



DIALOGUE: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES IN TEXTILES

LIZ WILLIAMSON AND KELLY THOMPSON



Left to right, top to bottom:
Liz Williamson, *Felt wrap*
(detail), 2005, silk and felted
wool, woven in India.
Photo: Ian Hobbs

Kelly Thompson, *Blue Line on
Wall* (detail), 2005, jacquard
tapestry structures, cotton
threads, woven in Montreal,
Canada.
Photo: David Ramkalawon

Kelly Thompson, *Window screen*
(detail), 2005, jacquard tapestry
structures, cotton threads,
woven in Montreal, Canada.
Photo: David Ramkalawon

Liz Williamson, *Lace* (detail),
2006, cotton, silk, polyester,
jacquard, woven in Montreal,
Canada. Photo: Ian Hobbs

Following page:
The 'chaos and colour of the
Delhi streets and markets',
as well as historical collections
of woven, dyed, printed
and stitched textiles,
were rich visual resources
for Kelly Thompson.
Photo: Kelly Thompson

Liz Williamson and Kelly Thompson are weavers who constantly seek new opportunities to research and develop their work. They know each other well, and are both interested in the structure of cloth, as well as in the meanings that it can convey. Here, *Object* asked each to discuss the influence on their work of two very different places they have in common: the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles (MCCT), in Canada, which provides opportunities to work on computerised jacquard looms; and a contrasting but equally rewarding experience in India.

Liz Williamson is senior lecturer and coordinator of textiles at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, in Sydney. Known for her range of hand-woven scarves and wraps, her current jacquard textiles refer to changes in the structure of cloth through its use and repair. In 2006 her exhibitions *A Visible Thread* at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery and *Visible Darning* at Object Gallery, both in Sydney, investigate notions of invisibility and visibility in the domestic repair process of darning.

Californian-born but New Zealand-raised, Kelly Thompson is a lecturer and head of the BA Textile program, at Goldsmiths College in London. Thompson specialises in jacquard weaving, working with images of her local environment and issues of political currency such as genetic modification of plants, as in a series of 'terror tea towels' woven in waffle weave, shown in the 2004 Norsewear Art Award in New Zealand.

Liz Williamson:

Although interested in textiles most of my life, I can link my fascination with jacquard weaving to the early 1980s, when my aunt gave me two woven silk portraits purchased by my grandfather nearly a century earlier on one of his many trips 'home' to England from the Victorian goldfields. At the time, 'Stevengraphs' portraits and pictorial cards made by Thomas Stevens of Coventry were popular as souvenirs. He had developed them in an effort to revive his ribbon-weaving business, which was suffering from the change in fashionable women's hats being decorated with feathers, rather than the ribbons that Coventry weavers specialised in. 'Stevengraphs' were finely woven portraits of royalty, politicians and sportsmen, especially jockeys and cricketers, and scenes of country life, fox hunting or commemorative events. All were detailed jacquard woven silks, usually 10 centimetres across and 10 to 20 centimetres in length.

While a student at RMIT, I researched historical jacquard textiles while continuing to collect and document woven patterns. With a move to Sydney, I enrolled in a jacquard weaving class at Strathfield College of Textiles, weaving my first jacquard textile, a small, visually textured design with a repeat of approximately 2.5 centimetres, on an industrial loom controlled by a hand-punched tape.

I was interested in incorporating jacquard weaving more into my practice. With the support of an Australia Council new work grant and COFA/UNSW funding, my recent project began in 1998 with an introductory workshop with Louise Lemieux Bérubé, director of the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles. This specialist facility makes jacquard weaving assessable for individual practitioners. MCCT's looms are an interesting mix of digital and hand technologies, as designs are developed in Photoshop and Pointcarré programs to digitally control the warp, while the weft is thrown by hand. Jacquard weaving has enabled me to juxtapose the visual texture of both imagery and weave structures, combined in complex arrangements.

