

# Every rug tells a story

THERE are misconceptions about tapestries in Australia. No, they're not just mediaeval wall hangings designed by artists and executed by skilled weavers. Nor are they necessarily a decorative way of enhancing space, providing warmth or a needy seat.

A handful of weavers trained at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in South Melbourne are emerging as prominent visual artists, using tapestry to create one of the country's newest and most exciting artforms.

"Tapestry is not just about expensive public wall hangings commissioned by companies that can afford them. Every culture has some kind of weaving history. In Australia tapestry gets confused with embroidery when, in fact, any material—including wire and paper—can be used to create images and textures," says Kate Derum (not to be confused with the illustrator and artist Kate Durham), who trained as a weaver at the tapestry workshop.

Derum, who initiated a tapestry department at Monash's Caulfield campus in 1993, says there is a pervading ignorance about tapestry in Australia that needs redressing.

She is doing that with her fourth solo show, *Prayer Rugs For the Antipodes*, which opened at the weekend at Gallery 101, Collins Street, city.

Derum prefers to work with traditional wools and cottons, which enable her to create flat surfaces and distinctive lines, and the four largest pieces in her show are based on Muslim prayer rug design. At the top

of the rug is a rectangle within a rectangle, which for centuries has indicated the top of the rug, which must face Mecca.

But the main theme of the work is Antipodean isolation and the inadequacies of communication — in spite of the technological advances of the age.

Derum's angst-ridden subjects, defined by fine, white lines, are set against a backdrop of rich purples, reds and blues.

"The thick weave creates a flatness, a natural awkwardness which comes out of the grid of weaving, very like a computer image," she says.

These four main works, which measure 180 centimetres by 120 centimetres, each took more than four months to make. Derum worked from a loose drawing, positioned behind the warp, as a rough guide, but stresses that everything was worked out on the loom as she went along.

The exhibition also features *Twelve Postcards From The End of the World*, a series of small works based on apocalyptic images woven in Vienna in 1890. "In these postcards I have mimicked the original images of 1890. Taking into account the imminence of the year 2000, I have portrayed faces as masks, as intense. There is no sentimentality."

Derum says there are only a handful of Australian artists exploring tapestry as an artform in Australia

and mentions Sara Lindsay (formerly from Victoria), Kay Lawrence (South Australia), Diana Conroy (New South Wales) and Leonie Bessant (Western Australia) among the forerunners.

Lindsay, who joined the Victorian Tapestry Workshop as founder weaver in 1976 and became manager in 1989, has been working as a solo tapestry artist for close to a decade. Her exhibition, *Dualisms #2*, which runs at Craft Victoria in Fitzroy until Sunday, is the first collaboration between a tapestry artist, sculptors, photographers and painters.

The idea was sparked in 1991 when Lindsay moved to Tasmania to lecture in textiles at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart.

For four years she has worked with torn-up gingham which, when rewoven, has a rich patterned texture — a metaphor for the theme of migration, taking the form of night and day, good and evil, East and West, the present and past.

"For some, gingham intimates home and domesticity. For me it's a means of exploring my ideas about 'the homeland' and migration ... about my parents' migration to Australia from Britain in the 1960s and my move to Tasmania in 1991," she says.

Sydney sculptor Tony Coleing, one of the nine artists in the show, was artist-in-residence at Tasmania University in the early 1990s. Lindsay presented Coleing with photocopies of reconstructed gingham and, in response, he uses the black-and-white weave to represent static on the television screen, through

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In another work with Tasmanian sculptor Heather B. Swann, Lindsay's obsession with Japanese culture and Swann's interest in theatre are meshed as woven stage curtains and actors take on a three-dimensional quality rarely achieved in tapestry.

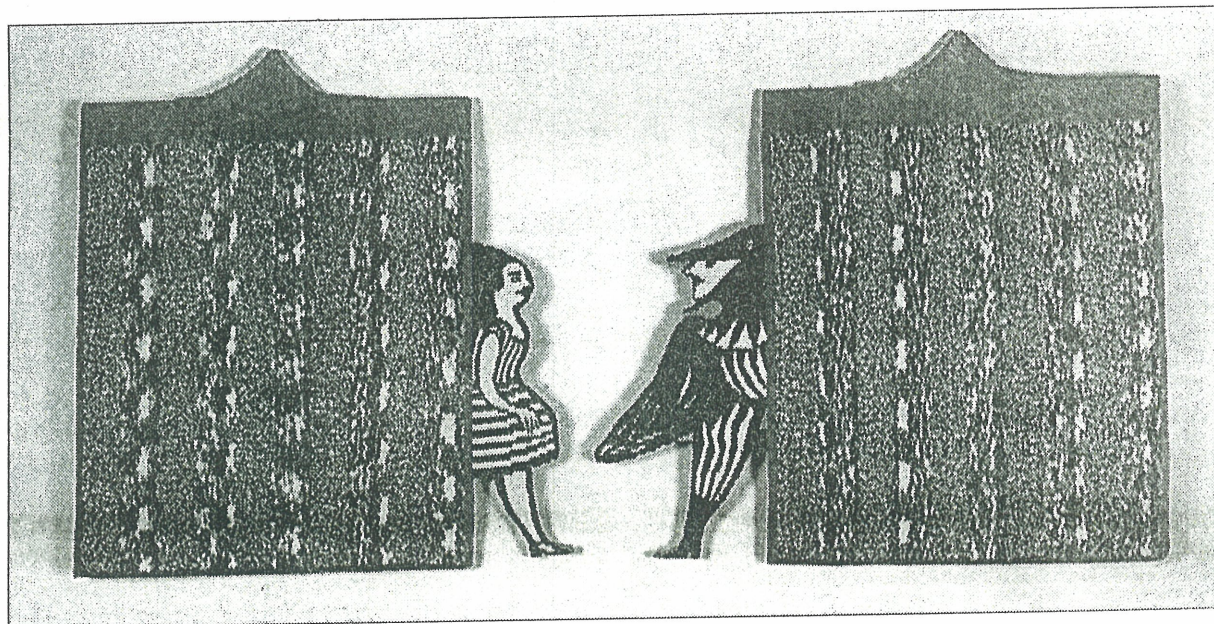
Lindsay describes herself as a visual artist who uses the craft process to create new images. "There is a need for a new language to lift the perception of tapestry. If you work in textiles it's labelled a craft, but that perception is outmoded."

If her credentials are anything to go by, Lindsay is well on the way to addressing the misconception. In 1994 she was awarded an Australia Council Fellowship; her work has been acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and Aichi Prefecture Collection, Japan; she won the outstanding prize in the 5th International Textile Competition '97 in Kyoto, Japan; and in October she will take up an Australia Council residency at the Besozzo Studio in Italy.

**M** Kate Derum's *Prayer Rugs For the Antipodes* runs until 1 March at Gallery 101, 101 Collins Street, city. Sara Lindsay's *Dualisms #2* is at Craft Victoria, 114 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, until Saturday.



**Kate Derum with Prayer Rug West, one of the works on show at Gallery 101, and below, Collaboration IV: Good Friends Well Met by Sara Lindsay and Heather B. Swann**



Picture: CRAIG ABRAHAM

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