

Writing memories is creating a surface with a blurred pattern

The text I wrote is not aimed at solving big political and social problems, nor is it aimed at helping anyone or answering some art questions.

This text is a pattern of daily life observations and a collection of memories from an ordinary life of people from my family. Intuitively, it turned out that personal memories from the past related to textiles were the most valuable to me.

The intention is 'to capture memories', to try not to forget some dear life moments, dear people, their habits and repetitive actions through textile objects and clothes. An attempt to recreate and to preserve.

I asked myself: what's my personal connection with the big world of textile? Yes, I'm a student of the textile department, but how do I relate to textile? Are we 'tightly bound', 'in a bind'? Do we have any 'emotional ties' or 'family ties'? Is it my 'relative'?

If I look at my family photos: father, mother, sister, grandmothers, grandfathers.

It is just an image of faces, bodies, clothes and a space.

But what is behind this picture? What do I see? Roots. My grandmothers gave birth to my mother and father. And then me and my sister appeared.

I'm a combination of my parent's genes. A combination of two different environments and cities. I'm a product of two contrasting standards of living, of two backgrounds, two attitudes towards clothes and textiles. I'm an intersection of two lines, an overlay of two colors which created a third color.

One thing that could be a connection between me and textiles.

It is memory.

Memory of people that are close to me or that are no longer here.

Memory of them and what they were wearing during life.

Memory of clothes on their body.

Memory of material of clothes.

Memory of color and pattern of this material.

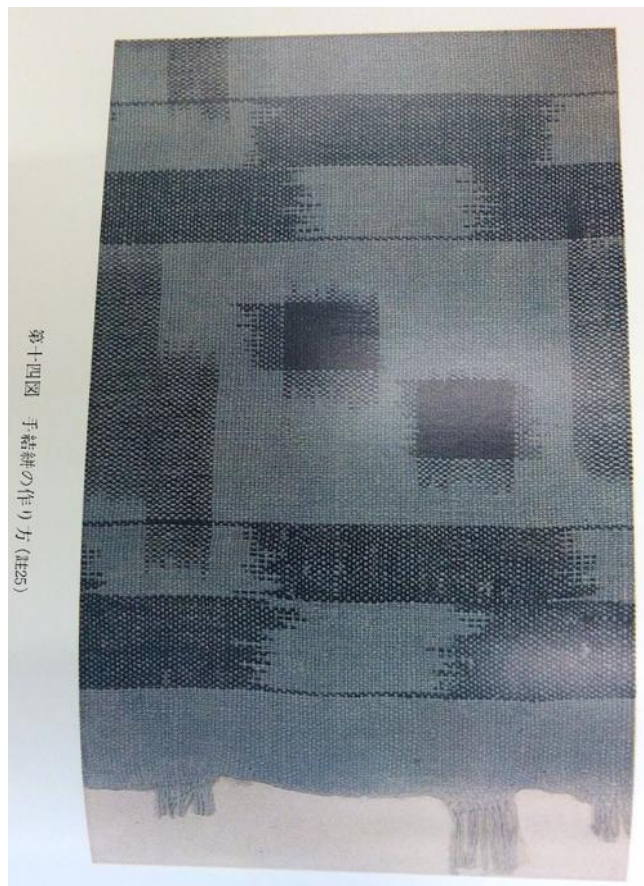
Can a piece of cloth of my grandmother's dress or simple textile rags be a hook on which the memory could be caught? Or are they just lifeless objects? Or even, are they non-objects, because they are not material anymore. They are thoughts in the present about things from the past. And if I'm writing those memories, am I materialising objects back? Recollecting them and binding together to release them afterwards. Maybe they are tangible now. It's them, I did not recognize them at first. Very similar. This time light and foggy. With blurred edges.

A picture from a book

While flipping a book, I saw a picture of a woven fabric with a Japanese 'kasuri ikat' pattern. The fabric was light blue with dark blue lines and spots on it. What was it? How did these spots appear? Why were these stripes so uneven, uncertain, vague, with blurred edges, without clearly defined outlines? Was it a mistake, an accident? Chaotic lines, unconnected with each other, would sometimes cross, overlap, create a darker spot or a third color. Blurred and diffused outlines reminded me of a reflection on the moving water. This fabric seemed light and lively.

