



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

What Students Say

Introduction

Mary Lane

Last spring I contacted the students who had applied for the 2011 ATA International Student Award to see if they would be interested in writing about the ways they think about, and approach tapestry. I put together a series of questions to get the juices flowing and let them know that these questions were just a catalyst. I wanted them to talk about what is most important to them as artists, and what they thought should be emphasized in the sphere of contemporary tapestry. The questions covered a broad range of topics including:

How does tapestry fit within your entire artistic practice?

How do you feel about the slowness of tapestry making?

How important is process to you?

Does tapestry's history influence your work?

Does the concept of "truth to materials" operate in your approach to tapestry?

How do the hand, head and heart intersect in your artwork?

Do you think the concept of kitsch relates to tapestry?

Does the notion of hybrid practice relate to your work?

Do you consider yourself an artist, a crafts person, both, neither, something else?

Do you consider your choice to focus on making objects to be a lifestyle choice?

Do you see your work functioning as a social or political object?

What do you think some of tapestry's unrealized, or under realized potentials are?

How do you think tapestry can be successfully promoted?

What services, programming etc. would be most useful to you as a tapestry artist?

Erika Diazoni



Erika Diazoni

Psyche

charcoal on paper, 84.1 X 59.4 cm



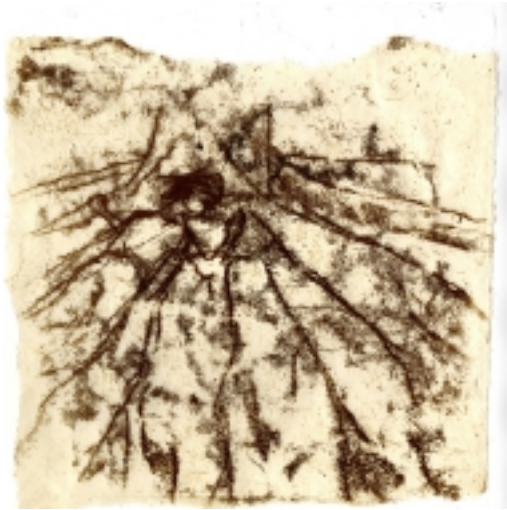
Erika Diazoni

4.75" x 5.25"

Shetland wool on cotton warp

It all comes from reading too many myths and fairy tales as a young girl. I saw my neighbor spinning on a spinning wheel and I soon was learning to spin, weave, dye and knit. It was really just an extension of my make-believe fairy-tale-play. In college, as research for an art history paper I was writing in pursuit of my Bachelor of Fine Art, I saw a modern tapestry exhibit – ATB 6 – at a nearby museum. I wrote about a piece, “Stamps” by Tricia Goldberg. A few months later I returned to the same venue and struck up a conversation with a nice lady, who just happened to be Tricia Goldberg. I ended up taking a class with Mme. Goldberg in her studio in Berkeley. It was there that I learned that I loved this art form, and since then I’ve been tangled up in tapestry.

Tapestry is only a part of my creative practice. The core of my practice is drawing. I don't draw to make a tapestry design. I don't think about tapestry at all. I just draw. Later I go back to the drawings and reacquaint myself with them. Often, it's like I'm meeting them for the first time, because I was in a different state of mind when I made them. Some are beautiful, most, mediocre. Some are downright awful- but those can be the best teachers.



Erika Diazoni
Listening/Roots
monoprint, 11x11 cm



Erika Diazoni
Angel
monoprint, 12x13cm



Erika Diazoni
Life model monoprint
84.1 X 59.4 cm

I look at my drawings critically, or rather, curiously. I have a conversation of sorts with the drawings; “Why are you beautiful, or not? Is it this mark? That tone? The tear in the paper?” I try to figure out which marks are most important. “What are you trying to say?” Only then do thoughts of weaving began to arise, because as I begin to understand the drawing, I might realize that I could better articulate its meaning through threads, rather than graphite, or chalk or ink. “I think I’d like to get to know you better. Come, let me weave you.” Then I start thinking about which materials might best express the essence of the drawing. I don’t adhere to the concept of “Truth to materials” but rather, “Materials to truth”.

The slow process of weaving complements my drawing practice beautifully. I can draw, or print quickly, and weave slowly. Weaving acts like a sieve for my thoughts. I understand more and more each step of the way, starting with what sort of materials to use. I can intellectually critique what I’ve done unselfconsciously in the drawing through the process of weaving. Weaving refines my practice.

