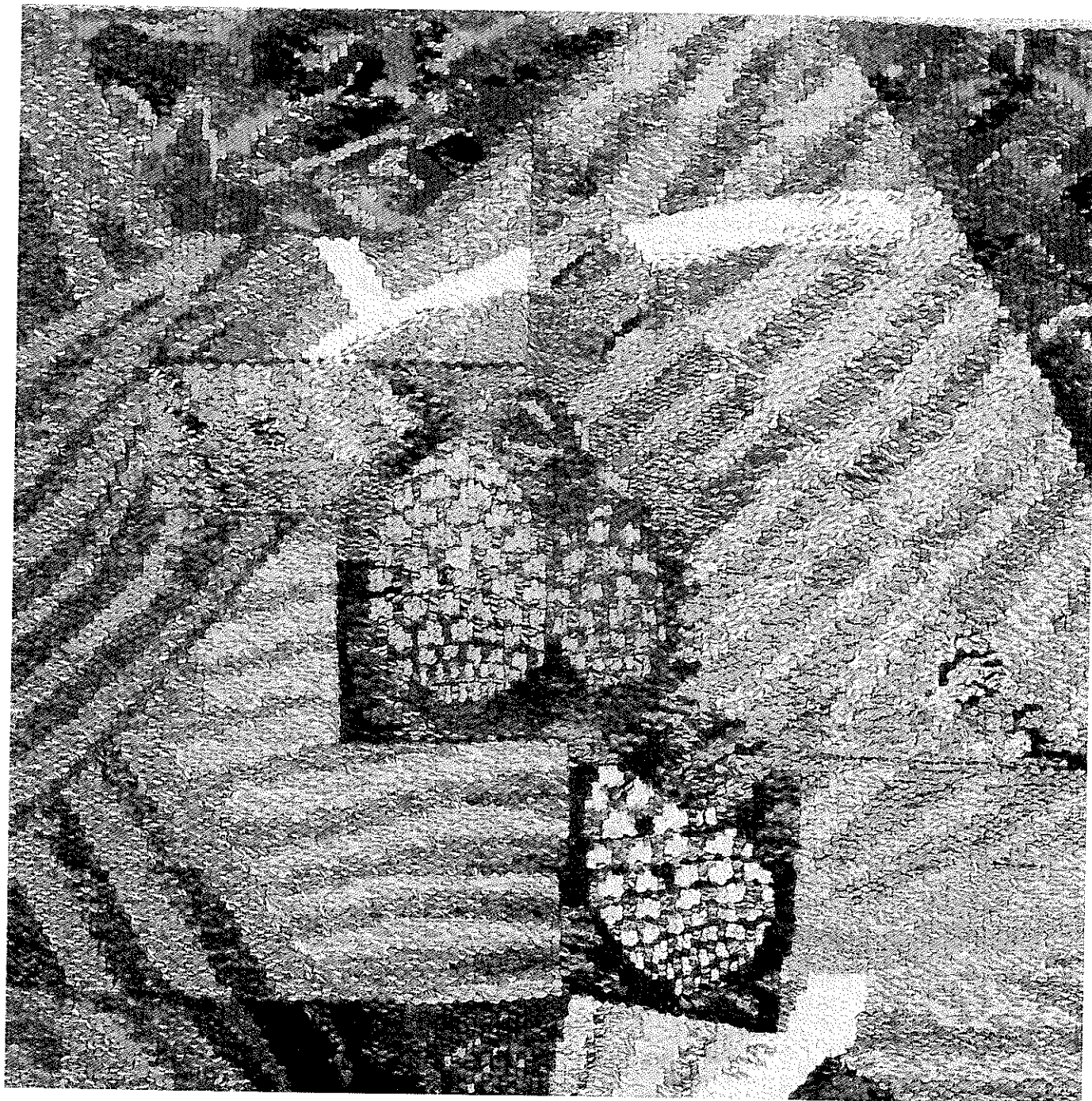


Times and Places: the Recent Work of Valerie Kirk



Pineforest Plantation (detail)
1993
woven tapestry: mixed yarns
57 x 38in (150 x 100cm)



Dwelling 1998

woven tapestry and painting on board:

mixed yarns, acrylic paint, pastel

15 x 115in (40 x 300cm)

Collection of the Legislative Assembly of the ACT

Valerie Kirk's recent work, *Dwelling*, is a long monochrome tapestry strip. The images are closely cropped, so that what we see is a series of details rather than a coherent image. The viewer's eye traverses a rich assemblage of patterns and textures, the kind we associate with the wealth of textiles that inhabit domestic spaces: doilies, knits, patchwork, lace, upholstery fabric. Interpolated between, or perhaps swimming across, this kaleidoscope of images, is the repeated motif of a salmon. It looks curiously at home as it navigates its way along this textile stream, an ambiguous motif in Kirk's tapestry world.

Valerie Kirk emigrated to Australia from her homeland, Scotland, in 1987. Earlier waves of migrants to Australia were encouraged to assimilate. "New Australians" was the well-meaning term for recently arrived migrants, its innocuous sound concealing an all-pervading pressure

to efface the past, the mother tongue, and all sense of place which was not that of the new country. These days, we acknowledge the impossibility of such a comprehensive amnesia, and, with the permission that Australia's multi-cultural society offers, we imagine other ways in which it might be possible for people who have left their homelands to accommodate their new world.

With the availability of cheap travel, migration is now much less of a permanent condition than it once was: people can and do travel backwards and forwards between the places of their birth and their adopted homes. Even for those for whom this is out of the question, either because they can't afford it or because their birthplaces are closed to them, the media, the internet and telecommunications mean that the boundaries between places are infinitely permeable. The migrant, then, is not so much transplanted to

a new home as constantly negotiating a number of possible homes, moving between places in what can be both a literal journey and a journey of the imagination and memory.

Since her arrival in Australia, Valerie Kirk's work has explored questions of identity and migration, using the language and history of textiles as metaphors for her shifting experience of self and place. Earlier works layered references to landscape and Australian textile artefacts to refer to the process of negotiating a sense of place, mobilising the surfaces of her tapestries in an interplay between interior and exterior, nature and culture, public and domestic space. Her latest work, made between 1997 and 2001, during which time she spent some months in Scotland, returns to specifically Scottish textile practices to extend and further explore questions of identity and place.

What is it that we see when we trace the journey of Kirk's salmon in *Dwelling*? The viewpoint of the tapestry seems to offer the possibility that, if we could stand back a little further, the image would cohere, and we might see the fish suddenly placed in a domestic context, tamed by the translucent walls of an aquarium, perhaps, through which we might suddenly glimpse clearly the comfortable world of a conventional living room. But Kirk's image refuses us this predictable perspective, offering only a mysterious palimpsest of intimate fabric details. In this context, the fish appears inscrutable, strangely self-sufficient, perhaps, but unassimilable, too – a wildcard in this lexicon of textile signs.

The salmon returns again in another of Kirk's recent tapestries, *Croxxing*. This time it arcs across the black ground of the tapestry, which is scored and hatched with a pattern of

intersecting crosses, like asterisks, scratchy marks replicated in the painstakingly ordered grid of warp and weft. The salmon appears to be leaping up the tapestry, as though working its way upstream, back to its native waters. But although the salmon is represented in all of its naturalistic, lifelike beauty, its habitat is ambiguous. It is not a denizen of the 'natural' world at all, but of the gridded ground of the tapestry.

