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Abstract

Since Mediaeval times drawing has been the foundation for and the integrated content of woven tapestry. This paper traces the evolution of a rich, colourful, tactile medium in response to the drawn image, the shift in importance of the weaver as artist within the process, and the emergence of Tapestry as a Contemporary art form in its own right.

Keywords

Drawing, Tapestry, Cartoon, Artist, Weaver.

“Found in Translation – the transformative role of Drawing in the realisation of Tapestry.”

Introduction

A bold definition of tapestry is that it is a woven work of art. It carries an image, made possible by virtue of what is known as discontinuous weft, i.e. the weft is built up in small shapes rather than running in continuous rows across the warp. The structure of the material comprises warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) threads. Hand woven on a loom, the weft yarn generally covers the warp, resulting in a weft - faced fabric. The design, which is woven into the fabric, forms an integral part of the textile as the artist/weaver constructs the image and surface simultaneously.

Of all the textile arts, tapestry is the medium that finds its form and expression most directly in the drawn line. Drawing is the thread, both literally and metaphorically, that enables the existence of woven tapestry and it has played both a supporting and a didactic role in the realisation of this image - based form. Throughout the ages drawing has alternately promoted and hindered the development of tapestry as an art form in its own right. The push and pull of what lay beneath, informing the structure of the weaving influenced the stature of the weavers' contribution to the finished work and, in turn, the spirit of the finished work of art.

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Cresside Collette has tutored in drawing and tapestry weaving in the Studio Textiles and Design Course at RMIT since 2000 and completed a Master of Fine Arts (by Research) in Tapestry at Monash University in 2003. She was a foundation weaver of The Victorian Tapestry Workshop (VTW) in 1976, where she worked as a production weaver for fifteen years.

As a weaver for whom drawing has always been an integral part of her fine art practice, she has exhibited in both individual and group shows consistently since 1971. In 2003 and 2004 she was awarded residencies at Bundanon where she pioneered working "en plein air" in the medium of tapestry. Over the last 25 years she has combined her own exhibition practice with designing and producing community tapestries for schools, city councils and universities.

"Found in Translation – the transformative role of Drawing in the realisation of Tapestry."

Historical precedents.

In Mediaeval times the "cartoon" was a line drawing derived from painted designs for rich and colourful works that depicted life in the Middle Ages and acted as a template for production. The cartoon was usually drawn to the size of the finished work and placed beneath the warps (in low warp, or horizontal, looms) or behind the loom (in high warp, or vertical, looms). From this position the image was then drawn onto the actual warps in ink, shape by shape, to determine the design of the tapestry. Weavers worked from the back of the loom to keep the woven surface clean.



Victorian Tapestry Workshop, inking cartoon, 1977

The design also dictated the direction in which the tapestry was made, whether the approach was taken from the base or from the side to achieve coherent woven shapes. Positioned against the grid of warp and weft, outlines were reduced to a series of "steps" much like a graph, and the approach was decided to ensure optimum elegance of line and form in the finished work. It could be said that the cartoon was, therefore, the foundation stone for the tapestry and that the very act of drawing imagined the subsequent woven work. Pierre Verlet (1978, p.206), curator at the Musee de Cluny, wrote that it was wisely recognised that "a tapestry cartoon is not a picture and the cartoonist is not free to utilise all the resources and means of expression which are open to the pictorial artist."



West Dean Studios, details, re-weaving *The Hunt of the Unicorn*, 2009

Consequently this drawing was not didactic but a loose outline of shapes defining different areas of colour. There was also some indication of intermediate tones, which were interpreted as "hachures", a geometrically precise way of blending two or more discrete colours. In this way the actual structures of tapestry weaving were developed in response to realising the drawn images. Its open nature gave some "breathing space" to the craft of the weaver and it would appear that the restraint exercised in the original drawing gave the weaver the scope to produce powerful woven work.



