



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Checking the Pulse: Reflecting on the ‘American Tapestry Biennial 4’ in an Expanded Field

by Jane Kidd

The fourth American Tapestry Biennial includes 29 tapestries: the work of 3 jury members and 26 selected artists from 7 countries. The stated aim of the sponsor organization, the American Tapestry Alliance, was to curate a “truly international exhibition reflecting the depth and breadth of contemporary tapestry.” Ambitious exhibitions like ATB 4 are few and far between; they are anticipated with much excitement by those of us in the tapestry field. Often, we become so caught up in the pleasure of seeing a collection of tapestries that we forget the overview, we avoid being critical and we do not question what we are seeing or consider how the work relates to or reflects a broader context.

ATB 4 offers an important opportunity to consider and to question the context of the exhibition, to gauge the health and vitality of contemporary tapestry and reflect on the future of contemporary tapestry practice. Influenced by my experience and perspective as an artist, educator and participant in the exhibition, I will offer a very personal inquiry into the role and influence of ATB 4, and its position in the expanded field of contemporary textiles and art. Throughout this paper I will discuss the things that both delight and worry me about the exhibition, the work, and the practice of tapestry making. I anticipate that I will pose many more questions than I am going to answer.

When compared to other artists, textile practitioners – and particularly tapestry makers – seem hesitant to disavow the influence of historic antecedents and much less willing to see rejection of tradition as an artistic strategy. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that tapestry weavers are not innovative or that we are not looking for ways to question or reinvent tradition. This is certainly happening. Yet if we look at ATB 4 as indicative of the contemporary tapestry field, then the innovation here is offered in more subtle shifts and interpretations than sweeping changes.

Several works in this exhibition embody a carefully considered approach to conceptual and technical innovation. Sharon Marcus's *Walls of China* (figure 1), Susan Iverson's *Horizons—Dreaming Sacsahuaman* (figure 2), and Christine Laffer's *Signs of a Shift* all manipulate and push the structural identity and the physical presence of tapestry.



We know Tapestry as an identity can undergo dramatic change. The dynamics of the Fibre Revolution of the late 60's and 70's saw tapestry change its location from wall to space. Narrative became overwhelmed by process and illusion subverted by the presence of primary material. Yet, a decade or so after this dynamic experimentation tapestry makers seemed to reclaim much of the tradition of tapestry, its wall-based location, refinement of technique, narrative and personal content, composition and spatial illusion.



Susan Iverson, Horizons—Dreaming Sacsahuaman

Some 25 years later, ATB 4 seems to confirm an identity for tapestry linked to a narrative and metaphoric tradition and constructed within the parameters of a unique material identity. Marcel

Marois states this well in his catalogue essay for the exhibition “Tapestry Visions” in Minneapolis in 1994. He writes:

“Tapestry as an art form has never, in fact, broken with its past. It is perhaps, in the final analysis, an art of synthesis; thus the links which it forges between tradition, modernism and the present lead to continual renewal of its content and pictorial vocabulary in perfect continuity with its origins.”²

2 Marcel Marois, Tapestry Visions, essay, exhibition at Minneapolis College of Art and Design sponsored by Convergence '94 and the Handweavers Guild of America.

For this exhibition Tapestry has been defined as “hand-woven weft-faced fabric with discontinuous wefts.”³ Within the theory-driven focus of much of contemporary art this simple technique-based definition may seem superficial. Contemporary textile art has moved into a stage where process, technique and material are often hybridized. Cloth and fibres are accessed by a wide range of artists for what they represent conceptually, not necessarily for what can be represented through the artist’s vision or by an authentic application of process and materials. The contemporary conceptual reference often exhibits little empathy for the actual process of making, particularly processes of making that have evolved from techniques and materials integral to traditional textile disciplines.⁴

Tapestry’s pragmatic identity would seem to be somewhat of an anomaly in the field of contemporary textiles where innovation, crossover and interdisciplinary approaches are so obviously valued and seem to gain much more critical attention. Lauren Whitley’s review in FiberArts Magazine of the 10th International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz Poland would seem to reflect the predominating critical view. She writes:

Despite the inclusion of many works of artistic and technical accomplishment, the overall tenor of the show is neutral, with no particularly groundbreaking or innovative works distinguishing themselves from the rest.... In the end, the 10th International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz seems to show us more of the past, rather than the future of fiber art.⁵

Kate Callen’s review of ATB 4 in American Craft (Feb/March 2003) was a pleasant exception. Callen seemed willing to discuss Tapestry with reference to a specific identify and recognized technical and conceptual innovation within that context.⁶

Here I must pose my first questions. Are we as tapestry weavers defining ourselves in a restrictive and stifling environment? Or are we side-stepping the dilemmas of identity that might arise out of these more pluralistic approaches?

