

Inspirations

Sara Brennan *"I think I like soft work."*



Forest with New Green_2017
photo Shannon Tofts, courtesy The Scottish Gallery

Sara Brennan's (SB) work has such a quiet sense of largesse about it. It conveys an overall singularity of intent in which details matter, line counts and colours participate. She works with what is found — gifts of yardage and historical referents, but with her own unique vision, skill, distillate of execution. She is saying something big and clear about space, line, colour, rhythm, trees and the stuff that tapestries are made of. There's not a whisper of trivia in it. SB's works have a formality to them, pushing on emptiness until there is something there. And SB's silhouettes have the edge. The studies, samples, drawings have their own place in her vocabulary and repertoire. Just the right white. There are words she uses a lot like 'warm' and 'cool' (ie. whites) and 'softness'. I just find it so fulfilling watching the zoom over and over again. There is that sense that she totally gets it, and she got there. Her artistic voice is resonant, strong, rich and real. It's like she's got this thirst for expression which finds its life force in the weave.

Sources

First and foremost she's getting at the *essence*: *Straight in*.

It is worth noting here that she cites abstract expressionists Barnett Newman (BN) (1905 - 1970), and Robert Ryman (1930-2019) amongst her inspirations. Barnett Newman said: "... if I have made a contribution, it is primarily through my drawing. Instead of using outlines, instead of making shapes or setting off spaces, my drawings declare the space. Instead of working with the remnants of space, I work with the whole space." (Barnett Newman, Tuchman, 1970, cited Crowther, 1985, p. 55). Like his contemporary Mark Rothko, they were very much working within and reflective of, a certain New York 20th century context of spiritual abstraction....and jazz. His saxophonist friend Robert Ryman (1930-2019) who painted white on white abstractions, is quoted: "*a painting is a miracle, in a sense. ... We don't have the words for it, because it's a miraculous thing. ... painting is a mysterious experience. ... you don't know how it happened.*" (Wagstaff, 2002). (Substitute 'tapestry' for painting, and it works). *Newman's aim for his art to be singular was matched only by his aim for it to be universal, and vice versa.*" (Temkin, 2002, p. 65). Although BN gained fame for his 'zip' striped paintings in which thin vertical lines separated areas of colour, hence dividing whilst uniting the overall compositions, 'zip' was not originally his term (cf. Temkin, 2002). In his words, he was "... concerned with numinous ideas and feelings ... art transcends nature. It is concerned (...) with divine mysteries." (Cited O'Neill, 1990, pp.97-98). Opinions differ; it is suggested that they had a Jewish mystical (Kabbalic) origin. Much has been written on this since his death, hence speculatively. Some argue that he followed a famous 16th Century Rabi Luria from Safad and sought to embrace the original creation of space (ie. origins of Adam as light) (cf. Baigell, 1994). Luria as translated:

"The world was created from nothing...To create a primordial space for the universe, God contracted into himself. Next, God sent out a ray of light in which he revealed himself as God the Creator; (after which) ... the first being which emanated from this

light was Adam Kadmon, the Man ... the first and highest form in which the divinity begins to manifest itself....”.

So the implication is that Newman’s stripe: “... may be understood as representing the first ray of light and the first man. Newman captured on the pictorial surface the very moment of creation ... of the first ray of the light of creation, before matter and therefore space, became differentiated.” (Baigell, 1994, p. 33). *He (BN) is visualising “... space into which depth had not yet been introduced.” (Bagel, 1994, p.32).* Studies of origins are not uncommon within religious cultural traditions, and artists are frequently commissioned to produce works for religious settings. Indian traditions for example, interrogate the origins or beginning of existence in The Rig Veda scriptures (eg. A creation hymn of the Rig Veda 10: 129) (cf. O’Flaherty, 1981): “*They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and it is the heavenly bird that flies (Garuda). The wise speak of what is One in manyways; they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan*” (O’Flaherty, 1981, p. 80).

SB’s other natural influence was her Dad. Her father Archie Brennan (AB) was also a tapestry weaver though not, in his words, a fine artist. “*I weave social documents*” he emphasised (*personal communication*). The link which fascinates me here is **birds**. Before getting to his stripes, Barnett Newman and his wife Annalee were keen ornithologists, and his earlier abstractions were bird like (Haldemann, 2016, p. 28). AB once taught me on a European Tapestry Network (ETN) master class held in Denmark (for which I was hugely under-qualified). The exercise for beginners was a **landscape in three stripes — plus bird** (he emphasised)! The three stripes were apparently the only thing I managed to complete to his satisfaction— but he never mentioned my absence of bird. (Some years later, during lockdown however, I did find my self spontaneously weaving birds — with no cartoon, no planning, no constraints, but plenty of chuckling and joy.)

History

Recently we gained an insight into SB’s practice. Sara grew up by a loom and has been weaving ever since. Nearly Wild Weaving provided a really good zoom interview (Wetherell, 26.10.22). Having studied and taught at Edinburgh College of Art, her *articulation* of tapestry is a finely honed art of great precision. I love her language around tapestry. It has a poetic ring to it which is a pleasure to listen to:

“I paint in a similar way to how I weave.” (SB)

(— not vice versa, JG !). You can tell she is a teacher. Her artistic voice is generous, modest, experienced and clear. Her Edinburgh WASPS workshop has a calm tonality to it which cuts through any hint of conceptual noise. The works in it and in the Zoom slide show are ‘aha’ moments. They include series of stripes (vertical and horizontal), squares, and trees.

