



**KELLY THOMPSON: LOCUS OPERANDI**

D U N E D I N P U B L I C A R T G A L L E R Y



60mm

115mm

170mm



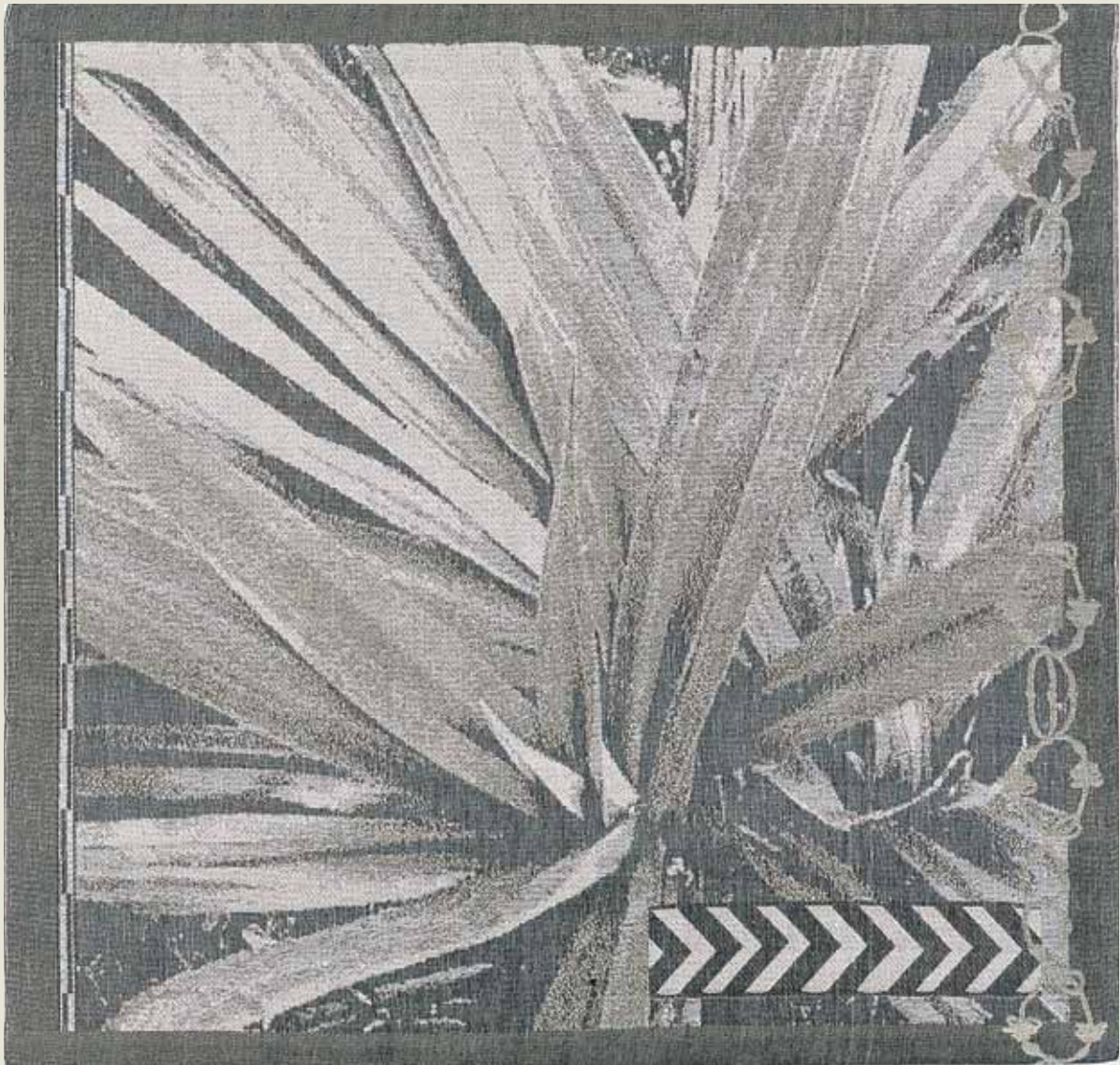
cover: **Gene Strands** (detail) 2000 jacquard weave, cotton and linen threads 1200 x 1070 mm. above: **Rengarenga Cross** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton and linen threads 990 x 1080 mm

