

Book Review

***Warp & Weft: Woven Textiles in Fashion, Art and Interiors,*
Jessica Hemmings, London: Bloomsbury, 2012**

Warp & Weft emerged from a one-day symposium and a touring exhibition with the same title hosted by the Oriel Myrddin Gallery, Wales, in 2008. The papers and discussions that took place during that day highlighted the energy and vibrancy surrounding weaving and the woven cloth as a form of expression as much as a form of construction. It is no accident that Hemmings, one of the most active and influential writers of cloth today has her own roots in weaving and she recognizes this in the final sentence of her introduction: “In the final event I did not become a weaver, but I am convinced that my time at the loom taught me to write” (p. 9).

Unlike other books on the subject, Hemmings is keen to avoid a commentary that imposes meaning on the works and artists highlighted; on the other hand, she appears to be equally keen to avoid overloading the text with so much technical detail that the cloths illustrated become overshadowed.

In order to negotiate such a complex path the book is arranged thematically with chapters entitled Threads, Light, Motion, Sound, Emotion, and Community. Each chapter follows the same structure

with a short introduction in which she outlines her themes before moving on to the selected artists and their works, including over sixty artists across art, craft, and design practices. This structuring emphasizes the key aim of the book: to let the weavers, weaving, and their woven cloths articulate their own concerns and expressions through juxtapositions rather than a didactic, authorial voice. As the book progresses the reader is taken through the activity of weaving: selecting the raw materials in *Threads*, focusing upon the play of light across and within the cloth’s surface in *Light*, exploring the fluidity and mutability of cloth in *Motion*, establishing a playful and yet powerful interplay between the rhythms of weaving and music in *Sound*, offering entrance into the intimate and ubiquitous relationship between cloth and the body in *Emotion*, and, finally, demonstrating ways in which creating and using woven cloth brings people together through its materiality and as a model for thinking in *Community*.

This journeying from the technical to the metaphorical through the material highlights that this book is not about the

REVIEWED BY CATHERINE DORMOR

Catherine Dormor, PhD, is an artist, writer, and researcher. Her artwork is in private collections and has been exhibited across the UK and internationally. She holds a practice-based PhD and is currently updating and editing her thesis for publication. She is lecturer and research coordinator in Fashion Theory at Middlesex University.

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transmission of knowledge about weaving, but rather a response to the enthusiasm and “hunger for dialogue about woven textiles” (p. 8) that was so tangible at the “Warp & Weft” conference. Hemmings explains in the introduction that she has brought together artists she herself referred to in her paper with those suggested by others in the field to open up this dialog through the weaver’s sensibilities, an approach that draws upon materiality, processes, the visual, and the tactile simultaneously as foci of and for discussion.

Warp & Weft is a book of starting points for leaping off and diving into cloth and its construction. Like weaving itself, there is a technical framework, there are disciplines and logics to be laid down, but these do not operate as restrictions to creativity, free-thinking or innovation. Likewise, this book offers reflections upon, and commentary by, the weavers and artists included, not by way of creating a fixed survey of who should be noted or who is the very best but rather seeking to prize apart the warp and weft of cloth to promote and provoke an expanded and expansive notion of weaving, weavers, and woven cloth from the often separated fields of art, craft, fashion, and design.

There are interesting “conversations” evoked through juxtaposing Susie MacMurray’s enormous installation, *Promenade* (2010) in Kedleston Hall with Laura Thomas’ relatively small *Horizon* (2010) series of resin weavings. Where MacMurray draws on the movement of people through the warp of the hall as a weaving across temporal spheres, Thomas

fixes her threads in a permanently preserved state referencing the assumed mortality of cloth. Both reference the time taken and the human labor involved in the production of cloth. Likewise, by positioning Aleksandra Gaca’s three-dimensional weavings that simultaneously work aesthetically within interiors and as acoustic control panels with Gary Allson and Ismini Samanidou’s collaborative *Woven Wood* (2010) series in which they play with the idea of wood being milled to mimic cloth, a tradition that evolved to minimize cold draughts and temper sound, raises important questions around processes and products. Both Gaca and Allson and Samanidou explore the same territory, one a highly skilled weaver working with soft threads and collapsed weaves and one working with precision milling tools, straight lines, and planes, these very differently produced structures having similar visual and acoustic results and thus opening out fascinating ideas around processes and outcomes, means, and ends.

The structuring of the *Warp & Weft* is itself extended and expanded through the illustrations that are set together with the text: details and installation shots satisfying both hand and eye. Again, it is an approach that means the reader does not have to take the author’s description of the work alone, but can comprehend it for themselves through images released largely by the weavers themselves. This establishes a direct dialogue between maker and reader that is usually only available through exhibition catalogs and artists’ talks.

Hemmings, in general, is attentive to her audience and to enabling that audience to generate their own connections and connectedness within and between material practice and the written word. However, to my mind, in abbreviating the introductory sections to such an extent, the reader is not offered much by way of signposting and in this there

is the risk of this coming across as a book of Hemmings' favorite weavers.

In spite of this, *Warp & Weft* is a valuable book for all those interested in the structures, processes, and languages of cloth within and beyond weaving, fashion, art, and interiors. The text, selection of weavers, and images create a matrix of and for

discourse that potentially enables and necessitates expansion and interpretation by the reader.

Through its exploration of current modes of what weaving and the woven cloth are it offers far more than the sum of its parts might at first suggest. Hemmings' clarity and intimate understanding of woven cloth will reward the active reader.