



PHOTO: ANNIE LEBOWITZ

'Tom Roots, Broken Branches - Gillis', 1997, Jacquard handweaving from Dance series, cotton, linen, metallised threads, 108 x 162 cm

## WOVEN IMAGES BY LOUISE BÉRUBÉ

Canadian artist Louise Lemieux Bérubé has been leading the development of weaving that crosses the boundaries between design, craft, art and technology. Profile by Ruth Scheuing.



PHOTO: ANNIE LEBOWITZ

THE work of Louise Bérubé specifically explores computerised application with hand weaving. Her best-known series, "Dance", includes such works as *La La La 2 #2 - Lock*, *White Room (La Chambre Blanche) - Laurin*, *The Café of the Blind #2 - Maheu*, *Tom Roots* and *Broken Branches - Gillis*, all of which make interesting connections between three art forms: dance, weaving and photography. The works demonstrate her interest and striving for excellence in different art forms and have been exhibited across North America, Japan and now Australia, captivating audiences with their dramatic woven images.

The pieces comprising the "Dance" series are large woven images of dancers, measuring approximately 1 x 1.5 m and larger. The images are striking compositions and use photography's ability to capture and freeze the dancers on film in a way that the eye may not be able to perceive. The titles of the weavings list both the title of the dance and the choreographer's name. Bérubé weaves these images on a hand-manipulated, computer-assisted Jacquard loom. The results are most effective, as they appear initially as quite simple digital halftone images in contrasting dark and light colours; upon closer inspection they display a range of rich woven textures. At the same time these images of moving figures are themselves on a moving



'White Room (La Chambre Blanche) Laurin', 1997, from Dance series, cotton, linen, metallised threads, 108 x 162 cm

surface – cloth hanging in space, pliable, light and flexible. Bérubé achieves her results using Photoshop to transform the image and a Jacquard weaving software program called *Pointcarré* to create the woven image. In the same way as the dancers appear to lift off effortlessly and remain suspended in the air, she uses her skills in weaving and technology to create visual works that dazzle the viewer, without drawing undue attention to the process that made it possible.

This artist's work represents recent developments in computerised Jacquard weaving. She has been instrumental in making this process, which was previously reserved for industry, available to a large number of artists and weavers all over the world. Jacquard weaving was invented in 1800 by Jean-Louis Jacquard, who combined various inventions by other individuals to create a new type of loom. Jacquard weaving was able to create large-scale motifs of incredible details with a mechanised system of punched cards that allowed each thread to be manipulated independently. The Jacquard loom, with its digital mode of operation, led to the Analytical Engine, built by Charles Babbage and described by Ada Lovelace ('the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves') in the 1840s. Later this device resulted in the computer. During the past 10 years or so Jacquard looms, available for small productions and hand-weavers, have been linked up to computers. This meant that individual pieces could be woven, avoiding the time-consuming process of creating full-scale drafts and punched cards, which

'The Café of the Blind #2 – Maheu (le café des aveugles)', 1997, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 145 cm

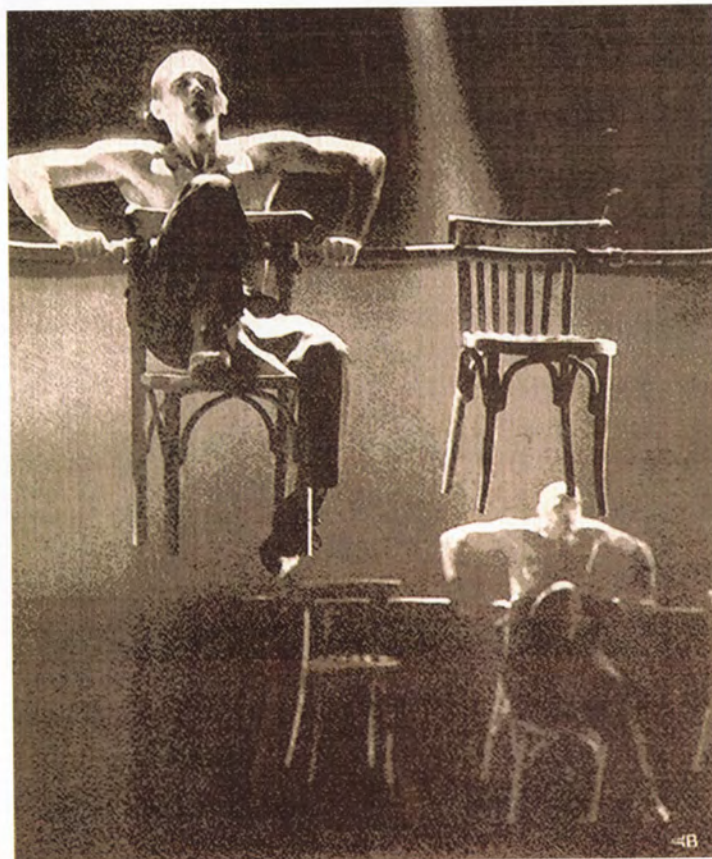




PHOTO: ENCHIRIUM LOCK



'La La La 2 - #2 - Lock', from Dance series, 1997, woven cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 154 cm

