

FT Series **Art Basel Hong Kong 2018****Collecting**

## How the art world learned to love tapestry

Once considered more craft than art, the medium is being revived — with fine work on show at Art Basel Hong Kong



Aisha Khalid's 'Two Worlds As One' (2017) © Zilberman Gallery

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The art world looks different from Hong Kong: different priorities, different histories and geographies and a different public. One of the strengths of this year's Art Basel fair is the number of galleries showing textile works from cultures with widely varying traditions in the medium. Madrid-based gallery Sabrina Amrani is offering a solo presentation by Egyptian artist Chant Avedissian, known for his embrace of a wide range of traditional, local materials. It will include 1980s works using hand-dyed cotton. In the Discoveries section, German gallerist Kadel Willborn will show Emirati artist Ayan Farah, who uses textile and ceramic works to explore ideas about colonialism in Africa.

The Zilberman Gallery from Istanbul will exhibit pieces by the Pakistani artist Aisha Khalid, including two enormous red velvet and gold tapestries entitled "Two Worlds As One" (2017). Embroidered with steel and gold-plated pins, these time-consuming, meditative pieces draw into tension western and eastern aesthetics, traditional crafts and contemporary politics. From Italy, with the Milanese gallery Francesca Minini, Riccardo Beretta will also display embroidered tapestries, exploiting the medium's potential for creating complex, multi-layered art works. This strong showing reflects a current fascination with textile among both contemporary artists and collectors.

Tapestries, especially, are back in fashion. Audiences at London's Royal Academy savour the magnificence of Charles I's Mortlake Tapestries, which were originally woven in the early 17th century from Raphael's Acts of the Apostles cartoons in Britain's first purpose-built tapestry workshops. Chris Ofili's atmospheric installation at London's National Gallery last year, "Weaving Magic", gave pride of place to the exotic, dreamy, just-completed tapestry it showcased, "The Caged Bird's Song". Grayson Perry's series of six tapestries, commissioned alongside the Channel Four television series *The Vanity of Small Differences* and gifted to the Arts Council Collection and the British Council in 2012, has toured the nation.

And in April, the centrepiece of Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes's first solo show at White Cube in Bermondsey, London will be a vibrant 16x2.7-metre tapestry titled "Rio Azul", depicting a series of abstract biomorphic and geometric shapes that swell and bloom with colour. "Tapestry is an art form that can be part of people's lives, in an intimate way," Milhazes says.

It is not the first time that this ambiguous art form has experienced a new surge of popularity. In the late 19th century, William Morris fought to restore the prestige of the medium, while the 20th century saw Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Delaunay and others invited to engage with tapestry, partly to save the skills of the renowned Aubusson and Gobelin weavers. In Britain, Edinburgh's Dovecot Studios worked with Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland and others.





Grayson Perry's 'Battle of Britain' (2017) © Grayson Perry/Paragon | Contemporary Editions Ltd/Oak Taylor Smith

Meanwhile the pioneering architect Le Corbusier wrote in an essay entitled *Tapestries: Nomadic Murals*, “The destiny of the tapestry of today emerges: it becomes the mural of the modern age.”

For many, however, tapestry remained a backwater, valued as a feat of craftsmanship rather than as original work. Today, the situation is transformed. Celia Joicey, the new director of the Dovecot Studios, offers one explanation: “There is a sea-change in where textile media sit within contemporary art.” Partly this is because the notion of collaborative work has become more acceptable, but there is also the significant influence of artists from less definitively white, western, male traditions. She notes that when Tracey Emin commissioned her first tapestry, in 2011, from West Dean Tapestry Studio in Sussex, it underlined her feeling that textiles, as women’s work, have always been important.

Sculptor Eva Rothschild, whose first tapestry, “Thefallowfield” (2018), is on show at Modern Art in London until May 5, also seized the chance to experiment with the medium when she won an open call by West Dean Tapestry Studio to work with their weavers. Rothschild says, “I like that sense of something being made up of increments, and of something being between image and sculpture. It is an additive process, unlike carving, which is subtractive.” She is also drawn to the way colour is not mixed, as with paint, but created from lots of different coloured threads: “Each colour retains its intrinsic value,” she remarks.



'El Pensamiento' (2010) by Carlos Garaicoa © Carlos Garaicoa/Galleria Continua

Dovecot is currently showing a dazzling, deep blue and sun yellow tapestry made from a design by photographer Garry Fabian Miller. Fabian Miller found a kinship with the Dovecot weavers: “It has been an incredibly emotional relationship. They occupy a colour space as developed as my colour space.”

But Fabian Miller is also realistic about the economics of the process. While Ofili’s tapestry for the National Gallery was a commission from the Clothworkers’ Company, Dovecot commissioned Fabian Miller directly. “They have £110,00 of labour costs tied up in that rug. They have to believe there is someone out there who will pay the £160,000 price [excluding VAT].”

Whatever the cost, however, for many, the hand-woven tapestry is king. For Milhazes’s “Rio Azul”, White Cube commissioned Ateliers Pinton, a traditional hand-weaving atelier in Felletin, near Aubusson, in France, which has made tapestries with Alexander Calder, Braque, Cocteau and Miró. Susan May, artistic director of White Cube, tells me, “You can just see the quality of the threads, the vibrancy of the colours.”

For over 10 years Madrid-based digital facsimile experts Factum Arte have worked with Flanders Tapestries, in Belgium, to enable artists to work with the newest digital Jacquard loom technology to create more affordable editions, available through Paragon Press.

Factum Arte’s director Adam Lowe has no time for disdain of machine-made tapestry. What matters is not the hand of the maker, he says, but the weaver’s understanding of weave structures. Factum Arte has worked with artists Craigie Horsfield, Marc Quinn, Cornelia Parker and Paula Rego, among many others, and has pioneered the double-sided tapestry. “Fin de Silencio”, a series of 12 highly experimental tapestries inspired by the pavements of old Havana by the Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa, will be exhibited at Parasol Unit in London from April until June.

It is Perry who has become the medium's most popular ambassador. Factum Arte has been working with him since 2008. In 2014, one from the 2009 edition of his "The Walthamstow Tapestry" sold at Art Basel Hong Kong through Victoria Miro Gallery to The China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, the institution's first purchase of a work by a foreign living artist. As Lowe puts it, "Contemporary audiences just get it — the scale and visual quality of tapestry, this complex language."

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