



How I Wove Home

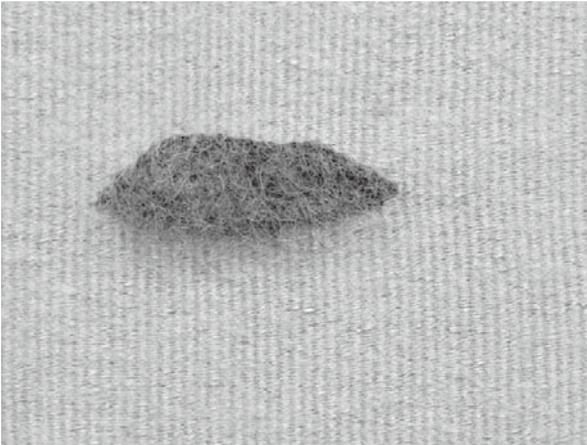
Susan Mowatt, Lecturer, School of Art,
Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh

It is almost exactly a year since the exhibitions ‘Weaving Home’ (at GalleryGallery, Kyoto) and ‘Interrupted Landing’ (at Art Hall, Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo) took place. This experience was a milestone for me. It marked a significant point in my practice. I believe that the work featured in these shows brought several strands of thought together for the first time in a coherent way.

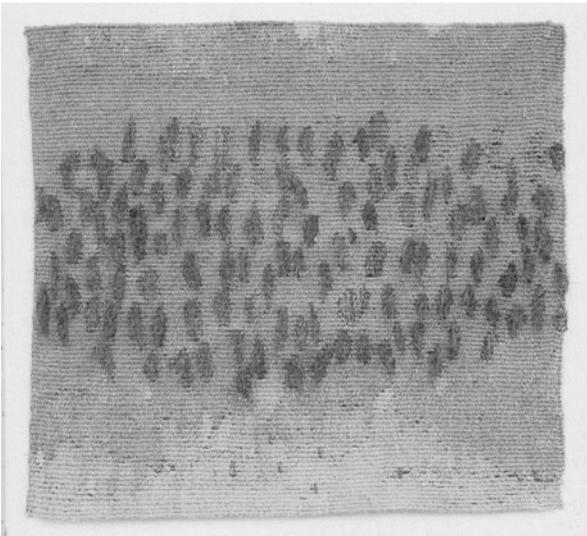
Both exhibitions emerged out of working with other people, most notably Davy Henderson, Scottish songwriter and performer, and Dr Paul Hullah, poet and writer who has lived in Japan for over 20 years and who is currently Associate Professor of English Literature at MGU. The sensitively creative Japanese translations made in letter and sound by Professor Hidetoshi Tomiyama, a colleague of Hullah’s in the MGU Faculty of Letters, reinforced the cross-cultural aspect of the venture and brought a significant new dimension to the ‘Interrupted Landing’ exhibition in particular, and generous funding and support provided by the Meiji Gakuin University Institute of Language and Culture enabled the project to come to a fruition in living reality in February of 2012.

I am extremely fortunate in having a connection with Japan. My first visit to Japan was in 1998 when I took part in the Art-Ex artists exchange programme. The artist Shigeo Kubota, a weaver based in Kyoto, came to work in Edinburgh for three months and then I, in turn, spent three months in Japan. I was given a studio and an apartment in Osaka, and the opportunity to experience living in a country, which I found mesmerising, strange, exciting and wonderful. At the end of a productive three-month period, I had a solo exhibition at OXY Gallery, near to the Suntory Museum. It was six years after I had graduated with a Masters degree in Tapestry from

Edinburgh College of Art, and I was very committed to Tapestry weaving. Tapestry is an ancient form of weaving usually constructed on a vertical loom. The discontinuous weft threads traditionally hide the warp threads. During the exchange I was weaving tapestries (using an old clothes rail I had found as a loom) that were quiet and subtle works. Outwardly they could be interpreted as being landscape-based, but my work has always related to personal experience. The colour was subdued and the compositions were very simple, with the odd fluffy shape interrupting the flatness of the woven surface.



