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Kevin Collins

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# Pairs of Hands: The Public Art Tapestry Project

Kevin Collins

*Using my prerogative as a consumer of art, I refer here to the image on pages 42-43 of this journal as a sunset. Of the small number of people with the authority to correct this characterization, some agree, some disagree, and some offer no opinion.*

In the hands of one of 25 people, a line of colored yarn passes horizontally between two vertical strands of off-white string in the same pair of hands, the strings being passed, the yarn doing the passing.

That intersection is called a “crossing.” Visually, each crossing blends the very limited meaning of the off-white string—it eventually expresses little more than verticality—with the richer meaning of the parti-colored yarn. Then each crossing is placed next to another, and each pair of crossings combines its meaning with another pair, and so on.

There are more than 300,000 such crossings in the Public Art Tapestry Project, *Sun on Earth*, constructed in 2009 and 2010 in the Art Building of Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford, Oklahoma. The project that was exhibited in eight Oklahoma and Texas museums beginning just hours after its completion in mid-2010. Together, these crossings present a stunningly schizophrenic vision: A realist’s fantasy, global in its locality, mocking with serenity.

But, “schizophrenic”? Those 25 pairs of hands!

Some pairs of hands created very few crossings; one pair created exactly one, and the experience might have given the individual attached to those hands a case of the willies. Other pairs created a couple dozen or a couple hundred crossings. I myself turned a few more than 100 crossings. But seven pairs of hands created enough crossings each to make them tired of the process, which some of them were at times.

Five of these seven pairs of hands created about 50,000 crossings each.

So as with any good schizophrenic, there is a dominant personality in the vision of the Public Art Tapestry Project, but it is distracted, tugged by the visions, among others, of someone who got the willies. (I mean, *the willies!*) It is tugged by me, a man who has reached age 57 without experiencing an artistic “vision.” It is strongly tugged by a couple pairs of hands that probably would have approached 50,000 crossings had one not arrived too late and the other left too soon. It is tugged by hands that didn’t like the work and by others that did, but not enough to continue. The tapestry is not quite in control of all its impulses.

The five central pairs of hands all belong to Western Oklahomans, but some have more solid claims to that title than others. Together, though, these people have seen much more of the world than I’d expect any five random Western

Oklahomans to have seen.

Carol Goyer plows the rough red earth as her people did before her, and her family's farm supports a few of the children of other Oklahomans. But she's seen the sights of North America and bits of Europe. I hear the Northern childhood in the voice of Mary Segal, but she left Minnesota and has taken root in Oklahoma, where she tends a menagerie that may have function but certainly has ornament. Myra Jennings grew up here, did microbiological research in Davis, California, did a long-term study in Gabon, central Africa, and returned to care for ailing parents. Christina Stone raised three children in Thomas—small and quiet even by Weatherford's standard—but she was raised in Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, where it can be hard to get a respite from arts-related events. EunKyung Jeong, eight years in Oklahoma, was raised in Korea and has seen Asia and Europe. She began an MFA program in the 90's at SUNY-New Paltz—taking remedial English courses at the same time—and she settled in Weatherford after earning her degree. (The sixth- and seventh-busiest pairs of hands complicate the vision even further: Melaine Campbell—whose interest in the project had to wane as her own master's program waxed—is a born Northerner who has seen both regions through biracial eyes; Huamin Wang—who joined the project only when it was well underway—is an official of the government of China who had come to Oklahoma to witness the birth and early infancy of a grandchild.)

Typical of Western Oklahomans and anything-but-typical, which is typical.

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The 7' x 14' tapestry depicts a setting sun against both the blackness of encroaching night and the earth shifting from bright green to shadow. The bright, broad green restricts the piece's setting in time to only a few possible months in Western Oklahoma.

The piece certainly does depict just Western Oklahoma, yet it just as certainly depicts more: the arc of the horizon—though far less parabolic than the arc of the sun—suggests something like 1/32 of the circumference of the earth, too much arc to present just Oklahoma, a little too much to present just the Midwest. This "error" serves to conflate the mundane with the exotic in the eyes of many viewers.

(As with most questions I asked all of the owners of the five central pairs of hands, I received answers of "yes," "no," and "sorta" to my question concerning whether conflating the local with the universal was a conscious choice.)

In 2006, EunKyung Jeong had a vision not of a sunset, but of a massive communal art project that no one, two, or three artists could claim as their own. She pictured as few as four and as many as 20 artists conceiving, planning, and executing the project.

She gave free Saturday tapestry weaving workshops in the Weatherford Public Library, where she shook and guided several pairs of hands, some of which would make up the central group of five.

She talked with a department colleague at the time, Jan Bradfield, about the depressing reality that arts funding is not only meager but dependent on matching funds; there's a chance of having a worthy project funded, but it requires a tiny grant to be used as a match for a small grant, which can be a match for a so-so grant, etc.

Bradfield told Jeong that there was such a thing as the Weatherford Arts Council, then she literally pushed her colleague through the doorway and into the next W.A.C. meeting. The tiny local arts council (whose treasurer swallowed hard when the membership had voted a \$50 donation to the arts council of New Orleans just after Hurricane Katrina) voted to contribute \$1500 to the tapestry project.

Jeong began building matches, and with contributions from Southwestern Oklahoma State University, the City of Weatherford, the Oklahoma Arts Council, and the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, she was ready in 2007 to commit to the project.

As she was ordering the essential materials—including the massive oak slabs necessary to construct the 9' x 16' frame across which the tapestry would be strung—a fluctuating number of interested volunteers in face-to-face meetings, and later on Facebook, generated ideas about the local landscape, concluding that the two central elements must be the land and the sun. (These two, of course, are the dominant features of Western Oklahoma, but where in the world—even in places where they are notable for their absence—are the land or the sun not the dominant features?)