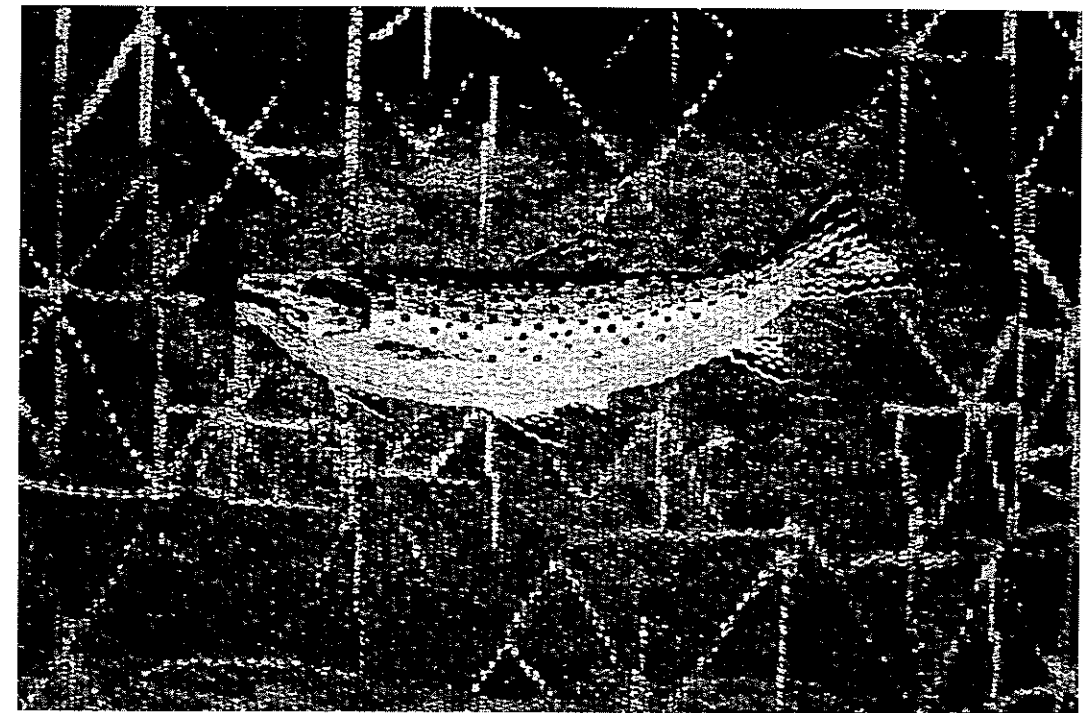
Kirk indicates that this grid is based on the stitches of Scottish Sanquhar knitting, a tradition of patterning that was originally based on the structure of warp and weft threads of woven textiles. Yet the grounds of Kirk's tapestries are not ordered and coherent; they are unfixed, unstable, continuously dissolving and reforming. In this shifting world, Kirk's salmon should not be read as displaced (literally a 'fish out of water') but as a traveller.

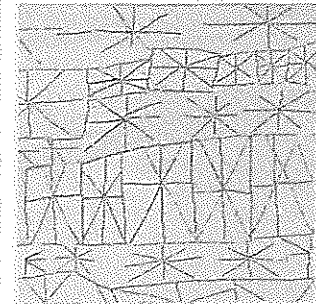
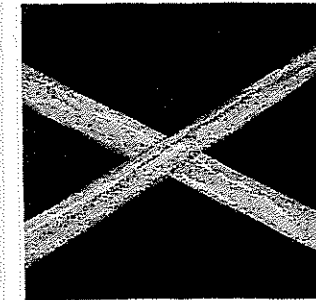
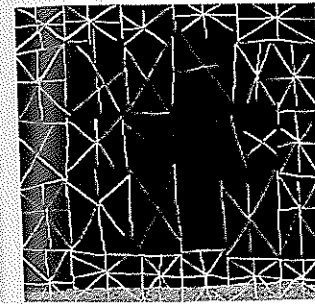
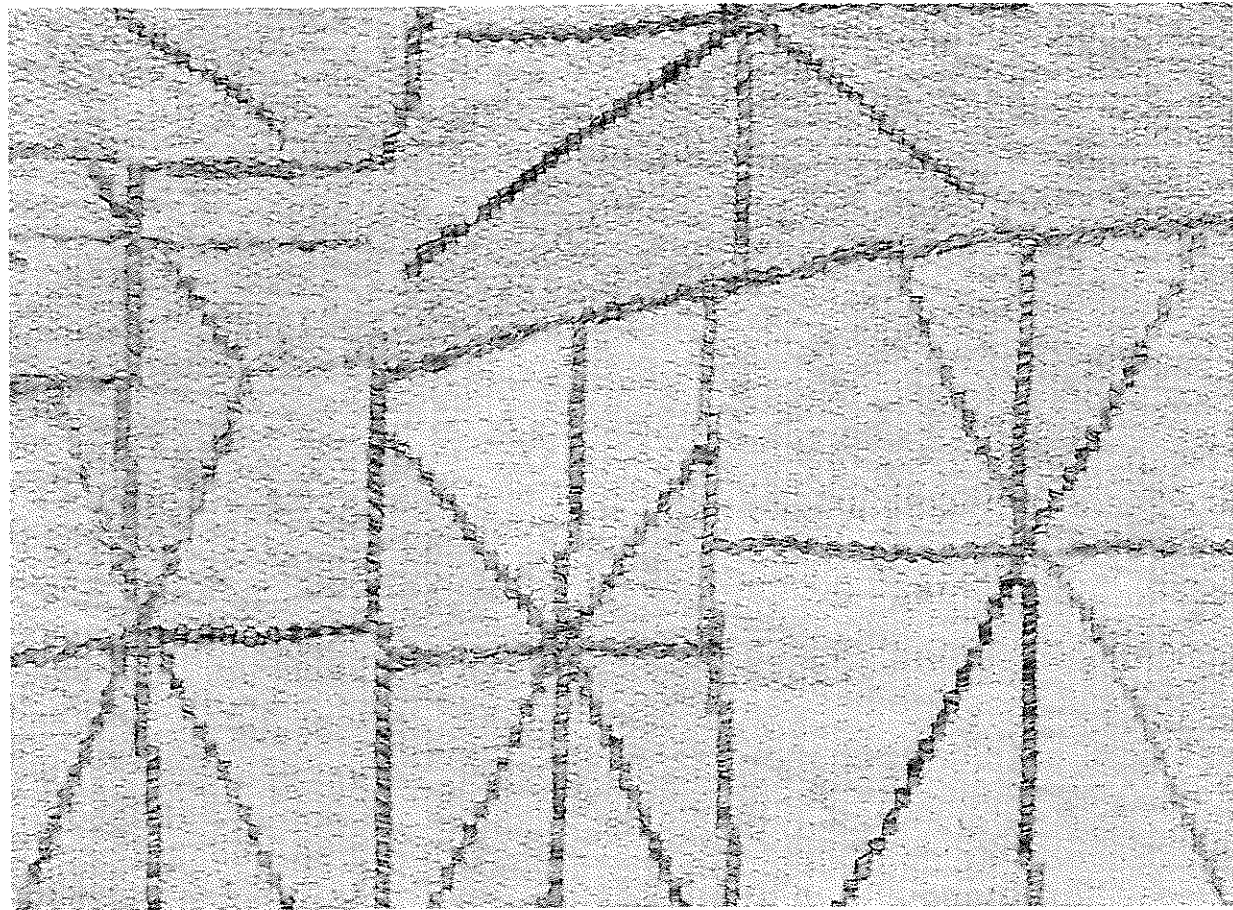
Croxxing (detail)

1999

woven tapestry: mixed yarns,
81 x 37in (210 x 97cm)

Collection of the
Museum & Art Gallery of
Northern Territory, Darwin





Croxxes

1999-2000

woven tapestry: mixed yarns
each 19 x 19in (50 x 50cm)

In *Dwelling*, it moves across a multiplicity of textile details, in the same way that the mind travels across the remembered spaces of our lives. *Dwelling's* microcosmic focus brings us in touch with the way in which memory configures experience – not through the invocation of intact narratives or spaces, but through a layering of sensory data, in which our temporal experience is collapsed. The space of *Dwelling* replicates this temporal telescoping so that places and time dissolve in a syncretic whole. In *Croxxing*, this telescoping is represented in more abstract form, using representations of the structures of woven textiles themselves to construct a web or net that can be seen to connect the temporal and material spaces of the tapestry.

Thinking about both *Croxxing* and *Dwelling*, I am reminded of Archie Brennan's observation that tapestry is "a creative journey up the warp". The journeying salmon is not simply

navigating its way across time and space, but through a landscape of material culture, mapping the context of Kirk's creative life. In this sense, the salmon stands in for two paradoxical conditions. On the one hand, its separateness, its dislocation from the natural world might suggest that it represents the unassimilable nature of migrant experience, that poignant condition in which memory and circumstance never quite 'fit' the collective experiences of either the home country or the adopted culture. On the other hand, it could also describe the consolations of such a condition, the ability to choose and respond to both cultural contexts, to fashion an individual response to this incessant shifting between worlds.

Handmade objects have a particular power. They are imbued with a kind of energy, as though we can see or feel coiled up inside them the passage of time: the time invested in making them, certainly, but also the time

which has passed in the world since they were made. They are the mute witnesses to histories, both great and small, often surviving long after their makers and the people who have tended them have passed into oblivion.

Opals: Coober Pedy

1984

woven tapestry: mixed yarns
60 x 42in (155 x 110cm)



On a recent trip home to Scotland, Valerie Kirk began a series of drawings of Ayrshire whitework embroidered objects, some of which belonged to family friends, some her own family's treasured heirlooms. The manufacture of Ayrshire whitework flourished in the west of Scotland between 1800 and 1860; it was developed as a cottage industry as a way of adding value to Scotland's nascent cotton and muslin weaving industries. Exploiting the cheap labour of women and children, it was hoped that these locally made products would undercut more expensive imported textile items from India. Nevertheless, the making of these items was time-consuming (agents allowed ten days for the embroidery of a collar) and expensive.

