In attempting to capture, in writing, a profile of educator artist designer Gunnel Hag, I found myself being taken in many different directions. She, and her career, are so multi-faceted that it is hard to know where to start. She came of age in a time of change --- change in definitions, processes and approaches within the textile crafts practices a fledgling textile arts movement and changing approaches in education: that were partly philosophically driven, and partly reinvention and experimentation. Fibre based production, use and meaning where expanding from a primarily domestic use that was either functional or decorative into a conceptual playground that was as virulent, fecund and robust as the fine art world. Fibre based production became a central location for a feminist reclamation and the re-defining of creativity. Located at the intersection of craft, fashion, art and industry, a movement was organizing disparate practitioners under the banner of Surface Design and achieving the creation of a home grown Canadian organization, Surfacing: Textile Dyers and Printers Association, and saw the beginnings of Harbourfront Centre and their Craft Studios. This was a time when craft based fibre work was seeking equal recognition with ceramic and glass, when Textile Art was demanding recognition outside of Craft.

I began by interviewing her, intrigued I started to do more research and found a 1985 article in Ontario Craft, the Ontario Craft Councils magazine by Alison Parsons entitled Running Gunnel. It seems to me I have been running after her for the past few weeks and now have found her in this spectacular place. Think of this as part one - since I seem to have left her in 1985 where Parsons' Article begins her story. Part two will involve a much longer conversation with the woman herself.

#1 "Texture Dance"

Gunnel Hag a short profile:

She studied textile design in Sweden and England.

She was a founding member of the Textile Printers and Dyers Association whose publication Surfacing Journal, and annual conferences held at the Harbourfront Centre changed the position of textiles in the craft and fine arts arenas of Canada.

- Her studio, Trees Textile Designers and Printers, in Toronto, produces fabrics for film and theatre productions.

She taught in the Textile Studio at Sheridan College, Oakville, Ontario for 12 years and continues her role as teacher at Haliburton School of Art, Sir Sanford Fleming College, and has been a visiting lecturer at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India. Her fabrics have been represented at international design exhibitions, and she has published two books: Creating Texture and Creating Texture: Soft Textures.

#2 "Quilt 7"

Gunnel Hag has been an integral part of Canada's continually growing community of textile artists and designers for over thirty five years. In her roles as textile printer/ business woman, fashion designer/ entrepreneur, workshop leader, and the developer of a non-toxic dye product/ process, ColourVie, her influence has been more in the background than on gallery walls. However, she has had her time on the catwalk. In September of 2008 she, along with Valerie Knapp and Margot Miller, revisited their fashion work in Changes: A Comparison of Embellished Fashion Through the Ages at The Handweaving Museum and Arts Center in Clayton New York.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit her at her studio in Toronto to talk about life, education, fashion and love of textiles -- dropping by on what she said was the coldest day so far this winter. She said that the fact that she grew up in Sweden didn't prepare her for Canadian winters any more than having been born here would have.

# 3 "Texture 11" She studied Textiles at Stockholm University then finished at the Royal Collage of Art in London. Of her time in London in the Swinging Sixties, she said it was difficult to get work done due to the sit ins and student strikes. My rebellion did not come until I went to Hornsby College of Art in London, England. They taught...
"space filling" in textile design class. I won a prize in a student competition for a blanket design, white with a large black circle --- much to the consternation of my teachers. My teachers at the Royal College of Art were much more understanding.....

She had come from Sweden where a continuum of weaving had not been disrupted by the industrial revolution and that had evolved in the early twentieth century as Art Fabrics. The work of Marta Maas Fjetterstrom was the most significant within this movement, according to the 1973 book &ldquo;beyond craft: the art fabric.&rdquo; by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen. Gunnel&rsquo;s Swedish textile influences were those of the weaver Elsa Gullberg, the printed textiles of Marimekko and Austrian designer Josef Frank. The latter moved to Sweden in 1935 and became the backbone of what is now Swedish Modern. His printed textiles were more inspiring than those of Stig Lindberg. Gunnel notes that &ldquo;Stig Lindberg&rsquo;s fabrics were simply part of everyday life, so I guess you can say that they probably were a subconscious inspiration. Not just textile designers, but also artists were a source of inspiration Hundertwasser - the list goes on. I was in thrall of pretty much all design&rdquo;

#4 "Ginko"

At the time the &ldquo;fibre Revolution&rdquo; was just heating up, with tapestry weaving leaving the wall and becoming three dimensional, Gunnel Hag finished her textile education in the United Kingdom. She came to Canada &ldquo;to find work as a designer in the textile industry." Finding that industry virtually non-existent, she began tie dying T-shirts on her Kitchen Table, soon graduating to a spare bedroom and she adding screen printing to her repertoire of techniques. 1* Through contact with the colourist weaver teacher Helen Francis Gregor, a fellow graduate of the Royal College of Art at the then Ontario College of Art, she found a blossoming community of fledgling textile artists, weavers, dyers and printers that were breaking new ground. Connecting with this group of like minded Canadians who where watching the recently formed Surface Design Association in the US challenge the status quo everything seemed interesting. At this time, the older, pre World War II, depression era textile organizations that began as "Adult Education" programs, along with the newer post war &ldquo;Studio Crafts &ldquo; groups, continued to see textile works as traditional, functional and domesticated, with practitioners "chained to their looms." (*2)

