

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Tapestry: a Narrative for Our Times

By Professor Lesley Millar



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Lesley Millar
Name of Output:	Tapestry: A Narrative for our Times
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Tapestry=3A_A_Narrative_for_our_Times.html
Output Type:	M – Exhibition; curation of exhibition touring to multiple venues, with accompanying catalogue publication
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p><i>Here & Now</i>, exhibition The National Centre for Craft & Design (NCCD), Sleaford, UK, October 2016-January 2017 Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham, UK, April-June 2017 The Holburne Museum, Bath, UK, June-October 2017</p> <p><i>Here & Now: Contemporary Tapestry from Australia, Canada, Finland, Japan, Latvia, Norway, UK and USA</i>, book (National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford, 2016). ISBN 9781526204547</p> <p><i>Weaving New Worlds</i>, exhibition William Morris Gallery, London, June-September 2018 Digital catalogue available at: https://issuu.com/directdesign/docs/weaving_new_worlds_book_final?e=1363289/62990826</p>
Key Words:	Tapestry, tradition, contemporary practice, transnational
Funding:	Daiwa Anglo Japanese Foundation to NCCD: £3,000 Japan Foundation to NCCD: £1,000 Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation to NCCD: £3,000 Norwegian Arts Council (OCA) to Kristin Saeterdal (participating artist): £1,500 Arts Council of Canada to Barbara Heller (participating artist): £2,000 Norwegian Embassy in London to UCA: £1,000

Synopsis

Tapestry: A Narrative for our Times is a research output by Professor Lesley Millar consisting of two international exhibitions and a catalogue publication. Millar was invited to curate *Here & Now* and to edit the accompanying book by the National Centre for Craft and Design, Lincolnshire. The exhibition then toured to the Midlands Art Centre (MAC), Birmingham and the Holburne Museum, Bath. Millar was invited to continue the project in curating the related exhibition *Weaving New Worlds* at the William Morris Gallery in London. The research explored the contemporary relevance of the traditional Gobelins tapestry technique as a carrier of narrative reflecting its time of making.

Here & Now was the first UK exhibition of international scope to focus on contemporary tapestry since 1994. Millar brought together works from artists in the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan, Latvia and the USA, evidencing the diversity of approaches within contemporary tapestry. In all its

three venues *Here & Now* placed the qualities and themes traditionally associated with tapestry (nostalgic depictions of mythical subject matter) in juxtaposition with very contemporary concerns (gritty, urban, politically-engaged works). In the Holburne Museum the exhibition was an opportunity for the museum to display its rare 1930s 'Arts Tapestry' by Edward McKnight Kauffer, showing this important work in the museum's collection to the public for the first time. The second exhibition, *Weaving New Worlds*, considered narratives of utopia and dystopia, continuing the themes of *Here & Now* with particular reference to the venue, the William Morris Gallery.

This portfolio of supporting contextual information presents details of the research contexts, aims and methods that led to new insights, evidence of funding, visitor numbers and media coverage, and images of both *Here & Now* and *Weaving New Worlds*. It includes a PDF of the *Here & Now* publication.

