

TAPESTRY TERRAIN: IN-RESIDENCE AT THE VICTORIAN TAPESTRY WORKSHOP

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Tapestry Workshop is a unique organisation in Melbourne, Australia, that facilitates the commissioning, management and construction of original, large-scale, hand-woven tapestries for public institutions and individuals across the globe.

An ex-knitting mill in the inner-city bayside suburb of South Melbourne has been home to the VTW for the past 32 years. The interior is atmospheric, its high ceilings embedded with clear glass windows that let in a constant level of natural light across the large, multi-purpose centre.

The building houses an open-plan work space with an array of standard and custom built looms, a studio, a library, shelves with rows of dyed thread, still others for samples and past projects, a gallery space, office space, a dye shop, a retail shop, a meeting place and the headquarters for many innovative public art projects.

The VTW tapestries are inventive and skilful translations of contemporary works designed by some of today's most respected artists across Australia, New Zealand and the world.

This text draws on thoughts and conversations that shaped my experience as artist-in-residence at the VTW over six weeks in February and March 2008.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The artist-in-residence program, now in its fourth year, is an initiative that supports the ongoing professional development of the weavers and staff at the VTW. It also offers visiting artists the opportunity to show and discuss their work while using the studio space for a time.

As a visitor, watching and listening to the making of the tapestries, I found the intense fields of colour,



Figure 1: View on the Victorian Tapestry Workshop.

the scale, rhythms and sounds initially overwhelming. I spent much of the first two weeks at the studio struggling to comprehend the processes and language of such ambitious and complex endeavours.

Through my first encounter at a working loom, however, tentatively weaving weft into warp, I realised how much the professional development experience can be a two-way street. At the monumental tapestry, *Into the Light*, designed by Leonie Bessant and destined for the Wangaratta Cathedral in north-east Victoria, I was encouraged by artist weavers Pam Joyce, Leonie Bessant, Louise King and Mala Anthony to consider the world from the weaver's point of view.

By the end of my sixth week I had responded through a series of ephemeral, layered, relief works, dismantled at the end of the residency, destined for re-working in my studio at a later time (see figures 2-5 overleaf). The works consisted of striped dishcloths together with cut and torn horizontal lines of second-hand fabric (readymade colour, stains intact, worn weave, faded dyes). I further explored forms made with pins, threads and cardboard, scavenged from the recycling bins. These processes of collecting and assembling caused me to reflect on the contrast between my practice – grounded in makeshift materials from urban environments – with concepts of permanence embedded in the tapestry works.



Figure 6: My studio with work in progress at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, March 2008.

WORKING SPACE

The studio space for guest artists is at the back of the building adjacent to the general meeting hub where many impromptu discussions take place. It is also behind a striking piece of engineering, the largest loom, where Chris Cochius and her team of John Dicks, Milly Formby and Emma Sulzer were weaving a 1.5 x 7.7 metre tapestry from a digital image entitled *The Visitor*, commissioned from artist Jon Cattapan for Xavier College, Melbourne. I worked behind this piece for six weeks. I also monitored and measured my time at the VTW by the rhythm and progress of the tapestry. The work was halfway through when I arrived and was fully completed during my last week as artist-in-residence.

While observing the lines of communication around this particular project, I could see how relationships between commissioned artist and weavers could enrich a work. Not to mention how consideration for the work's destination and surrounding architecture informed the development of the piece.

TRANSLATION

Another aspect of the weaving process that held my attention was the crucial act of scaling-up when making the shift from original artwork to the size of the tapestry. An arresting map-like drawing, the 'cartoon', is constructed and typically sits behind the strong vertical banks of warp on the loom where the weaving is carried out.

left Figure 2-5: Mary-Louise Edwards, details of work in progress during a Victorian Tapestry Workshop residency, March 2008.

The drawing becomes a primary guide for the main compositional characteristics of the image under translation. The whole layered, working scenario – the tapestry under construction – the cartoon, the loom, the interweaving of coloured weft with vertical warp – appeared to me like an expansive hybrid artform and a rather exciting sculptural work or a drawing in action.

I was also taken by associations with nature and the built environment when observing lines of colour; of weft becoming image. Rising, pass by pass, mark by mark across the emerging tapestry surface, the horizontal thread seemed part of an organic world in tension with the engineering of the loom.

