

Back and Forth

To be published in 2018 in *Tapestry of Light* by Irene Barberis

Imagining a future was always in some measure a matter of imagining a past, and the unfolding structure is also one of regression, to what was, or might have been, of anticipation of what may be and of postponement.¹

Just as mutual exchange of past and present plays out recurrently in Irene Barberis' artistic momentum so too the inseparability of recto and verso features significantly as an illuminating precept in much of her current and past work, and both concepts are judiciously encoded in her long-term megaproject *The Tapestry of Light*, the centrepiece of which is a double-sided woven tapestry that incorporates traditional and innovative weaving materials and production processes. Barberis often re-evaluates, embellishes and refines themes alluded to in various bodies of work made over an artistic lifetime and this constant reappraisal has now crystallised in the breathtaking vision and scope of her *Tapestry*.

The prophetic visions of St. John, evocatively described in the biblical text Revelation/Apocalypse have throughout centuries, inspired many artists and illustrators to produce visual representations of the visions described. The Angers Tapestry, also known as the Apocalypse Tapestry, is an epic scale visualisation of this narration and the one that has inspired Barberis to create her own monumental work. In this endeavour she looks back to her own artistic past, back to the materials, processes and imagery of the Angers Tapestry and yet further to biblical texts and contemporary iconography upon which its imagery is based and proceeds to manoeuvre all of this in this in the context of a technological 'now'. Like the mesmerising back and forth motion of a weaver's loom, Barberis' practice of re-purposing her own past imagery through selective self-referencing is a dedicated pursuit, one that has enabled her to experiment with a variety of materials and facture. Ironically, her repeated remaking has, in the *The Tapestry of Light*, resulted in a parallel to the original work's materiality and amplitude while imparting a distinctly innovative solution.

Recto Verso

The Tapestry of Light, like many of Barberis' earlier works, uses resolvable pictorial imagery on both the front and the back of what is, usually, a wall-hanging and, by suspending the tapestry on an elliptically arranged metal structure designed with a point of ingress, permits viewing of both its faces, although given the work's scale this cannot occur simultaneously. So displayed, the work creates an exterior spatial spectrum on which allusions to the figuration found in the Angers Tapestry are recognisable and, concurrently, a darker interior space featuring primarily geometrically abstract compositions and textual quotations from the Book of Revelation. In its first public display, the tapestry's exterior view is prioritised over

¹ Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997, p16

the interior one, but this can be reversed for various venues at the artist's discretion. Interestingly, the Angers Tapestry - at least those parts of it that have stood the ravages of time and misguided views on what constitutes a work of art - is also reversible, the verso being an exact but now greatly more colourful mirror image of its time faded recto.

The back of any painting, the blank woven fabric (linen or cotton) on the recto of which the image is depicted, usually faces the wall, unseen, ignored. The back of a tapestry, usually a web of interconnected coloured threads created by the weaving's structural realisation of its figuration is, like its painting counterpart, of interest only to the maker or possible future conservators. Tapestries, even hand-woven ones, can of course be double-woven to portray different motifs that can alternately act as back or front but such configuration is not now common.

Double-sidedness is evidenced in Barberis' *Memory Mirror* of 1998. This work consists of two laser-cut wood panels, one the reverse and inverted image of the other painted differently on both back and front – flat, matte colour on one side, patterning on the other. Designed for display on a wall, such structuring permits the artist a variety of presentation options although only one side is accessible to viewers at any one time. Residual reflected light does seep from the verso's colouration onto the wall that supports it and this intimates that, as with all art worthy of the name, there is more to the work than meets the eye.

Barberis' drawings on delicate tissue papers offer 'hands-on' potential for recto verso reading. Her fragile works in *Fresh Leaves/Seven Boxes*, (1996-2000) are displayed as loose leaves in hand made wooden boxed sets so that individual sheets which are printed, spray painted and machine embroidered with text can be, and need to be, 'turned' for reading/seeing and so act in much the same way as the bound pages of a printed book. The transparency of the tissue paper leaches a reversed ghost version of the page's front on to its back and this is clearly visible. In this instance allusions to illuminated manuscripts format and bleeding cannot be missed.

Time and again

Deliberate self-citation is a strategy used frequently by Barberis to cohere the linkages between her own past and present works and provide a foundation from which her new ones evolve. Such consciously channelled activity is evidenced in the assimilation of reimagined and reworked versions of imagery and ideas she first formulated years ago into works currently in process. Such a recursive ruse alludes to the works original sources, whether her own or from scriptural writing or illuminated manuscripts.

Continually reprocessing, Barberis manages to enrich her work's potential content and expand her personal range of images through experimental 'drawing', this whether on paper or, more dramatically, with coloured optic fibres lit and suspended in space or, elusively, via bodily gestures that stretch slumped molten glass into rearing flourishes. She fearlessly invents new versions of past works in a variety of 'non-art' materials (inflatable plastics, silicon, floor matting, resin, acrylic) and newly available digital processes. Yet along with this disregard for medium specificity her

artistic practice is an exemplar of constancy. Paradoxical as this may seem, she has, over 40 or so years, remained faithful to an over-arching narrative premised on her Christian beliefs, a narrative that guides her research and reading as well as underpinning all of her work.