HERE

&

NOW

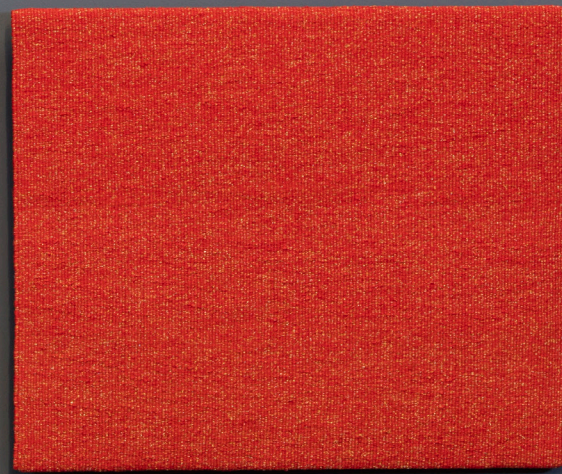
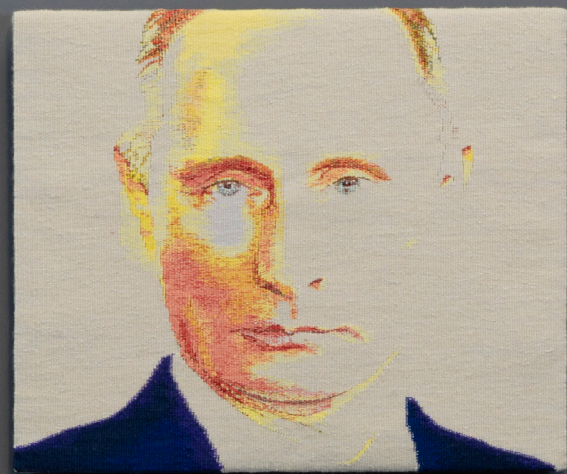
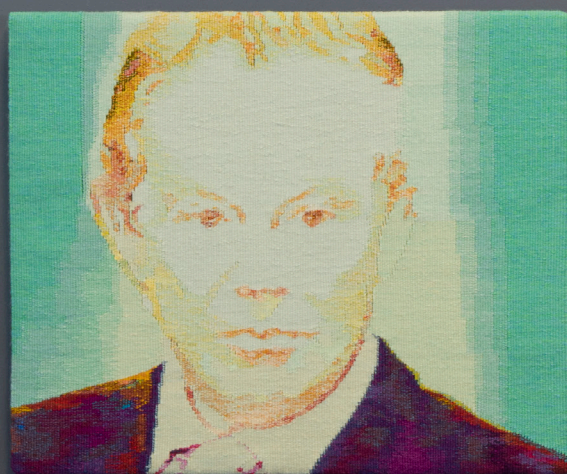
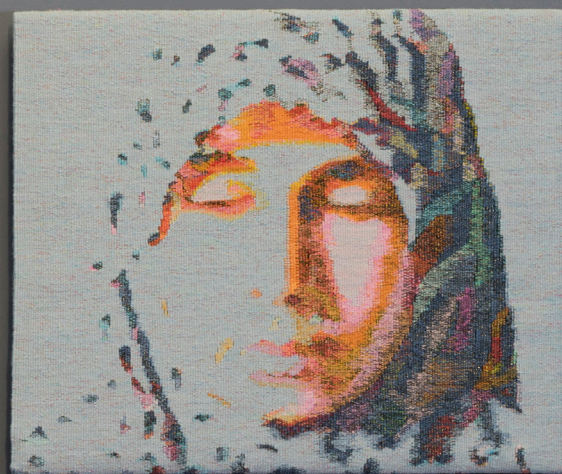
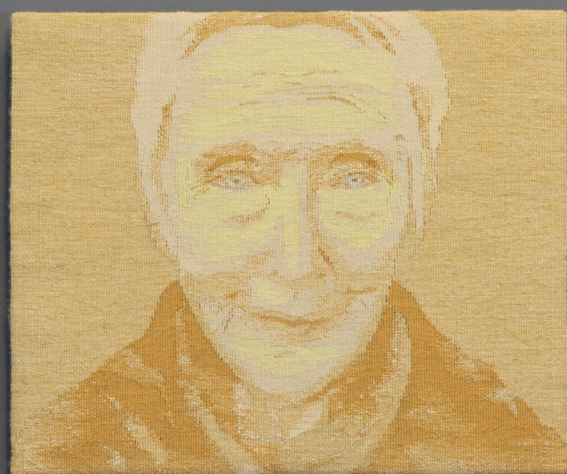
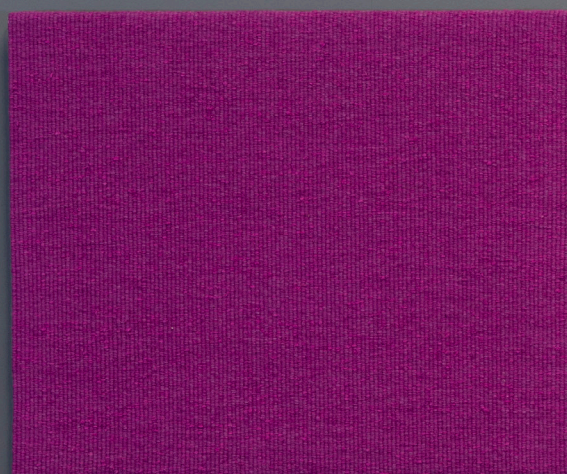
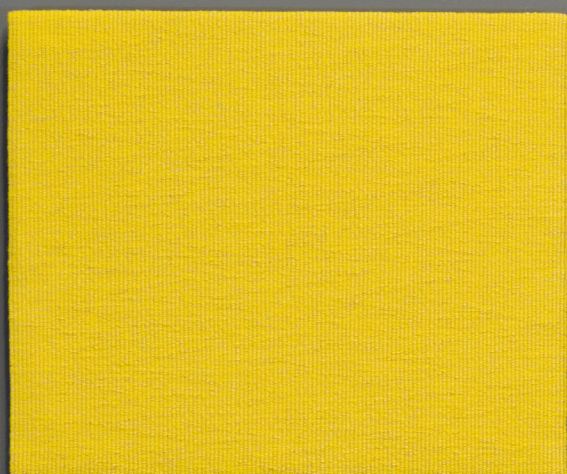
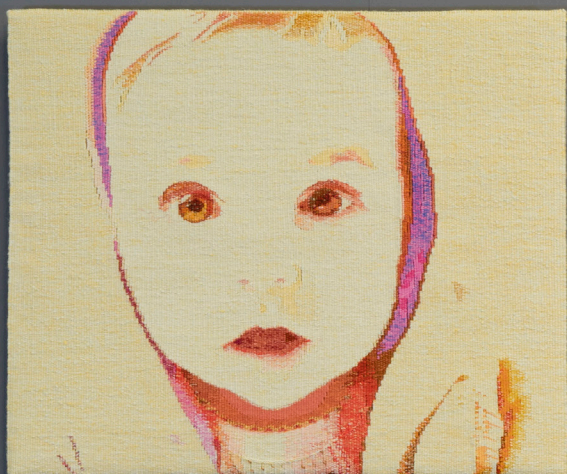
CONTEMPORARY
TAPESTRY FROM:
AUSTRALIA
CANADA
FINLAND
JAPAN
LATVIA
NORWAY
UNITED KINGDOM
UNITED STATES