I don’t think of my weaving as tapestry. Rather, I approach it as cloth, as threads. I focus on the process, and not the result. There is something about weaving that reminds me that I’m human. I think of my weaving as poetry. My poetry now is intimate and personal. My dream is to move beyond the realm of personal narrative, reducing my language to weave poems in which the sense of touch- the mother of all senses, is the only metaphor. But I am not quite there yet.

If there is any historical influence on my tapestry weaving, it is that of the deceptively simple, ancient, universal act of weaving cloth. I find the large, grandiose tapestries of castles and

palaces rather depressing. I find much more beauty and sincerity in those little scraps of Coptic weaving. I had an odd experience last year when I checked out a book on Coptic techniques from the library, only to find that I had been using some of them already! But I am not so concerned in trying to repeat what has been done already. I learn, but then I make it my own and utilize a technique as I see fit.



Erika Diazoni

Sail Away

monoprint, 5x11 cm



Erika Diazoni

They Pulled Me out of the Sack

I think that the best way to promote tapestry is by not promoting it as “Tapestry”. The fact that a work is a tapestry is rather irrelevant. I always think of Getrude Jekyll’s quote in her book, *Colour Schemes for the Flower Garden*, about designs for the blue garden: “My own idea is that it should be beautiful first, and then just as blue as may be consistent with its best possible beauty.” (Jekell p120) I apply this to tapestry: A tapestry should be beautiful first, then just as tapestry-ish as may be consistent with its best possible beauty. Or: Great works of art should transcend their medium.

The reverse is true- just because a work is tapestry does not make it beautiful. I think the tapestry world is especially afraid to admit this, because we all know how much time it takes, and that is why we sometimes exhibit mediocre works. The public sees this and thinks

tapestry is kitsch. Tapestry itself isn't kitsch. Everything depends upon how the maker uses the medium.

Tapestry has so much potential for artists. For a painter, there's no match for the colour in a tapestry. It can be seen as a flat surface, or a three-dimensional form for those inclined towards sculpture. There's a world of materials to explore and play with and nearly every culture offers a tradition from which an artist could draw. It has so much potential, but it needs the right artistic minds, and hands, to realize the potential. Minds and hands that will use tapestry not to exploit the form, but because they can articulate themselves best through the language of cloth.

Erica Diazoni earned her Bachelor of Fine Art at San Jose State studying with Consuelo Underwood in her native California. She pursued Post Graduate studies in Tapestry Art at West Dean College in England under the guidance of Pat Taylor. She now lives in the Swiss Alps, where she continues her artistic practice through drawing, printing, and painting as well as tapestry. Inspiration reveals itself to her in new surroundings, old memories, ancient stories, poetry, fairy tales and cups of green tea.

Susan Weir

The way I think about and approach tapestry



Susan Weir
Hampden I
33 x 106 cm, Wool, silk, metallic yarn, cotton, 2010



Susan Weir
Hampden I, detail

My love of fibre and colour developed from an early age when I learnt how to knit. Always striving for a more exciting fibre, I started spinning and when I couldn't get quite the right effect with knitting, I learnt to weave. My inspiration came from a very soft, pink and blue woven scarf which belonged to my mother. Tapestry weaving was discovered by accident. It

seemed like a natural progression and an interesting way to create a picture on a simple frame. This was in the 1980s when fibre craft/art was quite popular – although even then I recall being the youngest in the spinning group.

My artistic practice centres on tapestry, although I also have a love of photography. I create designs mostly by painting, however, I am conscious of finding ways to speed up this initial design process, and plan on investigating more experimental approaches. My work responds to environmental and sustainability issues, personal and cultural issues, and patterns and colours in the environment. I am also influenced by current art theory. My imagery is often based on photos taken during my travels and I am always fascinated to find changes in the environment when I revisit a special place. For me, making objects is a lifestyle choice. I am an emerging artist and craftsperson and I will continue to develop my own language and strive for excellence.

Fibre is both tactile and sensuous and I enjoy exploring the subtle nuances that can be achieved with colour and texture, and the way different fibres absorb or reflect light. Primarily, I weave with wool, however, I love the lustre and tensile strength of silk and often incorporate it into small areas of my tapestries to enhance a focal point. I find the process rhythmic and contemplative and, as I work on one tapestry, ideas begin to develop for the next. Wherever possible I endeavour to use environmentally friendly, sustainable or repurposed materials. The use of fibre goes hand in hand with material specific concepts such as protection, providing a metaphor for the body or providing a link to the past. People are drawn to the material qualities of textiles because their tactility evokes the senses and invites touch. Tapestry is a soft pliable textile with a rich tactile surface that provides unique warmth, richness of colour, texture and visual detail.



