

Textured Translations

The Stephens Tapestry Studio



NEW ORLEANS DANDY

Hoggins/Stephens 2005



Marguerite Stephens, February 2015

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In the late 1970s Walter Battiss wrote a detailed note, accompanied by a delightful small water colour, to Marguerite Stephens:

Design: Spirit/SPIRIT Birds that grant desires

1. Background: Rose (broken)
2. Figures: Green, yellow (gold?) blue, vermillion
3. Birds: white birds with blue or grey (pencil colour?) lines. Legs same colours I think.
4. Hair of figures: black

Notes: Birds have 2 & 3 legs!
 Birds have no eyes
 The magic birds appear very fragile but are very powerful
 The females appear very powerful but are weak and need help from the birds.
 I don't think the gold figure will look kitsch.
 What do you think?
 Blue figure can be the blue you choose
 The blue/grey of the birds will have to contrast with the rose background
 But in any case I leave it ALL to you as you will know what makes a good tapestry.



Spirit Birds that grant desires Watercolour, pencil on paper 205X290mm Original design by Walter Battiss and accompanying letter to Marguerite Stephens Private collection

Those who knew Battiss and his wry wit will immediately identify the subtle humour in his writing. They will also recognize the master at work, carefully considering colour and its combinations, speculating on the possible meaning of the work and what his artist's intention might have been. His note appears to be rather prescriptive, but in the end acknowledging that Marguerite is the expert. The question, however, is what has made Mags, as she is widely known today, such a masterful tapestry weaver?

The very first tapestry that Mags wove, was based on an artwork by Cecil Skotnes. Her mother, Coral Stephens, a well-known South African weaver in her own right, saw the incised wood block on display at an exhibition at the Egon Guenther Gallery, Johannesburg in 1963 and told Skotnes that the image would make a wonderful design for a tapestry. "Well, you weave it then," he responded. "No I won't", she replied, "but my daughter will!" And the rest, they say, is history. Skotnes made the cartoon, nothing more than a blown-up photo of the block, and Mags wove the tapestry on a high warped loom built by her mother specifically for the task. Skotnes exchanged his block for Mags' tapestry, promptly sold the tapestry for R100, and gave her R50! Her career was launched. The tapestry does not exist anymore because it was woven with linen warp, which disintegrated many years later, but the Skotnes block which started the whole story still hangs in Mags' house.

Cecil Skotnes made many more designs for tapestries and the two of them collaborated for many years. It was during this time that he introduced her to Eduardo Villa, who was also interested in having his work translated into tapestry. Mags subsequently met Sydney Khumalo and Cecily Sash for whom she also wove many tapestries. She, in fact, became the resident weaver for the whole of the then Amadlozi Group of artists, under the wing of Egon Guenther. "All except Guiseppa Cattaneo," she says, "because his paintings were impossible to translate into a tapestry".

The craft of textile weaving was introduced to South Africa, according to Frieda Harmsen (1985:150-155) by Anglican missionaries in 1904, and a year later, Emily Hobhouse and her assistants opened the first of her series of spinning and weaving schools in the Free State. The aim of these centres was to provide work for women of all races in a country impoverished by the South African, or Anglo-Boer War. The articles they produced were mostly functional. Erich Mayer, known mainly as a landscape painter, is recognized as the first artist to make designs that his wife, Marga Mayer-Gutter executed. It was only

well after the Second World War that weaving acquired a distinctive aesthetic quality in South African art, despite the international revival of tapestry from centuries of dormancy by such French artists as Jean Lurçat in the late -1930s. Bettie Cilliers Barnard's *Women* (1961) is a prime example, woven in the Gobelin technique by Elsabe Sauer, Susan Moolman, and Hester Hoek. Many artists such as Eleanor Esmonde-White, Cecily Sash and Judith Mason did not merely use an existing art work or painting to translate into a tapestry, but designed specifically with the weaving medium in mind. Initially, their tapestries were woven overseas in well-established weaving centres such as Aubusson and Felletin in France, or in Portugal, but increasingly, by South African weavers, such as Marguerite Stephens. On the other hand, a local weaving tradition flourished in such mission stations as Rorke's Drift. The weaving, however, was done very differently and did not follow the format of a specific design. Women would, for example, visualize an idea through listening to a story or through discussion or through a personal experience and the images developed as the tapestry grew on the loom. These women worked spontaneously, unhampered by preconceived ideas about style and technique, and, as a result, their tapestries were naïve, robust and unconventional.

Marguerite Stephens studied Occupational Therapy at Wits University, and since weaving formed an integral part of this field of study, she was extensively trained – albeit inadvertently – in the skill that she has refined over the years into an art.