Worked in pastel on dark paper, Kirk's drawings of baby's bonnets, christening robes and women's cuffs and collars have a strange power. She has devoted a great deal of attention to the depiction of the embroidered panels and how, through

being stitched, their patterns have become integral with the cloth. In some images, she has gone so far as to literally prick the patterns into the paper, imitating both the method for transferring patterns to cloth and the traces of the repeated movement of the needle through cloth in the process of stitching. The images, then, are in a constant state of flux, moving between states of becoming and unravelling, making and remaking, stitching and unpicking. In this sense, the drawings are about the passage of time: not simply the span of time required to make the objects, but the life-spans of the objects themselves, how they endure over time and how they are made and re-made across human generations.

Bonnet
1999
drawing: guache, pastel on paper
15 x 10in (40 x 30cm)



In her emphasis on the making and re-making of the objects, in her metaphoric reference to stitching and unpicking, Valerie Kirk also invokes a set of mythical textile references. In classical literature, Penelope, the faithful wife of the absent Ulysses, swore not to take another husband until she had finished the weaving on her loom. Each day she wove and each night she unpicked her weaving, to begin afresh each day. The web she wove was like a screen between herself and her unwanted suitors. But this process might also be read as a sort of material trace of the passage of time since Ulysses' departure, a manifestation of the process of memory. Weaving each day and unpicking each night, Penelope sought to hold back the flow of time and in so doing, she made a kind of charm that might protect her from the consequences of change and from her own mortality.

The time invested in the objects that Kirk has drawn gave them value; they were luxury commodities. Scrutinising her drawings of a nineteenth-century baby's bonnet or a christening robe, the viewer is brought to think afresh about the fragility of human life and the persistence of the life of objects. Certainly, only the prosperous could afford to buy such things for their children, but those children were no less vulnerable to the many illnesses and misfortunes which could snuff out a small life than the babies of those long-forgotten embroiderers.

The bonnet and the christening robe are ceremonial garments, worn to receive the sacrament that ushers children into the Christian community and into the earthly world as well. Christening, then, marks a liminal moment in the life of children, in which their earthly and heavenly status are marked for the first time, and during this time the child is considered to be particularly vulnerable.

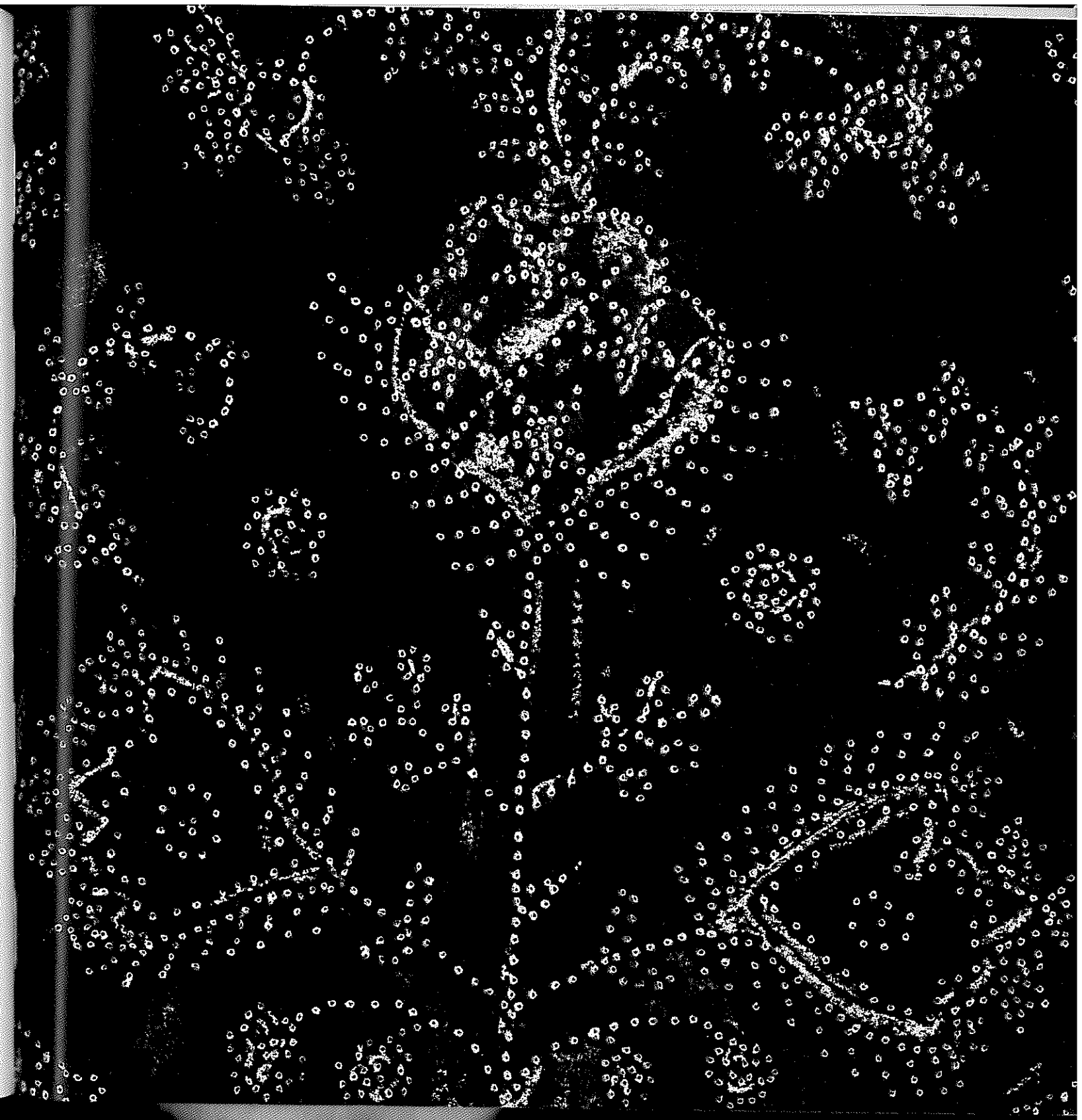
Perhaps dressing babies in those elaborately embroidered bonnets and robes was a kind of pact with fate, a little like Penelope's woven charm. In cocooning their child in all of that lovingly-executed labour, the parent was also invoking the time coiled up in those elaborate garments, as though that time were transferable to the garments' tiny hosts, so that the robe and bonnet might become a kind of frail armour against the possibility of life's mortal blows.

The structure of clothing takes on the shape of the wearer over time, and the cloth itself, repeatedly washed and mended, becomes a material testament of a lived human life. Worn over the body as a protective layer, garments become another, exterior skin, imbued with the scent and even the secretions of that living body. Empty garments always seem to imply a missing body and as such, we tend to read them as a metonym for loss.

No-one inhabits the beautiful garments in Kirk's drawings, but their emptiness is ambiguous. Certainly, loss is implied, but the christening robe and bonnet also look ready for something, as though they are waiting for their next little host. If the garments' emptiness implies that they were not always able to protect the babies who wore them, the images also offer us the consolation of new life. Perhaps the best way to think of these drawings is as a kind of portrait, not of a specific person in a specific place, but of generations of people over centuries of time. They are images that invoke notions of regeneration and hope, those gifts which time bestows upon us.

In Valerie Kirk's studio in Canberra, we pore over a photograph of a baby in a christening robe. The child is Valerie herself. She is arranged on a sofa, which is draped with a knitted shawl.

Ayrshire Needlework Pricking
2001
drawing: guache, pastel,
paper, perforated with a needle
8 x 8in (20 x 20cm)



She seems strangely coincidental to the image, which is shot in such a way that the christening gown is the focus of the photograph, its elaborately embroidered panels cascading over the edge of the sofa. Her mother, she tells me, was never satisfied with the image because it did not show up the beautiful detail of the shawl to its best advantage.

I think of Valerie, at home in this studio, so distant in time and place from that moment, lovingly weaving her web of knitted stitches and reproducing in powdery white pastel the crisp tucks, pleats and furbelows of just such a gown. To an Australian viewer, the textile traditions that she invokes in her work seem arcane. To Kirk, however, they lend a precise kind of specificity to her exploration of cultural identity: both Sanquhar knitting and Ayrshire whitework were made in regions from which her family originate.

For a moment, the boot is on the other foot, and it is I who feels a sense of slight displacement in the face of these subtle signs, which, for me, are not readily readable. But it is the considerable achievement of Kirk's work that, through her invocation of this rich material culture, she is able to make her work speak on a multitude of levels, as she traces the circulation of objects simultaneously through cultures, through time and through the lives of individuals. Her achievement is that she is able to make the metaphor of these textile traditions, rooted firmly in specific times and places, provide at once a consoling anchor for her own sense of personal identity, as well as a metonymic reference to the creative life.

