



AUSTRALIAN TAPESTRY WORKSHOP





Previous page: Experimental sample for *Bridle Track, Hill End* by Luke Sciberras, woven by Chris Cochius, Sue Batten, Amy Cornall, Pamela Joyce and Karlie Hawking, 1.6 x 1.6m, wool, cotton, photo Jeremy Weihrauch

Left: *Bridle Track, Hill End*, artist Luke Sciberras

A PALETTE OF THREADS

Elizabeth Walton

When the nomadic kings and queens of ancient realms came and went, they wrapped and rolled and carried away the loom-woven works that told the stories of their times.

These were the first tapestries, decorated with the signs and cyphers significant to the people who roamed the earth more than a thousand years ago. As people began to fix themselves to certain places and architecture began to evolve, richly threaded textiles played an important role in filling up the stone walls of chateaux and courts and castles. These tapestries had the unique ability to stop secrets and whispers from spilling outside the court by insulating the buildings not just from the cold, but acoustically as well.

The greatest number of tapestries ever made was in France and Flanders during the Middle Ages. A renewed enthusiasm for textiles emerged in contemporary times when designers sought to soften the slick lines and hard-edged surfaces of modern architecture by hanging a richly woven tapestry.

A hand-woven textile hangs like a split complementary between two otherwise unmatched hues, achieving a perfect harmony in the ambience of a room between the stark contrast of natural fibres and the manufactured perfection of steel and glass and cement. It was during the burgeoning era of contemporary Australian architecture and textiles in the 1970s that the Australian Tapestry Workshop (ATW) in South Melbourne was created.

Tapestries created at the ATW have influenced the choice of artworks in Australian public spaces for over 40 years, including galleries, institutions, hotels, private collections and war

memorials. Melbourne even has a map that can be followed to view the collected public hangings of ATW tapestries.

The ATW is the only space dedicated to the weaving of largescale tapestries in the Southern Hemisphere. When the ATW was established, master weaving artisan Archie Brennan was brought to Australia from the Dovecot Studios of the Edinburgh Tapestry Company to establish a unique practice that is still followed to this day. Brennan, who passed away in recent weeks, imbued in the ATW a commitment to the expertise of artisan weavers and a dedication to working in close collaboration with living Australian artists in the re-interpretation of their artworks as fullscale tapestries.

A visit to the ATW is a different experience to visiting other kinds of studios, in the sense that there is a certain confinement of the palette to the threads and dyes that create the colours on the loom. There are none of the messy hallmarks of the artist's studio in the sense of splashes of ink and paints and traces of the evolution of the work haunting the floors and the walls of the studio. To 'paint' with hand-dyed threads seems a very tidy form of artwork, which allows the weaver the freedom to dedicate their eye to an accurate expression of the original artist's creation. This gives the weaver the freedom to devote attention to a study of the colours, the painterly strokes, the watery textures and the weight of every dint and scumble and mark created by the artist, so that the finished work represents the artist's work as fluently as if the artist had created the tapestry themselves. For the ATW, this includes breathtakingly delicate portrayals of John Wolseley's translucent watercolours; Janet Laurence's glassy, watery

representations of the life of plants, and responses to the work of John Olsen, for whom the experience of tapestry lead to the creation of original works specifically designed for the loom as a new medium. John Olson's response to viewing the sunrise over the vast Australian continent, as with every artist's work, is told by the weavers in as true a voice as the original artworks.

Choosing the palette for each tapestry is a complex decision. A selection of colours are aligned in a palette box the way any other visual artist may work; then the precise colour for each stitch is blended with a variety of coloured threads selected by the hand and eye of the weaver.

At the beginning of each new work, a series of meetings and design processing workshops is held between the artist and the weavers to collaborate on the design decisions and direction for the piece.

The image to be made into a tapestry is called the 'design'. This is usually either an artwork created by an artist, or it may be a photographic portrait. Once the design is chosen, a cartoon layer is made which traces an outline of intricate shapes onto an acetate layer. This is then used to print the cartoon onto the warp threads as a map of how to weave the tapestry. The inking of this line drawing continues as the weaving evolves, delineating the contours for the weaver to follow as the design progresses up the warp with each pass of thread. Only the weft threads are

visible at the end of the process - the warp threads that carry the cartoon are entirely hidden in the final tapestry.

Colours are mixed by hand and sometimes dyed for a specific work. Sample test pieces are made by the weavers and the palette is refined from a range of 368 wool colours and 200 cottons.

