the drawloom, saying, "When you have your [own] drawloom you can use these." I still didn't

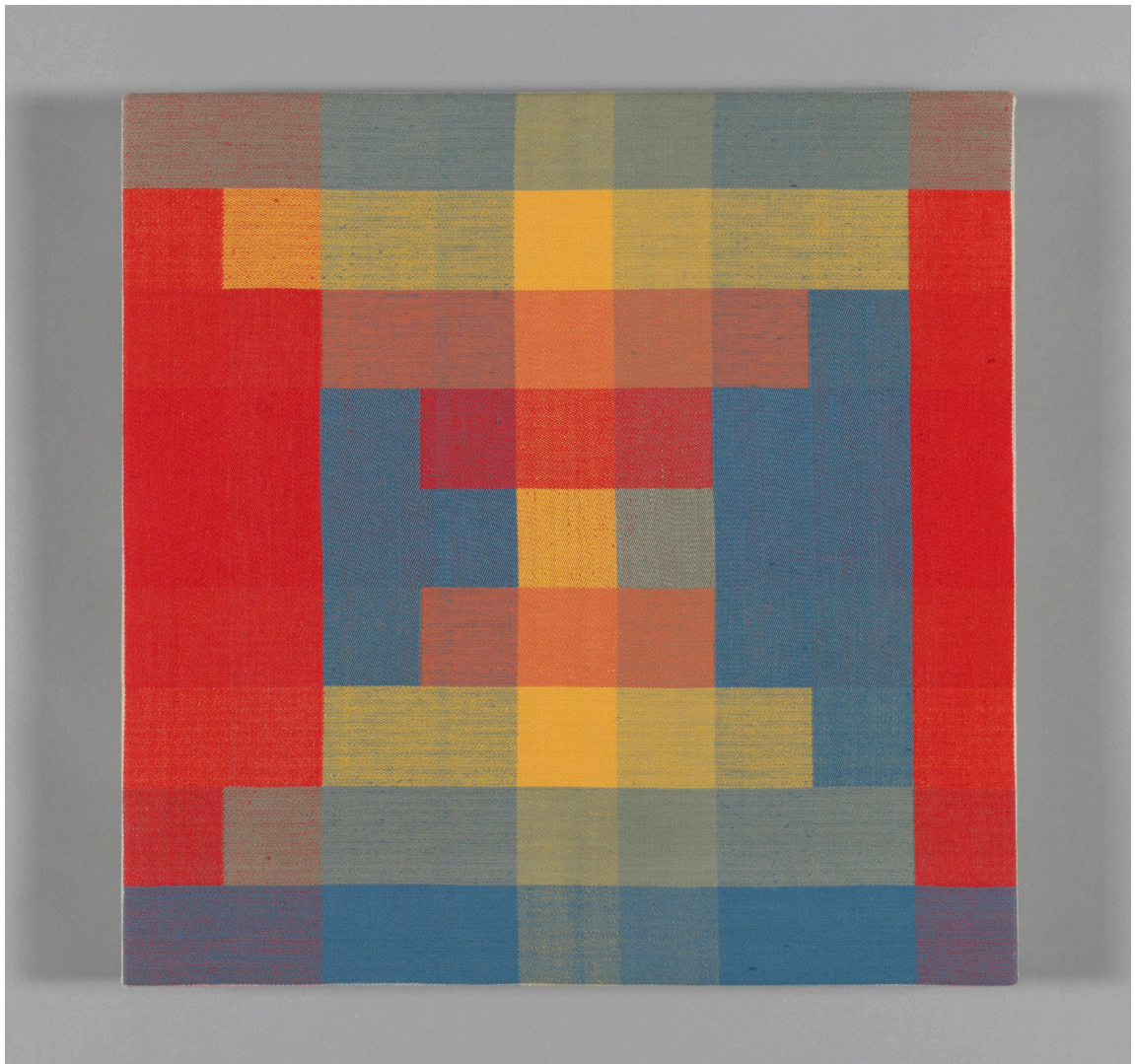


**José Picayo** and **Ethel Stein**, date unknown. Photo: artist's archives.



**José Picayo**, *Intersectionality*, 2019. Linen, wool, six shaft irregular satin woven on a drawloom, 18.5 x 29 inches. Photo: José Picayo.





**Ethel Stein**, *Red, Yellow, Blue, Green, Orange II*, 1995. Cotton, satin damask weave, woven on a loom with a handmade drawloom attachment, 16 x 16 inches. Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY.

understand that big loom with weights hanging from it. I didn't know it was a drawloom.

**What are some of the ways that Ethel Influenced you?**

I think she gave me a purpose in weaving because, until then, I had seen what weaving was in book drafts and I followed those. Through her, I saw weaving in a different way. She told me her 16-shaft loom wouldn't let her do what she wanted to do. That's why she went to Finland and Sweden to learn about drawlooms and then built her own loom with her husband, who was an architect. She also studied structures at the **Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum** and **The Metropolitan**

**Museum of Art**. They gave her a microscope and said, "Tell us how this was made."

I liked that she just decided to go do it and she did it. Ethel taught me that you're never too old and art is your own. Create art because you want to do it and you enjoy it, and to me, that's the main thing. I like what I do and so there's no expectation; whatever happens, happens.

**What is the most lasting impact she had on you?**

She gave me the direction to do what I wanted to do, without telling me [explicitly] and without really ever talking about





**José Picayo**, *Study in White, Pink, Red, Black*, 2016. Bamboo rayon, double weave pick up, 9.25 x 21.25 inches. Photo: José Picayo.



**José Picayo**, *Cross of Inclusions*, 2019. Linen, six shaft irregular satin, woven on a drawloom, 18 x 33.5 inches. Photo: José Picayo.

it, and maybe by me just seeing it there. I love that she did everything—or tried everything—from braiding, to card weaving, to knitting.

If you wanted to pigeonhole Ethel, you couldn't because at the same time she was doing modern pieces, she was doing pictorial pieces. She would switch and go from one to the other. To me, it was also the technical work that she enjoyed. I like that part in photography and I love that part in weaving; the problem solving and technically doing the work. She taught me that weaving is more than a craft, it's an art form.

#### **Tell me about your switch from photography to weaving.**

Creatively, photography has been such a big part of my life because it was both my profession and my art. After having skin cancer surgery, and coming home after a few frustrating

assignments, I thought about weaving. The start-to-finish process, and hands-on [work] were, to me, like the darkroom photo process. The loom was like a piece of equipment, the same way I use my camera as a creative tool. I took my first class at the **Textile Arts Center** in Brooklyn and I never left.

<sup>1</sup> Picayo, José, interview by author, March 23, 2022, remote video recording, Croton-on-Hudson, NY.

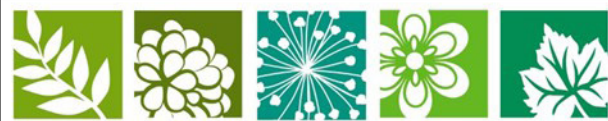
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—Nomi Kleinman is a fiber artist, designer, and Associate Professor in the Textile Surface Design department at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Her expertise is in weaving, complex structures, and jacquard design. She is also the proud owner of Ethel Stein's former house and studio in Croton-on-Hudson, NY.





**José Picayo**, *Weaving!!*, 2014. Tencel, plain weave, twill, clasped weft, 11 x 103 inches. Photo: José Picayo.



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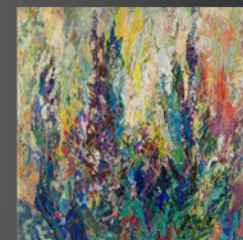
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