



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

The Soul, Eye, Hand Connection

Christine Thomson

Writing for an audience of tapestry artists as a fledgling tapestry weaver is a bit of a daunting task. The essays that have predated this, by much more erudite writers and more accomplished practitioners of the art form, squelch me more than a little bit. I hope that my enthusiasm for the form allows me some entrée into a world of artists that I admire. My foray into art school came for me as a mature student, during a career that already had some high accomplishments in the world of costume design for film and television. Designing for film may seem like a glam job for some, and yes, it does have its high moments and perks. Being hardwired for quick thinking, problem solving, creating “something out of nothing,” working long hours in different locations combined with an “artistic personality” had ruined me forever working a regular office job. But the constant stance of being a “gun for hire” was wearing me down. I was asked to read scripts and design costume concepts, but for the most part, (especially for modern shows and regardless of script demands), what the producer and the actor’s ego wanted won out. “I don’t care if my character is a homeless bag lady, I have to wear Fendi and only shades of mauve!” You get the picture. I needed a break, and one of the unfinished issues in my life was going back to art school and completing my BFA with a major in fibre.

I had enrolled briefly at the Alberta College of Art and Design before and it had been the most rewarding couple of semesters of my life. This place suited me: the critical creative thinking; the engaged students; and most importantly, the incredibly energetic and talented faculty. This faculty included Jane Kidd, the brilliant and accomplished tapestry artist. I couldn’t wait to take her class. I lurked about the tapestry studios, fairly salivating at what would soon be in my hands to explore. But as usual, fate would have other plans for me.



Christine Thomson, "BSE" (Triptych "MRI:BSE:vCJD"), 11" X 20", 2013. Wool and bovine hair weft, cotton weft.

It was to be another eleven years of single mom-hood before I could earn enough to pay my way, and for my son to be old enough, to throw myself back into the Alberta College of Art and Design in 2012. Finally, I was able to sit at that gorgeous wooden loom and explore the world that tapestry opened up. It was everything and more that I had thought it might be. What seduction in those threads and blending of colour! The lure of the historical nature of the art, combined with the craft of the manipulation of the loom and the structure of the cloth beguiled me. The accomplishment of weaving narrative into cloth was meaning and content in one. To make an entire image out of threads of wool and silk, and to weave a homage to the subject matter that enthralled me was liberating. The process of a time-based art form made sense to me, for how else could you build an object of beauty that was fully considered and of a tactility that one had to touch? Of course, I also experienced the despair when one questions the process of the work, with the resulting urge to throw the whole loom out the window, and perhaps yourself out after it. The art and discipline of tapestry for me embodies a spectrum of emotions that I am now reconciled to accepting.



Christine Thomson, "In Memoria: Auschwitz," 14" x 18" (framed) 2012. Wool weft, cotton warp

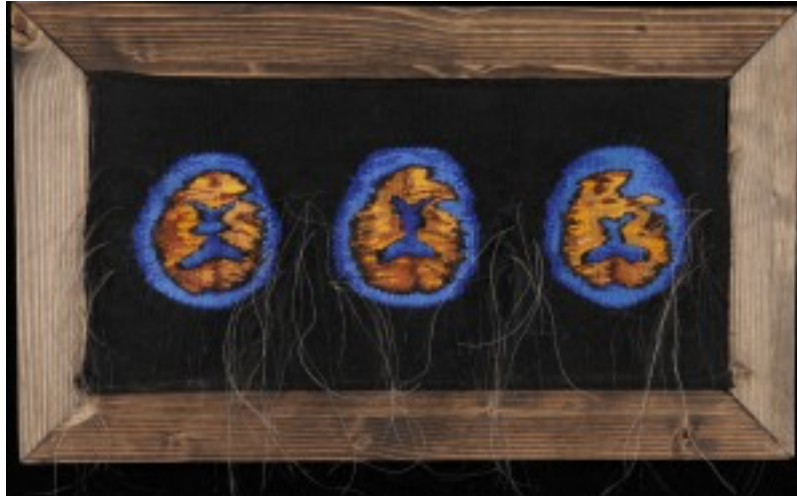
It was interesting returning to school after that eleven-year hiatus. The art climate of 2001 had evolved while I was working and supporting my child, and I had not really moved on with it. I was unprepared for some of the blank looks and hostility to the art form of tapestry that I encountered during art "crits". The instant was now hip (guess I should have seen that coming). Immediate gratification, instant art, ephemera was in, concept was everything and the medium was whatever was at hand. The weaving studios, and in particular tapestry, was not always a place to hang out and talk "conceptual art." We tapestry students had work to do, and not a lot of time to spare to sit around and talk about it. I discovered that tapestry is not for the faint of heart, nor for immediate gratification. It demands discipline, skill, a strong concept, an eye for design, and a dedication for seeing the process through to succeed.



Christine Thomson, Detail "vCJD" (Triptych "MRI:BSE:vCJD"), 6" X 9", 2013. Wool, cotton, bovine hair.