When Mags wove her first official tapestry based on Skotnes' design, it was on a vertical loom that Coral had arranged to have built for her. Coral used horizontal looms in her weaving business, which produced fabrics for curtains and carpets, but the vertical loom styled on the ancient French Gobelin construction is a better format for tapestry weaving because intricate detail in the design can be easily controlled. Coloured *weft* threads are woven horizontally and alternatively over and under a series of tightly, equally spaced vertical *warp* threads, to form a pictorial or ornamental design. Each coloured weft is carried on a separate bobbin and as the design is gradually built up, the bobbin is passed over and under the warp threads. These weft threads do not pass from selvage to selvage, but only as far as their colour is required by the pattern. They are then battened firmly down so that eventually the warp threads are completely hidden. The weaver copies the design from a cartoon which, in the case of a vertical loom, stands behind the weaver. Because of the essentially vertical and horizontal mechanics of weaving, there are no diagonal, or curved lines, and these have to be created by adding or dropping the requisite number of warp threads on each pass of the weft. Close up this is seen as a stepped effect, as one colour gives way to another, but from a distance though, the lines appear seamless. "What one has in tapestry weaving, is what you and I know today as pixilation," says Mags.

Mags' first loom was two meters wide, but it quickly became evident to her that this was not going to be big enough to fully amplify designs to the dramatic scale that she wanted. She commissioned Michael Fleischer, a sculptor, to build a three meter loom for her. Initially working on her own, Mags now employed a trainee weaver, Lilian Simelane who worked with her from 1970 until she retired to her home in Swaziland in 1998. Margret Zulu joined in 1978 and is now one of two head weavers in the studio, which buzzes with the energy of between ten and twelve women weavers and assistants on any given day.

After Mags has determined the colours for each tapestry design she usually goes to the family farm in Swaziland where the wool is spun and dyed. Incidentally, Cecil Skotnes and Egon Guenther in the mid 1960s went down to the farm in Swaziland together and work commenced with Skotnes' wood block series *Stations of the Cross*, as well as a tapestry commission for the local Anglican church in Pigg's Peak.

On a trip to Canada, Mags saw a five meter loom at the le Crerc workshop in Quebec, and she immediately ordered one which is still in use in the studio. She subsequently ordered a second five meter one from the same Canadian company. Recently, Tim Neethling, built a similar one for her, using exactly the same type of wood and design.



Tapestry studio, Diepsloot, 1980

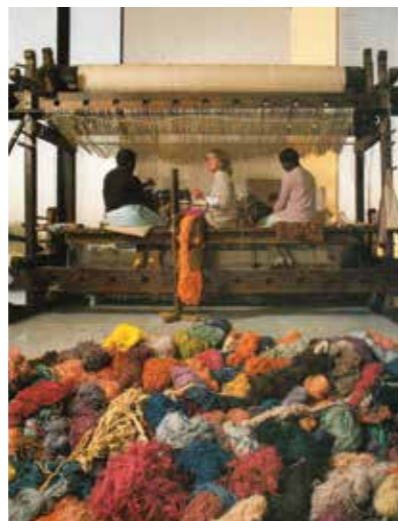
Mags' work was often exhibited at Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. It was through Linda Goodman that she met many of the artists with whom she commenced lifelong collaborations. Judith Mason was one such artist. She designed the celebrated Royal Hotel tapestries, commissioned in 1978. These were three meters high and thirty three meters wide, in sections of three meters each. "Judith is a very meticulous person, mostly preferring to develop the cartoon herself," according to Mags. Typically, Mags would do the tracing of an image from the original artwork/design by the artist onto a clear sheet of film, carefully indicating the various colours and their different shades. Judith did all that from the outset: "Probably because it was drawing a drawing again, or making a drawing from one of her paintings, ending with a drawing rather than starting with one." What is of special significance about the Royal Hotel tapestries, apart from the imposing size and the rich symbolism of its imagery, is the fact that Mags and Judith experimented with using the warp threads as part of the final work: these were plaited, knotted, twisted and allowed to fall like half-drawn curtains across the picture plane of the tapestry.

Mags met Norman Catherine in 1974 through Linda Goodman and the two began a working relationship that has continued to today. The earliest tapestry was of an intimate drawing Catherine made, based on his experiences as a schoolboy: it was called *School Board* and comprised deceptively simple stick figures, similar to what one might expect of a very young child. On closer inspection, though, all the humour and playfulness that one associates with Catherine's work, emerges and the deceptively simple imagery reveals a sophisticated commentary on life. "One of the reasons I particularly like working with Norman," Mags says, "is because he constantly reinvents himself and he often exploits the latest technology in his art. The latest design I am weaving for him is a computer generated image done with sophisticated software. Each of the colours is separated so there is no overlap. It makes my life much easier." Later that year Norman introduced Walter Battiss to Linda and Mags, and the two quickly started up a long and successful series of collaborations. Mags was particularly taken with his protracted performance piece, Fook Island that started in the early 1970s. Small wonder that one of the first tapestries she wove for him was of a typical Fook Feast, bought by Pretoria Art Museum at that time. Battiss was a frequent visitor to the weaving studio, and Mags also visited him at his famous Giotto's Hill house in Pretoria to discuss the progress of various tapestry projects.

Karel Nel led the pack of the new generation of artists with whom Mags collaborated. "I have known him since he was a boy coming to the studio to watch Judith Mason's tapestries being woven. He spent a lot of time in the studio and when I asked him what he wanted to be when he had grown up, he promptly said: "I'm going to be a museum director and then an artist!" The first tapestry she wove based on one of Nel's designs, was for an exhibition at a weaving symposium in Sydney, Australia in 1987, which was shown at the Melbourne Art Museum. The most exciting project on which Mags collaborated with Nel, however, was the Gencor commission for the new headquarters of the company. She had to weave four tapestries, each twelve meters long by one and a half meters wide, forming veritable banners that were suspended in the central atrium of the building. Nel based his designs on mining cores which meant that hundreds of subtly different shades of earth colours had to be dyed to be used in the tapestry. But more difficult even than that was making the images available visually from both the front and the back.