225mm



**Sections** (detail) 2000 jacquard weave, cotton and linen threads, each component 300 x 300 mm





60mm

115mm

170mm

**Astilia Indicator** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton and linen threads 1030 x 1080 mm

225mm



**Sections (detail)** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton and linen threads, each component 300 x 300 mm

## KELLY THOMPSON: LOCUS OPERANDI

“One does not necessarily find home or local knowledge in close geographical proximity. We may be able to identify several places where we would locate ourselves or that we feel closely aligned to”,<sup>1</sup> writes Joan Borsa recently about migration in our era of the artist as global traveller. Thus the question is not so much about where an artist belongs, but how she comes home to her practice<sup>2</sup> and makes a home of her work between diverse localities. Moving between California, Canberra, Quebec and Otago, Kelly Thompson continues to shift the trajectory of her making process while retaining the elements of a working vocabulary which sustains the distinctiveness of the material objects she produces. This distinctiveness has now been stretched to an exciting and risky limit as new energy seems yet again to infuse this artist’s practice.

Visits to the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles have played an important part in Thompson’s recent work, which has benefited from the jacquard technology accessible there. In its early phases this technology was a forerunner of the computer as the punched cards of its weaving loom worked in a binary mode with each space being occupied either with a perforation or with an absence of perforation – thus a similar mode to that used in computer language. “Today, weaving programs transfer the sequences directly to the jacquard head without the use of cards and also allow the artist or designer to modify the settings during the process. The resulting motif may be viewed on screen before even starting the weaving process and changes may be made along the way...[It] gives total freedom and encourages experimentation...[as] it allows the weaving of a single design or image from one selvage to the other...[and thus] a new weaving language is emerging.”<sup>3</sup> Over the past year Thompson has been working with images to create an electronic archive for translation through jacquard technology over in Quebec. The resulting pieces invite the viewer to come close and to stand back, while posing interesting questions about weaving and about this artist’s particular practice.

Going looking, I drive into the Portobello hills on Dunedin’s Otago Peninsula to find Thompson’s work. There, overlooking the water and set against rolling meadows, her studio nestles into the lush green hues of the landscape. Inside, I encounter the work done over the past year in Montreal: rural images meeting urban form; craft-making using computer pixels; an established

vocabulary veering into new directions. The artist says that the use of jacquard technology poses a subtle threat as it can all too easily be used for rapid and facile design results, for “tricks” which can override content. This is not what happens here in these carefully considered pieces. I rather sense a precarious and thus riveting balance between image and the texture which produces it; between this same texture and the tonal values upon which it is dependent. It is possibly partly this precarious balance which lures me to the work as there is something there which unsettles me.

This response is possibly elicited by the number of *ententes* effected through Thompson’s new work. Yes, the work reaches out to studio practices distinct from the process of weaving and its textile base. In the first instance it is a shift in scale which surprises me as the woven images take on the monumental qualities of large, semi-abstract sculptural pieces. Also, a confidence in the authority of New Zealand-derived images – flax, cabbage tree, neinei, fern, tussock and astilia – is countered by partly obliterating them for the sake of the confident and expansive brushstroke which carries the energy of the painterly gesture. Coming closer to a work such as *XY Scale*, my eyes focus on the gritty texture of the surface on which indentation and relief – caused by the opposing structural changes in the weaving – approximate the action of the potter’s hand in contact with the clay. But, standing far back and gaining distance, the images reconstitute themselves to remind me of their photographic existence in the artist’s archive of images. Moving nearer, a position in middle ground makes yet another aspect of the work clearer: the surfaces seem akin to lithographs with their characteristic tension between sketchy drawing and the smooth two-dimensionality of the paper receptor.

Moving out of the artist’s studio, my eyes retain memories of the work just seen inside. Other practices come into play as I variously remember the monochromatic works as a synthesis between burnished and tarnished jewellery surfaces painstakingly crafted from silver; and as large drawings rapidly executed with the swift movement of a hand barely touching the paper with sooty, smudged charcoal. What seems to loosely hold all these surprisingly diverse understandings together is the actual materiality of the weaving – despite improvisation and the expansive play with a multitude of readings, the works are still



Ponga Power (detail) 2000 jacquard weave, cotton, rayon and linen threads 1310 x 1080 mm



textiles and my fingers remember their weave and their tactile “fabric-ness”. Also: what retains my attention is not so much the referencing of many diverse practices, but their near simultaneity, only separable after the fact. I respond to them at almost the same time as I move closer and further away, even as I’m feeling the weave with my hands or while it is still lingering to the touch.