The discussion group, always in flux, considered and rejected dozens of designs from different sources. At one point, it considered a drawing similar to what the final design would look like, but with an important addition: a tiny black strip perpendicular to the horizon and marked with a sign as Highway 54.

It took the discussion group perhaps too long to eliminate the road and the sign for a good reason, but not for the most important reason: Highway 54, the local north-south artery, couldn't be perpendicular to the western horizon. (The more important reason that Highway 54 had to be eliminated, of course, was that its presence would have negated the suggestions of the Kalahari, of Nazca, and on some days even of Rangoon that eventually haunted the final work; it would have turned the work's exaggerated arc of the earth into a mere error in geometry.)

There were dozens of such debates, some not so conclusively settled, and the now-larger, now-smaller discussion group decided on the idea of an image.

Jeong produced drawing after drawing, each refined a little, until the group could offer no more criticisms. Jeong then scanned the image onto a computer program, expanded it to 7' x 14', and printed in early 2009, in sections, the "cartoon" that was to be mounted behind the huge frame to serve as a guide for the weavers. The off-white strings were hung vertically, the frame, and the weaving was begun in the spring.

Student assistant Nikki Jantzen mixed the yarns into color combinations and videotaped the developing tapestry. When she graduated and got married in 2010, student assistant Martin Lopez took over these and other chores.

At the start of the weaving, everything seemed to be going smoothly for the project with the important exception of its founding vision: the idea of an artwork that is communal rather than personal. The weavers tended to defer to Jeong as problems arose. As the colored yarn crept a few inches up the frame, it started to seem a little like the work of "Jeong and some helpers" rather than like a genuine community project.





*Photo by E.K. Jeong*

Like some other problems that troubled the project, this one solved itself. Jeong was enrolled in a Ph.D program. While she took online courses during the regular school year, she was required to be in Texas for the summer. The weavers, just comfortable enough after nearly two months of work, decided to push on in Jeong's absence rather than put the project on hold.

Five pairs of hands pursued the work of the summer of 2009—Jeong was absent, Campbell was still involved, and Wang had yet to arrive—and these hands gained an authority over the project that had been threatened by the presence of the mother hen. They raised and settled significant as well as silly disputes. Jeong was available by email, but the advice she could offer from Texas was limited. The group, with a new leader not just every day but with every new utterance, made, executed, regretted, undid, remade, re-executed, and congratulated itself for communal artistic decisions. By the time that Jeong returned in mid-July, she was the slacker, the single remaining weaver who had made the least contribution to the physical construction of the work. At this



*Photo by E.K. Jeong*

point, there was no sole proprietor of the tapestry project: it was a corporate effort, a communal effort. The group more than welcomed the return of Jeong, but it was prepared to question her, to challenge her, and often enough to prevail.

As the summer of 2009 passed into autumn, Campbell became less and less involved in the twice-weekly construction sessions, and the personality of the group reflected the personalities of the remaining five central pairs of hands: Jeong, Segal, and Goyer dominated that personality, each with a different brand of cheerful

stoicism; Stone was more passionate on strictly aesthetic matters, and Jennings most passionate of all on aesthetic matters, on the situation in Iraq, and occasionally on the price of tea in China.

Autumn passed into winter—and the yarn passed the halfway point on the frame—when Wang joined the group, repeating some of the errors that others had made months before. Some had the urge to lecture the newcomer, but all recognized in her, in addition to the same errors, the same sorts of enthusiasm

and wonder that they had felt months before. As Campbell had been, Wang was recognized as an essential part of the group before she returned to China in late April, 2010.

Winter passed into spring, and the end of the project was in sight. Jeong arranged to exhibit the tapestry in the summer, the fall, and the following winter at three nearby colleges and five nearby museums. The group agreed to aim for entry into the Fiberworks 2010 competition in June in the state capitol, an effort that would require a furious finishing kick at the end of a marathon. The group, minus Jeong—who again disappeared into Texas—agreed to team-teach a course on tapestry weaving for children at the Weatherford Arts Council’s Summer Arts Academy in July, a course that was voted the children’s favorite.

When Southwestern Oklahoma State University bought a substantial Main Street building, several local arts groups made an appeal to the president that a portion of the building be dedicated as secure exhibition space for the university, something it has never had before. Jennings represented the tapestry group for the appeal. The SWOSU Main Street facility opened in 2012 and has already hosted three art exhibitions, including a fund-raiser for the local hospital. In the year-and-a-half that it has been open, the gallery has dramatically altered the cultural life of Weatherford.

The day after the last crossing was secured on *Sun on Earth*, the group delivered the tapestry to the Fiberworks Show in Oklahoma City, where it dominated both the visual space and the conversation. After that exhibition, it visited the Route 66 Museum; the Thomas Stafford Museum; the Frisco Center; Redlands College; Texas Tech University; the Underground Downtown Gallery in Lubbock, Texas; and the National Ranching Heritage Museum.

The core weavers have continued their travels, and when they walk into world museums, they now walk in as accomplished artists. One has been teaching a college course in tapestry, another has begun a master’s program in art, and all—transformed by their years at work on their communal project—have produced solo tapestries to complement the larger work at future exhibitions.

The world was changed a little by 300,000 crossings of colored yarn with off-white string and also by the 200,000 crossings turned on practice looms by the five, the seven, and the 25 pairs of hands. The world was changed a little by other works of art by the same group, such as the odd Thanksgiving dinner adjacent to an ornamental menagerie on a rough patch of land dominated by the sun, a dinner at which people shared memories of Minnesota, Korea, San Francisco, and Gabon. Dinners like that are rare in Western Oklahoma, but they happen. They are rare all over the world, but they happen.