Sam Nthlengethwa is another contemporary artist with whom Mags has had a long and successful working relationship. Their first collaboration was for an exhibition at the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown. "Recently I took a very interesting photograph at a new Gautrain Station," says Mags. "I showed it to Sam and asked if he could use it in one of his collages." Of course he took up the challenge! Of particular interest is the red jersey in the bottom right hand side of the tapestry, woven in mohair, which regains the texture it lost in the two dimensional photograph.

Robert Hodgins was yet another artist introduced to her by Linda Goodman with whom she worked closely for many years. The tapestry diptych *King & Queen* was their first collaboration. "We both had such fun working on this project, because Robert would come into the studio, grab a piece of polystyrene, rummage through the needlework baskets, and start cutting up pieces of fabric – batik, felt and upholstery, ribbon – and pin them on the polystyrene, creating the designs for the two works. The playing cards in each image were from a card game of the night before. Imagine having to weave a design made of textile in the very tactile medium of mohair, and having to make it look like the representation of a textile as well! What Hodgins particularly liked about tapestry, was the effects one could get by mixing or blending two strong colours in one weft. The colours bleed into each other: one



Tapestry studio interior, Diepsloot, 1987

yellow and two red threads, or two yellow and one red one made for very interesting lines. He said it was an effect that was impossible to get from oil paint." Mags remembers that Hodgins insisted on being present at the cutting off of his first tapestry. He invited all his friends to celebrate the occasion with him, including William Kentridge and Deborah Bell. And that is how Mags started her long collaboration with Kentridge.

The first tapestry she wove based on a Kentridge design, was for the Porter series called *Man with Chairs* in the late 1990s. The Porter series ended up consisting of about fifteen tapestries. One of these, *Office Love*, was commissioned by the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Carlos Basualdo, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art saw this particular tapestry commission and promptly organized an exhibition at the Museum in 2008. He also, in 2008, published a book, *William Kentridge Tapestries*, based on the tapestries exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

With Kentridge's interest in *The Nose* many more tapestries followed, culminating in a cycle called *Streets of the City*. These were exhibited at the Goodman Project Space at Arts on Main in 2010 before they were shipped to Naples, Italy. A book, with the same title, accompanied the exhibition. In 2012 followed an exhibition of the Porter series, this time packaged under the title: *Will you join me at the ball?* at the Centro de Arte Contemporaneo in Malaga, Spain.

Maria de Corral curated the show in a unique way by placing selected sculptures by Kentridge in close proximity to his tapestries. "What I particularly liked about these works," Mags says, "is the fact that Kentridge pays subtle homage to Picasso in the tapestry designed particularly for this exhibition. Malaga is Picasso country: he was born there and his father taught at the local Art Academy. Kentridge integrated Picasso's famous *Bird of Peace* and the *Guernica* light in the tapestry". Arguably the jewel in their collaboration crown has been the comprehensive exhibition of Kentridge tapestries at Wits Art Museum in 2014 showing a fair number of the Kentridge tapestries she has woven for him.

"William works extremely quickly and is used to collaborating with other craftsmen. It came naturally to him to work with the weavers.

