Six weeks on the Velvet Highway: a Textile Journal part 2 by Joe Lewis

Magdalena Abakanowicz (Poland). Abakan 29, 1967-68. Sisal, horsehair. part of the Toms Pauli Foundation Collection/ Lausanne (Switzerland) Photo by Remio &Scaron;erbauksko, © All rights reserved. Shown at the Lithuania’s 8th International Kaunas Biennial TEXTILE 11: REWIND-PLAY-FORWARD

...At the age of 13 I became a writer...I was a very solemn boy, not that I was sad I was just paying attention...Garrison Keillor  September 21, 2011; Kaunas  I attended the ETN General Assembly during which their year-end reports dealing with the operating of the different parts of the European Textile Network: Textile Form (the magazine and its new electronic edition), Textile Routes and other business were presented to the membership and accepted. There were no surprises here, like most cultural organizations that struggle to increase membership and therefore, income, is of the utmost importance. Discussions around necessities of social networking and how to best use them is also a vital aspect. This discussion spills out into the general discourse of the entire event and remains on-going. That night was the official opening of the biennial. After a pleasant stroll down the Laisvės alėja, a wide pedestrian main boulevard of the historical old town with two Italian ETN members (who have become friends since our meeting at the 2009 ETN meeting) Eva Basil from the Lisio Foundation [http://www.fondazionelisio.org/ ] and Barbara Girardi [from 'Le Arti Tessili Association' http://www.leartitessili.it/ presenters of the 'Valcellina Award'] , we passed by what quickly became my favorite public sculpture. There are many, but this one, "Katinas" (Cat) sculpture by Vytautas Umbrasas, is my favourite. Then onward and to the cathedral, then turn toward the M. Žilinskas Art Gallery, where I was instantly overwhelmed by the immense crowd gathered to attend the opening of 9th Kaunas Textile Biennial. Alice Kettle, (England) Alice Kyte teler installatio ebroidered pannel glass tubes with thread Photo by Joe Lewis used with permission of artistMy experience of International Textile Conferences and exhibitions is limited since they rarely happen in Toronto; national ones are limited to one a year. When the Textile Society of America had its biennial Symposium Textile Narratives and Conversations happen in 2006 some curators and exhibition spaces rose to occasion: the Gladstone Hotel organized &ldquo;Hard Twist&rdquo; which has become a mainstay of the yearly Canadian textile schedule ever since there was a cross country student exhibition organized &ldquo;Small Talk&rdquo; and the Textile Museum of Canada [whose director at the time Nathalie Nagy was one of the organizers of the symposium along with Fran Dorsey from NASCD University] had a joint exhibition on with the Koffler Centre called &ldquo;Frey&rdquo; which had opened months before and not planned as part of the Symposium. The TSA had not organized its own exhibition. The next TSA I attended was the 2010 Symposium was in Lincoln Nebraska, Textiles and Settlement: From Plains Space to Cyber Space this time 32 exhibitions in Lincoln and Omaha, were planned to coincide with the 2010 Symposium. The coordinators Wendy Weiss and (who) , where able to take advantage of the Universities of Nebraska&rsquo;s Department of Textiles, Clothing and Design which is large in comparison to OCAD University&rsquo;s fibre course which are available with in the Material Arts and Design Department (or any other textile programme offered in a Canadian University) and the International Center of Quilt Studies and there was a very active student presences at lager local interested audience. This did not prepare me for what I witnessed opening night of the 9th Kaunas Textile Biennial. I suppose if you attend the Super Bowl on regular bases you may not have been impressed by the numbers but for me equating this audience with one enter a sports field for a major game or concert is something you might understand.