This process gives the weavers full control over the palette, and the ability to select from cottons that tend to function as highlights, or to select wools that tend to sit back a bit in the design. The weaver selects around 10 strands per bobbin to achieve the correct colour pitch.

The cottons and wools are grown in Australia and spun overseas. ATW's in-house dyer, Tony Stefanovski, hand dyes every yarn to ensure the quality and longevity of the tapestries which stand up to the same standards as archival inks. Tony uses coloured powders and mixes them in dye baths, as he finds the natural dyes that are available to him are unreliable and can't produce the same range of colours.

The threads are then spun onto unique brass-tipped bobbins that are hand made from Australian hardwood for the ATW. The bobbin helps the weavers to beat the weft threads tightly into place, a technique that makes a percussive sound that can be gently heard while the weavers work.

Below: Luke Sciberras and weavers Chris Cochius and Karlie Hawking and right, with Karlie Hawking, discussing experimental tapestry samples photos ATW



Plant Song: The ATW's current work in progress

For over 30 years Janet Laurence has explored the interconnection of the natural world – animal, plant, mineral – through her multi-disciplinary practice, working across painting, sculpture, installation, photography and video. Laurence's work addresses our relationship to nature, the interconnections between all living forms occupying the liminal zones, or places where art, science, imagination and memory converge.

Plant Song is the second Janet Laurence tapestry commission the ATW has worked on (the first, *The Sound of Plants*, in 2017). This new commission has been created with her extensive archive of images of plants layered with images of paint poured on glass to create a layered transparent effect.

A wide palette of lush greens has been created for this tapestry, which includes a high ratio of cotton yarns in order to create areas of luminosity in the tapestry. ATW yarn dyer Tony

The colour theories used by the weavers are evolutions of design work initiated by Leonardo da Vinci, which continued to influence the work of many painters throughout the ages, including the pointillist Georges-Pierre Seurat.

Every colour is hand mixed by the weaver, who relies entirely on decisions made by eye, which is quite a challenge considering the tapestry is woven by a row of up to three weavers all working together along the loom at the same time, depending on the scale of the work.

The result is an alchemy that speaks quite deeply not just to the weaver's skill, but to the consistency achieved despite the endless possibilities of human responses to colour.



In our increasingly cyber-influenced world where we are spinning towards the evolution of the Internet of Things, (where every element of our lives, from a driver's licence to the opening and closing of a fridge will be managed by some form of digital interface), it may be easy to assume that a sophisticated gaggle of machines might be a better hand at calibrating the unique strokes and marks of an artist than a warp of weavers. However, the experience of the weavers is that human decisions create a much more lively result than the flat perfection of a computer driven, machine

Stefanovski dyed three new wool tones and one new cotton tone specifically for this piece.

ATW weavers will capture transparent glass areas and lines of light by using very subtle colour mixing techniques and multiple tones that are very close together in colour range. In order to achieve a soft painterly and watery effect and maintain the reflective surface areas of the design, they will mix 10 or more different tones on each bobbin. The tapestry will take about 6 months to complete.

Janet Laurence is well known for her public artworks and site-specific installations that extend from the museum and gallery into the urban and landscape domain. Recent projects and commissions include an installation for 'The Pleasure of Love, October Salon', Belgrade (2016); 'Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef', for the Paris Climate Change Conference (2015) and major solo exhibitions at IGA, Berlin (2017), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2017) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2019).

woven tapestry. Suffice to say it takes a weaver a long time to learn this unique art form, and the weavers involved, by and large, dedicate their entire lives to the ATW.

After the cartoon is inked onto the loom and the palette is selected, the colours are mixed and the weaving begins. The more weavers engaged in the project, the faster the tapestry can be woven. Yet tapestry weaving is entirely a very slow process. The recent commission of Luke Sciberras's work was made by two people who spent 4-5 months weaving a 1.6 metre wide tapestry. During Oz Art's visit, lead weaver Chris Cochius is working on a six metre loom, although the ATW also sometimes uses a 7.8 metre loom for larger works. The length of the work can be anything. The Opera House has a 14 metre work that hangs on its side.

In the art form of music, an 'interpretation' of a composition is often considered to be as important as the original work. Tapestry is much the same. The team of weavers involved in the project are all integral to the work and credited for their role. Yet to draw on music once again, often in classical music, the performer is expected to perform the work precisely as written. So it is with the tapestries, which the weavers strive to make as true to the original form as humanly possible. For both the 'interpretation' as well as the desire for precise replication of the subtle expressions of the artist, the role of the weaver is perhaps as important to the end result of the tapestry as the role of the artist.

