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An archaeology of tapestry: contexts, signs and histories of contemporary practice

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PART 4

DOCUMENTATION

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‘ARCHAEOLOGIES’ AND ‘UNWRITTEN COUNTRY’

INTRODUCTION

Sites when dug, almost always prove to be much more complex than their surface indications suggest...

Philip Barker

In this, the final section of the document, I will discuss the relationship between the critical contexts of archaeology, tapestry and textiles examined above, and the tapestry, drawings and paintings submitted for the Doctor of Creative Arts degree.

To introduce the work made over the years 1990-1993 it is necessary to look briefly at my art practice before coming to Wollongong in December 1989. During the previous fifteen years I had lived in Bellingen, in northern New South Wales, making tapestries and rugs to commission, as well as teaching and researching part-time. A tight financial situation with my husband and two young children required me to work at great pressure to make a living. From 1984-1987 I co-ordinated a rugweaving workshop, Tapalinga Rugs where I designed rugs for other weavers to make. With three other women, I spun and dyed and made patterns for these rugs, more than eighty in number, which went to many parts of the world. From 1976-1985 I made many commissioned tapestries for the architectural firm in Sydney,

Banksia Circle, 1.2m x 1.2m, Private Collection, 1981.
Noel Bell and Ridley Smith, and for universities, offices, and private homes. I participated in group exhibitions and had solo exhibitions at the Beaver Galleries in Canberra in 1981 and 1983, and at the Old Bakery Gallery and Crafts Council of New South Wales Gallery in Sydney in 1985.

The images I used in this previous body of work look very different to the present range of concepts. What I looked for were the sinuous patterns of the bush vegetation, the intertwinings of the forest around my studio, the subtle colour and texture of bark, leaf and bird. These patterns were often contained by a circular or half circular frame, as if to give the unrelenting plant forms an iconic presence. The use of intricate vegetation seemed almost to indicate a 'horror vacui' or 'the terror of empty space'. Indeed, a psychologist friend saw these twining patterns as symbolic of 'the engulfing mother'. The symbol of the engulfing or devouring mother embodied in entwining vegetation is a very ancient one, with entymological ancestry in the Indo-European root, 'velu', meaning 'encircling, enveloping, winding, turning' from which comes the Latin 'volva', (convolvulus) and also 'vulva'. At this time I was a 'gourmet' of endlessly varied bush environments, with a dense knowledge of plants, animals and ecologies.
Diaries of the time stress this preoccupation with place in terms of vegetation and birds:

4 April 1989
Driving around Coffs - low grey clouds over indigo banana hills. The new industrial estate encroaching on the wild paperbark heathland, flowering as always despite its imminent destruction. Old, perfect, tranquil, in another time - once gone, egrets and paperbarks will never flourish there again - yet the buildings - aluminium, lurid, look transitory enough. Ragged fringe of dark gums still everywhere on the horizon. The land is so patient.

26 November 1989
Wake up suddenly before dawn, not knowing where I am - but its the deep cloudy black forest, a possum on the roof, a koala calling. The boys breathing heavily in the shadows. Quiet before dawn, even insects stilled. Dawn birds start, the koel first. Kookaburras, a yellow robin, a flycatcher. In the distance the rumble of sea like a faint wash. A truck comes along the road, all the birds call at once making the patch of light bigger, touched with gold. And suddenly a wind comes, stirring leaves, adding space and depth.

The decision to move to Wollongong brought the end of my marriage, and the parting from the remote forest and the long established home. This break is reflected in the complete absence of the wreathing vegetation in the new body of work, and a rediscovery of the surface of the ground. Instead of circles, the grid and the fragment which lack closure and certainty began to preoccupy me. The long processes of human habitation and dis-inhabitation and its effect on the landscape,
seemed to be able to reflect and contain my personal loss. Displacement, shifting from loved places to the unknown, is as engraved in the patterns of the psyche, as placement. My story of displacement and uprooting from familiar patterns is reflected in stories of journey and migration not only in my own family, but as a fundamental undercurrent in Australian culture.

By teaching at the University of Wollongong I was freed from the constraints of having to work for commission. This new body of work was able to reflect on the sense of place not only through a decorative and naturalistic observation but also through new reflections on the visuality of archaeology and the wide ranging associations of the tapestry medium. Indeed, I think also, that in this work I do attempt to confront the 'horror vacui', the terror of empty spaces, the imminent nothingness of nightmares that is the underside of ornament, abundance and celebration.4

Nevertheless, this body of work grows out of the long practice of tapestry and design, and obsession with place, developed over many years in rural New South Wales. The major forming influences on my work are the training in archaeology, the ideas behind the growth of textiles and tapestry since the 1960s, and contact with Aboriginality. The critical contexts of these diverse elements have been examined in Part 1, 2 and 3. Writing about one's own work requires a distancing from it, writing 'as if' the text were third person rather than first. Trying to pinpoint connections and meaning in a self-reflexive glance is a known difficulty: a psychoanalyst cannot analyse herself or himself but must always be the analysand of another clinician before becoming qualified. I have been helped in 'placing' my own work by the critical discussions of it written by Sue Rowley and Evelyn Juers, who address the elements of place and displacement, of crossing disciplines, and using the metaphor of archaeology.5 The keen insights of friends, Kay Lawrence, Ian Arcus and Darien Midwinter have also clarified my perceptions.

In relation to writing about the self, feminist thinkers have shown how the traditional male autobiographical texts of western literature, from St. Augustine to Jean Jacques Rousseau are constructed and censored texts which present the conscious self of the author as in control of the unfragmented narrative of the life. Shari Benstock comments:
Gaps in temporal and spatial dimensions of the text itself are often successfully hidden from reader and writer, so that the fabric of the narrative appears seamless, spun of whole cloth. The effect is magical— the self appears organic, the present the sum total of the past, the past an accurate predictor of the future. This conception of the autobiographical rests on a firm belief in the conscious control of the artist over subject matter: this view of the life history is grounded in authority. Because women have a different relation to authority she posits that women’s autobiographical texts are often de-centred, and discontinuous. I have always found it hard to locate ‘one’ self, to be firmly on one ground, and the writers I have read over many years, such as Virginia Woolf or Dorothy Wordsworth, give credibility to a more shifting and fragmented viewpoint.

The inclusion here of a section about Dorothy Wordsworth, the sister of William Wordsworth, and an early nineteenth century diarist writing with an intimate awareness of the English Lake District, allows me to connect my own sense of self and place to an earlier epoch. This epoch was nevertheless of great influence in the beginnings of Australian colonial art, and also in setting up a paradigm of the romantic artist which is still prevalent.

Dorothy Wordsworth and nature

A reflection on a feminine context of looking at the external world of ‘nature’ may serve to position my own drawings of sites. The understanding of the external world in relation to self is not a ‘natural’ universal understanding but a pervasively cultural act.

For me the ‘romantic’ idea of nature, so influential in Australian landscape from the time of Eugene von Guerard, was very attractive in its evocation of place,
though I felt ambivalent about my own contribution in such a scheme of art. The idea of the Romantic artist who, acknowledging his (so rarely her) own self as central to notions of power, finds his own visionary feelings reflected in a transcendental nature did not seem viable to my sense of possible artistic directions. This Romantic idea of the artist, the painter or novelist as the passionate 'outsider', formed the archetype of the 'artist' in Australia when I was a young woman in the 1960s. What was the basis of my hesitation to conform to this pervasive idea of creativity?

The self-assured position of male Romantic artists is what Meena Alexander in her book *Women in Romanticism* calls 'the vision that assumed the authority of self-consciousness'.

The male Romantic poets had 'a social code of implicit autonomy and permission for acts of power'. She goes on:

> The centrality of the poet's self was crucial to an art that tried to free itself of pre-determined orders, whether literary or political. The world could not be remade without visionary freedom.7

Women writers of that epoch, of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, were brought up to care for others, to support and maintain the fragile fabric of household and family, without any sense of autonomy. Their struggle to maintain a sense of their own innate creative subjectivity must always take into account the necessity of being located in the private and domestic sphere. The images of 'femininity' of the time, of women as gentle and nurturing, or possibly sexually alluring and witch like, did not contain in any way an image of women as equal in autonomy of action and creative power to men, and certainly rarely able to feel, or act on, a 'visionary freedom'.

Even two hundred years after the great period of the Romantic poets the force of these dichotomies could still be felt, even in twentieth century Australia. Like the unchanging forms of still life, the patterns of life of those who arranged these domestic objects, who organised the rituals of the table, was resistant to change.8 In my own family women did not work outside the home, though both my grandmothers were well educated, Nellie Eastman as a teacher, Ida Mackie at the Glasgow School of Art. After marriage neither of my grandmothers had any
financial autonomy, being solely dependent on their husbands. As a child, until the age of thirteen, I saw each of my grandmothers constantly in their separate houses, and spent a great deal of time talking to them, listening, helping with housework, learning to knit and embroider - this was before television. I remember the feeling of their lives, the looks of constraint, the bounded territories, the assertion of domestic order and the rhythm of meals as central. My grandfathers came and went, were figures of authority of looming size - but my grandmothers were always there, in their houses. Like many children, I was closer in different ways to my grandparents than my parents, who were caught in the struggle to bring up four children. My mother’s life did not seem substantially altered in comparison to her mother’s, and the same sense of longing for the power to realise thwarted capacities could also be seen, as the children grew older. (In my mother’s case, at least, the flowering of the crafts movement allowed her to develop further her great sensitivities to weaving, knitting, lacemaking and embroidery.) Yet, the following description of early nineteenth century women was still relevant to a mid-twentieth century woman with the desire to be an artist:

The Romantic self presupposed a self-consciousness that had the leisure and space to enshrine itself at the heart of things. Brought up with a very different sense of self, with constant reminders of how their lives were meshed in with other lives in bonds of care and concern, women could not easily aspire to this ideal.9

I was first struck by Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* 10 when I came across them in the 1960s, and re-read them again when I first settled in the forest in
the early 1970s. Despite ‘women’s liberation’ then so much in the air, I did not apply these ideas to this eighteenth century woman, finding the detail and poetry in her work sufficient, and her relationship with her brother William, the transcendental poet, very comprehensible. Her poetic yet simple journals with their detailed documentation of walks and country and light seemed very close to aspects of my life:

8th February 1798
Sat a considerable time upon the heath. Its surface restless and glittering with the motion of the scattered piles of withered grass, and the waving of the spiders’ threads. On our return the mist still hanging over the sea, but the opposite coast clear and the rocky cliffs distinguishable. In the deep Coombe, as we stood upon the sunless hill, we saw miles of grass, light and glittering and the insects passing.11

26th July 1800
We lay a long time looking at the lake, the shores all embrowned with the scorching sun. The Ferns were turning quite yellow, that is, here and there one was quite turned. We walked round by Benson’s wood home. The lake was now most still and reflected the beautiful yellow and blue and purple and grey colours of the sky. We heard a strange sound in the Bainrigg’s wood as we were floating on the water it seemed in the wood, but it must have been above it, for presently we saw a raven very high above us - it called out and the Dome of the sky seemed to echo the sound - it called again and again as it flew onwards and the mountains gave back the sound, seeming as if from their centre a musical bell-like answering to the bird’s hoarse voice. We heard both the call of the bird and the echo after we could see him no longer.12

Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals were written also for William, and their sense of place and specificity infiltrates some of his best known poems. She chose to live as a companion to her brother William in Dove Cottage in Grasmere in the Lake District. Conversations and long walks with William and Samuel Coleridge form the setting that was able to give her writing some existence, compressed into journal form. Her dedication to her brother’s poetic vision allowed her to at least participate in some aspect of literature, and she knew her journals were valued:

A means of knowing emerges in her writing, akin to the subtle quiet that was appreciated in women - a feminised knowledge if you will - non-confrontational, valuing the present and the boundaries of discrete and palpable phenomena, concerned too with care giving and nurture, anxious not to enter into the realms of overt power.
On the third reading of the *Grasmere Journals*, when I had moved to Wollongong, it was the parallel to my own relationship to the natural world that jolted me. Towards the end of my years in the forest, and the end of my marriage, the diaries still record:

Notebook, 19 September, 1989.
If I was set to do a self portrait I would do a forest - defined by my absence, trying not to implicate the ego.
A glittering morning, this forest so beautiful, I feel so identified with every flicker of life in it - tiny moths, orchids, sarsparilla, endless tangle and interactions of branches, leaves and sky. On the tiny spider orchids even more minute spiders, the size of a pinhead. Layers of bird song. Never the same, and lately these mysterious visitations of koalas, bower birds, the black snake twined around the sandpaper fig. How can I leave it? The boys’ laughter - in the dam, down in the bush?

17 June 1989
Waking up in a cloudless dawn - pure gold light, the sun fractured by the forest. Timeless, beautiful, just as it was when I was a child. Kookaburras and parrots, flocks of kurrawongs with their winter cries. Mist on the river flats through the trees. A sheer compelling quality of light and form outside and beyond my troubled psyche.

31 July
The forest seems dark - its been dull and grey ever since I returned - its quiet, separate from me. Crows. The forest becomes menacing through my own pain.

James Mc Gavran, in an essay on Dorothy Wordsworth, describes her as putting herself down through self-transcendence in nature as a method of self-avoidance, of avoiding the issue of placing her own great abilities in a more public realm. 13 For me, her disciplined casting off of ‘sad thoughts’ in pursuit of observation, of displacing the ‘T’ for the ‘eye’, resonated with the parallel reality of my situation. Her forms of observation, details of plants, animals, people in the landscape, and especially of the effects of light and shadow reflected the daily life I knew in the forest.

7 July 1991
Nature as fragmentary, as a precious remnant of a possibly illusory past wholeness - as I have tried to assemble past civilizations from the evidence of potsherds so will we try to resuscitate the wealth and complexity of what was, from the tiny remnants of wild forest. All the power and control over the land in Australia has
been through patriarchy. To perceive the spaces between trees, the negative, without which the positive does not exist, this is the 'unimportant detail' that supports the whole.

29 September 1989
The walks I do between bouts of tapestry: each walk so familiar. There’s some correspondence between me and these places. I suddenly understand the Aboriginal sense of responsibility to place. By my being there the place is enhanced, made conscious somehow. A place with ferns; where once was a huge tree, now all that remains is the ring of its circumference marked by fragments of deeply weathered wood and bark.

Meena Alexander discloses the intricacies of Dorothy Wordsworth’s relationship to the world outside, and its feminine difference to that of her famous brother. She comments:

It does seem.. out of the very privacy that sheltered and fostered her genius and granted her power, came the wound, the fearsome isolation, the repression...\textsuperscript{14}

The privacy and intimacy of her life at Grasmere did give her these moving insights, yet in the following passage, the fragmentary nature of her writing is emphasised - ‘fragments of perception’, ‘brilliant shards’: writing that displaces any confrontation of her real state by intensely noting the landscape in an almost mystical self-transcendence.
As she walks, seeking an exit from her own overwhelming self, she finds release in the minutiae picked out by her eye....These fragments of perception named in a slow resolute catalogue, set out shards of an earthly paradise she has done nothing to create. The flowers invade and console the keeper of the journal....The fragments of her journal resolutely bypass any attempt to explain her inner feelings. Instead the brilliant shards of a perceived world mark out the shifts of her mood, the transitions spelt out in terms of changeable light or weather.... The emphasis is subtly removed from the self and cast on to the objects of perception, however shadowy they may seem.15

My work has always relied on observation and patterning from the natural world as a way of not dealing with, but containing innate contradictions. The indigenous sense of a continuum between self and environment, discussed above in Part 2 is intrinsically different. My framing and categorising eye belongs to a European tradition where the ‘otherness’ of the landscape has to be captured through perception, and then perhaps, through some achievement of transcendence, the constricted self may be caught up in a greater realm. Or as Virginia Woolf puts it in an essay on Dorothy Wordsworth:

If one subdued oneself, and resigned one’s private agitations, then, as if in reward, 
Nature would bestow an exquisite satisfaction.16

Such serving and dedicated relationships to men, as Dorothy gave to her brother William while possibly possessing the same measure of talent as he, were entirely the pattern in my own family, two hundred years later. I confidently imagined that I was moving out of this family model by marrying an artist and living in the bush, with affiliations to the environment movement and to Aboriginal issues. (I thought these were unusual to my conservative background, but have since found my grandfather and great aunt had held similar perceptions about the environment and Aboriginal people long before they were fashionable). In fact this pattern of relationship, though less obvious, insidiously claimed me.