Victorian Tapestry Workshop, hatching colours, 1976

Coffinet and Pianzola (1974, p.78), describe tapestry designers as “inspired by the style of illuminated manuscripts rather than by paintings”. They state (ibid, p.76) that weavers “did the cartoon drawing themselves” which left them with considerable autonomy of interpretation. When painters did compose the elements of a tapestry their work was restricted to the presentation of a drawing of some grey tones and a few indications of colour, once again reinforcing the creative role the weavers played in the process. Coats of Arms, for example, were often collaged in to satisfy patrons. The overall homogenising texture of the woven work had the capacity to combine disparate visual elements to great effect.

Verlet (1978) further emphasises the license bestowed on the weaver. He states (ibid, p.63) the model (or cartoon) was often represented by simple sketches on cloth, with the addition of a scumble of colour. Compositions were changed at the weaver’s discretion – even to the extent of dropping or adding details or whole figures, and transposing colours according to the availability of dyed yarn. Verlet writes:

the final decision fell to him as an artist capable of creating a personal work on the basis of a graphic idea. He alone was responsible for the blending of colours, and for the tones and combinations which determine contrasts and accentuate planes. He was, in short, a complete architect in wool, free to construct something capable of adorning and sustaining an architecture of stone

We can assume that the weaver, was, in fact, drawing with his materials within a given framework. The freedom inherent in this method has direct implications for contemporary practice. As an extreme example, the work of Scottish artist Linda Green, discussed later in this paper, evolves from her ability to make sophisticated structures out of materials at hand that become woven drawings. Most artist weavers today enjoy the liberty of manipulating their own designs to the satisfaction of the ultimate woven outcome.

In this encouraging atmosphere the cartoon acted as a springboard for the realisation of some of the world’s most exquisite works of art created

in the Mediaeval period. The suites of "The Apocalypse of Angers" (France 14th C.), "La Dame a la Licorne"(France, 15th C.), "The Hunt of the Unicorn" (Brussels 15th C.), and the "Devonshire Hunts" (Arras 15th C.) may still be appreciated in their full glory today. Indeed, this period is regarded by art historians (Verlet; 1978, Phillips, 1994 & Brennan, 1980) as the sublime high point in the development of tapestry art. It was an age where designs were devised with the acknowledgment of the skills of the weaver, accommodating the deep knowledge of the craftsman. Tapestries from this time are imbued with a special "life" and are not just manifestations of technical accomplishment. Lively and engaging on many levels, they are an evocation of the times - celebrating the pastimes of hunting and other noble pursuits. Often suites, as in the case of "La Dame a la Licorne", were woven to mark special occasions like marital union (Erlande-Brandenburg, 1985). Their visual appeal is undiminished in contemporary times as they relate well to a modern aesthetic, dispensing with the employment of spatial perspective and adopting a flat picture plane upon which myriad decorative elements flourished.

Future masters of the medium, William Morris (1834 - 1896) and Jean Lurcat (1891 - 1966) were to recognise that the design attributes of Mediaeval tapestry were intrinsic to their visual appeal and developed their working methods accordingly, utilising pattern and colour predominantly to create narrative works. Archie Brennan (b. 1934) recognises and pays homage to the influence of early tapestry in his contemporary pieces, although he did experiment with an illusory sense of space in his work of the 1960s and 70s.



Tapestry, *La Dame a la Licorne*, Taste, 3.75 x 4.60 m

As well their function as colourful insulation for cold castle walls, Mediaeval tapestries acted as didactic "tableaux", both instructing the viewer (often spiritually) and providing entertainment as visual narratives of parables and reflections of courtly life, the media of their time. Could we then conclude that their conceptual cartoons were the first storyboards, a precursor to the cinematic tradition of contemporary times?

Tapestry scholars (Verlet, 1978; Phillips, 1994 & Brennan, 1980) argue the effect of the Renaissance on the development of art history irrevocably changed the role of the weaver in tapestry production. Painting, rather than drawing (with its inherent freedom) became the model for tapestries, and the once lively contribution of the weaver subsumed by slavish interpretation. Under Royal and Papal patronage painters of the stature of Raphael "designed" complex works. In skilful reproduction, Classical tapestries became woven paintings and lost their textile integrity to virtuosity. Phillips (1994), in her book, *Tapestry*, argues the word "cartoon", meaning a full scale preliminary design, dates from Renaissance times and is borrowed from the Italian "cartonne", meaning a large piece of paper.