Anne Brennan

Artist, writer

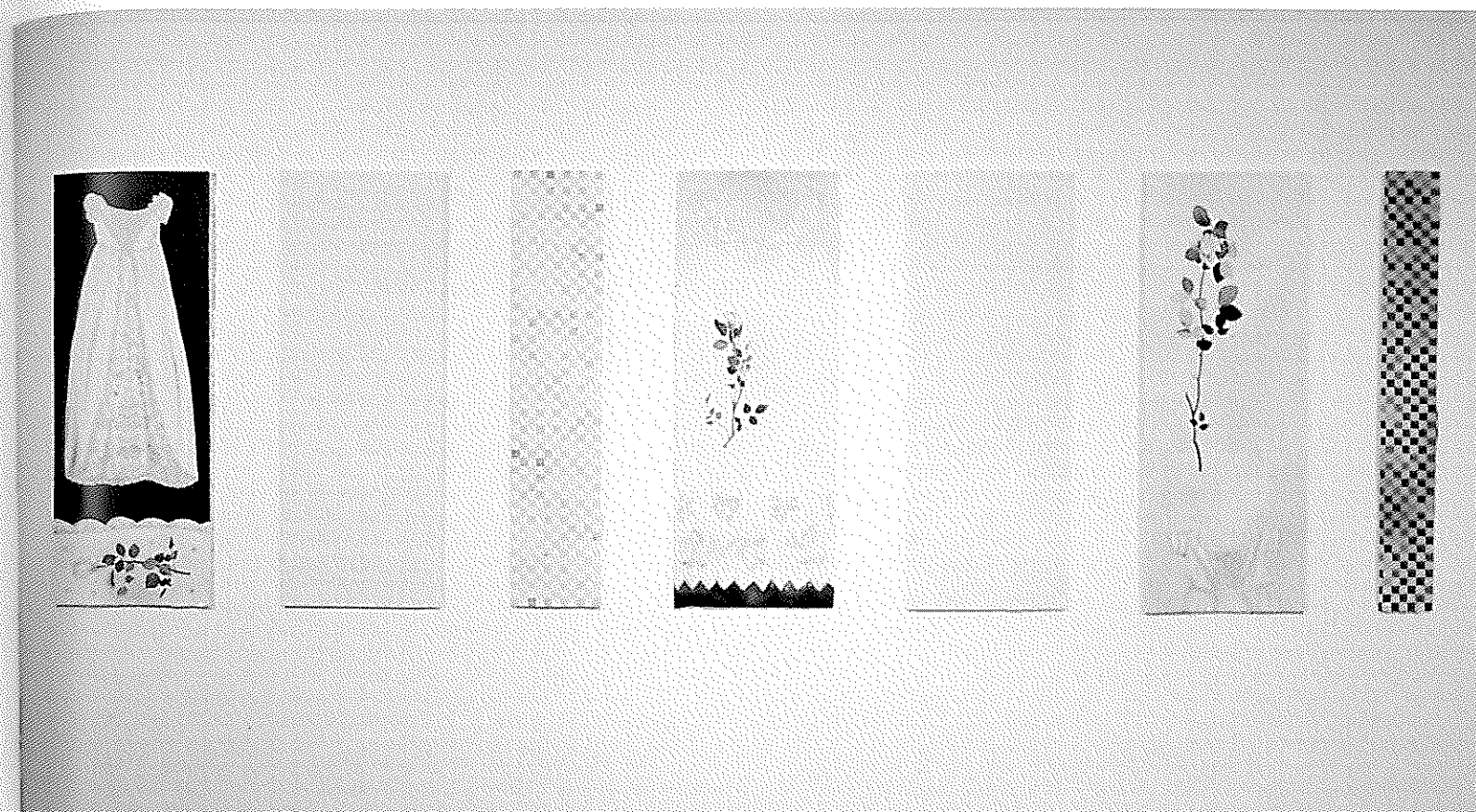
Lecturer at the Art Theory Workshop,
Australian National University

When the White Rose Blooms Again

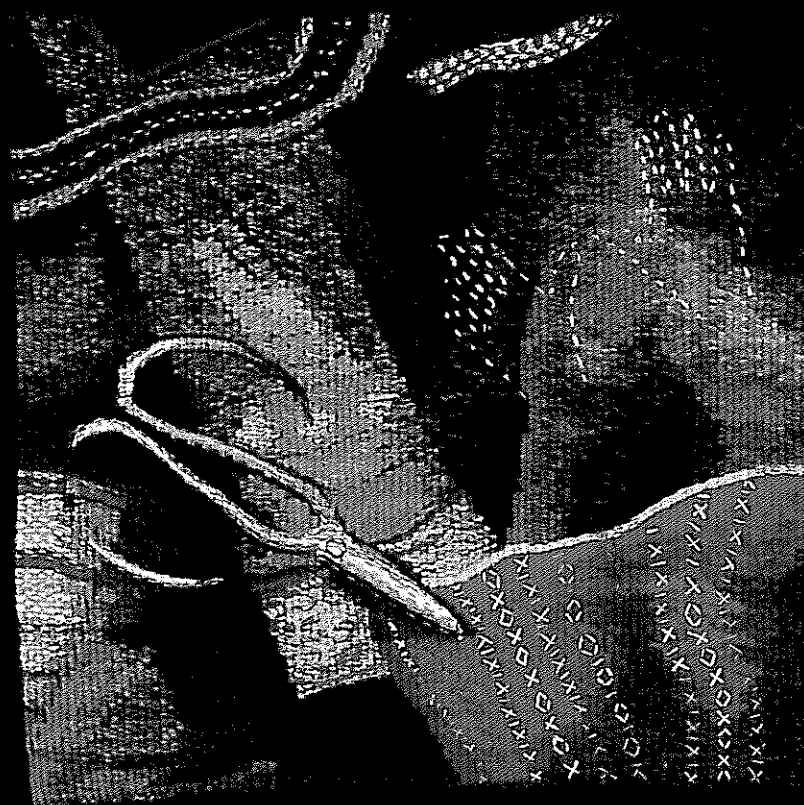
2002

drawing: indian ink, guache,
pastel on paper

42 x 115in (110 x 300cm)