Detail of Gold Spot, 1998



*Susan Mowatt
Brown Spots on Grey,
1998*

Someone at the opening reception commented that the tapestries reminded them of Japanese raked gravel gardens. I remember feeling astonished at the time that I, myself, had not made the connection, but in the months to follow it all started to make sense. The gravel gardens of Kyoto had been a real highlight of my visit, with the garden at Ryoan-ji making a particularly strong impact. The indication of the slow, rhythmic process that had taken place was something that I enjoyed very much.

Another memory, which used to crop up in the years to follow, was the sight of all the little stones that I had seen in temples (*Jizo*) with the bibs tied around them. I remember finding them incredibly moving and beautiful, wrapped in the individually stitched fabrics. It was definitely the start of an attachment to Japan as a country, and each time I have visited since, specific little sightings or moments make gentle impacts. With time, they seem to 'feed' and influence the work I make.

I wove many tapestries, large and small, for about 17 years. Latterly, however, it became rather a chore. Hours and hours would be spent creating works for exhibitions and I seldom felt satisfied at the end of it. Slowly I realised something very simple: I did not particularly like what I was doing. I was no longer challenged or excited. Things had to change.

My thoughts turned to Annie Albers, the most renowned weaver to have come out of the Bauhaus, that powerhouse of 20th century Art and Design.

The most interesting thing about her for me, is that despite her success and all the beautiful, innovative weavings and designs she created, she left it all behind. She stopped producing woven pieces, turning instead (amongst other things) to drawing and printmaking. She eventually found weaving far too limiting a medium for her ideas. I identified completely with this and following in her footsteps, I decided to change the way I worked.

This turning point coincided with another major event that had happened in my life. In 2002 and 2005 respectively, I gave birth to two daughters. Suddenly I no longer had hours and hours to spend in the studio. I was teaching at Edinburgh College of Art, and with two young children to look after, the time available to make my own work became very limited. To attempt to make work that demanded so much time seemed nonsensical. I started to really question what tapestry was, what it meant to me and what (if any) relevance it had in the twenty first century.

In the collection of Aberdeen Art Gallery in Scotland, there is a painting by JW Waterhouse of Penelope, the most famous weaver of all time. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the famous Greek poem written at the end of the 8th century, she was the wife of Odysseus and was famous for her cleverness and for her faithfulness to her husband. When Odysseus fails to return after the Trojan War, Penelope is bothered all the time by potential suitors. In order to keep them at bay, she declares that when she finishes weaving a shroud for her father-in-law she will make a decision about whom to marry.



Penelope and the Suitors,
John William Waterhouse, 1912

But she is clever because as the painting depicts, her suitors and her ladies-in-waiting witness her weaving the shroud by day, but at night when no one is looking, she un-weaves it. This delaying tactic lasts for three years.

Undoubtedly she had a motive, but like me, I think she must have enjoyed the actual process to spend years of her life doing it and undoing it without actually producing anything.

It is something that is hard to shake off. "Once a weaver always a weaver", it is said. From a personal point of view, this has something to do with the repetitious process, the act of weaving itself. Importantly, I also embrace the slowness, the implication of time invested. It seems to be an activity very much at odds with the world as we know it today.

There is another reason why I find this painting of Penelope intriguing. It shows her engrossed in the act of weaving, but also present in the picture are her ladies and her suitors, who become the *onlookers*. This gives the scene an air of performance. Recognising this was a trigger point for me.

In order to think or develop ideas in the studio, I draw or I make small exploratory

pieces. By 2009 I had made many drawings of weaving, rather than weaving itself. I was considering weaving as an act, rather than a means to produce a 'thing'. I was thinking about the very basics of tapestry weaving: the various yarns; weights and colours; how one yarn stops and the other starts. At one point I was asked to write a statement for an exhibition, and never really enjoying that exercise, I came up with:

A length of yarn has two ends: a beginning and an end, or vice versa.

I liked this simple notion. I started to think about weaving and un-weaving as a kind of performance.