My long immersion in the bush which formed the orientation of my work was centred around the intense observation of the forest as a way to centre myself, to counter any disruption or pull that might threaten this centre and shift my attention to underlying capacities and desires. The focused pleasures, the ‘exquisite satisfaction’ of observation and identification with the landscape were underwritten, as the years passed, with that same ‘fearsome isolation’, and
'repression'. By forcing the desiring self into quietness, perceptions of a wider clarity do break through, yet in putting the needs of the self last, the self becomes dark and destructive. Dorothy Wordsworth in the long years of her later life did in fact descend into the dimness of a physical and mental eclipse. All of the commentators on her work I have mentioned suggest that her willing relinquishment of her gifts may have at least contributed to this despair.17 Or, as Alice Walker would say about black women's efforts to use their capacities, if you don't use what is in you, what is in you will destroy you.18

So, while accepting the inevitable 'subjectivity' of this examination of my work, I recognise the 'discontinuous narrative' as being appropriate. This is not the whole story, but the fragments of it that have been illuminated by my research, like an exploratory excavation that reveals part of a building. What might have seemed an 'obvious' or 'natural' choice of image in my work becomes much more complex on investigation. What is seen, like the partly revealed building, may lead to lengthy excavations. The site of my own work has indeed proved 'more complex than surface indications suggest', to quote Philip Barker at the head of this prelude to the discussion of my practice.

In Part 4 I have loosely used the strategy of approaching my own objects as if I were classifying them as an archaeologist. Chapter Ten reveals the history and context of the sites and the images in them. Chapter Eleven deals with issues of medium and formal visual codes such as the grid and the map. Chapter Twelve examines museum collections and fragments, and the ambience of the images in the work, both classical and personal.


I suspect that my tentativeness towards the ‘vision of wilderness’ landscape tradition in Australia, to which I was so drawn by instinctive inclination, is common in women. Despite the many women artists of still life and intimate landscape, ‘transcendental’, visions of country in this tradition by women are rare. Mandy Martin, in her recent series of Lake Mungo (1993 Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney) does capture the arch of light, (Dorothy Wordsworth’s ‘Dome of sky’) the unbounded space. Yet in Sandra Mc Grath’s *The Artist and the Desert*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1981, there are no paintings by women of this archetypal visionary environment.


Mary Moorman (ed.), *The Grasmere Journals*, p. 31.


CHAPTER 10

ILLAWARRA SITES: CONTEXT AND PROVENANCE

The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body. The self is not contained in any moment or in any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once.

Jeanette Winterson

The ‘intersection of moment and place’ informs this body of work, and has been the moving force in my tapestry practice.

I came from the dense Bellingen forest in 1989 to live near the sea at Corrimal, Wollongong, close to the open and windy midden sites. The intersection of this time, a time of readjustment and sense of loss, with these haunting places seemed fitting, just as at other times and places the classical past had intersected with modern Greek landscapes, or the life of the Tiwi with the campsites and burial places of Bathurst Island. Here could be the portrait of self through a very different kind of ground.

The drawings, watercolours, and tapestry/tapestry fragments of Illawarra sites are very aware of the charged relationship between contemporary non-Aboriginal artists and ideas of the land that stem from Aboriginal culture. It is easy, faced with the aridity of endless suburbs, the banality of daily consumerism, to opt for the

Mt Kembla and Mt Keira from the Bellambi midden site (foreground), near Wollongong, 1992.
juicy plums of indigenous spirituality. I feel extremely hesitant to borrow in any way from the style of any Aboriginal artform, although any genre that uses mapping and ideas of surface may have a superficial 'look' of Aboriginality.

For me, the landscape around Wollongong is imbued with the loss of the people who lived here for so many millennia. (The site at Bass Point, the nameless site, goes back 17,000 years - an almost unimaginable timespan in relation to European ideas of history). Oriana Baddely and Valerie Frazer, writing about land and cultural identity in Latin America point out the obvious fact, so often overlooked:

Any consideration of land is charged above all with questions of occupation, ownership and use, of appropriation, expropriation and control....Landsapes, whether or not they are populated are about land and landuse, space, frontiers, boundaries, territories.²

Territories, boundaries and former use of the land are some of my preoccupations, which are used as metaphors for the bounded and contained self. I would like to see my own 'story' as being able to focus and extend the wider history. The recognition that the history of Australia does not only chart the tragedy of convict history, but

Ground, Murramarang, 3.70m x 2.4m, ochres and graphite on Canzon paper, 1991 - 1992.
also the far less well documented tragedy of Aboriginal history, is only beginning
to be acknowledged.³ The influence of this sense of another almost invisible past,
rather than a conscious influence from an Aboriginal style of representing place, is
what concerns me.

Bea Maddock, printmaker and painter made a series of images about this very issue
in Tasmania, where the elimination of the Aboriginal inhabitants still shadows the
landscape. Rather than warm earth colours associated with ‘Aboriginality’ her
pieces are in blues and greys, a combination of image of coastline, lines of text in
the lost language, and a grid of photographs. She comments that the grey is the
colour of ash, referring to destruction in both the past and the present:

Coming back to Tasmania after being away for twelve or so years. Whenever I
look at the landscape and whenever I drive out in a car I see it as their place ... but
the only things left are those words that have been written down. And their absence
in the landscape is what we are left with.⁴

Coastal middens, the ancient campsites, are peripheral and unnoticed places, absent
to the general consciousness of landscape, yet evoke the history of both Aboriginals
and Europeans. I used the title *Unwritten Country* to refer to the fact that there is no
language for the past of these sites, certainly no written language. The fragments
that form them can almost be ‘read’ as a language, but we have no means to
decipher the code. They are images without text, which could almost be said to
form the unconscious of our seemingly known and well populated coastal strip. The 'unwritten' is the inner country, still only beginning to be explored, and also apprehended through image as much as word. My work particularly explores the actual surface of the ground, the skin of the earth, without perspective or a bounded frame.

**Description**

These works were exhibited in *Archaeologies: Images, Vestiges, Shadows* at Wollongong City Gallery, June/July 1992 and *Unwritten Country*, Long Gallery, University of Wollongong, May 1993. Different media are used, drawing techniques in graphite and pencil, coloured wet media of watercolour and gouache, and a combination of these painted and drawn media with woven tapestry fragments. There is one complete tapestry in the group. Photocopies and collage provide an additional element. Across the range of work, with its references both to Aboriginal sites and classical antecedents, is an attempt to place objects within a space, within an actual gridded site, or within a fictional space of pattern and imagined landscapes. Does the context of the fragmented shells, the mixture of images within the paintings determine their interpretation, or does each item have its own self-referential existence? I shall attempt to make the impetus behind the work clearer.

All the site drawings are made from the surface of the ground, using an aerial view. A string grid was applied over a two to five metre area of the site, and a drawing made to scale, mimicking the process of making archaeological drawings, of surveying the site, described above. Careful note was taken of the orientation of the site, the position of the ocean to the east, and mountains to the west. The drawings convey the chance conjunctions of objects on the surface of the ground, and the mass of shells, bones and stone fragments were accurately indicated within the scale of the grid. The drawings are all fairly large, to give an inkling of the scale of a site, and the grid of the original scale drawing is developed through tonal contrast to emphasise the repetitive unit across the random scatterings of the ground.

Notebook, 27 November 1991

It’s the idea of actuality, of representing a specific place in an infinitely expanding mosaic of an archaeological grid.
Ground, Corrimal, 1.5m x 2.1m,
Charcoal, graphite, gouache and crayon on Canzon paper, 1992.
30 November 6.30 am
Outside, an even grey sky, a cool wind from the south.
The gritty earthiness of sites and places, that's what I want to communicate, the thereeness and wonder of unremarked detail. Put it inverted commas to place it in an archaeological context. 'Nothing is nothing' - every trace and vestige does reflect another network of causes. There's a poetry about the midden, a feeling about the place, which is quite distinct from machine made desolation.

The watercolours and gouaches describe assorted collections of objects and their conjunctions with places, particularly these coastal sites. They are all painted on rag paper, in watercolour and gouache, with some collage in tissue and other paper. Isolated objects, sometimes from an archaeological context, are combined with depictions of coastal and imagined landscapes.

Rather than having the specificity of the site drawings, many of the paintings derive from vivid dreams, recurrent dreams in which the same events are re-enacted with the insistency of the unconscious. If the fragments of archaeology are like the unconscious of our culture, teasing us with possible connections and meanings, the images of the personal unconscious tantalise in much the same way.

The tapestry and the tapestry fragments are woven in a mixture of wool and silk on a cotton warp. As I shall discuss in more depth in the next chapter which deals with medium, their technique is not a tapestry style derived from a workshop (such as

*Black ground, Bellambi, 5.5m x 1.3m, ochres, graphite, oil pastel on Canzon paper, 1992.*

*Central section of composite drawing, with other sections by Antoinette Prendergast and Edward King.*
the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, or the Edinburgh School of Art) but a way of working that emanates originally from Bauhaus ideas of structure and process, combined with a deep appreciation of the early Coptic tapestries (from Egypt, second to sixth centuries A.D.) that I knew well in London. The tactility, the texture, of the woven surface stands out against the flatness of the drawing and watercolour, and adds a different dimension, images that are actually more constructed within the woven surface. In the pieces with the tapestry fragments it is the medium of tapestry that stands out as being vividly and intricately crafted in colour and form, compared to the two dimensional marks of the drawing.

**Provenance: the coastal sites**

The drawings are made from four sites, and elements of these places also appear in the paintings and tapestries. Each of these sites is known from many visits at all times of day, and even at night. Murramarang Aboriginal area near Bateman’s Bay has a complex group of shell middens, situated spectacularly on a headland with rock platforms, inlets and a large island, Brush Island very close by. An extensive variety of stone tools dates this site to at least 4000 years ago.\(^5\)
The east Corrimal hearth site is near Bellambi Point, just north of Wollongong, and is one of the largest middens in the Illawarra, described as early as 1893 as having many burials and a great height of shell debris. This site, like Murramarang, is close to the plentiful shellfish of rock platforms, with water and shelter from the wind. Close by, and rising from the edge of the shell debris, is the Bellambi Sewerage Works. There is a large Housing Commission estate not far to the west, and new heaps of eating and drinking debris are often to be found on top of the very old camping sites of the middens.

Notebook, 30 November 1991
Walked around the area just south of the sewerage works - found pockets of very dense shells. An old umbrella, a box that once contained hair dye with a photograph of a beautiful woman on the cardboard packet, lying on the midden surface, with beer bottles, fragments of brown and green glass, black ashes from a recent fire. Also bottle tops, a sheet of corrugated iron. It all looked quite acceptable to the midden, an ancient place of eating and drinking.

My interest in grids as an ordering device was heightened by the ‘reconstruction’ of the Corrimal/Bellambi midden site by the Conservation Commission in May 1991. To strengthen the sand dunes, the midden was bulldozed and converted from irregular peaks to a rolling evenness. Over this reconstructed area a grid of grass was planted, at forty centimetre intervals. I was horrified at the interference in the site, but very intrigued at the beautiful vanishing points provided by the plants. Over two years or so, wind and wave patterns have restored something of the irregularity of the site.
Black ground, Bellambi. 5.5m x 1.3m.
ochres, graphite, oil pastel on Canzon paper, 1992.
Collaborative drawing with right hand section by Antoinette Prendergast
left hand section by Edward King.
Bass Point, south of Wollongong - named after the explorer who first described this coast - is a particularly complex site, and still offers many possibilities for further development of drawings. The Point is a reserve, with a large stone memorial to seven sailors who died rescuing the crew of the *City of Boston*, a United States freighter which was wrecked in a storm in 1943. Pieces of contorted and rusted iron still litter the rock platform, and are almost embedded in the midden which comes down to the edge of the rocks. Josephine Flood describes the site:

There is a continuous series of some 11 middens and open campsites on the north and south sides of Bass Point. One of the larger stratified open sites on a gently sloping hill .... at Little Bay was excavated by Sandra Bowdler in 1969-70. Occupation went back 17000 years, making it the oldest dated coastal campsite in N.S.W. At that time the sea level was much lower and Bass Point was a hill about 30 kilometres inland from the Pleistocene coast. Most Pleistocene sites were probably on the then shoreline, so are now submerged beneath the sea, but people camped on what is now Bass Point from time to time and left behind them the occasional stone tool. Then, during the last 3,500 years, after the sea had risen and the hill had become a headland, the site became a focus for fishing hunting and the collection of shellfish. A midden developed, with remains of fish, shellfish, seals, birds and land mammals.8

There is no indication anywhere on the Bass Point reserve of the extreme antiquity of this site on the east coast, except a painted Aboriginal flag on the path leading to the Memorial. The traces and residues of the old site are invisible to an unobservant eye, making it seem that the history of the place began with the shipwreck.

*Drawing of fragment, 25cm x 25 cm, ochre and crayon, 1992.*
Coastal sites as still life

The images within the drawings are not whole, but partial. The drawing itself is a fragment of the larger fragmentary site. The absences within the site (the personal and the geographical site) are as dominant as the presences which are never complete. Yet every trace and vestige, left by active bodies, does reflect a network of past events. I remember the vitality of the beach campsite on Bathurst Island where the intricate kinship law and mythological significance of each part of the landscape leave no ostensible mark in the simple artefacts of hunting and gathering, yet these patterns of culture inform the shell and bone remnants left on the site.

The unremarked detail and grit of the earth on these sites is like everyday life. The shapes on the midden, the convoluted and weathered shells are like fragile and broken bodies, or bits of bodies, ears, bones, pieces of hands and feet, sexual organs. ‘Kuckles’, cockle shells are the old sign of the female sex9, and in Europe the sign of the traveller who has made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, often dug up in graves. Both inferences seem appropriate here. The broken things in the drawings are like the teeming images just below the surface of the mind: a balance must be struck between them and the ‘cool’ objective archaeological drawing, where the mark of the hand is restrained, where content imposes itself within a seemingly disciplined framework.

For archaeologists the fragments of ancient rubbish dumps are the key to a whole culture, and, as any scavenger knows, dumps may contain unforeseen treasures. The images within the site refer to past events of eating and drinking, of implements associated with food capture and preparation. The fragments of the midden could be said to form a kind of prehistoric still life, crystallised in chance configurations. The objects can be described: querns, grinding stones, shell knives, fishhooks, needles, points, hearth stones, stone hand axes and flaked tools. So grouped, they evoke still life, a ‘natura morta’.

An illuminating study of the still life genre has been made by Norman Bryson, with a particular emphasis on the area called ‘rhopography’ in Roman times, meaning the art of depicting rubbish, or ‘lower’ forms:

Still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional
Detail of *Journey with cups*, 72 cm x 1.8m,
Watercolour, gouache, collage on Arches paper 1992
occurs: there is wholesale eviction of the Event.....
Rhopography is the depiction of those things that lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks....Still life takes on the exploration of what ‘importance’ tramples underfoot. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness. Its assault on the prestige of the human subject is therefore conducted at a very deep level....All men must eat, even the great.10

Grinding stones and shell knives are the remote antecedents to our own analogous eating utensils and containers. Bryson talks about the cultural field of still life as being beyond individuals, providing cultural memory and family tradition for generations:

Though still life can always be accused of dealing only in odds and ends, in rhyparos, debris, the abiding and ancient forms chosen by still life speak of cultural pressures as vast as those which in nature carve valleys from rivers and canyons from glaciers.....Simple utensils obey a slow, almost geological rhythm. In stratum upon stratum the archaeology of western sites unearths endless variations on the same basic ideas, of storage jars, oil-lamp, beaker, vase..... Such objects.... present the life of everyman as far more a matter of repetition than of personal originality or invention,11

The great age of the coastal sites, far older than European civilization, means that the forms of this prehistoric still life are only dimly perceived by us: their ancestry is discernable, but not directly congruous to our plates and cutlery, bowls and jars. The patterns of behaviour, the language that made meaning of these fragments as an integral part of the fabric of everyday life, are unrecoverable and unknown. The debris of the sites is left just so, scattered across the surface of site, the merest trace of the life once lived in these places. I have represented some sites (e.g. Ground, Murraramarang) as a fragment composed of fragments - endlessly referred loss, never whole. This interrelated filigree of fragments with all their associations can also hold an inarticulate sense of loss and underlying darkness. These are the disconnections of the mind, imagined, not spoken or written as text.

From all these coastal sites notable landmarks of pre-contact times can be seen, identified with Aboriginal stories. Mt. Kembla, Mt. Corrimal, and Mt. Keira are seen from Bellambi/Corrimal. Pigeonhouse Mountain, a known Aboriginal sacred site is visible from Murraramarang. The islands at the entrance to Port Kembla to the
north of Bass Point, are associated with Aboriginal myths of the arrival of the first people.12

The paradox of archaeology is that a site that is excavated to be read, deciphered, to inform and extend historical knowledge is destroyed by the process of excavation. The dig is an unrepeatable experiment, almost a theatrical event. (The long seasons of excavation, with many idiosyncratic personalities living closely together in remote places, certainly give credence to archaeology as also theatre and performance.) As the site is observed and excavated, it is destroyed. A feminist eye could play with the idea of the ‘symbolic’ logocentric system of investigation, the grid, as destroying the vulnerable and defenceless ‘maternal’ ground of the site. Certainly, some Aboriginal people have felt that excavation is also intrusion and sacrilege. Yet the grid may be a cultural form, not necessarily gendered. A simplistic use of male/female oppositions is not relevant: the earth may not only be vulnerable, but also devouring, and the grid is also a form used consistently by women.

