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Linda Rees

Image Line Publications, lerees@lindarees.com

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Towards a Proactive Outreach Political Strings: Tapestry Seen and Unseen

Linda Rees

lerees@lindarees.com

A casual debate, in 1998 lead me to the disturbing conclusion that contemporary tapestry in America had almost no documented critical review of our recent history or about the artists producing tapestries in the last half of the 20th century. It was not the first time I had questioned why such a low profile was occurring. This paper will focus on two factors that directly affect the status of the medium: tapestry's place in the current academic climate and the field's response to shifting realities in the digital age.

My conclusions are based on observations accumulated over almost 50 years of weaving along with insights gained while writing the book *NEZHNIIE: Weaver & Innovative Artist*, and while editing the American Tapestry Alliance (ATA) newsletter from 2003 until 2009.

I became interested in weaving as a child, pondering the vivid colors in a collection of serapes my parents received over the years from a friend who lived in Mexico. Two quarters of weaving at Southern Illinois University in 1965 gave me the basic techniques for tapestry. Whether bold geometrics or figurative imagery, my work is about unique color combinations.

In 1978 I saw an exhibition of work by Polish weavers that displayed the most creative tapestries that I had seen. Their expressiveness captured me. As my career progressed, I was puzzled that I seldom saw any Polish style pieces in major tapestry exhibitions or the skillful geometric imagery typical of several weavers around the country, especially in the Southwest. What I observed was that in general the tapestry community in the US was focused on a singular French tradition.

A few personal experiences, such as a juror ranking my work as having zero creativity, and being turned down when I later sought to join a regional tapestry group lead me to see a pattern during the 1990s. I could get into a fair number of exhibits that were selected by museum curators or fiber artists -- but not if the juror was a tapestry artist. I knew that I needed to get a better overview of the dynamics I was observing.

Coinciding with this conclusion, I discovered there was a retrospective exhibit of tapestries by Muriel Nezhnie Helfman at a local library and a lecture by her husband about the work. Her long career of fascinating imagery came to life during the lecture and confirmed my resolve to seek Sheldon Helfman's consent and aid in documenting her visual and philosophical contributions to our field. I had no previous personal contact with Nezhnie, but I carried a vivid memory of her "Images of the Holocaust" exhibit at the Sazama-Brauer Gallery during the 1988 Chicago Handweavers Guild of America (HGA) Convergence. Not only had the display impressed me, I felt empowered by the fact that Nezhnie had devoted ten years to working on a project that was controversial and too disturbing to be easily marketed.

Nezhnie was trained as a painter and graphic artist but when she decided to become a weaver, she understood that the most critical visual elements in a tapestry would require quite different solutions than for a painting. In fact her experimental approach quickly led her to conclude that the more the structural features of weaving were revealed, the more lively and effective an image became. The following three images show her early versatility:



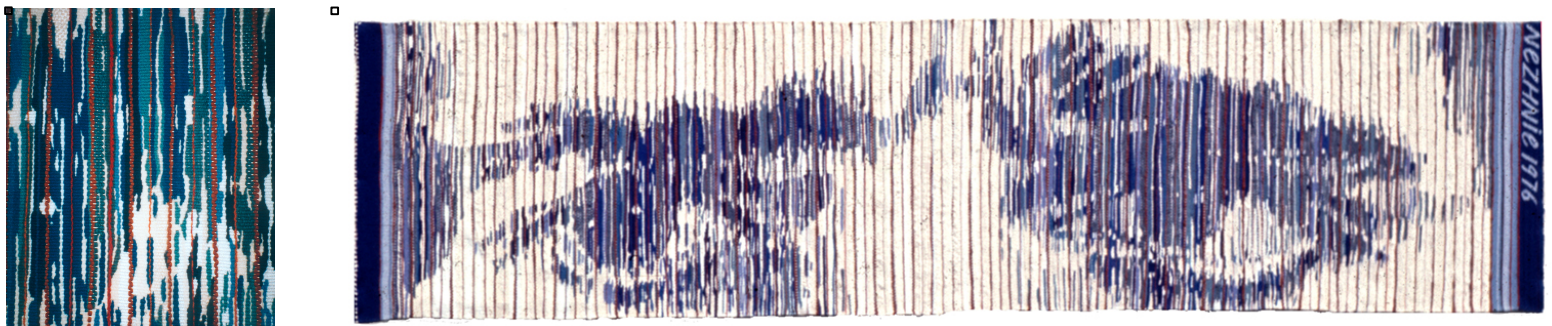
*Figure 1, left. Odyssey, 60" x 60" (152.4 x 152.4 cm) 1967 (?)
Commission, private collection St. Louis, MO.*

