AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Perspectives from the 2018 International Student Award

The American Tapestry Alliance is pleased to share the perspectives of two of the applicants for ATA's 2018 International Student Award. Read what they are thinking about.

Wendy Lauzon

Championing Tapestry

Examining my personal relationship with fibre and fibre arts seems odd because it has been a constant in my life, begun when I learned to embroider pillowcases at a young age. I have never wavered in my singular devotion to fibre arts. I cannot say definitively what it is about fibre in general, and tapestry specifically, that both compels and fulfills me more than any other medium. I grew up during a time of binary gender defined roles – girls were expected to learn home keeping skills in preparation for their ultimate duty of marrying, taking care of a husband, and raising a family. It was about the same time that women's liberation and women's rights movements gained momentum, challenging these traditional ideals and role expectations for women, although the women of the Bauhaus had worked in earnest to elevate 'women's work' four decades earlier, in defiance of the gendered workshops (T'ai Smith BWT 36). Pursuing a degree in fibre arts was, for me, primarily to learn new skills and techniques, but in all honesty, it would also be a piece of paper that celebrated, valued, and legitimized what I have always loved to do, and thereby who I am. *Why Bother* author Quinton's conversations with artists acknowledge this relationship with traditional hand work in an environment of industrialization and technology (1).

Wendy Lauzon, "Weaving Under the Arch," 30 in x 55 in, 10 epi, 2018, photo: Wendy Lauzon. Cotton seine warp, wool weft. Collection of the artist.

As a mature student at the Alberta College of Art + Design (ACAD), I felt unsure about the conceptual fortitude, and therefore, the validity of my work as 'art.' My strength was the 'finish,' the very thing Greenberg declared the definition of craft, and thereby, the antithesis of art (Auther 35). Audible in many contexts at ACAD, 'the Bauhaus' introduced me to Gunta Stolzl's tapestry. Stolzl wove in an environment that saw tapestry as a "degraded version of painting" (T'ai Smith 2) and set out to challenge that mindset, even as some modern painters and sculptors sought to translate their paintings and sculptures to tapestry (Johnson 39). T'ai Smith articulated what resonated with me in Stolzl's work – that tapestry is a union of design and fabrication (3), a textile of explicit and implicit meaning. Since weaving was new to me, I found it easier to direct conceptually, because that is the only way I had employed it in my practice. My associations with other crafts are so personal, I sometimes find it a challenge to recognize their potential to achieve other than the functional and beautiful. Whitford concurs saying "the most interesting parts of the imagination are closed off by logic and reason." (44) Though the technique may be ancient, weavers bring contemporaneity to the process (Darlaston 38), integrating its historical past with a contemporary relevance (Glusica 135; Morton 334). Leigh describes the handmade as "potently meaningful in contemporary culture." (36) Key to the finished weaving is the vision (Glusica 133) and the personality (Hung15) of the weaver/artist. Mary Black, a nurse in the 1920's, subverted political content for her purposes (329), and this is now what often forms the basis an artist's work (Sherwin np). Indeed, contemporary art in general, and weaving in particular, has been employed to comment on such topics as politics (Sherwin), the feminine (Weissberg 665), the femme

fatale (Noegel) and the feminist (Auther 97). It is a vehicle of activism, and a object of documentation (Deacon and Calvin 7). What is relevant to one generation may not be to another (Green 54), consequently weaving, an ever evolving practice (Green 58), with a reiterative evolution from pragmatic to theoretical construct (T'ai Smith BWT xvii), has afforded artists many points of entry throughout history. Johnson is therefore justified in claiming tapestry is "among the most ancient and the most modern of art forms." (37)
I like that weaving affords me some type of existential connection with past generations and cultures. "No matter how esoteric our occupations, we delight in diving back into the jobs our species had so many thousand years ago. How far, really, is the labor of a fiber artist like Sheila Hicks from that of someone carrying an armload of reeds to the door of a cave?." (Kooser 10) At the loom, we are not unlike the weavers of Jarmo, women thought to be the earliest weavers (Barber 78). Weaving technology survives fundamentally unchanged since its inception millennia ago (Hearle 87), and hand and loom weaving methods in certain parts of the world appear to have never changed at all (Barber 80). Gogarty (4-5) and Hung (11) see tapestry as a rebellion against the ubiquity of mass production and digital technology. Having grown up before the onslaught of technology, I think this is significant to weaving's appeal for me – there will be no power outage or lost computer file to upset my work, and, instead of virtually creating something, I am physically handling the elements of my work. The weaver's personal identity, a sense of self, of being and becoming, is, at least in part, attributable to this sense of continuity with the past. (Yda Smith 27) Darlaston's weaving residency in a local library inspired embodied responses of onlookers, from breathless appreciation to mimicking hand motions (35). She saw the evidence for Volpe's claim that the gesture of weaving is an ancient memory in us all. (Darlaston 36) Darlaston also recognized Laura Marks' "haptic look" in members of her audience, where seeing causes the body to react as if touching. (Darlaston 36) Gogarty acknowledges that it is textile's materiality that attracts the gaze. (12) Glusica addresses these phenomena by offering a "touch sample" for viewers to satisfy the compulsion to handle woven fabric. (134) The physical body is still the primary way of experiencing the world. (Gogarty 12)