Chief Executive of Kaunas Biennial Virginija Vitkien and Vice Director of the National Art Museum of M.K.Ciurlionis Dalia Kamarauskien

Culture Minister of Lithuanian Republic dr. Arknas Gelknas - the Patron of Biennial, Mayor of Kaunas City Rimantas Mikaitis and Biennial board member dr. Rasa Andriu&scaron;yt-Žukien

Congratulation speech by curator Giselle Eberhard Cotton, who presented COLLECTION OF LAUSANNE BIENNIAL from archives of TOMS & PAULI FOUNDATION

Speech by Beatrijs Sterk, ETN General Secretary, Head of 16th European Textile Network conference in Kaunas Opening night crowd 8th International Kaunas Biennial TEXTILE 11, there to listen to speeks of welcome form the organizers and politicians. Image provided by International Kaunas Biennial TEXTILE. Being an opening it was about the crowds: of course there where speeches in which national and local politicians and funding bodies were thanked along with organizers, Beatrijs Sterk of the ETN said a few words of welcome to those of us that were there for the symposium and the doors opened. You just sort of got pushed along, occasionally back tracked saw bits and pieces. I ducked out to get fresh air and stumbled upon embroider and historian Diana Springall and jaccuer weaver Ismini Samanidou who are waiting for the arrival of embroidered Alice Kettle. I had come across Kettle&rsquo;s work in early 2000 and was aware of her position in the textile artist hierarchy (there is one) and was fascinated with 2007 Mechanical Drawing &ndash; the...
Schifflin Project at Manchester School of Art which she had been involved in. We quickly established a mutual friend in Dorothy Caldwell and 24 hours later sure of her generous nature, astute sensibilities and her interest in textile work and education I asked to write a review of TEXERE exhibition which had been organized for the ETN Symposium. The next two days were taken up by the Symposium and attending several more openings where we were looking at people surrounding and blocking the art, which may have been frustrating had I not planned and extended stay in Kaunas to have time to see the work. During coffee breaks and on walks to exhibitions I took the opportunity to talk with the numerous students and their instructors who had come from the other Baltic countries to exhibit at the biennale. Meal times and late night at the hotel bar was time to talk with other ETN symposium attendees than it was three days of post conference excursions followed by good byes. Then it was time to work. I had come to Kaunas to get a broader understanding of how textiles function as art, as craft as cultural makers in this isolated concentration which an event like this biennial provides. September 25th 2011. Zilinskas Art Gallery, Kaunas

With that in mind most of the exhibitions had work produced in different ways so you could see how the themes of the 8th International Kaunas Biennial TEXTILE 11: REWIND-PLAY-FORWARD where organized while looking across the exhibitions at general categories and methods: Weaving, included tapestry and jacquard work hand and industrial woven. Embroidery hand and machine, printed quilted and pieced work such as Chungie Lee's Bojaigis Bond work as well as installation. I am going to focus on weaving. Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, (Romania). Textilt Terrain, 1981 Cotton, goat hair, sisal, 155x170x30 cm. part of the Toms Pauli Foundation Collection/ Lausanne (Switzerland) Photo by Remio &Scaron;erbausko, © All rights reserved.

In another special exhibition a selection of tapestries works from the Lausanne Biennale Collection where on display. To say it was a thrill to see this work would be understating my reaction. Names of makers I have only read about and pieces that I have only seen in books on and off the walls to be seen and experienced first hand. Abankan 29, by Magdalena Abakanowicz 1967-68, Sisal 2110 x 200 x 40 cm this giant organism floating there gentle power full like an elephant. Just standing there at the back wall waiting to be approached, It is present as if an alter piece. My catholic upbringing seems to be come to the fore it makes me feel like genuflecting. As I think back on the presentation I am reminded of the stations of the cross. In the long narrow gallery heading towards the Magdalena Abakanowicz on the left you encounter Wojciech Sadley (Poland). Depth, 1978. Sisal, metal Jagoda Buic (Croatia) "Blue Variations," Wool, gold metallic sisal Jean Lurçat (France) Terre Air Eau Feu (earth air fire water) 1961 gobelin tapestry wool, Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, "(Romania). Textilt terrain, 1981 Cotton, goat hair, sisal, 155x170x30 cm to the right heading towards the Magdalena Abakanowicz you encounter Maria Aaszkiewicz (Poland). The White Lady, 1979. Cotton, linen, wood, Katie Gulya (Hungary). Output in 1980. Photography on canvas. Mariya Yagi (Japan). Root, 1974-75. Japanese hemp rope, steel base. While the number of works is not the same there is still a sence of pilgrimage as you stop to view each one. Lia Cook who was one of the invited makers to show her work at the biennial took part in the Lausanne Biennale 5 times starting in 1973 at the 6th edition. Jagoda Buic (Croatia) "Blue Variations," Wool, gold metallic sisal Jean Lurçat (France) Terre Air Eau Feu (earth air fire water) 1961 gobelin tapestry wool, Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, "(Romania). Textilt terrain, 1981 Cotton, goat hair, sisal, 155x170x30 cm part of the Toms Pauli Foundation Collection/ Lausanne (Switzerland) Photo by Remio &Scaron;erbausko, © All rights reserved.

