



**The difficult and challenging art of tapestry has been practised since medieval times, but today's weavers are influenced more by 21st-century culture than by *fleur de lys*.**

Contemporary themes such as cartoons and computers are currently being re-interpreted by fine arts students at Monash University's Caulfield campus under the direction of senior lecturer and visual artist Kate Derum (GradDipArts (FineArt) 1994).

Monash is one of the few educational institutions in the world to offer tapestry as a major study, yet this expressive artform sits easily beside the more traditional painting, sculpture or printmaking, according to Kate. She took over Monash's tapestry studio in 1993, after being led to the medium and the renowned Victorian Tapestry Workshop (which had been instrumental in setting up the course in 1990) after many years as a painter, printmaker, exhibitor, writer and teacher.

Her recent fourth solo show – *Prayer Rugs for the Antipodes* at Melbourne's Gallery 101 – explored ideas of isolation and the inadequacies of communication in a technological age. Woven with traditional wool and some linen and cotton, the four main works each took four months to make.

"I hadn't really thought of tapestry as a means of expression before I went to work at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop," Kate said. "I was interested in textiles, but working there was an eye-opening experience. It clicked with me that you could create powerful images using a textured medium."

The textural approach to exploring artistic ideas and styles also appeals to her students. Some are into flat loomless weaving, creating works of plastic, acrylic and wire to illustrate their original, contemporary themes. "A few students are exploring the way the surface of a tapestry, although texturally-based, is similar to the digital image on a computer screen. Some students are attracted to cartoon images, and others are interested in feminist themes. "Whatever the theme, tapestry gives the artist a chance to speak in a unique voice or style – you should be able to look at someone's work and know who did it."

With 20 students, the tapestry studio has a significant presence in Monash's College of Art & Design. "Many former students are exhibiting artists, some are working at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop as weavers, and others you'll find in studios experimenting, inventing and pushing tapestry's boundaries."

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