'Rose', 1999, from Flower series, woven cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm

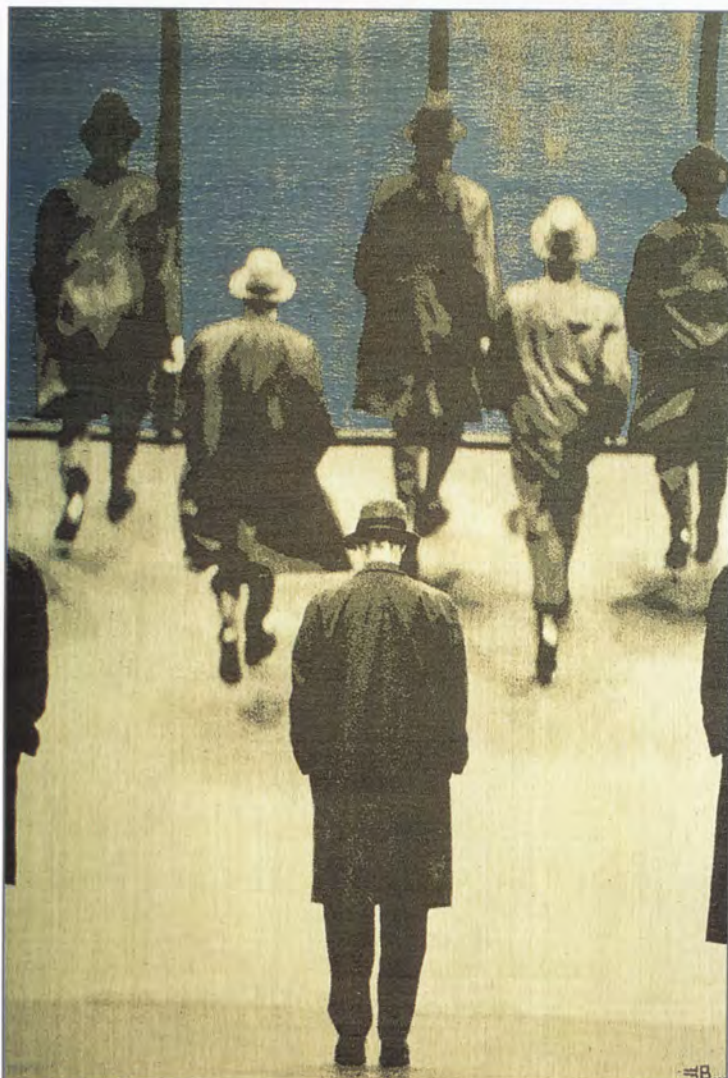


PHOTO: MICHAEL SORODJIAN

are necessary steps for all traditional Jacquard looms. Jacquard weaving, during its early development in the 19th century, emphasised highly ornate designs of representational imagery, but even then it was also used for painterly reproductions of people, architecture and landscapes. The earliest such woven portraits predate photography and it is said that they used such fine threads that people thought they were looking at prints. Contemporary Jacquard weaving creates realistic imagery by using a process that mimics halftone printing, such as mixing shades of greys with various combinations of black and white threads.

The Dance series was a new direction for Bérubé and represents her departure from previous endeavours. Her earliest works, such as *Light and Shadow* and *Waves*, produced in 1990, were abstract studies that focused on textures and the blending of colours and surface pattern through the combination of different types of threads and painted warps. These pieces explored the play between structure, colour, material and texture that is so important in her work. This is also evident in the later series "Sails", where Bérubé investigated the nature of "fabric-ness" and drape through such non-textile materials as metal threads. Her urge to play with aspects of fabric as cloth, firmly grounded in its material quality, is driven by a desire also overcoming its limitation of functionality through its visual seductive qualities. Later works in metal, such as *Column* (1995), show textiles shifting from the bounds of flat fabrics into free-standing columns. In the same way as the dancer aims to leave the ground, her fabrics aspire to transcend their physical reality. Since finishing the Dance series, Bérubé has begun to explore imagery taken from nature, initially with a series of large-scale flowers which dazzle with their

'Joe - Perreault', 1997, from Dance series, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 160 cm



'Fusion', 1993, construction textile, mixed metals, ht 92 cm

tremendous detail. Nature is very much placed under the microscope and the black-and-white renditions, with only slight touches of colour, tend to emphasise the removal of these natural forms from nature. In their larger-than-life depiction, we somehow become more aware of the tension and dynamics of the plant domain – nature transformed by photography, weaving and technology, but still desirable and remote.