As an example of this practice her installation, *Cut it out it's a wonderful world*, is an elaboration of 'observational' paintings and drawings from a still life construction, first conceived and produced in the 70s. Re-observed, redrawn and converted to CAD imaging, then laser cut in 12 differently coloured sheets of transparent and opaque acrylic, the resulting modular components, unlike their original counterparts, are capable of assembly in countless cohesive configurations. The individual segments that can be 'collaged' into a potentially monumental work restyle the everyday, domestic objects drawn and painted in the earlier works (milk cartons, scissors, perfume and glue bottles for instance) are rendered as simple linear abstract contours. The process of laser cutting has also reproduced the work's pictorial space as small, fragmented abstract shapes that to the undiscerning seem undifferentiated from those that should be understood as the depicted object. Some of the thousands of individual shapes were assembled in an installation exhibited at Langford120, in Melbourne, in 2012 (*Apocalypse Revelation: re looking*)² that spanned a 15-meter length and 5-meter width of wall space. This work's colourful exuberance hints at those parts of St. John's apocalyptic visions that proclaim the redemptive rather than emphasise the punitive and this is underscored by Barberis flanking the installation with luridly pink fluorescent 'cut-outs' at one end the figure of St John, (who, in most apocalyptic imagery is represented outside of the depicted scene), and at the other, one of the seven trumpeting angles of the Apocalypse. What was in the 1970s a series of pictures suggestive of the relationship between whole and fragment have, in this form, become an expanded narrative of refocused conceptualisation and, simultaneously, an expandable spatial field of colour and light that is synchronously fragment and whole.

Her 'poster works' (*Rock Posters – Interventions into the Angers Tapestry*, 2012) – screen-printed images of selected figures found in various medieval illuminated manuscripts and in the Angers Tapestry – are loosely connected to ones conceived and made as collage works on paper in Paris in the 80s. In these new works, the sobering and often grim medieval source imagery is deprived of its pictorial and narrative context and recast into shockingly coloured advertising billboards look-alikes, screen-printed in multiples on inexpensive paper. This strategy could be understood either as capricious, iconoclastic or, more positively, a reference to the informal notices surreptitiously pasted on to public structures. In Barberis' work, however, the messages are not the usual consumerist propaganda, like those that were ubiquitous in 1980s Paris, but ones that reference the dire warnings expressed in apocalyptic literature and imagery. The flat rendering of figures and overall fluorescent colouration contrasted against dense blacks project these works outwardly into a space seemingly larger than the one they actually occupy and in so doing, ensures that they be noticed.

In Barberis' case self-citation never results in formulated repetition but rather similarity under the guise of difference. Barberis thus utilises temporal gaps as spaces for reflection on what has already been achieved and devising possible starting points

² <http://www.langford120.com.au/irene-barberis--apocalypserevelation-re-looking.html>

for new works. Given this, *Tapestry of Light* can be understood as a single visual structure that holds together various personal temporal markers.

The Tapestry

All painters are familiar with techniques of layering. Overlays of, for instance, colour over colour, transparency over opacity or form over form can act to enliven a work's aesthetic appeal, add compositional complexity, control the amount of light a painting's surface reflects or absorbs and entice the viewer to closely examine the work's facture. Often however, despite the laboured and lengthy procedures required to produce such effects the lastly applied layer of paint mostly obscures the work's substrate or renders it visible only as surface texture. Barberis always draws on her experience as a painter even when not using paint. In her *Tapestry* she has used techniques comparable to those a painter might use and produced a rich multi-faceted woven structure that echoes St John's multi-imaged and multi-perspective visions.

Discrete forms over which others are superimposed in different types of weaving yarns are visible in appropriate lighting conditions but remain invisible in others. This double play of appearance/disappearance is achieved through the use of phosphorescent fibres that 'glow in the dark' and remain neutral otherwise. How these function technically and the scientific research undertaken by Professor David Mainwaring into nanotechnologies to produce phosphorescence applicable to yarns for use in weaving is described elsewhere in this publication. Suffice it to say here that *light*, as the work's title specifies, is present in actuality, literally woven into the tapestry, rather than achieved through illusionistic trickery or the gilding preferred by medieval painters. In the Angers Tapestry flashing sparkles of light were produced from threads of gold and silver interwoven amongst coloured woollen fibres.

Not all superimposed forms rely on special lighting to be seen. Contemporary versions of armoury, battle scenes, plagues and monsters act, like the marginalia one finds in illuminated manuscripts, as personal side-commentary to the work's thematic overtures. Drawn digitally on computer, airplanes, jet bombers, birds of prey and modern cityscapes that resemble emoji are boldly emblazoned along the borders of the work's recto and over similarly designed representations of the medieval iconography with which the artist is so familiar. These contemporary images not only reflect Barberis' personal commentary on the state of the world, politics, economics, environmental concerns, power struggles, war and peace but are consistent with innumerable readings of Revelation as applicable to current situations.