Colour Plates



Flower Hand

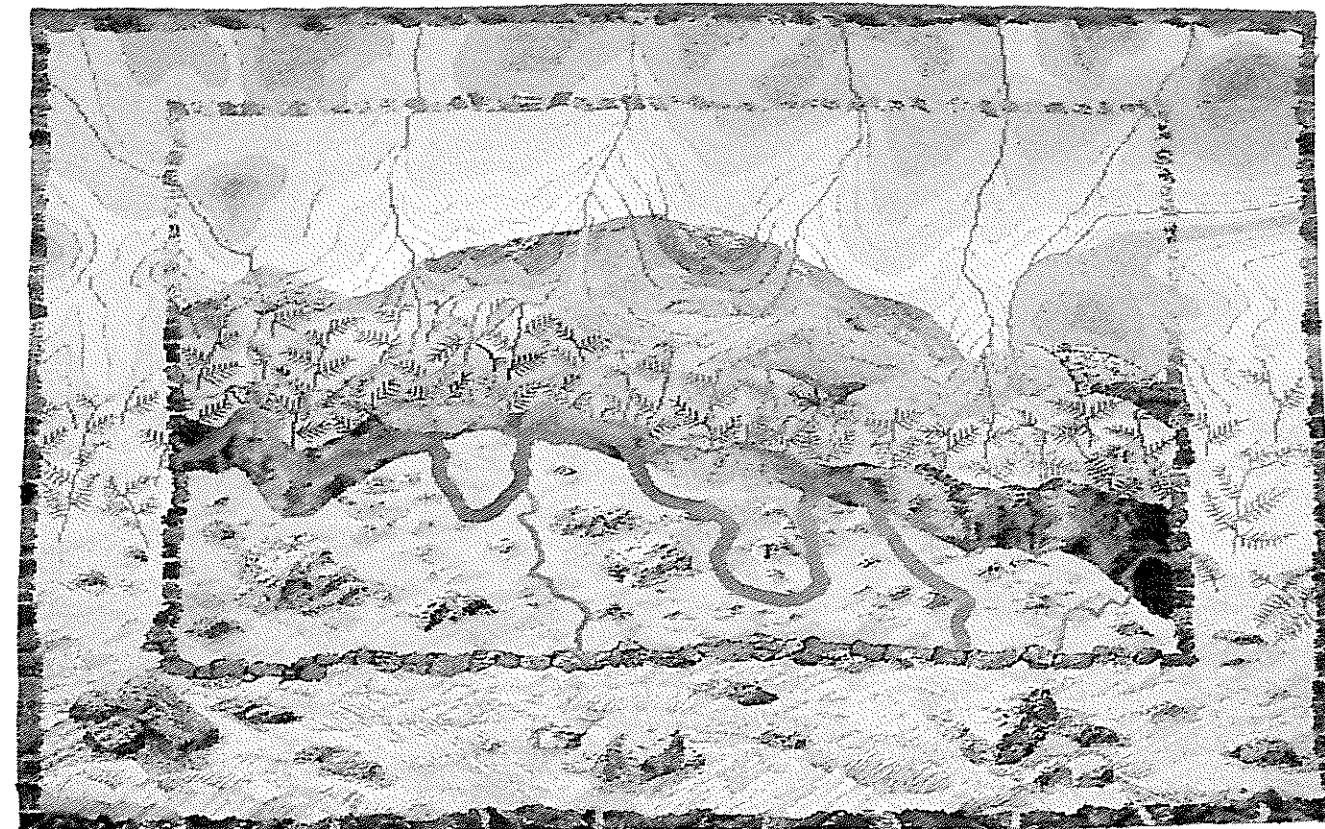
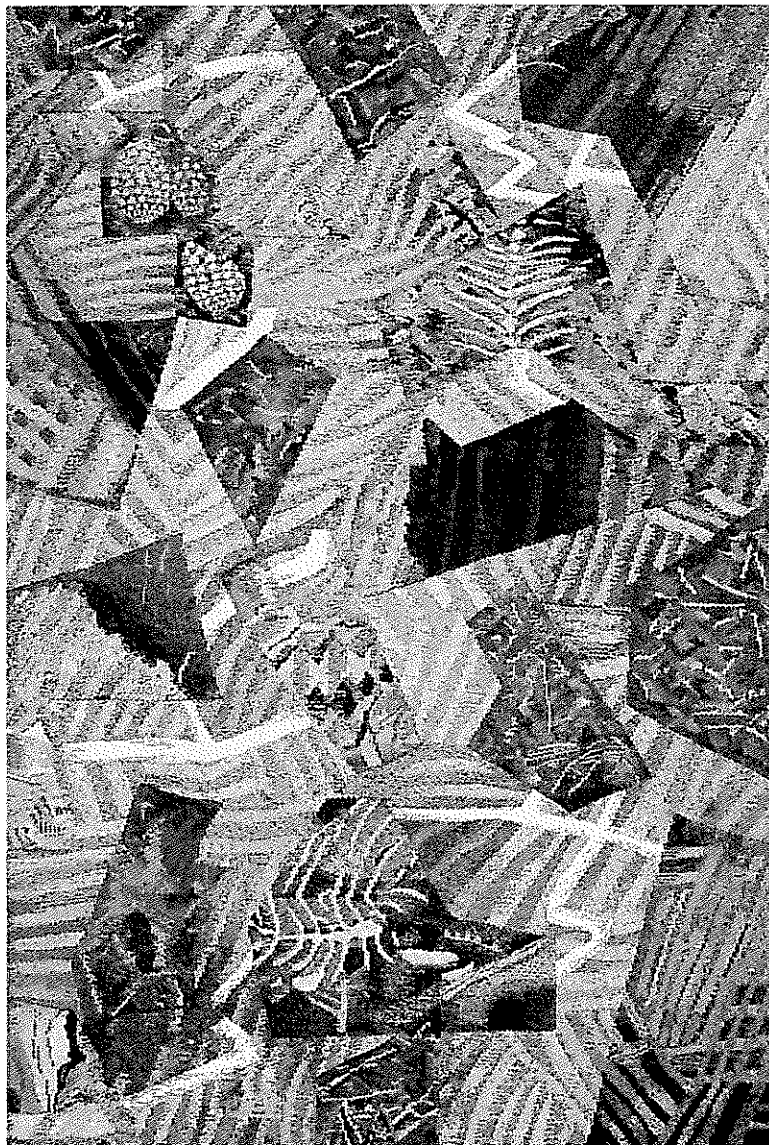
1995

woven tapestry: mixed yarns

12 x 12in (30 x 30cm)

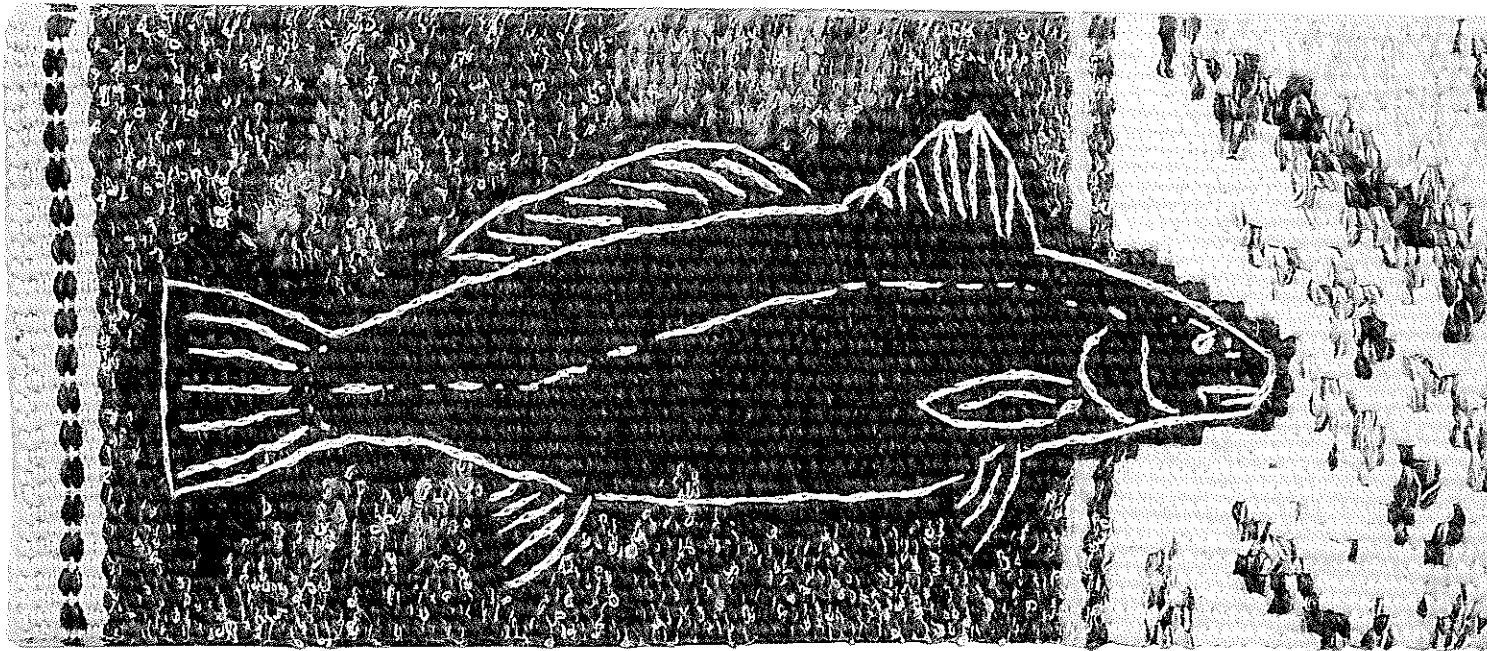
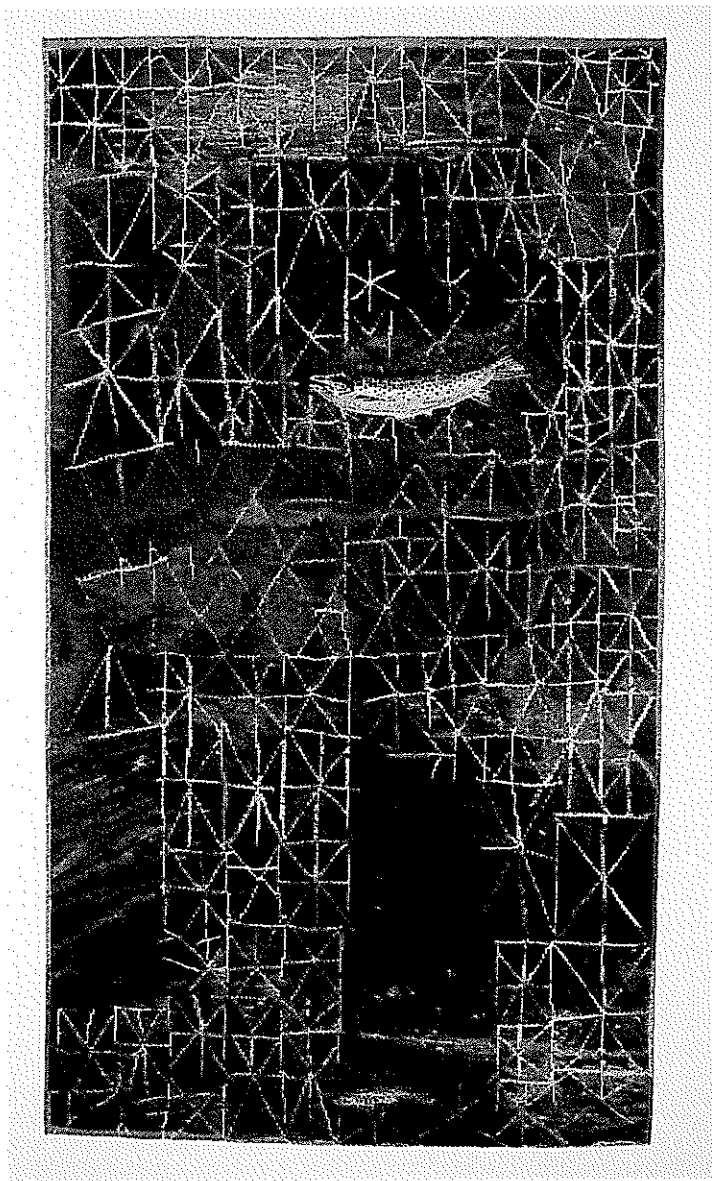
Brittany Angel
1981
woven tapestry: mixed yarns
15 x 23in (40 x 60cm)





