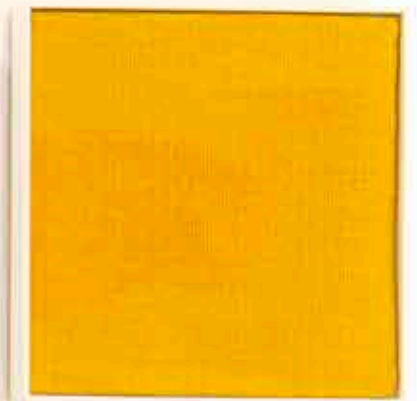
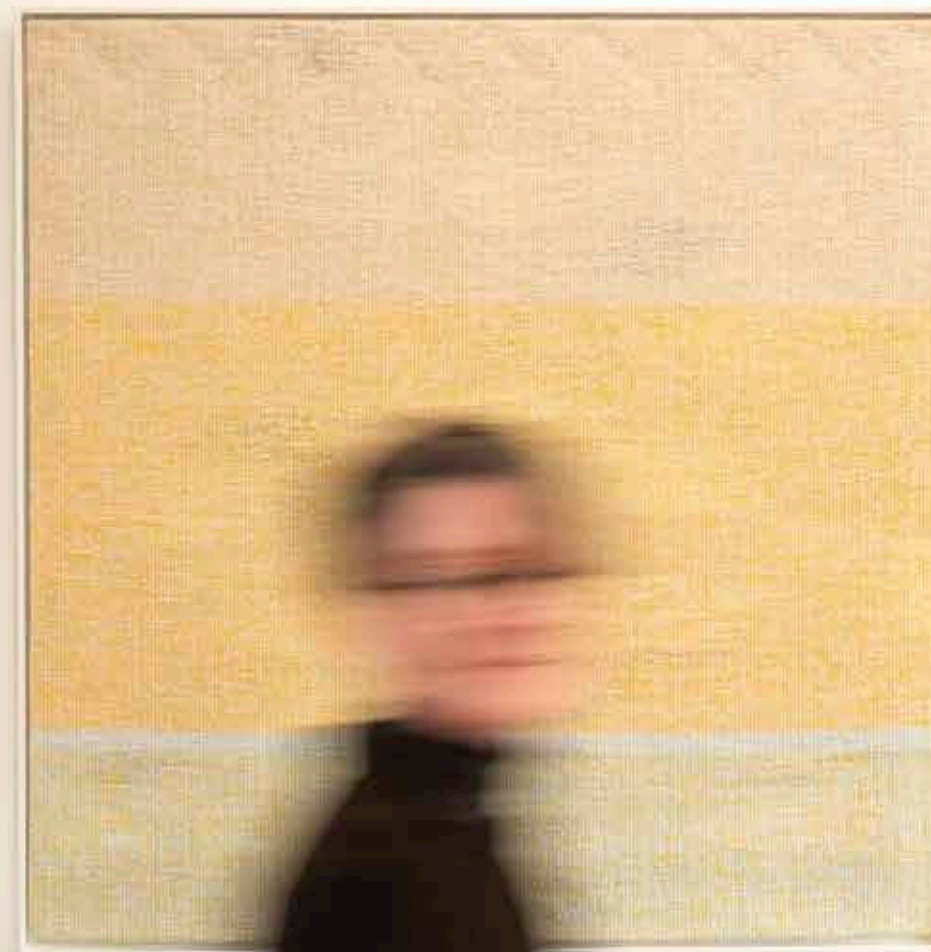
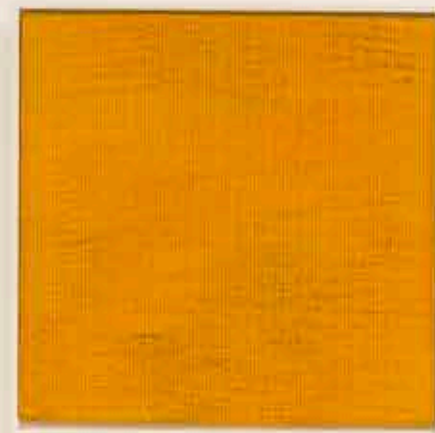


HEIRLOOMS OF THE FUTURE

KATHARINE SWAILES

The first of Katharine's Colourfield series, *Le Bric et de Broc*, was made with odds and ends saved from a previous project on the 16th-century Stirling Tapestries.