Detail of Ground, Murramarang. 3.70m x 2.4m, ochres and graphite on Canson paper, 1991 - 1992.
The inner context for these drawings is the sense of loss that pervaded my life at this time, in relation to divorce proceedings and the disappearance of a whole way of life and home. Nightmares of emptiness and intrusion afflicted me. To place my loss within the huge, if remote, loss and pain associated with these sites was to place personal anguish in proportion. The grid keeps the abyss at bay, as Lucy Lippard points out in relation to Eva Hesse's work, and also disallows obvious emotionalism.

Hesse uses the grid as both a prison and a safeguard against letting an obsessive process or excessive sensitivity run away with her. Women frequently use rectilinear frameworks to contain organic shapes, or mysterious rites of autobiographical content. Repetition, and repetition of moveable units in particular, leads to fragmentation, the disintegration of one order in favour of a new one.13

Tentatively I feel that the chaos of the surface of the ground represents for me the 'ground' of our earliest being, and the grid is the 'symbolic' order of logical language placed over it, structuring the traces of emptiness. I do not want to assign an absolute gender to either of these concepts. Mythological studies indicate that gender is often undifferentiated, both male and female, at the sources of creation myths that later come to uphold social structures. Like scholarship in difficult times, the grid offers a framework, a support. Grids hold the shifting assemblages of fragments on ancient sites and hold the shifting sites of one's own ground. Because of my own sense of imminent slipping over the edge, into nightmare and darkness, the grid is a force that keeps the site in place, a strength to stop the dissolution of the 'katabasis' (descent). The descent is of course, death. The midden reminds me that those once living here have died, as I must too. Archaeology digs up death as well as the traces of the living.
For me the sites are places of passion, but I did not want the form of the drawing, the voice of the surface of the ground to be obviously subverted by any intrusion of personality on my part, though of course the very selection of this part of the site rather than that, and the use of the expressive mark is a personal choice. The site and the objects in it must speak for me, so that personal loss is encompassed by the impersonal loss of history. The various uses of the grid, which in archaeology presupposes a small scale mapping technique, are enlarged on in more detail in the next chapter as are the elements of form as a cultural choice.

Conclusion

In the drawings, paintings and tapestries of the Illawarra places I have tried to acknowledge that the self is also under observation, not restricted but free to make connections in both private and public spheres. Most importantly, this investigation has not been constrained by difficult relationships but encouraged and helped by friends and colleagues. Here I have set aside the celebratory and fertile entwining of plant forms (though they do reappear in an appropriated form in the Shellal mosaic piece), to investigate the stoniness of the ‘ungarlanded earth’, a different nature that also recognizes human death and destruction.

Detail of Ground, Corrimal, 2.10m x 1.50m, Charcoal, graphite, gouache, crayon, 1991
The difficulties of presenting a feminine sense of place is ongoing for me. I have noted that the almost compulsive adherence to the patterns of intricate vegetation in my former work is related through the very structures of language to the female body. I had thought that the representation of the surface of the ground might move this preoccupation to a different sphere, a bony world of rocks, hard, brittle and crusted shell forms. Yet it appears that rocks, coming from the ground are also, of course, symbolic of the mother in the antiquity of Europe, as well as Australia. The ‘horror vacui’ has been modified and made conscious, but perhaps I have not escaped from the ‘entwining mother’ but merely shifted to another aspect of the maternal. This may indeed sometimes be the Terrible Mother, who demands sacrifice. Prometheus was chained to the rocks of the chthonic mother, and the heroes Theseus and Peirithous were punished by growing fast on to rocks. My diaries from Crete recall the visit to the birthplace of Zeus on Mount Dicti, the immense rocky cavern with its dark pool. From this rocky cavern came the stone that was venerated in Delphi as the ‘omphalos’, the navel of the world.

A less threatening, but more grieving condition of the rocky ground is suggested by the myth of Demeter and Persephone, where the mother Demeter wanders over the face of the earth seeking her daughter who has been swallowed up by it, by Hades who lives in the dark underworld below the surface. This is a myth that I, the journeying daughter also recounted in letters to my own mother, left at home. The ancient connections of substances and elements, vegetation and rocks, are dark myths, archaic cultural forms that may only faintly reverbrate for us, yet, like the stone flaked knives on the midden persistently hint at yet another layer of meaning.

Discovering Dorothy Wordsworth again in the course of this research allowed me to look at my life through hers, despite great differences in time, place and circumstance. We share a link in an affection for marginal places and insignificant fragments of landscape which also connect to the ‘rhopography’ of my still life representations of the site. To paraphrase Jeanette Winterson, the intersections of moment and place suggested by these explorations of perceiving place may perhaps, just catch the vanishing self.


Rodney Hall, interview, *The 7.30 Report*, ABC TV, 30th May 1994. 'Each generation has to re tell its stories in its own language. We've constituted our history as a European tragedy - but its really an Aboriginal tragedy.'


Middens have little 'status' as sites, because they seem mere heaps of shells, and because they are so common. The law protects known Aboriginal sites, but in this case a local Aboriginal man, with no particular contact with the area, had given permission for the bulldozing. Because of the dense settlements behind the dunes, protection of the dunes from erosion is given first priority.


For example Jimmy Chi (director), 'Everybody Wants Kuckles', *Bran Nue Dae*, Musical, Broome, Western Australia, 1992.


The stories that survive about many places in the Illawarra are documented in Michael Organ, *Illawarra & South Coast Aborigines: 1770-1850*, Aboriginal Education Unit, University of Wollongong, 1990.


This 'omphalos' was in fact said to be the stone that the baby Zeus' mother Rhea gave to his devouring father Cronus, substituting the rock for the child. When Cronus eventually disgorged the stone it was taken to Delphi by Zeus,
where it was constantly anointed with oil and offered strands of unwoven wool
From Pausanias, cited by Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1, Penguin,
CHAPTER 11

MEDIUM AND FORM

Any medium - what I'm interested in is the cultural act.
Lyndal Jones at the Adelaide Festival 1992

All good art should operate at many levels of engagement and to this end I continually attempt to enrich my process.
Julie Brown-Rrap 1991

I would agree with Lyndal Jones that a fixed hierarchy of media may inhibit the viewer's perception of significant 'cultural acts'. The impetus to address some of the issues regarding power, environment, and the space permitted for women to engage with art processes mentioned in the last chapter, may require a shifting use of process that includes many media.

Drawing: Scale and Collaboration

Making a drawing to scale to be enlarged or reduced is the mapping technique which allows large portions of the earth's surface to be represented on paper, folded up, and put in one's pocket. It is also the process for scaling up tapestry designs into 'cartoons'. I had made scaled up drawings sometimes three metres square when working on tapestry commissions in the past.

The three large Illawarra site drawings utilise the resources of textile processes, in the surfaces built up in layers, and the use of resist techniques like wax and oil, which refer to batik. I prepared red and black colours from earth ochres mixed with a touch of polyvinyl acetate, as I had learnt to do while on Bathurst Island, repairing bark paintings. I liked the use of materials to represent the earth that are of the earth. I had noted Josef Beuys' use of iron (ferric chloride) and even diluted blood in his early watercolours. Red ochre is often associated with the 'blood' of the earth and I imagine these whitened and weathered sites as imprinted with blood.

The drawings contain areas that are actually rubbed by placing a light paper over the site and rubbing it with graphite. The collaged background of Tenuous Evidence: Shellal Mosaic is constructed in this way, by rubbing sections of the rock, wood and leaves under foot on Jamberoo Mountain:
Notebook, 24 November 1991

Rubbing the bush: tiny traces emerge, not as eye or mind conceives, but as paper and graphite bring them out - a true archaeology, limited, two dimensional, lacking colour, but resonant with mystery and association, the 'inert traces' found in the house site, the grave, or further back, the fossil. This mark is impersonal, even if the selection process is very culture bound.

By controlling the visual elements used in a drawing, I wanted to show that any trained hand could allow the surface of the ground to speak. Antoinette Prendergast and Edward King, two students, collaborated with me in Black Ground, Bellambi, and Antoinette helped scale up the big drawing Ground, Murruramurang. I can see differences in representation, like differences in handwriting, but the same visual 'language' is apparent throughout. Archaeologists and textile artists commonly collaborate in this way, but it is unusual in other visual artforms.

The Mark

Of course, the traces of the hand are evident in the site drawings, in the manipulation of tone particularly. I noted in November 1991 that the current work of Julie Brown Rrap and Narelle Jubelin used photography because the mark has been eliminated.

Detail of drawing of midden, ochre and crayon, 1992.
Notebook, 21 November 1991

Julie Brown Rrap (in her installation ‘Resistance’ in the Wollongong City Gallery 1991) uses photography because there is no trace of the hand, of individuation, of the mark. If I use the mark consciously, I must refer back to the ‘markless’ archaeological drawings which go beyond the personal, are infinitely reproducible, yet site specific, time specific. My brain/body caught up in this mesh of time. The images are mine, but not mine, framed within frames.

Archaeology is about the traces of the hand, the vestiges left by active bodies - the mental order that directs the hand is less tangible, inchoate.

Yet for my purposes, photographs of the sites did not get the clarity of representation that I wanted because of recession in space, because of broad areas of textures, rather than particularities. The ‘technical’ marks of the archaeological drawings I used as a reference also go beyond the personal, are infinitely reproducible as is a photograph, yet site specific. The ‘documentary’ archaeological drawings that I looked at with fresh eyes (in the slide library of the Department of Archaeology, University of Sydney) seemed to me to reverberate with emotion by their very restraint in recording the innumerable fragments of old destruction and death.
Notebook 24 November 1991

The 'mark', as made in blissfully drawing from the bush - has to somehow be put into quotation marks, if the heroism of the 'marker' is not to be instinctively interrogated. Yet, in Japanese/Buddhist tradition the mark is seen as beyond, aside from the individual, expressing 'thereness', 'that art thou' not the egoistic self as creator. By questioning the instinctive brush stroke (Brown Rrap, Jubelin) we place in question the whole approach of (male) western artistry, a sort of despair at where it has got us. I fall between these two positions.

I feel that the 'heroic' marks of the Abstract Expressionist tradition, so pervasive in Australia and yet so easily read as merely 'aesthetic' radicalism, are not entirely sympathetic to my idea of expressing the site, by the site. I had seen large drawings by Mike Parr and Emmanuel Raft at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1991 and admired their scale and severity. Victor Burgin, writing about the privileging of painting in the logocentric western tradition comments on the link of the mark to the body:

Paint. the brush mark, is the index, the very trace of this expressive body and thus of the 'human essence' to which it plays host...Any form of inscription directly linked to human agency, without the mediation of modern technology, is to be valorised.\(^3\)

For women the association of the gestural mark is frequently linked to the male artists of the Abstract Expressionist idiom, to a modernism that tacitly supported...
Journey with cups, 72 cm x 1.8m.

Watercolour, gouache, collage on Arches paper 1992
the inequities between male and female artists. Many women artists at the ‘cutting edge’ have therefore chosen to work in collage, in appropriation strategies, in site specific installation, multimedia and photography. I wanted the *site* to talk in my drawings, I wanted no heroics from the artist, although I did want to use the full resources of the expressive mark. The inarticulate, so often invisible site must speak through the controlling grid laid over it. I wanted the site to draw itself. In the large piece *Ground, Murramarang* the earth colour is printed on with a rough towel to get a certain kind of muted texture. I would like to achieve a drawing which had, as Joseph Beuys asserted, ‘an imprint of reality affirmed by the inner spirit’.5

Another way of looking at the mark, as in a sense the ‘handwriting’ of the body is expressed by Lucy Lippard in her analysis of Eva Hesse:

> An integral part of Hesse’s work is that certain pleasure in proving oneself against perfection, or subverting the order that runs the outside world... In despoiling neat edges and angles with ‘home-made’ or natural procedures that relate back to one’s own body, one’s own personal experience, Thus outwardly rational work can be saturated with a poetic and compensatory intensity ....6

This certain roughness, the mark of the hand rather than the machine, is fundamental not only to tapestry but also in the way I use the watercolour brushstroke and the drawn mark, positioning the work in the long tradition of western media. Yet this is conscious, I am aware of the wider cultural associations of the ‘mark’, without wanting to locate it, and limit it, as only a ‘heroic’ strategy.
A drawn mark on a piece of white paper has the immediacy and spontaneity of a diary entry, the first translation of an image from mind to material. As Helene Cixous talks of a feminine 'écriture', writing which does not erase, but enhances the feminine, so drawing may have this intent consciousness of a woman's sensibility to space and form. Dorothy Wordsworth's fragmentary diary entries may not have the full visionary vocabulary of her brother William's poetry but they offer a parallel intensity from another understanding of space and consciousness, using the same elements of words and sentences as the channel for expression.

**Watercolour and gouache**

The medium of watercolour has few 'heroic' associations compared to oil painting, and has been the medium for amateurs, for topographical and botanical artists, often women, who document the natural world. It is rarely a medium for the large public painting, but for private, reflective and landscape painting.

I learnt watercolour techniques from my grandfather, Laurie Wood, who used to sit on his veranda painting the rim of trees at the end of the garden, on Watmans paper carefully stretched over a small wooden frame. Instead of the actual road behind the trees, he put in the sea, a piece of artistic licence that impressed me at the age of
Oracle at Towradji, 78 cm x 105 cm, watercolour, gouache, collage
1992
ten or so. As a special treat, for a birthday party about 1955 my father hired a projector and some films. One of these was about Albert Namatjira and his extraordinary achievements in watercolour, which my grandfather admired very much, being closely allied to the Rex Battarbee tradition himself. 'If he can do it, you can' he told me. I have never been quite sure what he meant, but I took it at the time as a mark of special distinction. (Being an autocrat with his wife, my grandmother Nellie, did he mean that even women could aspire to be like a successful Aboriginal artist? or that if an Aboriginal artist could be successful, anyone could with a bit of application, even a girl?) I still have his battered old metal watercolour box, and remember the excitement of buying the tiny pans of colours with him at Dymocks, with names like Carmine and Chrome. Watercolour has accompanied my life, and throughout my travels I made notations in the medium, as a prelude for tapestry, or just as records of place.

While working at the British Museum in London in 1969/1970, I made a particular study of the Samuel Palmer sketchbooks (early nineteenth century), in ink, pencil and watercolour, which conveyed a transcendent feeling about elements of landscape. Samuel Palmer of course comes from that same milieu of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Romanticism that Dorothy and William Wordsworth inhabited. Watercolour was also a medium that could illuminate an inner world, the world of imagination and dreams, as well as precisely indicate the natural world. I admired Albrecht Durer’s dreamscapes and Paul Klee’s fantasies.

Watercolour has an intensity of colour which is like dyeing - and as a tapestry weaver I dyed all my own yarn in a multitude of specific shades, so that nuances of colour were controllable. When colour is placed on wet paper it moves and changes in not quite predictable ways. In the large piece, *Archaeology of the sea* I used this quality of watery flux and intense colour as a very metaphor of the sea - water about water - to contrast with the grid of the sarcophagi from the shipwreck, which I had drawn in situ under the sea so many years before.

Objects of personal significance (for example, a dried seahorse found on the beach) can be played with as if they were archaeological fragments detached from some other time and place, using the mode of the natural history documenter or topographer. The connection between the images in these paintings is through the position of the assembler, who investigates a personal archaeology where chronologies and places can be reconstituted to map a personal significance. Ancient and contemporary objects and landscapes from both classical and
Archaeology of the sea, 1.11m x 1.88m, watercolour and gouache on Arches paper, 1992
University of Wollongong Permanent Collection
Aboriginal pasts can be reconnected to make sense of seeming dichotomies of experience.

**Tapestry**

The medium of woven tapestry is used in a fragmentary form in the three pieces derived from the Shellal mosaic in the War Memorial Museum in Canberra, *Tenuous Evidence: Shellal mosaic fragment*, *Katabasis/Going down. Fragment with hindquarters of a rabbit*, *Katabasis/Going down, Fragment with roundel*. A complete tapestry is presented in *Her only desire: Fragmentary site with Lady from Palmyra*, although the woven site is fragmentary. The same site appears in *Site map with flawed mirror*, with the mirror woven as a tapestry fragment.8

The significance of museum collections and the classical influence arises in the next chapter. The actual medium of tapestry as I have used it in these pieces is discussed here. The hold of tapestry is elusive; perhaps based in the sense of rhythm and progression of the weaving, a time of reflection, as if the mind’s wanderings were being inserted into the fabric and made substantial by the movement of the hands. Such repetitive activity - spinning, weaving, is the traditional forum for narrating and thereby transmitting, histories, folktales, myths, ‘spinning a tale’. All through this document texts have been likened to a ‘fabric’. Walter Benjamin aligns the repetitive rhythm of process with storytelling, and certainly narrative is inherent in tapestry:

> Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places... are already extinct in the cities and

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*Rabbit coming out of burrow, Apocalypse tapestry, Angers, detail of panel 52*, Jacques Cailleteau, 1987, p.84.
declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears... It is lost because there is no more spinning and weaving to go on while they are being listened to... This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unravelled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship.9

Since Benjamin wrote that essay in 1936 there has been a revival of craft processes, possibly for this very reason - to retain the story.10 It is intriguing to note his constant use of the weaving metaphor in his writing. Certainly in tapestry the traditional flat Gobelin medium has had a resurgence in the Western world, as if to counter balance the imminence of the superhighway of the communications media with a few country lanes and field tracks.