Tom Campbell (2002, p. 43), currently Head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art presents another view when he writes:

the earliest extant cartoons date from the beginning of the sixteenth century and all are painted in thin washes of body color on large sheets of paper glued together from many smaller sheets. Documents confirm that many fifteenth-century cartoons were painted on paper, though linen was also frequently used.

Campbell (ibid) makes the interesting observation that these painted linen cloths began to be commercially desired themselves as cheap substitutes for tapestry, some churches hanging them on regular days and saving their commissioned tapestries for hanging only on feast days.



Raphael cartoon, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes, Acts of The Apostles*, 1515.

Art historians agree the impact of the painted cartoon began with Raphael, commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1515 to design ten tapestries illustrating the *Acts of the Apostles* to decorate the side walls of the Sistine chapel. The master weaver, Pieter Van Elst, of Brussels, was commissioned to simply copy the paintings without any freedom of interpretation. Verlet (1965) writes that tapestry weavers bowed to the Renaissance domination of painting and began the ascendancy of the painter over the weaver, finding satisfaction only in flawless reproduction. Giorgio Vasari (cited in Phillips, 1994, p. 58) describes the completed

tapestries as “of such wonderful beauty that it astonished anyone who saw it to think that it could have been possible to weave the hair and the beards so finely and to have given such softness to the flesh merely by the use of threads”.



Mortlake Tapestry, *The Miraculous draught of Fishes*, early 17th c.



Mortlake Tapestry, *The Miraculous draught of Fishes*, 1659

The popular success of these tapestries led to the dominance of Brussels as a centre of weaving and the replication of these cartoons in woven form many times over in the following century (Delmarcel, 2007). Interestingly, tapestry design was also affected in other ways.

An artificial "frame" emerged - also as a reference to painting - as borders widened into panels of decorative "grotesqueries", becoming an integral part of the composition. Weavers were taxed to produce ever more complex imagery as accurate copyists. Colour palettes were widened from about thirty colours to around three hundred shades to capture the subtleties of the subject matter. These included highly figurative biblical stories and classical tales, "verdure" pieces full of foliage, and pastoral scenes. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries major painters of their time as diverse as Rubens (Flanders 1577 - 1640), Le Brun (France 1619 - 1690) and Fragonard (France 1732 - 1806) designed tapestries to be faithful reproductions of their paintings, and workshops flourished throughout Europe producing interior decoration for palaces, churches and stately homes (Phillips, 1994).

Tapestry in Modern Times

It must be mentioned that the visual and technical enslavement of the weaver to painter still exists today. An exhibition of tapestries entitled "*Demons, Yarns and Tales*" staged in London and Miami in 2008 consisting of work designed by sixteen contemporary artists illustrates this point (Banners of Persuasion, 2008). The exhibition includes works by artists who had not had work woven before and who had limited knowledge of the constraints or strengths of the medium. Woven in China by unacknowledged artisans, these tapestries illustrate only that anything can be woven in tortuous reproduction and the tapestries exist as curiosities of technical virtuosity. This may be seen by some as indicative of the cynical exploitation of one art form by another.

As a foundation weaver of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop (VTW), now the Australian Tapestry Workshop, in Melbourne in 1976 and having worked in production there for fifteen years, I believe I can pass professional comment on production values. When setting up VTW, the management paid careful attention to honour the weavers' contribution to the process and to acknowledge their visual input. They followed the sensitive advice of Internationally recognized tapestry artist, Archie Brennan, who recommended potential weavers should be sought who had training in the Visual Arts and the ability to communicate with artists, setting up a spirit of collaboration in making tapestries. Walker, (2007) the founding director of VTW confirms that a policy was made to work with living Australian artists so that this dialogue could take place. And most importantly the resulting work was regarded as an "interpretation", never a copy. On working with artists Brennan (1980, p. 35) recommended:

given that the submitted design, sketch, cartoon or painting is of merit, there is at the outset a key question to be answered. The question is this: Will the ensuing tapestry be a proper *extension* of the original work? Not just a variation of the original using some adopted system of techniques and colour transposition, but such that the tapestry will have an identity that is its own. It must be an extension of the original, yet be complete and entire in its own right.

