

# Book Review

## Archie Brennan: Tapestry as Modern Art

Archie Brennan as told to Brenda Osborn

Publisher: Schiffer Publishing

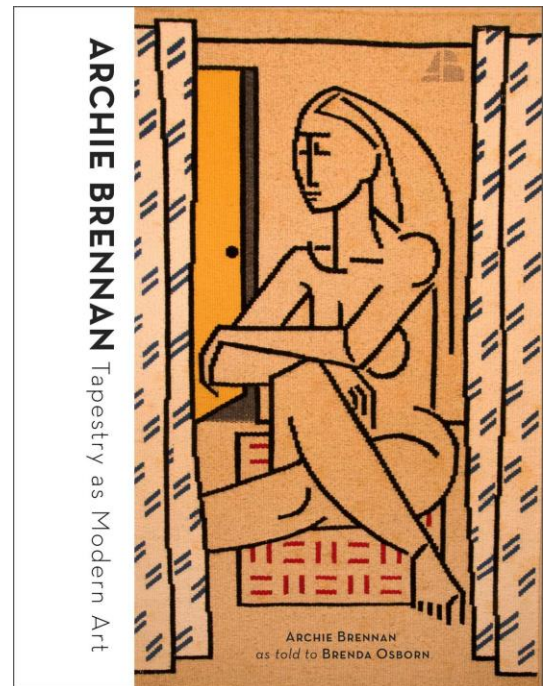
Date published: February 2022

Hardback

296 pages, 332 colour illustrations

ISBN 978-0-7643-6249-1

Review by Sally Reckert, April 2022



*Archie Brennan: Tapestry as Modern Art  
(book cover)*

This is neither an autobiography nor a biography, but a series of engaging opinions and anecdotes on Archie Brennan's view of tapestry's place in modern art. Illustrations of his pencil sketches and tapestries underpin his thoughts, as told to Brenda Osborn, a member of the Wednesday Group which met in Brennan and Susan Martin Maffei's New York studio.

The book is not a chronology of Brennan's long life (1931-2019). Rather, the chapters trace the evolution of his weaving ideas. Nor does the book dwell long on any one period of his life and work, such as his tenure at Dovecot, where - as Artistic Director - he had little time to spend on his own work.

Brennan was a complex mix of free-wheeling spirit, absorbing what he saw around him, and enthusiastic for new experiences, even if administrative. Photos of him weaving in a sarong on the beach in Hawaii contrast with accounts of him using his skills, developed at Dovecot, in helping to set up the Victorian, now Australian Tapestry Workshop. He spent seven years teaching at Papua New Guinea's National Arts School and was commissioned to embellish the new Parliament building with works that included a 60' by 30' mosaic frontage.

From this book, it seems that Archie Brennan wove and sketched what he saw around him, not as copies of life but as a collection of memories, symbols, words and objects to be retrieved, mixed and turned into visual anecdotes and jokes. All the while keeping to his rule that: "All the graphic elements had to conform to the chosen shape, proportion, and the inherent nature of the medium used – tapestry."

In chapter five, *'My Victorian Aunt: What She Really Knew'*, Brennan tells Brenda Osborn that he wove 'My Victorian Aunt' (1967) in reaction to the new forms of tapestry exhibited at the 1966 Lausanne International Tapestry Biennale. Brennan exhibited an essentially monochromatic tapestry "dripping with freely handled tufted loops ('Crucifix', 1965) alongside artists such as Sheila Hicks, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jogoda Buic, and Ritzi and Peter Jacobi. As time went on he gradually doubted his links with the 'New Wave' "I simply did not have the enthusiasm for the dominance of the materials and handling over the imagery".

Brennan preferred to "... revel in the intimacy of Gobelin tapestry ...the slow growth and proximity of the weaver in the making of parts". In chapter sixteen he tells of how he reconfigured Grant

Wood's 'American Gothic' into 'American Gotham' (1995). "It was the textile, the clothing of the two characters, that generated my interest." For how the story developed in Brennan's tapestry you'll have to buy the book.

He sketched the human form daily throughout his life. In chapter one, 'The Drawing Series', beginning in 1993 he began developing a "vocabulary of ways to weave linear marks" which he continued throughout his life "the model's pose and the position of various background props 'Drawing Series Number LXXXI' (2010) created interesting curvilinear shapes juxtaposed with a number of vertical and horizontal lines that fell into parallel shapes". It wasn't the inherent personality of the figure that interested him but the body's rhythms and lines.

Brennan's style seems cubist as he followed the lines of warp and weft, with curves only where the grid line naturally allowed. Or, perhaps, he always had himself in mind? A self-portrait shows him as a square-jawed, no-nonsense man, an image reinforced by photos of him posing for bodybuilding contests in the early 1950s. The same physicality runs through the author's selected photographs of Brennan's life, pencil sketches and tapestries.

The book includes an article by Mary Lane who observes of Brennan's 'Drawing Series', made without tapestry in mind, that he had "a vocabulary of mark making that is arguably inherent in the tapestry process". This is the overall impression that the reader gets from the pencil and woven images of the human form throughout this book.



*As They Are (Andy Capp) – after Reginald Smythe (1993). Woven in Timaru, New Zealand, 32" x 26" and 8 epi.*

Equally bold and muscular were Brennan's opinions on tapestry and its role in modern art. He wove 'Did you Remember to Feed the Cat' (1995) as a postcard, stamped it and posted it to a museum in Hungary, partly as a *jeu d'esprit*, and partly as comment on the changing role of tapestry, as he saw it "from the sublime to the ridiculous".

Brennan's enquiries constantly explored tapestry's technical limitations, and he enjoyed sharing this exploration with associates and students: "The real value of the experience was to enhance my approach to teaching by setting up students on their journey towards 'discoveries of their own'." His explorations included how tapestry can be woven from the back, on its side or, as more commonly now, front-facing. He wove from the front, bottom-to-top: "This decision, coupled with the choice of a much coarser fabric structure, exposes the inherent intimacy of the medium and forces a strong interplay between structural elements and the chosen imagery, rather than purely pictorial concerns."

This book is for non-weavers and weavers alike. Comments in the chapter on techniques such as pipe-loom construction are brief, and few technical terms are used. The book is clearly written, with a wealth of illustrations, as is typical of Schiffer's publications on art and craft.

From reading this book I have moderated my distrust of the 'cult' of Brennan, and learned to admire his work, in particular his exploration of how tapestry might depict concepts in a way that couldn't be achieved in other media.