

Materiality and Tapestry

By Jane Kidd

Magdalena Abakanowicz made the following statement about her relationship to fibre materials at the height of the Fibre Revolution in the late 1960s and 1970s:

I see fiber as the basic element constructing the organic world on our planet, as the greatest mystery of our environment. It is from fiber that all living organisms are built – the tissue of plants, and ourselves. Our nerves, our genetic code, the canals of our veins, our muscles. (Abakanowicz 1978)

Tapestry makers, like Abakanowicz, recognized and celebrated the potential of their materials and the powerful position of the individual maker. Abakanowicz, Hicks, the Jacobis amongst many others, embraced a practice that involved hands-on production; they created the work themselves and were intimately involved with materials and process. They recognized that the materials and process were ripe with meanings and through this close association they understood the dynamics of materiality. Through their hands the physical presence of the woven form became not only a means to create innovative surfaces and structures but also a metaphoric vehicle that gave voice to creative ideas and personal expression – even as they referenced historical tapestry practices.

A generation later we appear to have come to an impasse. While ideas of materiality in tapestry continue to engage the maker (just consider this current issue of *Tapestry Topics*) it would seem that it is primarily the image that has become recognized as the sole marker conveying the conceptual voice of the tapestry maker. A recent publication *Contemporary Textiles the Fabric of Fine Art*, illustrates these observations. The promotional text on the back cover describes the publication as “an inspiring and comprehensive survey of the many and varied creative expressions spoken through the language of textile fine art.” Certainly, the book provides excellent essays by Bradley Quinn and Janis Jefferies and illustrates and discusses many inspiring works. Nonetheless, of the over 50 artists profiled not one is working with the process of tapestry, a situation I find perplexing considering the importance of tapestry in the evolution of the fibre field and the depth and integrity of much of the current work in tapestry.

Has the unique material identity and commitment to skill that we as tapestry makers hold dear begun to inhibit our involvement in a broader critical discussion? Or has the critical world become myopic equating fine craftsmanship with a lack of conceptual content? In this essay I will argue that materiality continues to be integral to the tapestry discipline and that material and process should never be excluded from meaningful discussion of tapestry as a visual art practice.

Design Historian, Dennis Doordan, defines the term materiality as issues, themes, potentialities and limitations that arise out of the materials employed in making. He sites materiality as a complex negotiation of idea, context and experience that comes about through an in-depth understanding of materials and process. Doordan recognizes that the maker’s intimate knowledge of materials and process are an inseparable aspect of materiality. This reading is essential to an understanding of tapestry as a process invested in skill that draws on a long and well-established tradition of material sensitivity and technical ingenuity.

To understand the relevance and power of tapestry it is crucial to recognize that it is through this interaction that the weaver has the potential to be involved in constant interpretation, translation and innovation. Tapestry transpires as a form of woven speech spoken eloquently through the skill of the maker’s hands, the result of knowing hands shaping a sequence of thoughts thorough actions. Tapestry is an activity invested in the maker’s intimate and immediate involvement with the present through the physical imperative of materiality. Craft historian, Peter Dormer, refers to this as “*the workmanship of risk*” suggesting that process in this state is open to failure at any point as well as spectacular success and fosters discovery. Through this temporal state of active engagement, the maker meets with the potential for innovation and the prospect of originality.

In our contemporary culture, which is dominated by the reproduced object and the mediated and appropriated image, handmade objects such as tapestry 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 that circumvents

anonymity for both maker and viewer. Its essence acts as a catalyst for the interaction of material, form, process and idea, evoking a confluence of factors that brings the original creative act into focus. Thus it is through engagement with materiality that the tapestry maker has the opportunity to personify skill and vision in communicating the authenticity of original experience to the viewer of their work.

Tapestry as a language of material and process has remained a discreet practice that appears somewhat out of sync with the hybrid nature of contemporary art. In contradiction to current trends continued respect for traditional materials (yarn) makes it less likely that makers will choose to access the memory and meaning embedded in found and recycled material as a means for social engagement. The seemingly wild and free use of familiar and unconventional materials that have defined materiality in much of contemporary fibre practices and garnered fibre a place in contemporary art criticism does not translate well into the skill based focus of tapestry making. Tapestry remains a demanding medium with a long and involved history, one linked to royalty, power and patronage. It is a history largely unfamiliar to the general public. Further, unlike embroidery, quilting and garment based work; it does not provide a direct means to access the social history of the everyday, domesticity, feminism and identity. It is not a process that can easily be taken up and applied in the service of a popular theme or concept. In other words, it remains relatively closed to artists from other disciplines, and hence an outsider in the interdisciplinary exchange.

From this viewpoint the discreet material identity of tapestry could be seen as a detriment not a strength. In fact I would argue that tapestry's rather shadowy presence in contemporary fibre criticism offers an exciting challenge. One that asks us to reassess our relationship to material and process and find ways to be more engaged in the broader dialogue that addresses the rematerialization of the art object. The dialogue about materiality is continually evolving to embrace multiple perspectives including Fine Art, Design and Craft. Many of the elements that are essential to an understanding and valuing of tapestry as a material process (such as tradition, skill and the handmade) are once again part of this discussion. And we must be ready to take this discussion into our studios – and onto our looms.

The acquisition of skill and familiarity with materials can inspire extraordinary insight but it can also lead to complacency. Makers involved with skill based work processes like tapestry can be lulled into a false sense of security that is defensive instead of productive. We certainly do not need to abandon traditional tapestry practice, but we must be willing to let the material identity of the process evolve. The material presence of any object whether it is traditional or highly innovative is at its most dynamic when the object reflects the active engagement of the maker and the viewer can sense the original touch and the integrity of the maker's perception. Materiality is at its most dynamic and expressive when it reflects the workmanship of risk - not certainty.

Tapestry making is itself a challenging process. If our medium is to move forward and participate more actively in the broader cultural field we must be more than willing to take risks. From my experience, and given our history, tapestry makers are tenacious, optimistic and able to look to the future – we are ready for the challenge.

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