



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Students' Reflections on Tapestry

The traditions of tapestry weaving, combined with various other art practices, new technologies and the use of conceptual ideas, are influencing emerging tapestry artists. Here, in their own words, are three student tapestry weavers discussing their art.

Catherine Gray

I discovered weaving at the beginning of my second year at university. I was inspired by the artist Sheila Hicks and I was fascinated by the range of textures and effects that could be created with the medium. At an early age I was taught to knit and sew both by hand and on the machine and I enjoyed the notion of creating something from nothing, improving my skills and learning new techniques. Before university I was always interested in textiles and using my creative skills both during my studies and in my free time. Tapestry was something I had never tried before and I was inspired by the challenge to learn a new technique, as well as research the history and connotations of the method, and allow this to influence my work.



Allotted Time 4, 40 x 40cm Cotton warp, wool weft 2016

My work experience placement at West Dean Tapestry studio in West Sussex during my second year proved to be hugely beneficial to the development of my practice. During my time there I was able to learn different techniques and methods that are used on commissions in the

studio as well as create and get advice on my own work. I continued my placement throughout the summer, assisting at Art in Action in Oxford and developing my work in preparation for my final year.

I was initially drawn to the method of tapestry because of the versatile and unique nature of the medium. Within a tapestry the image and the object are one entity, they are created as a whole and cannot be separated. This means that the end result can be vastly different depending on what methods and materials are employed by the maker. There is also something pleasing and inviting about their surface texture and touch is almost as important as sight in order to appreciate them fully.

I use tapestry weaving to portray ideas of passing time and this ties in beautifully with the slow method of creation. The time consuming nature of the process has at times frustrated me, especially during university when I was unable to create as much explorative or developmental work as other students using different methods. Despite this I believe quality is more important than quantity and the slow gradual creation of my work allowed me to reflect and develop my ideas throughout the making of only a few pieces.



Allotted Time 1-10, 2016 40 x 40cm each 2016

The process of weaving is very important to me and this is what I would like to portray to the viewer through my work. I think it is important to recognise the abilities and limitations of the medium and allow this to influence the work. I am fascinated by the rhythmic, methodical process of weaving and how this can represent gradual change or movement from one state to another, I also like to accentuate the structure of the method with vertical warps and horizontal wefts as this is inherent to the medium and makes it unlike any other. Evidence of the handmade is also vital to my work and the concentration of labour and energy is visible within each piece. I use drawing, painting and photography to plan and develop my ideas before making a tapestry and this creates an interesting contrast between the instantaneous nature of digital technology

and the slow, laborious nature of the method. Anne Jackson has questioned whether tapestry is even relevant in today's fast paced society, 'which seems to privilege the instant and seemingly effortless'. However, these are the things that make it unique. Although technology has evolved around us, 'humans are much the same as they have always been, our hearts still beat at the same pace' and artwork that reminds us of this should be valued.



Allotted Time 8, 9 and 10, 40 x 40cm Cotton warp, wool weft 2016

The history of tapestry has always been a source of inspiration for my work and research into it allowed me to develop my ideas further. For centuries tapestries were used to depict scenes of historic moments, and tell stories of momentous battles or biblical events before the written word was widely understood. This is similar to how I am using the process as a way of documenting change and time, aiming to celebrate the beauty of our landscape through its repetitive and dependable timescale.

Throughout my studies I struggled with the apparent gap between art and craft and as a textile artist I felt a certain pressure to justify my practice as I was often challenged by comments about my work being 'just craft'. I think this is a relatively old fashioned way of thinking and believe that if something is made with the intention of being art and seeks to represent ideas bigger than the object itself then that is the way it should be received. My personal definition of fine art is something that makes the viewer feel something, it can communicate ideas or emotions from the artist to the audience and a piece of textiles or tapestry can do this in just the same way as a painting or a sculpture. I have also discovered that craftsmanship is somewhat undervalued in contemporary fine art practice with skill coming second place to ideas and concepts. However, if artists do not keep these skills alive then who will? I myself enjoy and appreciate a work of art much more when the level of skill is visible. When it is clear that the artist cares enough to spend time and effort on their work it carries so much more weight and demands attention and contemplation from the viewer.



