

Liz Williamson woven in Asia

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biography →187

Liz Williamson's work is familiar to many people who know of, and wear, her distinctive woven wraps and shawls. While working as senior lecturer and coordinator of textiles at the College of Fine Arts, in Sydney, she also makes her woven work on large floor looms in a studio at her home. At times she also employs a skilled weaver to assist with the weaving of her designs.

Central to Williamson's work is her strong interest in the way cloth is constructed. To give a unique appearance and surface texture she makes many of her designs by interlacing threads of different fibre content together within a particular weave structure. After weaving, these pieces are washed and finished so the fibres react differently to one another — some threads shrink and felt while others remain unchanged, creating a finished textile with a textured, crinkled or crushed surface.

Williamson's interest in altering cloth has been part of her practice for many years and has led her to research fabric that has already been altered in some way — changed over time through wear and tear, or then changed again through the process of darning and mending. Her investigation includes researching the social and economic circumstances that make these frugal activities necessary, and the education of those who needed to learn how to do it, through making samplers.

Recently, Liz Williamson has been involved in several development projects in Asia, working with skilled weavers in Vietnam, Cambodia, India and Pakistan, many of whom she met while teaching at a UNESCO workshop, Vital Traditions,

in Hanoi in 2001. The purpose of these projects is to revive and recreate traditional woven textiles for employment and income generation. Her work:

has involved introducing weave techniques and structures, and developing designs, patterns and colour combinations, often related to a specific textile tradition.¹

One group is the Milanangan (meeting place) group of weavers, formed in West Bengal in the late 1990s, and led by Shudhangshu Basak, an outstanding participant at the Vital Traditions workshop. He had guided the Milanangan weavers to extend their range of woven products and materials and Williamson saw an opportunity to contribute to their income and employment while at the same time working with them to convert her own woven one-off wraps and scarves to a production range.

Using weave structures and designs I've woven for many years in wool, the Milanangan weavers have re-interpreted the designs in fine silk threads while other designs combine wool and silk, with some being finished in my Sydney studio. Marketed as 'Liz Williamson — Woven in Asia' this range gives the Milanangan group experience of a different market and clientele, shifting their experience from selling to 'fair trade' outlets, to gallery and museum outlets.²

Meanwhile, in 1998, Williamson was introduced to a particular kind of Jacquard loom at the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles (MCCT), in Canada. Jacquard looms were among the first pieces of equipment to use a form of computer technology, with their complex punch card systems for organising the weave structure. The new looms are

usually found only in industry, but this specialist facility makes Jacquard weaving accessible for individual practitioners. Williamson says:

MCCT's looms are an interesting mix of digital and hand technologies, as designs are developed in Photoshop and Pointcarre programs to digitally control the warp, while the weft is thrown by hand. Jacquard weaving has enabled me to juxtapose the visual texture of both imagery and weave structures, combined in complex arrangements.³

A computer program allows an artist to scan an image, work on it and modify it, and then direct the program to sort out a weave structure for individually selected parts of the length of fabric. Ironically, the motifs that Liz Williamson is working with on this extraordinarily hi-tech equipment are to do with the most labour-intensive and painstaking kind of textile construction — darning. It could be a handkerchief darned by her mother; a darned piece of Italian silk damask; a patched pair of pants; a mended doyley or piece of lace. Between these two technologies lies Williamson's interest in a long history of changing social circumstances, changing skills and technologies, and changing aesthetics and values in textiles.

