

CRAFTS

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TOP TABLE

*Gareth Neal
reveals (nearly)
everything*

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SENATE DEBATES *Richard Sennett and Grayson Perry on making*
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WARP FACTOR *Peter Blake, Gary Hume and Gavin Turk on tapestry*

THE WEFT WING

Chris and Suzanne Sharpe have commissioned 15 artists to explore the possibilities of tapestry. But, asks Dominic Lutyens, does the project have any real value?

There is nothing new about the notion of artists creating tapestries: Graham Sutherland was commissioned to design his unapologetically modernist tapestry of Christ the King for Coventry Cathedral in 1952, after all.

In recent years, broadening the idea of tapestries to encompass embroidered or patchwork wall-hangings, Tracey Emin has revived an approach that was previously practised by feminists in the 70s. The latter often argued that the idea of demure damsels doing cross-stitch reflected an oppressive patriarchal hierarchy which ranked male fine artists above female craftswomen, others that revisiting – and reclaiming – crafts like as embroidery and quilting helped break down the rigid hierarchy between fine art and crafts that had precluded many women from registering on the radar of art history.

Emin's work in this vein has given the debate a new slant, by capitalising on the contradiction between embroidery – with all its genteel, middle-class associations – and the angsty self-expression so often associated with fine art. In one piece, for instance, the words 'There is no fucking peace' are spelt out in letters cut out of fabric against floral rectangles reminiscent of Holly Hobbie dolls, their pastel hues reinforcing the contradiction between the message and the medium.

Emin is not the only recent artist to have cottoned on to stitching and embroidery as a fine-art medium. There have been exhibitions devoted to this approach, for example *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery*, held last year at New York's Museum of Arts and Design. Earlier this year, *Cloth and Culture Now*, at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, showed work by artists also using techniques like knitting and embroidery.

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Far left: 'Alphabet', Peter Blake, 1.8 x 1.8 m, 2008



Left: 'Carioca', Beatriz Milhazes, 2 x 2 m, 2008

Opposite: 'After Migrant Fruit Thugs', Fred Tomaselli, 2.5 x 1.6 m, 2008



And now the idea of using thread instead of paint – in the form of tapestry – is the subject of an exhibition entitled *Demons, Yarns and Tales*, at London venue the Dairy (formerly Express Dairies' milk depot). Chris and Suzanne Sharpe, the husband-and-wife duo behind the Rug Company (which has commissioned such designers, from the worlds of fashion and interiors, as Paul Smith and Barber Osgerby, to create rugs), had the idea of inviting 15 artists to explore a medium they don't (say the Sharpes) normally work in. *Demons* is the first exhibition presented by a new visual arts commissioning organisation, Banners of Persuasion, established by the Sharpes. There are 14 tapestries in the show, one made by the duo Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh.

Whether you can say that they have or haven't worked in this medium before depends partly on how you define 'tapestry'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it's an elastic term, encompassing 'thick textile fabric with pictures or designs formed by weaving coloured weft threads' and 'embroidering on canvas, used as a wall hanging or soft furnishing'. This would suggest that there is little difference between a rug and a tapestry, save that the latter is wall-hung.

If so, it's not strictly true that the *Demons* artists haven't worked in this medium before: Amer took part in the *Pricked* show, exhibiting works using threads in place of a pencil. Another

Demons exhibitor, Sir Peter Blake, created a rug in the 60s bearing the words 'I love you', as well as one for Zeev Aram in 2004 (one of several created to mark his company Aram's 40th anniversary). And Grayson Perry, another exhibitor, says that he's dipped into 'textiles and wall hangings'.

What perhaps distinguishes the pieces in the *Demons* show from those of *Pricked* is that the traditional rectangular format of the tapestry has imposed a discipline on the artists. Like some of the artists in *Pricked*, however, Gary Hume and Amer and Farkhondeh, have deviated slightly from the trad tapestry medium by overlaying it with pencil-like lines using embroidery. Even so the majority of the rugs resemble traditional tapestries and have smooth surfaces.

And like several artists in *Pricked*, some artists in *Demons* have undermined the quaint, bourgeois associations of tapestry in their use of shocking imagery: Kara Walker's piece, titled (with heavy irony) *A Warm Summer Evening in 1863*, appropriates an image, published in *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* in that same year, and captioned 'The Destruction of the Coloured Orphan

Above: 'The Bugs and the Lovers', Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh, preliminary artwork, 1.54 x 2.32 m, 2008
Opposite: 'The Pathology of Suspension', Shahzia Sikander, 2.7 x 1.86 m, 2008

Some artists undermine the quaint, bourgeois associations of tapestry





Opposite page: 'Far from the Madding Crowd', Julie Verhoeven, 2.75 x 2.05 m, 2008
 Above: 'Georgie and Orchids', Gary Hume, 2.5 x 2 m, 2008
 Right: 'Mappa Del Mondo' (detail), Gavin Turk, preliminary artwork, 2 x 3.13 m, 2008



Asylum on 5th Avenue'. Walker has superimposed a silhouette of a lynched black woman, thereby spelling out the racist brutality depicted in the *Harper's* image, which, by comparison, resembles a dispassionate newspaper photograph.

Gavin Turk's tapestry is equally unequivocal: a comment on consumerism, waste and pollution, it shows a map of the world composed of crisp packets, cigarettes and drink cans (although the tapestry isn't collaged with rubbish but woven). Grayson Perry's tapestry, *Vote Alan Measles for God*, takes as its subject the recent war on terror, Osama Bin Laden and the planes crashing into the Twin Towers. And Shahzia Sikander's piece, *Pathology of Suspension*, has a menacing undertow: Sikander's depicts an apparently ordered decorative pattern which at its centre anarchically fragments into black, amorphous shapes resembling a flock of crows or rubbish blowing in the wind.