As a tapestry maker, I found the simplicity of this definition quite reassuring in that it seems to establish the physical presence of tapestry's material identity as a strong and viable link between the works in the exhibition and suggests that the physical construct of weft-faced tapestry is not just a means to an end but that the skillful and thoughtful manipulation of the tapestry structure should be an undeniable component in the success and content of the work. Acknowledging and prioritizing the physical language and tradition of tapestry would seem to suggest that the choice of tapestry as an art making process is in itself a means to evoke meaning and content.

3 American Tapestry Biennial 4 call for entry information.

4 See the following articles for further information: Twylene Moyer, "The Importance of Being Fiber," Surface Design Journal, Summer 2002; and Diana Wood Conroy, "Curating Textiles: Tradition as Transgression," International Tapestry Journal, Winter 1995.

5 Lauren Whitley, "Review: 10th International Biennial of Tapestry," FiberArts, Nov/Dec 2001, p.60.

6 Kate Callen, "Tapestry Biennial 4," American Craft, Feb/Mar 2003, p.76-79.

We might find that process references time, labor and the value of the skill of the human hand. Structure may imply relationships of interconnectedness and disconnection, permanence and transience. We might discover a 'claim to the past' through a tradition that recalls the private and public symbols of power and belief, and that alludes to ceremony, ritual and mythology.⁷ In ATB 4, I see the inherent identity of tapestry creating subtle layers of subtext that underlie personal statements as well as more transparent references that amplify political and social perspectives.

I would like to believe that maintaining a clear identity for tapestry is important and that Tapestry as a particular physical construct can exist within the broader field of contemporary textiles and contemporary art. It would seem to me that the artists exhibiting in ATB 4 chose to work within an identity of tapestry and in doing so, bring history and conceptual references to their own more personal narratives. There seems to be a commitment to speak about the present and provide a critique for the future by drawing on the past.

As we look at the work in ATB 4 we can see that the more general definition of tapestry provided allows full range for the 'depth and breadth' of individual vision. The focus of all three jurors was clearly to create an exhibition that reflected originality of vision through the parameters of the tapestry process. The inclusion of a work by each of the jury members, Marcel Marois (Canada), Christine Laffer (USA) and Peter Horn (Germany) set the tone and standard for the exhibition by exemplifying finely honed individual vision and deep understanding of the nature of the process. Bettina Matzkukn provides an overview of the juror's concerns in her "Introduction: American Tapestry Biennial 4" in the CD catalogue that documents the exhibition. Marcel Marios states that his personal criterion for selection was: "originality in the works especially in relation to tapestry traditions and especially about composition in accordance with colour and process." Christine Laffer says: "these works contain mastery of tapestry weaving: they pull the threads of thought and the threads of form together." Peter Horn states that he was delighted with the "great variety in style and pictorial appearance; from photographic realism to Pattern-like abstraction."

The narrative tradition is evident in much of the work in ATB 4; the artists gather both personal and cultural symbols to tell their stories. The overall effect is often more poetic than literal, provoking psychological interpretations and engaging the viewer in cryptic conversations. I think the joy of responding to a tapestry has a lot to do with looking intently and with the very creative activity of interpretation.

In *Falling into Light* Sondra Macleod from Canada offers haunting imagery that is veiled and mysterious, barely visible at a distance. Approaching this work is like peering through a haze to glimpse a subterranean and secretive world.

7 Diana Wood Conroy, Texts from the edge: tapestry and identity in Australia, exhibition catalogue, Jam Factory Crafts and Design Center 1995, p.5.

The use of Allegory, the symbolic representation of moral or political meaning, is part of the conceptual tradition of tapestry design, as is the use of provocative contrast. Jon Eric Riis of the USA skillfully draws on tapestry's history to give voice to contemporary conflicts. He evokes tense and disturbing contrasts, beauty/ horror, decoration / dissonance and innocence and the potential of evil. The three figures that make up the tapestry installation *Babes in Arms* (figure 3) are richly dressed. Are they prepared for a ceremony or a sacrifice, are they passive or aggressive, armed or disarming, real or illusionary? The title of Jon Eric Riis's tapestry also creates a double meaning. The allegory in this tapestry installation seems to pull us into a

