

January OPAA Art*Walks*, Suzan Noyes

*“...Everything has meaning to one degree or another, for the world is an ever-weaving tapestry from which no thread can be pulled without destroying the integrity of the cloth.”* Dean Koontz

Consider sitting before a loom to weave a tapestry. It involves a design presumably put to paper... but any creative process first begins in the mind. Then come changes. What does the vision require? Colors. What type fabric or thread, yarn or additional component figures into this abstract or realistic art-piece evolving before your eyes? Stop – perhaps *unravel*? Add an element unplanned for... a bit of serendipity.

Tell me artists don't live in their heads. We are an odd breed, making sense to ourselves, hopefully other artists and our mates understand and support what we are driven to do.

Much about weaving and tapestry evades me. In my family, women knit or crocheted. I sewed from early on and made most of my clothing. Tried macrame. I did weave potholders on a ten-inch loom with bags of stretchy loops you could buy at Woolworths, the apex of my ability. So, it intrigues me to write about this medium.

Wikipedia describes tapestry as a form of textile art, traditionally woven by hand on a loom. Tapestry is weft-faced weaving, in which all the warp threads are hidden in the completed work, unlike cloth weaving where both the warp and the weft threads may be visible... weft yarns are typically discontinuous; the artist interlaces each colored weft back and forth in its own small pattern area. It is a plain weft-faced weave having weft threads of different colors worked over portions of the warp to form the design.

This site is a font of information, more than I need to know, but it points one in the right direction. I remember Gobelin tapestries (woven) from Art History, and the famous Bayeux Tapestry (actually embroidered). Large hangings like these guarded against drafts in royal chambers, also were used for pomp and circumstance in official capacities.

Local artists trigger my columns; this month I query Estelle Jackson, a Contemporary Tapestry enthusiast, who has this to say about the art form:

“I came to contemporary tapestry work after years of work in various art mediums. The entire process of working with tapestry incorporates those



years of learning from design, layout, color work and blending, texture of media and sculpture – all with discipline of mind and hand. The challenge is to render a design using fibers, on a loom to make it so. Fiber textures and weaving style blend to make the graphic woven design. I find the use of various fibers, the element of design execution and the physical act of weaving all together embodies a feeling of painting on a surface yet sculpting at the same time. It is an act of creation both mental and physical.”

Estelle feels that working with eye, hand and fiber has always been a satisfying individual act. She still enjoys large and small attempts like a decorated felt eyeglass or needle holder, as well as larger needlepoint canvases.

For many years prior to a tapestry format, Estelle worked exclusively in single needle dry felting, creating large pieces of intricately executed pictorial images. Due to the repetitive actions, she had to give this up – an art form she had thought to work in forever.

Curiosity led her to tapestry. I asked if this was due to a teacher or mentor’s example.

Estelle belonged to an eclectic fiber arts guild, Desert Fiber Arts in eastern Washington. She fell in with tapestry weavers. She admired one artist’s work – a simple pear on a table. She was encouraged to try it. Soon, cheerful, patient fellow weavers visited her on a regular basis with a collection of yarns, also a simple frame for a loom.

“My first true project was a sampler. Though this was from a book, I created a finished trilogy of work. It was a ‘Wow’ moment with all the elements which called to me.” Estelle is quick to add that this initial experience wasn’t necessarily a ‘keeper’ or a ‘break-through’ piece – simply a learning experience. I asked what she absorbed from this.



“Colors, textures, imagery – the sharing of ideas, it all came together. With texture and color, I did in fact create a piece of work much like painting or sculpture, an image from negative space. The benefit of textures in fiber pushed me to continue to explore the medium.”

The concept of painting in fiber intrigued me, so I asked about her process. Estelle says that forming ideas in her head from start through to a finished piece is very slow-going.

“An idea forms. I make trial sketches; finally, one dominant sketch surfaces.”

She may scribble words about color along her sketched margins. Her next step is a ‘color bowl’, when she hits on hoarded fiber stores and yank colors suggested by her image, placing them in clear-sided bowls. Then she ruminates, possibly for days, rehashing imagery and colors.

“The beauty of nature and its varied way of casting imagery, perhaps one fiber artist’s striking sample of homespun yarn or the need to work with a specific color range – all these have given me inspiration at one time. My first reaction to color and inspiration is always emotional.”

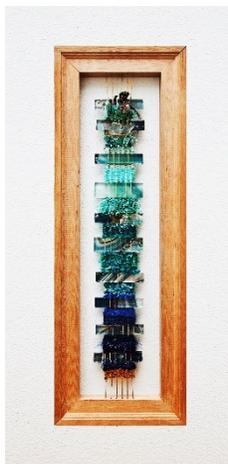
Estelle is now ready to begin actual weaving, her loom of choice is warped, referred to as ‘dressed in her slip’, suggesting the simple warp is a ‘slip’ as in women’s wear. When weft fills the warp, it produces a finished ‘garment’. (Estelle adds that many looms are given female names and jokingly, a loom never wants to be naked – but in her *slip*, ready to work.) She seldom attaches a cartoon (drawing) behind, preferring to reference it by matching weaving to her sketched image on the side.

Estelle states, “My materials may vary but must be placed in the warp to become weft. It’s a huge variation depending on the warp count and loom used.” She uses her eye only to select colors for application, either to blend or not. She always trusts the vision in her mind to translate to her physical weaving.

She owns several looms, some sized like a small frame of eleven by fourteen inches. Larger looms require ‘feet’ to steady them on the floor; Estelle has an antique Crisp loom about four and a half feet tall and two and a half feet wide. Years ago, her husband gifted her with an Ashford large tapestry loom five and a half foot tall by four and a half foot wide for Christmas.



I asked Estelle about the most frustrating impasse part of weaving during her creative process. She mentions two difficult, ever-constant parts of each piece she makes: 1) The Middle, when she has a love/hate syndrome with the piece (*will it never end*) due to slow and sometimes tedious application, 2) The Finish, after the bulk of the tapestry is done – essentially, how it is to be displayed. The process on the heels of creation.



For Estelle, the most enjoyable part of weaving a tapestry is her excited inner hum, an emotional feeling taking over as self-direction brings color, texture and planned image to fruition. She continues to be surprised over results.

Where does she see herself, a few years after honing these skills? Does she have specific future goals for such a challenging art form?

“These are questions that do bother me much of the time,” says Estelle. “Of late I’ve begun to add other bits of things to some of the weavings. Does that make it mixed media rather than contemporary tapestry? I don’t know. I do

feel that I now tend to not be as rigid in my process and find I enjoy the feeling of not being so long-term goal-oriented in my art. It’s a freed-up approach to the future which enables me to continue to create.”

I admire Estelle’s flexibility; the confidence she has in her art process and believe she will continue to push boundaries and include mixed media in her tapestries. An artistic journey is the story here – I trust Estelle will share some of her past felting process and artwork with us next month. This will initiate stories about other artists’ transitions in 2021.

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Estelle Jackson's artworks & photos:

*Night Waves*

*Glassy Seas*

Thanksgiving photo of Estelle.

Estelle's current loom