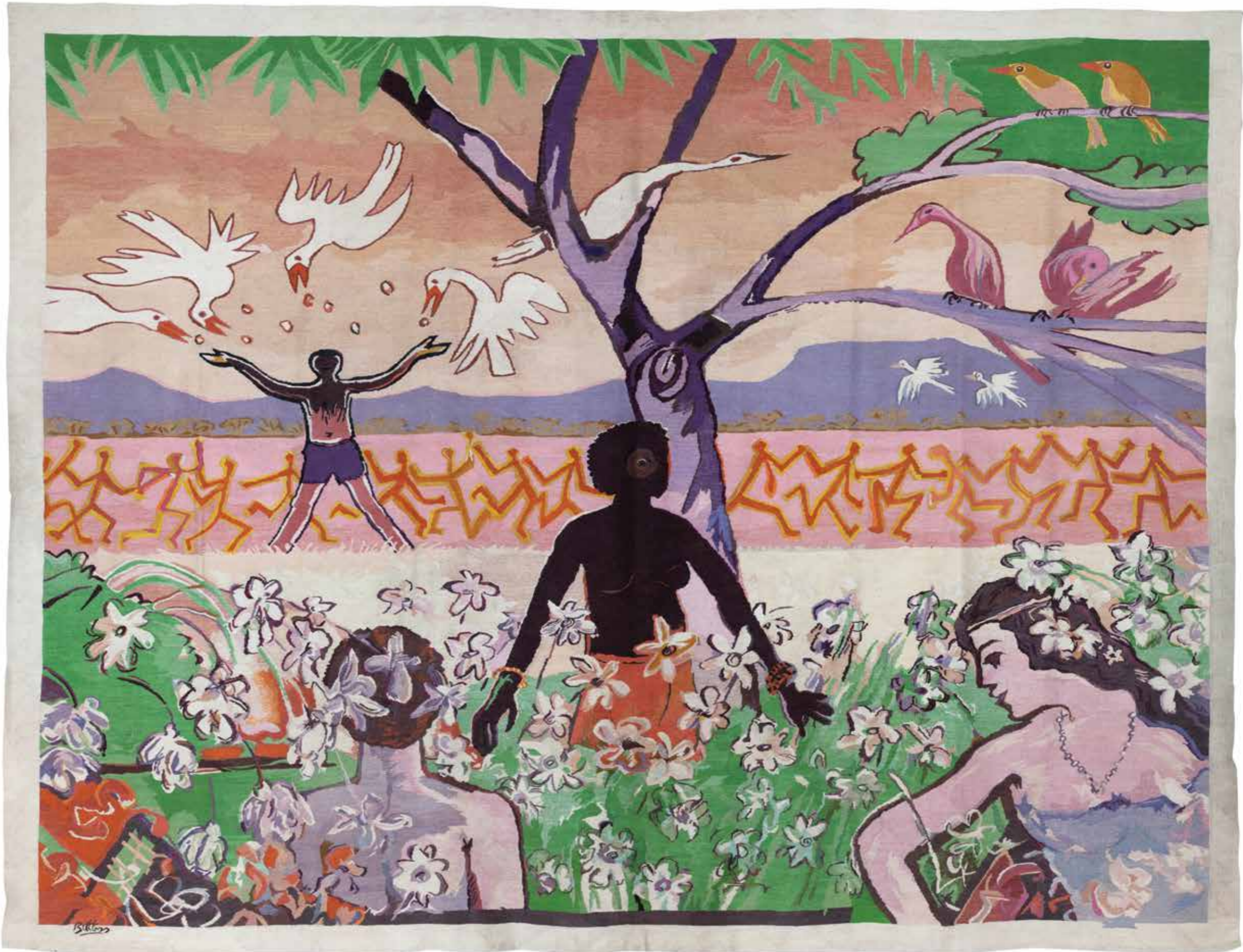
"His collages, which involves torn paper over which he draws and paints, is like the "choreography" of the hands of the weavers when making tapestries." Kentridge's many "projections" might appear fleeting in nature: they are as much of erasure as they are of assemblage. But in his tapestries, the images virtually become frozen projections.

In addition, Kentridge, it can be argued has always been interested in the notion of portability, and the tapestry, his tapestries, has the propensity to be folded up and unrolled, like a carpet, or hung like a wall covering in a new context.

"Tapestry", Maria de Corral says, "is the new remedy for amnesia. It maintains memory itself. The many maps Kentridge uses in his tapestries are a summary of the subjectivity of the terrain that holds time and history, showing how violence, subjugation, quests for power, traumas and inequality emerge as graphic synthesis of the events on his maps."

This is what makes Mags such a masterful tapestry weaver: she can interpret the vision of the artist expertly and translate it into a tactile medium with phenomenal result.

Wilhelm van Rensburg



Walter Battiss
Fruits of Life
2012 (designed 1981) 2/5
3060X3880mm



Walter Battiss
10 People in a Mopipi Tree
1981 1/5
1950X2400mm



Walter Battiss
Walking Feathers
2014 (1980/81) 2/3
1800X2400mm



Robert Hodgins
King & Queen (diptych)
1991
2480X1540mm; 2430X1490mm

Robert Hodgins
New Orleans Dandy
2013 (designed 2009) 1/3
2800X2310mm



Clear film showing annotations for colour and line over original artwork for tapestry design





