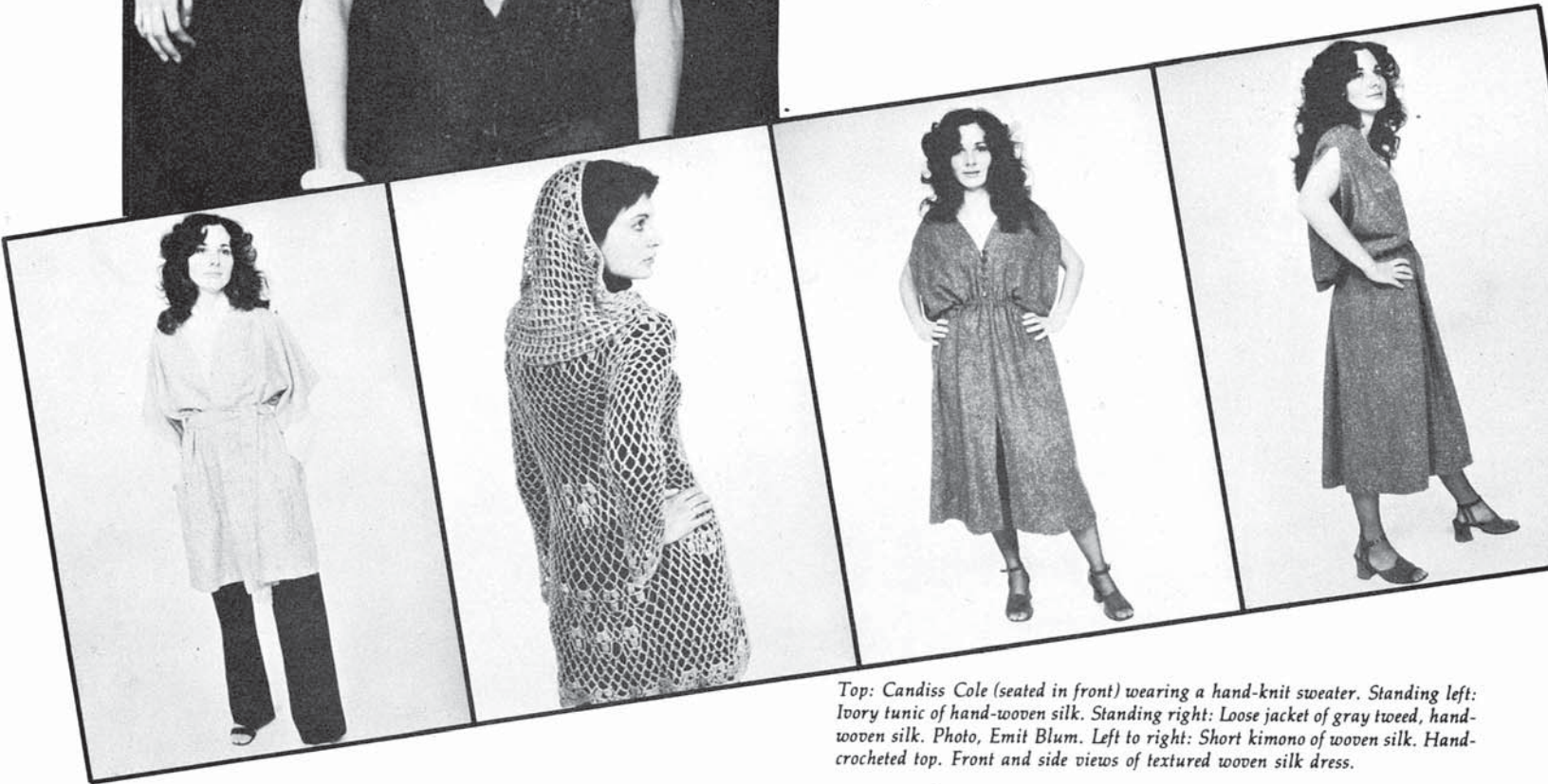




MADE FOR LOVE

The silken gowns of Candiss Cole



Top: Candiss Cole (seated in front) wearing a hand-knit sweater. Standing left: Ivory tunic of hand-woven silk. Standing right: Loose jacket of gray tweed, hand-woven silk. Photo, Emit Blum. Left to right: Short kimono of woven silk. Hand-crocheted top. Front and side views of textured woven silk dress.

BY AL PAQUA

"My goal in life is to inspire love. I stand back in sheer joy when I watch a couple fall in love with one of my pieces and I watch the man fall in love again with the woman in his life because she's wearing something that reveals a new dimension of her beauty. My work is not made for a wall or a fine art gallery, it's made for the human body. Suddenly a new world opens up—a world where even the least of them can fantasize on a world they've only dreamed of."