I had been interested in a work by the American artist Anne Wilson. It was titled *Wind Up; Walking the Warp*, and was performed in a gallery in Chicago in 2008. It took nine participants six-days of walking, counting, rolling, and winding to put the warp threads on the frame, and then it was left as a piece for the remainder of the show.



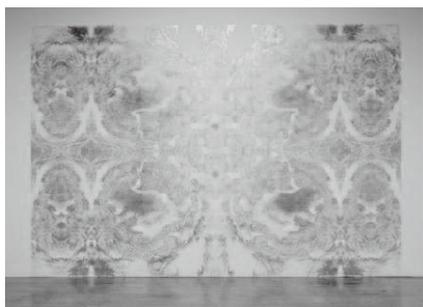
*Anne Wilson
Wind Up: Walking the Warp
Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago 2008*

I thought it was a very strong piece of work and I was also interested in the idea that after the show is over, there is nothing left. No work to store and no 'product' to buy. I had always been uncomfortable with the fact that tapestries are so expensive because it takes so long to make them. Historically Tapestries were commissioned as a means to display the status, wealth and grandeur of their patron. Today, Tapestry still attracts a rather 'bourgeois' audience. In a world already bursting with people and their discarded belongings, it's important to me as an artist to take on board the impact of producing even more 'stuff'.

In 2009, Richard Wright won the Turner prize (a major art award in UK). He studied at Edinburgh College of Art and is an artist who decorates architectural

spaces with intricate designs and patterns. Often the works are very short lived and painted over after the exhibition. They are equal in scale to the largest tapestries and take a very long time to produce. He uses a cartoon, which is also akin to tapestry. The fact that he allows them to exist only briefly is inspiring and something that I admire. It seemed to be the opposite of how people regard the 'preciousness' of tapestries, and how I had kept mine rolled up for years, redundant in the corner of my studio.

The ephemeral quality of the work adds to its beauty.



*Richard Wright,
Turner Prize 2009, Tate Britain*

So began a period in the studio where I was weaving and un-weaving lines in space, and tentatively starting to think about some kind of performative element in the work.

The actual act of making was also very important.

In this age of instant gratification, when being able to function normally in daily life is becoming more and more dependent on screen-based activity, and where populations are regarded primarily as potential consumers, I worry about my children. I worry that some of my daughters' friends do not like to play outside in the garden because they are afraid of bees and other insects. It scares me that a lot of children do not have an understanding of where food comes from and refuse imperfect fruit. Often on the train home from work I notice that nobody is looking out of the window at the breathtaking landscape we are rushing through or incredible, brief sunsets that are taking place outside, but are all plugged in instead to electrical devices.

Which brings me back to Annie Albers. She once wrote that

“Life today is very bewildering.....we have developed our receptivity and have neglected our own formative impulse. It is no accident that nervous breakdowns occur more often in our civilization than in those where creative power had a natural outlet in daily activities.

And this fact leads to a suggestion: we must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material”

What may be surprising is that she wrote this in 1938, long, long before any notion that a virtual world would one day become a reality.

I wanted to make work that addressed these issues and that highlighted the importance of making things and connecting to real material in the real world.

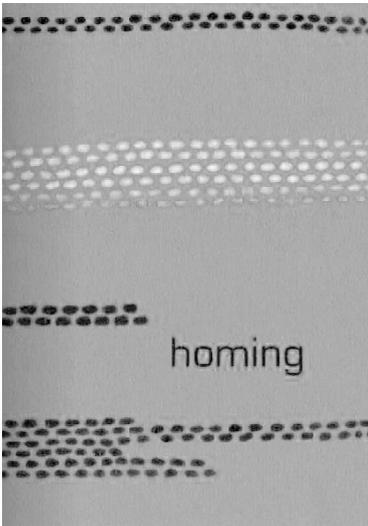
And then I had a moment of clarity. In 2008, during another visit to Kyoto with a colleague and 20 students (when we worked together with Machiko Agano and her students at Seika University), I had often frequented a second hand shop near to where we were staying. I had bought one particular photograph and hung it on the wall in my studio when I came home, without really knowing why. It never really offered much, but despite this I never took it down.



