

# REVIEWS

## The warp, weft and words of the Bauhaus

**Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design**

By T'ai Smith, University of Minnesota Press, hb \$90 pb \$29.95

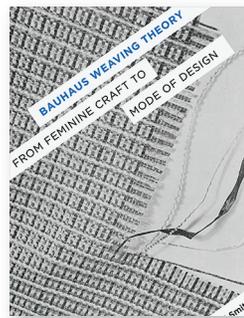
Reviewed by Jessica Hemmings

The Bauhaus often finds itself name-checked in education circles – in my experience evoked with an air of knowing vagueness when referring to the founding model of the art school, while bemoaning the challenges facing post-merger art education within British universities. In fairness, the history of the Bauhaus – from opening in the German city of Weimar in 1919 to closing in Berlin under Nazi party pressure in 1933 – offers us a lot of badly needed lessons.

Instead of following the well-trodden path of the Bauhaus ideal of integrating art, design and theoretical teaching, Smith, an assistant professor of art history at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, examines – at times forensically – the writings of a number of weavers associated with the Bauhaus. She acknowledges what has gone before but says: 'Little to none of the current scholarship, however, has critically analysed how the weavers shaped their craft through text, or how their textual pursuits significantly engaged with thought on craft and media more generally.' Rather than dwell on the physical output of the studio she focuses on the 'value and significance in the work they [Bauhaus weavers] did as writers.'

Smith acknowledges that the book began life as a doctoral dissertation. While there is clear evidence of painstaking archival research underpinning her writing, Smith avoids pulling the reader through tortuous academic jargon. Instead, four chapters establish distinct points of focus: Pictures Made of Wool: weaving labour in the workshop; Towards a Modernist Theory of Weaving: the use of textiles in architectural space; The Haptics of Optics: weaving and photography; Weaving as Invention: patenting authorship.

Throughout, her message seems to be that the writing of the weavers is important to textiles today but, perhaps more crucially, important beyond these



disciplinary boundaries. Anni Albers herself pointed to 'those whose work in other fields encompasses textile problems'. Textile problems: brilliant! What isn't a textile problem? This is largely Smith's point. We should pay attention, not so much because of an overriding fascination between the relationship of text and textile (valid though this reading is), but because of the broader implications of relationships between concept and material so fundamental to current debates in art, craft and design.

While Smith writes from the perspective of a historian it is clear that she understands the very stuff of weaving. Her one slip may be a reference to the drafting of woven structures, which she explains capably, but as 'esoteric'. Esoteric to the general public perhaps, but even in today's digital age, the drafting of woven structures is weavers' initial record or plan.

The book also labours under an awkward title that seems to play to the stereotypes her writing so adroitly quashes, a shame because the book's structure is as elegant as the simple but arresting weavings Albers was so celebrated for creating. Truth be told, writers wield curiously little control over the titles of the books that bear their names and I wonder if something along these lines is at work here as well. Authorship and agency again: themes, in fact, that form the very backbone of this compelling research.

*Professor Jessica Hemmings is head of the faculty of Visual Culture at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin*

*Whiteladies House, Moray Thomas, 1935*



## Model homes: mini machines for living

**Small Stories: At Home in a Dolls' House**

V&A Museum of Childhood, London E2  
13 December 2014 – 6 September 2015

*Dolls' Houses from the V&A Museum of Childhood* by Halina Pasierbska, V&A Publishing, £14.99

Reviewed by Liz Hoggard

Tiny figures prepare a meal in the well-appointed Edwardian kitchen. A scullery maid kneels to wash the chequerboard floor; while cook piles high cakes, hams and trifles. Just one of the many tableaux you'll find in artist Betty Pinney's adult's dolls' house. Pinney who studied under Paul and John Nash before becoming a wallpaper and textile designer for the Edinburgh Weavers, and Sanderson, bought the house for £5 in 1962 and set about refurbishing it. Her daughter maintains her mother, a perfectionist, planned it as a retreat from the imperfections of real life.

*Small Stories* provides a fascinating insight into changing styles of English domestic architecture. The 12 houses – veritable cabinets of curiosity, lovingly hand-built and decorated – take your breath away. The exhibition uses film, audio, scale models and full-size room sets, along with portraits of the fictional