Interview with Jenny Steele for the Textile Art Magazine

Where did you grow up and where do you live now?

I was born in Edinburgh and have lived in various places across Scotland, before studying at art college in Dundee when I was 17. I now live in Manchester, a city in northern England known for its industrial textile history where I have lived here for 15 years.

Your work explores themes of celebration, grief, and ritual. How do these themes influence your artistic practice, and how do you bring them together in your sculptures?

I am interested in how celebration or festive experiences can create a feeling of belonging and warmth between people, that are necessary for belonging and basic human needs. I use materials, bright colours and forms, such as tassels, garlands and ribbons that often feature in celebratory decorations that we are familiar with. There is a ritualistic element to my work in that many sculptures refer to community rituals, such as the Rush Cart, used for a procession at the end of summer or funeral boats that set sail.

I experienced multiple bereavements in my childhood, and my practice can act as one of the ways to process these experiences. There is storytelling, but it is not always overt, however there are details in the form and ideas of the work. For example, the series, A Cast of Characters, is a community of small woven sculptures that reference different memories from my childhood, and new information I have learnt in recent years from research about my maternal family.

Since 2020, you have immersed yourself in traditional crafts such as loom weaving, basketry, rush weaving, and passementerie. What drew you to these techniques and how has learning them transformed your approach to making art?

Before weaving, I worked predominantly in drawing, printmaking and printed textiles. I was going through a challenging personal experience at the beginning of the pandemic, and I felt a pull to make constructed textiles rather than just working with the surface. I started by weaving on a frame loom, learning passementerie, then basketry, and I kept my understanding and learning about different woven techniques. I find using weaving an intuitive process where I can tap into subconscious emotions more. I felt my approach to art making before was quite formulaic, and perhaps, more beholden to the 'critical' approach I had followed from learning in art school.

You describe weaving as a universal sculptural language. What do you think makes weaving such a powerful way of communicating emotions, memories, and shared human experiences?

Weaving is used in so many aspects of our daily life, from clothing, functional objects and interiors, which can make it feel very accessible, as from birth onwards we have a relationship and familiarity to it. All our memories and life experiences involve a woven object being present, most obviously in the clothes we wear. Weaving is well known as the oldest craft across cultures internationally, and I really like how basketry is still handmade and cannot be mechanised. As well as the power of the materials and form, I really like the metaphorical nature of weaving, taking together disparate parts and weaving a new whole. The journey of life is also often equated to the steps involved in weaving. Across many cultural mythologies, there are versions

of The Fates, a female textile trio, that determine the fate of people's lives. At present, I am creating a series of woven sculptures, called The Fates that reference these figures.

Your sculptures emphasise tactile and sensory qualities. How important is the physical interaction between your work and the viewer?

It is important to me to be generous to the audience, and kind of reach out a welcome hand to them in a sense. I'm not driven to make work that is obtuse or alienating as that doesn't fit with my values or personality. I have noticed that highly textured and coloured work can offer a stimulating experience for viewers that often-illicit personal experiences or thoughts.

In most cases, I'm happy for the audience to touch the work. I also create sculptures that are participatory, where people can make their own textile element to create the work together. Recent examples of this have been the Wound and Woven Maypole, Milton Keynes, where people could weave the artwork or make and attach a tassel. Another participatory work was Harvest Moon, Harvest Home, sited in Croydon, London, where visitors could plait a wreath. I like how these communal works, almost become like 'clootie wells' which are outdoor ritual sites in the UK, where people attach textiles to trees for personal good fortune.

You combine discarded industrial yarn from Northern mills with natural materials such as grasses, willow, flora, and seaweed. How do you approach the process of selecting and combining these materials, and what stories do they bring into your work?

There is so much waste produced in the textile industry, it is crucial that I avoid using new materials and source locally from waste and natural materials in my own practice. I work with a range of recycled textile agents and Northwest factories that donate their waste textiles to me. I ask them for certain waste materials on an ongoing and project specific basis. With regards to grasses etc, I use materials that grow locally to my studio. With plant-based materials, there is still so much I need to learn as preparation and long-term care varies greatly.

With regards to the textile materials, they can embed the work in the historical and current context of textile manufacturing in North England, which is ever changing.

With plant-based materials, it can be more specific depending on what is available in the season. The Gorton Rush Cart has a lot of daffodil leaves from our local park woven into it as it was created in Spring, which are now held in the sculpture long term, as a connection to the physical land. In a series of weaves I made on a residency at Cove Park, Scotland, I used seaweed and grasses from the land near to where my mother's family had lived when my grandfather worked there as a lighthouse keeper.

A strong sense of place and belonging runs through your practice. How do the landscapes and communities of Northern England influence your choice of materials, techniques, and artistic themes?

I had a natural interest in weaving in my early years studying at art college in Dundee, but I could not really see in any way how I could incorporate it into an art practice. I think having lived in Manchester for several years, the process of weaving has somehow seeped into my being. It is very hard to avoid the constant reminders of the industry everywhere in this city, and it is a strong thread of its cultural identity.

Themes or ideas in my work can vary from project to project, but there usually are elements of community, gathering, ritual and celebration. Materials wise, I'm always trying to pull as much as possible from what resources already exist, and reshape them, rather than creating new textiles from scratch and producing the waste the new waste accompanies it.

Your work brings together traditional craft, personal experience, and the restorative qualities of coastal, rural, and architectural environments. How do you see your practice evolving in the future, and what new questions or directions would you like to explore?

I would like to explore movement in my work much further by animating the woven sculptures in some way. I have an idea of experiments I would like to try that might expand further into larger works. I have referenced movement before by the final forms such as the Cart or the Boat, which could potentially travel.

I'm currently starting on a series of three woven sculptures that reference my maternal lineage in a more figurative way, using loom weaving and basketry. I'm looking forward to seeing how this progresses.