Thompson’s involvement as a curator has probably reinforced her intimate understanding of experimental work and as the coordinator of the textile section in a school of art. It seems that textile-related processes have become quite pervasive in many subtle ways within contemporary art.<sup>4</sup> Knitting, sewing, stitching and weaving inform or exist alongside writing practices; they are translated into bronze sculpture, ceramic braid or knotted paper; and students “roaming between sections of an art school”<sup>5</sup> read Maud Page on Lisa Reihana’s video weavings.<sup>6</sup> But it is a case of “give and take”, to judge by Kelly Thompson’s recent work. Not only do textile practices infuse their surroundings with new possibilities, but they also draw from their immediate context.

“Gathering inwards” and “moving outwards” also interest me with respect to the artist’s recent work in relation to her own practice over the last fifteen years or so. It seems that other modes of travelling have also taken place within this body of work and I experience some of them in the course of a morning on the Peninsula. Some of the new works draw me near and anchor me with their strong sense of centripetal contraction. They implode within their frame and pull me in with their gravity. A large work holds many such implosions within its grid-like structure, but then Thompson tells me that she plans to cut along the grid to disperse the various modules across the wall of the gallery to create a work called *Sections*. I realise that these units will join other works which explode their confines in a centrifugal movement to displace me, to unsettle the position I find myself in. Maybe this is also partly what accounts for my restlessness: the works do not allow me to become located for long; I have to move and shift; arriving can only be brief. I relive reading Salman Rushdie’s *Ground Beneath Her Feet* recently – as a “vision of our shaken, mutating times”.<sup>7</sup> Thompson’s work speaks to the question put by Joan Borsa: “... how to be located but not fixed – how to have ground or position but continue to travel?”<sup>8</sup>

Travelling between and becoming located/dislocated involve

space and it is in space that Thompson’s working processes are manifest. Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift write about current responses to issues of space as having in common a move away from the Kantian perspective on space as an absolute category towards “...space as process and in process (that is space and time combined in becoming)”.<sup>9</sup> They then identify various contemporary species of making and writing predicated on space. Of these, their “spaces of self and other”; “spaces of experience”; and “spaces of language” seem particularly helpful to me in my effort to articulate my responses to the artist’s new work.

Spaces of self and other can today be conditional upon our technologies of conversation; that is, upon the tools we use to communicate with one another. The expansion of textual media (allowing, for instance, email communication between Dunedin and Montreal) links people in disparate times and places and thus the self can be created without being self-present. This allows for the shaping of the self through textual forms and making/writing practices variously attaching to or separating from those we are in conversation with. The relationship between maker and viewer, writer and reader becomes contingent upon a shifting sense of agency: what does the expansion or contraction of my imaginative space allow me to experience of Thompson’s spaces of experience, her physical making process, her “here and there of travel”?<sup>10</sup> I go back to her work to look for something which can keep me in the loop of conversation and I find – amongst other things – the map.

The image of the map is often quite definite in the artist’s work and sometimes barely hinted at through the longitudes and latitudes of the weave. In whichever guise, it makes it impossible to forget the process of travel so pervasively suggested in the work. Gilles Deleuze writes: “...from one map to the next, it is not a matter of searching for an origin, but of evolutionary displacements...a redistribution of impasses and breakthroughs, of thresholds and enclosures...space constructed by trajectories and...maps of intensities”.<sup>11</sup> Thompson’s maps do not chart a place, but rather function as metonyms in the recurring processes of arriving and departing. As a migrant to New Zealand, their presence in the work reassures me – Thompson and I are both migrants. Some decades ago, Wittgenstein still dared to speak confidently of life as a stable “weave”, with one’s pattern



potentially interwoven with that of another.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Andrew Pickering rather talks about the complex and often contestatory energies through which the textile(s) of a life may be in a process of becoming alongside those of others.<sup>13</sup> In contact with other practices, the artist's work during the last fifteen years "...brings to light the internal logic of narrative: the semiotic domain around which [her own] plot coalesces and self-organises."<sup>14</sup>

The earliest textile I am shown is a brightly-coloured abstract horizontal of which the boundaries are stretched along the wall and away from the textile surface itself, so that the resultant wave-like movement travels uncomfortably across the structured grid of warp and weft. A subsequent experiment hangs unassumingly on the vertical in a corner of the artist's studio. This work seems to contain in shorthand the vocabulary yet to be explored and acknowledged: drawing in and on the surface; expansion and contraction of a textured spatial field inscribed primarily through plane, line and tone with images of travel (map, boat, coastline); and movement away from the centre of the format.

