

The Object's Power over History

GUSTAF HELSING DRAWS COLLAGES WITH IMAGES OF OBJECTS FROM HISTORY, OFTEN WITH A STRONG ASSOCIATION TO THE CRAFT OF WEAVING. WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE PRESENT IN THIS NEW CONTEXT?

It's June 2019, time for the degree show at Konstfack, and Gustaf Helsing is showing the rug *All Men Should Hate Themselves*. It was one in a series of rugs woven with rags. I reflected over the title, and felt a sort of sadness. Here is this talented person making headstrong, clear textile art. What does he mean?

Four years later, we meet in his studio in Västberga in Stockholm. The rug was purchased by Malmö Art Museum with the original title, but when he shows a picture of the piece the title is changed; the museum certainly uses the original.

– Hating oneself is somewhat of a privilege—it shows you have power—but at the same time it's not constructive. If you want to change yourself, that is.

I'm relieved, and we move on.

He got into weaving and textile materials while studying at the Nyckelvik School in Stockholm, dove deeper while at Konstfack, and has gradually honed his technique and drawing style. In his work he conveys reflections on historical objects that he's drawn to for one reason or another. That happens to him all the time, he



says, being drawn to objects. Pulled loose from their historical context, they're combined in collage and montage and are presented with titles that guide the viewer's thoughts but don't determine their interpretation. He

zigzags between praising the craft and the insight that doing just that—romanticizing the past—can be misinterpreted. He describes this as a balancing act.

– What's happened in history becomes fragments in our mind



Gustaf Helsing

MFA Craft Textiles,
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BFA Textiles,
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Nyckelviksskolan,
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Nyckelviksskolan,
Color, form and
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2014–2015

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Page 17: *Anxious rugs (III) Anxiousness lasts the longest*, 2019, ca 100 x 200 cm

Left: *Tapestry (VI) Revisioning Kaisa Melanton (II) (all lines are threads)*, 2022, ca 150 x 300 cm

Below: Gustaf Helsing in his studio. Photo: B A Ignell

Below, right: *Tapestry (IV) Revisioning Kaisa Melanton (I) (intertwined)*, 2022, ca 80 x 110 cm

that are put together into different scenarios, which can be used in different ways.

The nationalism of the turn of the twentieth century supported art-craft, partially to support women's liberation, but also in order to create an image of a more "authentic" and homogeneous past. Similarly, reactionary currents today use the past to create a separation between "us" and "them". By romanticizing the past, when men had the power, an impression of loss is created, that today we've lost our power and identity as Men, which makes us unsure and lost. I'm aware that I am privileged as a white man and losing that power can feel like a defeat. That has to be handled. As a feminist I strive for an equal society and must therefore yield.

In his Master's thesis he writes: *Going back and forth, trying to scope out something for the future, evaluating and proclaiming; do not count me in! Do not count me in, in your nationalistic fantasy, in thinking craft is something pristine and authentic, in being afraid of losing. I want to lose.*

His role models are, among others: Hannah Ryggen, Maria Adlercreutz, Charlotte Johannesson, Ingrid Wiener, and Kaisa Melanton. Hannah Ryggen was unafraid in a frightening time; her weaving *Etiopia* (1935) hung next to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) at the Paris Exhibition in 1937. It was her weaving that was a sensation, with Mussolini's decapitated head with a spear through it woven in; that section was covered up for the exhibition. Maria Adlercreutz wove her criticism of the Vietnam War in *The Light of the People is Preserved in Her Eyes* (1971) and her portrait of Hanna Keller (1994), a proud working-class woman, was her answer in yarn to the question of women's rights. Both Hannah Ryggen and Maria Adlercreutz had a close relationship to the yarn, which they spun, plied, and dyed. Charlotte Johannesson was an early adopter of computers to create images. Ingrid Wiener's practice included works with stories in broken shapes, pulled-apart pieces of a whole. Kaisa Melanton often worked in collage, with symbols glued together into a whole. Gustaf Helsing has



dedicated a series of tapestries to her. He reflects on being a man in a female-dominated art form.

– Of course there's a worry of being part of a quota in different situations because I'm a man, I can only hope that there are additional qualities to my work. Of course, there are advantages to separatist spaces, so maybe I should choose a different

career? But if the goal is equality, shouldn't everyone who wants to work with textile art be able to? The problem is if I benefit from being a man, which I surely often do.

Right now, he's working on finishing a weaving with motifs close in time period and close to his heart. He's recently become a





Left: *Tapestry (IX) Landscape of multitudes*, 2023, ca 140 x 190
 Below: *Tapestry (X) Looking at us through objects*, 2023, ca 110 x 170 cm. Photo cred: Laslo Strong and Dotdodot

father, and the collage consists of many parts: a breast milk pump from the maternity ward, an object marked by use, just like the textile tools featured in his other weavings. Dragon wings from a Lego set are a flash of red, lifting the pump like a vessel. This all rests on a background of a collage of paintings by Gothenburg Colorist Ragnar Sandberg. Gustaf is from Gothenburg, his great-grandfather is the artist's namesake, and his son's middle name is Ragnar. The breast milk pump lands in a safe landscape thanks to the dragon wings. Or is it flying away? The eight-shaft threading creates a twill pattern in the form of small hearts, which makes for a coarse grain.

WARP AND WEFT

His fascination with weaving structures has been with him from the start. Because the warp is visible. It creates a patterned foundation into which the images are picked. The objects seem to

be floating. This is heightened by how the pieces are finished and hung. Using handwoven ribbons, they are attached to the ceiling and lifted up from the floor, the rug's rightful place. His work still has its roots in the floor, so to speak, as the well-made finishing rests on the floor. The finishing connects his work to tradition and handicraft, through rag rugs and braided ribbon.

His early tapestries used thick strips of rag as weft. A historical wink toward the rag rug. The warp was different material, sometimes synthetic twine meant for binding up hay bales or sacks – a historical reference to a male – dominated world. The motifs are objects used in traditionally male-dominated labor, such as saws.

In his master degree show, work his craft knowledge has developed, there are finer lines and even more complex compositions. Rags, torn as narrow as possible, were mixed with wool yarns for

a broader palette. Some he spins and dyes himself. The warp is multi-colored. Before he decides on the sketch, which is placed underneath the weaving, the images are manipulated on the computer. He weaves with the “wrong” side facing him. The tightly-interlocked wefts make for rich detail. The objects are translated from past to present interpretations and transformed in the weaving; in each step, information is lost and the stories are prepared for new interpretations. His more recent pieces have been broken up into sections.

Some of his latest tapestries were shown at the exhibition *A Cat Among the Ermines* at the Royal Academy of Art. He was one of the curators. I take the opportunity to ask about the title; it has been a subject of critique for

putting textile art in in an underdog position.

– I understand the criticism and was aware of the risk. But it's also a fact: the Academy doesn't have textile art knowledge and hasn't shown textile art in its own right—ever. That's what the title wanted to say: it's time to make a change.

More exhibitions await, including in London and in the Stockholm subway. At the Odenplan station, there is a glass-walled room on the platform that shows Master's degree work.

– Now I wish I had a lot of time so that I could try to make them even more detailed and maybe even bigger. There's something about weaving, it's just more, more, more, and the more you learn, the longer it takes.