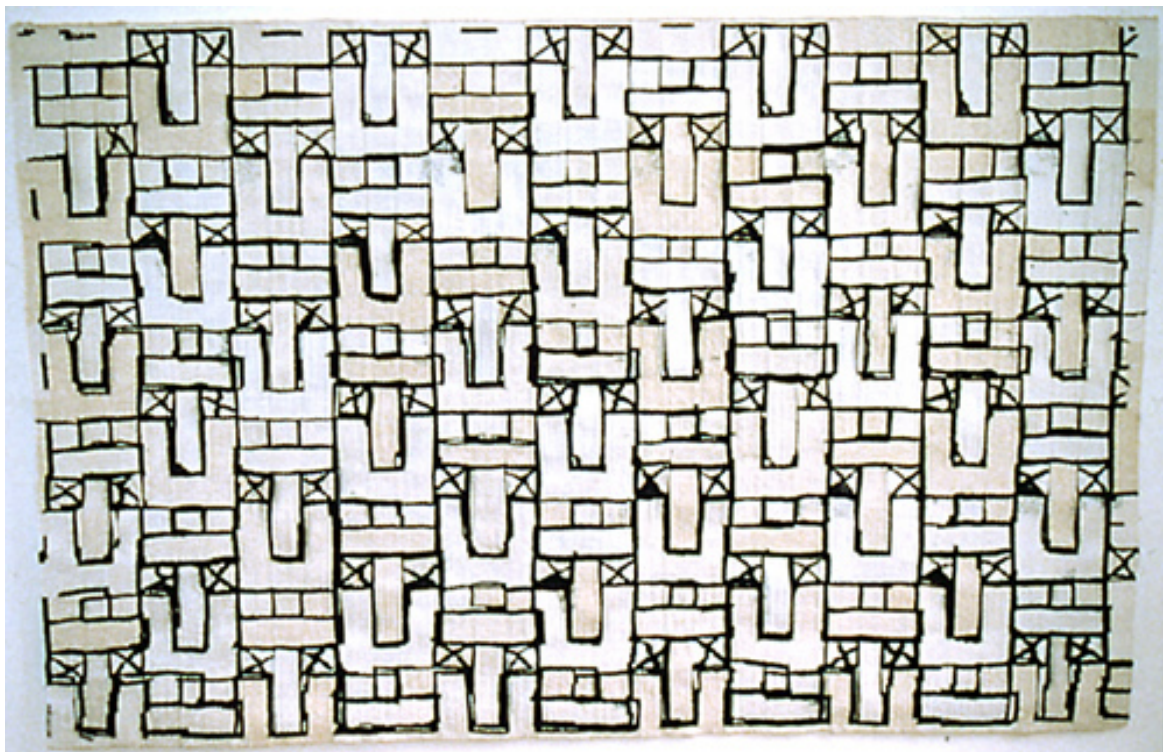
shockingly contemporary setting where all is ambiguous, and contradictory. An allegory for our time, one that reflects its multiple meanings through the perceptions and reaction of the viewer.



Jon Eric Riis, Babes in Arms

In *Stoff meines (deutschen) Lebens* (Fabric of my (German) Life) (figure 4) Thomas Cronenberg of Germany employs repetitive and decorative elements and the evidence of surface pattern that suggests fabric/cloth. The title seems to emphasize this intent by referencing a multitude of association between fabric and cloth and the body and life cycles. The very structure of the weaving process seems to reflect the content. It is structured and ordered, interconnected but also disconnected, and full of subtle shifts, openings and rifts. I am reminded of pre-Hispanic Huari period tapestry tunics where symbols and structure seem to elude to a symbolic and cryptic language. Meaning is implied but difficult to decipher like a code. I find I am compelled to travel over and through this work repeatedly, examining it closely.

In the critical anthology edited by Bill Beckley titled "Uncontrollable Beauty," the ideas discussed look at a reemergence of an aesthetic of Beauty, the relation of form, colour and content, a reevaluation of the sensual in art and the idea of nature as a reference for perfection or the sublime.⁸ Hungarian artist Ildiko Dobranyi's work *Grasses* is beautiful and lush. She draws on a simple yet dynamic principle of complementary colour contrast to create an aesthetic and sensual experience, creating energy and vibrancy that is palpable.



Thomas Cronenberg, Stoff meines (deutschen) Lebens (Fabric of my (German) Life)

Other works offer symbolic and commemorative possibilities; they seem to allude to ritual and to ceremonial involvement of textiles with the body and the spirit. Works like Olga Neuts' *Focus Southwest* (figure 5) draw from a broader historic tradition and research base than the European tapestry and acknowledge the extensive multicultural history of tapestry making.

⁸ Bill Beckley with David Shapiro eds. *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetic*. Allworth Press, New York 1998.