#5 "Drunkard's Path 24"

A turning point was the Lausanne Tapestry Biennales 1969 & 71, where the growing influence of ground breaking tapestry and &ldquo;Soft Sculpture&rdquo; work that was happening in Poland was shown. The traditionalists could no longer control or quell the growing experimentation that was being produced. Elsewhere in the world the Polish influence was being felt and in North American weavers, quilters, textile designers, dyers and printers were rebelling. These practitioners were breaking away from traditional roles and demanding recognition that their work was separate from and equal to Ceramics and Glass, while gaining entrée into the world of &ldquo;Fine Arts&rdquo;.

At an early SDA meeting in Baltimore (as Gunnel recalls, and that Dorothy Caldwell thinks was Purdue), Khadejha McCall from Montreal was among the participants. All Canadians found themselves grouped together and talking. Their conversations lead to the creation of the Textile Dyers and Printers Association in 1978. Their newsletters lead to the first issue of Surfacing in 1979, a publication lasting until 2005.

#6 "Heartbreak Hotel" small quilt.

Through the 1970s, working first at home before moving into a series of lager more professional studio spaces (including time at Harbourfront Centre&rsquo; Craft Studio), Gunnel was able to hone her skills and focus on her production. From T-dyed T-shirts through a line of whimsical kitchen accessories (fried egg aprons, lighting bolt oven mitts and hotdog pot holders), she also printed silk scarves for the gift and fashion market. By 1978 she was printing yardage and producing &ldquo;wearables&rdquo; which were, in other words, clothing. A support system for textile people was coming together around her from different directions. The Surfacing Textile Dyers and Printers Association held their first conference at Harbourfront Centre.

&ldquo;Beyond the Gallery and Into Society&rdquo; in 1979 saw &ldquo;Surfacing 79&rdquo; mounted at the Craft Gallery at 346 Dundas St and brought craftsperson Merton Chambers as key note speaker. As someone involved in the beginnings of the Professional Craftsman&rsquo;s &ldquo; Assoc., The World Crafts Council, the Ontario Crafts Council, his talk was controversial. He questioned the current model of &ldquo;do your own thing&rdquo; for craft education suggesting that ideas without technical skills were equally as useless as technical skills are without imagination.

#7 Red silk dupioni dress and cape

Jean Johnson, while heading the whole Craft Studio program at Harbourfront, &ldquo;organized a Fashion Show to provide the studio craft people working with textiles an opportunity to develop professional skills in present designs for

fashion. To accomplish this, Johnson invited people who were already established in their careers to participate with the Harbourfront designers. *4) This led Gunnel to develop her Trees Studio printing business as a small run fashion house. In her March 1985 story, *Running Gunnel*; in Ontario Craft magazine, Alison Parsons, chronicles this development. From Gunnel's arrival in Toronto at the beginning of the 1970s until the mid 1980s, while operating her studio, she was also involved with the Art Gallery of Ontario's "Artist with their Work" Program and the Artists in Schools program of the Ontario Arts Council. She was exhibiting and presenting workshops throughout Ontario. She was actively assisting with the establishment of the Textile Dyers and Printer Association -- as well as dealing with the results of the toxicities involved in the materials with which she and all dyers and printers work.

"Knit" screen printed silk crepe dechîne dress by Gunnel Hag 1987

Historically, water has always played an integral (if unknown to the general populace) part of all fabric production. Beyond the initial role of water in the growing of natural plant and animal fibre, the processing into yarn and finishing the product, the colouring of fabric (either by dying or printing) has been a toxic soup that has been re-introduced into water systems and into water tables for centuries. The impact on human and animal health resulting from the development of synthetic dyes in the later half of the nineteenth century (and which led to today's Pharmaceutical and Petro-Chemical industries) has only lately become of concern. The creation and delivery systems of pigments which involve liquid extraction and drying and pulverizing [creating powered forms of the materials] enables more economic travel in terms of space and cost, but it also creates airborne health hazards at both ends from production as it must be unpacked and liquefied again for use. In the last 20 years, there has been a concerted effort on the part of individuals, and now also of industry, to lessen the ecological damage this production sequence. Gunnel Hag's 3-part water based Colour Vie Pigment System has been her contribution to the solution of this major problem. First it delivers pigments in a wet, non powder form, lessening the airborne impact on individual users' health. Secondly, the clean-up of equipment does not involve solvents.

from "the Collection", Harbourfront 1987

http://www.colourvie.com/

notes:

*1) & *4), Alison Parsons "Running Gunnel", Ontario Crafts Volume 10 Number 1, march 1985

*2) Jason Pollon: president emeritus of SDA, Off the Grid DVD,

*3) Merton Chambers: notes from his speech, Surfacing, Volume 1 Number 3, Summer 1979

Gunnel Hag  Valerie Knapp, Margot Miller