

## Back and Forth

*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.*<sup>1</sup>

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 textual narratives. The Angers Tapestry, also known as the Apocalypse Tapestry, is an epic scale visualisation of this narration and the one that has inspired Irene Barberis to create her own awe-inspiring monumental work. In this endeavour she looks back to her own artistic past, back also to the materials, processes and imagery of the Angers Tapestry and yet further to biblical texts upon which its imagery is based and proceeds to distil all of this into the context of a technological, social and political 'now': a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of its 14<sup>th</sup> century precursor. Barberis' practice of re-imagining and recreating contemporary enactments drawn from her own well-established practice has left her free to experiment with a variety of 'alternative' materials, facture and installation presentations. In an interview with Virginia Fraser she states: 'I'm re-looking at work and lineages of work that have been in my practice for a long time, to just see how the thinking's changed, and what new dialogues are taking place between works'.<sup>2</sup> Such constant updating has, in the *The Tapestry of Light*, resulted in a parallel to the Angers Tapestry's materiality and amplitude while imparting a distinctly innovative solution.

Barberis is no stranger to apocalyptic imagery nor to reimagining imagery from her own past works or to referencing favourite works by artists she particularly admires. She is not shy to admit this. She is essentially a painter and while works made over the last ten years may not appear to attest to this she nevertheless thinks and solves pictorial problems as a painter would. She has also, in all the time I have known her, been undaunted by large-scale work, whether an individual painting or a series of modules capable of assembling into a formidable size and irregular site-specific formats. Through the re-evaluation and repurposing of her existing ideas and iconography Barberis breathes fresh life into existing content and context and concurrently expands the range of personal imagery that she may wish to draw upon at some future time. Drawing, whether traditionally rendered on paper or, as is the case recently, with coloured, flashing optic fibres lit and suspended in space or, more elusively, via bodily gestures that stretch slumped molten glass into rearing flourishes, nourishes her thinking. Re-inventions of past works in a variety of 'non-art' materials (inflatable plastics, silicon, floor matting, resin, transparent acrylic) and newly available digital processes is at the core of her recent works, especially those exhibited over the last seven years at Langford120. Despite her disregard for the personal medium specificity that many artists cling to – the so-called 'signature style', 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

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<sup>1</sup> Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997, p 6

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Fraser, *The Edge of Logic*, catalogue essay in *Apocalypse Revelation: re looking*, Irene Barberis, 2012, p 17

her Christian beliefs, a narrative that guides her research and reading as well as underpinning all that she imagines and creates.

As a case in point her installation, *Cut it Out! It's a Wonderful World; Resurrection in Melbourne (After Stanley Spencer), 2012* is an elaboration of 'observational' paintings and drawings derived from a still life construction, first conceived and produced in the 70s. Re-observed, redrawn and converted to CAD imaging, then laser cut from 12 differently coloured full sheets of transparent and opaque rigid acrylic, the resulting modular components, unlike their original counterparts, are not fixed in time or space but can be assembled in countless configurations and be adapted in overall size. The work's figurative elements restyle the everyday domestic objects that were drawn and painted in the earlier works (milk cartons, scissors, perfume and glue bottles for instance) and are rendered in this manifestation as simple linear contours. The process of laser cutting has also auto-generated the work's pictorial space as small, apparently random, fragmented abstract shapes that, to the undiscerning, seem undifferentiated from those that should be understood as depicted objects. Thousands of the individual shapes were assembled and pinned directly on to the gallery wall in an installation exhibited at Langford120 in Melbourne in 2012 (*Apocalypse Revelation: re looking*)<sup>3</sup>. In this version the work spanned an 18-meter length and 2.9-meter height 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 (the work's title clearly points us in this direction) 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 angels 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. Of course, notable too is the fact that acrylic is a material that naturally lends itself to reversibility and the laser cut edge of the transparent acrylic radiates an eerie light, the source of which is indeterminable and - just to add some extra visual stimuli - the central section of the installation is made up of repeated mirror image segments in a flurry of instinctively selected polychromes while at both ends of the display the arrangement of forms becomes chaotic and is dark monochrome.

