



WEAVE AN IMPRESSION

Contemporary wall hangings are turning traditional tapestries and rugs into alluring art. **Helen Chislett** reports

As the stark lines of white-on-white interiors give way to a less prescribed approach to design, a new, softer aesthetic is becoming evident. This has nothing to do with a 1980s-style revival of fancy soft furnishings, but a subtler and more interesting narrative about what constitutes art. Wall hangings – once the preserve of small-town craft galleries – are now embraced by the international design elite, with fairs such as Design Miami/Basel, BRAFA and PAD increasingly throwing the spotlight onto the walls as much as the floors.

One of the first gallerists to embrace textile art as core to her collection was Maria Wettergren, who opened the doors of her Paris gallery in 2010. From the outset, she showcased work by gifted names such as the Danish artists Grethe Sørensen (winner of The Nordic Award in Textiles 2017; works from €22,000), Astrid Krogh (from €25,000; example pictured on final page) and the Swedish duo Brieditis & Evans of Studio Brieditis & Evans (from about €12,000) – all creating spectacular new versions of the traditional wall-hung tapestry.

Wettergren is interested in the innovative approach revealed by each artist's work. "Grethe Sørensen is a pioneer in the field of digital weaving, transforming video recordings of city lights or water reflections into pixelated weavings," she says. "Astrid Krogh discovered the possibilities of handweaving with optic fibres, which she uses as if they were wool threads, and her tapestries pulsate with a flow of beautiful, glowing, ever-changing colours. Katarina Brieditis and Katarina Evans, meanwhile, explore sustainability through their techniques in pieces such as Off Piste, a chain-stitch crochet work made from recycled cotton T-shirts."

Wettergren believes such art also expresses the zeitgeist. "These tapestries convey the antithesis of the consumerist, throwaway mentality that characterised the second half of the 20th century," she says. "More than any other art form, they are works that increasingly occupy our interiors in the double sense of the word – both in terms of our inner being and habitat."

The art form is also winning the attention of big institutions. Sørensen's work is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's Cooper Hewitt museum in New York, among others, and Krogh's is also part of important public

apartments by Studiopepe

“What textiles do to an interior is so powerful – the space softens and becomes magical with diffused light”



and private collections worldwide. Over the past eight years, Wettergren has witnessed increasing attention from art collectors. “Time has become one of the most precious and rare things in our busy lives,” she says, “and the fact that these textile works are often handmade by the artists over a long time, embodying the very presence of the person who create them, makes them very desirable.”

It is a point of view echoed by Cristina Grajales, who has also embraced textiles as the intersection of craft, design and art within her own New York gallery since it opened in 2001. She has long championed the Colombian atelier of Hechizoo (wall hangings from \$30,000; example pictured overleaf), which creates innovative weaves using indigenous organic fibres combined with manmade materials such as metal and nylon – a process Hechizoo founder Jorge Lizarazo describes as “soft architecture”. Grajales also promoted the work of Sheila Hicks at a time when she’d been largely forgotten by the art establishment. “It is incredible to see how huge Hicks has become,” she says. “Back in 2005, when we showed her work at the first edition of Design Miami, nobody understood why I would want to show textiles in a design gallery. Yet, what textiles do to an interior is so powerful – the space softens and becomes magical with diffused light.”

Hicks’s work is characterised by her embrace of indigenous weaving practices in the countries of their origin, which has led her to travel throughout the globe since establishing her first studio in Taxco el Viejo, Mexico, in 1959. Today, with a career that spans 60 years, she is collected worldwide and 2017 saw her participate in the Venice Biennale as part of the *Viva Arte Viva* show, with a monumental wall of knitting that exploded with joyous colour. Available through Alison Jacques Gallery in London, Hicks’s works cost from \$24,000.

Part of the attraction of textile art is its storytelling quality. Artist, author and activist Mary Fisher has spent 25 years combining advocacy and art to empower those who share her HIV-positive status. In February, her work (from \$3,000) was shown at the Armory Art Center in West Palm Beach as part of *Textile Meditations: Mary Fisher and Friends*. This exploration of the art of



From left: Deirdre Dyson wool and silk Beauty Spots and Rose Mosaic rugs, £1,080 and £1,800 per sq m. Kustaa Saksi mohair, cotton, linen, viscose and Lurex Hiding in Plain Sight wall hanging, price on request

textile construction began, for Fisher, when her grandmother taught her to cross-stitch. “It goes to the place that is my heart,” she says. While her work comes from a need for personal expression – “I did not expect to be alive now as a woman with HIV” – it can be enjoyed simply as something beautiful on the wall. Fisher believes that textiles have a vulnerability that makes a room in some way appear less harsh or clinical. “These are pieces that can live both artistically and decoratively,” she says. “People can dig deep and find their own meanings, or just enjoy the total effect.”

