

# LOOMS with a VIEW

Contemporary artists are drawn to tapestries for their tactility, physical presence, and the poetry of creating complex images on a grid

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

**T**APESTRIES WERE AT ONE time among the most highly prized of art mediums. Raphael was paid about five times more for the tapestries he designed to adorn the walls of the Sistine Chapel than Michelangelo was for his fresco contribution to the ceiling. Tapestries were the province of kings and nobles. They glorified military triumphs, told moral tales, and illustrated worldly domains in breathtakingly monumental scenes woven with silk, wool, gold, and silver threads. They decorated the walls of castles and palaces, warming the rooms, absorbing sound, and dividing vast spaces. When one court visited another, tapestries were easily transported and reinstalled to display wealth and prestige.

"This would be your web page, your way of depicting your life how you wanted it to be," says Christopher Sharp, CEO of the Rug Company in London, who has worked with several artists to design tapestries, which are then handmade in the traditional manner in China. Sharp was one of the catalysts behind the growing wave of artists who have been seduced by the ancient medium of tapestry. Whether collaborating with craftspeople or exploiting the technological possibilities of the computerized Jacquard loom, artists including Chuck Close, Craigie Horsfield, Grayson Perry, and Kiki Smith have been drawn to tapestry for its tactility and physical presence as well as the poetry of building complex images from the simple yet intricate juxtaposition of colored threads on a grid.

Tapestry never died out, but by the 19th century, as styles in living and interior decorating changed, and as portable linen canvases became increasingly prevalent, tapestry production waned. In the 1930s, the Parisian collector and patron Marie Cuttoli sparked a mini-revival of the art by commissioning such artists as Braque, Léger, Matisse, and Derain to produce paintings that could be translated into tapestries by Aubusson weavers. Domestically scaled tapestries by Picasso, Miró, and Rouault, done in collaboration with Cuttoli, were purchased by Alfred Barnes and hang in the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. But these were largely a one-off activity for the artists involved. Today a number of artists are deeply engaged in the art.

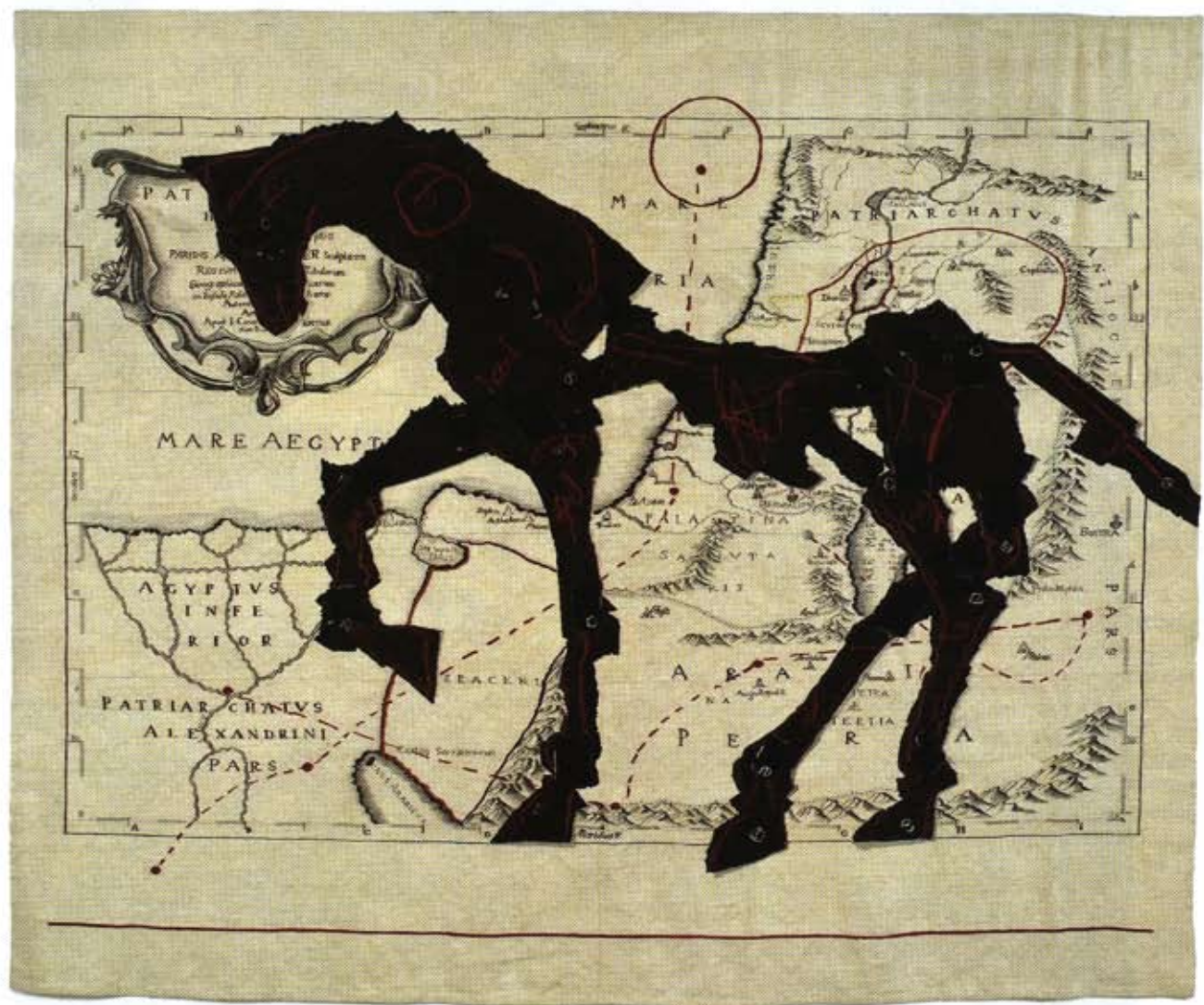
Alighiero Boetti, a pioneer of contemporary embroidered