In a way these works are sacrifices of the old to make room for the new, they represent a revolution that started between the world wars with Jean Lurçat trying to figure out away to work that would move the tapestry weavers role from machine copy machine making woven replicas in a factory setting to that of creator of original works. It took the post war weavers to move away from the tradition of working from a cartoon towards and image to texture and shape. These makers and the showcase that was the Lausanne Biennale broke boundaries and have a direct relationship to the range of approach to fibre today. I am by no means saying this work is sacrosanct and needs to be worshiping unquestioningly but quite the opposite. Some of the work such as Jagoda Buic, Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, Mariya Yagi and Magdalena Abakanowicz represent a change in direction that along with other like Françoise Grossen, Ewa Jaroszynska, Sheila Hicks, Lenore Twaney, Susan Weitzman and Clair Zeisler need to be looked again if only for their ferocity, savagery, fierceness in your face challenge which is the root of today's fluffy colourful whimsically charming often passionless Yarn Bombers. While Jean Lurçat challenge to work from your own cartoon fed the future work of tapestry makers like Japan's Misao Watanabe whose piece was hanging a few rooms away &ldquo;Red Scenery&rdquo; 2010, Gobelin tapestry 195 x400 cm which was astounding colour field work of blobs of rich shades red and orange running down from brownly taupe. This piece reminded me of Quartet Modern (1975) by Canada's own Tamara Jaworska hangs in a bank tower in downtown Toronto Misao Watanabe (Japan) Red Scenery 2010 Gobelin Tapestry wool, 195 x 400 cm

In Kaunas the tapestry was mostly pictorial as the early 1980s painting in a reaction to abstraction and conceptual work saw a return of the figure and narrative tapestry also made a slow return images rather then the structural exuberance in the work of the 60s and 70s examples of which could be seen in the work the Toms Pauli Foundation was showing. With the theme of Rewind the Personal works looking back and telling tails was to be expected. You will have seen the Andrea Midge's piece &ldquo;4 years-three generations -7 stories about women,&rdquo; 7 x (160 x 65 cm) gobelin tapestry jute wool, cotton silk linen, metallic thread, in her article about why she is a member of the European Textile Network elsewhere in this issue. These painterly life size women dressed in their everyday clothes sitting in a row chatting are floating in a background water colour awning stripes and pencil drawings all woven. There is a Pentimento...
quality to these works are you seeing what is underneath the surface a new thought that hides the original one these have rich inner narrative while having the randomness of a tourist; invasive snapshot capturing a private moment. Lia Altman (Russia) “Memory and Forgetfulness”; 2009-2010, 120 x 170 cm, and 120 x 240 cm gobelin tapestry wool

