

Remembering Archie Brennan

Annita Magee

I believe I first met Archie and Susan when they came to Alaska to jury a tapestry show for ITNET (International Tapestry Network) in 1992, when I was helping Helga Berry with the membership. They returned in 1997 to teach a tapestry workshop for our Anchorage Weavers & Spinners Guild. I remember they preferred to travel by train and wanted to take the train to Alaska, but sadly, no trains to Alaska! During one of the visits, I had the group over for dinner, and I was expressing my frustration with drawing cartoons. Archie made it seem so simple “Look around you and draw what you see; like the cloth on the bureau maybe.”

My tapestry experience started with a billedvev class, literally, picture weaving, while living in Norway in the 70s and seeing the Frida Hansen tapestries. Later, back in Alaska in 1985, I took

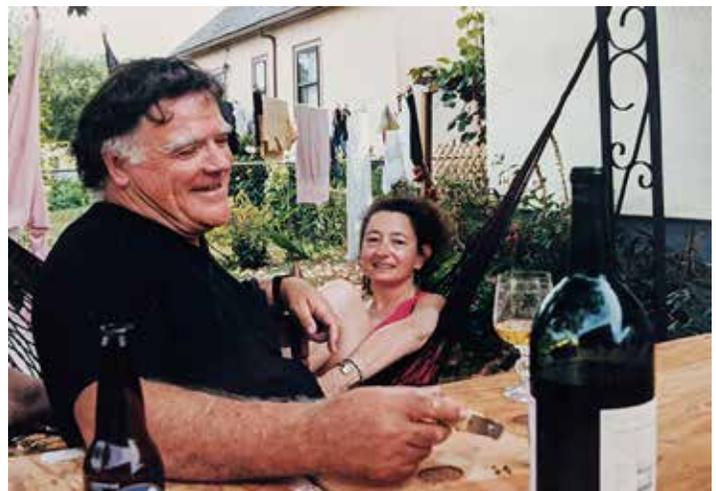
a weaving student on a trip to Norway, Scotland and England in pursuit of tapestry yarns from the Rauma factory where I had lived. We also visited the Dovecot Studio in Edinburgh where Archie started out, and the West Dean Tapestry Studio in England. Unconsciously following Archie’s footsteps, I was lucky to visit the Australian Tapestry Workshop on a visit to Melbourne in 1996; he was instrumental in the start of that workshop. One last memory was taking a week-long workshop with Archie, Susan Martin Maffei, Jean Pierre Larochette and Yael Lurie in Jean Pierre’s studio in May of 1995. Archie and Jean Pierre had many discussions back and forth regarding weaving from the front or back! Archie convinced the Dovecot Studios (Edinburgh Tapestry Workshop) to weave from the front but hadn’t convinced Jean Pierre! Many happy memories from Annita Magee.

This is my Archie Story: A Workshop Memory

Deborah Corsini

I don’t exactly remember the first time that I met Archie. I think it was at the Scheuer Tapestry Studio on Spring Street in New York City in the early 1980s. Of course, his reputation as an incredible artist and tapestry weaver was well known. I was familiar with some of his early tapestries—the images of people, windows and textiles—and realized that he had a unique sense of what a contemporary tapestry image could be. Bold graphic patterns, unusual perspective and a humorous undercurrent characterized his work and resonated with me.

In the summer of 1992, I had an opportunity to take a week-long workshop with Archie and his partner Susan Maffei at Pam Patrie’s weaving studio in Portland, Oregon. Fellow San Francisco weaver Joyce Hulbert and I loaded up my car. We gabbed (and bonded) during the entire 10-hour journey to our destination at



Archie and Deborah relaxing after class.

Pam's house. We were greeted by fellow students (a group of seven of us), Pam and her then husband Frank, Rudi Richardson, and of course Archie and Susan. Who can ever forget his lovely Scottish accent and the twinkle in his eyes? After a communal dinner, sitting outside in the warm Portland evening, we settled into conversations and eventually bed. All of us were sleeping somewhere in the house or garden. My bunk was in the garage and Pam's striking tapestry, "Power," depicting three nuclear cooling towers, hung on the wall behind the two beds. It was a wild backdrop to my dreams.