**OPPOSITE A nude figure floats in a kaleidoscope of elements from nature in Kiki Smith's large Jacquard tapestry *Sky*, 2012.**

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PHOTO: DONALD FARNSWORTH/COURTESY MAGNOLIA EDITIONS. OAKLAND, ART: ©2003 SMITH/COURTESY PRICE GALLERY, NEW YORK.



TOP: ©2012 ESTATE OF ALIGHIERO BOETI/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ISAE; ROMEO/LENSTONE; POTOMAC, MARYLAND; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, PARIS

tapestries, met some craftspeople in Afghanistan on a trip there in 1971 and returned later in the year to drop off a canvas to be embroidered. He had drawn a world map on the canvas and, with a felt-tip pen, colored into each country the design of its national flag. He continued making maps twice a year until his death in 1994 (after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the refugee embroiderers reassembled in Peshawar, Pakistan), producing between 200 and 300 woven maps that track the formation of new countries and changes in governments over time incrementally, stitch by stitch.

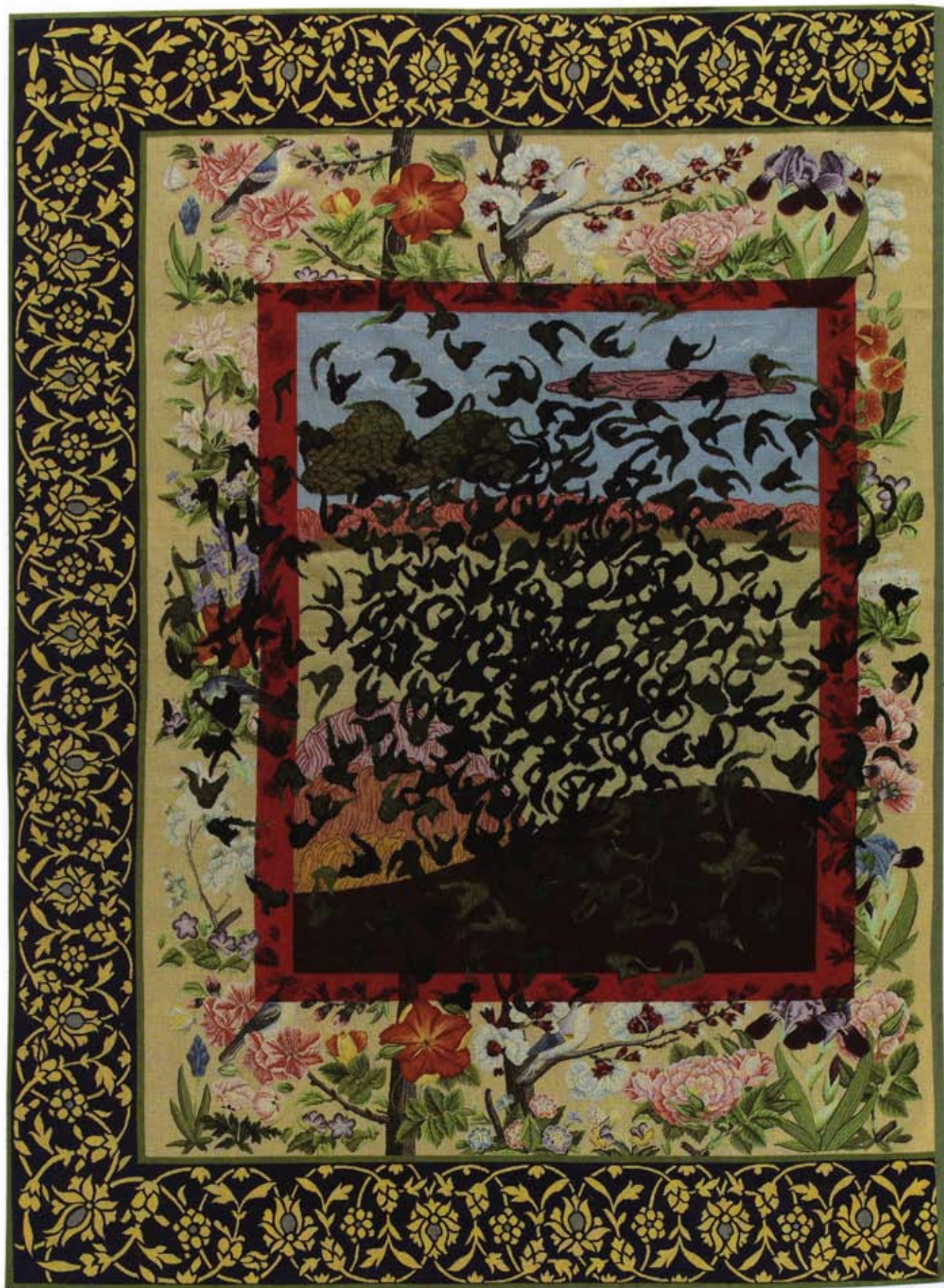
"He liked the idea that there are multiple authors to something and that within collaboration certain things might occur that no single person would ever be able to arrive at," says Christian Rattemeyer, cocurator of the Boetti retrospective on view (through October 1) at the Museum of Modern

Art in New York. For tapestries embroidered in 1978-79, Boetti forgot to indicate the color blue for the oceans, and the weavers just choose the threads most abundant in the workshop, producing maps with bright pink and green oceans. The artist liked it so much that he started leaving some color choices to his collaborators. "He embraced the happenstance," continues Rattemeyer. "Many of the principles of his work are structured along oppositional pairs, like space and time, order and disorder, the individual and the multitude."

Since 2001, William Kentridge has collaborated with the Stephens Tapestry Studio in his hometown of Johannesburg, where weavers work on traditional French Gobelin looms. The silhouetted figures that march in procession across his animated projections—refugees or migrants

**OPPOSITE** Alighiero Boetti, *Mappa (Map)*, 1971-72, embroidery on linen (top). William Kentridge, *Aegyptus Inferior*, 2008, tapestry (bottom). **BELOW** Jaime Gili, *Zelada*, 2008, wool, silk, and artificial silk tapestry.





