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HANDWORK AS A CONCEPTUAL STRATEGY

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Much of the work in the milieu of contemporary fibre is moving away from the handmade object to embrace installation, intervention, digital technology and hybrid approaches to material and process. The discreet material identity of traditional processes like woven tapestry and the skills of the tapestry weaver, once prized as a dynamic means to represent the world, now seem out of step, bringing into question the value of skill, disciplinarity, and the handmade object.

Through the mid and late 20th century tapestry remained an influential player in the field of contemporary fibre. Tapestry weavers continued to exploit the weaving process, exploring materiality and image to continue a long tradition of narrative concepts. In the 21st century, however, the landscape of contemporary fibre practice has changed dramatically. Fibre artists are no longer tethered to traditional materials and processes and we certainly no longer need tapestry looms to create a woven image. Found, repurposed and industrial materials can be employed to evoke social meaning and digital printing, computer controlled embroidery, Jacquard technology, projection and animation all provide the means to create imagery and are very much part of the contemporary fibre field. So now that anything is possible, why continue to work with arduous hand processes like Tapestry?

In this paper I will discuss my personal commitment to the material identity of hand-woven tapestry as an artistic practice, and my interest in the handmade as a conceptual and aesthetic strategy. Through my own choices as an artist I hope to show that skillful handwork as a means of production can be infused with meaning and intent and can remain relevant in a cyber world.



Figure 1. 'Departure, Voyage, Arrival', 2001 Woven Tapestry, 129 x 154 cm. Image by John Dean

Throughout my 35-year career as an artist I have explored ideas that reference my experience of the world. To do this I have chosen to work almost exclusively with the process of hand-woven tapestry. I have come to understand that I am drawn to tapestry partly because it is an inherently sensuous medium; the slow labor-intensive process of making a tapestry exudes physicality and sensuousness. The yarns are handled, pushed, beaten and stroked into place and images grow out of intense colour and ever present surface texture. In all my works I employ handwork as a sensuous and physical language that is able to link the maker to the viewer and communicate fluently across time periods and diverse worldviews. Like all textiles a tapestry transpires as a form of woven speech spoken through the skill of the maker's hands, the result of knowing hands shaping a sequence of thoughts thorough actions. It is through this interaction that the maker has the potential to be involved in constant interpretation, translation and innovation. I strive to use handwork as a dynamic tool to negotiate the complex interplay of idea, context and experience.

The tapestry *Departure, Voyage, Arrival* (Fig.1) reads from left to right suggesting transition, transformation, passage of time and the aggregate of history. Reference to time is an important metaphor in the visual language that I work with. The succession of time and the accumulated weight of history and life experience are reflected both through imagery and through the slow accumulation of yarn during the weaving process. In my work the consumption of time through the process of hand weaving embodies this continuum linking the past to the present to provide a counterpoint to the immediacy and temporal nature of contemporary culture.

Throughout my practice, skill and the labor of the human hand have been a subtext underlying more overt imagery that might arouse recognition through memory and imagination. Recently the concept of handwork has become a more dynamic narrative component in my work. Within my practice I have come to value handwork as a human centered technology that connects the mind and body to evoke sensual connections and a shared experience of making that can reach across history and cultural ideology.



Figure 2. *'Handwork Series: to the bone, in the blood, from the heart', fragment 4-9, 2001 – 2002, woven tapestry each 51 x 66 cm framed. Image John Dean*

In 2001 I started the “Handwork Series: to the bone, in the blood, from the heart.” (Fig. 2) This series of small tapestries initially began as an opportunity to explore some techniques that I rarely worked with. My exploration of weaving processes stimulated thoughts about the value of discipline specific knowledge and the meaning of handwork. This developed into a series of works exploring the social and cultural perceptions of time intensive handiwork and the long history that links material culture and the skill of the human hand.

In the *Handwork Series* I use images derived from anatomical and gestural drawings of the human hand and forearm. The hand has appeared in art since the earliest of human cultures and is inseparably linked with human endeavor and the achievements of material culture. I juxtapose the body images with images that reference traditional or historic textiles to drawing on the inherent nature of the textile as a material construct with which we are all intimately involved. Through this pairing of hand and textile I also hope to allude to the dynamics of skill and disciplinary knowledge that has fueled invention for a millennium. The tapestries are presented as artifacts enclosed in an architectural frame. My intent is to evoke reference to relics or mementos and suggest the potential obsolescence of both handwork and the handmade.