Susan Weir
Closure
18 x 18 cm; wool, silk, cotton

As an artistic medium, tapestry can be narrative, symbolic, observational, decorative, sculptural or conceptual. It can focus on the materials or employ a more painterly or even photographic approach. Materials can become secondary to meaning and association when the work is intended to confront social and cultural issues such as gender and the environment. However, tapestry can also fall into the category of 'kitsch' if it is aesthetically deficient, or reproductive. It is important that a tapestry weaver create work with strong visual impact that is enhanced by the medium.

I have accepted the slowness of tapestry to be part of the process. Using skills that are acquired over time and are specific to the process and materials appeals to me. Medium specific techniques can enhance the visual image, for example stepped lines, slits, hatching or half pass, soumak and eccentric weaving, showcasing the process and the inherent properties of fibre. Hidden layers of meaning and practices lie within a tapestry and the slow nature of weaving. For many the process is a basic artisanal urge and intrinsically motivated. I believe that handmade is an important component in fibre work and that different types of making enable us to imagine objects and environments beyond the norm.

Tapestry's slowness can also be seen as cost prohibitive in a digital age, as weavers struggle to make a living. Perhaps one of the biggest issues facing tapestry today is that, even though there has been a revival of the hand made, for the younger generation a slow art form is not so appealing. Tapestry's traditional techniques and materials can be viewed as lacking

innovation. But investigation of alternative materials or a more experimental approach can be undertaken. It is important to remain open to possibilities, especially when many contemporary fibre artists are moving away from the handmade object towards practices such as digital technology, installation and hybrid approaches to material process.

Exploration and cross mingling of traditional and non-traditional materials (such as wire, paper, LED lights, recycled materials, plastic bags etc), as well as the exploration of form, allows for new discoveries and can be used as a means to: challenge and improve visual impact; produce more concept-based artwork; and create aesthetically pleasing work. Achieving critical acclaim and acceptance into exhibitions requires meeting the standards of curators and jurors, aesthetic and critical standards that are informed by a knowledge of current trends in art. Weavers with professional aspirations must cross the 'boundary' that exists between craft and fine art. Art requires intellectual concepts, imagination and thought. The heart is as essential as the hands. Tapestry can be a powerful tool to express ideas; it has great potential for concept-based imagery. Tapestry could also be promoted as a slow art form that is environmentally friendly and relatively sustainable with little impact on the environment. Tapestry can be used with other media or to create sculpture and installations. The medium of tapestry can contribute to the visual message of the artist and can make an impact in today's art world.

It is important to increase tapestry's visible presence in order to gain interest from a younger generation. There is little opportunity to study tapestry weaving at educational institutions. Organisations such as American Tapestry Alliance, British Tapestry Group, and European Tapestry Forum promote tapestry as an independent art form. Workshops such as the Australian Tapestry Workshop and the West College of Dean raise the profile of tapestry. Juried or non-juried tapestry and specialist fibre exhibitions provide venues for a wide range of participants who might not receive exposure elsewhere and encourage excellence in order to promote fibre as an art form. It is important to also increase tapestry's presence in public and commercial galleries and in mixed media exhibitions.

The services and programs that I feel would be most useful to me as a tapestry artist would be: distance learning and mentoring (especially important for those new to tapestry so their skills and ideas base expands); an online critique group that could provide feedback with design work; and study groups where a wide range of topics could be investigated. This sort

of education would be likely to come down to organisations such as the American Tapestry Alliance given that learning opportunities in the field of tapestry are becoming more limited.