Similarly, her 'poster works' (*Rock Posters – Interventions into the Angers Tapestry, 2012*) – a series of screen-printed images of selected figures found in various medieval apocalyptic manuscripts and in the Angers Tapestry – re-engage with works conceived, made as collage works on paper and exhibited in Paris in the 80s. In these more recent works, the sobering and often grim medieval source imagery is removed from its pictorial and narrative context and recast into shockingly coloured advertising billboard look-alikes, screen-printed in multiples on inexpensive paper. Be it capriciousness, iconoclastic impulse or a desire to jolt a lazy viewer, the reference to informal notices surreptitiously pasted onto public structures, like those that were ubiquitous in 1980s Paris, cannot be missed. Be warned however that in Barberis' work the advertised 'event' is rather less entertaining than usual. The often flatly rendered figures appearing as ghostly emanations saturated in a field of disturbing

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.langford120.com.au/irene-barberis--apocalypserevelation-re-looking.html>

fluorescent colouration and contrasted against suffocating blackness act to project these works outwardly into a space seemingly larger than the one they actually occupy and, in so doing, ensures that these messages be noted.

As an experienced painter, Barberis understands that 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 reverse of a tapestry, usually a web of interconnected coloured threads created by the weaving's structural realisation of its figural content 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.

Reversibility and mirror imaging are devices that recur frequently in Barberis' works. Such pictorial structural reverberation indicates instructive content: it should not be misunderstood as aesthetic affectation. For instance, *Memory Mirror* of 1998, (described by Barberis as '...a reflected bouquet form of symbolic flowers inspired by the Dutch Still Life painters and botanical symbolism in Art and Scripture.'<sup>4</sup>), consists of two laser-cut wood panels, one the reverse and inverted image of the other and hand painted differently on both back and front – flat, monochromatic matte colour on one side, patterning on the other. Designed for display on a wall – the wall acting as both structural support and pictorial substrate – such potential alternation permits the artist a variety of presentation options although, only one side can be seen at any one time. Residual reflected light does seep from the verso's colouration onto the wall that supports it and likely intimates that, as with all art worthy of the name, there is more to the work than initially meets the eye.

Barberis' drawings on delicate tissue papers offer 'hands-on' potential for recto verso reading. The fragile works in *Fresh Leaves/Seven Boxes*, (1996-2000)<sup>5</sup> 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 results in a clearly visible leached, mirror-image ghostly version of the page's front on to its back. In these works allusions to the format and porosity often found in illuminated manuscripts is clearly evident.

*The Tapestry of Light*, completed in 2017, incorporates all of the visual complexities, twists and turns and coded messages embodied in Barberis' works that predate it. I think of *The Tapestry* as a crystallisation of all that preceded it and, as such, only by experiencing its full scope 'in the flesh' can its intricacies be understood and appreciated.

As in *Memory Mirror* (1998) and *Fresh Leaves/Seven Boxes* (1996-2000) the inseparability of recto and verso is judiciously programmed into *The Tapestry of Light*. Resolvable pictorial iconography on both front and back of the work can be

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<sup>4</sup> *Apocalypse Revelation: re looking*, Op. Cit. p 14

<sup>5</sup> *Saying it with Flowers*, exhibition catalogue, 1998

offered for viewing. Normally displayed as wall hangings the backs of tapestries are rarely seen. Barberis has ingeniously resolved this limitation by designing an elliptically constructed metal structure on which the tapestry can be suspended and which includes a point of ingress for viewing the back of the tapestry. So displayed in the central section of an expansive space the work creates an exterior spatial spectrum, parts of which reference the unmistakable figuration found in the Angers Tapestry; concurrently, the darker interior space features primarily geometrically abstract compositions and textual quotations from the Book of Revelation. In its first two public displays, (The Chapter House, Canterbury Cathedral, England and The Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula in Brussels) the tapestry's exterior view was prioritised over the interior one (this due to the nature of the venues), but the metal support can be adapted to suit various venues and 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.