GO-HAICA SPANDEL/COURTESY, JAMES COHAN GALLERY, NEW YORK; BANNERS OF PETULAGON AND SHYEMA, JENNIS & CO., NEW YORK



**ABOVE** Lara Baladi, *Sandouk El Dounia* (detail), 2007.

**OPPOSITE** Shahzia Sikander, *Pathology of Suspension*, 2008, wool and silk tapestry with raised silk embroidery.

burdened with their cumbersome belongings—reappear in his tapestries, frozen against 19th-century atlas pages of contested lands.

“Labor, in its barest, most elemental form, is perhaps what the tapestries monumentalize, both through their subject matter and by the process of their own making,” wrote Carlos Basualdo in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition of Kentridge’s tapestries at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2008.

Christopher Sharp, whose company specializes in hand-made rugs, commissioned 14 artists who had never worked before in tapestry—including Beatriz Milhazes, Jaime Gili, and Shahzia Sikander—to make large-scale designs. These were then hand-copied onto graph paper cartoons placed behind the loom to guide the weavers. One of the artists, Gavin Turk, paid homage to Boetti by making his own colorful map of the world, collaged from crushed beer and soda cans and discarded food packaging emblazoned with logos. Paul Noble’s fictional cityscape was the largest of the tapestries, almost 15-by-15 feet. It took three months just to copy his meticulous pencil drawing and the rest of a year for 20 weavers to complete it.

The 14 works, which took five years to produce in total, were originally exhibited in “Demons, Yarns & Tales” at The Dairy in London and at Design Miami in 2008, followed by the James Cohan gallery in New York in 2010. They will be

on view again this month at the Chicago showroom of the Rug Company during Expo Chicago (September 20–23).

While tapestry designing was a one-time experience for most of the artists in the exhibition, Grayson Perry has continued to work in it. He has completed nine tapestries. “I dreamed of being able to do a large pictorial textile with the richness and labor-intensiveness of tapestry, but it seemed too costly and time-consuming to embark on,” says Perry, who was happy to participate when the Rug Company approached him. He chose to have the first tapestry made in China in needlepoint to emphasize the craft element that is so important to him in his ceramics. His subsequent designs have been produced at Flanders Tapestries in Belgium using an electronic Jacquard loom that interfaces with a digital weave file.

“It still delivers a relatively organic wobbly-looking surface which I like,” says Perry, who works with the Factum Arte company in Madrid to prepare the digital data that will control the loom. His six recent tapestries, a narrative cycle shown over the summer at Victoria Miro in London, track a modern-day character making his way through Britain’s class system in the manner of Hogarth’s “A Rake’s Progress” (see page 82).

“I’m always interested in what an audience brings to a traditional medium,” says Perry. “Tapestries normally would be depicting these big events, either mythical, military, or



**ABOVE** Craigie Horsfield's "Slow Time and the Present," photo-tapestries installed in the Kunsthalle Basel last summer.

national. I thought there was something bittersweet about depicting a relatively ordinary life."

Perry's 50-foot-long *Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009) was shown last year at the Venice Biennale in "Penelope's Labour," an exhibition in which ancient tapestries and carpets were shown alongside contemporary weavings by Boetti, Lara Baladi, Carlos Garaicoa, Craigie Horsfield, and Marc Quinn, among others. Adam Lowe, cocurator of the show and director of Factum Arte, collaborated with a number of the artists included to convert their designs into digital weave files that could communicate with the Jacquard loom at Flanders Tapestries.

Invented in 1804, the Jacquard loom used punch cards to mechanize the interaction of the warp and weft. Early computers similarly employed keypunch cards to control a sequence of operations. Because they have a similar genesis, the computer turns out to be an ideal way to talk to the loom.

"I've long been fascinated by the fact that the computer is really a derivative of the Jacquard loom," says Lowe. "My interest is in how you mediate digital information back into a physical world." Lowe spends months on set-up with an artist—working out the color palette, determining the tightness or looseness of the weave, and running test strips. Once the calculations are complete, the loom can churn out a tapestry in days. Most artists chose to run them in editions to amortize the cost.