Susan Weir

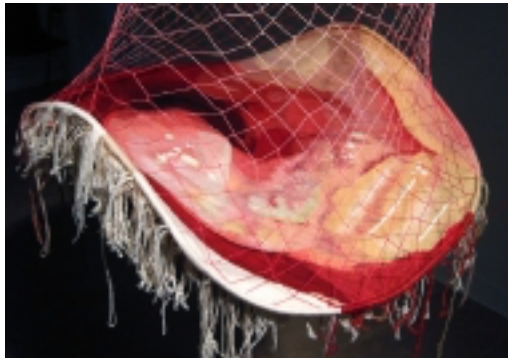
Sue Weir is originally from Dunedin (NZ). She has lived in both Australia and England and now resides in Wellington (NZ). Sue is a member of the Australian and New Zealand Tapestry Network, American Tapestry Alliance, Artists Alliance and Creative Fibre. Sue learned to knit at an early age and, always striving for a more exciting fibre or colour, she discovered spinning and weaving. For her, tapestry weaving became a natural progression and in 1989 she enrolled in what was then the Certificate of Applied Art (Tapestry) at the South West Institute of TAFE, Warrnambool, Australia. At that time Sue was unable to complete the Certificate but in 2007 she returned to tapestry and is now in her final year of the Diploma of Tapestry (South West Institute of TAFE). Sue is currently working on a series of tapestries that explore Hampden beach and its ever-changing scenes for her graduate exhibition. In the last few years Sue has exhibited work in three tapestry network group exhibitions and attended several arts-related workshops.

Melissa Wong



Melissa Wong

Circumintervention, woven tapestry with hand-dyed cotton needlepoint lace, cart, instruments, size variable, 2011

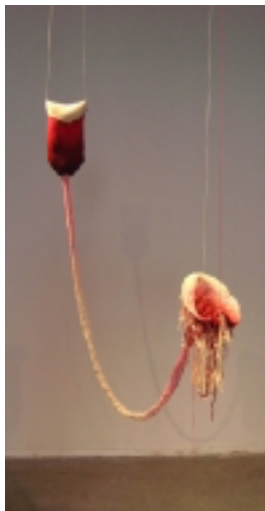


Melissa Wong

Circumintervention, detail

Skill is something I value. I grew up taking art lessons, and always sought to gain greater technical ability in working with my hands so that I could better express my ideas and thoughts through my work. Upon entering the Alberta College of Art + Design in 2007, I hoped to develop my conceptual and technical abilities congruently. This influenced my decision to major in the Fibre department, where I knew I would be leaving ACAD with new processes and techniques in my toolkit. As well, I could see the potential for textiles to effectively address the concepts I was most interested in at the time – identity, memory and loss. It was in my third year of studies that I discovered my affinity for tapestry weaving while taking an introductory course instructed by Jane Kidd.

The process is detail-oriented, and at moments challenging. Each time you sit down at the loom, there are new discoveries to learn about the process as you weave. Tapestry is engaging. You are constantly making decisions along the way, yet the repetition allows you to enter into a state of flow. These are some of the qualities that attract me to the process. While tapestry is currently the focus of my practice, I do not see myself as a specialist limited to the medium of tapestry, nor do I feel that I should be confined to working strictly in a traditional manner. For now, tapestry is the focus of my artistic practice because I find it the most engaging way to create work and appropriate for conveying the concepts in which I am interested.



Melissa Wong

Repository, woven tapestry with hand-dyed cotton needlepoint lace, each tapestry component approximately 9 x 6 x 4 inches with 44 inch long lace, 2011



Melissa Wong

Repository, detail

My current work is centered around comparisons between the fields of textiles and medicine. Both involve skilled handwork, reparation, and discipline. By weaving images of the body within a medical context, I draw focus to the intricacy and fragility of life, and the intervention of modern medicine. I cannot imagine this work to be as effective in any other medium. It is the specialized skill, intricacy, and slowness involved in tapestry making that resonates with the subject matter, and the softness of the textile materials that allows challenging imagery to become more accessible.

At times, the slowness of tapestry making is something to be savored; it allows space to reflect on the work as it unfolds, as well as an escape from the constant frenzy of city life. At other times, the slowness is the one thing I would change about tapestry if I could. As a student, I was occasionally frustrated when I looked at the progress of my colleagues who were working in other mediums. I felt I could never compete with the amount or size of work they could churn out within the allotted time we were given to complete projects. However, I see that quality is more important to me than quantity. Yes, it would be advantageous to be able to make work faster, especially when it comes to deadlines and shows, but I feel rewarded in being able to create work that is imbued with the value of time-intensive making, a value that can also be applied to the body and human life.



Melissa Wong

Melissa Wong was born and raised in Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada. She currently resides in Calgary, Alberta where she graduated in 2011 from the Alberta College of Art + Design with a BFA (Honorary) in Fibre. While the focus of her practice is currently tapestry weaving, she also enjoys needlepoint lace-making, dyeing, painting, drawing, mixed media

and installation. Her work has been featured in various solo and group exhibitions, including ACAD's *ArtaWEARness XI* and the Alberta Craft Council's *Coming Up Next*. Wong's artistic endeavors also include music and writing.