

## **“Do what you want, and stick to it!”**

### **Norwegian visual artists with textiles as their medium and the loom as their tool**

**Runa Boger**

*The importance and status of textile art change over time. Today we are experiencing an upsurge in the textile mode of expression within contemporary art. Norway has a large number of professional visual artists who use textiles as their medium. There is a rich variety – not infrequently, there is a strong feminist impetus linked to the choice of art form. 'With an on-going investigation of theme, technique and material, a strong involvement is maintained based on the context within which one lives. Work processes and the many levels of abstraction offered by the art form develop and change in relation to society and culture.*

In Norway, modern textile art began in the 1960s-1970s, inspired by 'the Polish wave'. This was an important period for textile art with regard to its being recognised as part of contemporary art. And it took place at the same time as female emancipation and feminism cleared the way for female artists. Poland was a power centre for the avant-garde art coming from Eastern Europe. The Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) had a number of exhibitions in Norway. The influence of foreign tendencies was of importance, but Abakanowicz became first and foremost a model for female artists because she represented a new, free attitude to a traditional art form. She went beyond what was a female sphere of activity within the field of art, setting a standard for what it means to be an artist.

At the same time, an innovation took place within the Norwegian weaving tradition that was to be of lasting influence and significance for the field. Two weavers who stood out were Hanna Ryggen (1894-1970), with expressive and socially critical statements made in her weaving, and Synnøve Anker Aurdal (1908-2000), who became key figures within the modern abstract imagery.

The focus of this article is artists who are prominent in the art scene today. All of them are innovative in their use of the medium and are highly expressive. They have a wide range of formal idioms and in terms of theme they explore different fields. What they all have in common is that they have the loom as their tool, their means of expression – either an upright loom<sup>ii</sup> or a flat loom – and that they dye their own yarn.

#### **Marianne Magnus (1943)**

The classic weaver. The tapestry weaving technique (Gobelin) at its best. Dependable, perfect craft combined with a great knowledge of materials and colours and with strong artistic vigour. A fascination with ornamentation is a formal visual element in her abstract compositions. Magnus has developed an independent visual imagery in which ornament and drawing contribute to emphasising and bringing out the dynamic presentation.

Characteristic of her artistic expression are movement and rhythm as well as an illusion of depth. Ornamentation and repetition are her starting point for the formation of patterns and themes in the woven textiles. Magnus has been inspired by the patterned ornamentation of

ceramic tiles in architecture specifically from Italy. Fine small-sized patterns are processed, enlarged and drawn full scale as drafts for tapestries.<sup>iii</sup>

The use of intense colours presupposes the use of quality materials. Magnus uses woollen yarn for both warp and weft. Wool from *spælsau*<sup>iv</sup> (sheep) results in long, lustrous fibres that when spun also acquire a glossy look. A precise combination of yarn, technique, colour and, in particular, the subtle shading of the colouring results in an apparently metallic, shiny surface. Stylised, geometrical forms are repeated, creating an illusion of depth and movement in space. It is this movement that reminds me of the futurism of the 20th century, a forward-looking art in which speed and technology were key themes. In her most recent works she has been moving towards a more cubist expression, where the motif is broken up into individual forms, while still moving around within the compositions.

### **Kristin Sæterdal (1963)**

Sæterdal also works with pictorial weaving using the goblin technique. She employs a varying set of motifs, often taken from popular culture, science fiction and animated cartoons. She thematises technological development and questions the relationship humans have towards technology. Her drawing of the motif has a quick, sketch-like feel to it, as in graffiti art, in stark contrast to the laborious, time-consuming work at the loom. The work *Katroom 2* has a space-like, science fiction feel to it. The universe explodes and the motif draws the onlooker into the monumental world of images. *Space Debris* has been made as a warning against space junk, detritus from human activity in outer space. An interesting set of motifs that activates us and raises our level of awareness, while also creating an interest in an old weaving technique. Sæterdal has made a film about how the work came into being.<sup>v</sup>

Sæterdal also gives courses in tapestry techniques and has thereby contributed to a new renaissance of interest in pictorial weaving. One of her most recent works, *Red Jacket*, is a detailed picture of a red down jacket. Realistically and photographically represented in all its simplicity. An expressive motif that almost grows out of the pictorial format and demonstrates the vast range of potential that exists within the weaving technique.

### **Ann Cathrin November Høibo (1979)**

November Høibo has a varied artistic formal idiom and practises a break with simple norms. Her work can be viewed in line with the diversity of the age and the many possibilities and platforms of today's art open up. Her installations are based on weaving and textile works, often combined with objects and items of consumption. In the coupling and contrasting of materials and objects new pictures arise. November Høibo makes use of the gallery space as a studio, developing works that are location-related.

In line with her generation she makes use of the informational images of mass culture as her idea-bank. Her works can be defined on the basis of material, form and popular culture, but they also contain historical references. Apart from her formal education as an artist, November Høibo has also studied under Else Marie Jakobsen (1927-2012), a striking textile artist who made visible her political and religious attitudes in her weaving and who practised in November Høibo's native city of Kristiansand.