When I'm thinking of patterns and ornaments in general, I imagine a clear element or a group of elements, which are repeated according to a certain 'rule', which have well-defined outlines and a precise rhythm. But here, on this picture, it is something else.

I knew nothing about this technique. The only thing that was familiar to me back then, was the sound of the word 'ikat' itself. This word reminded me of Russian verb 'икать' [ikat]. Which is translated into English as 'to hiccup'. So when someone makes staccato sounds caused by convulsive contractions of the diaphragm and respiratory organs, with a sudden closure of the glottis.



To bind and to blur

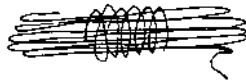
And here it is, this book and this picture of a 'kasuri ikat' fabric. The image is static, still and silent. As if it froze in time. Maybe, someone took this piece of fabric from a museum, took a picture of it for this book and then returned it back to the museum, where it still lies under the glass in a room with dimmed light? Or maybe it hangs on a wall in someone's house? Or maybe someone sewed a kimono from it and now it lies on a shelf in someone's wardrobe? Maybe this fabric sample was lost and its location and the reason for its disappearance still remain a mystery?

This fabric represents a secret of two meanings, a duality of sorts. Behind this end-result tapestry with spontaneous light and freedom-loving playful pattern is a long laborious process of preparation. Preparation done with mathematical-precision-like calculations, with strength and with resistance.

Tenderness and lightness are born out of austerity and power.

In contrast, this stiffness and stillness of the fabric seem to have preserved within itself both movement and human physical labor.

This duality and contrast are reflected in the name of the technique itself: 'kasuri (kasureru)' is a ready woven fabric with very characteristic vague and uneven edges of the pattern. It's translated from Japanese as 'to blur' or 'to lightly brush'. At the same time 'ikat (mengikat)' means 'to bind' in Indonesian.



To Bind



To BLUR

To bind

I'm binding. I'm pulling slowly and I'm pressing with tension, wrapping one thread around the other. Covering a bundle of threads. They will stay together for some time. Very close. Super close. As tight as they've never been before.

Now they are resistant to the surroundings. They are protected. Protected as a body: a baby's body or a woman's body or a dead body.

The baby's body that is swaddled tightly.

Back in time, there was a tradition in Russian villages of wrapping babies with pieces of cloth before bed time. Was a baby cold? Or a mother was afraid that her child would run away far far to the forest, sleep in a snowdrift and never come back home?

A mother wrapped her baby every day with all kinds of fabric she could find in her house: an old skirt - big and wide, a tablecloth, an old curtain, bed linen, towels - thin and soft.

Wrapping and unwrapping again and again with patience. With the same patience she made all these textiles manually, on her own.

It all started when she was 7 years old. A peasant girl began to prepare her dowry, spending days weaving. She needed to prepare fabrics before her marriage and for all of her future life. She did that, because someone told her that after the wedding she would not have time. After the wedding there would be children, household management and work in the fields. And death. And this girl needed to mentally prepare herself even for death, because the clothes for her burial were among the piles of clothes and fabric she had to make and prepare.

And now, already a mother, she's wrapping and unwrapping her baby. Putting layer after layer. She puts the baby's arms and legs close to its body. So his bones will be properly formed.

Now the baby is safe and protected from the world around.

I put the bound threads to the water of the 'marine blue' color. And they boil for a long time in salted water. The blue color is deeply absorbed by each of the uncovered threads.



Grandmother T

My grandmother lived in a small Russian town Ulyanovsk. She was a chemistry teacher. Her father was imprisoned for the fact that he had raised a shot of vodka to toast for the leader of the country. And so my grandmother became the daughter of the enemy of the people. And men were afraid to marry her. But it happened finally.