It is a philosophy echoed by Finnish artist Kustaa Saksi, whose artworks (from £10,000, through Gallery Fumi) have also been exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide. Within his abstracted Hypnopompic

tapestry series (example pictured above), he builds fantastical worlds that sit somewhere between the states of dreaming and awakening – surrealist and sensual. Using traditional jacquard weaving techniques, he combines fibres such as mohair, alpaca, cotton and wool with rubber, Lurex, acrylic and phosphorescent yarn.

“Weaving principles have remained largely unchanged since the 1st century BC, so I’ve always been interested in the analogue to digital relationship of the craft, as well as the possibilities of imaginative material combinations,” he says. “Every time I make a piece, there is a certain amount of magic when it all starts to come together.”

One of the most all-encompassing projects of “soft” art to date has been *Woven Forms* from R & Company, which encouraged its entire stable of artists to create works specifically for carpets – many of which morphed into wall pieces (prices on request; bespoke commissions also considered). First shown at the Venice Biennale last year, it presents unique designs by the late Wendell Castle (price on request, pictured on final page), Hun-



Chung Lee, Rogan Gregory, Lluís Lleó, Dana Barnes, the Haas Brothers, Thaddeus Wolfe, Katie Stout, David Wiseman and Renate Müller. The collection of limited edition designs, created in collaboration with the Italian carpet producer Amini, reflects the individual style of each artist. "Because there were no preconceived notions, there were some extraordinary results," says R's co-founder Evan Snyderman. "As a gallery, we love blurring that line between art and design, so this was the perfect crossover for us. The timing just seemed right."

Snyderman admits that some designers took to the challenge more readily than others. "All of them are makers, so it was hard for them to let go of the process and allow someone to fabricate on their behalf. It also challenged the weavers because they had to find new ways of doing things in order to create the look that the artists envisioned." Some of the pieces were designs for the floor and others for the wall or floor – in the case of Dana Barnes, they were wall pieces from inception. "We are used to occupying the floor space with our furniture and the ceiling space with our lighting – but we don't often occupy the walls so directly," Snyderman says. "Part of the fun is playing with the notion that what you put on the floor is design, but what you put on the wall is art."

The wall-versus-floor debate is an intriguing one for other carpet artists, such as Deirdre Dyson. A fine artist by training, she considers all of her works (examples pictured on previous page, from £1,080 per sq m) as standalone paintings within their own boundary – hence the title of her book *Walking on Art*. "I start with an outline and build it in layers, keeping in mind at all times what the makers can technically do; the reliance on hand-knotting is a particular discipline," she says. "The weight of most of our carpets would prevent them from being suitable for walls, but it is possible for us to reduce the weight by lowering the pile, when someone requests a wall version." Dyson is enthusiastic at the resurgence of interest in textile art. "We have been through this long minimalist period – paint, no pattern, barely any colour – and now it seems people want a more enveloping, cocooning and intimate space."

Another textile artist producing work of note within this field is Margo Selby, who is employing the age-old technique of lampas within her current collection of contemporary handwoven pieces (unique works from £1,950). Developed in the 13th century and used to create decorative brocade, the approach has enabled Selby to explore modernist, abstract colour studies in a new way.

Eminent German designer Jan Kath's collection of handmade rugs for London showroom Front includes a series of designs reinterpreting the ancient textile art of boro, a form of Japanese patchwork whereby locals would salvage old clothes and sew them

together into bedcovers and other household items. Made from handspun Tibetan wool, silk and nettle fibres, the bespoke rugs cost from £2,120 per sq m. "The look of boro reminds me of a wall that's had many layers of paint applied and is now peeling away," he says. An exploration of fashion also informs Kath's most recent work for Front. His Dresses collection includes rugs shaped like coats and gowns (£2,650 per sq m), inspired by historic textiles such as an 18th-century surihaku coat interwoven with gold embroidery.

Indeed, there is now a plethora of rug designs that create a statement on floors and walls, from The Rug Company's collaboration with Alexander McQueen capturing birds in flight in iridescent thread (example pictured above left, from £6,960) to CC-Tapis's geometric centrepieces by Patricia Urquiola (€5,443) and Elena Salmistraro (€4,968, both pictured overleaf) and Studiopepe (pictured on opening page, price on request).

Many interior designers are now waking up to the possibilities of wall-hung textiles too, particularly if culturally appropriate to the project. In 2016, Sophie

From top: **Alexander McQueen for The Rug Company silk, metallic thread and wool Hummingbird wall hanging, from £6,960. Hechizoo metal, silk and reed From Spring to Summer wall hanging, from \$30,000**

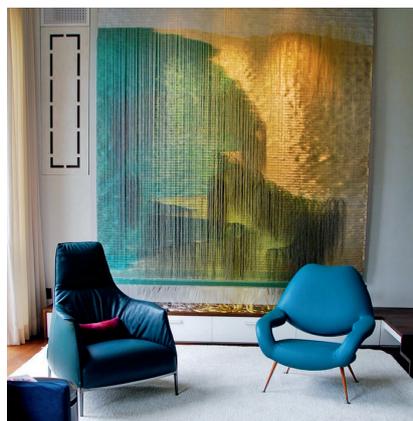
Jan Kath's collection of handmade rugs for London showroom Front includes a series of designs reinterpreting the ancient textile art of boro, a form of Japanese patchwork whereby locals would salvage old clothes and sew them

together into bedcovers and other household items. Made from handspun Tibetan wool, silk and nettle fibres, the bespoke rugs cost from £2,120 per sq m. "The look of boro reminds me of a wall that's had many layers of paint applied and is now peeling away," he says. An exploration of fashion also informs Kath's most recent work for Front. His Dresses collection includes rugs shaped like coats and gowns (£2,650 per sq m), inspired by historic textiles such as an 18th-century surihaku coat interwoven with gold embroidery.