Interpretation at VTW



John Coburn and weavers working on cartoon, 1978

At the VTW, cartoons are made from traced line drawings or photographs of painters' designs. The hand and eye of the weaver are present from this early stage, guiding the process. These are photographically enlarged many times over, giving the weaver an expanded space to inhabit that requires constant reassessment of areas in terms of colour and form, making the weaving a fresh and engaging exercise. The weavers then choose the wool colours and produce several samples of work, testing out techniques appropriate to the interpretation of the artwork. This preliminary work provides the basis for discussion with the artist.



Victorian Tapestry Workshop, cutting off Coburn's *The Sun Tapestry*, 1978

The Early 20th Century

After the excesses of the 18th century, the late 19th and early 20th Century saw a revival of the medium in its own right. F. P. Thomson, (1980, p. 62) distinguishes the Mediaeval period up to 1400 from the Gothic which extended until 1510. He makes the point that both William Morris (1834 - 1896) the pre- Raphaelite artist and craftsman, and Jean Lurcat (1891 - 1966), the French mid- twentieth century tapestry reformer, were of the opinion that tapestry design and weaving was "of the highest order of perfection" during this period.

Morris and Lurcat recognised the intrinsic pictorial values of earlier tapestries and used them to enhance their own practices. McCarthy (1994) explains in detail how Morris, the leading light of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, became interested in tapestry in the late 1870s. Phillips (1994, p. 120) observes that Morris' tapestries were inspired by Flemish examples in which he admired the shallow planes and ornamental qualities that had disappeared during the post - Renaissance period. Designed and woven as co-operative exercises, several artists of the time including Edward Burne Jones and Morris himself collaborated with weavers to produce richly decorative works at Merton Abbey. The weavers designed many of the embellishments and flower foregrounds themselves, a reinstatement of their importance as artists.

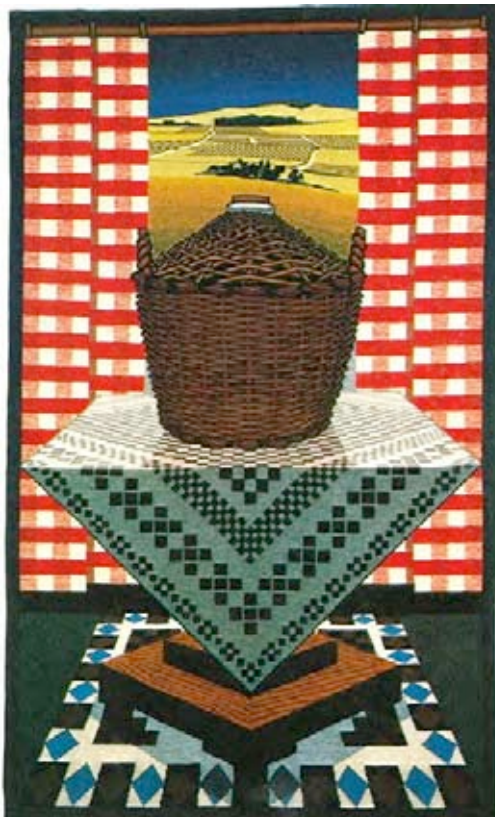
The French workshop practice of Jean Lurcat saw the restoration of the woven mark. Drawing on Mediaeval precedents, his designs were tailored to accommodate the skills and techniques of the weaver. Inspired by the "Angers Apocalypse", he became interested in tapestry in the late 1950s and re-invigorated the weaving community at Aubusson in central France by supplying designs to the individual ateliers. Phillips (1994) writes that Lurcat saw tapestry as:

a modern mural whose design was based not just on the interaction of the colours but equally importantly on the texture of the yarn. At Aubusson he reduced the colour palette to forty five tones and banned the use of perspective. He also insisted on a much looser, coarser texture so that a tapestry could not be mistaken for a painting.