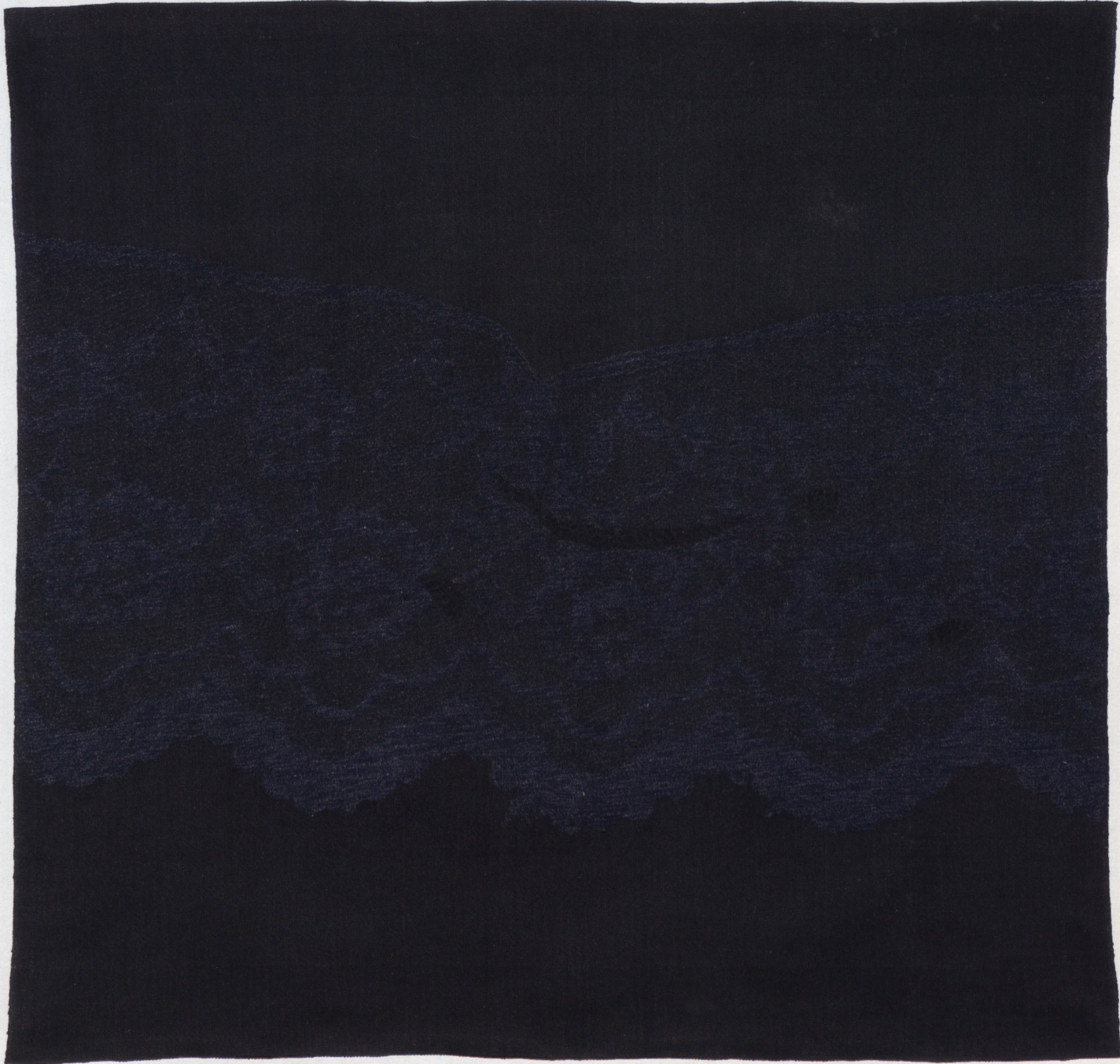
GRACE COCHRANE

NOTES

1. Liz Williamson, 'Dialogue: exploring opportunities in textiles: Liz Williamson and Kelly Thompson', *Object magazine* 50, Aug 2006, pp 31–32.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*



1. **Lace textile hanging** 2005

one-off work
woven by Liz Williamson on a Jacquard
loom using hand and digital technologies
at the Centre for Contemporary Textiles,
Montreal, Canada
cotton, silk, polyester
1000 × 1030 mm

PHOTO: IAN HOBBS



2 & 3. Weavers at the loom,
Milanangan group, West Bengal, India,
2006.
PHOTO: LIZ WILLIAMSON



4. **Fold wrap** 2005
limited series
hand-woven on eight-shaft loom,
felted, Liz Williamson's studio, Sydney
wool
1830 x 265 x 50 mm
PHOTO: IAN HOBBS

5. **Bubble scarf** 2006
production series
hand-woven by Milanangan group,
West Bengal, India
wool and silk
1740 x 240 x 10 mm
PHOTO: IAN HOBBS

6. **Band scarf** 2006
production series
hand-woven by Milanangan group,
West Bengal, India
wool and silk
2080 x 400 mm
PHOTO: IAN HOBBS