Here & Now entrance at The National Centre for Craft and Design (Image: Electric Egg courtesy of NCCD)



Here & Now
People looking at the work of
Yasuko Fujino
TITLE: 'In the Garden'
MATERIALS: silk, metal thread,
mohair
SIZE: 4.1 x 2.5 metres



Here & Now

Pat Taylor

TITLE: '6704-13'

MATERIALS: Cotton, linen, wool

SIZE: 133 x 112 x 2cm

Context

After enjoying a high profile in the UK during the second half of the 20th century, tapestry weaving disappeared from view in England (although not in Scotland) in the early years of the 21st century (Hemmings, 2013). However, it continued to be a vibrant force in many other countries, as evidenced by, for instance, the Lodz Triennial or the work of the American Tapestry Alliance.

Lesley Millar was invited to curate the two exhibitions that form 'Tapestry: A Narrative for our Times', building on her knowledge of contemporary textile art, developed in a range of significant exhibitions and publications including *Textural Space* (2001), and *Cloth and Memory* (2013). *Here & Now* was the first UK exhibition of international scope to focus on contemporary tapestry since 1994. For the Holburne Museum in Bath *Here & Now* represented the museum's first exhibition of contemporary textile art. *Weaving New Worlds* at the William Morris Gallery continued the development of the research started in *Here & Now*.

Millar brought together work from the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan, Latvia and the USA, evidencing the diversity of approaches to narrative within contemporary tapestry. Both exhibitions developed the traditional narrative role of tapestry as a tool for materialising the stories at the forefront of debate, showing how it can be used to depict contemporary themes. The works displayed tackled issues including the refugee crisis, sexual abuse and exploitation, gender politics and climate change. All were woven using the traditional Gobelins tapestry technique examples of which include 4th or 5th century Coptic tapestries with their bold colours and the early 16th century, highly complex, 'The Lady and The Unicorn' series. *Here &*

Now and Weaving New Worlds showed that the tapestry tradition continues with the energetic and vibrantly coloured works of studio artists in the late 20th century.

The works in the exhibitions demonstrated that in the digital age there remains a place for material engagement as a balance to imagery. The haptic qualities of tapestry bring the compassion of touch to its stories, with audiences making the connection between object and subject, and viewer and maker responding to the medium because of its provision of a 'textural space' for contemplating and understanding the stories told.

