



CARON PENNEY GRID LOCKED

The tapestry artist and founder of Atelier Weftfaced tells *Isabella Smith* about working with Martin Creed and the joy of New York

It is, perhaps, no surprise to hear of a weaver working quietly in rural peace. What *is* surprising is when that same weaver has a longstanding preoccupation with New York and chooses to focus primarily on that city's urban life in their work. For Caron Penney, whose studio Atelier Weftfaced is located deep in West Sussex near the mediaeval town of Arundel, this subject matter makes sense. 'The grid system of the loom is directly analogous to the gridiron plan of New York,' she explains. 'And I always try to bring the loom's structural grid out into the picture. I love systems, patterns and repetition.'

Penney is a master weaver with a growing reputation for her meticulously hand-made tapestries. These are crafted either to her own design or made to commission. 'I'm an artist when making my work, but when working for someone else I'm an artisan,' she states. 'I've done everything from recreating historic tapestries to weaving artworks for Tracey Emin.'

Since founding the workshop in 2013, Penney and her partner and fellow weaver Katharine Swailes have fabricated tapestries for various artists including Emin, Gillian Ayres and Martin Creed. It would be easy to focus on the roster of clients, but Penney's own tapestries repay equal attention. They are quiet grids of off-white, dove grey and charcoal wool punctuated with gold gilt thread; the subtle greyscale hues are married with a clear graphic strength. Penney restricts herself to a limited palette, and dyes those tones of concrete and tarmac – familiar to every urban environment – herself.

Featuring graduated geometric shapes and emblazoned lettering – STOP, GO and FUCK OFF – her tapestries recall linear abstract paintings by mid-20th century American artists such

PHOTOS: STEVE SPELLER



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as Frank Stella and Agnes Martin, alongside the more emotive work of Louise Bourgeois. It's no coincidence that none of these references hark from the world of tapestry. 'I don't see myself as a "textile person",' she says. 'The closest I get to influence from that source is indirect: through the paintings of Josef Albers, who was married to the Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers.'

As we sit together in Penney's pristine, white-walled workshop, situated amid quiet fields, she mentions her love of silence. I am not surprised. So where, then, did this unexpected fascination with the clamorous, dirty streets of New York City come from? The answer encapsulates the twin strands of her practice. 'It was during visits to study the seven tapestries that make up *The Hunt of the Unicorn* (c.1495–1505). I worked at West Dean Tapestry Studio for 20 years, and 12 of them involved a commission to recreate this enormous series for Historic Scotland.'

In each of those 12 years, Penney and Swailes travelled to the Cloisters Museum in Upper Manhattan, where they would colour-match the original tapestries and study the next area to be woven. They stayed in the same hotel every time, high above a busy intersection on 7th Avenue and 55th Street. 'I became fascinated by watching it, mesmerised by the ebb and flow of traffic and people,' she says.

Penney photographed the area extensively; the photographs were turned first into drawn designs then rendered in tapestry. 'I started to look at intersections because of the metaphor of crossroads signifying personal change. After leaving my 20-year career at West Dean, I set up Atelier Weftfaced – in my bedroom at first, and later moving into these studios. The life of a weaver is not an easy one,' she adds. Signs aimed

at pedestrians were a focus for some time: notably the red cartoon hand signifying 'Don't walk,' which recurs in works such as *Golden Handshake* and *Stop 7th Ave & 55th Street*.

While visiting New York in 2008, Penney witnessed a moment of history in the making. She happened to be walking past the Lehman Brothers' building after the crash, when employees of the now-bankrupt financial services firm were made redundant en masse. She watched as stunned staff streamed out, carrying boxes of possessions, surrounded by the clicking of cameras. The result was *F**K Off*, a tapestry whose stark, staggered lettering seems to shout.

It has become something of a truism to point out the shared origins of the word 'text' (from the Latin *texere*, meaning 'to weave') and 'textile', but in Penney's instance this connection bears repeating. In her tapestries, letters and words are translated into geometric design; explicit meaning is woven into the material of her work. '*F**K Off*' is about redundancy,' she explains. 'It is a horrible experience to go through, and one I've experienced myself – it's both autobiographical and a wider commentary. I'm probably a socialist at heart.'