Allotted Time 1-10, 2016 40 x 40cm each 2016

Throughout my time at university, I experimented with lots of different materials from natural found objects such as leaves and twigs to manmade carrier bags. With my subject matter being landscape I was interested in including objects that I found in these environments in the actual weaving. This is another element that makes tapestry unique in that once the warps are set up many different things can be used as the weft. I also experimented with natural dyeing techniques using onion skins, nettles, paprika and red cabbage to dye my yarn. Again, this connected the pieces much more closely with their subject matter of landscape and also linked my work back to historic tapestries as this is how they would have coloured their yarn.

In my opinion tapestry is sometimes overlooked and undervalued, maybe because it has been made in the same way for centuries with little development or influence from the modern world, maybe because it is seen as 'women's work' and often associated with the older generation and works of craft rather than art. Or maybe it is simply the time consuming, laborious nature meaning commitment and perseverance is needed to create something that is worth the wait. Despite this I strongly believe it has a great deal of potential and has a place and a future today,



it has also undoubtedly stood the test of time and practicing tapestry artists are still coming up with new and innovative ways to create and display this versatile medium.

Catherine Gray

Biography

I studied Fine Art at The University of Chichester. After graduating this year, I am now working for a flooring company making rugs. I am continuing to develop my artistic practice in my free time and am looking to pursue a career in interior design.

Mariana Pinar

My first encounter with tapestry, or weaving in a broader sense, is one of my first memories. My mom started working at a very young age and spent her little free time in a local art school learning how to draw, paint and weave. At the time I was born, she had a small studio with a vertical loom and several baskets full of yarn. Years later, I remember playing with the skeins and bobbins and trying to “help” her. We moved and she could no longer have a space for weaving, so she eventually stopped weaving. Nowadays, she is more devoted to photography and print media.

Some years ago, I had the chance of spending a year abroad in Germany. I studied for two semesters in the Bauhaus University in Weimar (Germany) where I got to know the work of Gunta Stolz and other great weavers. Back in Spain, I happened to attend the same school that my mom did for a few months. There I tried different skills, such as spinning, dyeing, and weaving. But it was not until last year, when I moved to America to pursue graduate studies in Fiber Art at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, that tapestry weaving became part of my artistic practice.



“Emotional Emergency Blanket” Cotton, shredded survival blanket and vinyl flagging tape. 52,5” x 45,5” 2016

I am especially interested in the similarities between the composition of texts and the construction of textiles. Handweaving becomes a metaphor for writing, recalling your memories, thanks to the slow-paced nature of its process, and narrate a story that results as long as your warp allows.



"Likes Dogs" (Found text project) Cotton, linen and acrylic yarn 20" x 12" 2016

Tapestry weaving allows me to make those texts tangible. A neat change of color separates background from writing, and using a different kind of yarn, maybe thicker or softer, allows the eye to appreciate the different tactile qualities of the work. Yarn works as ink and as paper, and the meaning of the text becomes more complex when loaded with the materiality of fiber.

My process starts with the source of text. Sometimes I write my own texts inspired by personal experiences. These works are usually focused on the content of the writing or the strategies I have followed to create it. On other occasions, I have used other people's texts as an inspiration, calling attention to the peculiarities of different personal handwriting styles and the appearance of the paper used each time. Right now, I feel very inspired by "post-it" notes, ruled paper, highlighting markers, and mindless scribbles.

The presence of text in fiber artworks is one of my main topics of research. Both in typeset style or handwriting, letters are very common in embroidery pieces, as in 18th and 19th-century schoolgirl samples, historic cloths such as the Bayeux Tapestry, or in the work of numerous contemporary artists, for example, Tania Candiani and Louise Bourgeois. In weaving, text can be found in antique American coverlets using double cloth techniques, but writing is less frequent in tapestry weaving, probably due to the complexity of its construction. That intricacy is probably one of the reasons I love weaving text. It takes a lot of preparation to choose the