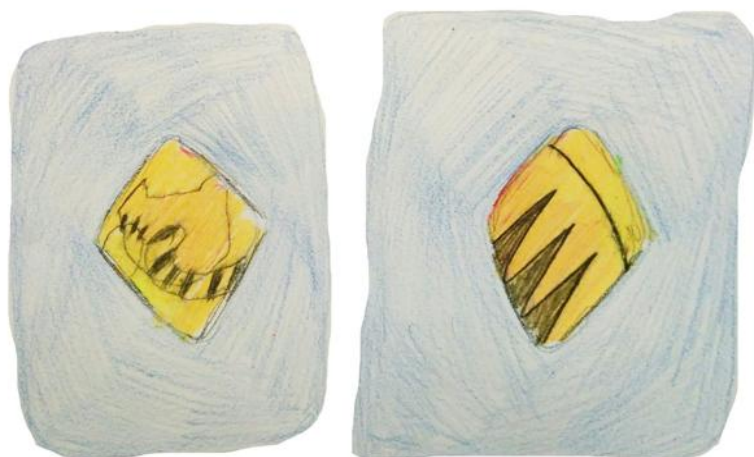
I know nothing about my grandmother's wedding. What kind of a dress she had. Or whether there was a special dress at all. These were early post-war times. Life was hard, people were poor, and to complain was not accepted. For sure, it had to be a very simple and modest dress, form-fitting, with buttons. But it is hard to say how it was for real. Maybe it was a 'sarafan' with a colorful flower pattern and a narrow ribbon on her head. Or maybe it was a cheap short skirt just covering the knees.

Time passed. Times changed. The dress either was put to the wardrobe or was adjusted for daily use.

Wardrobe's shelves started being filled with cloth diapers, children's clothes, bed linen for four people. And with warm wool blankets too. Two prickly wool blankets with the color of rust. Coarse, dense and heavy. With images of tigers on them (or one tiger?). A fierce tiger on both sides of the blanket - as if a positive and a negative image of a tiger. Grandmother put each blanket into the duvet cover with a rhombus-shaped hole in the middle.

What a strange and uncomfortable contrast of colors: a fiery-red tiger on a blanket peeping out from a blue duvet cover. As a coarseness surrounded by a blue wave of tenderness and serenity.

She loved the blue color. Blue was her favorite.



However, there was a certain austere simplicity in this blue. The austerity of grandmother's eyes. She used to look at me and my sister as if with a fire of life and with restrained kindness. On blue duvet covers she embroidered our initials with red threads: T.P. and K.P. Just so that we would not confuse the duvets and would not fight.

With age, my grandma seemed to get smaller, shorter and lighter.

I clearly remember that she was always wearing very warm clothes. She would start preparing for a walk outside two hours in advance of the walk itself in order to be able to put all the layers of clothes on herself. First, she'd put a thin white cotton t-shirt, then a turtleneck shirt with long sleeves, then a worn out men's t-shirt, then brown thick cotton tights (with 'darned heels') put over the t-shirt, then a grey-blue skirt and a blue woolen blouse, on top of that a dark-blue waistcoat. She'd also put a woolen knitted shawl around her neck and she'd cover it all, as a final touch, with a heavy greatcoat.

Why did she have such a ritual? Maybe it reminded her of the times when she was a child and she had to walk 5 kilometers to get to school even when it was freezing -30 degrees?

Or maybe she would do that, because she was afraid of losing the second lung after she had an operation during which one was cut out, as it was not functioning due to chemicals she was exposed to in her work?

Or maybe she was so light that the weight and the mount of these clothes were something that still kept her on the ground? And with this weight she did not have to worry that strong winds from the Volga river would blow her far far away, so high that she would not be able to find a way home?

So she would put all these layers of clothes one by one, from the one closest to her body to the last external layer. She was tightly covered with these clothes.

This way she was resistant to the surroundings. She was protected.

She would also prepare for her death throughout her life. She prepared a blue suit, a blue kerchief and more clothes way in advance. It was a pile prepared for the end of life. It was there in her wardrobe among the everyday clothes. We all knew where everything was, she reminded us of this pile every time we would visit her and grandpa in Ulyanovsk.

