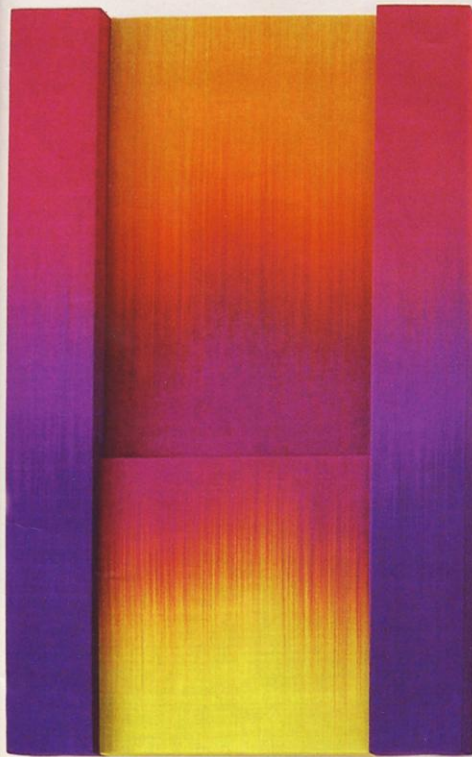


superior interiors

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Tapestry is casting off its “crafty” image and is back lining the walls of smart homes, says Emma Crichton-Miller.

In the Banners of Persuasion headquarters in London's Clarendon Cross, Chris Sharp of The Rug Company introduces the first result of his latest project. There is detectable excitement from all in the office as we sit with our backs to the downstairs sofa, our necks craned to the mezzanine above, from where a vast tapestry slowly unfurls. Almost 4.5m x 4.5m, it reveals a meticulously rendered landscape of building, statues, rocks and rubble, minutely realised as if with a charcoal pencil in 100 shades of grey yarn. The design has all the fierce humour and rampant eccentricity of the contemporary artist who designed it, Paul Noble, and who chose for the purpose a view of *villa joe* (from £76,375) from his famous sequence of graphite drawings of the fictional city Nobson Newtown. Yet the piece also has a surface sheen, an elegance, a sense of three-dimensional grandeur and permanence that comes from the exquisitely uniform stitching and the infinite variety of shading achieved in this monochrome work by the mixing of dyed threads. Through the translation of the work from a large drawing into a tapestry, Noble's imaginary landscape, already breathtaking in its detail, has taken on a different majesty.

From November 10 to 22 this tapestry will be on display alongside 13 others in the selling exhibition *Demons, Yarns and Tales: 14 Tapestries by Contemporary Artists* in a huge converted dairy on London's Wakefield Street. The show is the culmination of a four-year project, nurtured by Christopher and Suzanne Sharp through Banners of Persuasion, their new visual arts commissioning organisation. Diverting his attention from rugs (“The coarseness of the knotting process is quite restrictive,” Chris

tells me), he has chosen to revive a very traditional alliance, marrying 15 contemporary artists (one of the tapestries is a collaboration), including Kara Walker, Francesca Lowe, Gary Hume, Gavin Turk, Grayson Perry, Beatriz Milhazes and Peter Blake, with a team of expert weavers from China. Each design is radically different from the others, from Peter Blake's delightful *Alphabet* (from £35,250) to Fred Tomaselli's sparkling birds of paradise (from £64,625) to Shahzia Sikander's more political *Pathology of Suspension* (from £35,250), but they share a supreme technical accomplishment. Tomaselli's exhilaration on first seeing the resulting tapestries can stand for all: “I never expected it to be done so well, I was amazed.” The tapestries range in price

Left: architectural practice Felden + Newson commissioned Ptolemy Mann to make this hand-dyed, woven mercerised cotton work, *After Rothko* (2007), for its Somerset House HQ.

according to artist and edition, from £17,625 for Jaime Gil's smaller one to almost £100,000 for a final edition of Noble's or Walker's. The prices reflect the creative ambition of these extraordinary pieces.

This exhibition marks a new era for textile art. We are used to the idea that ceramic objects, glass and even jewellery can express ideas beyond the simply functional or purely decorative. Though defined as craft, these objects have increasingly been welcomed into the fine art fold and recognised as contributing to the conversation a culture has with itself. But cloth? With the honourable exception of Peter Collingwood, the grand old man of British art textiles, somehow textile art – whether woven, embroidered, knitted, printed or sewn – has remained, in the public perception in this country, resolutely domestic or costly crafty (an embroidered cushion, a woven picture on the wall), incapable of any searching reflection on contemporary life. You might buy a piece of textile art to decorate

WOOL-TO-WALL WINNERS

your home but you do not expect it to provoke or inspire you.