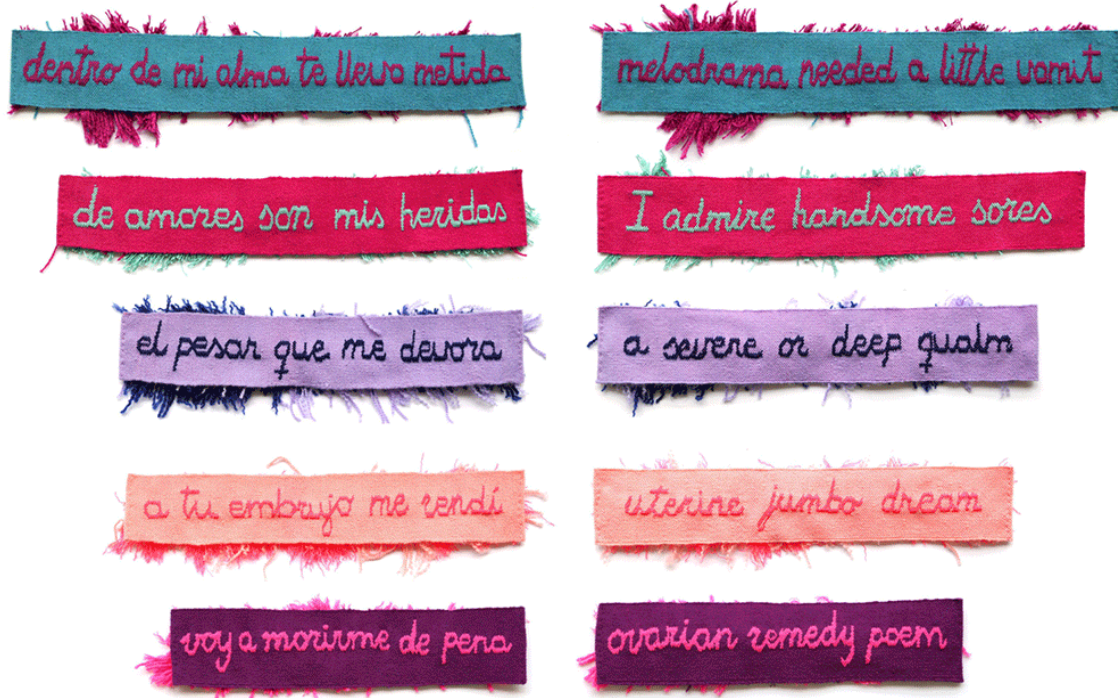
right yarn and warp density to make your letters readable, to create smooth curves and to manifest the different thickness that a brush or marker can make.



"Sick and tired" Acrylic yarn, neon rope and cotton 7.5" x 7.5" each 2016

Cranbrook is a school where learning is self-directed. Our artists in residence, who are our tutors or advisors, guide us when difficulties and doubts arise and encourage us to experiment and challenge ourselves. I could say that my creative process is very influenced by my learning process. Every mistake is a chance to find a different solution and sometimes unravelling and starting again allows me to get a new perspective on my work.

My weaving practice is not purely tapestry since I combine different techniques depending on my needs in each piece. In some of my works, I make use of loose weft threads, which hang in the back making the piece bulkier and separating it from the wall. In others, I use several colors in the warp to imitate the lines of ruled paper. I also have a tendency to use unorthodox materials, such as plastic or stretchy fabric strips that I cut myself with scissors, which gives each tapestry a more contemporary aesthetic. While I really admire how other tapestry artists have such a remarkable chromatic sense and can blend threads to create very realistic shades, I am more interested in flat colors and using different qualities of yarn to create visual textures.



"Translingual Anagrams" Cotton, wool, neon rope and acrylic yarn. Variable dimensions: 28" (max) & 20" (min) x 4,5" 2016

Making traveling part of my research helped me realize how important it is to have a first-hand look at the artwork and not see it only through photographs in books. Last summer I had the chance of traveling to Japan thanks to an award from my current school. Among other places, I visited the Kawashima Textile Factory where they still create tapestries using traditional techniques. They have a very wide loom upon which several people work together weaving cloth as long as 20 yards. These pieces are used as "doncho," drop curtains for theaters, in different cities around Japan and even in other places outside the country. On smaller looms, they create tsuzure ori weavings, very delicate and detailed tapestries using gold and many colored silk threads. These valuable fabrics are later used in religious temples and ceremonies. Due to my experience and formation, I consider myself more an artist than a craftsperson. The concept, the process, and the result, derived as well from the choice of material and technique, are equally important for me. I respect tapestry weaving as a craft but since I have practiced it for only one year, I know that I have much to learn and I am looking forward to it.