If you look closely, you see a man walking down a gentle sloping hill. Further back there is another person walking up the hill, and beyond that there are other figures that look like they are standing still or sitting down.

I realised that the lines I was weaving in the studio were also like peoples lives. The two lines I used for warp meant that weaving on them produced a similar rhythm to walking. And each pass was like night and day: time passing.

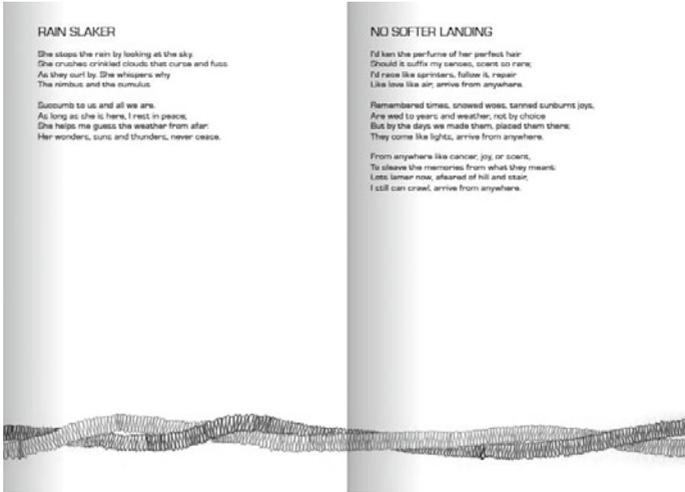
After my friend Paul Hullah lost his wife in 2009, we decided to make a book together. For me it was a way of helping him at a very difficult time in his life, and I think that, for him, it provided him with a focus and a way of dealing with his grief. We had previously collaborated on a book of poetry and drawings in 2002. Paul wrote poems responding to the death of his wife but as a result of subsequent events, the poems also grew to deal positively with 'connections' made by people: the importance of friendship and the need for continuity, cooperation and mutual understanding.



homing. A book about love and loss.
Poetry by Paul Hullah,
Drawings by Susan Mowatt

'Homing' is a book of poetry and drawings, which was published in 2011 by Word Power Books in Edinburgh. Ultimately, we like to think it is a book about hope, and moving forward. It marks mutability, the passing of time and emotion and life, but it is very much about new beginnings.

The drawings and the poems come together very well and compliment each other. Although I was responding to the poems Paul had written, it felt like we had reached the same place even though we had used our own totally separate routes to get there.



In the 2012 exhibition 'Weaving Home' in GalleryGallery, woven lines were installed in the space, and at certain times during the week I performed in the space weaving (or un-weaving).



*Yellow line/yellow socks
GalleryGallery 2012*

In an adjoining space was an audio piece with lines from some of the poems read aloud in English, but also translated beautifully into Japanese by Hidetoshi Tomiyama, a colleague of Paul at MGU.

There was one more element to the show that excited me as it was a new direction in my work and has opened up many other possibilities and ways of working.

Early in 2011, Davy Henderson and I were invited to work together and be part of a show titled 'Vegetable Loves'. For the exhibition, we were asked to respond to another poem: Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', written in the seventeenth century with the line:

**My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;**

In the poem, a man tells the woman he loves how he would love her had they an unlimited amount of time stretching out in front of them. But then he talks about how brief life is, how short their time on earth actually is, and he ends by basically telling her that they have to stop messing around and playing games and just get on with it.

Working with somebody else provides the possibility of trying out something new, and Davy and I had often talked about making films.

In Autumn I started to film fields around where we live, just south of Edinburgh, fields we have always loved looking at and walking in amongst. Some had cabbages, some brussel sprouts or potatoes that had already been harvested, but then in late December when we were going through a particularly cold, icy spell, I filmed this particular field several times. I liked the fact that it was in an in-between state. It was hard to tell if it had been ploughed, or planted. Was it the end of something or the start of something? The lines reminded me, of course, of warp, and the slowness and time invested in the soil were just *there*.

