

## CONTEMPORARY ART

SPECIAL REPORT

Far right, Marc Quinn's "Pixelation of a Hybrid," and right, Lara Baladi's "Sandouk el Dounia" (The World in a Box), made from hundreds of scanned photos. Both were woven at Flanders Tapestries in Wielsbeke, Belgium, a historic region of tapestry production.



ABOVE AND RIGHT, ALICIA GUIRAO/FACTUM ART

From Venice to Basel to Seoul, storytelling takes precedence for a new breed of contemporary artists and curators.



## Weaving a more modern narrative

VENICE

Contemporary artists rediscover the loom, with spectacular results

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, tapestry, embroidery and carpet weaving were among the most princely of arts, and vast sums were lavished on them by royal and aristocratic houses. But subsequently tastes changed, painting and sculpture became more highly esteemed, and works of the loom came to be regarded, even by the Victorian arts and crafts advocate William Morris, as products of "one of the lesser arts of life."

Yet a number of contemporary artists have been rediscovering weaving with amazing results, as shown by an enchanting exhibition, "Penelope's Labor: Weaving Words and Images," of pieces ancient and modern. The show, curated by Adam Lowe and Jerry Brotton, opened at the Cini Foundation on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore on the eve of the Venice Biennale.

The Bosnian Azra Aksamija brought together her academic and artistic vocations to create an astonishing and profoundly moving work: "Monument in Waiting," a kilim designed by her and woven by women war refugees in Sarajevo.

The origins of the project lay in Ms. Aksamija's research into 250 of the more than 1,000 Bosnian mosques that were destroyed or damaged by Serb and Croat extremists. Having gathered eyewitness accounts of individual stories of the war in the course of her research, Ms. Aksamija then wove these memories and experiences into what is

in effect a narrative carpet, with traditional kilim symbols now transmuted, for example, into the forms of barbed wire, mines, hand grenades and rockets.

The kilim's central "tree of life" motif contains complex references to the mosques, accounts of individuals and communities. A symbolic bird with a big foot refers to a local legend of a kidnapped woman in the 17th century, who transported herself from Budapest to Sarajevo by stepping on the foot of a mysterious man who appeared to her in a dream. "The wish to be miraculously transported to somewhere else, as in the legend, was an experience that many Bosnians had during the war," Ms. Aksamija explained.

The kilim is intentionally left unfinished on its upper border, since this is a story that still has not ended and a resolution of the wrongs committed and suffering inflicted is far from over. However, Ms. Aksamija said the kilim seems to have uncanny powers. Just before it was displayed for the first time at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague, Radovan Karadzic was arrested. And

**A designer said computers were "making it possible to achieve previously unimaginable forms."**

as it was about to be exhibited for the second time, in Venice, Ratko Mladic was apprehended. The ultimate intention is that the "Monument in Waiting" kilim will be permanently displayed at the tribunal in the Hague as a memorial to the Bosnian victims of the war.

Reinterpreted traditional, and even exotic, techniques are arrayed before us in other sections of the show.

During the 17th and 18th centuries small pieces of fabric were successfully woven from spider cocoons and even threads from living spiders. Simon Peers and Nicholas Godley returned to the craft of extracting and weaving this yarn again. Working over an eight-year period in Madagascar, they gathered silk from the spinnerets of more than a million golden orb spiders to make "Golden Orb Spider Mantle," a gorgeous golden shawl, which is not only beautiful to look at but, according to its creators, extremely strong.

Although Alighiero Boetti's lead was not taken up by his fellow artists at the time, he was a pioneer in reviving the use of embroidery in contemporary art, employing Afghan women in Kabul in

the 1970s for his series of thought-provoking geopolitical maps of the world. The now-deceased Italian artist is represented in the show by a map dating from 1978.

The remaining half-dozen artists in the exhibition have managed to achieve their extraordinarily varied range of pieces thanks to the latest computer technology. All these works have been woven at Flanders Tapestries in Wielsbeke in Belgium, for centuries perhaps the greatest single tapestry-producing area of Europe. And the dedicated Argentinian-born designer at Flanders Tapestries, Marcos Ludueña-Segre, has worked for more than a decade developing technologies to make it possible for artists to realize their visions — some of enormous dimensions — in tapestry.

"Strangely enough, some of the earliest calculating machines, the forerunners of today's computers, were based on the system of punch cards invented to operate the Jacquard looms in Belgium," Mr. Ludueña-Segre said. "So it is fascinating to see everything coming full circle and computers making it possible to achieve previously unimaginable forms of tapestry."

"Flanders Tapestry's Jacquard looms can now weave with 12 weft yarns, producing up to 240 color shades, weaving patterns in such a way that the eye perceives a vast range of colors, often by weaving layers one on top of another, which also gives the tapestry greater depth and texture," the designer said.

In two majestic woven images — an exhilarating cloudscape and a rock concert in which a Christ-like bearded figure is caught momentarily illuminated in the crowd — Craigie Horsfield pays homage to both the old master painters and to "the seemingly paradoxical effects of digital means opening previously marginal and archaic methods of reinvention."

This advanced technology has also made it possible to weave a single tapestry with entirely different images on either side. The Spanish artist Manuel Franquelo's intriguing "Palimpsest and Palindrome" (2011), which shares the first room of the exhibition with Simon Peers and Nicholas Godley's "Golden Orb Spider Mantle," is inspired by a quotation from the ancient Greek historian Plutarch's "Life of Themistocles": "The speech of man is like embroidered tapestries, since like them this too has to be extended in order to display its patterns, but when it is rolled up it conceals and distorts them."

The quotation, in Greek, Morse code and Braille and transformed into a moonscapelike pattern by computer scans, appears on one side of the tapestry, while more explicit images of 3-D technology, machines and mathematical calculations connected to the creation of this work appear on the other.

The Egyptian artist Lara Baladi's huge "Sandouk el Dounia" (The World in a Box) is inspired by the itinerant storytellers of her native Cairo. Composed of hundreds of scanned photographs, it is a kaleidoscopic vision of her life between Cairo, New York, London and Beirut, with references to Egyptian folklore, the Snakes and Ladders boardgame, characters from comics all over the world, cutie dolls and Manga heroines, "blurring the boundary between the mundane and the sacred, the private and the public, the pharaonic and the contemporary," in the artist's own words.

Grayson Perry's "The Walthamstow Tapestry" also mixes in bold, primary



Left and right, "Monument in Waiting," a kilim designed by the Bosnian Azra Aksamija and woven by women war refugees in Sarajevo. It transforms traditional kilim symbols into the forms of barbed wire, mines, grenades and rockets.