Biography



Mariana Pinar was born in Granada, Spain, and she holds a BA in Fine Arts and an MA in Art Theory from the University of the same city. Besides working in her artistic practice, she is also a researcher and has been invited as a lecturer to art seminars in Brazil and Portugal. She has also worked in cultural institutions in Berlin and Mexico City and as a costume designer and maker for different puppet and theater companies, as well as for short film productions.

Mariana has exhibited her work in different venues in Spain, Germany, Italy, Mexico and the US. Currently, she is a candidate in the MFA in Fiber at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. After her graduation in 2017, she plans to continue her artistic practice, work to keep fiber art present in the contemporary art world, and travel to different places to keep on learning.

Birgit Uibo

Tapestry “Legend”

My first contact with the field of tapestry was when I was studying at the art school. Of course, I had seen a few tapestries before, but I never thought about how they were made or that tapestry could be an art on its own, although it's even called painting with yarns. This is probably the first reflection that occurs to a person who is not familiar with this subject, but I understood that it is very easy to change this thought pattern. I felt the mystique and charm of tapestry as soon as I started my textile studies. I got a wow effect when I saw very different works with different approaches, topics, and ways of exhibiting and discovered that there is a very creative approach to tapestry weaving. It immediately made me think about how I would express myself through tapestry. It inspired me and made me interested in the topic. It seemed to me that tapestry was like some sort of a holy grail both for me and for my course mates – something that a real textile designer should make at least once in his or her life. Moreover, this should be done very thoughtfully and as if you are going to put your soul in it. What is important and interesting for me is that everyone can find their own way of weaving tapestry. This is certainly the most exciting thing that I observe in other's work, namely, which materials and techniques others use and how these materials and techniques help them to convey certain emotions. A tapestry is not just a picture. I see so much more hidden in it. It also says a lot about the personality of the designer of the tapestry: may it be someone who is a romantic at heart, goes along with the flow, or is, on the contrary, very open to new, and maybe even extreme experiences. I was looking forward to the time when I could actually weave my first tapestry and I generated various ideas of how to do it because, after all, it was a sacred thing and I had to put my soul in it. When the time came, I based my tapestry on what was currently going on in my life, my emotions and overall possibilities.

I also had to take the time limit into consideration because as you may know, tapestry weaving is quite time-consuming. This is not a bad thing in itself. I would only be able to fully enjoy weaving a more complex and time-consuming tapestry if I knew that I didn't have any other responsibilities at the same time and this would be my main job, so I didn't have to worry about anything else. I think that you need to make time to weave tapestry and take it as a meditative activity which you can enjoy. Although I'm quite an impatient person and want everything to be made quickly, I like weaving tapestry. It's a good time to concentrate on one thing at a time which is difficult to do in our information-rich lives today. But time limit also has its pluses. It

makes you think about ingenuity. Often new ideas of weaving methods and use of materials are born.



Birgit Uibo's tapestry "Legend"

My tapestry "Legend" was made as a school assignment. I connected the topic with a person who is a legend in the world and who had influenced my own personality quite a lot at a certain period of time. This topic touched me at a personal level and brought this work very close to my heart. Personal connection to a topic is actually something that I consider to be essential when I'm designing any bigger and more important work. This made each and every step in the process of tapestry weaving important. It was also important to weave it myself so that the work could be woven with the right emotions, which maybe only I can sense, but which I consider to be important enough.

What attracts me most in the world of tapestry is the use of unconventional techniques. Since I generally love different printing methods in textile design, I decided to connect my tapestry with this technique, which is also a way of self-expression that reflects my lifestyle. I used transfer print in my tapestry. The fact that I connected my favourite printing method with this work made the whole process even more enjoyable. Experimenting in itself was exciting and I was also able to experience life in a testing laboratory. It was funny that I only made some tests to weave tapestry and for that I needed a respirator and a pair of rubber gloves. One way of printing was to put the tapestry through the printing machine but I thought that transfer print gives a more unique result and there is always room for surprises. Some spots are clearer and some more dim but this gives the work its own little charm. I don't go for a perfect result, which

seems a bit clinical. I rather cherish quaintness which leaves room for fantasy. I love to leave things up to chance from time to time because it makes the process more exciting for me.