Details

The *details* of how this came about unfolded over the hour long interview (still available for a price from NearlyWild Weaving) with slides of drawings, weavings, exhibition, and studio spaces. For me, there's an almost oracular sense to SB's articulate descriptions of her weaving and her work. She describes herself as more of an intuitive than a technical weaver, and claims never to have taken a course on colour theory. She is driven by the art and not the technique. With the landscapes in three stripes, we get the sense that these are places she has been. And the beholder becomes welcome there too. Methodologically, she frequently works from her own tree photos, tracing, enlarging, sampling at various setts, before arriving at a full silhouette monochrome cartoon. There is an emphasis on multiples — variations, distillations, continuity, repetition, observation — all very instructive to the aspiring tapestry weaver. And yet, the surface texture is kept minimal — to convey what needs to be said (and not an excess). She talks about elements "holding a composition" and the distinction between graphic components, line versus mass (eg. Broken White Band with New blue, 2011).

Her works are pushing the limits of what can be said in tapestry — literally.

Quotes which really resonate: (SB)

"I hate it with tapestry (...) when it's not taken into consideration how it's woven."

"The older I got, the finer I got." (referring to sett, warp ends per inch or cm.)

"... but I'm always taking out weaving."

Space

"I like to keep things simple. There's so much space to work in ... if I keep it simple."

It's an impossible act to follow, but perhaps that is why I find it so uplifting; that plus the emphasis on, and deep understanding of **space**, from a perceptual/ experiential point of view. And from this perspective the ability to watch the video multiple times is a special advantage. Notions of space are indispensable in that they constitute components which make the work responsive to perceivers within the larger display environment. Her visual world is very organised, with a tremendous sensitivity to the woven surfaces. For example, referring to *Long Yellow Field with Whites* (1994, 142 cm x 121 cm), she says *"It opens up the same linear landscape feel."* Then, *"I think it's fascinating how the weather affects what we see. ... the rain (that we've had recently) is really adding to the depth of the autumnal colours."* In relation to *Two Black Verticals* (2005, 28cm x 25cm), *"When you place the two black verticals it suddenly stops it from becoming abstract and makes it into looking like a landscape, and it makes it a more literal landscape, even though it isn't a literal landscape as such."* Given that the UK was probably the largest European producer of graphite in the 1500s (cf. Petherbridge, 2010, p. 149), it is perhaps not surprising that there is a prestigious

Jerwood prize in celebration of centuries of excellence in drawing and making. More supervising though, is that a tapestry weaver won it (jointly)¹ — SB's *Broken White Band with Pink* (2008, 78cm x 62 cm). This is a high accolade. Her broken white band series show: *"... how you can explore the spatial aspect of landscape. ...There's a holding of an internal and an external world and how these worlds reflect each other by this holding. There's an opening and containing of spatial fields. ..."*

Colours

"Every white is very different in each tapestry." (SB)

She does not dye her own yarns (therefore quantities are significant), but weaves from an inherited stash. In her own words, she *"responds directly to and with the materials"*. She makes fabulous distinctions between yarn effects (eg. linen versus wool). In *Deep Forest with Old Grey Blue* (2016), there is a black linen against a wool, which has a softening effect.

Slide 21: *"I'll incorporate colour ... from that bottom blue...little bits of sewing thread that just lift, and help you look and read the branches in the forest better."*

Conclusion

"We can have all the knowledge in the universe, ... it comes down to one thing: practice. ... step-by-step implementing what we know. As often as necessary, and for as long as possible." (Pinkola Estes, 1992).

SB's work is gutsy, and it's her own. It gets so close, but is so liberating. It's like she very much knows what to do. So there is respect: Respect for the studio, the people there, the materials, the motivation and the medium; a commitment to make. Some of the tapestries are kind of earthy (eg. Broken Line series), but then they have lift off. Texture is restrained to just that which is required to convey what needs to be said (eg. unweaving of a green mix, in favour of a single one). I have been left with a new sensitivity about the surfaces. For example, tissue paper (which SB uses for cartoons) deflects the light more softly (versus tracing velum or acetate) — hence is more akin to textile; and it is softer to the touch, more responsive to the hands as articulators, it gives something back (in terms of fine motor control). (I personally prefer to make cartoons on rolls of tracing paper attached to the warp via magnets.). SB's work is plugged in, switched on and rigorous. I just love the purity of it — like a great Chuck Berry tune — played live!

¹ 1. SB writes: The "Jerwood Contemporary Maker's Award, came from the Jerwood Charitable Foundation ... It doesn't exist as an award now and the Charity has become Jerwood Foundation, (email, 05-23).

In the end:

“We need a method, a very precise method, that brings us right into what we are experiencing without confining, reducing or restricting it, in such a way that we neither hold on to nor try to dispel what arises.” (McLeod, 2016, p.76)

Acknowledgments

Thank you to The Scottish Gallery who represent Sara Brennan’s work for permission to reproduce the image, *Forest with New Green*, to Sara Brennan for everything, to Nearly Wild Weaving for hosting the zoom interview, and to Lin Squire’s editorial eye.

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