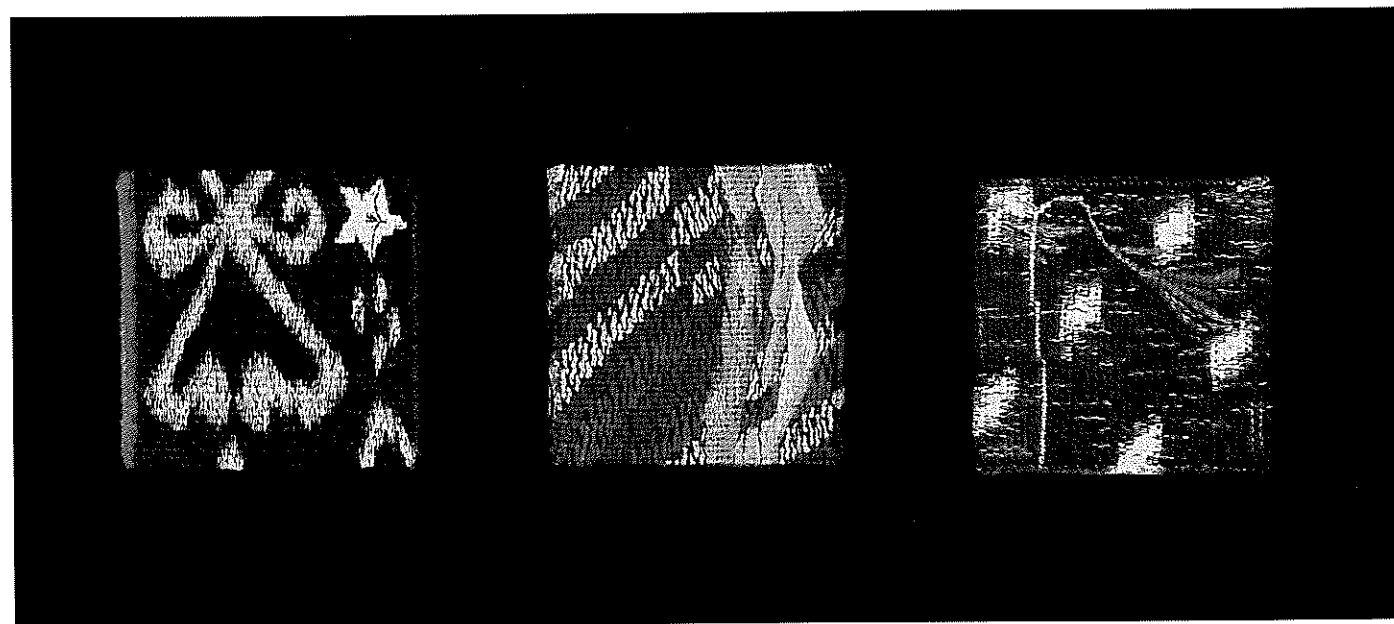
left:
Art Works for Industry project (detail)
 1986
 woven tapestry: mixed yarns
 38 x 75in (98 x 196cm)
 Collection of Ferguson Industrial Holdings plc

above:
Pineforest Plantation
 1993
 woven tapestry:
 mixed yarns
 57 x 38in (150 x 100cm)



left:
Croxxing
1999
woven tapestry: mixed yarns,
81 x 37in (210 x 97cm)
Collection of the
Museum & Art Gallery of
Northern Territory, Darwin

above:
Dwelling (detail)
1998
woven tapestry: mixed yarns,
acrylic paint, pastel
15 x 115in (40 x 300cm)
Collection of the Legislative
Assembly of the ACT

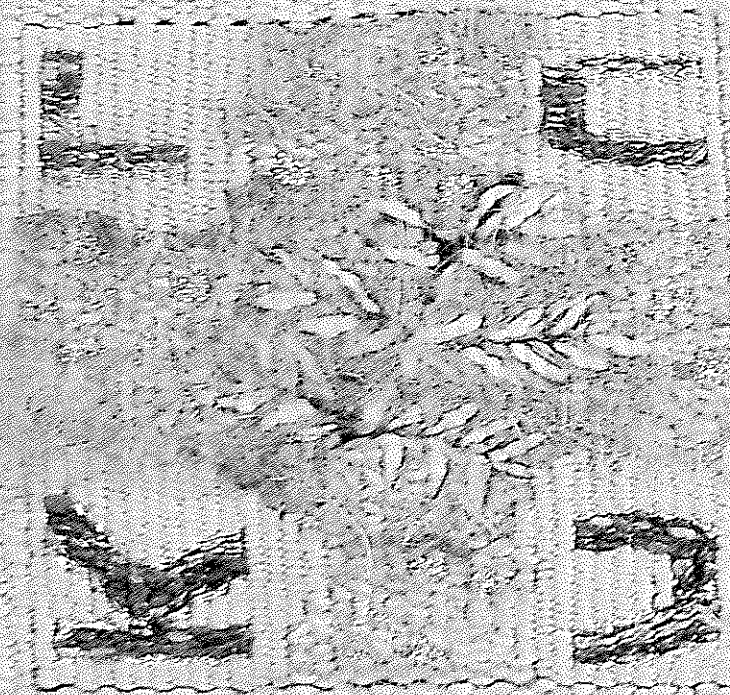


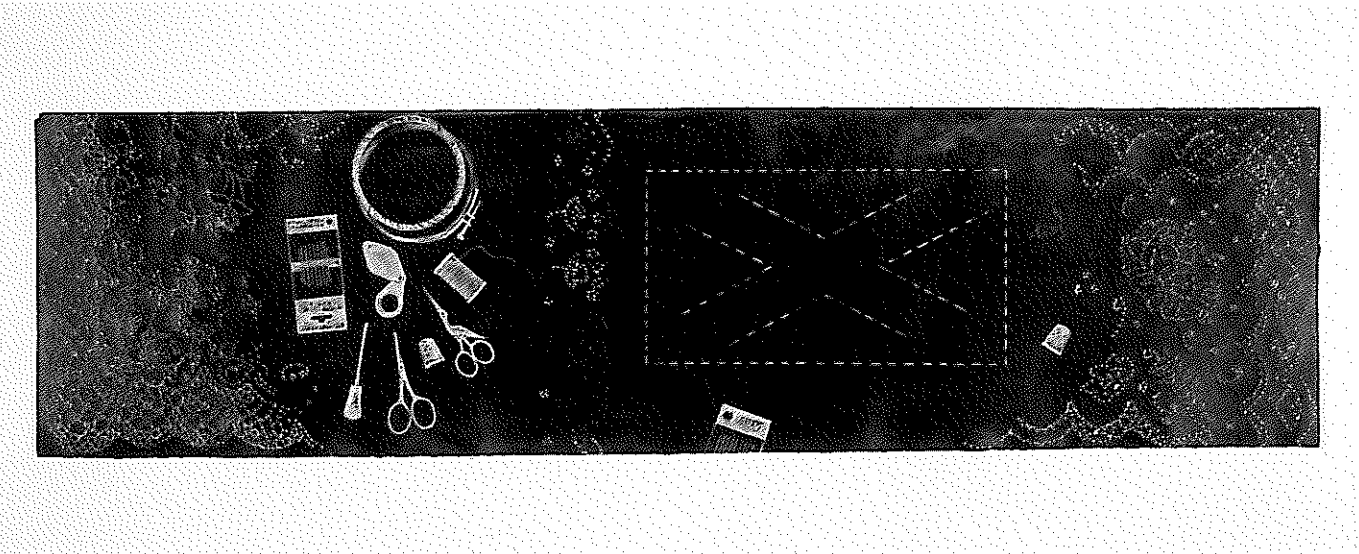
above:
The Australian Capital Territory series
 1991-1996
 woven tapestry: mixed yarn
 three works, each 7 x 7in (12 x 12cm)

page 38 and 39:
Opals and Luck
 1984
 woven tapestry: mixed yarn
 12 x 12in (30 x 30cm) each