European languages themselves developed with the development of complex craft processes. In a fascinating study of word excavation Elizabeth Barber has shown how the craft of spinning and weaving gives rise to complex concepts that are retained in words.11 These words can be analysed for their layers of meaning to recreate the precise contexts of an ancient craft. Some of the Greek words - from which our English terms may derive - have their roots in Indo-European, the language brought to Europe by tribes spreading out from Central Asia into Europe.
and the Aegean in the Bronze age. The verbs comb, card, shear, pluck, yank, tear out have an Indo-European derivation going back to Minoan Crete. Similarly the process of preparing linen fibre, gives hitting, pounding, driving off with blows, itching, combing, scratching. The spindle, ‘atraktos’, is derived from an Indo-European root meaning to twist and turn, and copulate (‘twist into one’). The round spindle whorl, ‘sphondulos’, refers to a whole group of round objects, vertebrae, column drums, round beetles, slingstones. A whole cluster of words from Greek and earlier origins describe kinds of thread - strand, cord, coil, line, roving, string, yarn, even sinew and nerve. Barber demonstrates that warp thread has connotations of orderliness and long fine strength, the weft thread on the contrary, the beaten-in thread, need not be strong but can be soft, fluffy and warm, and even flickering and wavering. I was delighted to see that the root of the Greek word to weave, could also mean playing a stringed instrument, as the unwoven warp of a prepared tapestry loom has precisely this connotation.

Textile processes are thus deeply entwined in the roots of language and custom - perhaps indicating why one chooses a particular medium rather than another. The momentum of such rooted customs may have formed the background to the obvious sympathy for textiles in my upbringing as I have described above, my mother, grandmother and great grandmother all had a love and knowledge of patterned textiles, embroidery, petit point, crochet, knitting, lacemaking and applique. Woven tapestry, a much more professional, public art was outside their expertise, and therefore seemed to position me outside the confined world of

Square with a hare, 18cm x 20cm, Coptic tapestry fragment, 6th century, Marie Helene Rutschowscaya, Coptic Fabrics, Editions Adam Biro, Paris, 1990, p.16.
domestic textiles. Tapestry is also about place, about commitment to consecutive time in a place, because of its slowly constructed nature. I used to note my anxiety when I lived in Bellingen when I did not have a tapestry on the loom, feeling that the days were unstructured.

Tapestry could also be a ‘ritual’ activity that could mitigate disconnectedness through its intrinsic interconnected structure. Looking back now on the undercurrent of difficulty that ran through my married life I can appreciate this description in a novel by Anais Nin:

She was weaving and sewing and mending because he carried in himself no thread of connection ... of continuity or repair... She sewed so the warmth would not seep out of their days together., 12

The allure of tapestry for me came from a combination of these qualities of obsessive construction, dense and three dimensional possibilities of colour and texture, of a layered surface, a woven image which may take on an iconic stability, and an archaic and historic resonance. Archaeology has demonstrated a similar long term dedication in the excavation of sites, in the slow piecing together of evidence from fragments to make meaningful connections, in the layering of strata and the use of the grid as a measuring and ordering device.
Contemporary woven tapestry comes in many styles of process which can be ‘read’ by a knowing eye to deduce provenance and workshop. In Australia, the Edinburgh school has been very influential in training weavers both as individuals and for the Victorian Tapestry workshop. This style of tapestry weaving, developed by Archie Brennan during his directorship of the Edinburgh workshop, works from a cartoon, and keeps the cut ends of the weft on the reverse side of the tapestry, away from the weaver. In the Aubusson tradition in France, by contrast, weavers work from the back of the tapestry, and see the front only in a mirror. The Edinburgh tradition also emphasises a particular relationship of warp to weft, with a tightly packed weft, in a medium spaced warp setting. In the Victorian Tapestry workshop subtle shifts in colour are organised through up to ten or twelve fine strands of different tones of a colour being woven in one row to give painterly transitions, a tendency Archie Brennan once commented on as being dangerously close to ‘porridge’.

In the Aubusson tradition, tonings are provided through the use of ‘hachure’, or hatching in which alternate rows of two colours are woven, in two wefts. Methods of ‘passing’ the bobbin are rigorous in both Gobelin and Aubusson traditions in France, and the sett of the warp is fairly strictly adhered to. Much contemporary American tapestry has developed through weavers studying in the Aubusson style, and therefore, on the west coast a style has developed which shows strong influence of hatching and a particular abstract decorative form. Jean Pierre Larochette’s workshop has been particularly influential.

My own ‘style’ of weaving is more idiosyncratic than these rigorous workshop techniques. I learnt tapestry weaving from Ruth Hurle in 1969, a weaver at the Stanhope Institute in London, through the elements of structure. The famous weavers at this time in London were Tadek Beutlich and Peter Collingwood, and their books on weaving techniques were the essential references I kept beside the loom for the next ten years. I closely studied Coptic weaving because of the expressive and eccentric use of the weft, which moves diagonally across the warp, in a very fluid way, creating a momentum in the pattern that comes from the weaving itself, not from the translation of a drawn line. I liked to let the predominantly horizontal flow of weft patterns subtly change and alter the concept, so that the object looked constructed as much by the weave as by the design. I did not want to conceal the tactility of the tapestry, or occasional roughnesses, but felt the awkwardness of joins could give a vitality and life that the perfect rendering in tapestry of a painted surface lacked.
It is this ‘Coptic’ quality that I have tried to capture in the fragments woven here. In New South Wales in the 1970s the influence of Polish and eastern European fibre art was strong, as I have shown. The integrity of the object was bound up in the process of its making, allowing the tactile qualities of material to be fully expressive. I wanted the tapestry to have the vitality of image, but image also as imbued in an object, constructed into the interlocking threads that make up the fabric. Beatrijs Sterk, the influential European commentator on tapestry puts it:

What I looked for in tapestry was this quality of medieval integrity: pictorial work not put onto canvas or background, but coming into existence through a simultaneous building up of background and image.13

As well as Coptic tapestry, I looked closely at the techniques of the nomadic kelims, where the structural processes of, for example, a saw toothed vertical join, are part of the character of the rug.

For the development of my weaving process the example of Polish weaving has been a continuously fascinating model. The clear distinctions between the ‘symbolic’ tapestry tradition and ‘semiotic’ textiles that I have examined in Western Europe, America and Australia was not so clear cut in Poland. After the war in 1945 the only materials available for weaving were handspun wool from Polish folk traditions and materials from industry and agriculture such as sisal, hemp, rope, cotton and paper twine. I have already discussed the powerful, large scale work of Magdalena Abakanowicz using these coarse and vital textures.

The next generation of Polish weavers is of particular interest, as the Gobelin tapestry technique has been revived and used in an idiosyncratic way, particularly to explore notions of history and culture. Urszula Plewka-Szmidt is an artist of great range, who has shown three-dimensional pieces at Lausanne throughout the 1970s but now works in the Gobelin technique because of her ‘obsession with

expressing memory and the passing of time'. Her large tapestry *Symbols*, 1979, represents the head of a famous wooden polychrome Madonna, paired with the portrait of Marilyn Monroe. The heads are set into a field of plain tapestry which is woven in slits to form a grid of squares, some with small numbers in them, which set up 'an imaginary prism through which the past is contrasted with present time.' Her technique contrasts many kinds of materials, dense matt threads and reflective smooth metallic fibres. This piece has been an inspiration to me, and though not consciously at the time, I can see I was influenced by Ursula Plewka-Schmidt's concepts when designing my own tapestry *Fragmentary Site*. I like the great sensitivity to materials in the Polish work: the mysterious quality the tapestries have of being representational and iconic from a distance, but on coming closer an entirely abstract 'semiotic' world of colour, thread and texture take over the field of vision.

This same characteristic is very evident in Ewa Latkowska-Zychska's large meditative tapestries derived from photographs of grass and water, which evoke space while being entirely textural and on the surface. I stayed with Ewa in Warsaw in 1992 and had the opportunity to look closely at her tapestries hanging in every room, and to observe also tapestries in progress. I found the Polish approach to the process of tapestry very close to my own: a simple loom mechanism which may
merely be a frame, no bobbins but finger hanks of yarn used to insert the weft in the warp, and large parts of the tapestry woven without a detailed cartoon. There is no way such work could be described as woven paintings: the full range of expression and textural mark open to the weaver has been used to great subtlety and effect. Perhaps the sense of a ‘dark history’ which came through so clearly in my long conversations with Polish artists at Lodz, parallels my own sense of the dark areas of Australian colonial history.17

In no way did I want the tapestry of the fragmentary site to look like the watercolour of the same site. I wanted the connective grid of warp and weft to be part of the overall effect, the slits and breaks in the weaving technique indicative of the site. The image in a tapestry is built in to its intrinsic construction, not brushed on the surface, and quite other kinds of marks are necessary. The tiny grid of interconnecting warp and weft threads parallels the actual grid of the fragmentary site.

**Form: the grid**

The skeleton of any recording system must be the site grid. Under all but emergency conditions this should be laid out before the excavation begins, and it is essential to relate the excavation and its grid to permanent features in the landscape....On any but the briefest excavation a base or datum line should be chosen and its terminal pegs concreted into place at each end.18
So writes the archaeological excavator, accentuating the primary function of the grid in the total comprehension of the excavation. The mathematically exact grid is given superiority as a tool of science, beyond subjectivity:

According epistemological and ontological primacy to the 'facts', the objects of archaeological knowledge, provides a powerful rationale for the use of mathematics and statistics which have become part of the rationalization of archaeological practice aimed at expelling the subjective. 19

Ernst Gombrich has demonstrated that the sense of order, of placing the visual world in categories is necessary as a survival mechanism. Faced with the abundance of pattern in the constructed environment we simplify our understanding by sweeping our eye over the whole series and just taking in one repeating element.

What I have called the sense of order may be said to serve us first and foremost to orient ourselves in space and time and to find our way in relation to the thing we seek or we avoid.20

The certainty and primacy of the grid is described by Rosalind Krauss. In her investigation into the use of the grid by avant-garde artists, the 'originality' of the assumptions of vanguard artists using the grid format are made ambivalent by the grid, which forms a ground of 'repetition and recurrence'. Artists who have been of particular interest to me in relation to their use of the grid are Jasper Johns, Eva Hesse and Agnes Martin. Like the archaeologists, the avant-garde sees the grid as 'impervious to language and to narrative.' She goes on:

The grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature onto the bounded space of a purely cultural object..... For those whom the origins of art ...are to be found in an empirically grounded unity, the grid’s power lies in its capacity to figure forth the material ground of the pictorial object, simultaneously inscribing and depicting it, so that the image of the pictorial surface can be seen to be born out of the organization of pictorial matter.21

The use of the grid in combination with images places those images in relation to some absolute idea of order. Bea Maddock in her self portrait Passing the glass darkly shows her own face as progressively fragmented. The grids beneath each frame of her face get larger and clearer as her face disintegrates, as if to suggest that the closer we look, the more obscure the subject becomes.22
Another artist who contrasts the disintegrating organic within a system of order is Julie Brown-Rrap. Her installation *Resistance* showed columnar forms with the repeated image of a braid of hair. She writes:

The work executed for this exhibition confronts two opposing aesthetics. On the one hand the idealised space of architecture - the exact, the proportional, the balanced - is found in the perfection of the 90 degree angle, the corner that suggests the demarcation of a space. The form is interrupted by a series of images formalised through repetition into a type of column.... The images chosen deal with a type of unruly order - a braid, hair flowing, caught etc....These images are printed on glass and are very unstable in their materiality...Finally order unravels. We cling to structures that deny chaos, while forever knowing that disintegration and disappearance live within us.23

Her use of the idea of order here is analogous to my sense of the grid poised over or within the intrinsically ungriddable, the sea, the chaos of the site.

My use of the grid in these drawings has overtones of both archaeological and avante-garde practice. I see the grid as laid *over* the objects scattered by chance on the ground, and as also capable of forming an infinitely expanding, non-selective mosaic, where the lines of the grid become immersed in the objects they contain. Time is held still by the grid which is like a mesh of time, containing objects caught in an instant of time, recorded by an individual but not obviously personalised. The potential anarchy of the ground can be controlled by the grid. Lucy Lippard offers a comparable use of the grid in Eva Hesse’s work:

Repetition can be a guard against vulnerability; a bullet proof vest of closely knit activity can be woven against fate. Ritual and repetition are also ways of containing anger, and of fragmenting fearsome wholes. Hesse uses the grid as both a prison and a safeguard against letting an obsessive process or excessive sensitivity run away with her.24

A much more restrained grid is evident in Agnes Martin’s modulated paintings, yet still the small irregularities of brush and hand, the subtleties of touch asserts the presence of the author. Tamar Garb describes her work in terms of feminine control:

Here is neither the assaulting expressiveness of the pained masculine subject, nurtured in the taverns of the city, nor the aggressive self-effacing mastery of modern material which purportedly replaced it, but rather the finetuned and restrained sensibility of an artist who remained committed to a rigid self-imposed
Ground, Murramarang, 3.70m x 2.4m, ochres and graphite on Canzon paper, 1992
sense of structure while inscribing herself on her surfaces in the tones she manipulated and the marks she made.25

The mesh or net of the grid has immediate references to the structures of weaving. Tapestry is built up of tiny units forming a grid of warp and weft intersecting, and weaving patterns are read in grids. The textile avantgarde of the 1970s took the grid as a 'natural' way to construct fibre, and this is evident in the textile art shown at the Lausanne Biennal in Switzerland where the grid is still a fundamental device to counter the unruly character of much fibre:

A grid derives from a man-made sense of order: it is a network of uniformly spaced horizontal and vertical lines. It is the epitome of self-imposed limitation, premeditated order, and intellectually conceived system.26

My own use of the grid comes from scaling up large tapestry cartoons, working horizontally on the floor and drawing the complex lines of the design across the fixed grid. That scale, always in the corner of archaeological drawings, a referent to some ultimate measure gives credibility to the stability and certainty of the grid as central, authoritative and restful in its certainty. The abyss of the unconscious can come so close; the repetitive grid can offer a framing mechanism that keeps the disintegration at bay. Persephone, Kore, can be dragged into the dark underworld by some failure of attention, some lessening of structure and form.

Style

'Style' comprises the visual criteria that form a distinctive manner of representation. In my article 'Contexts and Images' I quoted James Ackerman:

'Style' designates a complex of behaviour patterns within a society, with ramifications far beyond merely visual criteria .... The virtue of the concept of style is that by defining relationships it makes various kinds of order out of what otherwise would be a vast continuum of self-sufficient products. A style is a class of related solutions to a problem, or responses to a challenge.27

The 'style' of the 1980s and 90s plays with many appropriations of styles from any period of history, from any country, which take on new meanings by being presented in another time and context. This freedom allows, for example, technical archaeological drawings to be combined with more expressive markmaking, to form a 'style' of displacement. We have seen how different 'systems of
representation' may stand for particular relationships to the content displayed, as Ackerman also stresses. Systems of representation are indicative of different ways of relating to sites - the intuitive expressive mark, descriptive botanical/marine drawing, the archaeological grid - all are different systems of ordering visual information within a mental framework. To use such varieties of expression puts the work in yet another frame of contexts. Recent thought points out that style does not simply mirror social circumstances but can actually influence and reorientate the understanding of social strategies, in fact style can be active in transforming social practices. Style is not 'transparent' and innocent, it can represent a range of behaviour which may also be subversive and against the general interest. (e.g. 'Nazi' style in present extreme right wing movements in Germany and South Africa.) My use of various 'styles' therefore attempts to be conscious of the power in the way the image is represented.

Different 'styles' of dealing with the landscape - e.g. gardening, mapping, or landscape painting, are indicative of different relationships to country, and different forms of behaviour. The visual codes I have referred to in this body of work: include topographical and natural history documentation, mapping and the use of the photocopy and the appropriated image.