*Figure 2, center. Large Embrace, 41" x 29" (104,1 x 73.7cm) 1968, Free form hanging,
University City High School, St. Louis MO.*

*Figure 3, right. Loreli. 58" x 47" (147.3 x 119.4 cm) 1969. Woven tapestry on armature.
Private collection Stockbridge MA.*

Photos received form Sheldon Helfman for book NEZHNE, Weaver & Innovative Artist.

From 1970 through 1975 Nezhnie designed 13 commissions for public institutions. A loom for personal work or private commissions was also always available for experimentation. As the decade progressed, she shifted focus to exploring portraiture, her earliest passion. During this period her ability to build imagery through novel line applications rose to a level of mastery seldom seen.



*Figure 4, left. Nader and detail, Figure 6, right, of small part of right eye. 39" x 188" (99.9 x 477.5 cm) 1976.
Woven tapestry. Private Collection, St. Louis MO (exhibited as part of a diptych with "Trio" before sale.)*

Nader photo received form Sheldon Helfman for book NEZHNE, Weaver & Innovative Artist.

Detail photo taken in 2002 by Janita Loder, St. Louis



*Figure 5, left. Jacobs Dream (St. Louis version) 216" x 96" (548.6 x 248.8cm) 1971.
Temple Israel, St. Louis, MO.*

*Figure 6, right. Zelda, 10" x 9" (25.4 x 22.9) 1977 Silk tapestry.
Private collection Portland OR,
Photos received form Sheldon Helfman for book NEZHNIE, Weaver & Innovative Artist.*

By the end of the decade, Nezhnie was primed to take personal risks, ready to begin her first tapestry based on the emotive topic, the Nazi holocaust. Six tapestries, one large unframed painting on canvas and a folio of prints were included in the Chicago exhibit along with several early sketches, cartoons and photos. *Pogrom*, the last tapestry in the series, was woven shortly after that exhibit. Nezhnie was already suffering from Alzheimers by then. I found this image quite disturbing when I first saw it in the retrospective exhibit. Yet, as I worked on the book I understood the image of the woman reflects the terror Nezhnie felt as her mental capacity diminished. What impresses me most technically is how

successfully she used attractive elements to convey atrocities. Visually dividing the swastika within two color fields and cropping a bit off its top breaks its initial impact and causes the set of parallel lines forming the symbol to look almost decorative. She officially retired in 1992 with an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Missouri, St. Louis.



*Figure 7, left. Liberation, Holocaust Series 36" x 47" (91.4 x 119.4cm) 1987. Artist estate.
Photo received form Sheldon Helfman for book NEZHNIIE, Weaver & Innovative Artist.*



*Figure 8, right. Pogrom, Holocaust Series 64" x 48" (162.6 x 121.9cm) 1989. Artist's estate.
Photo received form Sheldon Helfman for book NEZHNIIE, Weaver & Innovative Artist.*

Through observing Nezhnie's multifaceted imagery, I began to consider that tapestry was especially appealing to those artists who liked to create intricate designs with complex detail, and who were influenced by traditional European examples. It is what drew so many weavers in the 1980s to the French techniques. Nezhnie liked complexity but sought to find a distinctly personal style. She was one of the earliest tapestry artists to truly embrace designs that relied on the abstract characteristics of line and pixilation. Had she not become ill at the time when her work was just getting recognition, more weavers might have been influenced by her innovations.

