



HALL



Installation photography by Da Ping Lou, courtesy of Bard Graduate Center

SHAPED BY THE LOOM: WEAVING WORLDS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

Bard Graduate Center, New York

Until 9 July

Reviewed by Judith Glass

This concise yet comprehensive exhibition is an exploration of Navajo weaving focusing on Diné culture, history and cosmology coloured by the location-specific guiding principles of the making process. The catalyst for this project was the discovery of a collection of Navajo weavings at New York's American Museum of Natural History by curator Hadley Jensen. These underappreciated pieces were last exhibited in 1910. Jensen, together with a group of Bard Graduate Center students, has created an accomplished and exciting show supported by an excellent and exhaustive digital exhibition. A selection of historical

pieces from the American Museum of Natural History is shown together with the work of contemporary Diné weavers, photographers and artists.

Hadley Jensen is guided by the contention of philosopher and historian Etienne Gilson that 'knowing is making' and that lived experience is fundamentally crucial to the act of production. The essence of the exhibition is the connection between thinking, making and knowing. Jensen collaborated with fifth-generation Navajo (Diné) weavers and sisters Lynda Teller Pete and Barbara Teller Ornelas, and the project was shaped by their personal narratives along with

artist interviews, essays, object studies and interactive multimedia experiences.

As viewers we are transported to the dramatic topography and vividly coloured landscapes of the Navajo homeland through immersive 360-degree panoramas. Artist Rapheal Begay (Diné) uses digital photography to illustrate the eternal bond between the Diné people and the Four Corners region: northeast Arizona, northwest New Mexico, southern Colorado and a sliver of southeastern Utah (2). Diné'tah, the Navajo homeland (literal translation is 'among the people') is defined by four sacred mountains each associated with a



Courtesy of the artist

1 Installation view of 'Shaped by the Loom', showing three blankets; the one to the right was woven by an unidentified Diné/Navajo artist in the 1870s, while the other two are dated before 1972. All three blankets belong to the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History

2 Window Rock (Window Rock, AZ), from 'A Vernacular Response' series, Rapheal Begay (Diné), 2018. Digital photograph

different colour: white, blue, yellow and black. Each mountain is also imbued with a particular attribute: thinking, planning, action and completion. Ancient Diné ceremonies featuring ritual processions passing across each mountain are believed to be integral to living a balanced life.

The land cannot be separated from Navajo culture or from artistic practice—they are seen as one. Such harmony is exemplified by an 1870s tapestry-weave wool blanket in the Late Classical style from the Navajo Textile Collection of the American Museum of Natural History (1). The songs, stories and prayers that are woven into every piece

were gifted to the Diné people by Na'ashjeii Asdzáá (Spider Woman), the original weaver who constructed the fabric of the universe. The link between landscape and the language of mystical weaving is aptly portrayed by Diné artist Darby Raymond-Overstreet's series of digital prints effectively

There are no sheep grazing on the plains and mesas of Rapheal Begay's digital Diné'tah, because the ancient peaceful cycle of Navajo life was destroyed by waves of European settlers. In 1864 the United States federal government deported the Navajo people from their lands. The Long Walk of the Navajo was one of many attempts

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overlaying the textures and motifs of woven blankets with the landscape of the Four Corners region, as with *Woven Landscape, Window Rock*, 2022.

Until the end of the 19th century, yarn was produced from flocks of indigenous Navajo-Churro sheep and coloured using dye plants and materials gathered from the same lands. This is illustrated by Diné/Navajo *Dye Chart*, 2019, by Roselyn Washburn, a miniature multi-sensory index of place with its plant specimens labelled with their Navajo and botanical names surrounding a miniature weaving, and with each dye source connected to its corresponding coloured yarn. Such dye charts were originally conceived as guides to natural dye sources for students of weaving and later produced for the tourist market via local trading posts and galleries. The practical cumulative stages of the weaving process are shown with exhibits of unwashed and carded wool, looms, combs and battens.

at the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population.

The government forced the almost total eradication of the Navajo-Churro breed, disrupting the chain connecting Navajo culture, weaving, traditional lifestyle, and self-sufficiency. New yarns, dyes and iconography were coercively introduced to the weavers through trade and dissemination. The evolution of production, colonial trade strictures, the 19th-century demand for hand-crafted souvenirs and the artificial value system imposed by the Western art market is reflected in the display of 19th-, 20th- and 21st-century weavings.

This engaging exhibition is successful on many levels: as an introduction to the weaving process for the textile neophyte, a moving history of the colonial and governmental oppression of the Navajo, a powerful platform for the voices of indigenous artists and makers to express their cultural legacy, and as a sumptuous visual feast.