In Lia Altman from Russia work “Memory and Forgetfulness”; or “Memory and Oblivion”; depending on which translation you are reading, 2009-2010, 120 x 170 cm, and 120 x 240 cm gobelin tapestry wool and linen reads as nostalgic soviet propaganda. There are two panels and I rather think they are both memory and forgetfulness; at the same time, one is a picture a group of woman huddled together with a single male shirtless an in shorts and sneakers down on one knee floating on a black background which has bouquets of flowers which is reminiscent of Black folk aprons with cross stitched or embroidered bouquets on them from eastern European regions. The other panel is a group men shirt less and in shorts doing callisthenics in a field landscape with buddies of cut straw standing in rows much like the men behind them. Both groupings of figures look staged for propaganda photos and she speaks of the communist education of her childhood in her statement. They are rough/ primitive in appearance. At first I thought they were hooked rugs rather then tapestries they have a feel of North American’s would call “Folk Art”. The slightly off nostalgia [not quiet cliché or tribute] is very appealing. Near by these and just before you enter the church of Lausanne to worship you encounter pure delight. The work of Tonje Hoydahl Sørl from Norway is almost graffiti, the tapestry frames themselves are part of the installation; isolated components of Walt Disney animation cells are just hanging on exposed warp. Displayed in a way you that can see behind them and see the ends of the discontinuous weft hanging behind the woven sections they are revealing process it isn’t a deconstruction of it. In many ways like the “magic of Disney”; it makes tapestry weaving more mysterious and wondrous. It was a breath of fresh air. Tonje Hoydahl Sørl (Norway) Billedvever / tapestry Instalilation 2007 2008 photo by Joe Lewis Tonje Hoydahl Sørl back detail. photo by Joe Lewis

Through out the exhibitions there a selection of jacquard work: There where invited makers: Louise Lemieux Bérubé [hand woven] from Canada, Lia Cook [both hand and Industrial woven] and Cynthia Schira [industrial woven] from the US, In the Competitive/ juried show Rewind Personal Story the work of Monika Žaltauskaité &ndash; Gra&scaron;ien&dot;ien&dot;ien from Lithuania. The special project Rewind History is a series of industrial woven &ldquo;interpretation&rdquo; of 20th century Lithuanian art works as suggested by current Lithuanian Textile artist. This special project being judge inappropriately by some participants and audience members, this being indicative of the tentative acceptance jacquard work has in the larger hand weaving community. While contemporary tapestry work is often of original design it has a much longer tradition of being woven from a cartoon drawn by a painter/artist. As contemporary jacquard looms are computer assisted in the operation and in design there is a suggestion that the weaver/designers hand has been removed from the process. While there is a difference in the width and speed that can be accomplished using industrial looms the decisions involved creating weave structures that allow for the surface qualities of the original works of art on which they are based are the same decisions those who work on smaller looms where the shuttle is thrown by hand. While the hand woven allows for structures that could comprises/ endanger industrial machines they can also compromise the structural integrity of the hand woven cloth also which may be the desired effect. That said the original hand woven jacquard works have a liveliness that is missing from the industrial woven pieces. All of the Lithuanian pieces where presented taunt on stretchers but that wasn’t really the cause of the lack of “liveliness”. The long involvement with the process that Bérubé, Cook and Schira bring to their work allows for an almost shorthand in their weave structures that puts the image lightly on the surface and lets it almost float unattached. The other work seems very solid and rather heavy regardless of the images.

Philosopher and art researcher Algis Uzdavniys choose Sarunas Suka painting Creek. III. 1989 to be woven as part of the Rewind History Special Project, here jacquard weaver Ismini Samanidou on the left is pointing out weft face (tapestry) weave structures to Carolyn McNamara, Diana Springall and Alice Kettle (I had just step out of the group to take the photo)

Lia Cook who was one of the invited makers to show her work at the Biennial took part in the Lausanne Biennale 5 times starting in 1973 in the 6th edition. The changes which have taken place in her work from 1973 until today have moved from depicting the drape of textiles on strips of interlaced per-painted canvas a kind of riff on double ikat she now the jacquard card loom to blend images faces, images of brain scans while the owner of said brain is reacting to one of her woven faces. Complex and layered images that reference her thought processes as builds an interface between making, and the involuntary cerebral activities engaged in creating the work. The imagery in this work is mesmerizing it is dimensional and hangs in the air rather the on a surface on the wall it is an effect caused by the skilled weaving. I have written about Louise Lemieux Bérubé work several times and seeing it here was like running into an old friend and comforting unfortunately it was not presented in a good light at the opening and could not be viewed to its best advantage which was unfortunate. The subtle shimmer of the copper wire and the sculptural effect was not apparent. It was hung better when I returned but I feel its debut was failure. Annika Ekdahl “Definitely Gold” 2010-11 detail, tapestry wool, silk, metallic, Photo Joe Lewis