Recently, I've also been involved with several development projects in Asia, working with skilled weavers in Vietnam, Cambodia, India and Pakistan, many of whom I met while teaching at a UNESCO workshop, 'Vital Traditions', in Hanoi in 2001. The aim of all these projects has been to revive, revitalise and recreate traditional woven textiles for income generation, enhancing the quality of life for the weavers and their families. Working with hand-weavers, in both teaching and studio production environments, has proven to be a fascinating experience. It has involved introducing weave techniques and structures, and developing designs, patterns and colour combinations, often related to a specific textile tradition. In some cases, introducing

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(Kelly Thompson)

'new' materials and finishes has successfully extended these weavers' product range.

I've had many visits to India to absorb the colours and the beauty of the country and experience the rich textile tradition, but the most recent have been to visit weavers in West Bengal, who together comprise the 'Milanangan' (meeting place) group. Having met these weavers at the 'Vital Traditions' workshop, I've now had the opportunity to commission them to weave a range of wraps and scarves. Using weave structures and designs I've woven for many years in wool, the 'Milanangan' weavers have re-interpreted the designs in fine silk threads while other designs combine wool and silk, with some being finished here in my Sydney studio. Marketed as 'Liz Williamson - Woven in Asia', this range gives the 'Milanangan' group experience of a different market and clientèle, shifting their experience from selling to 'fair trade' outlets, to gallery and museum outlets.

Kelly Thompson:

Textiles from India have an extensive history of cultural, technical and economic impact within India, and influence on the rest of the world. My proposal for the Creative New Zealand-funded residency at the Sanskriti Foundation in New Delhi, India, was to spend time researching new directions, and to make contact with people involved in textile scholarship, visit museum collections and observe current production. Studying ways in which Indian artists and craftspeople translate botanic imagery into pattern and motif within architecture, everyday objects and textiles was intended to build on my previous representations of the 'local'.

I arrived in India four months after relocating from Otago, New Zealand, to London, to take up a teaching and research position at Goldsmiths.

This unfortunately meant I could only take four weeks instead of the three months available for the residency. The Sanskriti Kendra (campus) provides individual artist studios and accommodation, shared vegetarian meals, and artefact and ceramic collections, all set within cultivated grounds where local and international artists and cultural groups are encouraged to interact. The peaceful space created on the Kendra provides respite from the stimulation of the crowds, chaos and colour of the Delhi streets and markets; both aspects are vital to the Indian experience.

Just after New Year, many local buses were fully garlanded inside and out with swaying, 3-D flower curtains of strings of marigolds – a completely immersive experience. Another day, a prominent New Delhi textile researcher, Priya Ravish Mehra, came to visit Sanskriti, bringing her visitor, Liz Williamson! At Sanskriti I was able to handle and photograph historical textiles from the collection, revelling in the inventiveness of woven, dyed, printed and stitched cloths with wonderful colour and thread juxtapositions, sometimes disrupted or given new life by signs of usage, repairs or patching. Carved marble screens, floral and geometric stone reliefs and mosaics caught my eye, as did the sari-clad women, shawl-wrapped men, and the layered chaos of the streets with graffiti and fragments of political posters on peeling walls.

Order and random traces were the references I took to the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles, following the residency, this time to learn and use a five-colour warp, in which new colour is visually created by combining jacquard tapestry structures. In the jacquard process, digital images are composed, simplified and manipulated through Photoshop and Pointcarré weave software, on which structures are added and pixels translated, enabling the computer-assisted handloom to lift individual sequences of warp threads during the weaving process.

Although an experienced technician can weave another's designs, each time I return to Montreal to produce new work, I need to test an image through sampling, adjusting colours and thread, density and distortion, with the handling and reading of the cloth translating back to decisions made on the computer and screen. The act of hand-weaving the images remains important to me, with its minor differences in tensions, the occasional loop or mistake and the changes in beating rhythm. These are the human marks of the technology, factors that also differentiate and make desirable the skilfully made Indian textiles. My ongoing interest in the interaction of hand and technology to produce embedded images in cloth suggests that return visits to both India and Montreal are likely. ■■■■

www.textiles-mtl.com

www.sanskritifoundation.org