There she was, and here were her belongings. As if she would be thinking: 'When I'm gone, I will still be here, in blue.'

Everywhere around the flat there were small leftover rag pieces of old clothes, no more than 5 by 8 cm. Some hung on the windowsill, others near the kitchen sink, some were wrapped around the handle of the frying pan, a few near her bed. She didn't use large towels for wiping her hands, but just slightly touched these small cotton rags and carefully hung them back on the heating.

She had geranium flowers growing on window sills. She watered them. And it seemed as if this water was also becoming blue. She was strict, her posture - straight. Behind the glass doors of the cupboard there were pictures of everyone in our family. She observed us and her look seemed pure and blue, but with lines of rust from her past.

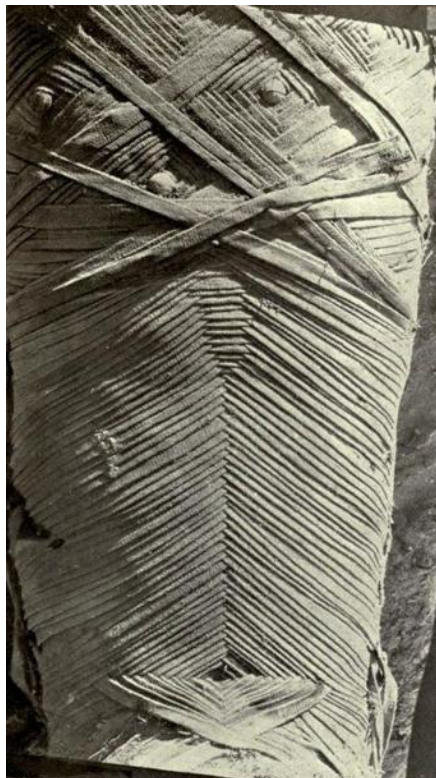
I do not remember which clothes she had on the day she was buried and which color they were.

Mummy

Way back in time, in ancient Egypt, bodies of the dead were wrapped in textiles. If the family was poor, they used everything they had in their house (reused clothes) for mummifying the dead. If a family was rich, they would have special hand-woven bandages for burial prepared in advance.

Did they worry about the dead getting sunburned? They wrapped them in fabrics, layer by layer, from head to foot and along and across and diagonally. Or maybe they were afraid that dead people would run far away into the desert, fall asleep in a sand hillock and never come back? So they wrapped and wrapped again. Wrapped them tight. All the body parts together. So tight as they've never been before.

Now they are resistant to the surroundings. They are protected.



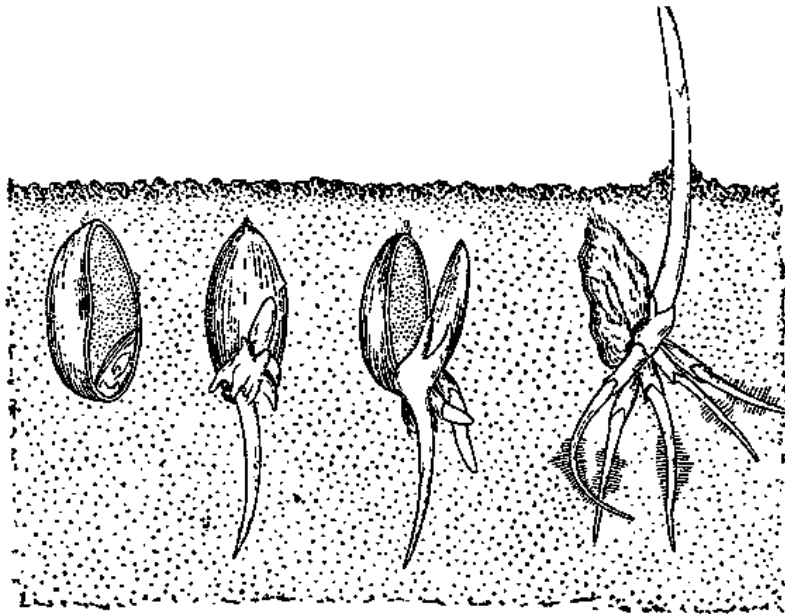
A seed

A seed was lying on a road.