The following morning we set out for Pam's studio in downtown Portland, where the workshop was held. Archie had pre-warped Pam's enormous tapestry loom with narrow warps, only 13 warp ends wide. Students sat on both sides of the loom. He handed everyone a thin strip of paper with two typewritten words: "This is." Our assignment and lesson was to weave these words and then finish the thought. Archie was interested in the graphic quality of words and how letters were formed, the positive and negative of a letter's shape and its relationship with the neighboring letter. We were encouraged to consider the spacing between letters, the choice of a slit or an interlock, the subtle pulling on the weft to shape curves. Starting with the letter T was an easy geometric form to begin with as we wove our way up the warp towards more complicated letter forms and relationships.

Many of us chose to follow Archie's advice by weaving the background in white cotton (the same as used for the warp) with a contrasting wool yarn for the letters. This separation of materials added definition and helped to clarify the nuance of the letter's shape. This was a challenging assignment for me. I was in a dilemma trying to figure out how my "This is" would end. There were too many possibilities. I was distracted. In the end my neat beginning began transforming and degrading as my letters fell apart.

Some details of that week from 28 years ago are a blur, but I vividly remember the contrast of the hot



Workshop participants, summer 1992, Portland, Oregon. Front, left to right: Joyce Hulbert, Archie Brennan (in hammock), Deborah Corsini, Pam Patrie. Rear, left to right: Mildred Sherwood, Barbara Golding, Rudi Richardson, Lucy Driver, Katie Guth, Susan Maffei, photo: Frank Engel.

days weaving in the studio and the ambience of the warm summer nights in the garden, sharing our meals and wine, and ongoing conversations about art, weaving, politics, travel and music. In the studio, Archie would sit by your side, offering advice, questions, some thoughtful suggestions, or a funny anecdote. He endorsed developing the tapestry while sitting at the loom, following the active growth of weaving from one end. "Indulge in the idea of growth," is a quote from my class notes that I recently uncovered. At night we looked at our other art/tapestry work and continued the tapestry dialog. I appreciated that Archie wove from the front (like me), without a cartoon, and that his flat woven tapestries had a simple elegance. He understood the idiosyncrasies of the medium and used the techniques to focus on "woven tapestry's long-established graphic pictorial role."

In later years I saw Archie and Susan a number of times. They came to my tapestry class at



Wall of final THIS IS projects, photo: Deborah Corsini.

City College of San Francisco and gave a slide presentation of their experience traveling to the Pangnirtung Tapestry Studio, part of the Uqqurmiut Center for Arts & Crafts in the Inuit community on Baffin Island in Canada's North. They told fascinating stories of their three-month residency, of organizing with the weaving community, planning drawings for the tapestry, "Our Ancestors' Land is our Land Now," and weaving with the community. This 14 foot x 7 foot tapestry depicts hunting and fishing, but also the changes that the community was experiencing as they moved into settlements. We were all so amazed by what they had accomplished and experienced at this remote tapestry outpost.

Many years later I took a second workshop with Archie and Susan at the Mendocino Art Center. It was good to share time with them again, but the classroom vibe was different from the Portland experience. The comraderie

and passion of the first workshop could not be duplicated. The last time I saw Archie was at the reception for the **Art is the Cloth** exhibition in New Hampshire, in 2014. We gave each other a warm embrace. Unfortunately, it was just a quick visit on a busy night.

I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to study with Archie and to enjoy his warm presence. I have shared his copper loom instructions and the H word challenge with my students. I hope I have imparted some of his lessons and approach to tapestry and design to my students. He was a warm and generous teacher, a mighty artist and an inspired tapestry weaver who understood and questioned the medium. His prolific output and unique imagery are unprecedented. Now as I weave and continue my own journey up the warp, I like to imagine that I see Archie's twinkle in the space between the warps.

Read the entire Tapestry Topics issue dedicated to *Archie Brennan's Legacy*: [HERE](#)

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