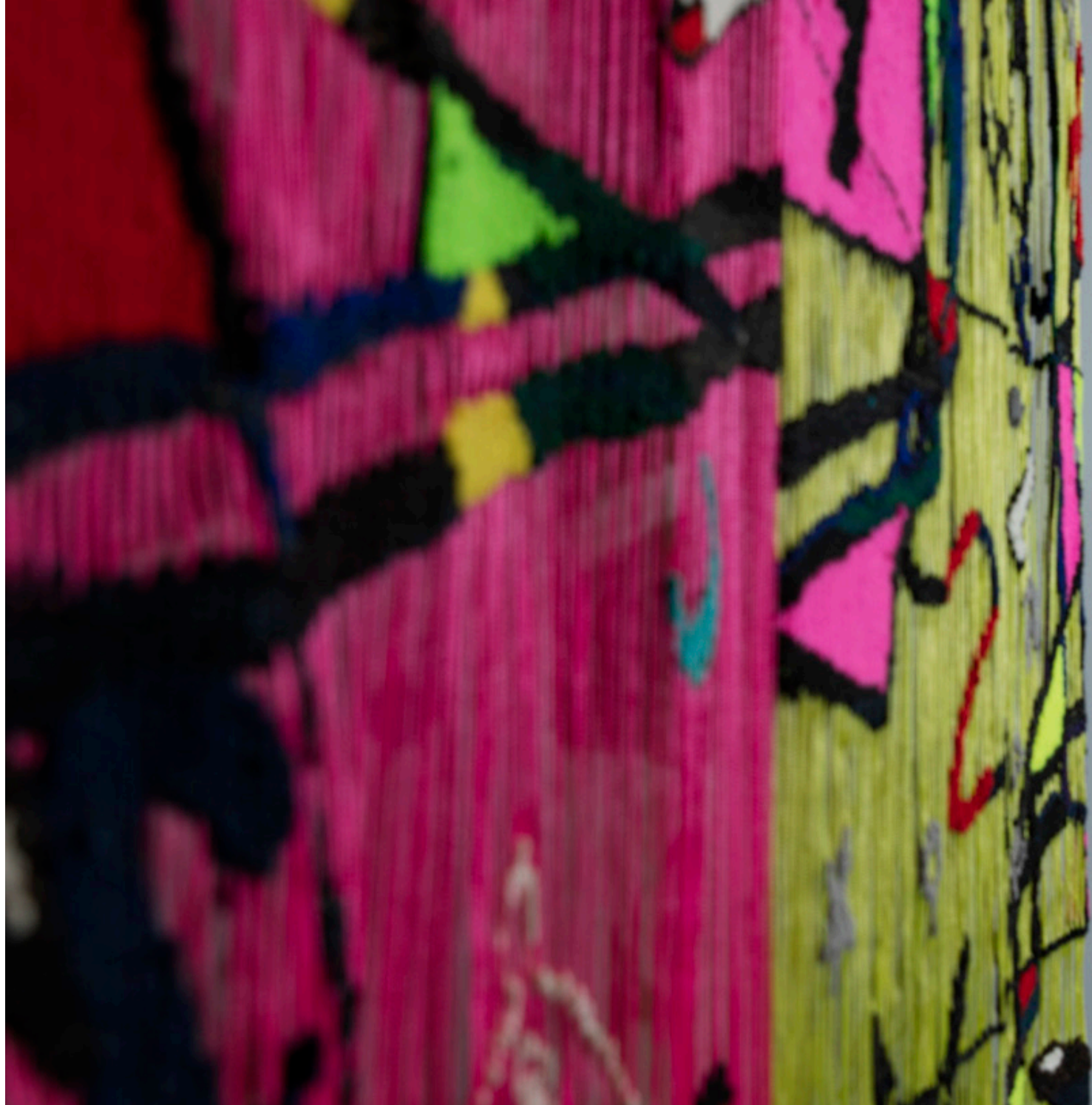
Here & Now and *Weaving New Worlds* offered tapestry to new audiences; public interest in the art form was further evidenced by the popularity of Modern Art Oxford's 2018 exhibition of Norwegian artist Hannah Ryggen's tapestries woven during the Second World War, and discussed by Millar in the *Here & Now* publication.