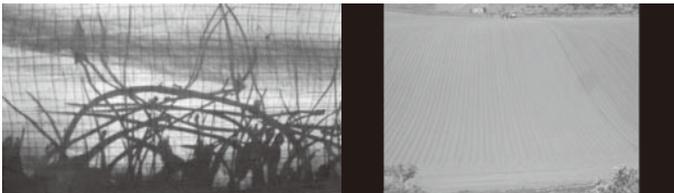


*Still from
Coleslaw, 2011*

Davy then made up some music for the piece, using only the musical notes C-A-B-B-A-G-E

We called this short film *Coleslaw* (which is a type of salad made of carrots, onions and cabbages). It was a really important piece for me to make, because I felt it spoke clearly about lots of things that I had been trying to say, but could not using different media. I liked the fact that a little magic appeared out of its *slowness*, the fact that it was soil and that nothing really happens: it is just the earth and the sun.

Mindful of the imminent exhibition at GalleryGallery, I started to film in and around the countryside of East Lothian, sometimes on family walks and sometimes on my own. This footage was edited down to only five films that were to be included in 'Weaving Home'. Davy in turn made up the music, enhancing each one and making every piece very distinctive and complete.



*Stills from
Ants and
Tractor, 2012*

In the film 'Ants', a silhouette shows a colony of ants working, travelling backwards and forwards across blades of grass. In 'Tractor', fast moving cars and lorries form the backdrop to a contrasting, slow-moving tractor that travels across the top of a recently ploughed field. Meanwhile birds and insects are flying past and the air is filled

with the drone of the traffic noise, with the bird song and buzzing of insects on top. In all the films, references to weaving and lines are there, but somehow the films are able to speak of other things, too.

These films were also shown in the exhibition ‘Interrupted Landing’, interspersed with sound works by Paul and Hidetoshi Tomiyama: see Appendix. Lines from some of the ‘Homing’ poems were read aloud, sometimes with translated lines interwoven and spoken in Japanese. Presented on a large monitor in a blacked out gallery space it became a sombre and moving way to encounter the poetry. Yet it was uplifting, too. It was a simple way of presenting our ideas.

Poets have used Tapestry as a metaphor for life for centuries. It was fitting that the work was conceived of and made in Scotland, then shown in Japan. We all have shared experiences. Art has the ability to transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Lines on the landscape mark the rhythms and repetition of daily life. As Paul Hullah has written, “We are all here, but we are on our way to somewhere else as well.”

Susan Mowatt
January 2013

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Meiji Gakuin University Institute of Language and Culture for the overwhelming support — both financial and in spirit — they offered to the ‘Interrupted Landing’ project. In particular, Ms Fukuzawa was wonderfully helpful in every way. I will never forget the experience, which was made warmer by the kindness and hospitality of all at MGU.

APPENDIX

Reprinted over the pages that follow is the full text of the booklet produced (with the support and generous financial assistance of Meiji Gakuin University Institute of Language and Culture) to accompany the ‘Interrupted Landing’ exhibition. English text is by Paul Hullah; Japanese translations by Hidetoshi Tomiyama.

Invalidate her at your peril: sow
Trust's seeds as yet unsown

And find Love's random wilderness
Already overgrown:

Impossible to tame, and so
Impossible to own.

彼女に侵入するなら、
危険を覚悟せよ。かつて
播かれたことのない信頼の種を
播くがよい、

そして愛の偶然の荒れ野は
すでに繁茂しすぎたと知るがよい。

馴らすことができない、だから
我がものとするのが できない。

She stops the rain by looking at the sky.
She crushes crinkled clouds
that curse and fuss
As they curl by. She whispers why
The nimbus and the cumulus

Succumb to us and all we are.

彼女は空を見あげて、雨をとめる。
皺のよった雲をつぶす、
雲は悪態をつき空騒ぎして
渦を巻いて去る。彼女はなぜ
乱雲と積雲が

ぼくたちに、
ぼくたちのすべてに従うか、ささやく。

But love is fair; sealed in the snowdrift
And the snow plough, absolutely,

Everywhere. In all our moments:
See her, there.