Apparently, it fell from a tree and rolled into a pavement groove. How long did it stay there? A day, a year, hundreds of years? It was covered with a hard seed coat and it was resistant to the environment.

Someone took it home and put it on the plate with some water. Suddenly, all the mechanisms inside the seed, that were in a state of stasis, turned on. Seed swelled, broke through the outer hard skin, that was protecting it so much time. And a gentle sprout came out.

‘Such is the mechanical effect of water upon seeds; it enables them to shed their coats which they no longer need, and to overcome the resistance of the surrounding particles of soil.’¹



To blur

In one of the streets in Amsterdam where I am currently living there's a construction going on. Road works. Bike lanes are partially blocked and people have to take a bypass route. The bypass lane is not straight. It's tortuous and intermittent. One has to ride on the sidewalk next to pedestrians or cross the main road or go back to the bike lane briefly.

As part of the works they move the tiles - grey squares with rare white stripes showing the way. They are like dashes, broken lines pointing in different directions. And now, what are they pointing at? They seem confused. Every piece seems to be on its own now. But there are still some similarities between them. They are all white and they are all lines. Were they parts of one line before?



A reflection in the water

Reflection in the water, ripples, anxious, swaying, shivering, brief and fast movements of tiny waves. The light spot on the water surface starts its movement, becomes alive, playful, imperfect, constantly changing.

Dark-blue reflections in the light blue water. Reflections of what? Torn edges are confusing - what is reflected there? 'Colors flow into each other a little.'² Is it a line? Or a dot that is stretched into a line? A dot that got reflected multiple times in every small wave.

Every ripple moves shuffles an object into a different state. An uncertain state that gets more and more uncertain the more movement there is. Every line appears and gets lost to appear again.



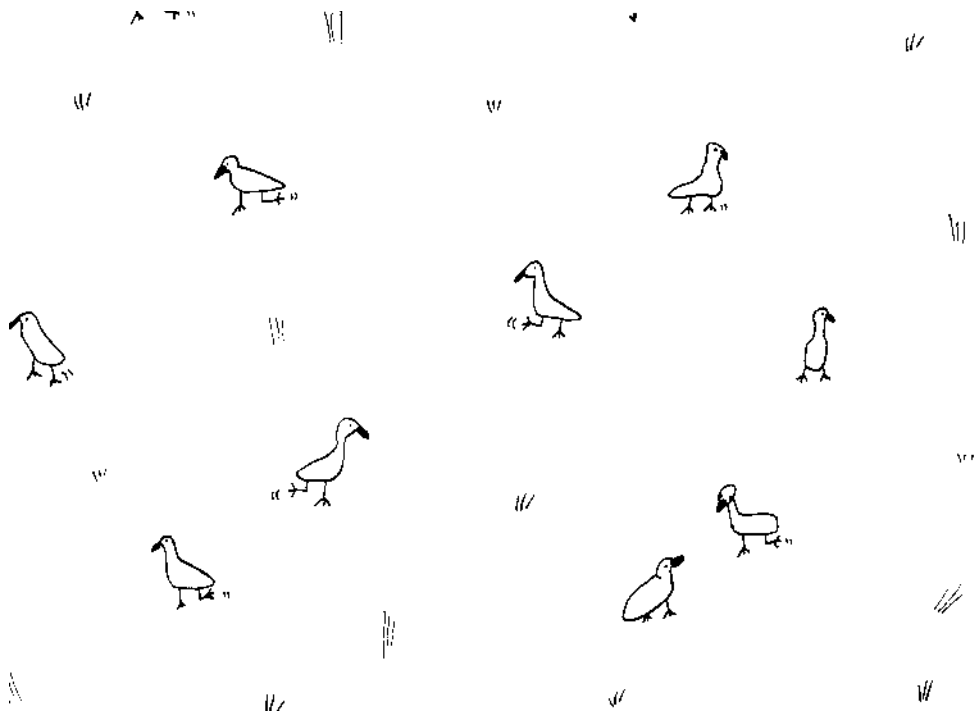
Seagulls

It's a foggy cool morning.