Others are more decorative: Julie Verhoeven's is crowded with her signature, Biba-esque waif-like faces and mythological creatures inspired by the 'pagan symbolism' of the iconic, seven *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries (created from 1495-1505). Fred Tomaselli's, with its two birds perched on a fig tree at night, has a fairytale-like quality.

Why did the Sharpes put on this show? 'We've worked with fashion and product designers who've designed our rugs, and I wanted to work with artists too,' says Chris Sharpe. 'I was also

inspired by the idea that in the Middle Ages, artists worked with craftspeople. Tapestry is an abandoned art, and I wanted to see how artists could work with a medium they weren't familiar with. Would they feel restricted by the tight knot counts when they normally work with freer blocks of colour? The one thing about tapestry is that it allows you to go into huge detail because of its tiny stitches. It also resembles fine art in that it hangs on the wall.'

The challenge of working in a different medium that faces these artists is arguably a red herring, since none were made by an artist (though some have later embroidered theirs). The artists submitted their designs – as drawings, paintings or digital images – to the Sharpes, who had them made into tapestries in China. But some artists might ask what they would gain from making the tapestries themselves other than demonstrate a pointless devotion to a work ethic.

Yet they seem to have leapt at the opportunity. 'Chris Sharpe contacted me about this and I said yes. I'm interested in anything traditional,' says Grayson Perry. Blake was approached by gallery

owner Paul Stolper, who shows Blake's work. 'Paul knows Chris Sharpe, who asked Paul if I'd be interested,' says Blake. For Blake – whose square, sampler-like rug features an alphabet in different fonts – working in this medium seemed a natural fit. 'I've moved a lot between the fine and applied arts.' Indeed, while at Gravesend Technical College Junior Art School in Kent, Blake was tutored in drawing, typography, lettering, silversmithing and joinery. He later applied to the RCA to do graphic design but was given a place as a painter.

But working in tapestry brought Blake surprising – and positive – results. 'Most of the letters were initially scanned from a book about Victorian sign-writing and at that point looked quite flat. But by the time these were translated into a tapestry, the gold thread in it made the image much richer. It had become a new phenomenon.'

For Perry, the chance to work in two dimensions instead of 'more complicated 3D pots' was a 'luxury'. He loves flitting between different media. 'I did a lot of things before ceramics. At college, I worked in cast metal and did etchings.' Although he believes the dividing line between fine art and design 'has been trampled over years ago', he thinks that many people still rank 'ideas above physical labour'. 'There's a false dichotomy between art and crafts – there are plenty of craftspeople who are great, and lots of artists who are rubbish, and vice versa.' One interesting aspect of

A map of the world in crisp packets, cigarettes and drink cans...



THE RIOTERS BURNING THE COLORED ORPHAN ASYLUM, CORNER OF FIFTH AVENUE AND FORTY-SIXTH STREET, NEW YORK CITY.

Opposite page:
 'Vote Alan Measles for
 God', Grayson Perry,
 2.5 x 2 m, 2008
 Above: 'A Warm Summer
 Evening in 1863',
 Karen Walker,
 preliminary artwork,
 1.68 x 2.5 m, 2008

Perry's design is that it references a carpet or tapestry tradition, giving the work another layer of meaning: its faux-naif, apocalyptic-looking imagery is inspired by an Afghan folk-art tradition of rugs depicting political events, such as 9/11.

For Verhoeven, this was her 'first tapestry venture'. 'I tried to forget about the medium, not to be inhibited by it,' she says. 'I wanted it to be graphic.' Another participant, Venezuelan-born painter Jaime Gili, who nevertheless works in different media, took Goya's tapestries as the inspiration for his Vorticist-looking piece, and Gio Ponti's designs for private homes in Caracas. He had no reservations about getting involved: 'I'm influenced by where I grew up: Venezuela is a country still being built. It had a "modern project" that was suddenly stopped and never realised. I believe modernity means, in part, art, design, crafts, art, architecture, politics, all working together to make a better place to live. So a commission like this is only natural to my view of art.'

We now take for granted the cross-pollination of art and crafts and the notion that separating them is outmoded and artificial. But does a project like *Demons* have a real value? In some respects it's limited: despite expressing wonder at the richness of the tapestry's threads, Blake simply replicated one of his favourite subjects (Victorian typography) in tapestry form. Arguably, Hume made the supreme sacrifice of not using his

trademark medium – household paint – yet the imagery on his tapestry lackadaisically repeats that of his paintings.

The most successful tapestries truly challenge the medium: Sikander and Perry nod to this tradition but give it an unruly twist. Also good is the design by the anonymous Brazilian artists' collective avaf – assume vivid astro focus – who exploit the degree of detail that the tiny stitches in a tapestry allow for. Their starting point was a collage of photographs ripped from magazines and their tapestry appears to have duplicated this, albeit in a totally different medium.

Whether or not it's futile for artists to work in this medium is down to how they treat it. Certainly there is nothing interesting in regarding it as just another rectilinear format, like a canvas or piece of paper. Unless artists refer in a thought-provoking way to the history and traditions of tapestry when using it, or take the opportunity to play with its physical, three-dimensional qualities – by embroidering over the tapestry, say, or exploiting such qualities as its glossiness or richness in a way that painting on canvas doesn't allow – the exercise seems pointless.

'Demons, Yarns and Tales – 14 Tapestries by Contemporary Artists' shows at the Dairy, London WC1, (020) 7243 7345, from November 10-22. For details, see Crafts Guide.