



American Tapestry Alliance Educational Articles

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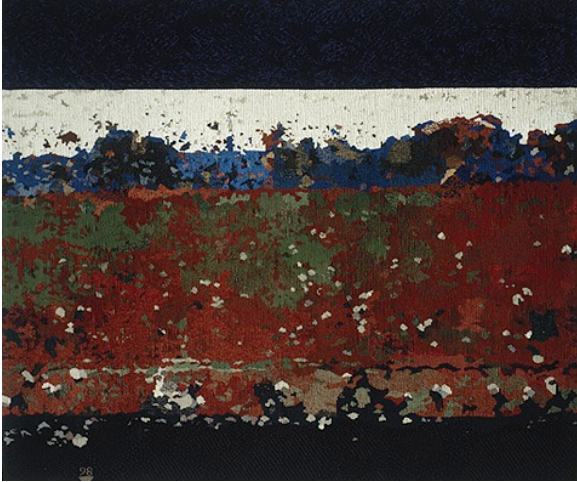
"Inspiration & Creativity"

Unmarked Lives: the weaving of meaning

In choosing the medium of tapestry weaving, initially as a student, I believe I chose a medium that would metaphorically be able to represent who I am. My diverse ethnic heritage has always been important to me. I am a Canadian with antecedents who were Scottish, Japanese and Lithuanian- and Ukrainian-born Jewish. Through the medium of weaving, I would be able to use the metaphor of interlacing to symbolically tell about who I am and eventually, although I did not know it at the time, to tell the stories of the unmarked lives of my ancestors. Textiles are also considered feminine, so they are a way of expressing that aspect of my identity. However, I do not inevitably use tapestry weaving as my medium. I am not tied inexorably to it. For example, in my exhibition, *Unmarked Lives*¹, most of the pieces on the Japanese quadrant of my ethnicity were made in cloth or paper, using references to the kimono and Japanese paper. I use weaving when its metaphorical and expressive potential is the best solution.

Tapestry weaving is a type of cloth as well as a work of art and, as cloth, it is linked to clothing. Clothing conceals but it also has the capacity to reveal. In a like manner, tapestry conceals the warp in order to reveal its imagery in the weft. Historically, the marginal, and even the people who lead ordinary lives, are invisible, i.e. concealed. The structure of tapestry, with its implications of both concealment and revelation becomes a metaphor for this concealment (and also tapestry's own gendered and historically low-status existence) while its image-making capacity becomes a format for revealing my ancestors' stories.

Often considered lower in the art historical hierarchy than painting, for me, tapestry weaving has many inherent advantages over other media, including the qualities of its materials and the way in which it is constructed. Its structure creates an object through an ordered meshing of diverse materials. Because of this, I find it appropriate to use tapestry to make reference to seeming opposites: the abstract and the figurative, the personal and global, absence and presence, memory and actuality. I conceive of these combinations as hybrids rather than antitheticals, as blends in which none of the diversity of the constituent parts is obliterated.



Cromarty
52"x60"

My tapestry entitled *Cromarty* is based on the worn and overpainted hull of a boat that I saw in the village of Cromarty in northeast Scotland. Through research, I discovered some interesting and startling facts. My Scottish great-great-grandfather was a linen weaver in Cromarty. Ships brought raw flax from the Baltic States to Scotland in the 19th century. My Jewish antecedents in Lithuania grew flax on their farm. I like to think that a ship might have made a connection between these two branches of the family (unconnected at the time) through weaving. One of the main materials used in *Cromarty* is linen. The deliberate choice of linen thread and of the woven medium stresses linkages to my family history and is thus, integral to the narrative of this piece. The idea of connections and the more literal thread of my family history are reiterated by the medium and the materials.

The abstract and the figurative are often united in my tapestries. Imagery appears to be abstract but is often based on photographs of actual surfaces. This emphasizes the possibilities for fusion that are inherent in the medium and also in the mesh of the stories I tell. *Steps*, for example, is one of several pieces which has, as its basis, figurative imagery taken from photographs, in this case of painted and worn steps in Edinburgh. This tapestry tells the story of my great-great-grandmother, who died in the poorhouse. The steps, leading down to a damp basement, represent the sort of home in which she might have lived. To complete the narrative, her name and dates (Jane Wallace, 1793-1866) are included in the image as though she were an important historical figure. These two stories of ordinary people are typical of my forebears and of countless others around the world.



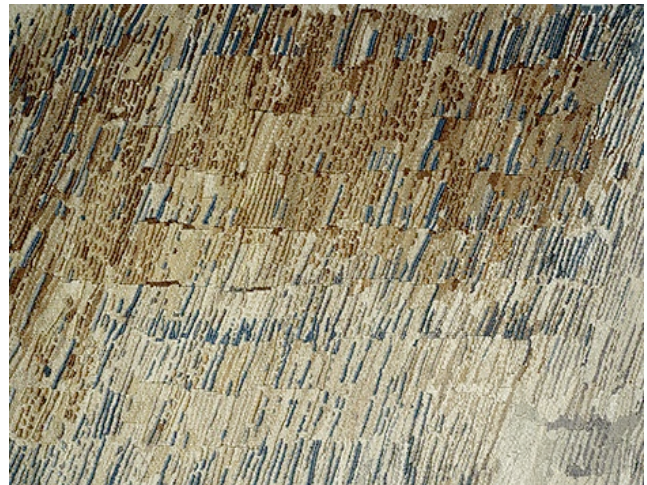
Steps
42"x88"

Weaving has the ability to make connections between apparent opposites, such as the personal and global, which are, in reality, extensions of each other. In weaving, warp and weft move at right angles to each other, but they are not truly opposites. Through the imagination of the weaver, they work together to create meaning, symbolism, imagery and texture. Materials are blended and yet remain distinct. The resulting tapestry becomes more than the sum of its parts. This hybridity also relates to my personal identity as a mixed-race person, with all of the narratives coming together in my blood and my memory, and then in the weaving.

