

MIDNIGHT SUN

Aino Kajaniemi Finnish impressionist tapestries

Hand-woven tapestry is a slow craft, suited to makers with grit and determination, makers who are strong of hand and back, patient. One of the few tapestry makers still working in Finland, Aino Kajaniemi is a veritable mistress of the medium. She has been a tapestry weaver for over 30 years. She weaves gentle narratives, alluding to the big subjects of life and the universe but picturing small moments therein.

Kajaniemi studied weaving for two years at the School of Arts and Crafts in Petäjävesi, before attending the University of Art and Design in Helsinki to study textiles, graduating in 1983. It was there, as she tells it, that her tutor Lea Eskola told her the only way to weave her design drawings was tapestry: 'So I started making tapestries for a very practical reason. My teacher decided the warp material and the yarn density. When the loom was ready, she left me alone to create the weaving technique myself.' She started as she went on, not thinking or caring too much about how to do a 'proper' tapestry: 'My weaving is not traditional tapestry weaving. I think it could be described as impressionism in tapestry. I don't know or care about rules. I want to weave freely and quickly.'

She works from drawings, or 'cartoons' as they are known in tapestry speak. These are pencil drawings the exact size of the finished tapestry, that she sits behind the warp threads. She then follows the pencil lines, weaving in the weft threads. She tends to draw from nature. She lives in her childhood home, with a big garden, by a

river: 'Nature is very important for me. We have four seasons in Finland and winter - the black and white period - is long. For many years I used (almost) only black and white colour scale in my tapestries.' Her tapestries tell stories of human growth and life's complexities: 'I think about how a human being can find her/his place in the world: about reversals, fears, the need for support and dreams. I create symbolic images, using moments, feelings, from a person's life. Together they form a metaphor of something greater.'

Kajaniemi draws her inspiration from many things: music videos, nature books, novels that she has read and the life she sees around her: 'I am also interested in pictures showing paused moments that I find in magazines, books and photographic albums.' She often works in series', liking the opportunity to present a narrative: 'Not believing in one single truth, my works are a series of scenes, which I feel shows the different sides of one's life. I have made over 30 commissioned works and the starting point is always different and unique. They are influenced by the purpose and architecture of the space.'

Once she has her subject matter tied (drawn) down, Kajaniemi's work has just begun. Nothing, it seems, is completely straightforward for her complicated, independent way of working. She likes to achieve different textures and colours in her tapestries by using vintage threads and materials: 'Nowadays I get almost all of my weft threads from flea markets. That way surprising tones appear in my colour palette. I like

changeable surfaces and use them to tell part of the story in my work.' Among the lovely list of materials she has woven with is: linen, cotton, hemp, jute, sisal, nettle, viscose, acrylic, silk, wool, bamboo, bass, paper yarn and paper strip, horse hair and human hair, feathers, fishing line, metal wire, plastic strip and yarn, twigs from a tree, birch bark, lurex, gold thread and triacetate strip. She uses silk to represent something exotic and luxurious in her tapestries and wool to represent something homey. But flax is her favourite, she notes: 'Flecked flax in many thicknesses, tow flax, hand spun flax and even unworked flax fibre. With flax I can achieve all my atmospheric effects, from lightness to heaviness.' Her list of materials makes one's mind boggle, at the same time it makes one's aesthetic heart yearn.

If so many possible materials weren't complicated enough, there follows another set of considerations: 'Weaving is about making decisions. Do I combine threads to form different tones or use original colours? Do I want the surface to be shiny or rough? Do I create structure and effects using thicker materials? Do I want the fabric to be dense so that it cloaks the warp threads or do I want the texture of the tapestry to stand out and the fabric become almost transparent?' Of course, after so many years many of these decisions will have become second nature to Kajaniemi, part of the unconscious actions of an experienced maker.

Today, unfortunately, tapestry is somewhat of a lesser-spotted craft. Such meticulous living and ▶





doing - as that of a tapestry maker is - is not for everyone. The opportunity to try one's hand at the craft is becoming harder and harder to find, too; teaching tapestry in art colleges is so reduced as to be almost non-existent. Tapestry weaving, Kajaniemi mentions, was never that common in Finland anyway, and there are now fewer than ten Finnish textile artists who use

tapestry in their practice. Kajaniemi and three of those makers - Ariadna Donner, Soile Hovila, Inka Kivalo are currently in the exhibition *Woven Image* at the Craft Museum of Finland.

Going forward, Kajaniemi has been invited to take part in The Mänttä Art Festival - the largest summer exhibition of Finnish contemporary art -

next year, as part of an interdisciplinary line up that looks exciting. For it she will weave a tapestry (including some 50 animals) that will be shaped into a boat using resin, to form a 4.5 metre long ark. It will stand on rug-woven rocks. This sounds fantastical. It makes one hopeful for the future of this slow craft. It will be tapestry, yes, but not as we know it. *** **Jane Audas**