Robert Hodgins
Rococo I
2008 1/5
1020X1090mm



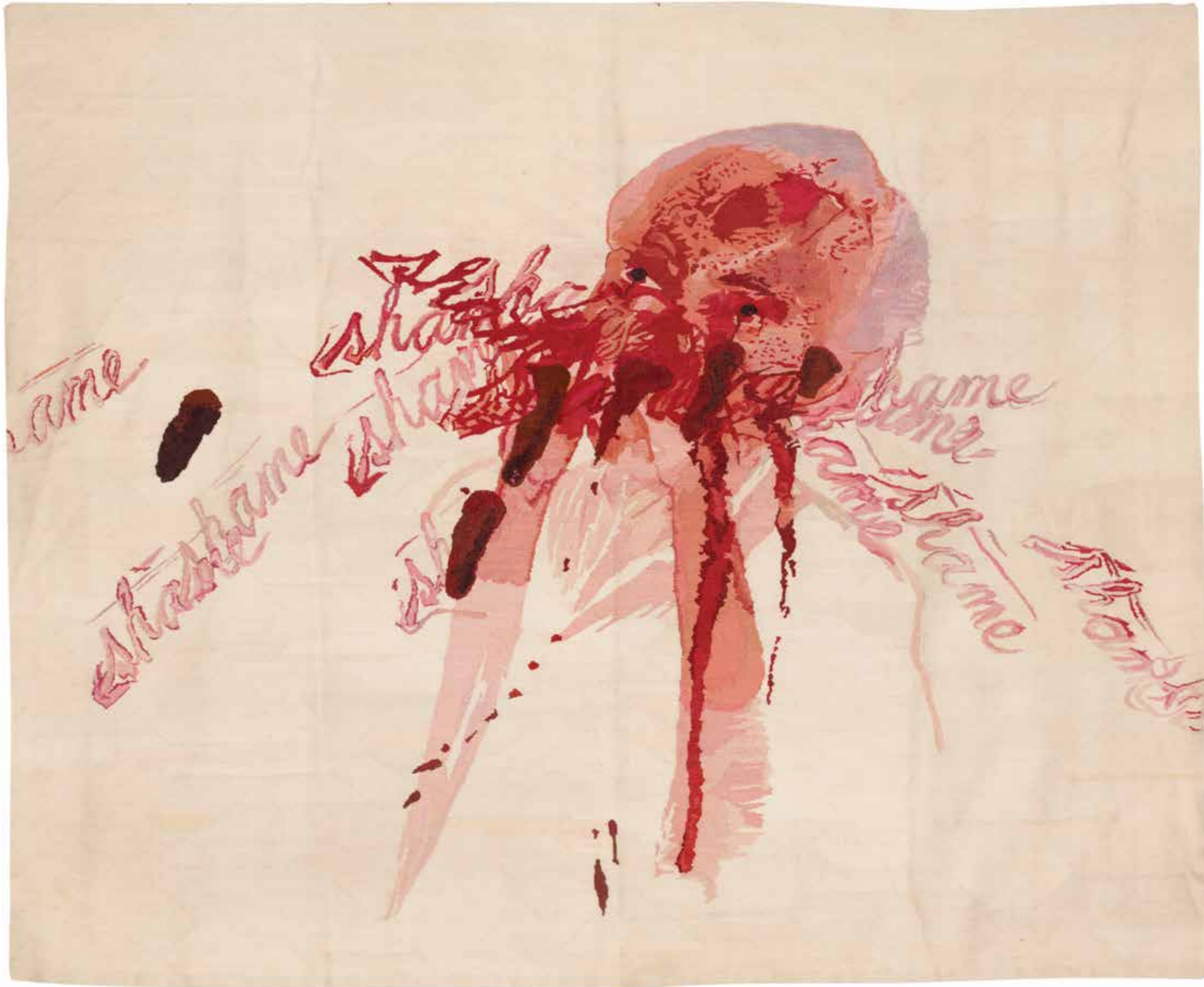
Robert Hodgins
Rococo II
2008 1/5
1060X1090mm