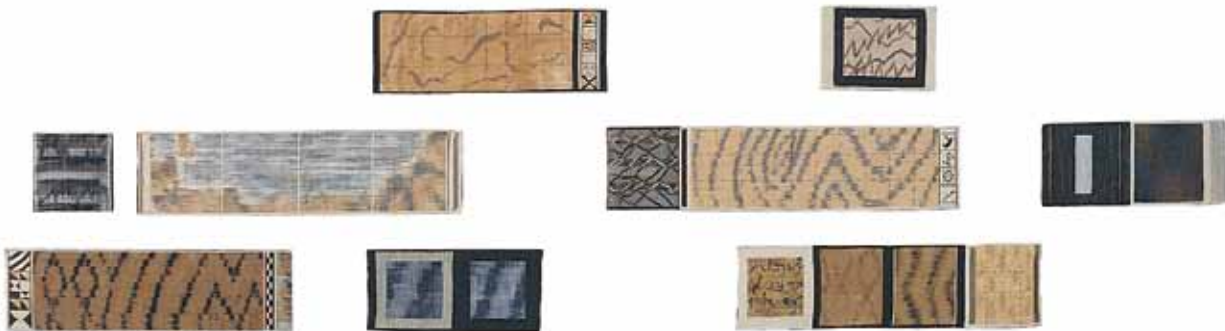
Later works in Thompson's solo exhibition, *Passages and Postcards*, favoured the long and stretched-out horizontal to become colourful scrolls telling stories of the Pacific with vivid and centred images; 18<sup>th</sup>-century exchanges between Maori and European on the southernmost coast of Aotearoa; and colonialist panoramas redolent of human navigation and charting techniques with grid, number and marker. Some of the sections within the scroll took on separate lives to become small squares ("postcards") exhibited as conglomerates on the gallery walls. In them, colour tended to drain away in favour of tone; and the illustrative image of the storybook became less important as a more formal engagement with spatial dispersal away from the centre and the documentary image manifested itself.

However abstract, Thompson's work has nevertheless always retained an emphasis on its concrete materiality through tactile values. Her studio houses a dobbie loom at which she currently works when in Dunedin. The resulting pieces, such as *Local Readings*, show computer manipulation as being secondary to the physical process through which the dyed and painted threads are picked up by hand in double or triple layers of weave. The imagery emerges from the structure of the weave in combination

with the colour effects of painting held within the woven "frame" of the works. Looking at these pieces, I am reminded that the artist always retains recognisable images. In this respect the recent horizontals created on the dobbie loom link with other earlier pieces such as the *Constructed Surfaces*, shown together in an approximately five metre long strip in the *Pasifika* exhibition. Horizon-lines, maps and barcodes, grids and markers still continue to provide clues and to make the work accessible to the viewer.

Thompson accedes that "...technology and the screens through which information is framed, filtered and conveyed through intermittent and often disjointed flickering have come to dominate aspects of contemporary life...but in my current work, textile structures and sensibilities are also deliberately being employed as connective commentary...exploring the notion of place as a definer and a marker of self, locating oneself in the terrain of Aotearoa, a Pacific nation."<sup>15</sup> She agrees with the definition of *locus* as: "...a place or locality; the collection of points, lines or surfaces which satisfy a geometric condition; or the linear position of a gene on a chromosome."<sup>16</sup>

The artist's interest in current genetic research and manipulation should not come as a surprise in an oeuvre which has consistently addressed issues of ownership in our era of postcolonialist awareness. Thompson's recognisable images often link with such concerns: the map implies charting of wilderness areas; the native plant is simultaneously an emblem of national identity and a device for the critical questioning of its assumed authenticity; and the digitally scanned chromosome references the continuously hybridising practice of colonialist expansion. The artist's work in *Locus Operandi* is subtle in many respects: her identification and exposure of the current sites of power within – amongst other practices – scientific research sponsored by state or industrial interests do not stare the viewer in the face. Images referring to genetic research are partly hidden within the complexity of her weaves or on the margins of her formats; they are slowly revealed and often only on close scrutiny. Thus, the insidious nature of power, or rather of the process of "overpowering", is suggested and made ironically manifest because the viewer can easily mistake the references to genetic manipulation as motifs merely imaging the natural habitat – the lake- and sea-life – of many of Aotearoa/ New Zealand's native plants.