All painters are familiar with techniques of layering. Overlays of, for instance, colour over colour, transparency over opacity or form over form can enhance a work's aesthetic appeal, add compositional density, control the amount of light a painting's surface reflects or absorbs and so entice the viewer to closely examine the work's facture. Barberis always draws on her experience as a painter even when not using paint. In her *Tapestry* she has used layering techniques reminiscent of those a painter might use to produce a rich multi-faceted and layered woven 'fabric' that reverberates with St John's multi-imaged and multi-perspectival visions. And, as in much painting, the discrete forms over which others are superimposed, in this case using a variety of weaving yarns, are visible only in appropriate lighting conditions but otherwise remain obscure or hidden.

This oscillation between conspicuousness and obscurity, fluctuations in luminosity and intensity of colouration is achieved through the use of phosphorescent fibres that 'glow in the dark' but remain neutral in normal lighting conditions. 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.

As a counter to this evanescence, some images are emblazoned, tauntingly ever-present in ways similar to *Rock Posters – Interventions into the Angers Tapestry* (2012). Contemporary versions of armoury, battle scenes, plagues and monsters act, like marginalia 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, all of which resemble emoji, are boldly inscribed along the borders of the work's recto and elsewhere integrated with similarly designed interpretations of medieval iconography. These contemporary images reflect Barberis' personal commentary on the neurosis and mechanisms evident in

times of political, economic and social unrest: at times when environmental concerns, power struggles, threats of war are at the forefront of contemporary consciousness and this is consistent with innumerable historical readings of Revelation.

Just as Henri Matisse brushed, scratched, scraped and reapplied chromatic colours to achieve his special *lux* effects, so too Barberis has paid 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 fraught with the dilemmas of colour perception and colour matching between incomparable materials. 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 colour fibres they had carefully chosen for their particular tapestries 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.'<sup>6</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, experimented with such contrasts in both her painting and textile and fashion design. Simultaneous contrasts are particularly problematic when fine, coloured threads are densely interlaced in the warp and weft of textile weaving. Yarns need to be examined and selected both as individual strands of colour and as mixed colours woven into samplers and this may occur many times before the final selection is confirmed. To create the dazzling array of colours that ensure *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.

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<sup>6</sup> Johannes Itten, *The Art of Colour*, Van Nostrand Co New York, 1961 p. 87

In her 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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!

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.'<sup>8</sup>

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 female artist to 'profile' the full cycle of Revelation and the Angers Tapestry in such a monumental way using aspects of traditional 'women's work'. Moreover, commentators now tend to eschew engagement with biblical and medieval sources and the religious overtones of her subject matter. That history repeats itself is 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 (and many other female artists) – forms a substantial current often unnoticed in art history. However, this hardly serves to excuse the refusal to acknowledge the importance of work that 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'<sup>9</sup>: the same may be said of Irene Barberis.

## Postscript

In June 2018, with *The Tapestry of Light* safely in transit between England and the USA, Barberis expressed a longing to 'go back to painting'. She wanted to 'just load up a huge brush with pure colour and paint as long a line as possible'. In November 2018 "*and then... a psychochoreography of colour*", a work in tempera and acrylic on 238, 15 cm width cut strips of watercolour paper each strip painted in a single colour in one choreographed brushstroke (measuring 240 x 2500 cm in total) was installed in

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<sup>7</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Art criticism and the problem of the non-modern story of modern art', *Sonia Delaunay*, Tate Publishing, 2014, Millbank, London

<sup>8</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Op Cit.* p.219

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222

the exhibition *Transitions*.<sup>10</sup> One perceptive viewer at the exhibition opening commented that the work seemed like Barberis has ‘unpicked’ all the coloured threads of her *Tapestry* and converted them back to single lineaments of gestural artistry. While this reading may not, at the time of making, have occurred to the artist the connection is undeniable. And so again, intentionally or not, that recursive ruse, the circularity of the past intervening into the future, intentionally or not, is once again at play here.

Wilma Tabacco  
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<sup>10</sup> Langford120, Melbourne, 17 November – 16 December, 2018