Horsfield, one of the first artists to work in large-scale photography in the 1980s, had kept an eye on the field of tapestry for some time before beginning to design his own seven years ago when he realized that the technological advances of the Jacquard loom presented phenomenal possibilities. In a 2010 series of enormous scenes woven from black-and-white photographs he had taken in Barcelona of the Moscow Circus, Horsfield was able to achieve lush and continuous tonal changes—something traditionally difficult to do on a loom—and localized areas of relief emerging from the flat weave, for the wizened hide of an elephant, for example.

"The tapestry allowed scale. It allowed physicality," says Horsfield. "It's not just to create a spectacular effect. It's meant to have a meaning concerning the massiveness of this beast forced to balance on his front legs and our own ambivalence in viewing it as being something rather terrible and yet something which is entertaining. It allowed the sense of things being woven and how we imagine the world through the stories we tell each other."

In his exhibition this summer at the Kunsthalle Basel, titled "Slow Time and the Present," Horsfield showed three new photo-tapestries, including one of the smoldering rubble at Ground Zero that weaves this mythologized memory into a scene of immediate material presence. "I like the idea that the tapestry takes on meaning by the juxtaposition of

individual threads, individual colors, which when read together become whole," Horsfield adds, "rather in the same way that in our society we are individuals, but when we work together we take on new meaning."

For Chuck Close, the relation of the part to the whole has always been an essential tension in his oversize close-up painted portraits. "I build a painting really in the same way you build an image on a loom," says Close, who had phototapestries of Philip Glass and of himself hand-woven in China in the early 1990s after Sol LeWitt brought him back a tapestry of Mao.

"It's the ultimate grid, just horizontal and vertical threads," Close says. "I always thought tapestry was right up my alley." He returned to it in 2004 and has since produced more than 20 editions at Flanders Tapestries in collaboration with Magnolia Editions in Oakland, California, where Close prepares the digital weave files. He often uses daguerreotypes, another antiquated medium, as his source images because he likes their amazing range of grays and degree of detail.

Close's tapestry portraits of Roy Lichtenstein and Lucas Samaras will be on view at Pace Gallery in New York in October. "The black wool for the background absorbs so much light without reflecting any that it makes the tapestry almost like a holograph," says Close, who compares the rhythmic pounding of the loom to a symphony. "It pushes the image forward and makes it a kind of startling illusion. Then by combining three white threads for every grayer white thread, that puffs it up. Our brain reads a figure in deep

space. It almost transcends the physical reality of what it is and makes it not just threads for me."

Kiki Smith, the subject of a Close tapestry, was approached at his opening by Donald Farnsworth of Magnolia Editions about making her own.

"I'm very attracted to serial narratives and symbolic representation," says Smith, who traveled to Angers in France as a young artist to see the enormous grouping of 14th-century Apocalypse tapestries there, which impressed her deeply. Her first completed suite of tapestries, titled *Earth, Underworld, and Sky*, was exhibited last spring at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York. Each featured a nude female figure floating in a decorative kaleidoscope of elements from nature.

"I'm making something between spectacle and pageantry—mixing the Middle Ages and Busby Berkeley and hippie art," Smith says. Her new suite will go on view at the Fondazione Merz in Turin, Italy, on October 4. "Because tapestry is a matte surface, it absorbs light—it really envelops you," says Smith. "That's one of the primary things I find seductive about them. I like working in historical languages and trying to see where they hold a vitality for me."

Close admits he's fully smitten with the tapestry endeavor. "My grandmother knitted and crocheted and made quilts, which had a very profound influence on me," he says. "Making things out of threads and big complicated things out of a lot of little things has real urgency for me. This old-time system has a history, and it's not used up yet. It's something to breathe new life into." ■

**BELOW** Chuck Close's tapestry portraits of Lucas Samaras (left) and Roy Lichtenstein, both 2011.