**Natural history**

My mother taught me carefully to draw wildflowers when I was eight, to notice the varying leaf and petal forms, and write their botanical names precisely beside them. Such detailed and dissected drawings were a way of coming to terms with the inhospitable and rocky bush, making a system where no system seemed to be. Ludwig Becker, the German artist employed on Leichhardt’s exploration of the desert, made drawings of a snake with meticulous attention, even when he knew he would most likely not return from the dangerous expedition to the interior. I have always loved these natural history drawings, many of them made by women. My grandmother, Ida Mackie, had a folio of drawing from the Glasgow School of Art of about 1910, and amongst these were painstaking drawings of flowers that I liked very much. So, in these watercolours I have made studies of shells, wings, a seahorse, crocuses, with such prototypes in the back of my mind. David Malouf beautifully evokes the anti-heroic stance of such artists:
Mr Frazer on these outings wore a wide-awake hat, much frayed at the edges, and bore on a strap over his shoulder a portable inkstand, and in another bag, of canvas, a set of fat little books. Here, to Gemmy's delight, he sketched the parts of plants Gemmy showed him, roots, leaves, blossoms, with straight little arrows in flight toward them from one side or other of the page, where Mr Frazer, in his careful hand, after a good deal of trying this sound and that, wrote the names he provided.29

This imaginary sketch of the first European descriptions of Australian fauna bring to mind the piquant contrast of the exquisite attention to detail, while the overall understanding of the country remains a threatening mystery. My own archaeological drawings have a similar precision as records and documents of very particular objects, named and measured.

**Mapping as a visual code**

Making order out of the surface of the earth is the domain of maps, which is the same system used by the surveyors of archaeological sites. The map as a visual code may seem to be free of loaded associations, but in fact maps have been the tools of the powerful, providing a means of enforcing arbitrary divisions of territory and population. The early maps of Australia emphasise the European concept of 'discovery' of the unknown landmass, and impose arbitrary and geometric divisions into states and territories.

Places significant to the indigenous inhabitants are not of interest on official maps, very old tracks, pathways and ceremonial grounds are simply inconsequential to the priorities of the map makers. J. B. Harley in his analysis 'Maps, knowledge and power' comments:

> Just as the historian paints the landscape of the past in the colours of the present so the surveyor, whether consciously or otherwise, replicates not just the 'environment' in some abstract sense but equally the territorial imperatives of a particular political system.....

> The notion of 'silences' on maps is central to any argument about the influence of hidden political messages. It is asserted here that maps - just as much as examples of literature or the spoken word - exert a social influence through their omissions as much as by the features they depict and emphasise.30
The omissions on maps may hide a whole culture. The early maps of Wollongong, and the first road down from the Bulli Pass assume that the land has never been tracked or marked before, that Aboriginal people had no significance in the habitation of the land. The first maps of the northern Illawarra do in fact show the names of Bellambi and 'Corimul' but 'the oldest road', described by Macquarie as early as 1815, makes no reference to previous inhabitants' pathways, and the very name presupposes that in fact the history of this region began with this first track down from the escarpment.31

In drawing a site, as in a map, compass direction is essential, and some indication of scale: that vital factor that allows whole portions of the earth's surface to be comprehended through a small grid. In many of my pieces I have made reference to these points of measurement, as also to the topographical studies of the south coast, of headlands and bays seen from the ocean. In these exhibitions I have used the forms of survey drawing - the indications of compass direction, and scale, even the topographical representations of the coast made by early explorers, juxtaposed within one frame, as a way of referring to the many possible relationships with a place. Perspectives are juxtaposed just as they are in early maps, switching from a horizontal surface to distant space. How satisfactory it would be if one could map one's inner continents with such precise indicators of scale and direction.

A very intriguing conjunction of mapping, the grid, and embroidery is found in the work of Alighiero e Boetti ('e' means 'and' in Italian, and this way of calling himself, as two entities, is evidence of the 'fictitious symmetry' of his personality). Boetti, who was born in 1940, took part in the influential 'Arte Povera' movement which arose in Italy in the 1970s out of the issues of conceptual art of the time. His use of the embroidery medium shows a similarly acute awareness of the undertones of the medium and its possibilities for political statement. Art was made out of poor, common, and useless materials with a playful audacity, an antecedent to many multimedia installations since.

His work shows a fascination with all kinds of systems, including language, and a playing with assumed logic of visual codes like maps or temporal systems (clocks), even the methodology of the post office. The grid and the series accompany most of his works.

Jean-Christophe Amman writes 'A sense of process is inherent in Boetti's oeuvre'.32 The large embroidery Map, (1979, 130 x 230 cm) was made by women in Afghanistan, a distant and industrially undeveloped country. The western
emphasis on individuality in art and authorship, and its disrespect for manual labour, is ironically brought into focus, in an embroidery of a map of the world which emphasises western domination, made by women in the third world. Seeming inconsistencies in interpretation by the women making the Map are part of the ancient Afghan tradition of embroidery.

Boetti transcends distinctions between "first" and "third" world art, between the refined intentionally aestheticised objects of the west and functional native art objects, by offering an artwork that embodies the conjunction of cultures in its making. 33

The map of the world presents an apparently smooth surface of a multitude of stitches, which could be undone only by an arduous process of unravelling. This presence of time, of the long hours of embroidering, is an important component of the geopolitical concept of Map.

Such a use of embroidery goes beyond the mere attractiveness of the medium by aligning the repetitious processes of stitching, our almost unconscious grasp of the characteristics of colour and surface formed by tiny movements of the hand, to wide ranging concepts. As in Jubelin’s work, the contrast between the serious questioning of political and social assumptions with a ‘despised’ domestic and ‘feminine’ medium gives a frisson, a jolt, to the viewer.

Photocopy and ‘Appropriation’

In the large piece, Tenuous evidence: Shellal Mosaic, a photocopy of the whole mosaic forms a major part of the surface. The original mosaic floor was discovered by the 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade during the second Battle of Gaza on 23 April 1917, and brought to Australia in 1918 as a trophy of war, where it has been mounted on the wall of a small hall in the centre of the War Memorial Museum in Canberra, together with other marble relics from the same area, particularly the marble bust of the lady Hagar. The mosaic is dated 565 A.D., the time of the Christian Emperor Justinian, a time when the Roman Empire was hard pressed, and divided into East and West. I will develop in more detail the images and connotations of this piece in the next chapter.

Photocopy has a grainy, unpredictable character which depends on the quality of the image to be reproduced. In this case, the photograph of the whole floor in the Shellal Mosaic Catalogue was tiny, barely 15 cm by 7 cm, and from these scarce
indications I enlarged the copy to two metres square. I wanted the vitality of the original still to be discernable, even though so translated and duplicated. The idea of translation, from an original to a copy, from one medium (marble mosaic) to another (photocopy), from small scale reproduction to large scale drawing permeates this work of many media. The work has been transmuted, changed to the late twentieth century by the use of photocopy - copying is the way our society transmits culture.

Walter Benjamin pointed out in 1936 that even a perfect reproduction can never duplicate the unique existence of a work of art in its own time and space:

> The unique value of a work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value...For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction manipulates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree, the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility...The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics.

The implications of power in copying, of the politics of who may translate and reproduce an image, of the labyrinth of trying to establish copyright in a time of instant duplication in the electronic field, is in this piece set beside the static and definitely handworked fragment of tapestry. Instant mechanical reproduction is juxtaposed with the laborious craft of tapestry, the rapidly copied shorthand version of the mosaic which functions as the merest sign of the original, and an 'original' piece of tapestry, which nevertheless is nothing like the real mosaic. The dot matrix and pixels of the computer screen and photographic reproduction have long held a fascination for tapestry weavers, as they replicate the tiny intersections of the grid of tapestry, the intercrossings of warp and weft.

Every contemporary artist in tapestry mentioned in this document is aware of the close connections between the mass of 'mechanical reproduction' and the ancient systems of interlocking threads in a tapestry. 'Mechanical reproduction', fifty eight years after Walter Benjamin made his observations, is the everyday visual culture, ubiquitous and varied, that permeates our lives. The 'appropriation' of reproduced images of artworks also, has become a 'natural' source of material for contemporary artists, as I have argued in discussing Tass Mavrogordato's tapestry exhibition Eyeing Love and Death.
Similarly, Bea Maddock in the 1970s used the series form, and the dot matrix in her prints, feeling that the idea of a series ‘promoted transmission rather than representation’, and was relevant to the sequential character of newspaper and magazine narrative. She explained that the reference to photographic techniques was timely because of the complexity of late twentieth century living.37 Another aspect of the constant allusion by contemporary artists to the world of electronic media is that computers and technology represent the language of power, a language it may be necessary to subvert and place in another context.

In the reproduction of the Shellal mosaic I hesitantly perceive that I have used this image because the forms it represents, the twining tendrils of the vine, the still life elements of basket of fruit, jug, vase, are still with us. And yet this piece of early Christian art is so radically displaced from its own setting - how could its makers ever have envisaged it as a trophy of war, in a museum commemorating the death and sacrifice of soldiers, in the Antipodes, a country hardly imaginable? It was once the floor of a chapel, now it hangs on a wall, the missing sections a memorial to the Turkish gun emplacement that once stood on it. By reproducing it I want to draw out these anomalies, the unpredictable trajectory of a work of art. What relationship can such an image have with the Australian terrain? In considering the factors that make up our English speaking, yet many-stranded Australian culture, the importation of classical artefacts to enhance or extend the sense of history is of great interest to me.

The ‘reproduction’ and appropriation of classical images, sometimes from my own drawings, or as here from a photograph, is therefore an endeavour to clarify the images that form me through my close association with them, not only the wider Australian culture. My own relationship to classicism is inherent in this piece.

**Conclusion**

The irony of placing a classical map, like a transparent film, across the new wild of Australia is brought out by David Malouf, as he too brings the immutable ‘classical’ colonists in contact with the boy Gemmy, half wild, brought up by Aborigines, so that indeed it seems as if the classical and prehistoric exist at the same moment (as they always have done.)

(Sir George Brisbane) sees himself as a kind of imperial demiurge, out of mere rocks and air creating spaces where history may now occur - at once the Hesiod of the place, its Solon, and its antipodean Pericles. The archaic and the classical,
indeed the prehistoric and the classical, exist side by side here and in the same moment. Sir George finds it entirely understandable that in the little coastal port he has honoured with his name a crocodile has been seen to emerge from the mud and waddle unperturbed about the main street. ‘Your town’, he writes to his patron, Lord Cardwell, of the little mosquito-infested port in the north on which he has settled that great man’s name, ‘lies in a position analogous to that of Thermopylae; that is, at the north end of the Australian Epirus’.38

The subject of the classical, and its place in Australian collections will next be considered. The device of the fragment, and the juxtaposition of personal images with those of the classical past will be investigated as a final stage in this description of my ‘cultural acts’.
Named after the large drawings made by Raphael in the sixteenth century, the 'cartone', for translation into tapestry.

For example, I have considered the work of Narelle Jubelin, Julie Brown-Rrap, (paralleled by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger in the USA). Micala Dwyer and Noelene Lucas were shown in 1993-4 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

For example, I have considered the work of Narelle Jubelin, Julie Brown-Rrap, (paralleled by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger in the USA). Micala Dwyer and Noelene Lucas were shown in 1993-4 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The tapestry, Her Only Desire: Fragmentary site with lady from Palmyra has appeared on the cover of Periphery, and in Textile Fibreforum. It was selected by curator Jan Irvine to travel to South America in the exhibition The Art of the Object, a survey of Australian craft initiated by Craft Australia, to visit Uruguay, Brazil and Chile during 1994. The three pieces relating to the Shellal mosaic in the War Memorial Museum in Canberra have been chosen by Dr. Sue Rowley, curator of Crossing Borders to tour the United States in 1995. Shellal Mosaic Fragment has appeared in Fiberarts (USA) and was used by Exhibitions USA in their promotion of Crossing Borders. Katabasis: Fragment with hindquarters of a rabbit is the image to be used on the front of the catalogue of Crossing Borders.


Gayle Wimmer, 'Polish Textile Art: Photo-realism in the second generation', p. 34.

Irene Huml, Wspolczesna tkanina polska (Contemporary Polish textiles), Arkady, Warsaw, Poland, 1989, plate 161.

Gayle Wimmer, p.34.


Philip Barker, Techniques of Archaeological Excavation, Batsford, London,
1982, pp. 150-151.
33 Rainer Crone and David Moos, 'Alighiero e Boetti: The Difference between invention and exploration or from geography to experience with two maps', *Parkett*, no. 24, 1990, p. 52.
34 A. D. Trendall, *The Shellal Mosaic: And other classical antiquities in the Australian War Memorial Canberra*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1942, plate 11.
36 Archie Brennan in Scotland in the 1970's first used the copy reference in his tapestry of a *Long distance Runner*. The Australians Gary Benson and Tom Moore both had tapestries shown in the Lausanne Biennale, Switzerland based on a tapestry version of newspaper photographs, with their coarse dot matrix. Ann Newdigate, Tass Mavrogordato, Kay Lawrence, Marie Cook, Sara Lindsay, Catherine Kay all make frequent allusion in their work to the media matrix.
CHAPTER 12

COLLECTIONS, VESTIGES AND SHADOWS

For he who contemplates physical beauty must not lose himself therein, but he must recognise that it is an image and a vestige and a shadow, and he must flee to that of which it is a likeness. For if one were to rush forth and to grasp for truth that which is only a beautiful reflection in the water, then the same thing will happen to him that happened to the one about whom a meaningful myth tells how he, wanting to grasp a mirrored reflection, vanished in the depths of the water: in the same way, he who holds on to physical beauty and will not let go of it will sink, not with his body but with his soul, into the dark abysses horrible for the mind to behold, where he will languish blindly in Orcus, consorting with shadows there as he did here.

Plotinus, *Ennead* 1:6:8, Third century A.D.¹

When I first read this text, the associations were piercing, and I put a personal interpretation on it, rather than understanding it only as Plotinus’ meditation on the Platonic ‘eidos’. Here the beauty of a mimetic art that mirrors nature - the ‘beautiful reflection in the water’ is so beguiling that it seems unrelated to the shadowy unconscious that contains a dark fragmentation. By not realising that the beautiful image is one with the dark water, Narcissus was claimed by the dark water. Dorothy Wordsworth centred herself in the reflection of nature, desperately refuting any knowledge of another less denying self, and led a later life obliterated by shadows. The images in this text of the third century (parallel in time to the
Coptic tapestries) bring up to my mind's eye many other classical images, the circular bronze antique mirrors (literally a reflection grown dark and tarnished), and the despairing images of the muted underworld of Homer and Virgil. The story in Ovid, referred to by Plotinus, is that after death Narcissus in the underworld continued to gaze at his reflection in the dark Stygian waters of Hades.

The 'beautiful' naturalism which was the discovery of classical art has a much less harmonious undercurrent, recognised as of equal momentum by the ancient world, that of the orgiastic frenzy of Dionysos, leading to death. I chose this text as a title for the exhibition Archaeologies: Images, vestiges, shadows because of the chain of associations it seemed to reveal, without having to keep to the framework of Plotinus' mystical monism, which brought together early Christian and Platonic thought.

The compelling character of the Plotinus text on Narcissus is apparent to Stephen Bann, writing on the antique Narcissus, and also to Julia Kristeva. Both see the Plotinus description of Narcissus as being a moment of transition between 'the Platonic metaphysics, where the ideal is envisaged as being entirely outside the self, and the Neoplatonic theory of Plotinus, which places the emphasis on the interior movements of the soul in dialogue with itself.'2 Ultimately this leads to the unheroic soul of the introverted subject of psychoanalysis, whose interiority might be called a form of madness, parallel to that found in 'the dark abysses, horrible to the mind to behold.'

The potent myth of Narcissus was a metaphor for Sigmund Freud's analysis of self love, as Oedipus became the metaphor of incest. Julia Kristeva, in the continuing discourse of psychoanalysis, takes the same passage by Plotinus and relates the emptiness at the centre of the Narcissus myth to her own complex linguistic theory. She postulates:

against the background of linguistic theory and language learning, the emptiness that is intrinsic to the beginnings of the symbolic function appears as the first separation between what is not yet an 'ego' and what is not yet an 'object'. Might narcissism be a means for protecting that emptiness?3

She argues that the inevitable separation of Narcissus from his reflection, the impossibility of union with an illusory reflection, opens up -
Site map with flawed mirror, 170 cm x 110cm, Gouache and collage on Canzon paper, with tapestry fragment, 1993.
the barely covered abyss where our identities, images and words run the risk of being engulfed. Narcissism, and its lining, emptiness, are in short, our most brittle and archaic elaborations of the death drive.  

The abyss of Hades, the shadowy underworld that is visited both by Homer’s Odysseus and by Virgil’s Aeneas, permeates classical poetry. Anakreon, a Greek poet of c.530 B.C. is clear about the descent, the Katabasis:

My temples now are grey, my hair is white:
My grace of youth is gone, my teeth are old,
And little time of my sweet life is left:
Therefore I whimper, fearing Tartaros,
Hades’ cave is terrible, awful
The road down, those who go do not come home.  