Interestingly, even in his recognition of the weaver's art and his identification of the woven form as separate from a painted work, Lurcat issued detailed instructions to his weavers, especially in terms of dictating colour choices. He produced scaled up cartoons in gouache which were carefully numbered to indicate well defined colour areas.

The tapestry Biennales in Lausanne initiated by Lurcat in 1962, unleashed the work of many International individual tapestry and textile artists over the next few decades and gave rise to the contemporary movement (Phillips, 1994). Archie Brennan, as Director of the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh elevated the position and input of the production weaver and also established the first Tapestry Course within an art school at the Edinburgh College of Art in 1962. Influenced by his student and protégé, Maureen Hodge, he revolutionised the way tapestry was woven by bringing the weaver to the front of the loom, thereby ensuring more artistic control. This fundamental change in process saw the rise of the artist/weaver who found freedom of individual expression through the creation of tapestries as works of art. These works took many forms, from three dimensional to flat, and sat comfortably beside painting and sculpture as an art form in their own right.

The weaver as artist.



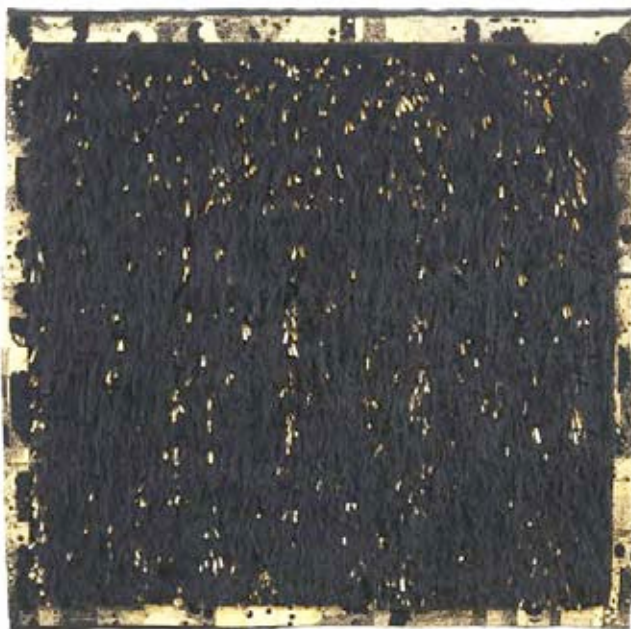
Dovecot Studios, Archie Brennan, tapestry, *At a Window III*, 1974, 190 x 112 cm

With the constraints of historical precedent now behind it, the late twentieth century has seen an abandonment of traditional methods in favour of new concepts and ideas in the creation of tapestry. Most tapestry artists today acknowledge that drawing plays a major role in the evolution of their work. Drawings are often shown alongside woven work in a tapestry artist's exhibition, either as companion pieces where the works are weighted equally in importance, or as working drawings that illustrate the realisation of a concept. Other artists rely on drawing as an adjunct to their practice – the keeping of sketchbooks and visual diaries or the limbering effect of a weekly life drawing class to keep perception honed. For many it is a starting point, a process for notating and developing ideas into concrete form.

The variety of approach to drawing as a tool of conception is illustrated in *This is Now: From Drawing to Contexture* (Scottish Tapestry Artists Re-grouped, 2008). In the foreword Maureen Hodge (*ibid*, p. 2) writes:

the finished pieces are evolved from ideas, notes, drawings and personal research, but the artists work through many different processes - some have a very clear idea of what the outcome will be, while others work in a much more open-ended way. Some use carefully considered drawings and maquettes. Others work in a freer, more instinctive fashion, experimenting as they go.

As illustrated throughout the publication (*ibid* p. 2) the “cartoon” may exist these days only as a tiny thumbnail sketch or a simple colour swatch.



