

What preparation do you undertake in the creation of a tapestry?

The practicality of bringing a tapestry together is, first, the winding of the warp onto the frame. Then the weaving of the “floor” with waste yarn, to even the spacings of the warp across the frame, and to provide a base to beat to. I also use it to determine how many threads to weave with, to create the plump pixels of colour that makes tapestry so compelling to me. Prior to this is the concept, the image, the cartoon that is used as a guide, the drawings, reference photos, colour notes and the gradual evolution of a style.



Tapestry gives weavers an opportunity to abstract an image, simply by choosing a course sett [the sett is the distance between warp threads; a high sett allows for more definition, and a low sett allows for less detail-generally]. Stripping detail out of an image encourages the viewer to imagine and speculate on the lost details.

For my landscape work, I am drawn to the lines that the vista scribes across a panorama. I draw these lines and imagine where they go, as they disappear behind the bulk of foreground shapes. When I first started weaving this way [illustrated by Narrawa and Vale Creek tapestries], I suggested the trajectory with dotted lines. The undulations of rolling hills so typical of the tablelands are hypnotic and pleasing to weave. They create a narrative around the bulk of the landscape, rather than its biological details.

You have described woven tapestry as a process that builds an image by degrees.

When drawing or painting, the artist generally works across the entire space of the image, gradually building the work up to bring the concept into focus. With woven tapestry, the image is built from the bottom up, each pick adding to the one that had gone before, as the tapestry climbs the length of the warp. So it is built by degrees.

However, the artist needs to approach a concept in a similar way to traditional media. This could be painting, collage and digital manipulation of photos. I have found that drawing designs that later become cartoons for weaving in the landscape gives my image a location, and a connection that feeds the meditation of the process.

In creating your woven tapestry Hawkins Hill 2019, you experimented with different weaving techniques. How was it made?

Hawkins Hill is a studio work, probably the largest weaving I have undertaken in years. It was also one of the last woven in the series. The design is from a drawing I completed en plein air, after a number of trips to Hawkins Hill. I wove a study first, allowing mistakes to happen, investigating tone and colour and looking at texture. In

the larger tapestry, I decided to suggest a whisper of perspective using texture. The easiest way to create textures is to effectively double the sett. In this work, I wove sections over and under two warp threads instead of one. I also used a technique called soumac, which is a half-hitch knotting weaving, not unlike that used on carpets.

The mechanics of tapestry weaving have been compiled over the centuries across cultures, and modern weavers are not constrained by tradition, to incorporate these devices in their work. It's an area I hope to explore further over future work. I also played with “flying needle”, a drawing technique borrowed from the Coptic Egyptians, which allows threads to be drawn across the woven surface and captured by the warp on occasion. It's like in-weaving embroidery.

In some of your tapestries, such as Wombool (2016), you have experimented with different materials such as paper, wool and fibres.

Wombool is a little bit political. It was created around the time that the mining company Regis Resources wanted to purchase water from the Bathurst Council, depriving the Macquarie River - Wombool - of a vast amount of water. During this drought, water is an even a more precious existential resource for us all, and this tapestry is still very relevant.

To indicate water usage, I looked at fibres that suggested its use. Cotton is obvious, so is wool. I thought about forests and logging and used paper - kozo paper and tea bags hand-spun. I used nettle string to suggest weeds introduced since colonisation, horse-hair yarn to suggest hard-hoofed livestock, raffia for grazing. The river is woven using horse hair, bovine tail hair and stainless steel wrapped in wool. All these are resilient fibres, weaving a bit of hope into the concept.

The patchwork nature of the design relates to the carving up of land, the bureaucracy of acquisition that cares little for natural processes. All these fibres behaved differently in weaving, and were a challenge to manipulate around the warp, particularly the nettle string. I used the remnant of a decorative wire fence to frame the work.

What advice would you give an emerging textile artist?

Textiles are a broad church, everything from reframing traditional and enormously time-hungry techniques, to modern textiles and the manipulation of fibres using the incredible scope of the digital age. For me, it has been a natural progression - not everything I conceive becomes a textile-based work, but a lot of it does now.

Any exploration of a media relies on first learning a technique, experimenting with the opportunities and constraints of a technique, and then pushing it to where you want to go. Textiles are no different, Love what you do, explore and play with what you have, and keep drawing. Textiles are labour-intensive, so you need to truly enjoy most of the process. All the other tenants of the artistic journey are there, and they need to be nurtured, and textiles can be a hugely satisfying branch of that journey to cultivate.

image captions:

COVER *Golden Gully* 2018,
woven tapestry: silk, wool, cotton, acrylic

1 *Heather Dunn in studio*
Photography by Clare Lewis

2 *Hawkins Hill* 2019
woven tapestry: silk, wool, cotton, acrylic

3 Sample cards of the dye pot results
compiled during Hill End Artist in
Residency 2017

4 *Wombool* 2016,
woven tapestry: silk, wool, cotton, acrylic

All artworks © the artist
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HEATHER DUNN: PALETTE OF PLACE

18 OCTOBER - 1 DECEMBER





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IN CONVERSATION

For Bathurst-based textile artist Heather Dunn, location – place – is important. Palette of Place showcases tapestries inspired by the landscape and colours of Hill End. Using dyes created from local organic materials, Dunn's tapestries comprise rich ochres, wattle yellow and subtle shades of green. Their designs, drawn en plein air, reflect broad elements of the landscape, allowing the palette of the place to become the heroes of the composition. Here she discusses her practice and current exhibition, Palette of Place, with BRAG curator Emma Collerton.