In tapestry weaving, as in any art form, medium and imagery are inseparable. My imagery often appears painterly. This type of tapestry is sometimes criticized for imitating painting. However, I am striving for a non-illusionistic surface, one without perspective, one in which the textural qualities of the materials become more prominent. The painting I ‘imitate’ is accidental marks that arise from wear, erosion or abrasion. I do not set out to reproduce with exactitude. While the tapestries may appear painterly from the slide, inspection in the ‘flesh’ will show a range of textures unavailable to the practitioner in paint, with its visual uniformity. As critic Peter Dormer has said, ‘...the nature of weaving encourages a natural incorporation of diverse materials. Indeed the term “weaving” and the activity it represents are often used as a metaphor for the combining of disparate materials or ideas’.²

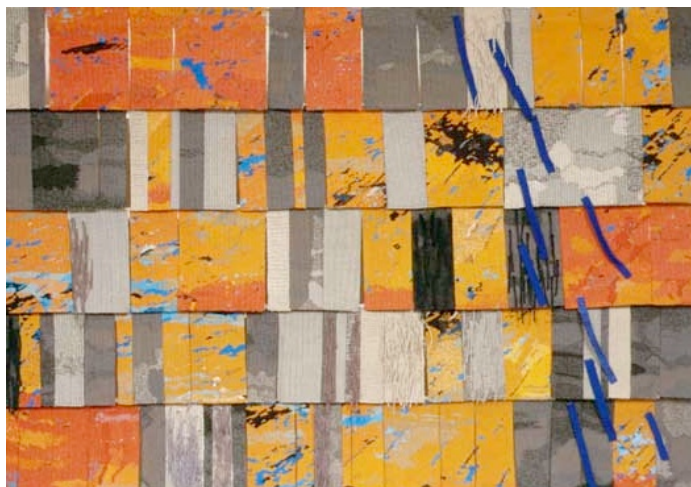
Weaving also metaphorically orders and signifies the interrelationship between itself as a medium and the imagery it creates. I make explicit reference to this link in the miniature tapestry, *Mesh*, a work that joins the strands of the lives of many families. This piece layers weaving upon weaving, some ordered and some apparently haphazard. The genealogy of any given family is ordered in its schema but also has random elements, such as illegitimacy or bigamy. Weaving must be orderly, since it is based on a grid and will not hold together unless certain techniques are followed. In my work I consider carefully the relationship between the medium and the imagery. In this tapestry, weaving’s grid structure with its verticals and horizontals is reiterated, and then modified in order to physically illustrate the content of the tapestry.

My stories come from family members, from genealogical research and from the study of local history. For example, in *The Journeyman Stonemason His Mark*, I remember my great-great-grandfather, a Scottish stonemason. The only physical marks he would have left after his death are anonymous ones, the functional, repetitive marks of the humble mason. I based this tapestry on a photograph of a block of stone that could have been made about the time that he was working in the mid 19th century. His designation as journeyman meant that he never achieved the status of master craftsman, but I emphasize through the title the fact that he also had to *journey* to Oban, Stornoway and Glasgow to find work.



The Journeyman Stonemason His Mark
43"x57"

I use this commonplace story to create a commemoration of an ordinary person. The tapestry, a handmade object created through repetitive actions, stands in for the block of stone, which in turn symbolizes my ancestor's life's work. The texture created through the use of both the materials and medium would not have been possible in any other form. For example, knotting creates *bas-relief* texture and mixtures of thin silk and coarse cotton suggest the delicacy of the mason's marks and the strength of the stone. The surface of the textile and the metaphoric potential inherent in weaving are employed to create meaning and memory.



Chaya's Dream (Nightmare)
48"x70"

To suggest memory and its apparent opposite, actuality, I sometimes use an existing painted surface to consider what is long past. The layers of paint connote delving into the past and the uncovering of, perhaps, forgotten stories. In *Chaya's Dream (Nightmare)*, I have broken up the imagery and the weaving from another tapestry, *Scratching the Surface*, and rearranged it, using small blocks of weaving. The tapestry relates the story of my great-grandmother, who persuaded her reluctant husband to leave Lithuania. I imagine her looking up to the shingled roof of her house and dreaming of a new life, a life that would save her descendants from a nightmare. The tapestry's form suggests shingles, their color interspersed with those of

the metaphorical boat that would take my ancestors to Canada. The deep blue stripes represent a disintegrating prayer shawl. This story comes to me from my father, so I rely on his memory and that of my great-grandmother to tell me about people and events which happened before he and I were born. I preserve these memories in my tapestry, whose imagery refers to both the memories and to existing surfaces.

The tapestry medium is crucial to the statements I make in these works of art. Both its metaphorical significance and its physical properties create the structure of the narrative and of meaning.

Joanne Soroka

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¹ Unmarked Lives toured 2000-2003 to the Multicultural Art Gallery, Pier 21, Halifax, Nova Scotia; Canadian Guild of Crafts Quebec, Montreal; Cornwall Regional Art Gallery, Cornwall, Ontario; New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, Summit, New Jersey; Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto; Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland; St Fergus Gallery, Wick, Scotland; Aberdeen Art Gallery, Scotland; An Lanntair, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Scotland; and the Museum of Edinburgh.

² Dormer, Peter, "Textiles and Technology", in Dormer, Peter, Ed, *The Culture of Craft*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997), p 169.