REFERENCES

Hemmings, J. (2013) Jon Eric Riis Tapestries. At: https://www.jessicahemmings.com/jon-eric-riis-tapestries/#_edn1 (Accessed 20/04/20).

Ryggen, H. (2017) *Woven Histories*. [exhibition] Oxford: Modern Art Oxford. 11/11/2017 – 18/02/2018.

Saroka, J. (2011) *Tapestry Weaving: design and technique* Marlborough: Crowood.



Here & Now
FOREGROUND
Saori Sakai
TITLE: 'Let's Pretend'
MATERIALS: Nylon, Wool, Cotton
SIZE: 2.2 x 2.5 metres

BACKGROUND
Tonje Høydahl Sørli
TITLE: 'We Don't Know What the
Little Bird Sings!'
MATERIALS: Wool, Cotton Linen
SIZE: 3 x 0.8 x 0.6 metres



Here & Now
Philip Sanderson
TITLE: 'Windblown Tree'
MATERIALS: Cotton, Wool
SIZE: 1.34 x 3.5 metres



Here & Now

Caron Penney

TITLE: 'Golden Handshake'

MATERIALS: Wool, gold, cotton warp

SIZE: 43 x 41cm

Research Aims and Questions

Research aims:

To explore the breadth of international commitment to contemporary tapestry and the ways in which the narrative heritage of the medium is used to engage with political, aesthetic and personal issues of current discourse

To present tapestry to new audiences in England after a period during which it had not been widely exhibited.

Research questions:

How to evidence that there is an effective space and place for contemporary woven tapestries to occupy and tell the story of our times?

How to re-establish a platform for, and engage new audiences in, contemporary tapestry?

How to link traditional tapestry techniques with a contemporary context and current social and political issues?

Research Methods and Process

Millar's research commenced with a thorough contextual review surveying the current position of, and interest in, tapestry. This survey was global, with particular reference to biennale and triennale events in Australia, Canada, Poland, Lithuania and Japan. The international Cordis Prize for Tapestry held in Edinburgh provided contextual comparison and reference. Discussions with the Director of the Fondation Mary Toms - Pierre Pauli in Lausanne, the organisation that holds the archive from the Lausanne Biennials, provided further historical context.

The research analysed the traditional role of woven tapestry, and identified its narrative and textural (haptic) qualities that are still relevant in the present day. Themes were established in discussion with curators at NCCD and the William Morris Gallery. Artists were identified through networking and following the above contextual research. Millar visited and interviewed all the UK, Scandinavian, Eastern European and Japanese artists, while online interviews were conducted with those in Australia, Canada and the USA. Millar was particularly keen to include an emerging group of young tapestry weavers from Japan, whose vibrant work was unknown in the UK.

The premise of the project, that tapestries tell the stories of their time, meant that all the selected works had to have an underlying narrative rather than being purely

abstract compositions. The tapestries were chosen for their contemporary references to two overarching themes: the rural, referencing tapestry's nostalgic traditions and mythical subject matter, and the city, which provoked an engagement with more gritty and urban contemporary themes. In *Weaving New Worlds*, these themes were developed further into 'Utopia' and 'dystopia', in fitting response to William Morris, who both wove tapestries and, as a writer, explored Utopian ideas. Within these themes the works variously referenced cultural iconography, mythology, personal and global trauma, and pastoral romanticism.

Each of the exhibition spaces presented particular challenges and resonances. The gallery at the original project partner, the National Centre for Craft and Design, is a reclaimed industrial space with very few internal walls. Temporary walls were installed which allowed free visual and physical flow between the various themes of the exhibition. This allowed the themes to interact, as no work fitted exclusively under a single thematic heading. Other venues were more restricted in size. The Holburne Museum required a more particular separation of the works with, for instance, a specific focus on the body in one of the gallery spaces. The exhibition space at the William Morris Gallery was small, and this created unexpected and revelatory 'conversations' between works by different artists, which had never been seen together previously.



Weaving New Worlds
Mari Meen Halsøy
TITLE: 'Wounds/Beit Beirut/Snipers
Room' detail
MATERIALS: Wool, linen
SIZE: Installation

Weaving New Worlds
Miyuku Tatsumi
TITLE: 'Reflections on the other side'
MATERIALS: Ramie, silk, cotton
SIZE: 2.32 × 1.87 metres



Research Contribution and Impact

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. The transition from the digital to the haptic brings the compassion of touch, making the connection between object and subject, viewer and maker. The audience response to *Tapestry* greatly exceeded expectations, as is shown by the extraordinary footfall for the two exhibitions, with over 326,000 visitors. On its final day *Weaving New Worlds* welcomed 1000 visitors, a record for the William Morris Gallery.

