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## **Kay Lawrence : land, self, loss**

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Kay Lawrence:  
land, self, loss

A Gorgon in the mid-threads of a shawl, fringed with serpents is the description of a baby's shawl, the key motif of the story of the mythical Greek Kreusa. Raped by Apollo, the young princess hid their baby Ion in a cave at birth, wrapped in a covering woven with a Gorgon head she had made herself. His later recognition as a grown man, her son, by a distraught Kreusa depended on the identification of these figured cloths that she had woven as a girl. On this distinctive evidence which gave Ion his genealogical birthright hung the future of the people of Athens who were descended from him. The fierce Gorgon image, which originally had turned all viewers to stone, acted as an apotropaic ['turning away evil'] force to protect the innocent baby. Tapestries and woven images are crucial in Euripides' play in defining the architectural and political spaces in the Greek story of Ion as well as the understanding of personal fate.

Underpinning Kay Lawrence's work is an insistence on negotiating between the traditional techniques of woven Gobelin tapestry – so beautiful, laborious and persuasive – and the emergence of non-traditional and sometimes *subversive* approaches to the history of Australian settlement, in the positioning of women,

Aborigines and the environment. Her perception has moved through images of sparsely graphic landscapes in the 1980s commissioned for significant public and political spaces, towards the interior terrains of that most primal landscape, the family, since the 1990s.

Born in 1947 in Canberra, Kay Lawrence left Australia with her family when she was still a young child to live first in New Guinea, and later in Malaysia. Although her mother was born in Australia, her father had been born in Wales and his parents had emigrated from Wales in the 1920s to a remote town, Oodnadatta in South Australia to work on the railway. Her father was able to train as a meteorologist when he returned from World War II. After Malaysia her family returned to Adelaide, and Kay completed the Diploma of Art at the South Australian School of Art with an emphasis on painting and printmaking. Her mother died in 1970 after a long illness while only in her mid forties, and this event reverberates through Kay Lawrence's mature work.