All jurors expressed their concern for crafting a coherent and representative exhibition. Marcel said: "We had to build this exhibition as a work of Art by itself." Peter explained that he: "[t]ried to achieve an image of the utmost variety." Christine stated: "A concise international exhibition allows each piece to contribute as an instance in a broader, complex perspective."⁹



Olga Neuts, Focus Southwest

The prospect of an exhibition that might represent an international overview of a particular field of endeavor is very tantalizing. As an artist I am always curious to see works from an international field, I am curious about interpretations of style, process, history as well as divergent viewpoints on political and social issues that might be influenced by geography or culture. ATB 4 shows us a small international field from which it is impossible to discern any unique national perspectives. As nationalities other than the US are represented in very small

numbers (Canada 4, Hungary 3, Germany 2 and single selections from Norway, Denmark, and Lithuania), it is, of course, difficult to gauge.

ATB 2, "Harmony Interpretations of Nature,"¹⁰ in 1998, was the most successful ATB exhibition to date, in pulling together a more representative international field. But much has changed since then and shipping work across borders has become complex and increasingly expensive, so many individuals may not want to bother. It is properly inevitable that the host country will dominate. The situation in Vancouver at the Richmond Art Gallery where ATB 4 was first exhibited in July 2002 could provide an interesting format to consider in the future. Thanks to the initiative and insight of Barbara Heller, ATB 4 shared the exhibition space at the Richmond art Gallery with "Karpit: Tapestry Works from Hungary." The two exhibitions inhabited distinct viewing spaces within the Gallery floor plan but worked together to provide a broader sense of what tapestry is. The partnership may have compromised the overall ease and visual flow of both exhibitions, as the curatorial installation was a little tight. I was personally thrilled to have the opportunity to experience works from ten major Hungarian tapestry artists. I think this kind of partnership may be a very interesting way to expand on the international goals of the American Tapestry Alliance. Partnerships with other tapestry groups or organizations in other parts of the world could be pursued: an affiliated organization could coordinate a national juried or curated exhibition, or ATA could coordinate a single gallery or dual venues to house the exhibitions. The broader scope of the joint exhibitions may also open some additional funding sources from joint Government funding agencies.

9 *Bettina Matzkukn, Introduction: American Tapestry Biennial 4, exhibition CD.*
10 *American Tapestry Biennial 2, Harmony: Interpretations of Nature in Contemporary Tapestry, exhibition catalogue, Fernbank Museum of Natural History, Atlanta, Georgia.*

If we consider this exhibition as a means to check the pulse of contemporary tapestry, a gauge to the health and vitality of the practice, I am fairly confident that we would declare good health. We might disagree about the work that is the most vital and exciting, influenced by our own biases and interests, but as a general impression I think we would see the identity of tapestry as strong, emanating a healthy glow. But is it really so? Are we looking at tapestry with the caring and devoted eyes of a supportive family? Has tapestry become too discreet a process? And are we being critical, poking and probing to insure good health in the future? It is here that I must let go of my 25-year commitment to tapestry as a viable process and expressive media – I need to think past my own pleasure in being included in this exhibition and joy at having my work acknowledged by this particular jury.

As an educator, I am forced to look at textile and tapestry practice from the outside in, from the point of view of a student and the broader art community. I must consider the pragmatic and pedagogical demands of an educational institution. I need to ask myself some serious questions. Is the process of tapestry making healthy? Is it a viable and appealing means of expression for a younger generation of artists interested in textile approaches? Does tapestry have a presence in the developing critical language of craft and textile theory? Will there be an ATB 10? What will it look like? Will the presence of an identity unique to tapestry be deconstructed and subsumed? Will that identity be threatened by non-traditional materials, by mixed media constructions and digital technologies or perhaps by diminished evidence of traditional skill and process? In contemporary art, textile identity, along with conceptual and visual evidence of labour and careful construction, is often conveyed outside of traditional or even recognizable processes. Within the Tapestry milieu we might recognize and appreciate differences, but how apparent is this in a broader context? And how will it influence the appreciation and value of tapestry in the future?

We might concur that Tapestry is currently a vital art form. The works in this exhibition attest to this fact. The artists involved in ATB 4 have invested considerable time into this discipline; they offer work that is mature and considered, skillful and insightful. It builds on tradition but embraces contemporary concerns and viewpoints. I am confident about the present but what about the future? How do we ensure that tapestry making will continue and those new makers will participate fully in these traditions and histories and propel them into the future?

I believe the continued health of tapestry and the assurance that there will be an ATB 10 depends on drawing intelligent, insightful and knowledgeable young people to the field. After my participation in Convergence in Vancouver last summer, I was concerned by the lack of younger people involved in the conference, and articles and letters to the editor in FiberArts and other magazines showed that others concurred with this observation. There may be a number of reasons for this: Convergence is an expensive conference and I know a number of my students complained that they just could not afford to go. But one also has to look at the possibility that interest may be waning.