Most recent works, such as *Silence of Winter* and *Icy Branches*, deal with the ice storm of 1999 and the havoc it caused to trees, nature and people in Bérubé's native province of Quebec. Portrayed in shiny metal threads, nature is shown to be both dangerous and vulnerable, not what we tend to regard as its romantic aspects. These works also strongly express a sense of place, Quebec, where nature is indeed hard on people. As the famous quasi Quebec national anthem by Gilles Vilneaut goes: 'Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver, mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est la neige ...' Besides language, the landscape equally makes Quebec unique. This idea also continues the emphasis on exploring Quebec's contemporary dance, expressed in her earlier work.

These representations of realistic flowers and more abstract version of trees, give Bérubé the chance to investigate organic patterns and translate them into textured surfaces. She is not primarily interested in the photographic representation, but instead uses the image to draw the viewer into her woven textures. The absence of colour in these works does force us to view them more as pattern, texture and "nature morte".

Besides her own work, Bérubé has had tremendous influence on others who have become interested in contemporary Jacquard weaving. She has rendered the process a viable tool for many studio weavers who choose to work in a non-industrial and non-institutional setting. She conducts workshops on Jacquard weaving in addition to her regular teaching at her school, the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Text-

*'A Knot, 1996, woven steel, brass, copper, rayon and metallised threads, 150 x 50 x 60 cm*



'Clematis', 1999, from Flower series, cotton, linen, metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm





'Amaryllis', 1999, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm



'Cabbage', 1999, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm



Louise Bérubé

'Peonias', 1999, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm

'Pavots', 1999, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm

'Sunflower', 1999, from Flower series, cotton, linen and metallised threads, 108 x 108 cm



tiles, that she founded and still manages. She is committed to making the loom available to artists and designers and provides information and knowhow to facilitate a wide variety of projects and levels of expertise. Typically, Bérubé's workshops are attended by people ranging from complete novices in weaving to university professors. Her contribution to teaching and promoting contemporary Jacquard weaving resulted in the recent group exhibition "e-textiles", featuring the work of international artists, that opened in Montreal in November, 2000 prior to commencing its tour of Canada, the US and Australia.

Bérubé's untiring energy has involved her in the activities of many cultural groups. She was active for 12 years as a municipal counsellor and a board member of the prestigious La Place des Arts in Montreal. She has played an active role in cultural organisations such as the Quebec Textile Arts Council and the Crafts Council of which she was the president until a year ago. And last but not least, she recently wrote a 400-page book, titled *Le Tissage Createur*, which uses quite contemporary methods to teach weaving, from the most basic structures to complex Jacquard patterns. Containing many drawings and designs, it is an excellent source of information but, unfortunately, at the moment it is only available in French.

I first met Bérubé when she came to the Banff Centre in the late 1980s to help install and teach the software Pointcarré, a computer language for patterned weaving and a precursor to the Jacquard weaving. I soon came to appreciate her thorough technical grasp of weave structures. Since then I have attended her workshops and followed her progression from the initial Jacquard weaving done at the Rhode Island School, using point paper and working with a technician over a lengthy period. In all aspects of her work, Louise Bérubé demonstrates her dedication to weaving, personal growth and technical excellence.

#### Ruth Scheuing

*Ruth Scheuing is a weaver, artist and teacher in the Capilano College Textile Arts Program, North Vancouver, Canada. She is an internationally exhibiting artist who also writes on the subject of woven textiles.*

Louise Lemieux Bérubé is the keynote speaker at the "Textiles and the Digital" conference at the College of Fine Arts in Paddington, Sydney on 21 July, 2001. Her work, along with that of Ruth Scheuing, is featured in the exhibition "e-textiles - Ventures in Jacquard Weaving" to be shown at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW College of Fine Arts, Sydney, 19 July - 18 August, 2001. For details contact Liz Williamson on (02) 9385 0610 or Liz.Williamson@unsw.edu.au