Marguerite Stephens in conversation with Robert Hodgins, Diepsloot, late 2009



Robert Hodgins
Blue Suit Guy
2013 (2012) 2/3
2140X1460mm

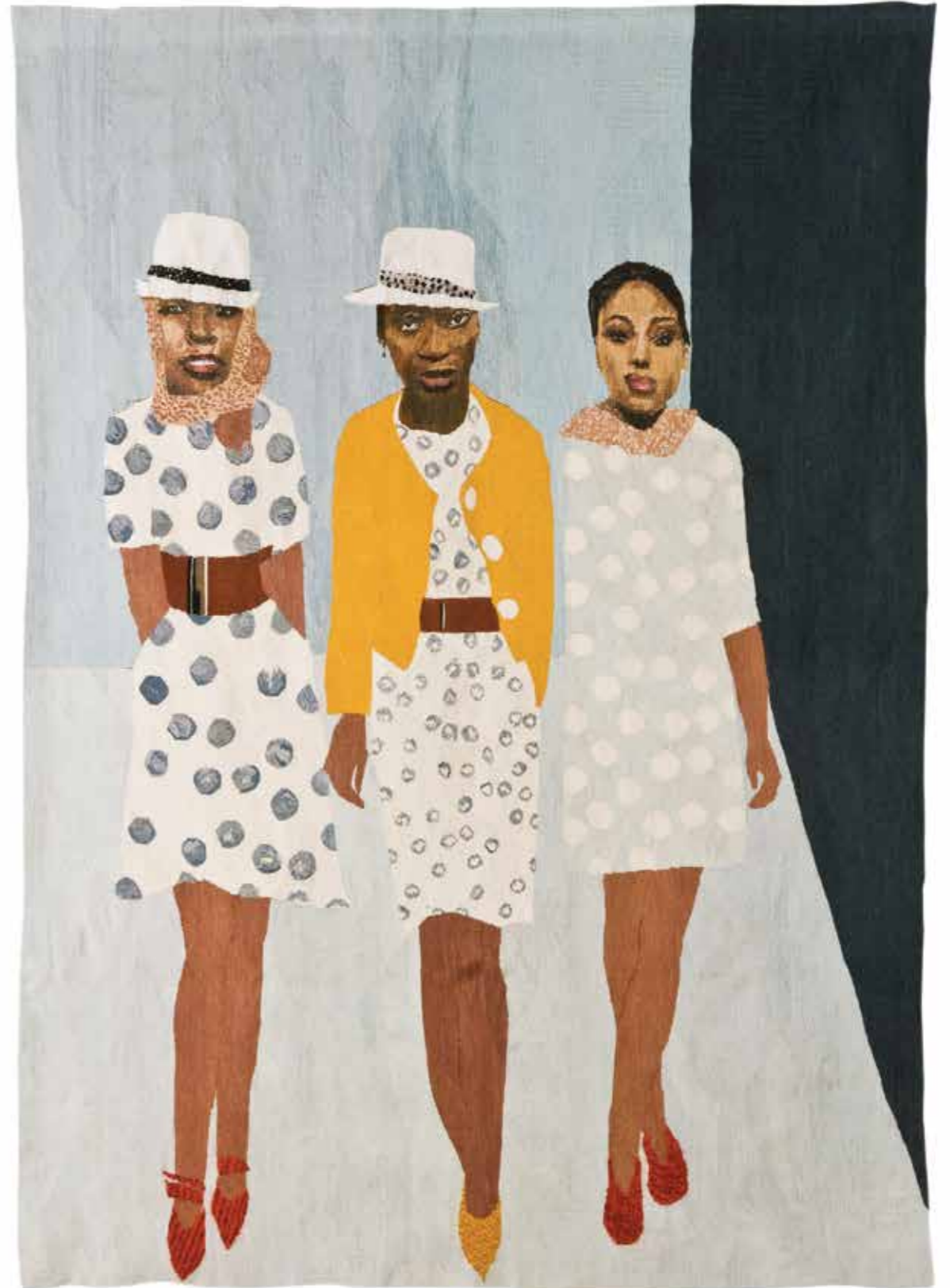


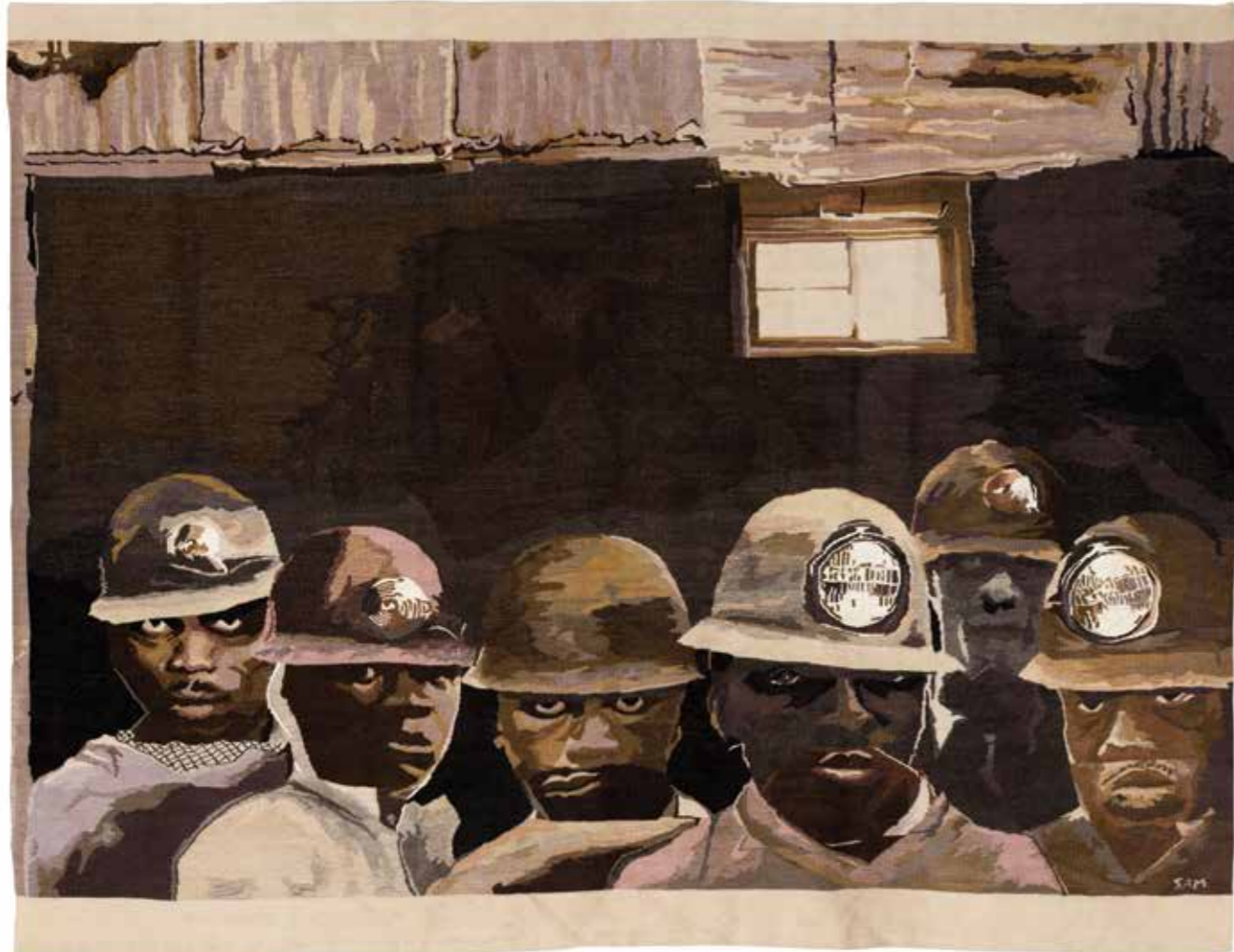
Penny Siopis
Shame/Shame
Circa 1995 1/1
2020X2500mm