Maureen Hodge, *Starry starry skies 2*, goblin and tufting, 2009

In other cases drawing still acts as springboard for translation, where synthesis takes place between the drawn line and the woven structure. On this point, Anne Jackson (2008, p.14) elaborates and comments:

often gestures or marks are made quickly and spontaneously at the cartoon stage, then slowed down to glacial speed while being made part of the tapestry surface. This characteristic communicates to the mind and eye a density, a gravitas. The viewer knows, even without consciously recognising, that seriousness of intention and commitment went into this series of transformations. Whether medieval or contemporary, the sense of gesture caught, distilled in time and slowly built up on the warp is a key characteristic of tapestry.



Anne Jackson, tapestry detail, *Certayne Wytches: Chelmsford, Essex 1566*, 2008

And how does the "action" of drawing influence the "action" of weaving, as the artist makes the intellectual and physical leap from two - dimensional design to three - dimensional artefact? The practice of tapestry weaving engages the eye and the hand in a unique act of perception followed by a process of interpretation. Skilled weavers

develop great visual awareness in performance of art that is technically demanding and requires great attention to detail. I found my accuracy of observation more acute when I returned to life drawing after a period of interpretative weaving.

In the last decade several tapestry artists have expressed the figure in woven form to great effect and with differing philosophies about the approach. Due to the construction of tapestry on a rigid grid of warp and weft, any given curve appears "stepped" into a series of shortening or lengthening straight lines. And evoking the body does demand the interpretation of curves! Two differing examples are illustrated here. Tim Gresham's work, though strict in technique, gives into the curves expressed in his drawing as he weaves his tapestry on its side to define optimum flow of form as practised by Mediaeval and Classical weavers.



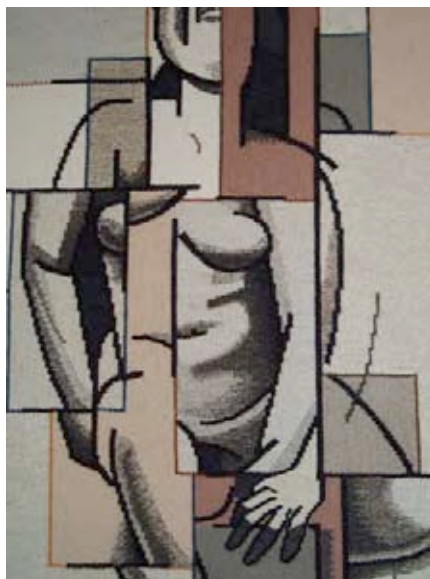
**Tim Gresham drawing, *Torso*,
2000, 76 x 56 cm**



**Tim Gresham, tapestry, *Cool Venus*
1999, 82 x 60 cm**

Conversely, Brennan (2002, p.25) uses the structural constraints of warp and weft to interpret his drawings in vertical progression. He argues:

The seemingly obvious choice to work from the bottom upwards is in contrast to a longstanding European tradition of weaving sideways. There are strong arguments to support either choice, but simply put, weaving a tapestry on its side works to conceal the process whereas working from the bottom upwards exposes the process. This decision, coupled with a much coarser fabric structure, exposes the inherent intimacy of the medium and forces a strong interplay between structural elements and the chosen imagery, rather than purely pictorial concerns.



Archie Brennan, tapestry, *Seated female nude*, 2004, 44" x 23"

As a tapestry artist who has always included drawing in my practice, I often translate from the more immediate gestures of my drawing and printmaking. Because of the disconnect between the time taken to draw a line and the time taken to weave it the challenge is to preserve the freshness of the original gesture, maintaining its subtlety and nuance whilst translating it into the solid structure of the tapestry medium. As a student at the Edinburgh College of Art I was instructed not to embark on weaving any design in which I could not maintain my interest for the duration of production as the weaver's energy is an important ingredient in the end result.