**Votes for Women**

(detail of 'Centenary of Women's Suffrage Community Tapestries')  
1993-4

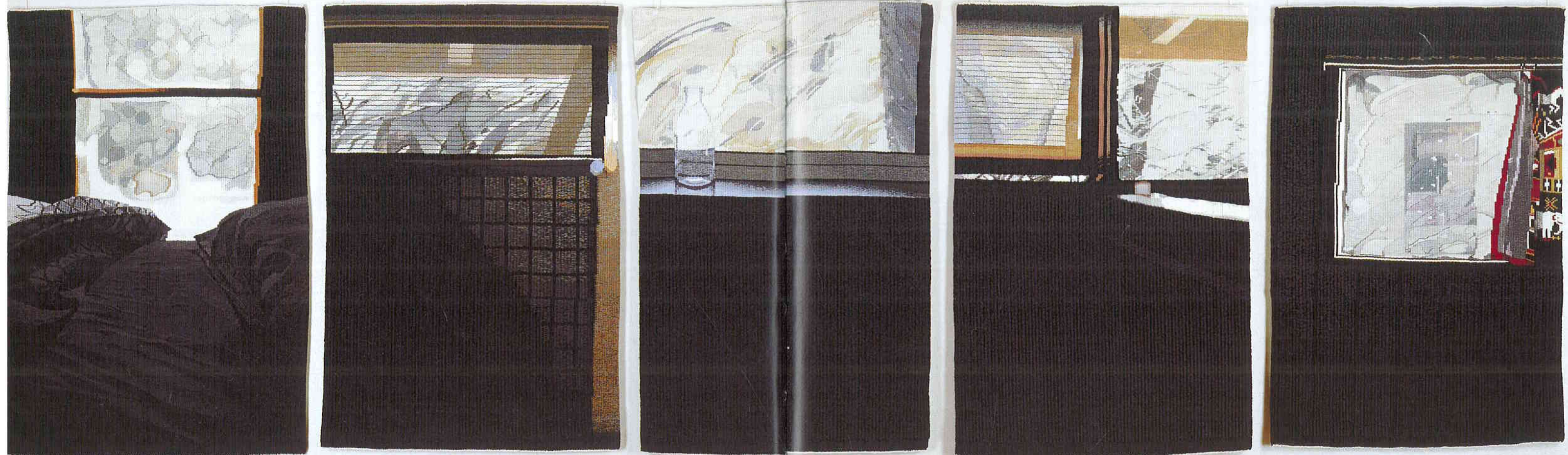


A wave of excitement about the new possibilities of craft mediums had flowed to Australia in the mid 1960s. A ripple of such provocative new approaches to traditions of tapestry weaving was evident in the exquisite work of Belinda Ramson who had studied tapestry with the renowned Scottish weaver Archie Brennan in Scotland. Kay Lawrence attended summer schools in tapestry with her in South Australia in 1974 and 1975, choosing tapestry almost by accident.

Her interest in the medium was confirmed when she attended a workshop given by Archie Brennan when he visited Australia in 1976. Brennan had been the prime mover in elevating tapestry at Edinburgh as a revitalised medium commenting on popular culture and the intricacies of modern life with wit and elegance. He had also advised on the development of the influential Victorian Tapestry Workshop, set up in Melbourne in 1976 with State Government funding. Kay Lawrence travelled to Scotland in 1977 to study tapestry weaving with Maureen Hodge, Archie Brennan's successor at the Edinburgh College of Art, returning to South Australia in 1978 when the craft movement was blossoming.



**Two Years, Two Hills** (detail)  
1982-3



a walk around on the inside looking out

1980-81

woven tapestry,

cotton warp, wool, cotton and linen weft

110 x 448cm (43 x 176in)

The Queensland Art Gallery, Australia

Sydney Nolan.  
Arthur Boyd.  
Russell Drysdale.

**A woman's view: national identities**

The substantial work 'a walk around on the inside looking out' foreshadows many later preoccupations. Here, a woman's view is strongly indicated, where the outer landscape is mediated through the window framework and glass reflections. A dark interior with light outside is repeated in the five panels that form a long narrative. Although the tapestry's formal strength relates to the imagery of mainstream artists, the difference lies in the crafted medium and the reference to the feminine viewpoint of 'inside looking out' which connects Lawrence's work to often hidden domestic histories.

The continued reflection and fascination with domestic artefacts is evident in the three small tapestries 'Rust' made twenty years later. 'Lawrence's still life objects, prefigured by the milk bottle in 'a walk around the inside looking out' are like emblems of ourselves weathered by the archaeology of our lives. The primacy of drawing in her images separates her tapestries from the structural emphasis on material found in the textile art of the pervasive 'fibreaerts' movement.

Another meditation on the divided

light and dark image followed in the tapestry 'Two Years, Two Hills'. The representation of the Australian bush landscape in the first half of the twentieth century had been very much a masculine domain, where virility and strength were the qualities underlying the settlement of the land. Although some women artists, for example Hilda Rix Nicholas, had struggled to make the experience of the bush of equal importance from a woman's perspective, the vast spaces of the arid inland were famously mythologised in the 1940s, 50s and 60s by Russell Drysdale, Arthur Boyd and Sydney Nolan and given iconic form in the paintings of Fred Williams.

'Two Years, Two Hills' nods to these stylistic influences in the depiction of a modern landscape, but the hills are seen not as the space for heroic or mythic action but as two light and dark symbols of a feminine psyche, one in South Australia, one in Dartmoor in England, which were bound up with my emotional life.<sup>2</sup> Both 'a walk around on the inside looking out' and 'Two Years, Two Hills' have an imagery characterised by an energetic diagonal mark, which is both abstract and representational of the scribbled vegetation of the stark hills of South Australia.

← the way we see it

← symbolises

②

**Two Years, Two Hills**  
1982-3  
woven tapestry  
cotton warp, wool, cotton and linen weft  
246 x 337cm (96 x 133in)  
Collection of the Commonwealth of Australia



# Description

The inclusion of fossil forms in 'Two Years, Two Hills' overlaid the brief personal time noted in the title with the immeasurably ancient layers of the landscape. The depth and complexity of the Australian landscape in which European settlement is such a brief moment, are indicated by the Aboriginal petroglyphs depicted in the major tapestry 'Red Gorge, Two Views' commissioned for the Prime Minister's Suite in the new Parliament House in Canberra. Such references within a landscape subtly underlined the fact that the exclusion of Aboriginal viewpoints and understanding of land had become a political issue in the celebration of two hundred years of European settlement in 1988.