Across the workspace Cheryl Thornton and Rebecca Moulton were working on a tapestry for the new Melbourne Recital Centre. This tapestry is based on the mural-sized painting *Dulka Wangjiiid (Land of All)* in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria by Sally Gabori and her fellow artists, Netta Loogatha, Ethel Thomas, May Moodoonuthi, Paula Paul, Dawn Naranatjil and Amy Loogatha from Bentinck Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It tells of the women's connection to their land.

Among other exciting projects was a commission for the Queensland Art Gallery being woven by Sue Batten and Amy Comall, from the figurative photographic image entitled *Alice Bayke* by New Zealand artist Yvonne Todd. This showed how Medieval and Renaissance traditions of tapestry can successfully interpret images from our contemporary digital world.

I carefully watched this work under construction and thought about the levels of invention and skill engaged in translating across size and medium into a completely different set of formal parameters. As with all weavers working with big changes in scale, Sue and Amy created a new original artwork; activating the rich territory of tapestry weaving through their nuanced passages of texture and colour.

CONVERSATION

Valuable conversations emerged during and after my time at the studio. Some of the dialogue revolved around materials and methods; how the artists-in-residence used a diverse range of materials and employed different working methods. Other conversations, launched by particular exhibitions around town, opened out into broader areas of art



Figure 7: Studio conversation between Helen Fuller (left) and Cheryl Thornton at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, 2008.

history, art education and contemporary art practice in general.

The VTW community is comfortable in interacting with visiting artists. Many of the programming and administrative staff are artists, as are the weavers. Working with artists is what the VTW does well. I would argue, however, that the majority of interactions between the organisation and artists (often through necessity or circumstance) is through completed work, or with artists via a version of a proposed work (as is the case with commissions). This scenario is in contrast with the levels of visibility and exposure afforded by observing day-to-day processes in the studio. For me, the residency program balances this equation and opens up greater understanding of the less-than-straight line that is the reality of art making.

Inhabiting the studio made me feel part of the fabric of the organisation. I enjoyed varying degrees of contact over the space of a day, a week, a few weeks. I felt welcomed and free to be curious. But I was also aware of being observed myself and of the challenges of creating work in an open studio context.



Figure Figure 8: Choosing colours for *Dulka Wangjiiid (Land of All)*, 2008, Rebecca Moulton (left) and Cheryl Thornton.



Figure 9: *Alice Bayke* tapestry in progress, Sue Batten and Amy Cornall from the original digital image by Yvonne Todd, 2008.

The residency experience poses unique questions and choices for the artist; whether to have a planned work to pursue, or whether to approach the studio with a fair degree of uncertainty and open-endedness. It can be an episode that is enlightening, demystifying and confusing at the same time as it necessarily depends on the provisional, the temporal, and the contingent nature of things in the studio.

I spoke with previous resident artists, Helen Fuller, based in Adelaide, and Sebastian Di Mauro, based in Brisbane, about their impressions of working at the VTW. Helen poetically described the soft, muffled, tugging sounds she noticed as the weavers passed their cotton and silk wefts through warp on the largest loom nearest the studio. She also talked about the fields of raggedy ends that make up the back of most tapestries, their bushy appearance reminding us again of the natural world.

Sebastian spent his studio time pursuing an ongoing project, cutting and slicing close-up digital self-



Figure Figure 10: Artist Sebastian Di Mauro in a Victorian Tapestry Workshop studio, 2007.

portraits, then weaving them back together, merging and overlapping separate images into one. Both artists remarked on how they enjoyed the experience of working away from their usual environments and both commented on the generosity of the staff and the artist weavers, and on the atmosphere and the culture.

Under the direction of Susie Shears (who has recently left the VTW) and Studio Manager, Sara Lindsay, the Victorian Tapestry Workshop had a lively pulse when I was there. When I now consider the number of projects underway at any one time – horizontal lines of weft moving constantly upward – I realise that the collaborative and optimistic nature of tapestry weaving makes it the perfect place for a rich and fruitful residency.

Mary-Louise Edwards is an artist working across sculpture, installation and painting on individual and collaborative projects. She was artist-in-residence at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in 2008 and is engaged in Master of Fine Arts research at Monash University in Melbourne, focusing on the ambiguous relationships between city dwellers and contemporary notions of land and ground.