EMMA COLLERTON:

In 2011, you graduated with a Diploma of Tapestry from Warrnambool TAFE. What drew you to the tapestry medium?

HEATHER DUNN:
I have always been drawn to textiles, learning to spin when I was 15. Woven tapestry became a natural progression of the desire to make images and to incorporate textiles and fibres. Like a lot of human endeavour, woven tapestry has the ability to cross cultures and epochs. Each tapestry is unique, even if a cartoon

[design] is used several times. Artists can use tapestry as a tool, a metaphor, or in my experience, both. Its richness and diversity are a lifelong journey through the media; I'm only on the first few steps.

Over the years, you have continued to hone your skills through masterclass workshops. Is there an artist or artists who inspires you?

I take every opportunity to learn from other artists, and to study other artists' work. I collect work that inspires me, and my shelves are filled with art books. Influencers in my work range from the deceptively simple compositions of Giorgio Morandi's later paintings to the artists who are contemporary to me. I love the shapes and streetscapes of Rachel Ellis, the complex narratives in Kiata Mason's still life, the complexity and emotion behind the eyes of Ben Quilty's portraits, the absolute colour and movement of Nicole Foxall's work and the observational brush work in Nic Mason's paintings.

Printmakers also inspire, as their media has limitations not unlike woven tapestry.

David Frazer's towering prints taught me about tone, and I finally understand G.W. Bots' Glyphs after drawing trees around Hill End. I love Harrie Fasher's work and the shadow lines that her sculptures produce.

In textiles, India Flint's botanical printing on cloth was a revelation to me around 2010. Drawing on her methods, I experimented and worked on finding my local palette around my own environment.

On the weaving side, there are many. One who does stand out is Cresside Collette and her spontaneous "en plein air" weaving that freed me from sticking to rigid cartoons. I didn't have an opportunity to weave en plein air at Hill End, but most of my designs [cartoons] are drawn en plein air and woven straight from that.

Can you identify some turning points in your career?

My first solo at Bathurst's TARTS Gallery in 2013 made me realise that textiles could take a more prominent place in my skill set, with people responding to

my work so positively. I have found that by following a seam of inspiration, I can explore different processes and a theme over an extended period. Another turning point was completing my diploma. I studied art amongst the chaos of raising three teenagers. The course gave me structure and accountability that has continued into my work.

In September 2017 you participated in Hill End Artist in Residency (HEAIR) program at Murray's cottage. What affect did it have on your practice.

Hill End was a huge turning point in my practice, in that it was a moment when I recognised how my processes can intersect with the many layered complexities of a place. Different people view place from different cultural and time aspects. Trying to cut across these layers with my process reveals similarities across time and sadly huge disconnects between cultural groups.

It's this connection through landscape and its biomass that still gives me rich themes and authentic responses to place. Hill End crystallised these processes and will be a huge influence on future work.

During your HEAIR residency, you spent time gathering material, pigments and vegetation for dyeing and mark-making.

Spring in Hill End is a variable season. I checked the skies and the radio for the forecast each morning over breakfast and after giving Boris the magpie his bribe - he never swooped. If the wind was relatively calm, I lit the gas under a dye pot and got it bubbling away. I usually walked and collected and drew in the afternoon. It didn't take me long to realise that pigment is everywhere to be found in Hill End.

I had planned to weave in my response to place, and dyeing yarn from the pigment in the area was the natural progression. I also collected mud to paint on cloth, with beautiful colours found in the Golden Mile. For the yarns, I picked up bark and leaves from the roadsides in and around Hill End.

Natural dyes have been used in textiles for tens of thousands of years. However, in this instance I wanted to focus on where I collected the dye stuff, as opposed to what it was. I recorded the location, with the tree or shrub being a

secondary notation. I didn't need a lot of material to dye the quantities of yarns that I had planned. The dried mistletoe leaves were the most painstaking, as they were long and brittle, and tucked away in the grass. Bark and dried leaves were then placed in a dye pot and broken up with a wooden spoon or broom handle, and then soaked. The next day, the dye stuff and the soaking water was boiled until I could see a release of pigment into the water. This liquid was strained into another pot, and it was ready for the yarn.

Once the yarn was in the pot, I steeped it until the colour was strong enough for my palette. I used rusty bits of metal found on my walks to sadden colours, and aluminium pots to brighten colours. Very occasionally I used copper sulphate or a few teaspoons of alum. It soon became apparent that the colours I was finding in and around Hill End reflected the colours many artists before me had used in their paintings. This was a bit of a 'a-ha' moment. As the weeks went by, my palette grew, and the balls of yarn stacked on the mantelpiece were a constant inspiration.

(continued over page)