For me the fascination with the world of natural appearances, and long association with both the objects and scholarship of classicism is always allied to compulsive images of darkness and fragmentation. The ‘katabasis’ is the descent into darkness always just below the surface. For these reasons the Plotinus text seems to illuminate these seeming contradictions, without resolving them. Such myths continue to reverberate because their meaning is elusive and ever changing; like any symbol, the images seem to open up a realm of meaning without defining it.
Plotinus' meditation on Narcissus and his dark reflection have been perceived as representing a shift, a transition in western thought. Other classical images, like that of Narcissus, might also shift their meaning through changing perceptions of their 'original' context, in a particular time and place. Classical objects in Australian collections seemed to offer to me such shifting reflections on the place of these ancient remnants of the western visual tradition in a late twentieth century Australian milieu.

**Classical images in *Her Only Desire: Fragmentary site with lady from Palmyra***

The phrase 'Her only Desire' refers to perhaps the most famous series of fifteenth century tapestries, the Unicorn tapestries, now in the Cluny Museum in Paris, whose theme is the senses. One of the most enigmatic of these is entitled 'A Mon Seul Desir', 'To My Only Desire', and shows a richly attired woman opening a box of jewels. The title is supposed to refer, not to the desire of the woman in the tapestry, but to the forthcoming marriage of the aristocrat who may have commissioned the set of six tapestries. I wished to restore the ownership of the desire to the woman in the tapestry, in this case, the funerary portrait of a lady Hagar, from Palmyra.

This carved bust is exhibited in the War Memorial Museum in Canberra, beside the Shellal Mosaic. The lady Hagar is an old prototype, the woman in the house, recalling images of Demeter, the grieving mother and harvest deity. Demeter has her dark side, the kinship with the underworld through her daughter Persephone, married to Hades. Peter Levi relates:

> At Phigalia there was once a statue of the Black Demeter, which was worshipped in a cave. She was made of wood, sitting on a rock, she had a horse's head and hair, with serpents and monsters spouting out of it. In one hand she held the dolphin of Poseidon, in the other the dove of Persephone. She was dressed in black. It is said that Poseidon mated with Demeter in the form of a horse, and she bore at Phigalia a daughter called the mistress.

> Traditionally Pausanias said, she was offered fruits of the earth, grapes, honey and unspun wool.

The bust of the woman from Palmyra brings a shadow of all this to Australia, the convoluted images of female deities, who have their 'official' Olympian position as deities of order, fertility and the domestic hearth, but an underside which is far less accessible, as in this story of the 'Black Demeter'. The lady of Palmyra makes a
Her only desire: Fragmentary sitew ith Lady from Palmyra
1m 95 x 1m 45, Woven tapestry
Cotton warp, wool and silk weft, 1993
new story by coming to Australia, an immigrant, as the technique of tapestry itself is also an immigrant. The now nameless and ancient sites of Australia are visited in the tapestry by the dark lady, carrying her emblems of order and the civic realm, a spindle, a distaff, and the key to her house.

She represents for me also a constant figure in dreams, located as an amalgum of my grandmothers and the many 'dark ladies' I knew in Greece. In the Greek letters quoted above I mention the brown and black gowned women spinning in the village in Crete, like images of fairy godmothers. In 1989, as my world dissolved, I tried to grapple with these persistent images, as my diary indicates:

26 November 1989
Sorrowful, masochistic. She sacrifices herself and her talents, capacities. Does not risk, dare. Is full of guilt and a dark engulfing fear - of what? Of aging, of lack of beauty, vigour. Clings on, won’t give up, believes in resignation, in the past. Such qualities strong in my mother and grandmother. She suffocates creativity with negative assumptions: 'it wouldn’t be any good if you did it.' She seems gentle, even passive, but is very strong in her inhibition of action. She is the fearful one: at 3 am she allows emotions (usually depressive ones) to engulf her... She yearns for an impossible ideal - domestic harmony, benign authority. Responds to suffering with compassion and in doing so, fosters it. She wants to exclude the clamorous outside world. She is so overwhelmingly vulnerable, with the sadness of human love. Mater dolorosa. In guilt and fear.
Yet she is the tough old woman of Greek villages, wanting more power, more anger, more feeling, more definition, less reasonableness. Thrives in murky areas.
Similarly, Aphrodite had a less pleasing aspect, the clandestine side of her celebratory beauty:

As goddess of Death-in-life, Aphrodite earned many titles which seem inconsistent with beauty and complaisance. At Athens she was called the eldest of the Fates, and sister of the Erinnyes, and elsewhere Melaenis, the Black One, Scotia, the dark one and Epitymbria, 'Of the Tombs'.

Images merge, and overlap each other - I had not related the image of Hagar of Palmyra to my own daimonic Dark Lady, but as I wrote, the connection was overwhelming. I had even changed the paleness of the original marble to blue-black in the tapestry. Now I have lived with the tapestry for a while, I have noticed the resemblance of the figure in the tapestry to my mother, when she sat beneath it. Yet Ann Newdigate the Canadian weaver, said, 'you have woven a self-portrait'. I am now the same age as my mother was when I wrote to her from Greece, and a mother myself. The archetype consumes the individual. Demeter the grief stricken, like the recurrent Mater Dolorosa beside the Cross, is the mature woman, with much loss behind her.
In fact, the tapestry is about grief, the broken lives of the fragmented site. The woman holds the symbols of woven fabric, binding together, constructing home, the key of the house. But she is also the dark woman, the black robed Greek woman whose desires can never be fulfilled - children die, homes break, life tears. The pursuit of happiness, that Bonnard life of domestic serenity and intimacy, she dismisses as an illusion.

Another image I have used in this body of work is the archaic figure of a ‘dea nutrix’, the goddess nurturing a child, holding a baby to her breast, a familiar image that I walked past daily in the Etruscan rooms at the Museum of Archaeology in Florence, and found throughout the Mediterranean. In the large watercolour, Oracle at Towradji I used this image, even further fragmented and headless, juxtaposed against the landscape of the midden site at the edge of the sea, with a spear drawn from another Etruscan artefact. Once again, the images resonate for me, without exactly being able to pinpoint a definitive meaning. As a ‘nurturing mother’ myself, I felt this role to be full of ambivalence, and often disregarded in its centrality, yet it is the heart of the matter, the forming bond that orientates the child and his/her subsequent relationships. The ‘semiotic’ pre-linguistic moment in the formation of the child may well be the impulse that permeates textiles, as I have suggested. These two ancient images of women, the funerary portrait and the nurturing deity seemed to present signs that could be re-invested with a fresh meaning.
The Fragment

The power of the remnant of a classical form was brought home to me when exploring the ‘ghost town’ of Silverton on the outskirts of Broken Hill in the west of New South Wales:

Notebook, 23 December, 1991, Silverton
The ground, bare, stony, red and grey is all pervasive, stretching with great clarity to distant horizons. The pleasure of nothing, of absence, of space full of monotonous repetitions of blue dusty bushes. Crows, galahs. The ground at the abandoned town of Silverton humped with fallen buildings. Walking over these with the boys - a true site, rusted beer cans caught in the prickly bushes, but also fragments of Victorian pottery, delicate blue and white twining tendrils, totally anachronistic in this landscape - and a red terracotta fragment of an acanthus ornament, probably from a tile. How fascinating that even tiny fragments tell a story that evokes Greece, Christianity, a journey to the desert from distant 'civilization'.
A drawing I did from one of these nineteenth century china fragments with a painted tendril, set against 'nothing', was in fact the beginning of the series of fragments. But I have been struck by the power of fragments in other contexts too:

Lunching at an isolated village - on Aegina? or on the mainland of Attica near Perachora? A chapel, a long road flat beside a flat sea, a taverna with an awning, wooden tables and chairs set on dirt, smell of fish grilling over charcoal. A small jetty going out into the clear water. In the chapel, dark brown air thick with incense, icons set in niches in the wall and hung with votive offerings - arms, legs, feet, an eye, a baby - prayers answered or cures sought, cut out of sheet metal. Strangely on the sea bottom, from the end of the jetty the same votive offerings could be seen - when the chapel became too crowded, the offerings were ritually thrown into the sea, must not be touched. Did I find one on the sand? and was I told to throw it back in? The scene is like a dream - those powerful icons and the fragments of bodies that surround them.

The drawings of the sites in these exhibitions are fragmented or contain fragments. I have overviewed other contemporary artists using fragments, Stephen Cox, and Susan Hiller in particular. In fact the fragment has accompanied neo-classical movements since the eighteenth century first began to prefer the classical fragment to the restored whole. David Lowenthal in his complex investigation into the concept of the past, writes:

Decay and mutilation gained favour in the late eighteenth century, owing to picturesque taste and the increasing cachet of authenticity. The emotional power of a mutilated marble was held to more than compensate for its lost perfection....Taste for fragments spread from sculptural remains to other works of art, old and new. Literary creations like Goethe's 'Faust' were advertised as 'Fragments', poet's lives themselves often seemed curtailed and truncated, much as the present now seemed sundered from the past.10

My use of the fragment is derived from long study of the presentation of partial evidence in museums - the piece of fresco, the fragment of papyrus, the broken vase. Restoration is a tricky business - how much do we restore the past - do we make the break between the authentic and the reconstructed obvious, or invisible? I worked for two years in the Gabinetto di Restauro, in the Museum of Archaeology in Florence, not only drawing fragments but surrounded by those who were reconstructing the shattered remains of ivories and ceramics damaged by the great flood of Florence in 1967. The aesthetics of the fragment became deeply engrained.
Katabasis/Going down: Fragment with hindquarters of a rabbit, 120 cm x 55 cm
Tapestry fragment with gouache, graphite and ink on Canzon paper, 1993.
The woven fragments in the *Shellal Mosaic* and the two drawings called *Katabasis* and *Site map with flawed mirror* are of course, invented fragments, though their shape comes from actual sherds I had documented in museums. The formal power of the fragment, set against a vaguely outlined panel for the viewer in a museum had always intrigued me, as a way of placing textile in a context. Part of my task as archaeological illustrator had been to reconstruct, in the drawing, what had been lost in the fragment. Late in 1991 Narelle Jubelin came to my studio and we discussed ways of using the museum convention as a contemporary work, a possibility she found exciting. Her discriminating and apt use of appropriating images from Australia’s past was a great influence.

The use of the woven fragment in the overall pattern of the *Shellal mosaic* is a way of concentrating attention, of re-vivifying the past. The twining circles of the vine provide a frame for isolated motifs, emblematic of fertility and abundance, and even resurrection. This was an early Christian mosaic, of the same period as the great mosaics in Ravenna, and the familiar ancient symbols of Dionysos (who was resurrected after being torn apart) are here re-presented in the light of early Christian iconography. Dionysos had been symbolised by the vine for a thousand years before this mosaic was made, but after Christ had said ‘I am the True Vine’, the image became appropriated for another long history as a Christian symbol. The peacock was the bird of Hera, wife of Zeus, but it too became a Christian emblem of immortality, perhaps because of an old tradition that its flesh was incorruptible.

The woven fragment of the roundel where the vine branches meet is like a pun on weaving, on connection. To weave a twined connection underlines the Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘weave’:

> Braid, twine, interlace, intermingle, incorporate, intertwine, knit, mat, merge, plait, twist, unite, fabricate, make, put together, wind, zig-zag, criss-cross.

The woven fluted vase, and the basket of fruit are other still life motifs typically painted or embroidered by women. The basket of fruit is reminiscent of those Pompeian still life paintings classified as ‘xenia’ - hospitable offerings to the guest, a concept enlarged by Norman Bryson. It was most fitting to offer the guest simple unadorned foodstuffs, fresh from the garden, without the intervention of artifice, raw rather than cooked. Here is a description from Philostratus, another philosopher of the third century, but a Greek one:
Katabasis/Going down: Fragment with roundel, 120 cm x 55 cm
Tapestry fragment with gouache, graphite and ink on Canzon paper, 1993.
Here are the gifts of the cherry tree, here is fruit in clusters heaped in a basket, and the basket is woven, not from alien twigs but from branches of the plant itself. And if you look at the vine-sprays woven together and at the clusters hanging from them and how the grapes stand out one by one, you will certainly hymn Dionysos and speak of the vine as 'Queenly giver of grapes'\textsuperscript{11}

I have appropriated these classical images yet again, in their new country, which is represented in the dark rubbed ground on which the Shellal mosaic is positioned. Baskets of fruit still sit on my table, my sons' rabbit keeps escaping from her cage and I see her hindquarters disappearing into the shrubbery yet again. The fragments for me highlight the brilliance of the fleeting moment, its vivid colour, caught in time - but not necessarily death or decay. I am moved by the seeming innocence and simplicity of these images which still vibrate, but in another culture and another time. To leap over the immediate historic past to take images from antiquity is a way of circumventing a history of art which has hardly considered the woman artist, of going around the dilemma of the heroic Romantic artist which had little space in it for a feminine stance.

\textit{The Shellal Mosaic, Australian War Memorial, Canberra. A.D. Trendall, 1973, Plate II.}
Museums contain collections of objects and we accept this idea as fundamental in the study of our past. Yet the museum is a relatively recent concept, in fact about the same age as Australia. The accelerating momentum of the British Empire in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century was accompanied by a new passion for archaeology and the gathering up of antiquities. Susan Sontag, in a deeply researched fictional biography of Sir William Hamilton, a dedicated collector and the contemporary of Lord Nelson, describes the abundance of the early collector:

A great private collection is a material concentrate that continually stimulates, that overexcites... The collector's need is precisely for excess, for surfeit, for profusion...
The room seemed crowded, disorderly. Antique terra-cottas and intaglios on the tables; specimens of lava, cameos, vases in cabinets; every bit of wall covered with paintings... Here the Cavaliere spent most of his day, doting on his treasures. Their forms, he wrote, were simple, beautiful and varied beyond description...  

Sir Charles Nicholson, the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney was himself a collector of the most varied antiquities, which seem to have been purchased by himself, or an agent, from many parts of the Mediterranean in the 1840s. His collection formed the nucleus of the Nicholson Museum Collection. The details of excavation and provenance were erratic, and researching the objects was like a detective story. The profusion of the past, its delights for the Victorian classificator of types and series and natural wonders is evident in the early pictures of the Nicholson Museum. This is no minimal aesthetic - the rooms overflow with deities, inscriptions and tiny memorabilia of antiquity. Yet some of the pieces are of true eminence, of a quality that brings the distance of classic art, so remote in time and space, suddenly close. Perhaps Sir Charles Nicholson had a personal interest in gathering his collection:

The Cavaliere had felt the bite of passion when he first saw it... a Roman cameo vase thought to have been made in the reign of Augustus... Brought up two centuries earlier out of a newly excavated imperial burial mound just south of the boundary of ancient Rome, it was then, and still is considered the finest piece of Roman cameo glass in existence... He never tired of gazing at it, of holding it aloft so as to see the true colour of the ground, a midnight blue inextinguishable from black except when pierced by light, and brushing the tips of his fingers over the low relief figures incised in the creamy white glass.
But what happens to objects when they are removed from their proper country and transported to Australia? What is the reason, the justification of this transposition? The two collections I have used as a reference for this body of work, the Nicholson Museum and the classical collection in the War Memorial Museum in Canberra, had very different origins, but both were located in the colonising impetus, which was accompanied by a growing endeavour to establish a national identity.

The Nicholson Museum was one of the earliest museums in the British world, and was established to give a cultural grounding in the classical past (including Egyptian and Mesopotamian relics) that would set the new university on a civilizing course. Sir Charles Nicholson made a gift to the new University of Sydney (of which he was the founding Vice-Chancellor, appointed in 1851) of four hundred and eight objects collected during a Grand Tour of Europe in 1856-1857. This was the time of the great opening up of archaeology in Europe, culminating in Schliemann's discoveries in Troy. In his original offer to the University Sir Charles Nicholson wrote:

> the acquisition of a Museum of objects ... is calculated materially to promote the objects for which the institution is founded, as supplying materials interesting in themselves and most important in the illustration of various branches of historical, philological and classical enquiry.15

The Shellal Mosaic collection in the War Memorial Museum in Canberra was chanced on through the presence of Australian soldiers in Jordan in the 1914-1918 World War. It was acquired as a trophy of war, a treasure to bring back after the terrible losses of men at Gallipoli and in France. (The vivid classical fragments are juxtaposed against the darkness and loss of war, the macrocosm for my microcosm of the same conjunction of images). The practice of transferring precious and ancient artworks to different locations is common in the struggle to achieve symbolic attributes and a national identity - or a sheer determination to have the best classical sculptures, as in the case of the Elgin marbles which were transported from the Parthenon in Athens in the nineteenth century and retained despite Greek remonstrance. David Lowenthal writes:

> Relics are profoundly altered by being moved...away from their place of origin.... Perhaps the most grievous effect of dispersing antiquities is the loss of environmental context. The removal of relics whose lineaments are indissolubly of their place annuls their testamentary worth and forfeits their miriad ties with place.16
The Shellal mosaic may have lost its original ties with place, but it has gained a new history, a new intermeshed web of connections with the small antipodean nation, arriving less than twenty years after federation. Coming across the Shellal mosaic while taking my sons to the War Memorial Museum gave me a certain ‘bite of passion’ myself, at suddenly seeing the animals, birds, vases and baskets entwined by the familiar grape trellis of the late antique.

