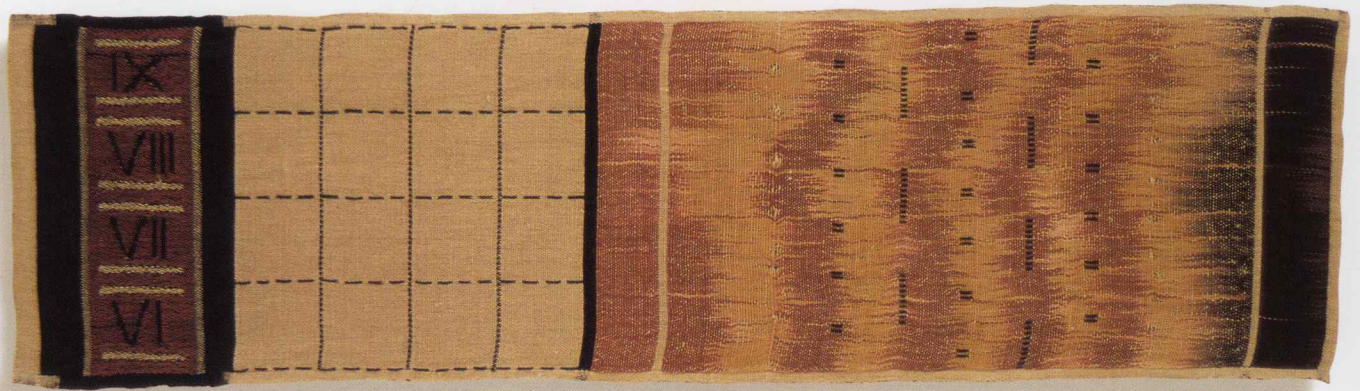


Thread-bare



Kelly Thompson, *Constructed Surfaces* (detail), 1998. Hand woven cotton and linen.

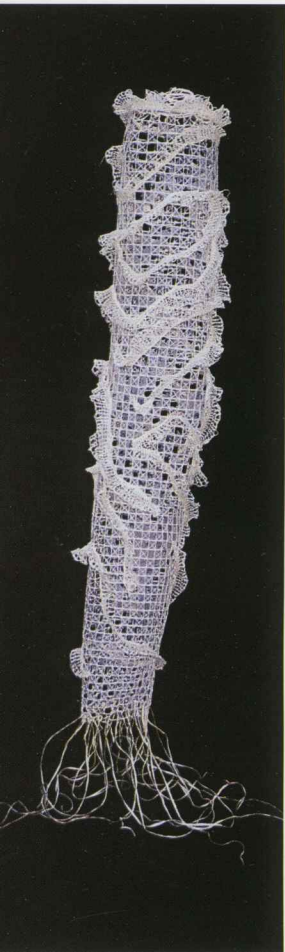
BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO DISCOVERS A GROUP OF ARTISTS WHO ARE REINVIGORATING CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE THROUGH TRADITIONAL TEXTILE MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

IN RECENT YEARS A SURPRISING NUMBER OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND—viewed separately, for the sake of argument, from those artists engaged exclusively in a textile art practice—have appropriated or employed a variety of weaving practices. These practices, traditionally associated with craft, include stitching, felting, embroidery, knitting, braiding, sewing and tapestry to name a few. The reasons for this interest vary, although the artists can be roughly divided into two groups. The first group includes those who have appropriated the tools, materials or techniques of weaving as a means of exploring or advancing a contemporary art practice. The second group includes those who, more committed to textile arts, float between the two, developing new subject matter, materials and techniques.

The latter group of artists is smaller than the first and, consequently, the secondary focus of this article. This group could be said to include the work of artists such as Kelly Thompson, Hanh Nguyet Ngo and perhaps Louise Weaver. The first group of artists encompasses aspects of the work of Ronnie Van Hout, Harriet Parsons, Anne Kay, Anne Marie May, Nelia Justo, Fiona Foley, Ani O'Neill

and Fiona MacDonald. What seems to link the work of these artists is an understanding of weaving practices and techniques as divorced from their traditional role and function and, as a result, open to reinterpretation in the contemporary arts. While the results, for some, might be considered as just bad craft (offering an interesting inversion of the usual complaint levelled against craft that it is just bad art), the objects and installations by these artists illustrate how traditional process-oriented craft practices can offer a basis for the production of innovative contemporary art.