Ann Cathrin November Høibo's tapestries have been done with an open warp and weft of various materials with a rich texture. Her visual imagery is abstract and expressive. Organic colour

surfaces of various sizes combined with open warp field and bold execution create dynamics in the surface. Complexity, vitality and playfulness are typical. She has a strong intuitive feeling for composition and materials and her experimental mode of expression is felt to be both intimate and exposing. The mounting is special: in the top edge of the tapestry the warp threads are casually knotted round a strip of wood. At the bottom edge the warp threads hang down in large knots or have been fixed with stones could be interpreted as a reference to the Stone Age and the origins of upright weaving.

### **Aurora Passero (1984)**

Passero is the poet. The delicate, light, fragile, imaginative and picturesque expression is like an abstract landscape painting. At the same time, it has been roughly and sculpturally carried out in nylon yarn, often combined with rope and braiding. Ephemeral colours merge into each other, like spreading watercolours. The shimmering textiles remind one of Claud Monet's water-lily pictures – bright and airy, light and liquid in a dream scenario.

The synthetic, smooth and shiny nylon material enhances the abstract artistic idiom. Passero exploits the softness and flexibility of the material to form sculptures that relate directly to the architecture of the gallery space. Constructions with monumental qualities float freely in a dialogue with the spatial dimension. The architecture forms a framework for the installation and the work is not completed until it has been installed in the interior.

Passero weaves her canvas on a flat loom. Seemingly using simple plain weave, horizontal and vertical threads that cross each other. The nylon canvases are then dyed, or being dipped in a dye. The unpredictable dyeing method adds a sensual dimension. The exactly planned weaving is carried out at a slow tempo, unlike the quick, intense process in the dye bath. To achieve various textures she has recently begun to vary the thickness of the thread, combined with closely woven and open surfaces.

Passero gains inspiration from ethnology, fashion and abstract paintings, and her work motto is *"Do what you want, and stick to it!"*

### **Brynhild Slaatto (1959)**

Slaatto is one of the textile artists who works on outdoor projects. Her installations are often knotted to heritage buildings, museums or church ruins. She is deeply interested in, and strongly influenced by architecture. Her textiles move more in the direction of building constructions than pictorial associations.

Slaatto weaves long, narrow strips of textiles, which remind one of panels in old houses and walls of timber. And as in old timber, Slaatto's woven panels have a rich interplay of shades of colour. When the textiles are mounted outdoors, a symbiosis arises between the dull, hard timber and the rich texture of the soft textiles.

Slaatto uses advanced flat loom techniques and experiments with weaving constructions. Woollen and nylon yarn are combined with coarser rope material and she twines and mixes the threads to gain the desired surface texture. Different weavings and various materials produce varying structures which in turn can provide associations to the location or the building where the project is going to be shown.

Brynhold Slatto's outdoor project started as an investigation and testing of materials and colours. A kind of hardening process which proved able to give the textiles a new dimension and inspire her to undertake new experiments and showings.

This has gradually become an architectural project which interests both open-air museums and municipal agencies. Her next project is the church ruins in Maridalen, those of the Margareta Church from 1250. The ruins lie in open countryside 20 km outside Oslo. The artist's wish is for the project to be able to show how architecture and textile art can team up with each other – and that past and present can throw each other into relief.

A textile artist who definitely belongs to both past and present is **Brit Fuglevaag (1939)**. Fuglevaag was the first Norwegian textile artist who went to Poland to study in 1963. While she did not know of Magdalena Abakanowicz's works, it was other artists who attracted attention and set the standard for avant-garde art.

One of the most important things that Fuglevaag learnt in Poland was that textile art was on an equal footing with other art forms. The dismissive attitude to the profession that was usual in Norway was not found in Poland. At least as important was that one should be proud to be an artist. When Fuglevaag later started to teach at the Norwegian National Academy of Craft and Art Industry (now Oslo National Academy of the Arts) in 1970, she brought with her the positive attitudes from Poland and added new dimensions to the teaching of the subject. She was like a breath of fresh air from the international world, with new ideas as to what textile-based art could be. Her work capacity and enthusiasm influenced her students, including myself.

Now, at the age of 82, she has retained her strength and ability to experiment and last autumn had two solo exhibitions in Oslo. Brit Fuglevaag is still an inspiration for female artists.

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.norwegiancrafts.no/articles/magdalene-abakanowicz-and-the-norwegian-art-scene-style-creator-or-liberating-role-model>

<sup>ii</sup> Upright weaving is done on an ancient type of loom which is known from archaeological finds in all of Europe. The most typical form is where the loom is upright and the warp is held tight using weights. It is assumed that looms such as this have existed since the Stone Age.

<sup>iii</sup> Randi Nygaard Lium, foreword to the catalogue Marianne Magnus 2012

<sup>iv</sup> Spælsau (Norwegian Short Tail Landrace) is an ancient Norwegian sheep race. The wool is characterised through having two layers: An outer longhaired glossy undulating layer of wool protecting the underlying layer against wind and rain, and an underlying layer which keeps the sheep warm.

<sup>v</sup> Space Debris; how it was made: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvOjv4CTAa0&t=9s>