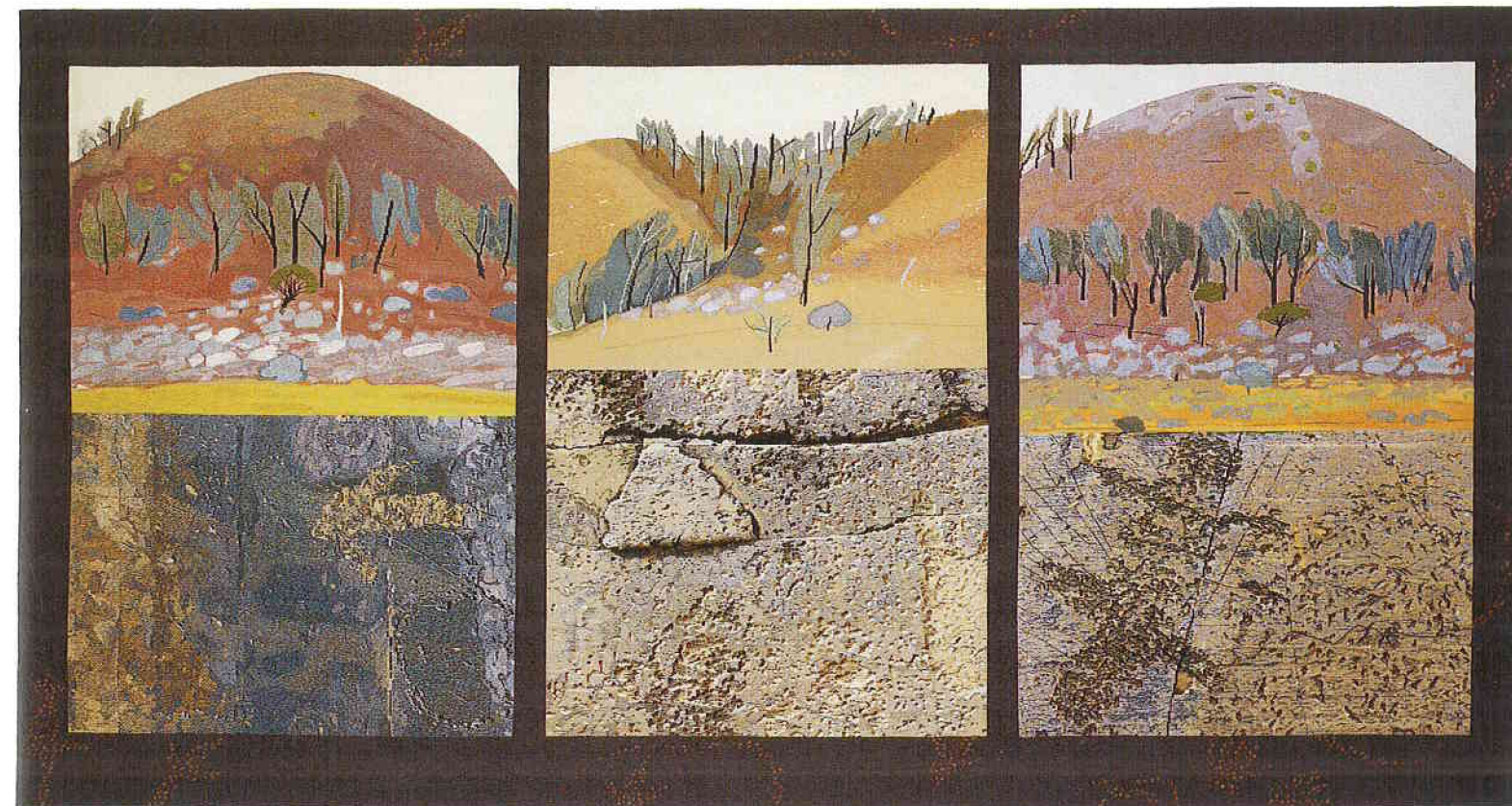
The underlying issues of reconciliation between the two cultures are revisited in the recent tapestry 'Translation' extending the meditations foreshadowed in 'Red Gorge, Two Views'. New anxieties have emerged in the wide debate about Aboriginal reconciliation and European occupation of Australia. The gridded field of pale golds and ochres is an interpretation of dyes from the native plants of Lake Mungo named in both English and the Paakantyi Aboriginal tongue.