Historically, of course, this was not the case. Art textiles, pre-eminently tapestries, were at the top of the tree, the preserve of kings, popes and nobles. Designed by leading artists (the Raphael Cartoons for the Sistine Chapel, for instance), they were realised by highly skilled craftsmen in vast workshops such as the Gobelins factory in Paris. The finest silks and wools, even gold and silver thread, were lavished on their creation. In the 19th century William Morris fell in love with them, both for their evocation of a misty medieval past but also for the truthness of their colours and the density of workmanship. In France in the 1940s, Jean Lurçat inspired Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, Calder and others to design tapestries for his workshops at Aubusson. In parallel, established artists known for work in a range of media – Henry Moore, Louise Bourgeois, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Claes Oldenburg – had of their own accord discovered the potential of material to express their ideas. More recently, the Bulgarian sculptor Christo's adventures wrapping the Reichstag or running a fence of fabric through northern California, Yinka Shonibare's installations of headless dummies dressed in Dutch "African" fabrics and Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* tent have all raised the profile of cloth, demonstrating its continued symbolic potency.

Yet while these glamorous guest appearances of textiles on contemporary art's main stage have drawn plenty of attention, art textiles in and for themselves have generally slipped from view over the years. Just recently, however, there has occurred a genuine shift in public perception. A run of museum shows and selling exhibitions has shown an increasing appetite among galleries and collectors for adventurous work – as

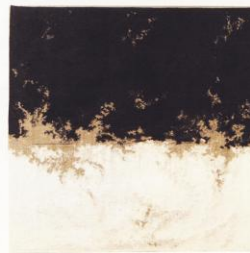
There is an increasing appetite for adventurous work – as far removed from genteel hobbyism as possible.

far removed from genteel hobbyism as possible. Earlier this year the show *Cloth and Culture Now* at The Sainsbury Centre paraded works by leading British textile artists Michael Brennan-Wood, Maxine Bristow, Sue Lawty, Shelly Goldsmith, Freddie Robins and Diana Harrison, alongside work from around the world. The exhibition is now at Manchester's Whitworth Gallery (until December 14). Exhibits as different as Brennan-Wood's magnificent multicoloured carpet of flower and star-like objects, *Stars Underfoot-Random Precision*, and the Latvian Ieva Krumina's haunting mythological screen-printed polythene garbage bags, *Nobody*, or Bristow's rigorously "padded paintings" and Mitsuo Toyazaki's beautifully simple maple leaves (*Passage of Time*) created on the floor with buttons, or Sue Lawty's poetic four-piece series *Call and Response: Lead, Linen, Stone, Shadow* demonstrated the beauty and dynamism of work now being made. Far from witnessing a creative dead end, you emerged from the exhibition with the dizzying sense that to weave or sew is to participate in some primal act of creation, and that to be intimate with stitch is somehow to draw close to the mystery of how anything holds together – skin, landscape, a story, a building, a community.

Warwickshire's Compton Verney gallery, too, has just closed *The Fabric of Myth*, an



ambitious show exploring the symbolism of fabric (from Penelope, Arachne and Ariadne in Greek myth to the present day) and its creation. Contemporary makers included Louise Bourgeois, Alice Kettle (who uses machine embroidery to create sumptuously layered, mythological panels), the visionary Bispo do Rosário, Michele Walker and Ray Materson, a former convict who embroiders tiny tense autobiographic works using threads from unraveled socks. The Jerwood's new applied arts initiative, *Jerwood Contemporary Makers*



(November 14 to January 31 at Edinburgh's Dovecot Studios), also features work by two textile artists: the teasing embroidered shirts of Deirdre Nelson and Sara Brennan's magical tapestries. Seen from afar, Brennan's pieces (from £1,100) look like quiet abstract paintings. Close up, entrancing landscapes of time and distance open up, alive with subtle textural and tonal variation. For those inspired to buy or commission, all these British artists can be tracked down at the addresses overleaf, and are open both to the purchase and commission of their work.

At Contemporary Applied Arts this summer a selling show of art textiles, *Spectrum*, included some of Ptolemy Mann's vibrant ikats (£800-£890) and Fiona Rutherford's colourful Japanese-influenced, almost narrative tapestries

(£700-£2,900). In Gloucestershire in May, the annual Stroud International Textile Festival brought the best international work to a British audience while, in Halifax, *Tapestry 08*, a show of 36 tapestry artists, marked the second major public initiative of The British Tapestry Group, founded in 2005. Alongside accomplished work by Jilly Edwards (from £3,076), Kirsten Glasbrook (from £1,846), William Jefferies (£1,335-£6,923) and Jane Freear-Wyld (from £750), Soon Yul Kang offered charged serenity with her piece *Meditation* (£5,500) and Elin Huws (£3,076-£4,615) from Wales demonstrated how tapestry can glint and ripple like the sea. And at The Crafts Council's selling show *Origin*, at Somerset House (the final day is tomorrow, October 19) seven textile artists are showing work – including Ptolemy Mann's vivid woven mercerised cotton panels on wooden frames (£370-£2,000).

Some public and private institutions have long seen the virtues of these expansive, sound-dampening artworks. As part of the Scottish Parliament's art programme at Holyrood Palace, the distinguished textile artist Norma Starszakowna (prices from £2,800) was commissioned to create the magnificent *Hinterland* (2004), 18 wall-mounted textile panels reflecting the colours and textures of the Scottish landscape. Alice Kettle's embroideries grace institutions from The National

Top and above left: Paul Noble's *villa Joe*, from £76,375, and Gary Hume's *Georgie and Orchids*, from £58,750, on show at *Demons, Yarns and Tales*. Sara Brennan's *Broken Linen Line 1*, £7,500.