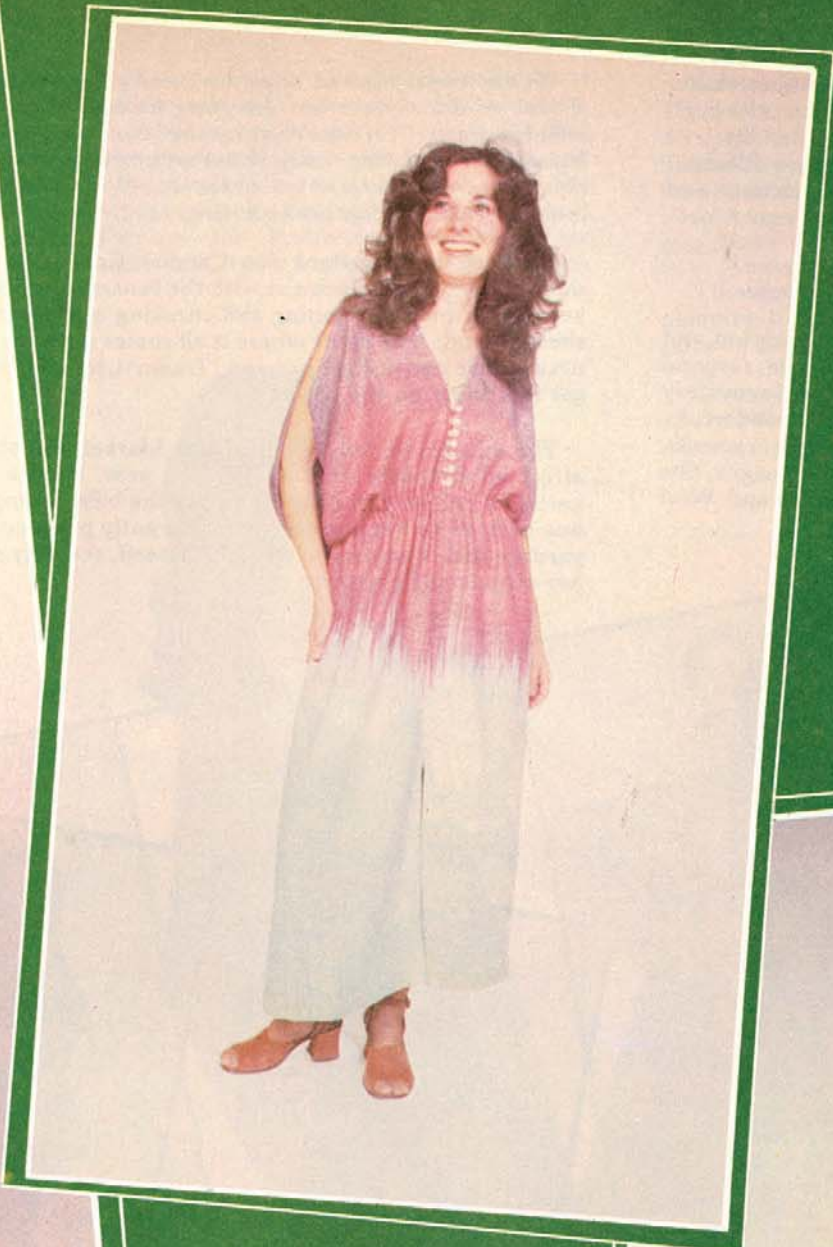
Candiss Ann Cole, clothing designer, became an obsession with me last December, after a chance meeting at a gallery in Washington, D.C. Relaxing after a nine-hour drive into town, I sat amid the pre-opening chaos of a wearables show, catching up on D.C.'s interminable fiber art gossip when . . . I glimpsed, hidden

among the clusters of quilted vests, appliqued capes, and batiked tunics, the first and only handcrafted clothing I'd ever seen that I felt worthy of the title *wearable art*. These elegant woven gowns, kimonos, and caftans, magnificently simple garments which, even on their hangers, sans bust and buttocks to fill them, brought a flutter to my heart.

I've always been disturbed by *wearable art*. There seem to be two basic approaches, both equally discordant to a harmonious mind. One is to take an item of clothing and treat it like a painter's canvas, turning it into a *work of art*, transforming a vest or a cape into a statement.

The other is the converse: to take a painted canvas or sculptured form and impose it upon the human body. Neither do for the body what, to me, seems crucial—the enhancement of the human form.