I have to look to my own institution to put this in some perspective. I have taught in the Textile/Fibre program at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, Alberta for 20 years. During this time I have observed many changes in the perceptions of textile practice by students as well as colleagues. In the last three years the enrollment in the fibre program has more than

doubled from levels of 10 years ago, but enrollment in the tapestry course we offer once a year has decreased dramatically. The students that are entering our program tend to be interested in the more interdisciplinary approach to textiles.

They are interested in experimenting with traditional textile materials and processes to a point but they are painfully aware of the constraints of time and the demand on their time, both academic and personal. They are searching for ways to validate their practice in relation to contemporary theory and issues that are generated in studio, liberal studies classes and in contemporary art writing. They are also moving through educational systems with curricula that promote a more interdisciplinary and conceptual approach, often at the expense of processes that demand more time for technical training and hand skills.

As an artist and educator, I am often excited by the work that our students are producing. It is expressive, witty, and innovative. It alludes to contemporary theory in meaningful ways and presents interesting critiques of contemporary culture. But as a tapestry maker I am also saddened by the fact that many students, though interested in the results of the process, feel unable to work within the demands of the tapestry medium.

My frustration is compounded as I look for contemporary theory and writing about tapestry that discusses tapestry in ways that acknowledge a specific history, links between process and content; time and ritualized activity and presents tradition not as something to be avoided but as a platform to move from and as a means to provoke reflection and critique.

The current groundswell of theory and language linking contemporary textiles to pre-linguistic semiotics, the feminine, the corporal, and even the haptic is only partially useful to a discourse about contemporary tapestry. Tapestry remains something of an anomaly. Its social and narrative history and the disciplined language of process bring to bear other considerations. These must be articulated as a potential means to affirm, confound or conflate the personal, political and provocative images that inhabit contemporary tapestry weaving.

We may be convinced that it is important and meaningful to retain a framework of skill, process, narrative and history as a baseline for identity. However, I feel we are doing a poor job at bringing knowledge and appreciation of this to a broader audience of museum administrators, gallery curators, critics and most importantly the next generation of artists. A lack of substantive writing about tapestry is partly to blame. There are good reference sources, my well-thumbed

copy of the catalogue for the exhibition “The Narrative Voice”¹¹ is a good example. This small catalogue provides four excellent essays written by Alice Zrebiec, Michael Thomas, Archie Brennan and Janis Jefferies, as well as artist statements from the five tapestry artists. It contained more words than illustrations and provides insight into what tapestry is, through discussion of the power and dynamics of a specific history, process and individual vision. Individual artists like Marcel Marois, Sharon Marcus, Ann Newdigate, Diana Wood Conroy and others have contributed to the more general writing on tapestry.

I don't feel that writing about tapestry should always fall on the shoulders of the makers. It is increasingly important to encourage curators, historians, critics and other academics to take up this cause, particularly if we want to reach a broader audience. I think ATB 4 may have missed an important opportunity to contribute to the understanding of tapestry in an expanded field by not including a more extensive essay as part of the documentation for the exhibition. I hope this might be a consideration in the future. Contemporary art and art education, in response to contemporary paradigms, is often driven by innovation and the search for the new. In many ways this has served the field of textiles very well, opening up new possibilities, material extensions and clearer links between fine art and fine craft. The danger lies in going too far, of transgressing to the point of losing sight of who we are and what we value. Conceptual ideas can become hollow and self-conscious without reference to history, tradition and personal and social realities.

Exhibitions like ATB 4 are positioned very well to provide a balance to the detached and over-intellectualized stance of much of contemporary art. These tapestries represent an authenticity of practice that emulates the engagement of head, hand and material.¹² There are works in ATB 4 that make me catch my breath, they are beautiful, provocative and deeply satisfying but I think we are being naive if we think it is enough to just display works of this caliber. If we want to insure that tapestry survives and contributes to the broader art dialogue from a position of strength not subordination, and if we want students to respect and engage in tapestry making, then we must work to provide substantive writing and a clear and articulate voice that will uphold the characteristics and unique identity of tapestry, and that will recognize the intent of tapestry artists to reflect, confound and critique the changing contemporary world.

¹¹ Dr. Alice Zrebiec, et al., *Tapestry the Narrative Voice exhibition catalogue* 1989.

¹² Twylene Moyer, “The Importance of Being Fiber,” *Surface Design Journal*, Summer 2002, p8.