

review

Heyden, Daniel (Ed) (2022)

Silvia Heyden, Movement in Tapestry

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Liberating the Blues

I pick up a weft bundle and say to myself: 'I am going to play this one next'... inspired by the vision of artist weaver and violinist the late Silvia Heyden. It is so uplifting, this serious compendium of first person and edited text, images, diagrams, reprints, indices and chronological reproductions. She was Bauhaus trained by Gropius and Itten, in an ethos which emphasised transparency and purity (cf. Cotton, 2015), simplicity amongst complexity (cf. Weltge, 1993). Silvia trained at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts, within a broader Swiss context which led to tapestries' ultimate transformation into textile sculpture. This featured works made by the actual hand of the artist-weaver (cf. Meynaud, 1968).

"... the loom and woven structure were used as a vehicle for free creative imagery." (Waller, 1995).

"There were not many weavers who were able to weave according to Bauhaus principles..." (Heyden, 2022, p. 9).

... to weave into the essence and beyond time, opening up new dimensions of reflection..... very much global (versus local) perception in scientific terms, and not an easy place to weave, given the intimate proximity of one's loom within peri-personal space. My way in is through studies of the brain, and Silvia Heyden's story interests me given her colour tone synaesthesia. I feel convinced that it made her a better weaver, one capable of absorbing and transforming greater intensity and condensation of multi-sensory experience, thanks in part to a remarkable capacity to hold the visual image over extended periods of time. She was able to know what to weave, despite the limitation of having to hide what was wound round the bottom warp beam during the three months taken to complete a tapestry. In the film, she explains how the family moved a great deal after their children were born and the loom always went with her: "It was what kept me sane" (Dalsheimer, 2011).

The book points out how in pre-Renaissance tapestries

"...weavers drew charcoal outlines directly on the warp above the finished portions in order to connect ... with what was to be woven next ... to continue the fundamentally woven approach of repetition and variation of basic motifs, a visual device uniquely prominent in weaving, otherwise only used extensively in music. ... for larger more complex tapestries however, improvising by drawing on the weft ... was no longer enough to ensure the continuity of the overall composition." (Heyden, 2022, p. 4).

This anticipated the use of cartoons — of varying stages of development. Silvia however, relied on the: "Bauhaus principle that weavers must let their medium, the loom, dictate their design." (D

Heyden, 2022, p.10). Did she? This book lovingly gives us the affirmative in a series of sketches whose evolution is super informative. The quality of the blues is transformed from start to finish, amazingly enough. Moreover, the print quality is up to the challenge. An initial sketch which is in monochrome 6 x 8 inches, then an intermediate colour version enlarged to 8 x 9 inches, is followed by a slightly larger variant at 9 x 11 inches, leading to the final drawing decreased to 3.5 x 4.5 inches with a different blue, underpins the Eno River Tapestry (2006) of 50 x 55 inches. These detailed aspects of her design journey form scrumptious images of various colours and textures of paper studies, as objects of art in their own right (p. 203, 207, 208), not to mention the delicate colour rendered leaf drawing for example (p. 209). They constitute valuable lessons for many makers seeking to distill their process... and specific to Bauhaus notions, she has definitely liberated the image from the picture plane.

The print quality and overall visuals of the book as object, as integral representation, is testament to a remarkable artists' life's work. There is such incredible variety in her method and this volume so generously documents the minutiae of technical innovations she adopted. The graphic representations of her various interlocked and eccentric weft patterns are eminently repeatable (eg. diagrams of diagonal wefts, rounded wefts, heavily curved exaggerated wefts, p. 27, 30), and the large format size does justice to the full page colour reproductions. Text and images marry wisely in an informative and methodically cohesive tutorial on the evolution and thematic glue of selected specific works finally displayed chronologically at the end. Her body of work gives the impression that she ultimately knew what she wanted to say. When asked, Daniel Heyden responded 'yes'— in the later years of her life (*personal communication*). At 80, Miro said: "*I have to work now, because when I am old, I won't be able to...*" (cf. Hampton, 2011).



Emerald Leaf, eccentric, pic and pic 'feather weave' technique
(Heyden, 2002, p. 13)

The book is a resounding success, indispensable for students, weavers and collectors. Not only does it mark a notable moment in time with respect to Bauhaus textiles, but it celebrates the sheer virtuosity of one unique artist's vision. They look like paintings, only better and of course they could not be made in that medium, which is the whole point. Expressivity of line, space, colour and texture are thoroughly resolved. Who could want for more? Well, it's just a book, but it stimulates the curiosity to experience the textiles in situ and for real. Hence they answer the 'so what' question indispensable to any scientist; namely, why weave?

