

BENGT ERIKSON: TAPESTRIES

COLLECTED WORKS BOOKSTORE & COFFEEHOUSE
202 GALISTEO STREET, SANTA FE

WE SPEND OUR LIVES, FROM BIRTH TO DEATH, WITH OUR BODIES

almost constantly swaddled in some kind of fabric. Yet the process of weaving, like that of food production, is a mystery to most of us today. Textiles are taken for granted but we could not live without them. Sometimes it takes an artist to bring our awareness to something so basic. In Collected Works Bookstore & Coffeehouse, the tapestries of Bengt Erikson almost recede into the walls, so reticent do they seem at first. Yet, as one draws closer to experience the particular frisson of textiles, the Shaker-like simplicity of Erikson's designs meets the eye as boldly as the late cut-outs of Henri Matisse.

Weaving, with linen, cotton, wool, silk, or any available and malleable material, is done on a loom—large or small, vertical or horizontal, tied to a tree or to the weaver's toe—with two sets of interlaced threads, those running parallel to the length (called the warp) and those parallel to the width (called the weft). The warp threads are set up under tension and the weft thread is passed back and forth across part or all of the warps, sometimes with additional threads tied in a dizzying array of possible knottings. Tapestry is weft-faced weaving, in which all the warp threads are hidden in the completed work, unlike cloth weaving where both the warp and the weft threads may be visible. In tapestry weaving the artisan interlaces each colored weft in its own small pattern area to form the design. Kilims and Navajo rugs are types of tapestry work. For most of us the technique used makes little difference and it is how the work looks that matters.

Carpets and tapestries can be bold and ornate or subtle and sensuous; they may be meant to lie underfoot and provide comfort or hang on a wall and make a statement. Navajo rugs are strong abstract representations of forces of nature and ancient thought-ways enacted in wool and color. In floral and highly complex decorative schemes, ancient cultural patterns are encoded in the carpets of Central Asia. They can induce, at least in me, a most pleasant mind-state comprehending the connectedness of everything and the organic continuity of

the world with my mind.

Weaving has been done in most cultures for millennia and textiles have been found among Neolithic remains worldwide. In the late eighteenth century the process began to be mechanized; as this process accelerated it initiated the industrial revolution, ultimately even providing the cognitive basis for the precursor to the invention of the computer. As the renowned textile scholar Elizabeth Wayland Barber explains in *Women's Work: the First 20,000 Years*, "...textiles mark special places, people and times and ... cloth can also be used as a vehicle for recording information, such as history or mythology." Thus, weaving is deeply rooted in pre-literate epic and myth—from Indra's web to Homer's Penelope, weaving by day and undoing her work by night during the long wait for her husband's return.

There is a sort of luxuriousness to Erikson's pieces, whether the severely rectilinear *Old Church, Finland* or the more organic *Mim's Favorite* or *Towards Taos*. This spare elegance is reminiscent of certain domestic spaces whose subtle sparseness is only possible through a focused attention to detail and unlimited access to abundant resources. But it is not luxurious interiors one really needs to reference in connection with Erikson's works but the design philosophy of Christopher Alexander. In *The Luminous Ground* (which is book four of

The Nature of Order, Alexander's series on the art of building design) he discusses how, among human-made objects, certain ancient carpets profoundly demonstrate what he calls the nature of living structure. They possess what Alexander identifies as "intense living centers." The slow process of their making allows the weaver to "fuse her own experience of self" with what he calls the "No mind, or the One, or God." This is the apex of Alexander's patient exposition of how to find, in the practice of architecture, what in some traditions

is called "self-remembering" or essence. I have for years continued to look at all kinds of art because of the occasional moment when a work takes me beyond myself in an unexpected way. Erikson's tapestries have that capacity. They exercise their enchantment in a subtle and refined way, leaving nothing out and adding only what belongs.

—MARINA LA PALMA

Bengt Erikson, *Old Church, Finland*, wool and cotton, 50" x 45", 2012