Sam Nhlengethwa
Homage to Romare Bearden
2013 1/3
2450X3600mm
Signed on the back by artist

Sam Nhlengethwa
3 Models
2012/13 1/3
2450X1720mm





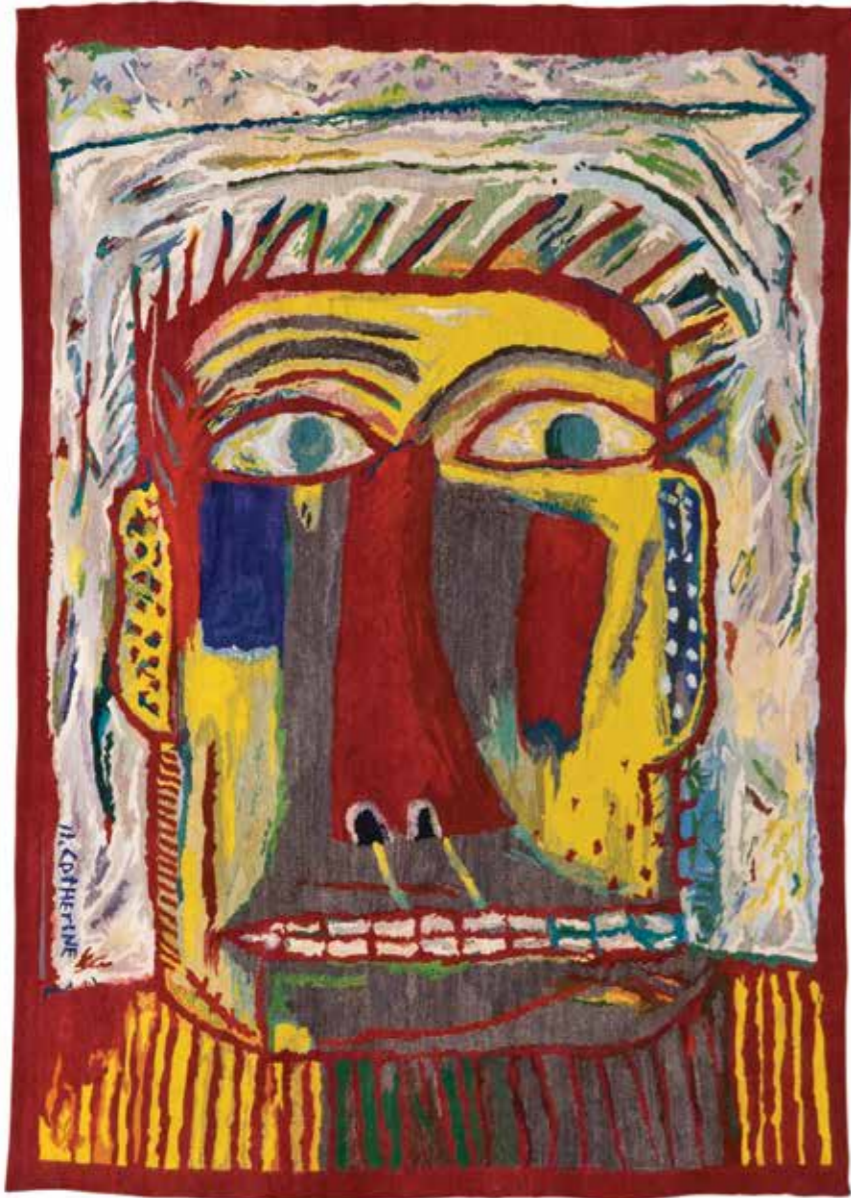
Sam Nhlengethwa
Night Shift
2012 1/3
2310X3020mm



Sam Nhlengethwa
Back Stage
2013 AP 1/2 (edition 3)
2160X2950mm



Sam Nhlengethwa
Gautrain Station
2013 1/3
1930X2560mm



Norman Catherine
Wise Guy I
2015 (1990) 3/3
2770X2230mm



Norman Catherine
Wise Guy II
2014 (1990) AP 1/2
2070X1630mm



Norman Catherine
Wise Guy III
2014 (1990) AP 1/2
2090X1070mm



Norman Catherine
School Board
 1986 1/1
 1960X2070mm



Norman Catherine
Hodge Podge
 2015 1/5
 1580X2170mm

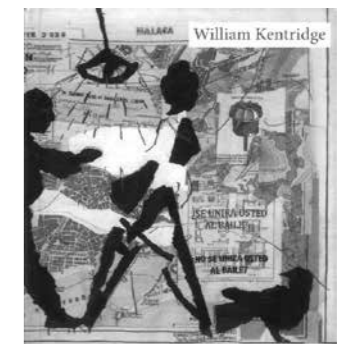
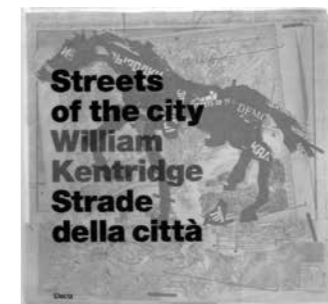