Several of the works were affected by bad presentations due to space restrictions there were moments when it felt like the work was stuffed into the space, but not often, The work I have been talking about was in one gallery there were two
more to visit on the first night and was able to spend time at the other galleries there is one more tapestry of exceptional quality I have to mention. The piece by Annika Ekdahl from Sweden "Definitely Gold" is both med evil and modern in fell with a unicorn, a wolf, a rabbit and a cat it depicts: A body, a dress up person surrounded by decorative and beautiful things, ornaments, flowers, gold and thin layers of colours. This is a sumptuous gorgeous thing finely woven tapestry of subtle subdued drawing with brilliant colours showing from under a surface that almost looks tea stained and faded.

There is much more to say about many more things, but after reading almost 3,000 unedited words I'll stop. A look at the embroidery on exhibit will be coming out in my "fiber Report" column in "A Needle Pulling Thread" later this spring.

Notes
*To learn more about Annika Ekdahl and her time as visiting Professor in Textile Art at HDK, School of Design & Crafts at The University of Gothenburg, and a full photo of "Definitely Gold" go here http://www.bienale.lt/2011/?p=664&lang=en Students from around the Baltic were shown at the Biennial at one show "STATE OF EXCEPTION" the teacher was identified with the students which is something I found refreshing. It was nice to see teachers standing behind the work of the students, in textiles like modern dance is is important to be able to trace back through the last 170 years to be able to discern the lines of influence and the schools of thought from which they come: Arts and Crafts movements [with a Socialist agenda] Folk/ Ethnographic Movements [anti-socialist nationalist and tribal in intent] or Industrial Design [capitalistic, soviet free market] roots. Interestingly enough there is a mix of all of these influences in this region of the world that don't seem to be in conflict but rather do to rapid changes in dominated powers the blending is the way of keeping a continuum of tradition that has been adapted to intriguing results.

Lullaby by Elena Jakunaite 2011, Tutor Assist.Proff Loreta Svaikauskiene

The Dress Eva Mustonen 2010 , Tutor Aet Ollisaar

Simona Skeltyle with Sea  Tutor Liama Oriekauskiene

Schools participating in the International Student Exhibition

the Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn (Prof. Piret Valk),

Vilnius Academy of Arts (Prof. Egl Ganda Bogdanien, Laura Pavilonyt),

University of Gothenburg (Prof. Annika Ekdahl

Tartu Art College (University of Applied Sciences) (Prof. Aet Ollisaar)

Latvian Academy of Arts, Riga (Prof. Ieva Krumina)

WBadysBaw StrzemieDski Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Aodz (Prof. WBodzimierz Cygan).

Carpet design by Aleksandera Glusinaite 2010 part of “Fresh Textile” exhibition of Vilnius Art Academy students at the VVA Exhibition Center in Vilnius


Tonje Høydahl Sørli http://www.tonjesorli.com/billedvev.html Special Project Rewind History


http://www.bienale.lt/2011/?p=387&lang=en website  http://www.cynthiaschira.com/ Lia Cook, Binary Traces, Blur 2, 2004 woven cotton, 58 X 50 inches Installation shot from Textile Muesume of Canada "Faces and Mazes" exhibition April 9 - October 17, 2010 You can take a look at all the satellite exhibitions on the Bienale website including special project Rewind History and the MÁXIMO LAURA tapestry show which I have not mention since it was in a separate gallery

http://www.bienale.lt/2011/?page_id=66&lang=en  the M. Žilinskas Art Gallery, Kaunas Lithuania