Although tapestry has historically been dominated by male artisans, here in Australia the ATW is predominantly a female enterprise. Lead weaver Chris Cochius's training in fine arts and interior design has given her the skills to be able to plan and think of a work to scale. 'Whether it's a line building or an artwork, the process is very similar', she says. 'Being able to imagine what it looks like to scale is really important', she says, explaining that the work on the loom during our visit is enlarged nine times.

Chris has worked overseas on other looms which restrict the weaver from seeing the

Opposite and this page:
Plant Song; Janet Laurence
2019 1.56 x 2.7m
Materials wool and cotton
Weavers: Chris Cochius,
Sue Batten, Amy Cornall &
Cheryl Thornton





Pink Heath, 1979, Marie Cook, woven by Marie Cook, Mary Coughlan, Sue Hick, Andrea May and Iain Young, wool, cotton, 3.65 x 6.09 m

work at a distance. 'With other methods', Chris says, 'you're working from the back and can only see through mirrors.' A glimpse of the work is all that can be achieved when the rest of the work is hidden by the loom. She prefers the methods introduced to the ATW by Archie Brennan, which she says allows the weavers to engage in a proper collaboration with the artist.

The weavers must consider the stance of the viewer when selecting their threads. 'We need to consider how far back to set the colours and how much detail to put in, so that it looks right, close up, and also from a distance', Chris says. This can be even more of a challenge when the work is not hung in the space it was designed for.

After many long months of labour when the work is finally finished, a gathering is held to cut the tapestry from the loom and birth the tapestry into its new life as a public artwork, a significant moment which is often celebrated with a party of weavers, artists, dignitaries and people close to the design process.

To create a tapestry from a photographic portrait, a series of photographs will be used to provide a cross reference for the colour palette - as lead weaver Pamela Joyce explained during Oz Arts' visit to ATW. She is working from a series of three printed photographs, only one is

too dark, one is too light, one is too sallow. She uses her eye to calibrate the exact colour required, blending a hand selected collection of cotton and wool threads to create the perfect pitch of the colour for the section she is working.

A black and white sketch is inked onto the threads to create a photographic enlargement, and small sections are worked up to test the colour palette against the skin tones of the photograph. The test patches and samples created in the development phase of the work are kept as a reference point for future portraits, and are often featured in small exhibitions.

'I joined in the 1980s', Pam says, as she sits quietly at the loom weaving a portrait for a private commission. 'I was the fifteenth weaver. There have been 26 weavers collaborating on tapestries throughout the 42 years of the ATW, and sometimes we work in pairs, depending on the scale of the portrait.'

Many forms of textile works are known as 'tapestries'. The Bayeux Tapestry (cited in the OzArts 18 story on Locust Jones) is actually an embroidered cloth — not a tapestry — which stretches almost 70 metres long. Similarly, works woven into cloth or stitched onto an existing print are also considered to be 'embroidery'. The difference,

according to lead weaver Chris Cochius, is that a tapestry is the creation of an original fabric, whereas the other forms often referred to as tapestry are stitched over a textile that already exists. Tapestry, she says, is not a textile until it is woven.

The exploration of tapestry and textiles in the broader sense is a link that the ATW very much wishes to develop. The current exhibition 'Placemakers' is curated to look at tapestry and weaving as a broader art form through the unique cultural heritage of people from all over the world, who are living in Melbourne, reclaiming and continuing traditional practices in ways that interpret those forms through the lens of 'place'.

Whilst an artist in their daily practice might dab on a fresh layer of paint to correct the devils that looked like angels the night before, a weaver does not have the same freedom to respond to yesterday's work with the fresh gaze of the morning. In the words of Archie Brennan, 'tapestry is like life, you can't change what you did yesterday, but you can modify it by what you do today'. In this sense the weavers can allow yesterday's progress to inform today's decisions.

The ATW has created complex, highly nuanced representations of visual expressions that carry the same level of respect in the art world as painting with oil on canvas, often of high profile Australian artists. John Olsen's European immersion during the 1950s allowed him to explore the palette of Miro;

the spiritual learnings of Buddha, and the quixotic art of preparing Spanish food. In response, his life became imbued with a celebration of place and spirit, satiated with food, colour and love. Tony Stefanovski needed to create many new tones of orange to allow the weavers to create a good impression of Olsen's work (see image inside back cover).