Figure 3. ‘Handwork Series: to the bone, in the blood, from the heart fragment #9,’
2001 – 2002, woven tapestry, 51 x 66 cm framed. Image John Dean

Through handwork I feel linked to a continuum of makers. In Fragment #9 (Fig. 3) I choice to recreate an obscure corner of 17th century verdure tapestry. I worked from an enlargement of the selected pattern area. The enlargement revealed what seemed to be a tiny flaw in the original

tapestry an area where the colour seemed mismatched and awkward as if the weaver so many years ago lost their concentration or was momentarily distracted. I reworked the area leaving my own possibly flawed interpretation as part of the recreated image. Through this experience I was reminded that in our contemporary culture, which is dominated by the anonymous reproduced object and the mediated and appropriated image, handmade objects could stand for authentic experience. Like other constructions that are brought to life through the skilled negotiations of handwork, tapestries are infused with a sense of originality and authenticity. Their material presence provides a direct link to the original act of making and is able to circumvent anonymity for both maker and viewer

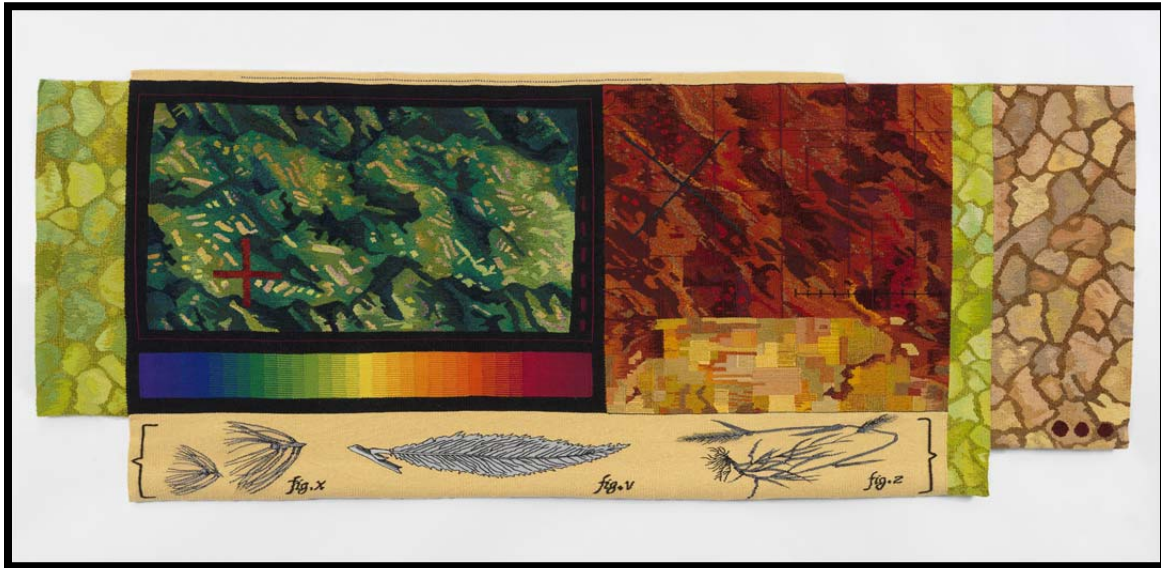


Figure 4. 'Land Sentence: Arbour', 2009, woven tapestry, 81 x 203 cm. Image John Dean

My works reflect the complications and contradictions of the issues that we live with. *Land Sentence Series* is about human and nature relationships. The first work in this series *Land Sentence: Arbour* (Fig. 4) references land use issues in the forests and grassland areas of western Canada where I live. Through research into the human impact on the environment I became fascinated with technological data and aerial and satellite photography that documented the changing environment. Satellite photography and scientific imagery can provide a beautiful yet unnerving view of pollution, erosion, deforestation and infestation; images that represent a disembodied technology that records the result of our complex and often destructive relationship to the world around us. I am aware that these images represent knowledge but I am also aware that through this disorienting technological viewpoint I become removed and disassociated from the reality of my surroundings and fail to perceive my environment with the same sense of personal responsibility. *Land Sentence series* is my attempt to take a scientific worldview and through the physical presence and sensuousness of handwork draw it back into the realm of the personal. Using the flawed and imperfect language of tapestry and the slow and intimate process of weaving I attempt to reinterpret and rewrite the dispassionate certainty of these technological sources to refocus on our shared complicity in the sentencing of the world we live in. The second work in this series *Land Sentence: Pool* (Fig.5) draws on diagrams, schematics and aerial photographs as a source for imagery to explore our relationship to water use. The imagery, colour and surface reflect the subject matter, but again it is through the inexact and distinctly human process of hand weaving that I hope to mediate recognition of the inimitable nature of our environment.



Figure 5. *'Land Sentence: Pool'*, 2009, woven tapestry, 91 x 207 cm. Image John Dean

It has become almost impossible to talk about the handmade object without an inferred oppositional dynamic to technology. However like the ongoing discussion around art and craft, I feel the productive discourse arises from recognition of relationships and dualities not the establishment of false dichotomies. My interest in maintaining skillful handwork as a strategy in my practice, like narrative, figuration or decoration is defined not by what the handmade stands against but by what it represents as a human endeavor.

Within my approach and practice I employ handwork as a human centered activity that embraces risk and invention to create the potential for originality. I value skillful making as a means to connect to skillful thinking and disciplinarily knowledge as a link to history and the tradition of makers. I see the labor-intensive nature of my process as an embodiment of time that creates a metaphoric reference to the accumulated weight of experience and history. I am willing to invest in hand processes as a way to pay attention and focus on the issues that I care about. Ultimately, I hope that my tapestries will be seen as objects of expressive and sensual beauty that celebrate the handmade and encourage reflection on the world we live in.

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