Little seagulls are trampling on the grass. Shifting from one foot to another, slightly touching the ground, performing some kind of dance. Are they warming up or are they warming the soil under their feet? An everyday exercise on fresh air? Healthy muscles? More.

Motif of their whole life.

They know for sure what 'motif [motivus]' means (from Medieval Latin). It means 'moving, impelling'. These gentle movements are the reason why they keep waking up from each day. It motivates them to go to a specific place, to take the position relative to each other and to be trampling the grass. They don't even notice when a woman daily passes by in a strict bright suit with the classical 'pied-de-poule' ornament. Seagulls are busy leaving traces. Their 'pied-de-mouette' traces.



Grandmother N

When my eye accidentally catches the familiar silk white dress with blue flowers in the wardrobe a picture arises again.

A train in Moscow, my grandmother sits in front of me.

We're going to our 'dacha', the old country house outside of the city.

She is looking thoughtfully out the window, watching the landscape change rapidly. The trees are replaced by a fence, the sun appears, falls on the face and disappears behind the plastic roofs of a train station. Everything is moving fast. The wheels of the train are knocking, there are conversations of smoking passengers from the aisle, approaching screams of people selling stuff, who are passing through the train cars, shouting: 'Socks! Tights! Napkins! Super-glue 'Moment'! Flytrap! Plasters! Magnifying glass! Pens! Crossword puzzles!' And then again: 'Ice cream! Soft drinks! Beer! Nuts! Chewing gum!'... With the advent of new technologies, these sellers began to use small microphones with pocket-sized sound amplifiers, to ensure they are well heard.

But my grandmother does not seem to notice all of that. Sitting in her silk white dress with blue flowers pattern. She looks through the window, then looks at me. She seems confused a little.

Emerald color

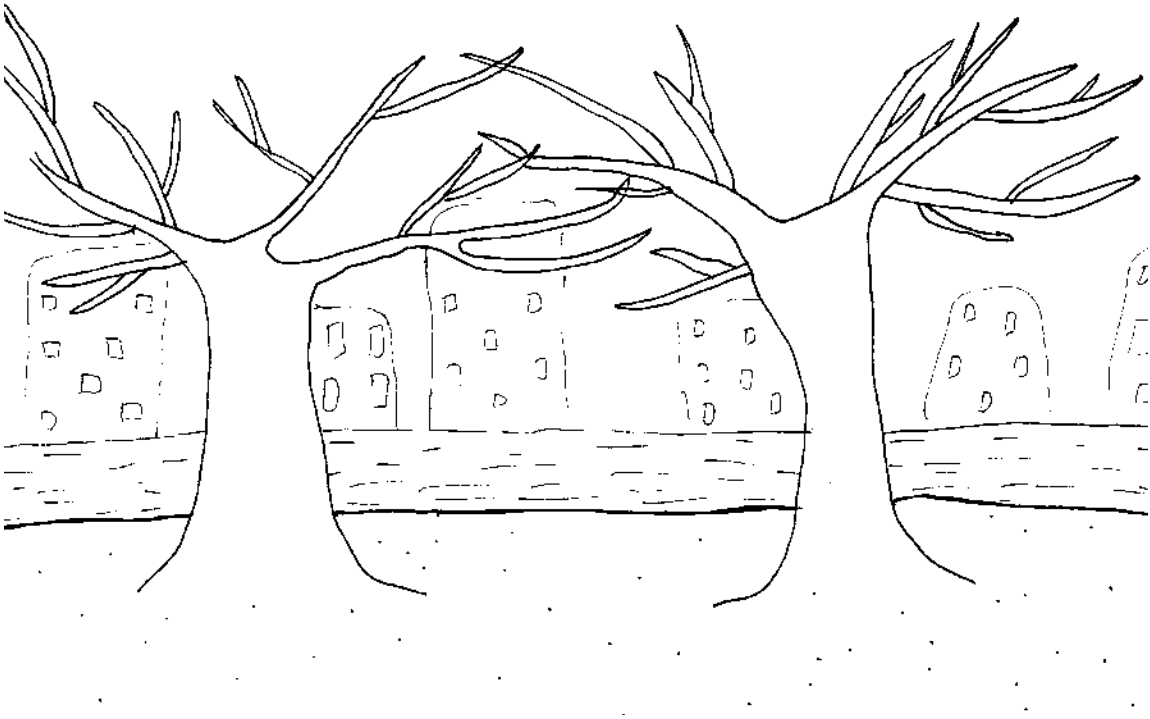
I know about this swimsuit only from a picture of my grandma. A black and white one. On this photo she's very young. Someone took a picture of her from the back. On the background there are people swimming in the sea. My grandma is touching the neck part of her swimsuit. Or maybe not. She's actually touching her hair. She had long blond hair, which was always rolled up into a certain style with pins holding the structure together.