Just as Henri Matisse brushed, scratched, scraped and reapplied chromatic colours to achieve his special *lux* effects, so too Barberis has had to pay special attention to the selection and blending of colours for use in the various segments of her tapestry. Machine woven from digital files into 14 manageable sized panels - (8 panels measure 1 x 3 meters, 4 panels measure 4 x 3 meters and 2 panels measure 6 x 3 meters) the assembled work is 36 meters in length. The lengthy process of colour selection has been a double-edged one. Firstly, digital computer-screen colour needed to be manipulated to approximate that of pigmented colour: later, woven colour samplers were sent to her from the weavers in Brussels to check that selected digital colours had been correctly replicated in the wool to be used for the tapestry. Michel-

Eugène Chevreul's *On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colour*, published in 1839 during his time as 'colour trouble-shooter' in the employ of the Gobelins Manufactory discovered (after complaints from clients that the colours they had carefully chosen for their particular orders seemed different in the final product) that any colour, when placed next to other colours, appears different, often muddied and dulled. In his instructive *The Art of Colour*, Johannes Itten explains that 'Simultaneous contrast results from the fact that for any given color the eye simultaneously requires the complementary color, and generates this spontaneously if it is not already present. The simultaneously generated complementary occurs as a sensation in the eye of the beholder and is not objectively present.'³ Thanks to Chevreul painters better understand the effects of simultaneous contrast and can readily manipulate, adjust and readjust colour relationships to achieve their aims. Interestingly, Sonia Delaunay was one of the first artists who, in the early 20th century, experimented with such contrasts in both her painting and textile and fashion design. Simultaneous contrasts are, however, particularly problematic when fine, coloured threads are densely interlaced in the warp and weft of textile weaving. Yarns need to be examined both as individual strands of colour and as woven samplers and this may occur many times before the final selection is confirmed. To create the dazzling array of colours and keep *The Tapestry of Light's* radiance, Barberis carefully made her selection from the hundreds of coloured yarns, both as single and woven threads, arranged for some yarns to be dyed in specific fluorescent colours and worked in close co-operation with Professor Mainwaring on using the phosphorescent threads.

Light, that element conferring visibility and acting as metaphor for intellectual enlightenment, should, Barberis believes, be celebrated. Salutary lessons are offered in her visualisation of good (light) triumphing over evil (dark), lessons that are as relevant now as they ever were. Her vision of the world is one bathed in the holy light of Revelation's end time.

Woman's work

In an essay stimulated by a recent re-evaluation of Sonia Delaunay's long art career Griselda Pollock comments on the belated and almost begrudging recognition of the significance of Sonia Delaunay's contribution to modern art.⁴

Her rather late insertion into an already written art history was, Pollock argues, too little, too late and somewhat mealy-mouthed. Her involvement in 'woman's work' – textile and fashion design, decorative embellishments for home or office – furniture, carpets, curtains and her 'dressing up' in outfits of her own creation somehow detracted from her paintings and cast a shadow over her importance to the 'new art' of the early 20th century. In 1971, when her work was reassessed and her status as a painter acknowledged, Sonia Delaunay was 86 years old and, as Pollock protests, she had made her breakthrough in her 20s!

³ Johannes Itten, *The Art of Colour*, Van Nostrand Co New York, 1961 p. 87

⁴ Griselda Pollock, 'Art criticism and the problem of the non-modern story of modern art', *Sonia Delaunay*, Tate Publishing, 2014, Millbank, London

The 2014 Tate exhibition dedicated to Sonia Delaunay ‘has the appearance of ‘recovery’ rediscovery and reinstatement. It cannot, however, banish the ghost of the doubt created by the disjunction between what may be claimed *now* about the importance of Sonia Delaunay to the historical moment of chromatic abstraction and the evidence of relative silence over the preceding century.’⁵

Although Irene Barberis does not see herself as a contemporary version of Delaunay, she does like to point out that, as far as she is able to ascertain, she is the only woman artist to ‘profile’ Revelation and the Angers Tapestry in such a monumental way using aspects of traditional ‘women’s work’. Moreover, commentators eschew engagement with biblical and medieval sources and the religious overtones of her subject matter. That history repeats itself is now a clichéd idea; but this does not diminish its potency and truth. The re-evaluation of ideas and artworks that may seem outmoded or not relevant to current cultural imperatives – like those of Delaunay – forms a substantial current, often unnoticed, in art history. However, this hardly serves to excuse the refusal to pay attention to work which offers up the riches of both a personal and collective past because of its indifference to the shibboleths of contemporaneity.

Sonia Delaunay, Pollock writes ‘ had always done exactly what she wanted and felt was necessary’⁶, and the same may be said of Irene Barberis.

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⁵ Griselda Pollock, Op Cit. p.219

⁶ Ibid, p. 222