I derive a therapeutic solace while weaving, and this aspect has a notable history. Salom's article, about the role museums can play in providing art therapy interventions for displaced indigenous women, talks about "artistic containment," (51) "therapeutic holding environment(s) grounded in emotional safety."(59) While a contemplative relationship with the tapestry loom may be less likely where productivity rules, (Barber 33) no doubt it was enjoyed in the sequestered spaces of ancient (female) royalty. (Barber 210) The weaving

artist works in an individualized space that permits an evolving identity, removed from external influence, via the generative process of craft making. (Darlaston 36) Weaving was central to the occupational therapy provided by Black to address the diverse consequences of industrialization: post war disability, (Morton 325), post-traumatic stress, (Morton 328) and even upper middle class neurosis. (Morton 330) Something I could take away from Black's work is the realization that aesthetics (read perfectionism!) should not come at the expense of the therapy weaving provides. (Morton 331) As recognized in the Bauhaus, embracing failure also affords celebrating the spectacular. (Gogarty 7) Leigh talks about a special state of mind induced by extended periods of repetition in craft making, both meditative and therapeutic. (38) More recently, various restorative initiatives have been undertaken that (re)introduce weaving to women whose cultural and domestic stability have been compromised to various degrees, (see Cross, Findly, Green, Sahagun, Salom, Shuzhong and Prott, Yda Smith) reinstating a sense of dignity and self-respect, whether a former tradition, or newly adopted coping mechanism. On a much smaller scale, I too have benefitted from these qualities of weaving that have mitigated the strain of personal struggles. Tapestry has a historically diverse application as narrative, whether historical – tapestry conveyed and helped to interpret, and at times even influenced, historical meaning (Astington 127), or personal – Salom describes weaving as personal storylines and visual narratives created nonverbally. (58) Gogarty shares an anecdote of an African culture that believes language and weaving came to be at the same time. (6) Its imagery draws out memories and stories and restores gaps in cultural history. (Deacon and Calvin 11) Craft actualizes our desire for expression. (Leigh 35) At the very least, weaving provides the fundamental pleasure of 'making.' (Leigh 38).. Fibre allows me to create a woven narrative that fills a void of personal cultural tradition – that which I have adopted, borrowed or appropriated, is, in the end, made my own. While the tradition of making in my family was rooted in penny pinching, it was not long before I began to focus more on the opportunity it presented to customize and personalize what I made, to separate myself from the masses, akin to what Gogarty refers to as "a challenge to our increasingly standardized environment." (6) Weaving fits in my fibre 'alpha-omega' experience – I can make the cloth with which I will make other things. There is a delightful challenge in being able to unpack a product and its process, to its origin, or essence.

Gunta Stolzl. "Slit Tapestry Red/Green." 1927-1928, tapestry, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. http://library.artstor.org/asset/SS36187_36187_26778482. Web. 22 Nov 2017.

Warping the loom is a straightforward process so the loom is soon ready for weaving. The real work begins after that. Tapestry technique involves the hand and the eye working cooperatively in a manner that far exceeds coordination; the hands work to realize what the artist is attempting to create, while the eyes judge their success. Each session at the loom is what Gogarty refers to as a process of "constant interpretation and translation." (7) Working simultaneously in the conceptual, aesthetic and technical realm, decision making involves knowing that tapestry is the right medium for the message, what image will convey the concept, the dimensions, when to shift colours, when to separate features with a hard or blended edge, how firmly to pack the weft. Working with colour, particularly how proximity influences the appearance of colour, extends the possibilities. Whitford recognizes the fact that "often a poverty of content results in a richness of concept, a paring away of the

superficial to reveal the fundamental."(19) Artist Kiki Smith articulated the challenges I experience bringing my ideas to life saying, "My suffering is that I see that there are these really great forms. They're holy in a way, like they have this really incredible power about them. And all I can do is recognize it." (http://www.theartstory.org/artist-smith-kiki.htm) The intellectual rigour of tapestry may, in fact, be unparalleled in the art world. Artists like Hannah Ryggen, who builds her designs while actively weaving her tapestries as opposed to following a cartoon (Sherwin np), challenges the thinking that weaving is subordinate to painting because it merely reproduces an image. (Mathison 20) In "Pictures Made of Wool," T'ai Smith writes "the art and the textile are integral to each other – the surface and the art become one" (4) subverting Kandinsky's belief that abstraction (contemporary art context) would be achieved only once materials become subordinate to concept. (T'ai Smith BWT 23) Black understood weaving could make abstraction tangible. (336)