**Local Readings** 2000 double weave pick up, dyed and painted threads, cotton and linen 270 mm high x various lengths

Thompson's recent textiles are confident on many levels: they are often boldly framed with dark borders and presented as monumental abstracts or they wrap like fluid sentences around the corners of a room; they are visual and tactile macrocosms for current microscopic genetic research and its contentious public face on television or the web; and they are riveting because they do not quite fit within the confines of any one practice, but rather occupy that seductive space within contemporary art – the boundary, the threshold, the risky thin edge of the wedge. The artist negotiates her precarious way between the territory she inhabits at any given time and the map charted through her own practice – that *locus* which is her true home. As Denis Cosgrove reminds us: "The map differentiates itself from the territory precisely through acts of selection...translated through semiotic systems".<sup>17</sup> He also warns that "...mapping begets further mappings...as another form of mapping is the creative probing, the tactical reworking, the imaginative projection of a surface as the map excites imagination and graphs desire [while being] the foundation for and stimulus to projects".<sup>18</sup>

After Thompson's very recent return from yet another period of intensive work in Montreal, I visit her studio once again with a sense of anticipation, this time eager to see what she has brought back in her travel bag and what this may be leading to back in Dunedin. What further twists in her self-organising plot; what new texts from her established vocabulary? I find carefully considered tactical probings within a consistent body of work in the process of final preparation for exhibition. Existing grids have now been cut to create the planned clusters of small modules in combinations which allow the viewer to choose sequences of focus from a variety of co-existing differences and similarities. New doobby loom pieces have gained in hue and intricacy of subject matter. Large and small pieces scarcely off the jacquard loom lure me with embossed surfaces, density of texture, depth of tone and surprising new colour exploration in green ochre and burnt sienna. Through this body of work, Thompson's artistic *practice* is in evidence: she is using a language with which she is at ease but never too comfortable and thus the results shift and change as the artist locates and relocates herself. Writing alongside her work, it keeps travelling and moving me with it.

Leoni Schmidt

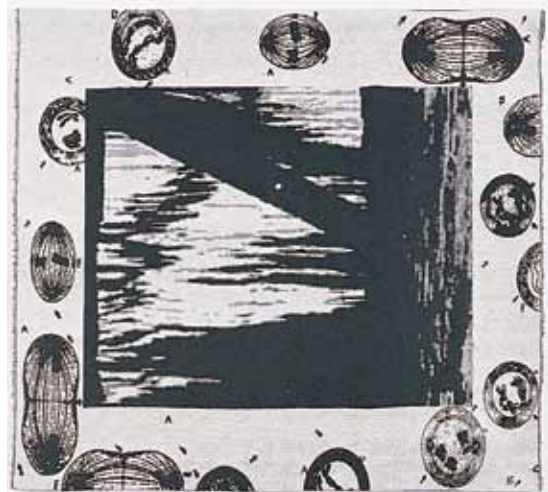
1. Joan Borsa, "Nomadic Locations, Travelling Subjects; Affirmation of Autobiographical Acts" in Peter White (ed.), *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*, Walter Phillips, Banff, 1996, p. 69.
2. *Ibid.* p.68.
3. Publicity information from the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles in conjunction with the e-textiles exhibition and dated 19 October, 2000, pp. 4 –5.
4. I thank Grant Thompson for recently discussing the extent of these practices with me.
5. An ideal state of affairs according to Carol Becker from the Chicago Institute of the Arts, who visited the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin during October 2000.
6. Maud Page, "Interdigitating Reihanamations; Lisa Reihana's Video Weavings", *Art Asia Pacific* 21, 1999, pp.40-43.
7. Quoted from the dust jacket of the Jonathan Cape, London edition of 1999.
8. Borsa, p. 69.
9. Mike Crang & Nigel Thrift (eds), *Thinking Space*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p.3.
10. *Ibid.*, p.20.
11. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p.63.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, , Zettel, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe & Georg Henrik Von Wright, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1967, paragraphs 567-69.
13. Andrew Pickering, "The Mangle of Practice; Agency and Emergence in the Sociology of Science", *American Journal of Sociology* 99, 1993, pp.559-89.
14. F. Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, Verso, London, 1998, p.65.
15. From unpublished writing by the artist, July 2000.
16. *Ibid.* as quoted from the Oxford English Dictionary, 1998, p.463.
17. Denis Cosgrove (ed.), *Mappings*, Reaktion, London, 1999, p.12.
18. *Ibid.* pp.13 and 15.