The extraordinary quality of the Shellal mosaic in Canberra has been elaborated by Stephen Bann, particularly in reference to the multi-faceted colour of the mosaic and the hidden symbolic significance of the vine at this moment of transition between the late antique where the vine still embodies sensual abandon and excess, and Christianity. The familiar quote from St John’s Gospels chapter 15 reads ‘I am the true vine, and my father is the husbandman...I am the vine, ye are the branches’. Bann claims that the annexation of the vine motif to Christianity does not diminish its ‘exuberance and abundance’ and in the Shellal mosaic the fertile vine has been transposed to a Christian significance which ‘encircles birds and animals from the pagan tradition in its endlessly fertile branching’. Looked at from the perspective of another period (the end of the millennium) which may also be perceived as transitional, the visual motifs of twining vine, birds and beasts can signify a layering of meanings beyond one historical moment. Our own historical moment can include these ancient images in new juxtapositions.

In the next hall are aeroplanes of war, dioramas of battles. It is easy to walk past the small group of marbles, and the faded fragment of mosaic floor mounted on the wall. The mosaic is in this museum, which documents the journeys, catastrophes and ‘victories’ of war, because of its emergence from the ground at the time of a battle being fought between Turks and Australians south of Jerusalem, near Shellal, on 17 April 1917. The remarkable events of the discovery are described by A. D. Trendall:

In constructing their position on a small hill, the Turks had partially uncovered the mosaic but had unfortunately inflicted considerable damage upon it by digging two parallel trenches diagonally across it.

He goes on to relate how the mosaic was excavated by volunteers from the Anzac Field Squadron, under the direction of Chaplain the Reverend Maitland Woods. The difficult task of the removal of the mosaic was performed with hot glue and a linen canvas, again with the help of troops, over a period of fourteen days.
Tenuous Evidence: Shellal mosaic fragment, 2.2m x 2.2m
Graphite and photocopy collage with tapestry fragment, 1992
The question of the disposal of the mosaic was considered at a meeting of the War Trophies Committee in London on 8th November 1917. Strong representations were made to the War Office by AIF Headquarters in London about the decision to send the mosaic to England... and finally permission was given for the mosaic to be handed over to the Australian Government.19

The mosaic, after a two month trip by sea arrived in Australia in December 1918 and formed part of an exhibition of war trophies and relics in Melbourne and Sydney. It was eventually mounted in a special display in the Australian War Memorial in 1942, when A.D. Trendall’s lucid catalogue was first published. From November 1941 to April 1942 my father David Wood, a gunner in the 2nd 5th Australian Field Regiment was himself stationed in Gaza, not far from Shellal. ‘A wonderful landscape’ he told me, ‘an ancient part of the world, with a feeling like Egypt, partly desert, but partly hills covered with citrus’. My father in Palestine, as it was then, is one of the myths of my childhood, the actual images of the small black and white photographs he brought back difficult to discern.

Many connections seem to link me to this mosaic. I knew Professor Trendall in Athens, as a student at the British School of Archaeology. (In a letter of this time I described coming down to breakfast and finding ‘Professor Trendall delicately eating an egg.’) A.D. Trendall became curator of the Nicholson Museum in 1939 and was also the first Professor of the newly established Department of Archaeology in 1949. The classical collection of vases in the Nicholson Museum was increased under his curatorship, and the large number of pieces from the Italo-Greek world bears witness to his influence. He had an outstanding reputation as a classical scholar, and conducted me amongst others, on tours of Greek vasepainting in the National Museum of Athens. Another connection is that the time the mosaic was made, about 560 A.D. in the later years of the Emperor Justinian, was always a significant period for me. Coptic textiles also belong to this epoch of the overlap between Christianity and the older ‘pagan’ religions, as do the luminous mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna, which I had also visited.

The funerary bust of Hagar, displayed beside the Mosaic, has a separate, if equally extraordinary story, and another set of associations. In 1918 two soldiers of the Australian Flying Corps were blown out of their course by a storm, and had to make a forced landing in Palmyra. The local Sheikh was given a reward, and a gold watch for saving the crew of the aeroplane. In return the Sheikh presented the Australians with the gift of the portrait bust.
A.D. Trendall describes the bust as 'a superb example of Palmyrene portrait art at its best' dated to the second century A.D. The inscription gives her ancestry: 'The portrait statue of Hagar, the daughter of Zebida, the son of Male, and wife of Taimai, the son of Bel-suri and grandson of Taimai. Alas!' Trendall concludes by emphasising that the bust is 'one of the few really outstanding pieces of ancient sculpture to be seen in Australia.'

The bust of the lady from Palmyra came to Australia, like many women after her not on her own volition, but as the result of war and the activities of men, firmly grasping the security of the house, the key, and the 'vital occupations of the ancient housewife'\textsuperscript{20}, the distaff and spindle. My own grandmothers had also made the long sea voyage, equally fixed on house and textiles. My grandmother Ida Mackie Carment made the voyage during the same first World War, in a ship blacked out and in constant fear of mines. Yet surely the key, the distaff and the spindle were not 'her only desire?' Or were there other less recognised and less possible desires - the desire for the freedom of an autonomous self? The necklace of the interconnected beads of descent and lineage, wife, mother, daughter, the foundation of family, is serenely set around her neck.

**Disrupting the habitual logic**

Thinking about collections, it is also to the point that strange correlations emerge from the odd conjunctions of objects in a collection. A quite arbitrary relationship is set up in the museum between objects that is unlike any living affinity they might have had. Anne Brennan expresses something of this conjunction of the personal and the historical, writing about the difference between owning and wearing a gold ring, and seeing one in an archaeological context:
Journey to a distant site, 63.5 cm x 90 cm, watercolour, gouache, collage on Arches paper, 1992.
The romantic power of archaeology lies in the way it can take the small personal possession, and by stripping it of those layers of personal association and meaning, give it both new contexts and reinforce our own sense of intimacy with those who are caught up in the historic process.  

Living in Italy for two years, and working in the Archaeological Museum in Florence, which is a treasure house of early Greek and Etruscan art, made me aware of intersections between the past and the present using such objects as a kind of key. In Florence in 1967-1969 I saw many works by the Metaphysical painters, who ‘disrupted the habitual logic’, as de Chirico put it, ‘of situations and spaces.’ The mystery of things captured in an artificial context of a museum can make ordinary objects in present day living spaces suddenly seem arbitrary and yet full of significance. Seeing the heap of disparate objects left out in the street in a clean-up campaign, the strange debris of children’s rooms or a kitchen after a party makes objects resonate with psychological significance. As Paolo Baldacci explains in his text on these Metaphysical painters, De Chirico followed this line of thought:

seeking to decipher this language of signs and to perceive the ability of things to emit a disconcerting multitude of meanings which formed the basis of a new system of representation and perception...He then proceeded to a ‘solitudine dei segni’ - a solitude of signs which created extraordinary possibilities for transmigrations of meaning... invoking other images, other signs and meanings in the reading of a painting. Things are associated with each other in an order that had nothing to do with common logic....

I am interested in these ‘transmigrations of meaning’ in the mixed ancestry of the objects referred to in my paintings. The collection may have a formal civilising function, but its cacophony of objects and their arrangement can also demonstrate, as de Chirico said, a rupture of logic. In my own body of work, objects and landscapes are put together in an ‘impossible’ time frame and circumstance. Classical images may visit the coastal sites and my own seemingly disjointed experiences of both Aboriginality and classicism, can be melded.


9 Another large watercolour with the same image, set against a pool of reflections was made in 1991, and is in the University of Wollongong Permanent Collection.


13 The Gothic quadrangle at the centre of the University of Sydney, where the Nicholson Museum is still housed, was begun in 1858, but not finished for twenty years. The foundation of a University was considered a waste of resources, and classical education regarded with hostility. There were 18 students in 1862.

14 Susan Sontag, *The Volcanic Lover: A Romance*, pp. 120-121.


CONCLUSION

Archaeology, tapestry and Aboriginality

The written component of this study set out to examine the relevance of archaeological theory to contemporary craft, both through the discipline of academic investigation, and through an autobiographical voice. After setting out the background of the empirical process oriented archaeology of the mid twentieth century, the question of the relationship of artefacts within theories of textual philosophy was addressed through the post-processual perceptions of recent archaeological theory. The implicitly theory laden character of archaeology can be seen in the changing face of the Nicholson Museum in the University of Sydney in one hundred and thirty years of curatorship.

A probing understanding of culture as a living entity was provided by experiencing the ‘otherness’ of Aboriginal society while working on Bathurst Island, Northern Territory. The unconscious assumptions of the archaeologist/artist are revealed in coming to terms with a profoundly different structure of thought. The European assumption of human domination of the natural environment is such a cultural viewpoint, not a ‘universal’ position. The sense of place which archaeologists develop strongly in their daily relationship to a site is very different to the undercurrent of invisible beings and powers perceived by Aboriginal people. The sense of place in my own bond with landscape derives from an intrinsically European ‘framing’ of the landscape.

As an ‘artefact’ of contemporary culture, tapestry can be appraised as if it were enmeshed in the contexts that archaeology uses in placing an object. Both textual and empirical approaches to the artefact are considered in an enquiry into Kay Lawrence’s tapestry House, Self and through a review of the exhibition Clashing Fragments. Textual approaches which are so influential in art theory are seen to extend and open out the empiricist basis of archaeology, while recognising the visuality of archaeology in maps, drawings and photographs as a primary method of comprehension.

The principal findings in bringing archaeological theory to bear on contemporary tapestry and textiles is the relevance of a faceted materiality, visuality and textuality, when exploring the cultural meaning of a work. The reductive modernist
emphasis on style as the primary means of ascribing meaning is broadened to include geographical and social contexts, analysis of content of image and form, and an emphasis on specific qualities of materiality. Tiny differences in handling a medium may argue, in an archaeological context, for regional variation, different workshops and distant trade routes. The work of contemporary artists can be placed within an archaeological matrix to elucidate aspects which may otherwise be passed over. For example, a particular weave structure can function as a 'sign', opening out connections and cultural contacts.

The profound differences between the two areas of tapestry and textiles were brought out by an analysis not only of the objects themselves, but also of the documents that positioned them within the spaces of contemporary art/craft. These documents were the craft journals of the 1970s and 80s and an examination of reviews and artists' statements clearly defined the polarised fields of tapestry and textiles at the beginning of the crafts movement. The framework of 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' derived from Julia Kristeva does offer a loose paradigm that is helpful in understanding the schisms within the textile/tapestry field. This study is significant in having created a critical structure that enables tapestry and textiles to be placed in alignments between the inarticulate tactility of the 'semiotic', and the coherent visuality allied to the institutions of the 'symbolic' Fine Arts. The shifting measure between tactility/semiotic and visuality/symbolic presents a viewpoint that includes both the historical origins and the present character of current tapestry and textile practice. The exploration of the relationship of tapestry to painting, and to curatorship and exhibition revealed assumptions about originality and the copy, and about the translation or appropriation of an image from one medium to another. Such issues have been fruitfully re-contextualised in a postmodern milieu.

This milieu includes feminism, which has re-evaluated art history from women's viewpoints and discovered implicit and hidden assumptions about male/female relations at the foundation of western art. The historical emanations of the tapestry medium, itself part of that 'western civilization', are juxtaposed with seeming subversions of this history, with often disturbing autobiographical images such as those of Kay Lawrence and Tass Mavrogordato. The content of the work questions the assumptions held within its very technique. Elizabeth Grosz described a relevant feminist approach to such art practice in her discussion of French theory:
Instead of seeking the inherently artistic properties of a work, to see the mark inscribed within it, and which it, in turn, re-inscribes on its producers and audience. The erasure of this process within patriarchy is an attempt to remove all traces of the body, its corporeal residues and limits, for any account of art. This closure functions to evade the questions of sexual positions inscribed through the processes of artistic production and reception.¹

The recognition of the maternal 'semiotic' in the textile work of the 1970s is, I believe, coming into a very different focus in contemporary tapestry. The theoretical implications of placing the 'semiotic' within the fibre art of the 1970s do accentuate that the early bodily closeness to the mother is an indissoluble part of the psyche, even though such areas of the psyche are often disturbingly confronting. Craft itself is deeply corporeal, and dependent on the rhythms of body, hand and eye, with obvious implications for the libido. Contemporary tapestry artists are acknowledging the centrality of the body, and contesting the domain of the patriarchal workshop tradition that denied any allegiance to the demeaned realm of feminine, and tactile textiles.

This study does not examine in close detail the linear histories of tapestry and textiles. Instead, it seeks to engage in a theoretical approach that may shift deeply entrenched positionings of art and craft. Investigative research could illuminate the varied world of past tapestry and its relation to the present, through the nuanced areas opened up by analyses of material and text, and feminism. Historical tapestry is inherently literary, often incorporating text, and would offer a rich field for examination in relation to the new narratives of current practice.

**The place of autobiography**

Archaeology excavates the un-imagined and brings it into consciousness, questioning easy readings of our history. I perceive my work in tapestry, drawing and painting as important because it brings together like and unlike in connections that interrogate fixed hierarchies of past and present. The current idea of the self as layered and fragmentary was also an ancient perception. The multiplicity of the layers of the self is said to have been discovered in the third century A.D. when the many strands of the Roman Empire were beginning to fray - Plutarch affirmed that the soul is not simple, it is composite.² An artist investigating the multiple self
brings to the surface of the conscious mind 'brilliant shards' as Dorothy Wordsworth put it, an intimation of meaning rather than a complete picture.

An autobiographical position is a difficult stance to take in relation to a doctoral thesis. To write in the first person is to be vulnerable, and an open subjectivity may be seen to prejudice the discriminating balance of scholarship. Nevertheless, the intertwined strands of personal and theoretical can enrich each other, though inevitably the personal reads as naive and emotional in relation to the different and formal language of academic research. Yet for an artist it is this essential emotionality, even indeed naivety, which provides the continuous momentum to go on making work.

Archaeology and practice

In my work archaeological discourse secures a fundamental allegiance between materiality and visuality. The aesthetic of the fragment was supplied both by the scattered remains on sites and within museums and became a metaphor of loss and absence. The objects in the ground are like tiny connecting threads within the immense fabric of the site. The investigation of the materiality of objects is reflected in the love of the 'thingness' of tapestry which is a result of its intricate construction and tactility. Archaeology has given me a sense of place, a detailed knowledge of textures and mediums, the surface of the ground and the contexts of objects - and a consequent sensitivity to the de-contextualised and the displaced.

In the course of this research I have discovered a new relationship to the classical, a new freshness in those seemingly unchanging icons of the Greek and Roman image of humanity which has been such a central locus in western culture. Looking at the classical from the point of view of Aboriginal culture made me appreciate previously unperceived rhythms in relationship to place in Greek myth, which were unseen when my knowledge and experience were more circumscribed. My research into the infantile and corporeal 'semiotic' textile revealed the underside of classicism, where the grotesque and the erotic always had a fantastical aspect and an acknowledged place.

A monolithic classicism itself is re-defined through the moving articulations and multiple voices permitted in recent thinking, and old certainties are uncovered in new investigations. Robert Calasso begins his recent book The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony with five versions of the myth of the rape of Europa,
suggesting very different understandings of the story from the viewpoint of Asia, Europe, or Africa – the ‘official’ version is only one viewpoint. The ‘universal’ centralities of modernism have been fractured, and we are seen to be composites and mongrels, crisscrossing between cultures and perspectives. Archaeology recognises wider perspectives on ancient life, which may well include a new tolerance of the fictional and the narrative in the meaning of sites. In a review of an exhibition of art and archaeology which included the work of William Stukeley, an antiquarian artist of the eighteenth century, John Michell wrote in the archaeological journal *Antiquity* in 1991 ‘Stukeley’s poetic insights into prehistoric religion, architectural symbolism and sacred landscape have had far greater influence than his more sober achievements’. The imagination has been re-instated as a necessary element in re-visioning the past.

