

## Everyday Heroes Review – Jen Gurd

Armitage completed postgraduate training at the Royal Academy. His style features layered applications of oil paint on lumbago tree bark cloth which is irregular and stitched together. The surfaces are incorporated into the work. This cloth is used as burial shrouds by the Baganda people of Uganda. “Armitage scrapes, revises, and repaints his compositions. The visual iconography of East Africa lies at the heart of his practice: its urban and rural landscape, vegetation, and varied animal life. Undermining this rich colour palette and dream-like imagery, however, is a quiet exposition of Kenya’s sometimes harsh reality to reflect upon more universal concerns: its politics, social inequalities, violence and extreme disparities in wealth. In turn, Armitage considers the more absurd aspects of the everyday, commenting on both society and the surrounding natural environment – evoked with a lyrical and phantasmagorical vision.” (RA website). (cf, his 2022 book, *You Who are Still Alive*, Kunsthalle Basel (ISBN 97819910844571)).

With respect to this new tapestry — there is a video link on the West Dean College website (see link above), Armitage explains his motivation and desire for a ‘communal’ work — hence tapestry. It was woven by Jo Howard, Philip Sanderson, and Emma Straw over 10 months with 404 colours of wool on a cotton warp. That in itself is an extraordinary achievement: Three people sitting side by side weaving one piece of fabric daily over 40 weeks. The full-scale colour cartoon and the yarns can be viewed there as well. (See above for link to West Dean article and studio images).

My own observations are that:

First (and foremost), the cartoon composition is rock steady. The work is woven on its side on a low warp tapestry loom and contains extensive metallic threads. Additionally, it is very bright (in a good way), with some fairly rough colour blends, which perhaps surprisingly, work well from a distance. Weft bundle blends relate to resolution of the image. If the blends are smooth and contained, then they are composite. To a certain extent this is required to contain the plot. It is a question of what the viewer is willing to accept. The smoother the blends, the more space is opened up. However, as Sanderson puts it — we do not want it to look too airbrushed. It is a question of careful aesthetic balance. This tapestry comes across as a masterpiece of translation. There are some fabulous but sparse raised, wrapped, textured lines where the hand of the weaver makes its mark (i.e. shows that it was woven by hand, not machine). Also, given that it is woven on its side, the wraps serve as binder in

difficult weave areas (i.e. where the fabric sett is too coarse to express the level of detail inherent in the original design artwork). Curiously enough, though woven on its side, the wraps might in places also smack of 'body parts'! The sett appears relatively crude (perhaps 6 epi, ends / inch)?

Second is the defining element of dimensions, in that it is very tall. To my eye, there is an association here with all that is totemic. There is categorical belonging in a concept called 'portrait'. It gives space — for the journey, whilst raising the question of what exactly that means. There is a certain ambiguity about it — what was the artist really feeling? Is it a sense of not really fitting anywhere, a whiff of alienation or possible clash of dislocation?

Third: Technical benefits of employing a weave structure are realised in lovely, detailed line renderings which allow it to breathe and hence are conceptually life-enhancing. There is a reference to drawing; drawing out the line with progressive weft bundle shading which enhances the flow, the eye's exploration of space. The rhythm of the stepped black curved lines is very effectively calculated to sit beautifully within the weave constraints and graphic context. There are shapes within shapes which particularly lend themselves to "Gobelin" translation (e.g. small bird). There is a lovely balancing of light and dark. Where the line hangs at a diagonal, high-lit complementaries surround darkest lines of organic floral reference against paler blue-green wash backgrounds of complex weft mixes.

Fourth: Overall the image has got a sort of tumbling tumultuousness to it (as in — what happens to the rubbish?). And we note that people are not rubbish. (Particularly those whose job it is to process it). Who amongst us would do this work by choice? Probably they had no choice, but they risked it anyway: courage. Is that what a true hero is nowadays? It's Armitage's filter, but he's not the bin men. They're just the subjects of his composition.

Fifth: It photographs really well — in part due to the superb lighting in the NPG gallery which houses it.

My personal assessment: I like the subliminal shapes (e.g. coffin shape) and somewhat amorphous renderings, plus contrasts using text, whilst blending representation with abstraction, which speak to the largely unknown (uncertain) nature of how we all felt during the pandemic. And the expressive voice is large, and colourful, and strong, and bright. It is a sound piece of work, but not brilliant, although there is very skilled translation and hue rendering. It

would have been better woven at a finer sett (i.e. warp ends per inch or cm.). The NPG did it proud. It hung in pride of place, displayed prominently at the end of a long rectilinear gallery so it could actually be viewed from varying distances including up close. In the long run it will inspire; weavers can be heroes too. For me there are some unanswered questions that I would have really liked to ask:

For the weavers — what did they like about the original painting? What were the most difficult challenges in weaving this piece? What did each of them enjoy most in the weaving? What would their ideal sett have been (all other considerations aside)?

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