Johannes Itten said the greatest achievements are the result of play overcoming labour. (T'ai Smith BWT 27) The Bauhaus philosophy was that end results could be sacrificed if learning was gained through the experimental process. (T'ai Smith BWT 53) In this way, contemporary tapestry weaving could be said to closely follow the six step scientific method: the weaver makes an **observation** that provokes a **question** that the weaver sets out to answer by **hypothesizing,** and **predicting** an outcome, then **testing** the hypothesis. Based on the results, the process is **revised**, which inevitably leads to urther inquiry, either along the same tangent or entirely new foci. Stolzl's scientific perspective may have been in recognizing how tapestry challenges two dimensionality because the bottom layers predicate those that follow, more like architecture. (T'ai Smith BWT 27-28) György calls it a "2.5 D representation." (148) Furthermore, Mathison describes the binary nature of tapestry; pictorial (e.g. William Morris) and structural (eg. Annie Albers), very unique processes visually and theoretically, coexisting within the same discipline. (Mathison 20) Glusica's article about the power of weaving to illustrate wave/particle duality demonstrates a passion for both science and craft that recognizes and celebrates their commingling in her practice. Göry's article explains the development of an "editor", a computer program designed to analyze non rectilinear weaving structures in Andean textiles, and to create models derived by an algorithm, to illustrate their structure. Take that, painting and sculpture!

Textiles have been constantly reassigned on the continuum between ornament and function. (Astington 119 Groot 3) Tapestry's myriad purposes throughout its historical existence lie on a web tethered between various poles. From status conveyor, patronized by the rich and

powerful, (Wilcox 10) to art (read artsy-craftsy) activity in pre school, to inaccurately categorized wall hangings, to provocateur in the realm of contemporary art, (Mathison 40) and so on. Around the world weaving may be newly embraced, (Mathison 41) or part of a country's strong textile tradition. (Mathison 51) Mathison reiterates the importance of current generations embracing tapestry to ensure its continued existence. (54) Well, I will do my best.

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Author's Byline

Wendy Lauzon is a retired educator who has just completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Fibre, at the Alberta College of Art + Design, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, where she lives with her husband, Don. She compulsively explores all aspects of fibre arts in her home studio. This is a revised version of her unpublished Grad Paper.

Pamela Palma Olguín

I discovered tapestry in a casual way. I decided to study Fine Arts at the University of Chile and there I discovered the textile workshop. Somehow I found in this place something I was looking for, a different way to develop my artistic practice. In the workshop, the concepts of art and craft were intertwined. One of the characteristics that I love the most about working in textiles is related to the long processes involved in the different techniques being valued for their particularities, and as they contribute to the whole.

Pamela Palma Olguín, "Symbolic heritage of instinctive learning", 12 in x 12 in, 2015, Photo: Pamela Palma, cotton.

In the beginning I learned *shibori*. This technique introduced me to the language of fibers and colors. I was particularly interested in the gradations and soft steps between tones. Here I was introduced to the minuteness and slowness in the processes. Then I learned the gentle art of tapestry – one of my favorite techniques and the one I have been practicing the most. Thanks to this experience I discovered a new kind of time and a new way to relate to the environment

– a very different way from what I was used to, where immediacy silences the beauty of delaying and contemplating.

My work is related to the reinterpretation of photographs, through re-framing small details and changing the scale of the images, generating new views, bringing to life new ways of "representation." Other interests have resulted from the study of technical ways of representing different materialities, such as the folded sleeve of a wool sweater or a *vasija de greda* (clay pot) on a wooden shelf.

Pamela Palma Olguín, "Violeta's hands", 15 in x 30 in, 2017, Photo: Pamela Palma, cotton.

"Violeta's hands" originated as an homage to Violeta Parra in her centenary. This work tries to, or at least chooses to give an answer to the question "How we can see her work today?" My attention was caught by a photograph in which she, Violeta, appears working at home. In this scene I felt the beauty of an instant. I believe that this scene evokes and reveals an intimate moment, one that usually has no spectators. I also found it interesting to represent an action and the development of a technique, such as *papier-mâché,* through weaving. This piece involved a lot of work, about a year. In the beginning, I spent five months researching Violeta's work. After that I took on the formal study of the final image, its colors and fibers. The other seven months were weaving. During that period, my work time and its relation in general with the concept of *time*, tended to change. The set of actions went from hours and hours of

weaving, or not weaving, thinking about weaving, and even dreaming about the movement of the weft – from one side to the other, back and forth, back and forth, generating rhythms that in my opinion go beyond every aspect of everyday life, or at least that's what I felt when I was devoting most of my attention to this activity.

Pamela Palma Olguín, "Fragment II", 5 in x 12 in, 2017, Photo: Pamela Palma, cotton.

Through my work I seek to materialize all the emotions and thoughts that vibrate when I'm in contact with fibers, and to reevaluate techniques and "doing" in general – whether through art, craft or any practice that involves a personal investigation through materiality. I think it is necessary to go back a bit to how things were done before, look at the objects from the perspective of who produced them, in order to know their context and, in a certain way, to absorb a bit of the essence of their making and maker.

About Pamela

Pamela Palma Olguín lives in Santiago, Chile and is finishing her degree in Fine Arts with a major in Textiles at the University of Chile. She is currently doing an internship at the Andrés Bello Central Archive, in the area of conservation and restoration of photographs.