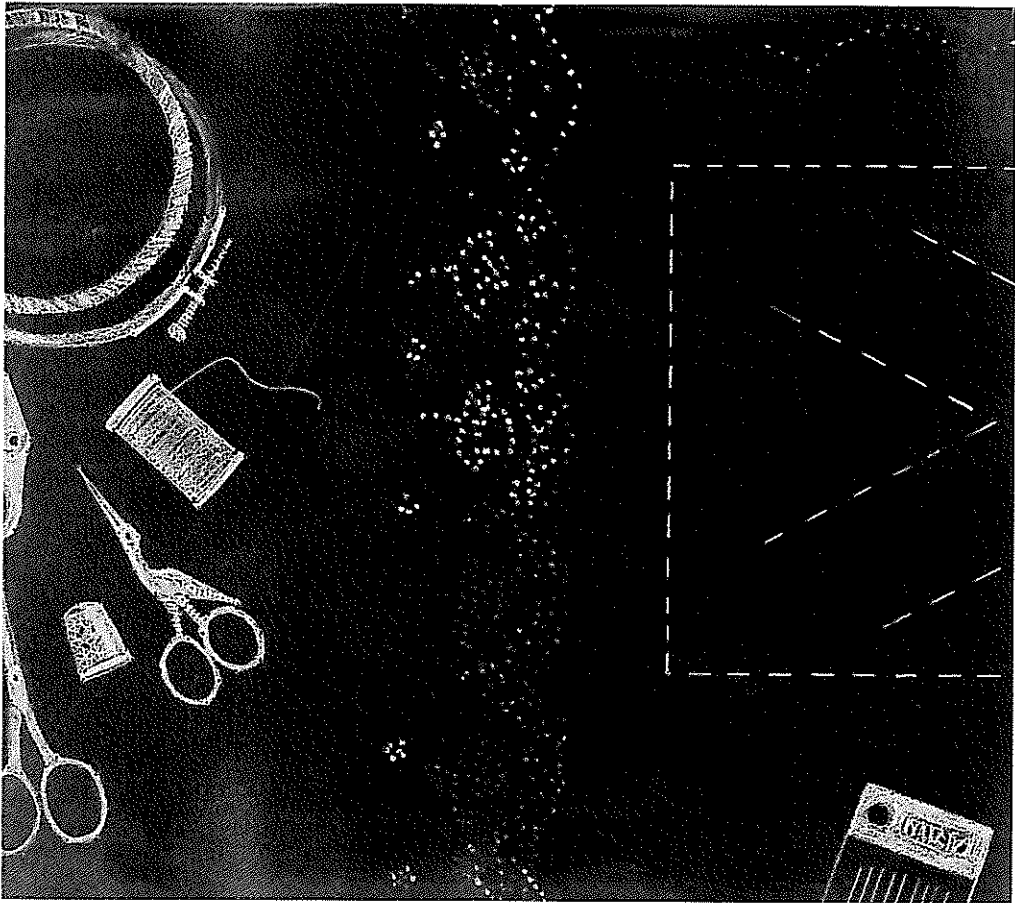
right:
When the White Rose Blooms Again (detail)
 2002
 drawing: indian ink; guache, pastel on paper
 42 x 115in (110 x 300cm) overall







Ayrshire and Cross
2000
drawing: indian ink, pastel, paper
15 x 42in (40 x 109cm)





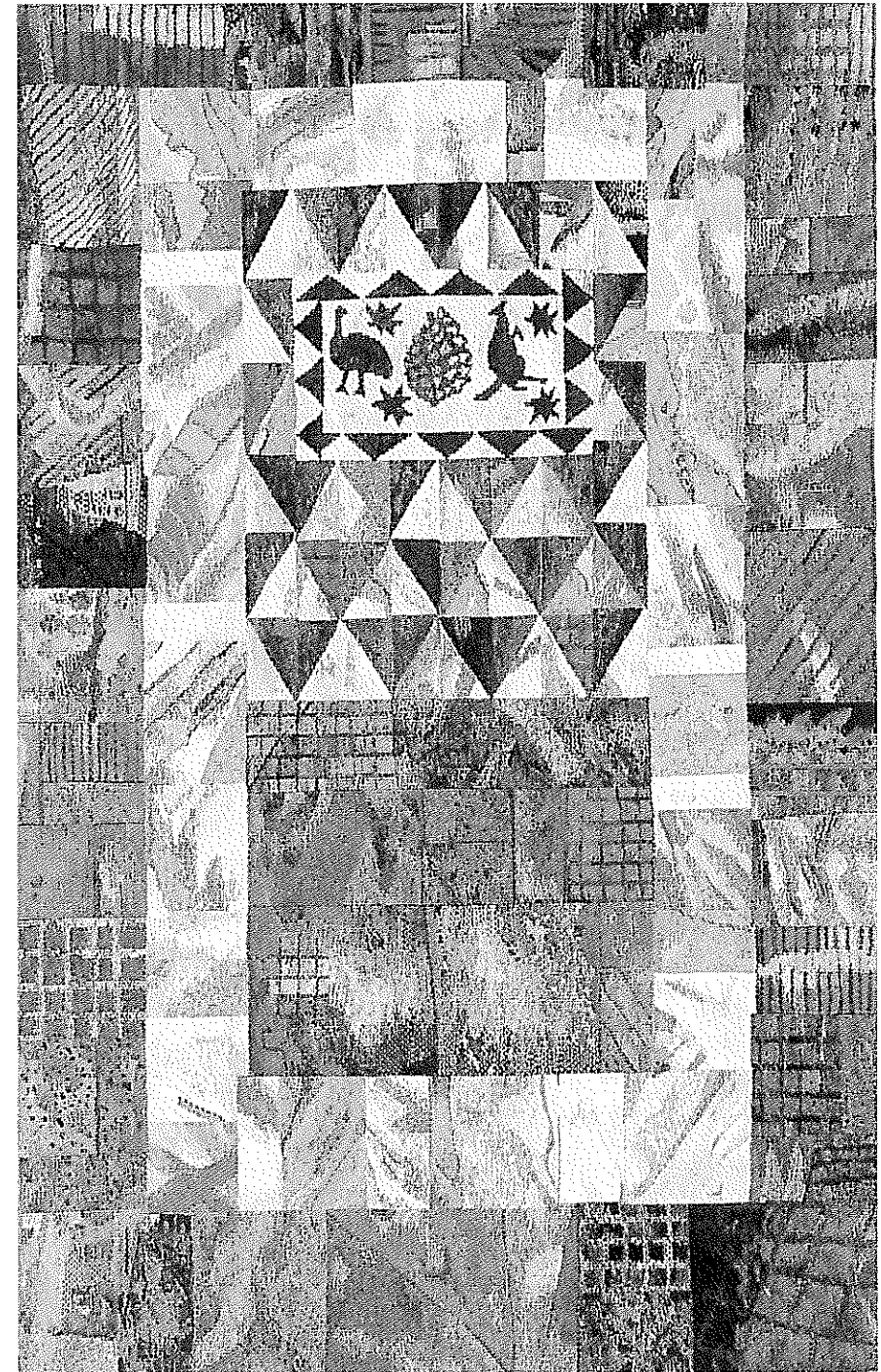
Pineforest Quilt – Applied, Used, Discarded

1994

woven tapestry: mixed yarn

58 x 35in (150 x 90cm)