It is fitting, then, that her work is now being shown at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, a venue dedicated to one of England's most eminent socialists. Curated by Lesley Millar, *Weaving New Worlds* features tapestries by 16 contemporary artists from the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Norway and Japan. Though the styles and subject matter are varied, the curatorial theme is that of utopian and dystopian storytelling. 'I'm probably under the second category due to my political interests,' she laughs. 'My work appears to be decorative, but

Above, left and right: *Go_2008_2013* and *Stop_2008_2013*, hand-woven tapestries, 2016



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The Challenge, hand-
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there are always subtle messages.’ The show includes her tapestry *The Challenge*, in which a stylised box junction grid is overlaid with the parallel lines of a pedestrian crossing. The monochrome crossroads representing decision-making and change is overlaid with gold, that enduring symbol of wealth and power.

Millar, director of the International Textile Research Centre and professor of textile culture at the University for the Creative Arts, believes that the time is right for tapestry to take its place in the public eye: ‘As our lives become more and more dominated by digital technology, and the written word has less currency than the image, the possibilities are opened up for a re-encounter with narrative tapestry.’ She adds: ‘I believe there is a potent space for woven tapestries to occupy, to hold and to tell the story of our times.’ Millar’s opinion is certainly supported by the growing number of major exhibitions – from Hannah Ryggen at Modern Art Oxford in 2017, to Anni Albers at Tate Modern this October – that put tapestry in the spotlight.

Penney agrees about the current ‘hunger for the hand-made’, as she puts it, that is driving this interest in weaving. ‘I like finding a thumbprint in a pot, for instance. I’d hate people to think my work had anything to do with the digital.’ When I mention that her love of technical problem-solving and sequences reminds me of coding – in *The Challenge* there are 11 warps in each block and 11 passes in each turn of the weft – she smiles somewhat ruefully, remarking: ‘It’s true that the loom was the precursor to the computer.’ Victorian inventor Charles Babbage famously got the idea for his Analytical Engine, the first mechanical computer, from observing the automated Jacquard loom. That said, Penney

is thoroughly devoted to hand making: each tapestry takes months of patient, solitary work.

‘It might seem to the casual observer that Caron’s own tapestries are simple compared to her interpretations of, for example, Gillian Ayres’s paintings,’ says Millar. ‘However, it is important to remember that the precision required for her own work involves exactly the same level of skill, material understanding, and – of course – commitment of time.’

These commissions have played an important role in shaping Penney’s output, not least because the financial reward, supplemented by teaching, allows her to create her own work. During her time at West Dean, she rendered a small painting by Emin, *Black Cat*, into a large tapestry that was the centrepiece of 2011’s Collect art fair. In 2014 she translated Ayres’s *Tirra Lirra* into an edition of three tapestries: each captured the minute gradations in colour and line of blended



brushstrokes on canvas. For Penney, who has spent almost 30 years dedicated to tapestry, this is easy. ‘It’s what I was trained to do. It’s not an emotional experience – it’s a technical feat. I love taking the painting apart to understand the order of brushstrokes, for instance, then building a plan to recreate it.’

Her most important commissions have come from Martin Creed. This is due not simply to the prestige of working with a Turner Prize-winning artist, but to the nature of the relationship. ‘Working with Martin breached the gap between my work as an artist and an artisan for the first time,’ she says. ‘Studying the systems, patterns and repetition of his work made me see these same aspects in my own.’

Each work for Creed takes Penney three months. ‘Martin’s very interested in weaving and asks us to research various aspects thoroughly. His pieces are directly informed by the nature of the craft. Historically, heddles – which move the warp forward and back – would be the same width as the shoulders of the weavers. Each weaver would sit with their own set of heddles, sized to their body. For *Work No. 1683*, we made heddles the width of my shoulders.’ It’s not every artisan who would find their body woven into the fabric of another’s artwork in this way, but then Penney is clearly no average artisan.

What does the future hold for her own work? ‘I’m looking to make similar pieces on a much bigger scale,’ she says, adding: ‘I know I’ll always be content if I’m doing this work. We weave because we love weaving.’

‘Weaving New Worlds’ is at the William Morris Gallery, London E17 4PP, 16 June–23 September.

wmgallery.org.uk
weftfaced.com

Left: *Golden Handshake*, 2016, and opposite: Penney weaving the tapestry in her studio. Below: *The Streets are Paved with Gold*, 2016