Grandma's swimsuit had an open back and a thin (almost fragile) waist. The material seems to be thick and warm. She told once, it was her favorite woolen emerald color swimsuit.



Two trees

There are two trees. I see them through my window. They are so huge and wide that I can only guess how large they might be. How old are they? It seems they grew together throughout their life. They were planted the same day the one a certain distance from the other, knowing that someday they would grow and touch each other with branches. I know their scientific name in Latin. But do I really know anything about them?



In an attempt to repeat and try myself the *ikat kasuri* technique, through working with the material, I realised that initially there was nothing in it that personally touched me. It's something from another culture. However, working with *ikat kasuri* made me contemplate on the historical aspects of textile, on how differently humans related to textile a while ago. This process made me think about the past and of the memories woven into the textile.

To me, textile is a container for a body and a container for memories. It's the first layer on top of people's skin. A layer between a person and the environment.

There must be a reason why textile brings up memories in us, humans. I see the reason in the fact that clothes and textile in general are something basic, something we would not be able to survive without. It's also something that's 'with us' day and night. Throughout our lifetime, our clothes and textiles change and evolve, following our growth and development. It 'follows us', protects us, absorbs our bodies odor and in a way represents what we do.

Textile is there in the important moments of our lives, be that starting and graduating from school, various celebrations, weddings etc. It's there in the sacred moments of birth and death. Sometimes it might even feel we have a deeper connection and relationship with textile than with our bodies. One could put stuff into pockets, tighten a belt, tuck the pants to fit one's height, open or hide certain body parts, pull up a sock that slipped down or mend a hole.

With accuracy to details it is recollected: I remember how my grandmother was moving, how she jumped slightly to put on a heavy coat over her shoulders.

Peter Stallybrass writes in his work 'Marx's coat': a 'thing' is just a commodity 'without sensuous characteristics' ³, if you take away all the memory that it stores, the history and the warmth of a person who wore it.

I wondered how do hold, how to keep such memories? Behind textile objects, for me, there are people to whom they belonged. A meeting with these objects as a meeting with these people, an opportunity to remember their life. People go, but memory remains.

An emerald color swim suit, a white silk dress with blue flowers, a pile of blue clothes for burial, blankets with tigers - these objects make me recall hugging my grandmas or feeling the warmth of their hands, talking to them, seeing them sew, sharing space with them, traveling together.

And if I ask myself what is textile for me at its core. It is a starting point, a reason to, maybe even just an excuse to recall life of people dear to me.

1. Kliment Timiryazev, *Life of the plant* (lectures from 1875-1876); p. 104, Moscow, 1958
2. Daroun Schijndael Suzani, *Ikat*; p. 9
3. Peter Stallybrass, *Marx's coat* (the chapter from a book by Patricia Spyer *Border fetishisms: material objects in unstable spaces*); London, New York, 1998