だが愛は明らかだ、
雪の吹きだまりに封印される、
また雪かき車に。絶対に。

あらゆる場所に。
ぼくたちのあらゆる瞬間に。
彼女を見なさい、そこに。

Are they angels? Are there diamonds
In the dustbins? In each face I glimpse
A glimmer of a hope I once latched
On to but is gone now. Faintest traces,

Like a shadow never watched, brief
Moisture on a mirror, ice in sun,
The remnants of a headache, shattered
Headlamps after accidents are done.

Love move as mist-bow, seadog shine,
Love fogdog for the birds to find;
Make damage right,
Make fractures fine;
So all signs say be well.

Ourselves the grounded wintry beach, and
Not the sea. Contained and charted
field of flight, the sea

Is skinter vast old oceans gaping penniless
With neither home nor firmament,

Indigent and destitute
with absences and lack,
Like anagrams of silence...

あれらは天使か？ ゴミ缶の
ダイヤモンドか？ それぞれの顔にぼく
はわずかに見る、
いちどは掴まえた希望のかすかな
兆し。もう消えた。あるとも見えない跡、

だれも見なかった影、つかのまの
鏡の吐息、陽射しのなかの氷、
頭痛のなごり、くだけたヘッドライト、
事故が起こったあとだ。

愛は、
霧のなか光の輪となり動く、海の滲み。
愛は、鳥たちが見つける霧の虹。
損失を正す。
裂け目を細やかにする。
だから、あらゆる徴は
「よきものであれ」と言う。

ぼくたち自身は動かぬ冬の海岸で、
海自体でない。
囲まれた作図された飛行領域、海は

素寒貧の巨大な古びた海洋で、
一文なしで口をあけ
故郷もなければ大空もない、

不在と欠如ゆえに貧しく枯渇して、
並び替えられて沈黙する文字…

And everywhere I see her ghost:
That young girl's coat, a roadside bar,
A Spanish film, peach jam on toast,
For places are not haunted; people are.

そしてどこにも ぼくは彼女の幻を見る、
あの娘のコート、道沿いのバー
スペイン映画、ピーチジャムのトースト。
場所は取り憑かれない、
ひとが取り憑かれる。

INTERRUPTED LANDING

This collaborative project aims to reset and reframe shared experience in order to rescue it from meaninglessness. It is about creatively translating events and emotions, re-finding, and newly knowing places we might otherwise think are no more, and thus may think of no more. These may be places we live in, or places that live inside us. This project considers the past and how we have to manage it and learn from it in order to continue. It is designed to be a way of winning.

INTERRUPTED LANDING is a reappraisal and extension of HOMING, a set of poems and images about loss and healing created in 2011 in response to sundry experiences we shared that awoke us to face and engage with the place and functions of creativity and meaning and connections in our waking lives.

HOMING wanted to forge a viable future out of grief, a way forward to which we could reconnect and better understand the difficult past, negotiating its seemingly meaningless obstacles to peace and joy. INTERRUPTED LANDING tries to push that positive process further. It wants to help the healing happen with the hints that hindsight hands us ages after events and experiences have turned into history and time gone by. In so much, INTERRUPTED LANDING forms and frames a future, a proper homing; a landing interrupted, but a landing after all.

Paul Hullah
February 2012

INTERRUPTED LANDING

INTERRUPTED LANDING は過去そのもの、そして、そこから前進することを過去から学ぶ方法を思案する。

このプロジェクトは、2011年に制作された喪失と再起をテーマとする詩とイメージで構成された、前プロジェクト HOMING からの新たな展開である。この新プロジェクトは創造の場と、人生における意味や縁の関係性を考える。

INTERRUPTED LANDING は未来を形作り、本当の帰家 ('homing)、そして不完全だが確実なる着地を実現する試みである。

ポール・ハラ
平成 24 年 2 月

Davy Henderson Paul Hullah Susan Mowatt Hidetoshi Tomiyama

<www.weavinghome.org>

Scotland/Japan 2012