Karel Nel
Conciliatory Rod & Vessel Head
1987 1/1
2510X2530mm

Left
Karel Nel
Pele Landing
1992 1/1
3040X2490mm



William Kentridge
Cicero
2014 1/6
1860X2000mm

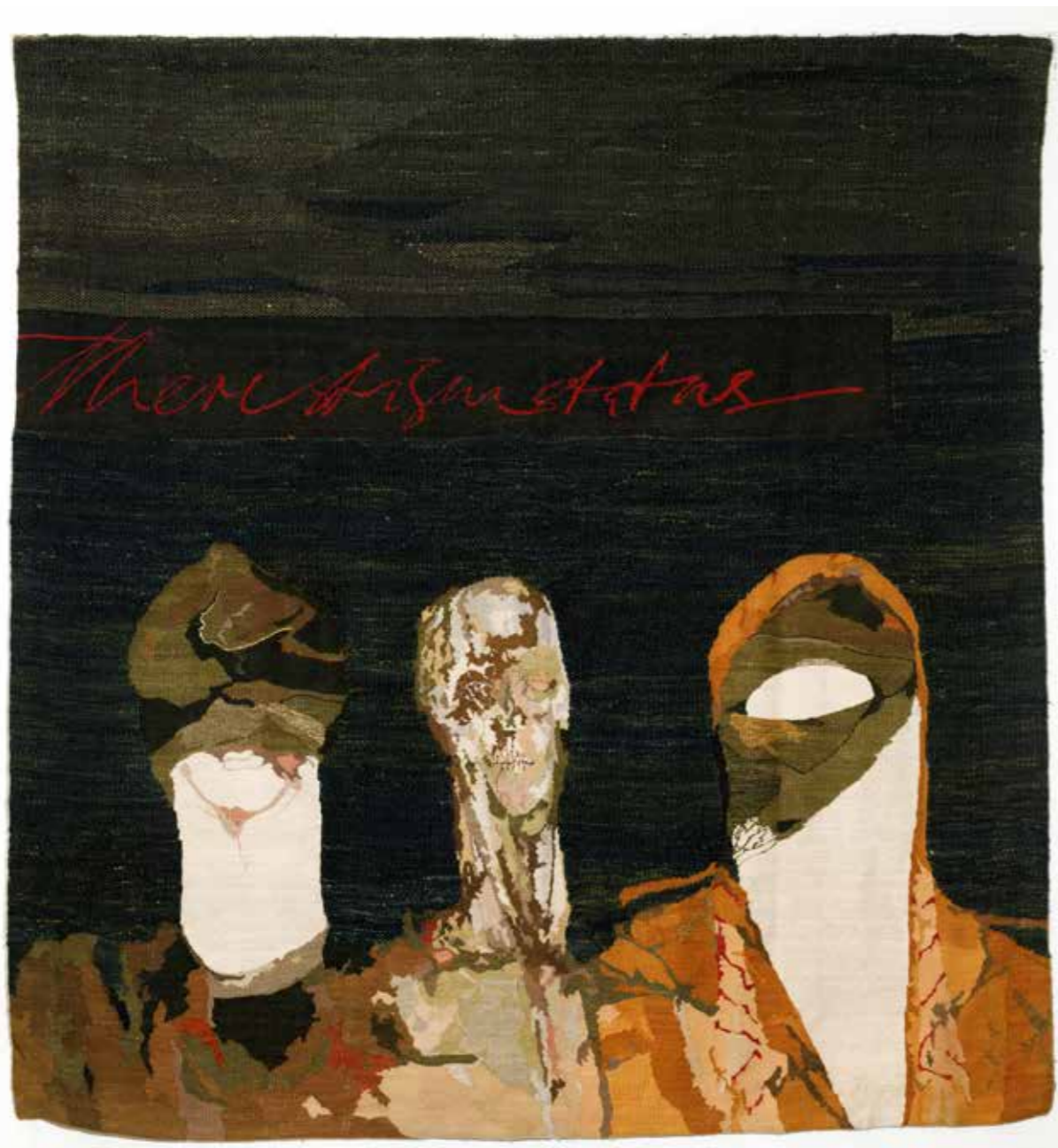


Covers of catalogues for exhibitions featuring tapestries designed by William Kentridge



Homage to Christopher Smart.

Judith Mason
Homage to Christopher Smart
2014 2/5
2150X2800mm



Judith Mason
Media Fed Hunger
1980 1/1
2230X2330mm



Judith Mason
The Garden
Circa 1995 1/1
2000X2580mm



Marguerite Stephens and Judith Mason, March 2015



Judith Mason
— for the lion roars himself complete...
2014 1/5
2100X2630mm

For Mags



Left Original artwork by Robert Hodgins for *New Orleans Dandy*
Right Clear film tracing for printing and enlargement of the cartoon used for weaving *New Orleans Dandy*

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Textured translations: The Stephens Tapestry Studio* at GALLERY AOP, March 2015

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Note: All tapestries are woven from mohair. Dates in brackets refer to dates when tapestries were first woven

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