

ART &amp; DESIGN | ART

# To a Tapestry's Warp and Weft, Add Vision and Craft

By ROBERTA SMITH JAN. 25, 2010

It is always instructive when artists translate their work from one form into another, especially if the end result is the mad, magical, labor-intensive domain of tapestry. While astoundingly flexible and able to represent the finest details, the warp and weft of the loom have a regularizing effect. Their physical consistency creates a level playing field but also deadens some designs while enhancing others. So we learn new things about an artist's sensibility and how well it travels.

Thanks to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibitions of Renaissance and Baroque tapestries over the last decade, the glorious history of tapestry as art is much better known than it once was. But it is still largely neglected as a contemporary art medium, with only a few exceptions. One is the South African artist William Kentridge, the subject of a forthcoming retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, who, starting in 2001, made a striking suite of large white tapestries populated by his black, puppetlike silhouettes, with touches of red.

More recently, 14 tapestries were commissioned from contemporary artists by the owners of the Rug Company in London, under a program called Banners of Persuasion. All but one of these works are now on view at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea in an exhibition titled "Demons, Yarns & Tales: Tapestries by

Contemporary Artists.” The pieces were fabricated in China — a process that took three years — and they range from pedestrian to brilliant. By coincidence, this exhibition has a telling but somewhat humbler foil in a group show across the street at BravinLee: three rugs based on works by other artists.

At Cohan, “villa joe,” by the Briton Paul Noble, is the most commanding piece. For one thing, its labor-intensiveness is especially intense: it is 14 feet square. Not surprisingly, it took about eight months just to enlarge its cartoon to full scale and a year to weave. For another, translating Mr. Noble’s detailed graphite drawing into subtle shades of gray wool adds physical heft to his mordantly desolate landscape. This one is an immense, Death Valley-like expanse of totemic stone formations rife with references to the sculptures of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. These are juxtaposed with a glass museum-like villa — filled with displays of ceramic vessels — whose variously shaped wings, seen from above, spell the word Joe.

In front of this structure sits an enormous animal dropping — plop art in the literal sense. It calls your attention to the fact that the landscape is dotted with similar, much tinier ones. In the lower left a cow with a yin-yang head and an enormous dark udder seems to be the culprit. The added substantiality makes Mr. Noble’s landscape a trifle cruder and more present.

The British ceramist Grayson Perry, who also works in embroidery and performance art, often appearing in public in Dorothy-Alice drag, makes the most of textile conventions. Working in the very English, more plebian technique of needlepoint, he creates a piece redolent of the war rugs that began to appear in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, with a nod even to their darkened palette — albeit lightened with a wonderful butter-yellow background. He uses the traditional border — in this case of words and bombs or bullets — and scatters his design with images, as he often does in his ceramic glazes, that up the level of violence.

Mr. Perry portrays his ubiquitous childhood teddy bear, Alan Measles — a companion still — as a suicide bomber standing on the World Trade Center towers like King Kong as the planes hit. The ruddy bear is seen in a kind of X-ray under the legend “Vote Alan Measles for God,” his very arteries sprouting hand grenades. Around him are depictions of Abu Ghraib, an exploding United Nations vehicle,

coffins, an oil derrick and a London Underground train; Israel's wall marches border to border.

Another standout is the translation of one of Fred Tomaselli's high-gloss images of two birds among some trees. In matte wool it gains a medieval sense of importance, although it may almost be too much at home. People unfamiliar with Mr. Tomaselli's paintings could think that it is an extremely well-maintained period tapestry. Still, it would be interesting to see what would happen if Mr. Tomaselli did further tapestry work, especially if he had more of a hand in the process.

Gavin Turk pays homage to Alighiero Boetti's embroidered world maps, which were recently the subject of a large, gorgeous show at the Gladstone Gallery. The Boetti maps, made mostly in the 1970s and '80s, fill in each country with as much of its flag as fits within its frontiers. Mr. Turk acknowledges the spread of globalism by covering all the landmasses with crumpled fast-food packaging: litter without borders.

The found motifs used by Kara Walker; by Shahzia Sikander, who divides her time between New York and Pakistan; and by the British Pop Artist Peter Blake convert well to the tapestry medium. Ms. Walker's piece "A Warm Summer Evening in 1863" enlarges a harrowing engraved Harper's Weekly image of the burning of an orphanage for black children in New York that occurred during the Civil War draft riots. She places on top of it one of her black silhouettes; this one, cut from felt, is of a hanged woman.

Ms. Sikander scales up a 2006 piece titled "The Illustrated Page," framing one of her typically updated Mughal landscapes with borders that conjure up Chinese and Persian sources, as well as William Morris. Mr. Blake's design presents the alphabet in an array of bold typefaces on big squares of contrasting color to evoke both needlepoint and quilts.

The New York collective that goes by the name assume vivid astro focus has based its tapestry on a dense photo collage with a wildly shaped silhouette. It's a beautiful mess that resembles a work by James Rosenquist shrunk in the dryer; an unsettling large hand spattered with red paint (or blood) is its best moment. But tapestries need corners, and you imagine that the original collage was better.

The Rio-based artist Beatriz Milhazes's usually exuberant floral motifs die without the texture of her hands-on collage-painting technique. The British artist Gary Hume admits in the catalog, correctly, that he may not have tried hard enough. And the works by Francesca Lowe, Jaime Gili and Julie Verhoeven, Londoners who are not so well known here, seem to have lost something in translation.

As long as you're looking at textiles, drop by BravinLee to see the new hand-knotted rugs: they are based on an abstract painting by James Siena, an abstract photograph by James Welling and one of Nina Bovasso's spirited, textilelike flower motifs; another by Thomas Nozkowski is in the pipeline.

Made in Nepal, these are more modest productions. Although they are consistent with the three artists' styles, they don't necessarily announce themselves as "artist designed." They are also more serviceable, since they can be used on wall or floor — and quite a bit more affordable.

"Demons, Yarns & Tales: Tapestries by Contemporary Artists" continues through Feb. 13 at James Cohan, 533 West 26th Street, Chelsea; (212) 714-9500 or jamescohan.com. Rugs are on view through Saturday at BravinLee, 526 West 26th Street, Chelsea; (212) 462-4404 or bravinlee.com.

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