She was also: "...very familiar with the idea that art doesn't belong to its creator..." (D. Heyden, personal communication, 12-08-22). Apparently Robert Hughes was one of her favourite art critics. To him, 'the basic project of art' was: "to make the world whole and (more) comprehensible", ... "to pass from feeling to meaning...closing the gap". (YouTube video clip, 1978, [youtube.com/watch?v=bvbTXCOvmAc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvbTXCOvmAc)).

In conclusion

1.) Revelations. The beauty of her treatment of space in tapestry is that she just punches straight through. They open up other worlds fracturing the cartesian rules by drawing the nets aside.

2.) Transcendence. She is doing things a painter can not do, in terms of taking the beholder on a multi-modal perceptual journey; particularly given that Heyden's tapestries invite listening to as well. Hers is a direct way in to feeling, and she has gifted it to us. Full though they are, of vibrant strings, it remains the case that there *is* 'enough nothing' in them (cf. Cage , 1939, Millar, 2010).

3.) Timelessness. This medieval tradition constitutes a trajectory of temporal development offering hope to aspiring makers, including those brave enough to embrace tapestry weaving as vehicle of choice. Working throughout her life and unto its final end, her vision continues to ripple out through this rich and harmonious volume. Not that she has left anything unsaid, but rather that she knows it can be said, and in this way, via this medium of vibrational strings. It demonstrates a very basic virtuosity which continued to mature undimmed throughout her life. What emerged was an utterly unique descriptive language lauding nature and its textures; a rare talent not wasted. ... because the hands tell us things our conscious minds can not otherwise know.

Quotes from the film (Dalsheimer, 2011):

"In the end, I do tapestries, I don't do river pictures. I don't want to do that. ...

I want tapestries which flow, which have their own landscape. ...

The thread in my hand influences my seeing it. It really does. ...

I had to forget my static patterns, the river did something totally different

This fluid way of patterns is what I was looking for. ...

What I don't see, I just imagine. ...

I really enjoy using my hands in the warp, it's like a dough. That linen (warp) is really something for your hands ... and then when you put it in (the weft), you really hear it. ...

All the connections ... that's the hardest part in tapestry. ...

I really have to go way out, into the weaving, not stay with what the river does. ...

It doesn't help drawing it (the river). You just have to understand the movement, moving lines... you have to identify with it. ...

It's constantly a conversation between the forms. ...

Can I find a colour that makes it interesting?...

Between the blue of the river and the blue of the sky, I have another relation....”

She kept it simple, that was her language in textile. It conveys a guidebook to remaining open with the creative process; as Daniel said, the balance between a maximum of confidence and a maximum of modesty (*personal communication*). Her journey with the Eno River series was one of total immersion, in the sheer liquid joy of its fluidity: listening, feeling, looking, seeing, knowing, drawing, weaving. And yet, her technique had something of the minimal about it. This she navigated faithfully, with linen warps, often showing loosely beaten ‘coarse (her term) set (ie. 6 - 8 warp ends per inch/cm), Swedish wool pre-dyed wefts, diagonal (eccentric) weave in pic and pic with alternating directions (‘feather weave’, her term), and most remarkable of all, post-loom editing with the removal or stitching in of replacement yarns to balance tone and hue effects. To have these collected in an elegant volume is a rare opportunity for further meditation on her vision and realisation of multi-sensory celebrations in nature and culture.

In one of her first texts (reproduced in the Appendix), Silvia wrote:

“The idea behind it all

People often ask me: what keeps you weaving one tapestry after another? I think it is the urge to transform a vision of colour and form into texture and technique. At the beginning, the gap between vision and the actual tapestry was painfully wide. With every new work I manage to close the gap a little more. The vision becomes real, ... loomish, the realisation independent, more skilled. I am very curious about the final outcome of every tapestry. ... I try not to lose sight of the original idea, to stay alert, involved, and open for fascinating details which happen on the loom. They often lead to visions of tapestries to come. The design develops as my work on the loom progresses. The principles of continuous, organic growth are inherent in the weaving process. What I weave is no longer a repetition of a static design. What used to be a transposition — design on one hand, execution on the other — has become the manifestation of unfolding ideas which grow in time as well as space.” (Heyden, 2022, p. 140).

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Jennifer M Gurd

*“Mind itself, originally pure, is like space.
As long as you look for it with conceptual tools,
You are like a bug encasing itself in its own spit —
In your obsession, you turn your back on what is truly meaningful.
How worn out you must be, you listeners, from rejecting everything!”*

(Jigme Lingpa, 18th C., transl. K. McLeod, 2016,
A Trackless Path, Unfettered Mind Media, p. 38.)