The challenges presented to the weavers were particularly apparent in Imants Tillers' work where the artist's stroke meets text overlaid on bleak images appropriated from the 19th century, foretelling the coming of winter. The work perhaps refers to war as the season of death, reflecting on Australia's autumnal experience of Anzac Day as the season of the fall, and indeed the fallen.





Avenue of Remembrance, 2015, Imants Tillers, woven by Sue Batten, Chris Cochius, Pamela Joyce, Milena Paplinska, and Cheryl Thornton, wool, cotton, 3.3 x 2.8m

Sciberras considers the work to be a gesture of a sense of place. 'For more than twenty years I have travelled up and down the famous and precarious Bridle Track from Hill End....The road rises and falls from the crossings and causeways as dramatically as a roller coaster.'

Sciberras connects his work to a response to the world he finds himself in by interlocking themes of indigenous displacement, in what he refers to as an authentic expression of the human condition. He observes the intimate connection between the land and the farmer; and every geological event that lays its hands upon the earth, from good season to bad, from drought to flood, feast to famine. He is interested in tracing the experience of a story long after the artist has left the room, in much the same way, he says, that we cling to the sunset or a fallen down house and other moments that have come to pass. Maybe he is contemplating the pause we take before returning to the breath that comes after a long exhale, as though he is thinking of

As Oz Arts visited the ATW the luminous work of Janet Laurence's 'Plant Song' is on the loom. This enchanting multimedia artwork explores the relationship between all forms of life centred around the plant world, layering glass, photographs and paint to create a transparent sheen that looks as though it may in fact be dripping wet. To translate this work into tapestry the weavers have selected a higher ratio of cotton to wool threads, and a new selection of colours has been dyed. Her work is evocative of the liminal interface of life in the Anthropocene, which presented a particular challenge for the weavers who re-created Laurence's reflective areas of transparent glass by repeating tones and understating the choices represented in the colour mix, combining at times as many as 10 colours on the bobbin.

Recently the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and its Society commissioned a tapestry of Luke Sciberras's 'Bridle Track, Hill End', a painting which depicts the meandering hills at the back of Ilford. This dirt road hangs in the landscape like a metaphor for all that has become of the Central West in the name of agriculture. The track works its way around the paddocks and the crumbling gritty boulders that stand up to the river in the parched landscape where the Turon River gives way to the Macquarie to the north east of Bathurst.

some other future for our land from his skyward position at Hill End, even contemplating the possibility of a new song line in the making. He has a unique vista upon which to summon the view as he questions what is real and what is merely a dream. From home, he can probably see the place called World's End which is only just over the other side of his valley.

Hill End was colonised by iconic Australian artists who escaped the brutality of the depression by ensconcing themselves in the bohemian paradise of the Central West of New South Wales, chasing rabbits and eating Warragul greens to survive during the lean times. The locality itself has become something of a pilgrimage for Australian artists, with Russel Drysdale, Margaret Olley, John Olsen AO OBE and Brett Whiteley all enjoying their journey.

The ATW raises income through a variety of sources including State and Local Government funding, philanthropic donations through the Australian Tapestry Workshop Fund and tapestry commissions. They also run learn-to-weave workshops and sell their in-house dyed yarn online. While a small part of the operational budget to run the ATW comes from Creative Victoria funding for organisations, to supplement this they also take



Great Hall Tapestry, 1988, Arthur Boyd, woven by Leonie Bessant, Sue Carstairs, Irene Creedon, Robyn Daw, Joanne Feder; Owen Hammond, Kate Hutchinson, Pamela Joyce, Peta Meredith, Robyn Mountcastle, Jennifer Sharpe, Joy Smith and Iain Young, wool, cotton, 9.18 x 19.9m

Right: Alan Archibald QC, 2019, John Gollings AM, woven by Chris Cochius and Pamela Joyce, wool, cotton, 1.5 x 1m

tapestry commissions and sell their yarns, along with an annual appeal for donations and a strong cultural outreach program including an artist in residency offering which is open to all artists, regardless of their area of practice.

The ATW shop sells the full range of colours hand dyed on site, and displays them in the shop the same way an art supplies store displays tubes of oils or pastels or gouache. The ATW develops tapestries which are exhibited and offered for sale, to fund the ongoing evolution of this centre of excellence in the textile world.

Elizabeth Walton

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