

ART & DESIGN

For Tapestry, One More Renaissance

By CAROL KINO JAN. 22, 2010

WHEN Chris and Suzanne Sharp conceived of their Banners of Persuasion tapestry project, the premise was fairly straightforward. “In the Renaissance people would commission an artist to do a tapestry for them,” Mr. Sharp said in a phone interview, “and then they’d commission a workshop to produce the design. We thought it would be interesting to return to the same format and that synergy between the commissioning person and the artist and the workshop.”

The results of that synergy are up through Feb. 13 in the show “Demons, Yarns & Tales,” at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea.

It is the first purely artistic endeavor for the Sharps, owners of the Rug Company in London, which produces artisanal floor coverings. They had often considered working with artists, Mr. Sharp said, but the typical rug weave of 100 knots per square inch does not allow for much nuance and detail. Tapestry, which he said “enables literally hundreds of knots per square inch,” offered vastly more expressive potential, one reason that the medium was as highly regarded during the Renaissance as painting.

The couple set up a tapestry workshop just north of Shanghai, in a community full of expert weavers. Then they sought out “artists we adored,” Mr. Sharp said.

“There was a lot of convincing them, because nobody’s done much with tapestry recently.”

Eventually 14 artists came on board, including the American painter Kara Walker and the British pop artist Peter Blake. While a few offered existing work, others created new projects. Each piece was then scaled up to monumental size and redrawn on graph paper, a process that often took several months. After that the weavers took over.

Although many of the tapestries ended up embodying some conceptual twist, Mr. Sharp didn’t plan it that way.

“We were interested to see whether it would be perceived as craft or fine art,” he said. “I think people often get a bit stuck on the line between them.”

Gavin Turk

‘Mappa Del Mundo’

When the Sharps approached the British artist Gavin Turk, best known for making cast bronze facsimiles of trash-filled garbage bags, he said he immediately thought of the Italian conceptualist Alighiero e Boetti’s long-running series of embroidered world maps. “I wondered if it was possible to do something that combined my interest in waste with a Boetti kind of image,” he said. “I wondered if we could make the map out of rubbish that we found on the street.”

While making continents from crashed boxes and cans, Mr. Turk mulled over the way painters have rendered volumetric objects throughout art history. “For neo-realism and Pop Art, you would take a solid three-dimensional object, and then you would make it two-dimensional,” he said. “With Cubism you’d look at it from different sides at the same time.” But with his piece, “you start with a three-dimensional object, and then it gets crushed” to the point that it resembles wallpaper. “It’s sculpture to flat,” he said.

Shahzia Sikander

‘Pathology of Suspension’

The Pakistani-born artist Shahzia Sikander has always played with the process of transformation. Although she studied traditional Indo-Persian miniature painting, she has consistently stretched the boundaries of the genre, mixing up different eras and painting styles and exploring variegated mediums, from drawing and watercolor to video and animation. When offered the chance to work with tapestry, she said, “I wanted to see what would happen in that translation” from drawing to weaving. “I was interested in what would be the obvious loss — the nuances — but obviously the very tactile sensibility of this medium would replace it.”

Yet what’s surprising is how much nuance remained, once her original work — a tiny 12-by-18-inch piece made up of different-sized ink, gouache and graphite drawings collaged on top of one another — was scaled up to 9 by 6 feet and rendered in wool and silk. To convey the details and the multiple layers, some of which are translucent, the artisans chose different weaves, from fine to coarse, and raised silk embroidery.

“There was a sense of lack of control,” Ms. Sikander said, because the execution was carried out by others. “But I was interested in all the other things that would come into the picture.”

Fred Tomaselli

‘After Migrant Fruit Thugs’

Fred Tomaselli has been hooked on Renaissance tapestries since he saw them in a 2002 show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “There’s something in the warp and the woof of those weaves that reminds me very much of pixilation,” he said.

For this project he decided to reinvestigate “Migrant Fruit Thugs” (2006), which, like much of his other work, is “a hybrid of paint, photographic collage and real objects,” he said, including leaves from the fig trees in his own garden, all of it suspended in layers of glistening resin. The challenge lay in translating this multilayered, multimedia work into a uniform weaved surface.

To suggest depth the birds and foliage were fashioned from silk against a black matte wool ground, while the leaves were veined with metallic thread “to impart their life force,” Mr. Tomaselli said. “I’ve always been really inspired by applied arts

that aren't exactly painting or craft, like marquetry and tapestry, and I've allowed those influences to be part of my work," he added. "So it was interesting for me to go back to the source and to make a tapestry out of a work that was probably initially inspired by a tapestry."

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