As the new millennium arrived, the art world was feeling the impact that computer generated imagery would have on how art was produced. The scope of new options significantly affected university art departments in terms of how art is taught and defined. In looking at course descriptions for art majors today, there is less focus on specific disciplines and greater appropriation of a wide range of materials, tools and concepts considered.

During the restructuring of curricula, it was all too clear that weaving classes and instructors were disappearing from art departments across the country. The failure to sustain a strong presence at the university level is not particularly about taste or aesthetics. The problem relates to the number of students who could be effectively enrolled in weaving classes per term. The limited number of looms that a fiber studio can accommodate and the fact that each can only handle one project at a time means that weaving cannot compete with the quantity of potters or painters or even other fiber art disciplines that use equipment shared daily. Along with this lost opportunity, another issue is relevant. There has been very little academic interest in documenting or analyzing contemporary tapestry's development at any stage of our relatively brief history, thereby further justifying art departments in negating the importance of weaving as part of the curriculum.

Better understanding of the causes for marginal attention from educators and low visibility in studio activity or exhibitions, should make working artists be more proactive. We need to be alert for situations to tout the contemporary nature of the medium and find opportunities to present stimulating imagery and commentary in print or other formats about why we are weaving, not painting. Progress is gradually being made in the new century and we have the opportunity to shift the "underdog" perception and promote what the medium contributes to art.

Tapestry artists in particular entered the 21st century with many questions about where our medium was going. Weavers were disgruntled about the competition created by newly accessible computer aided weaving options and other "quick" systems for producing artwork. Also, we were not attracting young artists to explore the field. Surprisingly, at the same time that weaving seemed out of favor, "fibers" had become one of the two most popular majors for art students. What could this disconnect mean?

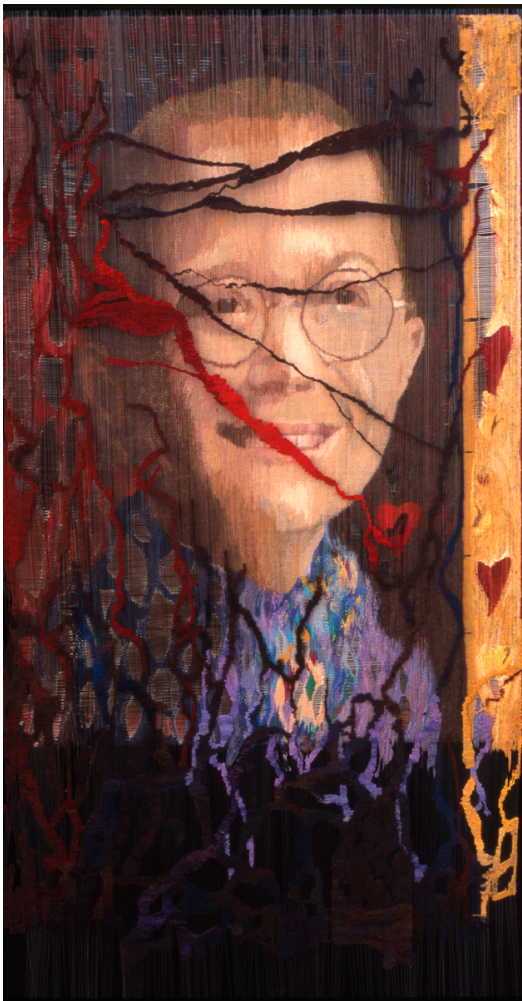
Two factors seemed responsible for the new approach to fibers: computer savvy young artists expected speedy results so they dismissed slow techniques. These emerging artists also questioned the notion that art must be "made by hand" and they embraced interdisciplinary input and appropriated imagery. Their changing perspective has resulted in a greater emphasis on mixed media art in textile exhibits, and this has actually become a motivating factor causing established weavers to question the traditional constraints about what techniques can be considered suitable for tapestry.

One option for dealing with slow execution was to work small. In fact, I believe that the significant increase in membership in ATA during the last decade occurred to some extent because the pressure to produce large work was lessened. Artists felt more confident in committing to small tapestry projects. Several "Postcard" type exhibits were organized and ATA initiated a second juried biennial format for tapestries 100 square inches or less, now in its third competition. Besides taking less time, the limited size lends itself to experimenting and taking risks.