DNA Reflections (detail) 2000 jacquard weave, cotton, rayon and linen threads 1080 x 1060 mm

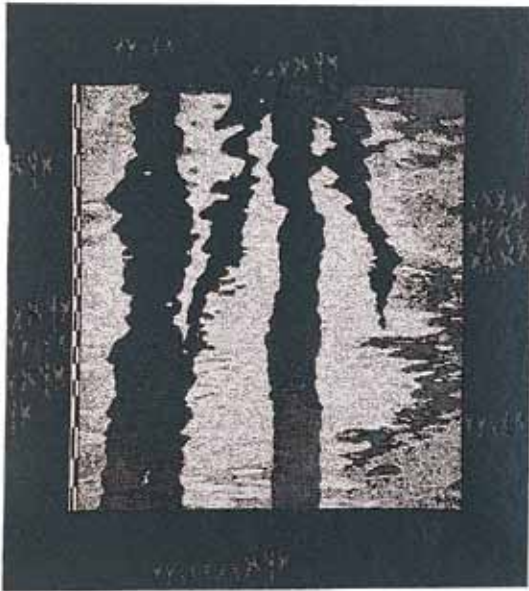


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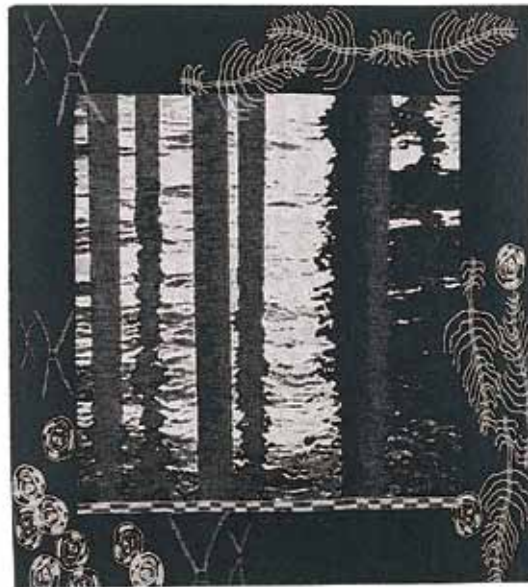


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above left: **DNA Reflections** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton, rayon and linen threads 1080 x 1060 mm. above right: **Reflected Cycles** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton, rayon and linen threads 990 x 1070 mm  
 below left: **XY Scale** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton, rayon and linen threads 1160 x 1050mm. below right: **Skeletal Reflections** 2000 jacquard weave, cotton, rayon and linen threads 1160 x 1050 mm

## BIOGRAPHY

Kelly Thompson was born in California in 1961 and immigrated with her parents to New Zealand in 1971. She studied weaving in Nelson and then received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1985 from the California College of Arts and Crafts and in 1994 an MA (Visual Arts) from the Canberra School of Art. She has been a lecturer at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin since 1988, where she is also the Head of Textiles.

Solo exhibitions include: *In Transit*, Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, 1994; *Parallel Crossings*, Photospace Gallery, Canberra, 1996; *Passages and Postcards*, public galleries in New Zealand and Australia, 1996-8; *Details*, Mori Gallery, Sydney, 1997.

Group exhibitions include: *Vernacular*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1997; *Pasifika*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space and 4A Gallery, Sydney, 1998; *Southern Lights*, City Art Centre, Edinburgh and Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1998; *Objects with Meaning*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, 1999; *HeadHandsHeart*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, 2000; *Language of Memory*, New Bedford Art Museum, Massachusetts, 2001.

Thompson's work is in numerous private collections in New Zealand and elsewhere. Public collections include the National Gallery of Australia, Nelson Polytechnic, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Otago Polytechnic, Powerhouse Museum of Applied Arts and Science, University of Otago, Whangarei City Council.

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