The project contained work by artists of international standing, brought together for the first time. Japanese tapestry artists, in particular, are not known in the UK, and so these exhibitions brought their work to light. Since then several of the Japanese tapestry artists curated by Millar have been featured in European exhibitions including:

Cordis Prize 2019

Garden of Eden Austria 2019

Ukrainian Fiber Art Exhibition 2019

Lodz Tapestry Triennial 2019

International Tapestry Exhibition Galway Ireland 2020

IMPACT

This research output underpins the Impact Case Study Innovative Textiles Curation: Enabling Arts Organisations to Deliver Institutional Strategies. As an example of this impact,, the former Head of Exhibitions at NCCD stated that ‘The partnership with Millar enabled NCCD to exhibit the most innovative, challenging and accomplished artists practicing tapestry to demonstrate that woven tapestry has a role in telling the narratives of our time, challenging the notion that woven tapestry is no longer relevant in the digital age.’



Weaving New Worlds
Kanae Tsutsumi
TITLE: 'Cosmic'
MATERIALS: Wool, cotton, ramie
SIZE: 2.3 × 1.8 metres

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

Here & Now attracted 298,000 visitors during its tour of three venues. *Weaving New Worlds* attracted 28,160 visitors.

The book was reprinted 4 times, selling out each time. Copies were sent all over the world, particularly to the USA and Australia, and sales were good in the UK.

Follow-on-activities:

MEDIA

Aimee McLaughlin, 'Here & Now: the exhibition reviving the art of tapestry weaving', Design Week (5 August 2016) [online] <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/1-7-august-2016/now-exhibition-reviving-art-tapestry-weaving/>

Richard Moss, 'Think you know tapestry? Tapestry Here and Now will make you think again', Museum Crush (27 June 2017) [online] <https://museumcrush.org/think-you-know-tapestry-tapestry-here-and-now-makes-you-think-again/>

Elizabeth Fullerton, 'Review: Weaving New Worlds, William Morris Gallery', Art Fund (31 August 2018) [online] <https://www.artfund.org/whats-on/more-to-see-and-do/features/weaving-new-worlds-william-morris-gallery-review>

Maev Kennedy, 'Bullets and bandages: the artist healing the wounds of Beirut', The Guardian (June 15 2018) [online] <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jun/15/beirut-mari-meen-halsoy-william-morris-gallery-weaving-new-worlds>

PAPERS

Millar was invited to deliver keynote presentations at the following events:

1st West Dean Tapestry Conference 31.07.2015

Cordis Tapestry Prize Conference Edinburgh 16.03.2019

Galway International Tapestry Symposium 23.05.2020

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

PUBLICATIONS

Millar was asked to contribute to the following journals:

Invited by Selvedge magazine to contribute article about
tapestry weaver Sarah Brennan (2016)

Invited to contribute the main essay for the American Tapestry
Alliance Annual publication (2017)

Invited by Selvedge magazine to contribute article about
tapestry weaver Mari Meen Halsoy (2018)



Weaving New Worlds

Tonje Hoydahl Sorli

TITLE: 'Brittle, Little and The Brutal Truth'

MATERIALS: Wool, cotton linen

SIZE: Installation



Weaving New Worlds
Pat Taylor
TITLE: 'Kim'
MATERIALS: Linen, lurex, cotton
SIZE: 0.3 x 0.65 metres



Weaving New Worlds
Curator's tour
Barbara Heller
TITLE: 'Regeneration 2'
MATERIALS: Linen, handspun and
hand-dyed and commercial wools,
cotton
SIZE: 1.6 × 1.8 metres



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FRONT COVER

Erin M. Riley

TITLE: 'Self Portrait 1'

MATERIALS: Wool and cotton

SIZE: 1.8 × 1.2 metres

BACK COVER

Lesley Millar in front of

Joan Baxter

TITLE: Halaig 2

MATERIALS: Wool, silk and lurex

SIZE: 1.96 × 1.88 metres

