

TAPESTRY 08



Location : UK-wide

Dates : 2008

Tapestry 08 was developed by BTG, and funded by the Arts Council, to be a comprehensive exhibition of contemporary work by British tapestry weavers. This was long overdue, as the last overview of British tapestry weaving, The British Tapestry Triennale 2, was in 1998 at the Harley Gallery at Wellbeck.

Tapestry 08 was much more than an exhibition. The tapestry weavers developing activities for Tapestry 08 were concerned that perceptions of the medium were tied to connotations of the historical. Outreach work with schools and young people, with students and the general public needed incorporating into the event to raise awareness of contemporary tapestry weaving. Demonstration days, seminars and a National Conference were held to encourage dialogue between practitioners.

Review:

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The Exhibition:

The range of scale, from the miniature, as in Joyce Coulton's 'sketchbook' pieces, to the monumental 'Arizona Quartet' by Shirley Ross, was exciting and, whilst some pieces were extremely bold in colour and composition, such as Fiona Rutherford's 'Up and Up' or Kirsten Glasbrook's 'Soul Birds', others are infinitely subtle. A piece by Soon Yul Kang, 'Meditation' slowly reveals its subtleties rewarding close scrutiny and time to enter into its atmospheric and inner world. Other pieces similarly reward close attention, the iridescent, twilight visions of Elin Huws and the shimmering, shifting landscapes in Beryl Hammill's 'Weaving the Country; Pilbara'.

Together these works exemplify the potential and diversity of tapestry weaving, from the hugely complex sculptural cell structures of Margaret Crowther's 'Fandango' to the restrained geometry of 'Thin Ice' by Hillu Liebelt or the subtly vicious piece by Alastair Duncan, seductive at a distance, deeply disturbing at close quarters (incorporating barbed wire – see below). The work is accessible for both

those who have never seen tapestries to those familiar with or immersed in the process of creating them.

The qualities of colour and surface in tapestries attract – warp and weft impose structure which harmonises compositional elements, be they representational, illusionistic or abstract in content. Viga Slater's 'Broadband' pieces play upon indigo, cerise and viridian, painstakingly evoking painterly strokes and mottled stripes. Jilly Edwards' fascinating double sided, tiny compositions on a continuous roll record her responses to changing seasons, use colour and light which mutate from the soft greens and pale yellows through to near monochrome and midnight hues spiked by tiny lines and spots of pinks and vermilions. These pieces are quiet but intense distillations of visual experience. It is the commitment and time embedded in these works which make a sustained visit so worthwhile.

At the Bankfield Museum the second part of the exhibition presented an equally varied range of pieces including the representationally complex 'My September 11' by Christopher Sanders, referencing twenty first century technology and institutions, mass media and advertising, all painstakingly woven – a rich contradiction in every way, pushing the medium to express the transient and banal. This very large piece is in stark contrast to the beautifully subtle, near abstract 'October Landscape' by Joan Baxter with its hazy undulating bands of colour suggestive of windblown moorland and watery horizons.

This was flanked by other sensitive atmospheric pieces, Ros Bryant's 'Furthest Ebb' and Sallie Tyszko's 'Island of 3 Stones' both evoke beach and early morning light in very different ways, the latter incorporating fragments of driftwood which hold a warp woven with mica and monofilament suggesting floating jetsam and reflections.

Tapestry 08 considered how we present tapestry and what informs the making process, both conceptually and practically, to create new, stimulating work for the 21st century.

Several works challenged the surface and form of conventional tapestry and question tapestry as 'woven painting'. Non-traditional materials are incorporated and relief structures are created, moving some pieces towards the sculptural.

Other works articulate concepts and ideas, focusing on subject material that references contemporary culture whilst remaining true to the historical role of tapestry as a narrative medium. The exhibition signalled how tapestry weaving may develop.

Several pieces showed that traditional notions of narrative sequence can be disrupted, re-ordered and re-considered and the conventional role of tapestry as a direct woven interpretation of an image can be challenged.

Tapestry 08 Exhibition Review

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