Collection of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney



Biography

Born	1957, Dumfries, Scotland
Education	
1996-2000	Honours Master of Arts, University of Wollongong,
1979-1980	Art Teachers' Certificate, Goldsmiths College, University of London
1978-1979	Postgraduate Tapestry, Edinburgh College of Art
1974-1978	Bachelor of Art and Design, Edinburgh College of Art
Professional	
2002-	Craft ACT Board Member
2001	Women in Asia Conference Committee, Art Convener
2000-	International Tapestry Journal, Editorial Panel
1998-2002	Capital Arts Patrons Organisation, Board Member
1995-	Textile and Cultural Tours to Vietnam, Guest Lecturer
1991-	ACT Schools Textiles Accreditation Board, Member
1991-	Australian National University, School of Art, Canberra, ACT, Senior Lecturer and Head of Textiles
1998	Textile Network ACT, Founding and Committee Member
1997-1998	'Shift', textiles conference, exhibitions and events programme organiser
1992	'Distant Lives – Shared Voices', Lodz, Poland, Australian representative
1988	Crafts Council of Victoria Board and Warrnambool Art Gallery, Member Advisory Board,
1988	Ararat Commemorative Bicentennial Tapestry Commission for the City of Ararat, Victoria
1986	Commissioned tapestry for Ferguson Industrial Holdings plc (an 'Art Works for Industry' project)
1986-1990	South West TAFE College, Warrnambool, Victoria, Lecturer
1979	Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne, Victoria, Tapestry Weaver

Solo Exhibitions	
2003	'Departing Traditions', Craft ACT, Canberra, ACT
2000	'Crossing', Sturt Gallery, Mittagong, NSW
1999	'Rock and a Place Between', Spark Gallery, Wollongong, NSW
1998	'Dwelling', Street Theatre Gallery, Canberrra, ACT
1990	'Opals and Images of Outback Australia', Warrnambool Art Gallery, Warrnambool, Victoria
1985	'Guestspace', The Ararat Gallery, Ararat, Victoria
1984	'Opals', Busselton Arts Centre, Busselton, WA
1981	'Tapestries and Drawings', The LYC Gallery, Cumbria
1980	'Tapestries', The Centaur Gallery, London

Selected Group Exhibitions	
2003	'Lake Mungo', The Mura Clay Gallery, Sydney, NSW
2002	'Unfolding Territories', Cloisters Gallery, Wollongong, NSW
2002	'Black, White and Grey Matter', Craft ACT, Canberra, ACT
2002	'City of Hobart Art Prize', Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania
2000-2002	'Frisson', 14th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, Tamworth, NSW (tour)
2000-2001	'Lake Mungo Revisited', Goulburn Regional Gallery, Goulburn, NSW (tour)
2001	'Chinese Whispers', The Study Gallery, Poole
2000	'Northern Territory Acquisitive Craft Exhibition', Museum and Art Gallery of NT, Darwin
2000	'Uluslararası Oğrenci Trienali', Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
1999	'Presiding Officers Craft Exhibition', Parliament House, Canberra, NSW
1999	'Australian Textiles', Sturt Gallery, Mittagong, NSW
1999	'Drawn in Form', Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland

Portfolio Collection Vol. 25

VALERIE KIRK

TELUS

Portfolio Collection Valerie Kirk

TELUS



TELUS

709.
2
WAL

2250856



A.N.U. LIBRARY

Authors: Sue Walker, Anne Brennan
and Dr Grace Cochrane
Series Editor: Matthew Koumis
Graphic Design: Rachael Dadd
Reprographics: Ermanno Beverari
Printed in Italy by Grafiche AZ

© Telos Art Publishing 2003

Telos Art Publishing
PO Box 125, Winchester
SO23 7UJ England
T +44 (0) 1962 864546
F +44 (0) 1962 864727
E editorial@telos.net
E sales@telos.net
W www.telos.net

ISBN 1 902015 37 1 (softback)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from The British Library

The rights of Valerie Kirk, Sue Walker,
Anne Brennan and Dr Grace Cochrane
to be identified as the author of their work
have been asserted by them in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents
Act 1988. All rights reserved. No part of
this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system or transmitted in any
form or by any means, without the prior
permission in writing of the publishers.
Photocopying this book is illegal.

Notes

All dimensions are shown in metric and
imperial, height x width x depth.

Photo Credits

Neal McCracken, Stuart Hay, Steven
Murray, Henry Jolles, Terence Bogue,
David Paterson

Artist's Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this book to my
gorgeous daughters, Amelia and Heather.
Special thanks to my family, friends and
colleagues for their generous support in all
the ways that really matter. My artwork and
this publication have been generously
supported by the ACT Government
through arts ACT, The Australian National
University publication subsidy and assisted
by the Commonwealth Government
through the Australia Council, its arts
funding and advisory body.



ACT Government

Cover illustrations:

front cover:

Opals: Coober Pedy
1984
woven tapestry: mixed yarns
60 x 42in (155 x 110cm)

back cover:

Sanquhar Pattern
1999
woven tapestry: mixed yarns
19 x 19in (50 x 50cm)

illustration page 1 & 48:

Ayrshire Needlework
2001
drawing: guache, pastel,
paper perforated with a needle
8 x 8in (20 x 20cm)

Publisher's Acknowledgements

With thanks to the following individuals for
kindly loaning work from their collection for
the purposes of photography: Holly
Brackmann, Monica Epstein, Dorothy Kirk,
Damian Trytell, Sue Trytell. Thanks also to
Paul Richardson.

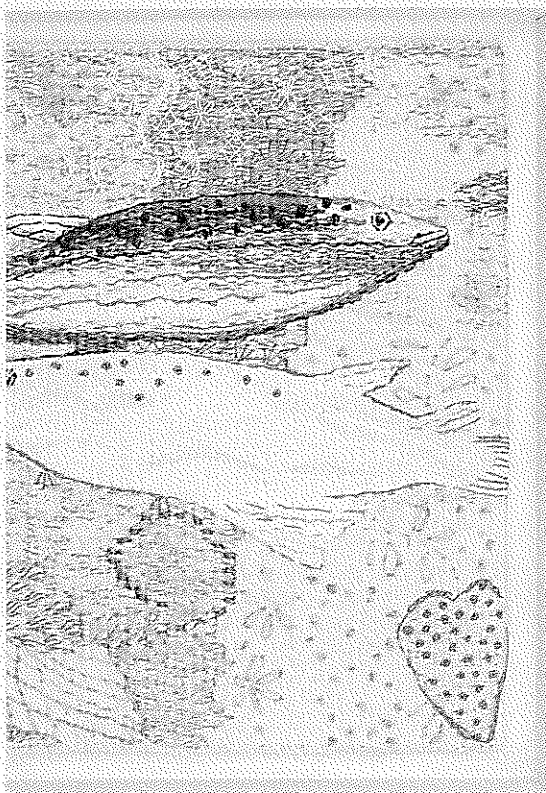
portfolio collection Valerie Kirk



Valerie Kirk is an important international figure in the world of contemporary tapestry. As an artist, writer, teacher, and public figure she has made a significant contribution to tapestry in Australia, forging valuable and tangible links with the Scottish tradition.

It is timely, that this handsome publication presents a record of Valerie Kirk the artist. Its lavish illustrations reveal a highly personal weaving language, a language both subtle and strong, restrained and determined, evoking two cultures, shared but separate.

Sue Walker
Director
Victorian Tapestry Workshop,
Melbourne



Contents

- 7 Foreword
by **Sue Walker**
- 8 Valerie Kirk
by **Dr Grace Cochrane**
- 13 Times and Places:
the Recent Work of Valerie Kirk
by **Anne Brennan**
- 29 Colour Plates
- 44 Biography

opposite:
Looking Forward – Looking Back
1999
woven tapestry: mixed yarns
8 x 8in (22 x 22cm)



Foreword

Valerie Kirk is an important international figure in the world of contemporary tapestry. As an artist, writer, teacher, and public figure she has made a significant contribution to tapestry in Australia, forging valuable and tangible links with the Scottish tradition.

In 1979, as a young graduate, fresh from the Edinburgh College of Art she came to the Victorian Tapestry Workshop for two months work experience, bringing the spirit and conviction of Scottish tapestry to our newly formed studio. Her taste for travel and adventure took off. Using a small portable loom as a sketch pad for ideas Valerie traveled and worked for several years in remote and far flung areas of Britain, and Australia, before settling finally in Canberra where she is Head of Textiles at the Australian National University.

Sanquhar Pattern

1999

woven tapestry: mixed yarns
19 x 19in (50 x 50cm)

While actively maintaining her practice as an artist, Valerie's remarkable capacity for achievement has seen her inspiring and leading community tapestry projects, researching and writing a major thesis on tapestry, stimulating students at TAFE and tertiary levels and through an innovative off-campus program, travelling widely, and performing a valuable role as a public voice for tapestry as an art. In recognising the breadth and depth of her experience she says, 'It has been a very fortunate and stimulating career'.

It is timely that this handsome publication presents a record of Valerie Kirk the artist. Its lavish illustrations reveal a highly personal weaving language, a language both subtle and strong, restrained and determined, evoking two cultures, shared but separate.

Sue Walker

Director of the
Victorian Tapestry Workshop,
Melbourne, Australia