← Rocks

that one



**Translation (detail)**  
1999-2000



## Culture

### Red Gorge, Two Views

1987-8

woven tapestry, cotton warp, wool, cotton and linen weft

193 x 359cm (76 x 141in)

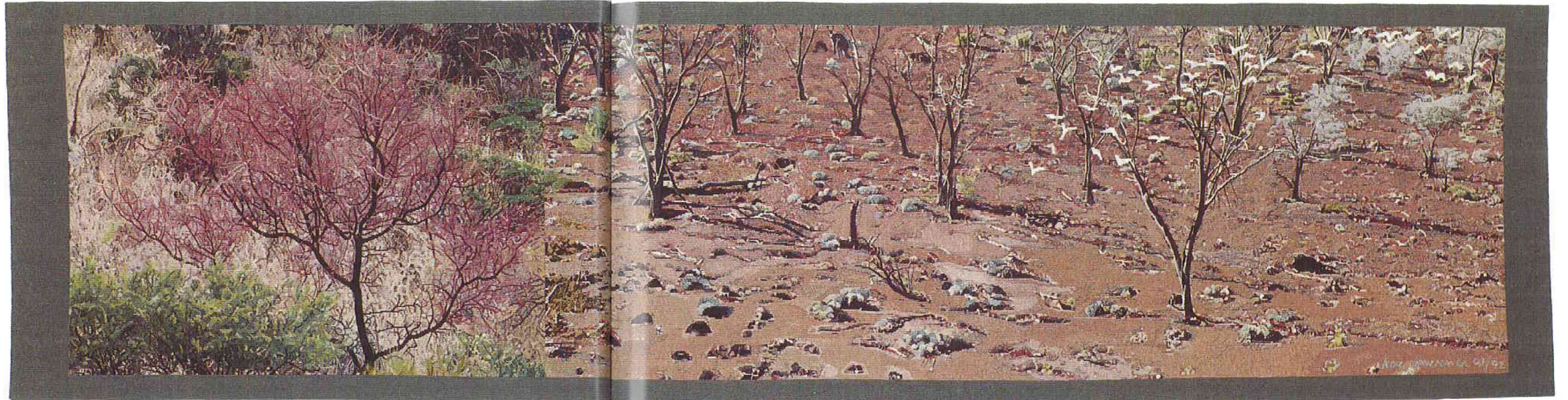
woven by Kay Lawrence, Jude Stewart, Chris Cocius, and Shirley Benlow,

with additional assistance from Sue Rosenthal,

Parliament House, Canberra

Another complex desert 'Gorge' tapestry 'From Italowie to Chambers Gorge' subtly recording the changes European settlement made to the land, was commissioned for the Sembler Building in Florida, USA. Viewed from close up, this densely detailed and poetic work is an intricate mosaic of flecks of colour that take on an illusionary realism from further away. The bromide cartoon, enlarged from original landscape photographs, is translated almost magically into tiny woven units.

This Sembler commission emphasised the architectural role of tapestry. Both textiles and tapestry have been distinct from other artforms in acknowledging a collaborative basis in the workshop, between designer, weaver, architect, dyer and spinner. Kay Lawrence's energetic involvement as a teacher, and as a committee member for national arts organisations has emphasised the importance of generously collaborative models in public arts.



**From Italowie to Chambers Gorge**

1991-2

woven tapestry

cotton warp, wool, cotton and linen weft

122 x 478cm (48 x 188in)

woven with assistance from Lucia Pichler

The Sembler Building, St Peterburg, Florida, USA