Indeed, there is now a plethora of rug designs that create a statement on floors and walls, from The Rug Company's collaboration with Alexander McQueen capturing birds in flight in iridescent thread (example pictured above left, from £6,960) to CC-Tapis's geometric centrepieces by Patricia Urquiola (€5,443) and Elena Salmistraro (€4,968, both pictured overleaf) and Studiopepe (pictured on opening page, price on request).

Many interior designers are now waking up to the possibilities of wall-hung textiles too, particularly if culturally appropriate to the project. In 2016, Sophie

"Part of the fun is playing with the notion that what you put on the floor is design, but what you put on the wall is art"





“Astrid Krogh discovered the possibilities of handweaving with optic fibres, and her tapestries pulsate with a flow of ever-changing colours”

Ashby undertook the complete redesign of The Robertson Small Hotel in South Africa, using only local craftspeople, suppliers and artisans. As part of this commitment, she commissioned Cape Town-based artist Renée Rossouw (through Smith Studio) to create a large wool wall hanging (R30,000, about £1,825) inspired by traditional Karakul rugs. “I was looking for a way to add warmth, cosiness and comfort to the restaurant space. The wall hanging was the perfect solution because it also helps to deaden the acoustics,” Ashby says. “Renée created the artwork using pen and ink, based on the local landscape, fauna and flora, and the piece was then realised by handweavers using an earthy palette based on the Bushveld. Wall hangings are another art form, alongside painting, photography, sculpture and drawing – there is a simple pleasure in getting up close and examining the detail of weaves, stitches and threads.”

For anyone wishing to begin their own exploration of textile art, Dovecot Tapestry Studio in Edinburgh has been working since the 1910s to produce astonishing collaborations with artists, designers and architects including Stanley Spencer, Edward Bawden, Graham Sutherland, Cecil Beaton, Eduardo Paolozzi, RB Kitaj, David Hockney and Chris Ofili. More recently, Dovecot has completed a project with the highly regarded artist Garry Fabian Miller. His tapestry Voyage into the Deepest, Darkest Blue is inspired by horizon imagery and forms the centrepiece for a show that runs at the studio until May 7, but is available for £160,000. “Handwoven tapestry is arguably the richest of art forms. From northern Europe to east

Asia, it has proven symbolic of wealth and comfort for hundreds of years,” says studio director Celia Joicey. “The appeal of bringing tapestries into a modern home lies not only in the sensual allure and warmth of their surface and materials, but in the enduring story of construction and craftsmanship.” ♦

HANGING ON THEIR EVERY WORK

Alison Jacques Gallery, 16-18 Berners St, London W1 (020-7631 4720; alisonjacquesgallery.com). **Amini Carpets**, amini.it and see R & Company. **Astrid Krogh**, astridkrogh.com and see Maria Wettergren. **CC-Tapis**, cc-tapis.com. **Cristina Grajales**, 152 W 25th St, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-219 9941; cristinagrajalesinc.com). **Deirdre Dyson**, 554 King’s Rd, London SW6 (020-7384 4464; deirdredyson.com). **Dovecot**, 10 Infirmery St, Edinburgh EH1 1LT (0131-550 3660; dovecotstudios.com). **Front**, 20 Bruton Pl, London W1 (020-7495 0740; frontrugs.com). **Gallery Fumi**, 2 Hay Hill, London W1 (020-7490 2366; galleryfumi.com). **Garry Fabian Miller**, garryfabianmiller.com and see Dovecot. **Grethe Sørensen**, grethesorensen.dk and see Maria Wettergren. **Hechizoo**, hechizoo.com and see Cristina Grajales. **Kustaa Saksi**, kustaasaksi.com and see Gallery Fumi. **Margo Selby**, margoselby.com. **Maria Wettergren Gallery**, 18 Rue Guénégaud, 75006 Paris (+331-4329 1960; mariawettergren.com). **Mary Fisher**, maryfisher.com. **R & Company**, 82 Franklin St, New York, NY 10013 (+1212-343 7979; r-and-company.com). **The Rug Company**, 555 King’s Rd, London SW6 (020-7384 0980; therugcompany.com). **Sheila Hicks**, sheilahicks.com and see Alison Jacques Gallery. **Smith Studio**, 56 Church St, Cape Town 8000 (+2721-422 0814; smithstudio.co.za). **Studio Brieditis & Evans**, brieditis-evans.se and see Maria Wettergren. **Studiopepe**, studiopepedesign.it.