Opposite: Woven silk kimono, dip-dyed and ikat. This page: Front and back views of woven silk blouson dress, dip-dyed and ikat. Photos, Jack Cole.

Candy's work offers tribute to the body; it embraces and caresses. "Bodies aren't square or rectangular. Although loomed cloth has a tendency towards angular lines, it doesn't have to be that way. Different fibers have different draping qualities. It's only a matter of correct dent and utilizing the finished fabric to accentuate its drape."

Where's the man could ease the heart like a satin gown.
—Dorothy Parker

"There's an aura about silk. I could work in cotton and wool blends, or even silk blends, but people respond differently when it's all silk. There's a mystique, a mystery about silk, and there's nothing that drapes so wonderfully as silk." Spun slub silk yarns, tussah, shantung, raw silk, these are her materials, the substance of her designs. She constantly seeks it, hounding N.Y. importers and West

The interminable night has waned into morning. There are 23 inches of snow on Baltimore's streets. Everything is closed. There has been almost no plowing. The buses aren't running. There is a 5 p.m. curfew because of massive looting. Today, 300 or so craftspeople from all across the country are supposed to set up their booths for Winter Market which opens tomorrow: two days wholesale; three, retail.

This fair is important for Candiss Cole. After nine months of total involvement with the business, preceded by a year and a half of planning and checking out the market, she's nearing that point where it all comes down to yes or no, a simple nod of the head and, "Damn it, let's DO it! Let's get this show on the road!!"

The success or failure of Winter Market will strongly affect what Candy does in the next year. Failure means getting a full or part time job to pay the bills, letting go of one or both of her weavers who currently produce all her yardage and returning to weaving herself, severely cutting her output and exposure.



Coast agents alike, buying up full lots of any quality silk she can find.

"I used to get all my silk from Switzerland, but with the devaluation of the dollar, I can't afford it anymore. A kilo of silk costs \$90 now. That would make a piece that now sells for \$195 go up to nearly \$300. In my business I could do better following the stock market than reading CRAFT HORIZONS.

On the other hand, success at the fair will be a confirmation of her belief that there is a good market for handcrafted, limited production, high-fashion garments, and will encourage her into a full commitment toward making the business succeed.

In spite of the blizzard of '79, the Baltimore Winter Market was a smashing success for Candiss. Consequently, she expects to move her studio from Oneonta, New York to Washington, D.C.—Ed.

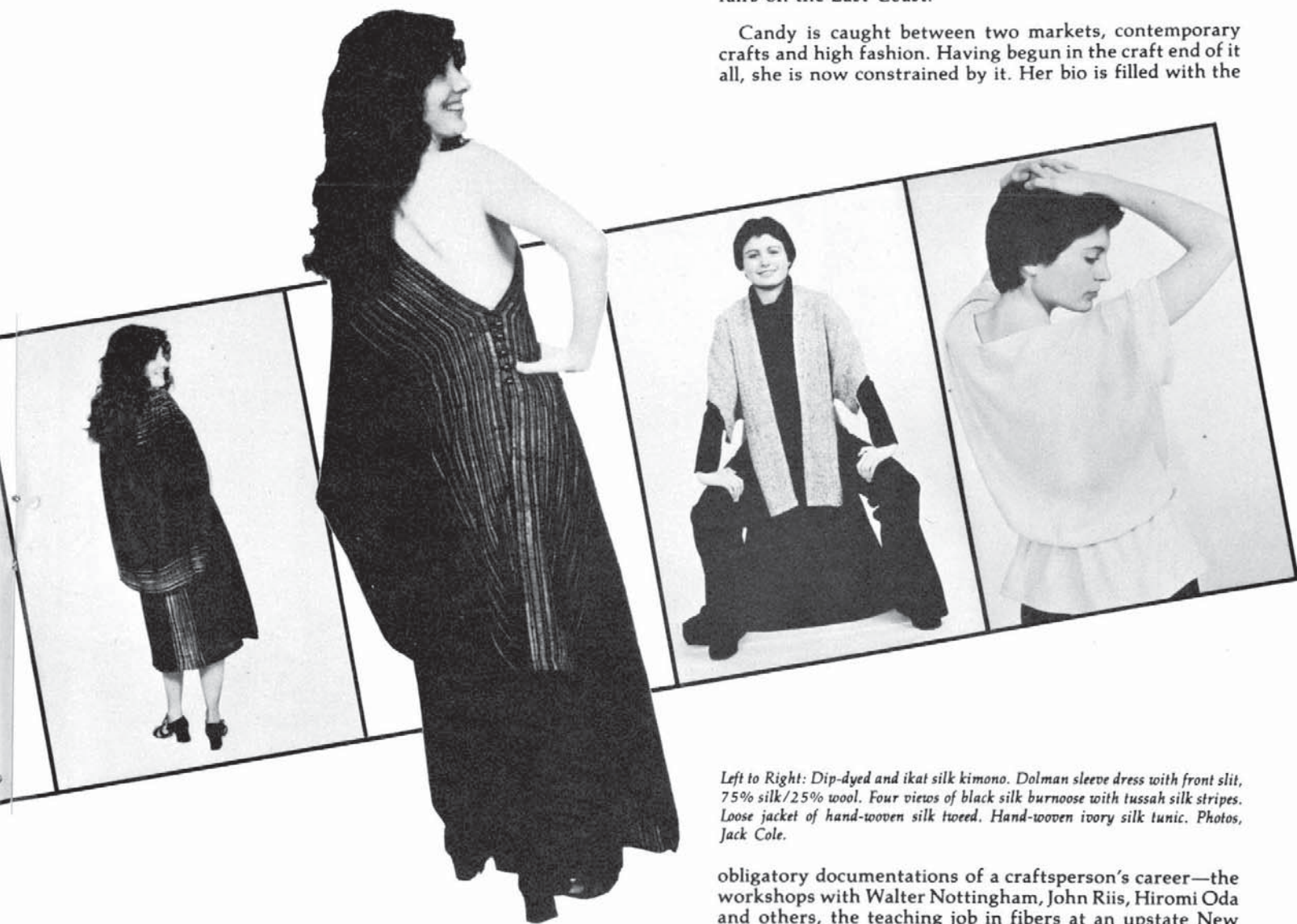
"I quit teaching last May (1978) to begin working full time at this. Rita had been weaving for me since March, and I picked up Karen that summer; by the fall we had seventy garments out on the market, in boutiques and in craft