I always felt that if I was going to commit the time to weave an image, it better be an image that I was committed to seeing for the next month or so, or more. During crits, or sitting at the loom in that higher flow zone that one can be transported to during creating, I was often asked "Why tapestry?" "Why take the time?" In retrospect, those questions and prodding were of benefit to my practice. They helped me shape the reality of the importance of tapestry to my life. As well, through the incredible support and mentorship of the current tapestry instructor at ACAD, Mackenzie Kelly Frère, (Jane Kidd had retired the year before I returned), I was able to contextualize and verbalize the importance of tapestry within a global framework of art.

As my work is based on socio-political issues, I see my work as a documentation and visual translation of man's inhumanity to man. I am interested in imagery of loss and ruin, usually because of anthropogenic manipulation through war, subjugation, or genetic and food engineering. Whether it is an indictment of the food we eat, the poignant detritus left over from a bombing, or a political statement about censorship, tapestry has been the medium of choice for my personal remonstrance of historical events. The chiasmic play of the time it takes to weave an image juxtaposed with the often lightning-fast occurrence of disaster was important to me. The first image that I wove in the series "In Memoria," of a woman's red sandal lying alone in Auschwitz, had me mesmerized. As I built the image, I thought of her, of her last minutes, of man's insane behaviour and misguided ideologies, and I knew that in my very small way I was paying homage and recognition to her life.



Christine Thomson, "vCJD" (Triptych "MRI:BSE:vCJD"), 11" X 20", 2013. Wool and bovine hair weft, cotton weft.

So, I too now know the pure joy and pure despair of being at the loom, slowly creating the exact shading to complete an image, the manipulation of fibres and colours to make the most delicious iris flower gleam, or the piquant shading to embrace the sadness of a discarded child's shoe in a window in a radioactive town. The challenges that I set myself are ongoing, and I strive to add my vocabulary to a history that is rich in narrative. Having graduated from ACAD this year, I am somewhat freed from the strictures of the impending "crit." But the "crits" that I put myself through are as arduous and as exacting as any from my peers. I currently balance tapestry with printmaking, and also link the two disciplines.



Christine Thomson, "The Not So Distant Present 1," 12" x 14" (combined exhibition width of 48"), 2014. Ink on mulberry paper.

My graduation piece for school was a series of prints that I had carved and printed about local mountains that had politically charged names, and then I remediated those prints into Jacquard weavings. This process resulted in a mixed media installation that visually played off the different disciplines. As tapestry is my love and passion, enlarging and enriching my

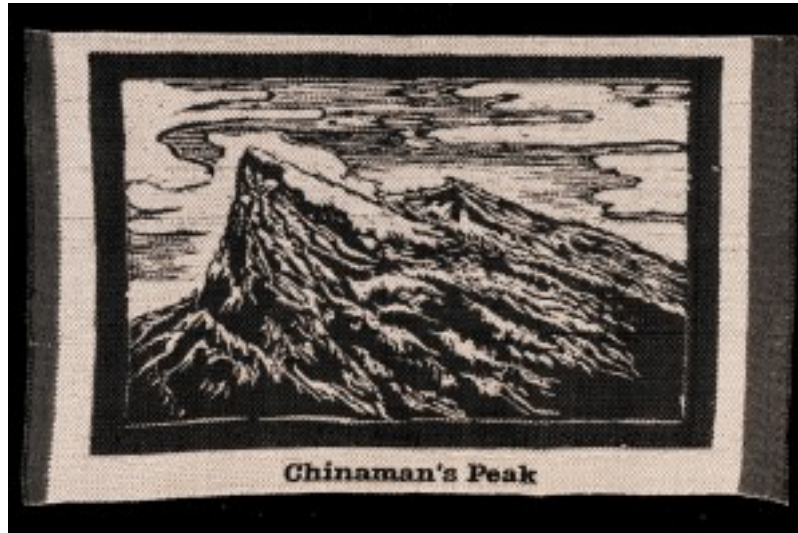
practice with printmaking and drawing only aids and sustains the motivation for weaving. As an artist, all the tools that I have in my theoretical tool belt come into use. When I need some time away from my big wooden tower I play with inks and carving tools, and this exploration in turn informs and incorporates new ideas for the loom.



Christine Thomson, "John Ware Ridge" (Triptych "The Not So Distant Present II" Series). 19" x 36," 2014. Cotton warp, bamboo weft.



Christine Thomson, "Squaw's Tit Mountain" (Triptych "The Not So Distant Present II" Series). 19" x 36," 2014. Cotton warp, bamboo weft.



Christine Thomson, "Ha Ling Peak" (Triptych "The Not So Distant Present II" Series). 19" x 36," 2014. Cotton warp, bamboo weft.

Artist Byline:

Christine graduated in 2014 with distinction from Alberta College of Art and Design's BFA Fibre program, and was the recipient of the ACAD Board of Governor's Award for Fibre. Her practice is concerned with sociopolitical and environmental issues. She is a professional costume designer for film and television, and when not at her loom, spends as much time as she can exploring Alberta's wilderness with her beautiful bay mare.