The popularity of mixed media compositions spurred a growing acceptance of applied embellishments and alterations of the surface. A wide spectrum of members have been sorting out ways to retain the classic elements that originally drew them to this labor intensive process while challenging themselves to be more competitive.

It should be noted, however, that while there are examples of quite innovative work, in general, fiber artists in the United States have been slower to respond to experimental approaches than is evident in many other countries. Besides stretching our perception of what styles, materials or concepts are

effective, even our definition of tapestry has needed broadening. Since 2009 juried exhibits sponsored by ATA have included some caveat that encourages participants "to be open to exploration,



**Figure 9, left. Monique Lehman, *Heartsong, for American Hero: Mattie Stepanek*. 56" x 30" x 3" (142.2 x 76.2 x 7.6 cm) 2005. Two layered tapestry with the top layer of monofilament woven in sections perpendicular to the lower image's weaving. Pasadena, CA.
Permission to publish granted by artist. Photo by Meghann McCrory.**

**Figure 10, right. Alexandra Friedman. *Flow*. 1 32" x 27" x 1.5 (81.3 x 68.6 x 3.8 cm) Woven tapestry with "eccentric" weaving creating a dimensional effect that alludes to twisting skeins of yarn, whereas the background, with its "lazy lines" remains flat.
Collection of Nelsie Davis, White Salmon, WA. Photo by Kate Cameron**

experimentation, and to creative risk taking". Our methodology has expanded, we are beginning to adjust our perspective and the field is more competitive as participation in international fiber exhibitions and conferences increases.

To address our immediate concerns, however, we have not made significant progress in overall acceptance into major art venues. Also, here in 2012, what is taught in fiber courses includes only cursory information about tapestry. To counter this trend, ATA initiated an international award in 2006 for university students with an interest in tapestry. Email notices are sent out three times during the

school year to colleges, universities, and art schools in the USA, Canada and the UK and Australia. The award recipient is announced to these same schools in May. Emails to magazines and journals and on Facebook are also used for notification of winners and to solicit entries. ATA has also bought a display ad in *Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot's* current fall issue to advertise the student awards. This publicity is impressive but we still need a greater presence on campuses and other venues where young artists seek inspiration, to convince them that contemporary concerns can be effectively addressed through tapestry.

To make any progress in reaching a greater audience, we need to project our enthusiasm and pride as well as our artwork to the public. As fellow member, Stanley Bulbach, has frequently advised, we need to convince our audience of the merits of our materials, its structural stability and how fiber art can enliven an environment with its rich colors. Small endeavors like sending out complimentary newsletters to gallery owners if exhibited work there was reviewed in our newsletter, can be positive bits of publicity for our medium and for their establishment too.

A well-received seminar about how to promote work was presented at the ATA meeting in Denver in 2004 but only reached a marginal portion of the membership. Members who are naturally good at promotion can contribute commentary and seminars about "talking points" that could help our practitioners in interactions with interested viewers and prospective buyers. Anyone who enjoys writing should actively review the exhibits or events they encounter – not only in ATA's newsletter but in other broad based publications. We especially need to seriously devote energy towards a better appreciation and interest in collectors than has been demonstrated in the past.

We also need greater outreach in terms of exhibiting. I think ATA should invite a noted Contemporary Art Museum curator to judge an exhibit. I encourage members to start entering well-respected regional "all media" competitions. Themed shows, where medium is less a consideration than how the work relates to the topic, are a good place to start. Also, focusing on regional exhibits makes it more likely that artists can be present to talk about the tapestries in the show. We need to think of an entry fee as a publicity item. Even if the work is not accepted, it is a way for influential curators to view expressive contemporary imagery in tapestry, some of which just might sway their opinion.

Most importantly, it is essential to place our dynamic work where it will get the greatest exposure, namely, a presence in multiple sites on the Internet. The other big challenge is to have a clear, confident message to promote, a bandwagon for viewers and patrons to jump onto.