The fact that the majority of these artists are women is not insignificant. The historical affiliation between women and weaving is undeniable. Who, for instance, can forget the evil Madame Defarge in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, knitting away as the heads of French nobles roll at her feet? Or, a little more appropriately, one could cite everything from the Korean pojagi or wrapping cloths—traditionally made by women during the Choson period (1392-1910) for a variety of ceremonial and functional purposes—to classic American quilts or needle knitting, believed to have been developed in Europe in the 15th century (the Scottish have claimed its invention and



Harriet Parsons, *Glass Sponge*, 1998. Bobbin and needlepoint lacework, 1.2 m.

introduction into France). The complex reasons for this affiliation (rightly or wrongly) are not at issue here¹. What is worth noting, however, is that the resurgence of interest in weaving by contemporary artists would seem to relate to a wider, post-feminist re-exploration of traditionally feminine terrain.

One of the most inspired reworkings of weaving practices can be found in the work of Nelia Justo. An early series of works by the artist titled *Electronic Threads* (1995-96) consisted of three ethnographic gowns (a Chinese tu fou, a Korean bridal robe and a Japanese kimono) covered with an interlocking network of wires powering LED screens and a series of small speakers. The networks, which served to transmit audio and video signals, were made from lacquered copper wire that was intricately woven into the surface of the gowns following the existing embroidered designs. The speakers played music that corresponded with the images (both of which related to the nationality of the gown), creating a multi-dimensional cultural experience for the viewer, without the hassle or expense of travel.

Justo's recent works also fuse a technical knowledge of electronics with the decorative language of textile design. *Pursuing Paradise* (1997), for instance, consisted of a freestanding wooden frame on which the artist embroidered in lacquered copper wire, over a woven layer of metallic gauze, the image of a Phoenix based on a 14th or 15th century Italian design. The use of an image of the Phoenix (Middle Eastern in origin) from this period makes reference to the ancient trade in silk between China and Europe as well as the appropriation of Eastern designs for European textiles. The lacquered wire also formed the basis of a circuit track that was linked to a series of tiny speakers integrated into the design. These emitted a blend of traditional Chinese and Italian Renaissance music. Overall, the work offered a contemporary reflection on a history of cultural exchange while drawing parallels between the silk trade and current Asian exports like electronics.

All of Harriet Parsons' artworks employ or refer to weaving in some way. In each case, however, the results and materials are distinct. An early work consisted of strips of wire gauze meshed together over a metal frame to create a kind of patchwork quilt. A more recent piece consisted of bobbin and needlepoint lacework in cotton and wool stiffened with cornflour glue to create an intriguing sculptural object. Titled *Glass Sponge* (1998), this work was based on a glass sponge endoskeleton stumbled upon by the artist in the bowels of the Australian Museum in Sydney. Although much larger than the original, the lace version is still extraordinarily delicate and beautiful, resembling a piece of intricately patterned coral or strange micro-organism.

A collision of domestic/natural science and aesthetics characterises many of Parsons' artworks. Another work titled *Five Hoops (Satin)* (1997) consisted of five pieces of dark blue satin containing delicately embroidered images of winged insects made from strands of her own hair. Inspiration for the work came from collections of insects and butterflies in boxes found at museums or viewed in illustrations in books. What most interested Parsons about these collections was the way in which the specimens were arranged, often in circular patterns and shapes, some of which were based on the concentric circles of livestock arranged in the centre ring for agricultural shows. (Another elaborate arrangement of moths and beetles spelt out a verse from a poem by Henry Longfellow, written to commemorate the fiftieth birthday of biologist Alexander Agassiz.) Displayed within circular embroidery hoops, Parsons' mesmerising hair pieces resemble specimens in beakers or scientific dishes.

