

Helen Dangar Memorial Bursary Report 2023: Janna Hayes

In December 2023 I travelled to Japan to attend the Kawashima Textile School on the outskirts of Kyoto. Along with some other Australian weavers, we were taught tapestry weaving by Sensei Kondo. It was wonderful to learn traditional techniques from a master craftsman and to create connections with Australian contemporaries however it was being exposed to Japanese philosophy and the dedication of the teachers and students at the School that has had the most significant impact.

In Japan, *tsuzure-nishiki* or tapestry weaving is an artform of cultural significance with a history that stretches back to the late 15th Century. They were usually woven with silk thread and used to make robes, obi and wrapping. Our teacher Hirokazu Kondo studied himself at Kawashima and was involved in the restoration of the "Chōjū Monyō Jinbaori [bird and beast pattern battle surcoat]" (Important Cultural Property), which is said to have been used by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598).

Several months out from the course, we had to submit our designs for feedback. I sketched out my design and roughly shaded the different areas to show what colours would go where. My design was sent back to me via an interpreter, with circles showing where my colouring in had fallen short and a message noting that it was definitely too complicated for my skill level. Oh dear.

I chose a different tack and created a butterfly print, like a Rorschach inkblot. Once dried I went over the colours with posca pen to make the edges clear and colours stable. I liked the idea that a design created with a random, uncontrolled method, would then be put through a process as controlled and careful as weaving. This time my design was accepted. Phew.

Tapestry weaving is not a fast art. We worked from 8.30am to 5.30pm with a short lunch break for five consecutive days to each create a 50cm x 50cm tapestry. We sat at pre-warped looms that require an education of their own and several hours to be prepared. The studio must have had at least 40 such looms in it. It's a large airy space, filled with a quiet but determined concentration. Sensei Kondo would visit us each and with the help of interpreter Harumi gave gentle guidance.

As beginners we wove in woollen thread, not fine silk, which I imagine to Sensei Kondo is akin to big clumsy pre-schooler crayons. Despite the beginner's equipment I still managed to tie myself in knots and when I look at the work I created I can see tears in the orange and yellow stripes on the right hand side, an area I had to redo 4 times to get right.

In weaving the Rorschach design, I wanted to keep the illusion that the two sides were identical while staying true to the fact that there are small differences in the way the paint comes out on each plane. I hope that at first glance you see something symmetrical and its only with more study that the idiosyncrasies appear.

My usual art practice is to paint, and I like to paint in short fast bursts as if what is inside me needs to be furiously pushed out before it gets embarrassed and hides. This is in stark contrast to the slow, methodical process of weaving, where rushing usually means you need

to go back and start again. That's exactly why weaving is such a good counterbalance to my usual practice, it forces me to slow down and be considerate. I wanted to travel to Kawashima to expand upon my own self-taught skills and have a chance to work at a seated loom. I also wanted to expand my own practice at home to be able to create using wool, a material that is so integral to the New England region. I hope to be able to tell a story of identity through my work, and using materials relevant to that identity feels important.

On our final day at Kawashima, cross-eyed and complaining of sore backs we were taken across the school to the "factory", home to the largest loom in the world. Twenty metres long, it takes as many weavers, all working in unison, to create opulent theatre curtains. We were able to view the factory floor from above and the sight of something so beautiful, and so large, made entirely by hand brought us all to tears. It was breathtaking and brought home the deep respect with which the art is understood in Japan.

I was able to talk with one of the weavers who showed me how they each keep a small file next to them, with which they file their nails into tiny combs allowing them to brush down the fine silk threads. Unfortunately, there are no photographs permitted in the studio so I can't share any images.

By that last day, my focus was waning and I was dreaming of the 12 course Japanese degustation that awaited me in my ryokan that evening. I made a terrible rookie error and sped up which resulted in the top corners of the work tightening and pulling in. A lesson learnt. Nonetheless I got the nod from Sensei Kondo who was pleased with the concept, the colour choices and the final piece.

This Spring I'm planning to expand upon what I learnt in Japan by doing a workshop with Australian weaver Natalie Miller in the NSW Southern Highlands. Natalie works on large scale looms she makes using builders scaffolding. I'm hoping to translate what I learnt in Japan to these looms to create super-sized Rorschach tapestries in the second half of 2024.

I am extremely grateful to the opportunity afforded to me by the Helen Dangar Bursary and NERAM. The bursary supported me financially to travel to Japan and expand my practice. In addition to the financial boost, it was very special to be able to travel and learn in honour of someone special. My heartfelt thanks to the Dangar family.