It follows that looking at the ‘artefacts’ of tapestry from the perspective of an archaeologist is one approach, but looking at archaeology from the position of a tapestry weaver may well enable shadowy areas of the past to be brought into a new light, as Elizabeth Barber has demonstrated in her ‘discovery’ of the pervasive influence of classical textiles. The weaver attuned to ancient processes of making may re-investigate archaeology from a very different theoretical position to the benefit of archaeology and tapestry. Artists can bring new perceptions to the understanding of the past, whether Aboriginal or classical, a past which conditions the direction of national and personal identity. David Lowenthal comments:

> A fixed past is not really what we need, or at any rate not all we need. We require a heritage with which we continually interact, one which fuses the past with the present. This heritage is not only necessary but inescapable; we cannot now avoid feeling that the past is our own creation. If today’s insights can be seen as integral to the meaning of the past, rather than subversive of its truth, we may breathe new life into it.

My desire as a young woman to be both a scholar and an artist is realisable within the mercurial currents of present art theory in a way that could not be achieved within the bounded disciplines of the 1960s when an artist was one who made, rather than one who spoke. The diverse fields - archaeology, tapestry and textiles, Aboriginality - involved in the realization of this body of work are indicative of the breaking down of rigid divisions between disciplines, and between fixed systems of representation, in the late twentieth century. The question is one of translation not only between tapestry and painting but also between archaeology and tapestry,
between theory and practice. Such fluidity requires also a flexibility in the viewer/reader, a shifting ability to connect discourses. Evelyn Juers has written about my exhibition *Unwritten Country*:

running throughout this exhibition as a binding thread is also the idea that copying by any method - mirroring, drawing, weaving or mechanical reproduction - is like following an apprenticeship in the building of ideas and emotions. Trained concomitantly as archaeologist, weaver and academic Diana Wood Conroy has become deeply concerned with the abolishment of strict boundaries - between drawing, weaving, watercolour, mosaic, sculpture as well as between objects lost, discarded, found and copied. Her interest now is in a fluency of translation between these categories and the establishment of a joint language.7

The very different languages of tapestry and textiles, between the ‘symbolic’ and ‘semiotic’ relate to dichotomies in my own practice, to the differences between theory and practice, between writing and making. In this body of work the desire for the ‘maternal’ realm of touch and instinct is allied to the ‘paternal’ realm of order and structure through conjunctions of concept and material.

This thesis has encompassed the varied contexts of the exhibition work. The study demonstrated strands in the development of a practitioner which are still incompletely woven, strands which are connected to mingled backgrounds of history and culture. One thread connected me to the wide arc of the distant European past, another linked me to the unfamiliar understandings of place in Tiwi culture. The searching investigation of textiles and tapestry, in relation to my own work, opened up craft histories of materiality and image in Australia that are at the heart of our self-perceptions.


Sue Walker: Is your work (for your doctorate) actually about textiles rather than tapestry?

Diana Wood Conroy: No, it is about tapestry, but I am placing tapestry in its broadest contexts, investigating that art/craft debate, in the context of the whole Australian art scene, not just as an isolated branch of the art industry. I'm trying to place tapestry anthropologically across the whole spectrum - why does it suddenly emerge in Australia at this time. I'm looking at the various aspects of tapestry - the VTW has given this extraordinary impetus to the interpretative side of tapestry weaving, and from this workshop independent weavers have gone off to establish other workshops and develop their own art. When I first heard you speaking in 1980, there was a lot of criticism of the way the workshop seemed to be just making work from painting. I wanted to ask you if this skilfulness in interpretation has changed in the intervening years?

SW I think its difficult to go into that question without going into the question which you mentioned on the telephone which was the actual impetus for the establishment of the workshop. I think the first thing that needs to be said is that the impetus for establishing this workshop had no connection whatsoever to anything that was happening in the so-called textile world at that time. At the time the Workshop was established, people were working with fibrearts in the late 60s - Jutta Feddersen, Rasma Druva, people involved in fabric-y sort of textiles - but the impetus for this workshop was very much from the Fine Arts way of thinking, because it was from an exhibition of French tapestries in the National Gallery, and it was supported in the main by people, who with hindsight had more Fine Art, or applied Fine Art sensibilities, people from the National Gallery, and a Professor of Architecture, people like that. The initial feasibility study was written by John Blanch who was employed as a consultant, and did look into the weaving situation,
did make contact with handweavers, but his report was not adopted. The one that was adopted was the one I wrote, and that was part of the situation of being given a job, I suppose.

DWC And were you a weaver at that time?

SW This is a further area of confusion. I have always been interested in weaving and textiles, but I'm not an original image maker, I've never had an exhibition. I very rapidly realised that I was a better facilitator than an original artist. But I was married to a painter you see, and my whole excitement at the idea of starting the workshop was to do with the concept of the collaborative role, between a painter and a tapestry artist.

One of the big difficulties we had in the early days was to encourage people who were involved in hand weaving and textiles to understand that we were not looking for people who had a fabric style background - its very easy to learn to go over and under - its the sensibility of what you do with it. You need to draw - are you familiar with Mark Adam's paper that he gave at the tapestry symposium this year? - I'll have to get a photocopy for you - he says people come to tapestry training from different directions, from textiles and fine arts.

So the initial challenge for us here was first of all to capture the confidence of the artists. We needed the confidence of the image makers, the original thinkers, with whom we were to be able to work to interpret their designs. It was really essential that the people we employed understood the artists language. It isn't easy to attract that kind of person so initially we did have to take some people who did have more varied backgrounds, - I don't know if the original weavers only had a textile background - we had a graphic artist, a professional designer and a sculpture degree - basically they were all Fine Arts trained, so that the initial interpretative dialogues that we undertook had this as a main feature, this dual role of experimenting with the textile medium which we didn't know about.

There wasn't much experience or background in Australia, and as Archie Brennan encouraged us to think, this was a very free experience for us as we weren't hampered by preconceptions, and when you look at the American model you can see the problem, they've got that terribly heavy overlay of the French model, and I
think we've been terribly lucky. Another thing we also had to explore has been our interpretative situation. Now I don't think that its only been things that we've done that have changed people's attitudes, I think a number of other things, as well as what we've done have started people thinking about the visual arts offering experiences in work that is other than solitary - you don't have to be in a garret any more, there's collaboration.

A whole spirit of excitement has come into the visual arts in the last ten or fifteen years, so we found it easier to attract people to work here who had painting qualifications because they could see that it wasn't a corruption of what they'd been taught at art school. So that was one thing, and I think painters themselves, the whole state of mind of the really good artists were excited and delighted to work with us. They've enjoyed the stimulus of seeing their own work - we've printed in various publications some of the statements that they've made about this, the excitement that it offers.

So, taking all that as a backdrop to the question you asked about have our skills developed, expanded since 1980, I don't think its to do with skill, I think its to do with artistic confidence, certainly we've become more confident and sometimes artists hand us work and would almost rather that we didn't collaborate, would just rather see what happens, so that gives us a strength. There are some key people in the workshop, whose capacities in analysing, in interpreting an artists' image have certainly grown and developed and I think with some artists we have worked through a series of developments that have been very exciting and we can now re-draw their work and all sorts of things which the viewer doesn't necessarily recognize - that doesn't really matter.

DWC I was fascinated to see the Coburn tapestry you've got in the front foyer, because I saw the Coburn tapestries that were done in France displayed in the Art Gallery of NSW, and they were so flat. The interpretation was nothing like that one in the front, which is so lively in comparison.

SW Yes, well I feel the same way. They almost looked to me like silk-screen or fabric, they don't have the richness that tapestry can offer.

DWC You're not afraid of the 'stepping', (the stepped quality of a curved vertical line in tapestry, as the weft crosses the warp) which can offer a nice quality.
SW No that gives a nice dynamic to it. Coburn enjoys that, he gives us a lot of work. Mind you, that was a lovely design he gave us - his work has moved into a very rich spiritual phase so that we're enjoying the opportunity to work with him. I'm mad about that tapestry, every time I go out there I get a really nice feeling from it.

So I think any discussion about where the workshop is compared to where it was at must also be seen in the context of where the wider visual art community is at. If you want to look at it, there are probably different shifts of thinking that go on amongst textile people, but I think that textile people will always resist and misunderstand what goes on in a place like this, and that doesn't truly worry me at all. One of the things that worries me much more is that people who were around in textiles are going to grasp tapestry as the answer when it isn't the answer. All these workshops, and all these tertiary institutions will start having half-baked tapestry courses with people simply using techniques without the visual language to use it.

Somehow I feel there are high points that can and will be reached in Australian tapestry. When paper became the thing there was all this technique based stuff so I'm really wary and cautious and hope the textile courses don't take up tapestry. I see a massive future for textiles in Australia to do with fashion and fabric, surface printing on fabric and all sorts of things where we can draw on the Asian tradition. We've got to start on something really Australian. So I'm really scared about multimedia constructions.

One of the things we do is to draw the comparison with the performing arts - a concerto can be done in so many different ways. People who listen to music understand and I suppose people who really look understand what is happening in interpretative tapestry.

DWC I've been an independent tapestry weaver for many years but I think you need this kind of base, as well as the independent people.

SW Well that was always how it was seen and that was why I was thrilled when Chisholm started. (Monash University Tapestry course, begun under direction of Ann Newdigate in 1990) And Ann was the person I wanted because I felt she was such a good artist, she thinks as a fine artist and she has an amazing intellect. She's
been marvellous, and I'm sure it will continue at Monash because the professor (Chris Pyatt) is really passionate about it. He said he'd like to have it in his department. He and I travelled together, and the place where in the whole world tapestry is strongest in my view, and independent tapestry, is Britain. Edinburgh and Royal College of Art in London both have distinct Tapestry departments, that are not part of Textiles. In America there are no Tapestry Departments, they're all mixed media, and people trying but getting confused about whether its an Applied art or a Fine art and nobody knows where they are.

DWC So you've always been very clear that tapestry belonged to the Fine Art spectrum and the craft involvement was really something separate?

SW I can see why there's been confusions and as much as anything I suppose my own identification with crafts in the 70s would have contributed to that confusion but I suppose I went sideways into another field and I think some of the things the workshop has done to encourage the development of individual tapestry weavers has absorbed a large percentage of the leisure time but I don't want to overemphasise that...

Have you read any of Ann Newdigate's catalogues? That one of her recent exhibition, where someone else wrote it but quoting Ann (Lynne Bell), the struggles and the marginalisation, Ann cares very passionately about that. To an extent I've had the same kind of feeling here at the workshop but not as much as she has an individual artist, and you've probably experienced the same type of thing.

DC I suppose because the workshop does use the work of 'great' Australian painters to some extent that validates the work as art in the eyes of the public.

SW I guess thats right..

DWC But if you create the work from scratch, you have a different problem entirely, you have to be validated as art and as tapestry

SW I'm hoping thats whats emerging is the independent artist in the art industry, the independent image makers, who incorporate tapestry as part of their oeuvre, who are also painting and making prints and drawing. Robin Daw, I don't know if you know her, she's an interesting example, she's doing some lovely little
paintings, she's a very prolific printmaker, she's also a very energetic and active tapestry weaver, and she's shown her work as a group, and I think that is a good sign.

DWC Yes, I've had this discussion with Kay Lawrence, she does drawing and painting as I do, and you really have to have a parallel development in that area.

SW I think it will be better when we get more work of people who are actually showing work that is about their feelings and ideas and that is across the board gambit of their art so that tapestry is legitimate. This is what tapestry weavers will need to do to validate what they're on about. I also think that the things we've done have been a kind of role. I think that those mixed exhibitions at the Tapestry Symposium in 1988 were probably not a terribly good idea, I think it reinforces the notion of the one-off object. I think it would have been a lot better to have a series of exhibitions of people maybe like you or Ann or Kay, who didn't only make tapestries, but, had a statement and more ideas than could be incorporated in one tapestry. We go on along that track and our ideas go on developing, and hopefully we'll go on another way.

DWC But the technique itself is so entrancing, we keep coming back to it, even though its so slow, so laborious, but its also marvellous isn't it, it does add something completely extra to an image. and I sometimes feel the art world has to decry that area, they don't see the beauty of the medium..

SW Indeed, certainly. We've had terrific feedback from the exhibition in the National Gallery, talking quietly to artists who say how they enjoyed it, how meaningful it was, and this comes from people who really look.

DWC I wanted to ask you about the selection of the artist. Do artists come to you now? How do you go about it? Some people's designs are much more suitable for tapestry, aren't they?

SW Well there's always been a small number of artists who've been interested and approached us, and possibly we try to do something small of theirs as samples which helps them to see through the eyes of their own work and gives us a chance to have something there for a client to get a bit of inspiration. If its got integrity we can do something, and its their attitude, its more to do with their attitude. We have
at the moment got two artists with commissions to weave, Ann Newdigate, and a
painter the first painter to come to us, thats David van Noonen. But by and large
we're working to commissions and we try to encourage the clients to think through
as to the artists they feel most drawn to for their particular needs. If I feel its really
something that would waste our time I try to suggest to the client that it isn't
suitable for the medium, I don't say its bad art, but that it wouldn't make a
successful tapestry. We don't always get that set of options, sometimes its a bit
difficult. People have had the opportunity to choose work because we have had
planned exhibitions. One particular one starts next year and goes all around
Australia is called Interpretations, the language of the Australian tapestry
workshop, showing the broad range of qualities that tapestry has to offer, with
much consideration of whose work to include. So we've chosen artists that we've
worked with over a long period, like that John Coburn. Its also meant to be
bringing contemporary Australian art to a wider public, so we're including
provocative work like Gareth Sansom - its an amazing tapestry - also Russell
Ward's work which is narrative story telling about contemporary life which would
be lovely to have printed, not just as tapestry, Colin Lancely who's eager to
incorporate a series of images and thats going to be an exciting experimental
project, because there's an assemblage which is drawn, and a photograph of the
assemblage and our drawing comes out of all that

DWC So that you actually take part in the designing..

SW Well in that case, yes. They do a certain amount of re-drawing and moving
around of images, its a fine line. I was talking about this with a lecturer from
Monash who's very keen about music - its a fine line between actually altering the
composer's notes and having to play it all.

DWC So you'll show the cartoon of the original as well as, or beside the tapestry?

SW We'll show some explanatory panels, we won't necessarily show the artwork.
When the workshop first started my main principle was to approach artists who
were excited by the idea of working with us, and who had not had experience of
European workshops with their very formal traditional approach to tapestry. The
artists don't collaborate, they go in and get a slide or something, and don't usually
even talk to the weaver. They talk to the workshop master and then its just done.
They also had the line drawings ... you see, we do that here, that stage is always
part of the whole thing. Now, our choice is somewhat different, and also its really important to bear in mind the state of all the visual arts, what is going on in Australian art at the moment and hopefully to reflect that - this is a difficult one. In some of our exhibitions we talk to people about what they see and think of our work - its a continual search to do more and different and keep developing, keep our own set of developments happening. There are some very exciting things going on here and I have to say that by and large this is coming from people who have been trained as painters working here, almost solely.

DWC One last question, could I ask you about your involvement with Aboriginal art? When did you first start working on this?

SW We were first approached - it was very early after the workshop was first started (1976) by Roy Grounds, one of the people who was first involved with Papunya - the Papunya artists were with Jill Battersby, and he approached us to do seven tapestries for the foyer of the Concert Hall in the Art Centre, which was fairly mind boggling when we had about three and a half weavers. We really wanted just to get into exploration - but it was wonderful and of course it opened this wonderful treasure house to us. I expended considerable effort on that whole cultural thing and wanted to make sure we did it with propriety because we didn’t know the meaning in those days.

DWC Did you consult with Aboriginal artists or weren’t they interested?

SW There was a lot of discussion over quite a long period of time, also discussions about how we would cope if we had to do the whole lot, he was very keen to encourage us to do one a year. In the end we only did three because the proposal was changed, Roy Grounds was out of it. So we had lots of discussions with all the advisers up there, Bob Edwards of course, and eventually we did do the first one. The work was borrowed from “Art of the western desert”. It was placed in a foyer so we didn’t borrow it for the 1988 exhibition. And as we were doing that it seemed as if it would be a good idea if we took that work up to the western desert to show the other artists. Prior to this too of course, I was making sure they were properly paid and all that kind of thing. So we went up into the desert, and sat around, so that was the most wonderful experience, I got very hooked by it all and wished I’d bought a lot of art then. So then we did two more, one of Yalla Yalla belonged to Margaret Carnegie, and she’s given it to the National Gallery of Victoria. Most of
the artists came down. I was really struck by something I hadn’t expected to find, I was struck by a kind of quality you find in nomadic work of the Middle East, an extreme presence you know.

DWC It was the extreme scale of the tapestries that astonished me, like ground paintings

SW Yes its like reinterpreting it back again. When I took that to New York in 1980, nobody even looked at it, whereas if I took it now they’d be trying to buy it. So that when that finished, I thought it would be interesting to go. We borrowed from Anthony Wallis a wonderful Tiwi bark, and it was bought for the United Nations Conference room, it looks wonderful. Well the weavers are extremely good at dealing with scale. ...

I’m glad you had that feeling of wanting to protect tapestry from the ravages of the textile war.
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FICTION AND POETRY