galleries. Rita and Karen do all my weaving. When they first started working for me, I'd tell them exactly what I wanted, how many yards, what to use for warp and weft, etc. But now, since they've become familiar with my designs, and come to know my needs, I basically just tell them the amount I need, what basic color and texture, and they take it from there. Part of the business is definitely our relationship as individual artists working toward a common goal.

"I checked out Bloomingdale's, Bendel's; no one's buying. The boutiques in Washington, New York City, that's where my work belongs; they look at it and say, 'Yes, it's beautiful, but we're not interested.' The designs are going back to the forties, and the colors are getting more vibrant—greens, purples. I just can't compete. My designs are simpler, more in a classic vein.

"I do best at the fairs." Besides Winter Market, she's also planning to do Rhinebeck and Frederick, two of the biggest fairs on the East Coast.

Candy is caught between two markets, contemporary crafts and high fashion. Having begun in the craft end of it all, she is now constrained by it. Her bio is filled with the



Left to Right: Dip-dyed and ikat silk kimono. Dolman sleeve dress with front slit, 75% silk/25% wool. Four views of black silk burnoose with tussah silk stripes. Loose jacket of hand-woven silk tweed. Hand-woven ivory silk tunic. Photos, Jack Cole.

"The fashion world right now is crazy; no one knows what's going on. Buyers would say, 'I love the designs, I love the fabric, but do you have it in this shade of green,' or 'It's beautiful, the designs are great, but I don't think we can sell it.' And I've had no trouble selling them, at between \$250 and \$300 a piece.

"The surprising thing is my best sellers are my highest priced pieces, \$250—\$350. The kimonos, and dolman jackets, \$85—\$135, which I thought would be my biggest movers aren't doing anywhere as well as my kaftans and evening dress ensembles, the top end of my line. There are some people out there that, regardless of what the economy is doing, have enough money to drop \$200 and \$300 at a time. The recession will never really affect them.

obligatory documentations of a craftsperson's career—the workshops with Walter Nottingham, John Riis, Hiromi Oda and others, the teaching job in fibers at an upstate New York college, flirtations with the fanciful and funky at Julie's in NYC—another version of the basic bio possessed by so many fiber artists, through which they all merge into one amorphous *fiberist*. But from the time when someone picked up one of her huge crocheted sculptures and draped it over her body, she's been exploring fiber and the human form better than anyone I know of.

"I don't follow commercial patterns. I feel they don't allow for spontaneity or my own input into a piece. I go into a new piece as some sculptors approach a subtraction piece. I try to uncover what is already there, inherent in the material. In this way I don't fight the material, but I work with the best features of the cloth. There's a mystery about women, an intrigue, a subtle gracefulness to a woman's body that I try to accentuate through my work."●

Al Paqua is an itinerant writer who divides his time between Cincinnati, Ohio and Washington, D.C.