It is not only the execution that is important when making tapestry, but the whole process – creating designs, experimenting, and finding the best method to make the tapestry – everything that one needs to do before weaving. I could say that the process is even more important to me than the result but the result should also be good.

Although I'd prefer to use unorthodox methods and materials, I also cherish the history of tapestry which even influenced my own work to some extent. I use classical takes or forms that work well even when I make my other works, but I mix them with contemporary techniques. It would be great if these two aspects could be joined as it would create the element of surprise. I don't conform to certain rules but I still think it's important to preserve the traditional features of tapestry which, so that I could classify this work as tapestry. When it comes to the tapestry "Legend," I also wove a traditional surface with different yarns to get this meditative joy of weaving and then mixed it with the printing method – that was exciting for me.



*"Legend" was made and exhibited in the Tartu Art Kollege students exhibition "MAKING TIME" Jõhvi Concert hall-
2014*

Combining different techniques and materials is a very welcome past time for me. I believe that there are no limits when it comes to materials. As long as there's fantasy and a desire to experiment, there should be no limits. When using a print, you have to take into account the

limits that come from printing, but I believe that you can always overcome these – you just need to find a way. Finding that way is for me one of the most interesting steps in making tapestry and this is followed by the prize – starting to weave the final work.

It's important for me that the topic or the execution of the work is apt, witty, ironic, or simply heart-warming. The work should also carry some message so that it would provoke emotions in the viewer or make the viewer think about a certain topic. That is when the work of art has given its contribution. I used this aspect in my tapestry, too. It could be seen as a form of kitsch, so that the work of art would appeal to bigger audiences, but it does not bother me. I like to connect my work with my own feelings and experiences, but I like to express it clearly and not to go too deep with the execution, as it may only be understandable for me and remain a mystery to others. Sociability is an important keyword for me. I used quite a topical theme in my tapestry "Legend," and that is the print. My goal is to address as many people as possible and not only the experts in my field. My work is connected with positive memories or emotions, so I didn't want the tapestry to give a heavy impression. I depicted my work simply and clearly.

I do not consider myself to be an artist. An artist for me is a person who has art as his or her main job and lifestyle. I'd like to move in this direction myself. However, I think my works are pieces of art. It's easier to define one work as art. If there are emotions, feelings, and thoughts in the work, then I see it as a real work of art. I've exposed my work in different exhibitions and I think this is also important. You should definitely not keep your work hidden, but rather give it a chance to spread your message and maybe even sell it. If I want to sell my work, then I have to think about it before I start making the work and then take the aspects that connect with it into consideration. If I'm making something very personal, then I don't think about selling and I don't sell that work even if somebody would like to buy it. We should exhibit tapestry not only in art galleries but somewhere in the public space which is even visited by the so-called ordinary people to promote tapestry more around the world and to destroy the opinion that tapestry is an ancient and boring art. I've also thought that tapestry weaving could be a part of the arts and crafts programme at school. What engages children is the small opportunity for invention so that you can make something new and unique by using some of your favourite techniques, materials, or a topic that speaks to you, and then come up with an idea on how to weave it. Children dig the idea of inventing something. If it is in my powers, then I would like to implement this idea in the future. I think that tapestry weaving is a very good way of self-expression and it can be a very fun activity.

Biography



Birgit Uibo

Birgit Uibo is 26 years old. She lives In Estonia. She graduated from Tartu Art College in Estonia, studied textile design. During her studies she had the opportunity to participate in many fashion projects that are her passion as well. In the summer of 2013 she worked at Luan By Lucia fashion house in Hungary as a trainee. Before Art College she studied Art and Design at Kuressaare Regional Training Centre. During that time she had a good opportunity to work in Estonia National Theatre and Vanemuise Theatre, apartment of decorations as a trainee. These experiences influenced her to include more theatrical feelings and elements. Her creation can be defined as minimal, multifunctional and humorous. Her passion is to combine classical cuts or materials with new

techniques. She is interested in different printing methods. Currently she is focused on digital printing fashion.