Kelly Thompson's works employ more traditional weaving materials and practices. Still, her sinuous sections of densely woven fabric consistently enchant viewers with their dramatic patterns and moody tones. Influenced by the layered weaving techniques of Ikat textiles, Thompson's works resemble landscape paintings, in particular the horizontal bar-like sections of the work of fellow New Zealand artist Shane Cotton. Like Cotton, Thompson draws on images of maps, cross-sections of geographical surveys and a variety of other codes and symbols as the basis for her imagery. The results, however, are more abstract than realist, more meditative than metaphorical. A good example is *Constructed Surfaces* (1997), shown at Canberra Contemporary Artspace. This weaving-installation consisted of numerous different-sized strips of hand-woven cloth arranged along the wall in a horizontal plane. The layering of cloth in sections could be likened to a film strip, but the work reveals a more painterly attention to issues of surface, shading and light. Hazy and almost random in association, Thompson's small wind-swept images, punctuated here and there by signs of life, are like the fleeting and fragmentary impressions of memory or the faint outline of dreams.

A quite different use of weaving techniques and materials characterises the work of Ani O'Neill. Although O'Neill was born in New Zealand and lives in Auckland, her family is originally from the Cook Islands in the Pacific. Many of her works combine traditional art forms associated with Cook Island women (such as crochet, which she learnt from her grandmother) with more contemporary influences such as Pop Art and the urban street culture of cosmopolitan New Zealand. *Cottage Industry* (1997), for instance, consists of seventeen large open disks made from different strands of coloured wool woven together in luscious thick bands. Hung on the wall as paintings, these works arouse



Anne Kay, *Homilies No.5*, 1997. Knitted pieces installed in Artspace, Sydney.

a sense of warmth in the viewer like a radiant sun. The pieces playfully refer to crochet as a cottage industry for tourist souvenirs in New Zealand and the Pacific, but they also invite associations with Abstract-Expressionist painting, in particular Jasper Johns' famous target series. Yet O'Neill's works are more ironical than spiritual in intention, poking fun at the Western fascination for kitsch indigenism and their own flamboyant collision of cultural influences. *Tangaroa* employs corduroy and shells to create fluffy-doll versions of a Cook Island god, parodying visions of the Pacific as an exotic tourist locale and souvenir wonderland. At the same time, however, the work also serves as a means of preserving and disseminating island traditions, under constant threat from the forces of cultural homogenisation.

The multiple cultural references in O'Neill's works take on an allegorical quality, serving as indicators of a hybrid identity and place. A similar process defines the work of Vietnamese-Australian artist Hanh Nguyet Ngo. Works such as *Identity Badges* (1997) and *Stringing Sentences* (1997), for instance, consist of lines of cotton thread installed in an interlocking grid, which contains square sections of tapestry filled with woven images and text. Based on an epic poem by Vietnamese writer Nguyen Du, both works offer an imaginary map, charting literal as well as metaphorical journeys across time and space. Other works such as *Chinese Export Blues* (1998) combine fragments of tapestry, vinyl and text within an outline, recalling a map of Vietnam, drawn directly onto the wall. This use of a boundary line suggests an investigation of the borders that define ideas of

nationality and identity. At the same time, the fragmented nature of the imagery would seem to refer to Ngo's own experience of displacement and bi-culturalism.

Other works, not examined in detail here, are more conceptual in orientation, such as Anne Kay's explorations of the relations between architecture and knitting. *Homilies* (1997), for instance, consisted of scraps of knitting installed in the toilets and other odd areas at Artspace in Sydney. Randomly fitted over levers, roof beams and bathroom appliances, these works relied entirely on inferences and associations for their interpretation and power. The process-oriented approach characterising *Homilies* and the majority of other works explored throughout this article illustrates how textile practices can provide a basis for the production of innovative contemporary art. These *fabric(ation)s* often retain the resonance of a distinct social or cultural heritage while engaging with modern and postmodern art practices, resulting in a provocative reinterpretation of traditional craft materials and techniques.

endnotes

1. According to Freud, weaving has its origin in an imitation of the growth at maturity of pubic hair to cover the genitalia. And the motive for women's invention and traditional affiliation with this art form? Seasoned readers of Freud will surely guess: to mask or cover her sexual inferiority caused by the lack of a phallus. The problems with Freud's 'theory' are numerous, not least of which is his failure to address the huge social and cultural inequalities that have restricted women to domestic servitude and thus practical art forms.

Dr. Benjamin Genocchio is the Visual Arts Critic (Sydney) for The Australian.

Anni O'Neill, *Cottage Industry* (detail), 1997. Wool, acrylic, stainless steel. 17 components, dimensions variable.

