

MacAusland's Woollen Mill - a fuzzy gem in western PEI By Rilla Marshall

"deus ex machina.." Shelagh Young, digital college, 2010. created after trip to MacAusland's Woolen Mill * You can take a tour of the mill and can see all aspects of production starting with processin the wool into yarn this is there Carding Machine Dye Vat Visitor are allowed access to the entire mill, moving from carding onto spinning. weaving room after weaving comes the fulling and hand finishing

Blankets are woven in a checker board, or Plain or Tweed with two stripes near top and bottom

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Located in the western end of Prince Edward Island, sits MacAusland's Woolen Mill. Originally a sawmill and gristmill started in 1870, the mill was converted into a woollen mill in 1902 by Archibald MacAuland and is currently run operated by the fourth generation of his family. There are many things remarkable about this small, family-run operation, one of the most noteworthy being that it is now the sole producer of woven wool blankets in Atlantic Canada – a region that has a long heritage of fibre production, both domestically and commercially.

When I was first learning hand-weaving at the age of fifteen, my teacher at the time took her three students (including myself) on a field trip to visit this mythical old-fashioned mill that was still operating as it had been for many decades in rural western PEI. What I remember most about that visit was entering a large barn-like room housing endless machines. It seemed like the bare wooden rafters and walls were covered in woollen fluff. There was the loud mechanized clacking of industrial looms weaving blankets, and there were machines for processing raw fleece into yarn – both processes pretty much un-changed since textiles started being made on an industrial scale.

When MacAusland's was converted into a woollen mill in 1902, its original operation included a carding machine to convert raw fleece into batts which the mill sold by the roll for hand-spinning. In the early 1900s, handspinning was a very commonplace activity in Maritime households. Fleece could be obtained directly from the sheep farm down the road, but buying your fleece batts from the mill removed the laborious step of washing and carding the fleece in preparation for spinning. By 1932, the mill was starting to produce 100% virgin wool yarn from Maritime fleece and had produced its first woven wool blanket, made completely from “scratch” - meaning the wool used to weave the blanket was cleaned, carded and spun into yarn on the premises. Today, blankets have become the staple of the business, and they are still made from scratch using raw wool from the Atlantic provinces.

On looms that are pretty much the same as the ones used a century ago, it takes up to sixteen hundred warp threads to weave a blanket.. In the early 1900s, this industrial loom technology was considered “state of the art”;, and though there has been some changes today in terms of electricity and motors, the mechanics of these looms are essentially the same. The mill hasn't changed drastically over the years, only converting to electric motors from water turbines and diesel in 1973. In 1949, the mill suffered a major fire, and only one piece of mill equipment survived. Even so, the mill isn't necessary operated with the newest technology and equipment: their current machine use to wash the wool is from 1949 and works much better than the industrial machines they kept having to replace over the past 50 years. One of the most interesting things about the textile industry for me, especially an example such as MacAusland's Woollen Mill, is how little the machines have actually changed over the years. Sure, the power sources have evolved, but the basic engineering of the equipment is still efficient, useful and functional in today's manufacturing world.

A few years ago, my brother and I were each given a MacAusland's blanket for Christmas by our parents. A queen size cocoon of cozy-ness, this blanket has become essential to keeping warm on chilly nights throughout the year. A twill structure helps the wool hold in the warmth, creating a lofty soft hand, further increased by the shrinking and brushing which takes place after the blanket is woven. My blanket is typical of MacAusland blankets: the delicate diagonal stripes of a twill structure with a natural white warp, a heather grey weft, and blanket-stitched hems. The blankets are available in a wide array of colours (from wool dyed at the mill) as well as striped designs, but are always woven in a basic twill. It is a classic wool blanket and will last my whole life. I have also used their two and three ply wool in many of my weaving and knitting projects – a choice made because of the traditional quality of the wool and the knowledge that I am using wool from sheep raised in my region of Canada.

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MacAuslands Woollen Mills

Photo credit:

All photographs (except where noted) were taken by Shelagh Young during a tour of the mill in the later part of this past winter. Dale MacCausland has given his permission for the images to be published here.

"deus ex machina.. "© 2010 Shelagh Young and "Plant"© 2010 Shelagh Young are digital collage by Shelagh Young and used here with the artist permission. Bio: Rilla Marshall is based on the east coast of Canada. She is a production weaver and a maker of one of a kind pieces. She received a BFA with a Major in Textiles in 2004 from NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, She has participated in a number of group shows since leaving school and her 2008/ 9 solo exhibition at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown PEI Rilla Marshall: Home Terrain was met with critical successes.

You can read about her practice in Process: The Production Handweaving of Rilla Marshall published in fQ Volume 5 Issue 2

You can keep up with Rilla Marshall through her blog Marshal Arts "plant" Shelagh Young, digital collage, 2010.* * Bio: Shelagh Young is an interdisciplinary artist working in new digital media, painting, collage, textiles and production design for drama and dance. Among many others, she has worked with performance artists Marget Dragu, Elizabeth Chitty, and Carol Greyeyes, choreographer Bill James, dance company Le Groupe de la Place Royale, and collaborated with electronic sculptor Doug Back. Her output has been honoured by many grants and awards, a fiction prize from Maclean Hunter Ltd., a Gemini nomination for costume design, and her essays and installations have won critical praise. She has recently moved to PEI, where her visual work is on display at the Eptek Centre and Gallery 33 in Summerside.