



CATCH ME IF I FAINT

Professor Lesley Millar, MBE, talks to Celia Pym about her work and career

Lesley Millar, curator, teacher, and weaver, has built an exceptional international reputation for her wide-ranging textile exhibitions. Her track record is impressive – 19 exhibitions, working with more than 200 artists in 16 countries over 26 years.

Revelation at the Barbican Curve in 1997 found a wide audience for large-scale textile artwork that revealed the power and cultural politics of textiles; *Textural Space*, opening simultaneously across six venues, and then travelling to the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, in 2001, introduced many spellbound visitors to Japanese textile work and its concept of space; *Lost in Lace*, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, 2011, captivated audiences with its delicacy and its stories of lace, light, and shade; and, more recently, *Kawaii* showed us textile work from Japan that challenged the notion that kawaii translates simply as “cute.”

Millar will retire as professor of textile culture and director of the International Textile Research Centre at the University for the Creative Arts this autumn. She'll become professor emerita in textiles and has plans and active projects for the next two years. Hers is unlikely to be a quiet retirement. I met Millar at the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce, to talk about her work and career.

We began with how Millar got started with weaving. She has a confiding manner and tells stories as if they'd happened yesterday. In her early 20s, she moved from Manchester to London with her then husband, a rock 'n roll musician. She took a research assistant job at the Slade Film Department. One day a man walked in, declared himself depressed, grabbed a handful of sugar cubes from a bowl, and walked out. He made an impression. He came again and asked Millar, “What are you doing here?” When she replied that she was interested in colour and film, he said, “You should be making textiles.” This was the artist and documentary filmmaker Lutz Becker, who later became her partner.

Millar had been thinking then about how to get colour into materials. She didn't know precisely how or why, and, as she says, she didn't have any training – but she did have a motivating drive. She wanted, above all, to translate the colours she saw in nature onto and into garments. Colour inspiration came from nature, but she was also exploring London, and at Liberty's department store, she came upon Bernat Klein's textiles. It was a “haptic encounter,” based on the sense of touch. She fell completely in love with the fluffy, fuzzy weaves and

the colours meshing and blending in the jackets and dresses made from Klein's fabrics.

Following her gut and Lutz's prompt, Millar walked into Hammersmith College of Art (later Chelsea College of Art) and asked if she could study textiles. No portfolio. Just – would they have her? And they did. Talking about the next three years studying weaving and dyeing, Millar lights up as she recalls literally “skipping down Ladbrooke Grove to get to the studios.” She was excited about how different fibres absorbed colour and how she could translate and construct the colours into cloth. Millar also discovered she had an excellent colour memory. Later, when she accepted commissioned work, she found that after only a single visit to a client's home, she could recall all its colours. Back in the studio, she could select her dyes with complete precision.

While studying at Hammersmith, Millar visited an exhibition, *The Navajo Blanket*, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1973. The blankets were a revelation – textiles, she said, never featured in exhibitions at that period. The show turned her toward rug weaving. She studied at a Sussex weaving studio, Graffham Weavers, run by Gwen and Barbara Mullins, and later, as an artist in residence at Sevenoaks School, established the school's weaving department.

As Millar looks back, she identifies this grounding in skill and craft as formative to all her later curating and teaching. It shapes her questions as a curator and informs her responses as a teacher. At Sevenoaks School, Millar met the painter and teacher Bob White. He became her creative partner – “I discuss everything with Bob,” she says.

Millar began her curatorial career with *Revelation*, at the Barbican in 1997. It featured large-scale work, heavy and unafraid of politics and narrative. It's startling today to read the overt sexism in some reviews. One journalist asks the husband of a participating artist what he thinks of her work. This is worth mentioning since, as Millar says, “It's hard to imagine in 2023 how empty of textiles the art world then was.” In 1988, she remembers, “There was Pennina Barnett's show *The Subversive Stitch*, but that was it.”

Millar refuses to make her early curatorial work sound hard – instead, she speaks about *Revelation* with pure excitement. We wind our way to talking about the show's opening – and she remembers it clearly. Here she was introduced to Keiko Kawashima, a Kyoto-based textile curator, who became a long-time collaborator. Kawashima made a strong first impression, wearing Issey Miyake and an immaculate bob ▶

Image right: Teruyoshi Yoshida Fabrica *Through the Surface*, 2003.
Image far right: Harumi Isobe *Textural Space*, 2001.

