Review: American Tapestry Biennial Eight 2010

First prize winner Suzanna Pretty [USA]: Divided Landscape, 35" X 43.5", Warp: Linen, Weft: wool, silk, cotton, metallic thread

Elder Gallery at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska, September 20, 2010 - November 15, 2010

American Tapestry Biennial Eight 2010 was a featured exhibition at the Textile Society of America 2010 Symposium in Lincoln, Nebraska. It brought together work from fifteen countries and represents the best work being produced by members of the American Tapestry Alliance which has become an international organization since its beginnings in 1982. In her essay, curator Rebecca A.T. Stevens, from The Textile Museum in Washington DC, says "Tapestry is a special art form; (I feel the need to change that to 'tapestry is a specialized weaving technique') ... that was once the province of church and court supported workshops, focused largely on the religious and classical subjects favored by its elite patrons." She goes on to say that "today it is an egalitarian art practiced by individual artists &ndash; alone or in collaborative studios." I suggest this change from "art" to weaving technique because what we are seeing in this exhibition are sixty four "hand woven, weft-faced fabrics with discontinuous wefts" made by weavers dedicated to this technique. Second prize winner, Barbara Heller (Canada) Shiva Dances, 36.5" X 24.5", Warp: linen, weft, wool and rayon technique (some Hand dyed)

Along with the two prize winners: Suzanna Pretty of the United States for "Divided Landscape," First prize, and Canadian Barbara Heller's "Shiva Dances," Second prize, there seems to have been a synchronicity at work as a number of weavers have used mapping and/or landscape as a point of departure. Rebecca A.T. Stevens suggests this may be a response to the current "green" movements whose roots lie in nineteenth century romantic thought which championed human sensitivity and spirituality associated with the natural, pre-industrial world. The work of this period was patronized by cliental wishing to see the bucolic rather then decimated landscape left in the wake of industrialization. It was as much green washing as championing of human sensitivity over which the burgeoning middle class and socialist movement were in conflict. Joanna Foslien (USA) "Truth (Obscured)" 45 X 49.5", Warp cotton seine, Weft: wool, monofilament, rayon, linen, viscose.

The work using location [landscape] as a starting point uses the technique of textile construction, the grid, to take viewers on journeys to inner and outer space with points of views from above, inside and in front of mythical, actual or metaphoric landscapes. Geographically the weavers are from different parts and have different experiences of the world, and yet these pieces question whether the need to be anchored in a landscape is a biological imperative or a cultural construct like the landscape painting of the nineteenth century. I see American Joanna Foslien's "Truth (Obscured)" as topographical with the axis on the bias; it has areas with the appearance of smudge finger prints. The red crosses and broken lines speak to me of locations never reach and a discontinuous journey and GPS satellite tracking. While Norwegian Ann Naustdal's "Arid Landscape" is a vast, deep horizon line over a dry flat landscape which, to me, a North American viewer, seems to come from the North American prairies with the sky being both a flower chintz pattern and dust and funnel clouds associated with the "dust bowl" of depression era America. Ann Naustdal, (Norway) "Arid Landscape" 53 X 57", Linen, coconut fibre, gold leaf

As viewers will bring their own background and perceptions into any image, the work presented here provides a diverse and universal range of material to show us that Tapestry is a vital, expressive form of visual communication and not a moribund tradition.

* The Art of Tapestry by Rebecca A.T. Stevens; American Tapestry Biennial Eight 2010 catalogue

** Tapestry as defined by the ATB 8 entry form

The exhibition catalogue is available through the ATA's website: http://www.americantapestryalliance.org/index.html