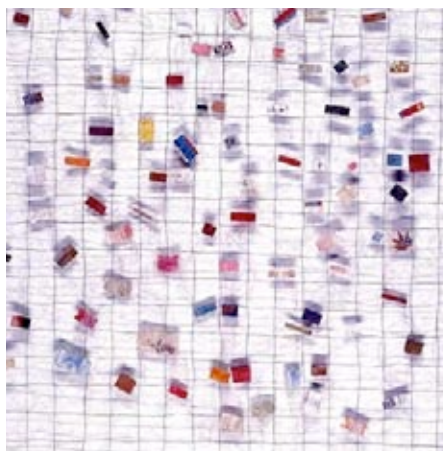
Cresside Collette, tapestry detail, *Two lands twice*, 2009

Jo Barker (2008, p.7), an artist who weaves formal tapestries in saturated colours over which delicate lines and forms spiral in directional swirls says of her work, "the initial designs combine gestural use of drawing, painting and printmaking with collage and digital manipulation. This leads on to the translation into woven marks. The images create illusions of space or movement."



Jo Barker, tapestry, *Resonance*, 2008, 125 x 171 cm

Tapestries can evolve as constructions in three dimensional materials where the structure effectively becomes the drawing. A Scottish exponent of this experimental style, Linda Green (2008) uses fishing wire, nylon and scraps of paper to build intricate grids that are simultaneously drawings and weavings. Writing about her method Green (ibid, p. 15) says "I explore textile and paper structure, the relationship they share and the critical point where elements connect and fabrics form. Drawing directly with materials builds a surface that unites disparate elements integrating idea and the process of making."



Linda Green, textile detail, *Diary of a journey*, 2003



Linda Green, textile, *Connection*, 2009

In my own work I am most interested in the point at which the "drawing" drops away or is superseded, giving way to a new way of working in the manifestation of an entirely new work of art. In recent years through residencies at Bundanon I have enjoyed pioneering "en plein air" tapestry weaving, an exercise in "drawing with the eye" where the visual process of accumulating information is transferred directly into woven form without an intermediate sketch. Sitting with a small frame propped on my knees and immersed in the elements I have taken on the challenge of aesthetic decisions being made constantly with the changing patterns of sunlight and clouds, capturing the landscape - its light, colour and atmosphere - in a fluid response. I concentrated on breaking down marks to most eloquently express what is observed. Although colour and tone play their part, I think tapestry does this best through line - the woven line can be as expressive as the drawn line and it can be manipulated to be both strong and subtle. Techniques such as half passing break the tonality of the line whilst preserving its rhythm in the horizontal format. Equally, wrapped warps that become vertical lines work exquisitely well in suggesting landscape form.



Cresside Collette, en plein air tapestry, Valley view, 2004, 6.5 x 28 cm

It has also given me great personal pleasure to reverse the historical order of things and produce series of drawings that use tapestries as their starting point.

Conclusion

So what may we conclude about the symbiotic relationship between tapestry and drawing? Writing in 1980, Brennan (1980 p. 34) comments that in the last hundred years there have been "a number of attempts to return to the weaver greater control and authority and to re-establish the spirit, vitality and proper exploitation of the character and qualities peculiar to tapestry weaving".

In contemporary Workshops like The Edinburgh Tapestry Company, VTW and The West Dean Studios where tapestry artists and painters design for weavers this balance is being achieved. And importantly, in the last thirty years individual weavers have wrested control for themselves as practising artists. They have transcended the limits that drawing has placed on them historically - to be interpreters of a given image - and used woven technique to validate tapestry, not just as an image bearing form but as stand alone, integrated textile art. Dependence on drawing may exist only in the gestation of an idea to explore the potential of a concept, or it may be abandoned entirely as the eye traces shape and the hand develops woven marks unaided by the support of the drawn line.

As our definition of "Drawing" expands so too does our definition of what art is. Tapestry and textiles, for so long regarded as craft or as some poor relation to the exalted arts of painting and sculpture now sit comfortably beside them, in fact often as vital components of these art forms. Drawing and tapestry become interchangeable in our current perception of art. And while drawing may perform a transformative role in facilitating tapestry, it never dictates.



Anna Ray, textile, *Knot- Random Pattern*, 2007

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