Dominique Corlett speaks to the tapestry weaver about finding inspiration in the colours of nature and breaking free from unicorns

When weaver Katharine Swailes is ready to start a new tapestry, she heads into the garden with her wool yarn, buckets and dyes. Katharine lives just outside Arundel, West Sussex, with a garden that overlooks the South Downs, and it is here, surrounded by the colours of nature, that the journey of the work begins.

Light and weather permitting, Katharine will dye at any time of the day and year, working in small batches, creating just enough yarn for her next artwork or two. Referring to her well-thumbed recipe book, she weighs out small amounts of dye to start with for the lightest ▶



RIGHT Katharine weaving at the loom, surrounded by the hand-dyed yarns that are so central to her work. **BELOW** *Verdure Colourfield*, 2023, a work that 'traverses and climbs the canvas from left to right.' **FACING PAGE** In *Chalk Quartet*, Katharine explored her relationship with Sussex and its distinctively chalky landscape.



'It's the garden that forms the palette. I react to the light that surrounds me'

Downs, Katharine describes it as 'a damp place that catches the morning mist'. Having grown up in Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria, surrounded by water, cloud and sparsely populated hills, Katharine instantly felt at home, and the move reconnected her with the landscape in a way that she says 'completely changed my work.'

While this was an important step, the seeds of Colourfields had been sewn a few years earlier. After Katharine's tapestry-weaving training at West Dean College from 1999–2000, she remained at West Dean, working at the tapestry studio for 18 years, spending 12 of those on the project to reweave the 16th-century *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries for Stirling Castle. In 2017, she was invited to take part in an exhibition showcasing the work of the studio's master weavers at the Crafts Study Centre, Farnham. The Stirling Castle project had just

shades, adjusting the recipe to create more intense colours, or to add warmth or coolness.

Every now and then, she will pluck a yarn from the bucket and hold it up to the surrounding flora. 'It's the garden that forms the palette,' she says. 'If the colours come out looking too manmade, they don't sit right with the garden and I'll think, "What do I need to add?" It might just be a tiny bit of black to take the edge off. I react to the light that surrounds me.'

Through this method, which Katharine likens to an artist mixing their paint colours, she sets the foundations for her abstract Colourfield tapestries. These works capture the light, colours and atmosphere of that moment in the garden with the dye baths, and in turn seem to capture the very essence of the seasons. Works such as *Fall Light into Winter* – a triptych in ivory, umber and brown, that suggests leaden skies and muddy fields, while also evoking a feeling of encroaching darkness and falling temperatures. By contrast, *Impatient for Spring* is a delicate,

painterly work, filled with gentle greens, pinks, lilacs and yellows that hint at warmth and sunlight, yet remain on the cool side of the spectrum, creating a sense of yearning for what is to come.

Katharine, who originally worked in costume design, has been weaving for 25 years, but it wasn't until 2020 when she started the garden dyeing that certain things fell into place, and the Colourfield tapestries took off. Now represented by the Cavaliero Finn Gallery, her work has gained increasing recognition and has been shown at the Collect Art Fair; Make, Hauser & Wirth, Somerset; and Pallant House Gallery, Chichester. From March to June this year, she exhibited with her partner and fellow weaver, Caron Penney – with whom she runs the Atelier Weftfaced studio – at Petersfield Museum.

The garden dyeing was prompted by a move from Atelier Weftfaced's previous studio to a rural studio on the Barlavington Estate near Petworth. Located down a single track road on the north side of the



finished and, ready for a change, she decided to return to her love of the abstract, and to use the odds and ends of yarn from the castle tapestries project to weave something completely different.

'I didn't want to put in any techniques, I just wanted to show what I loved about weaving – the repetitive action of putting the weft through the warp and the calming, transformative nature of that process. I wanted it to be just me, the warp and the wool, and if somebody came in, all they would see would be a sea of colour.'

The result was *Le Bric et de Broc*: nine variously sized square and rectangular panels, each a sea of colour, which hang together as a perfect whole. When Atelier Weftfaced showed the work at the

2020 London Art Fair, it drew a crowd, with visitors commenting on the feeling of peace it evoked in them. It was bought by the Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation, with plans to hang it in the respite room in the maternity hospital.

This piece also prompted Katharine's brother to liken it to the artwork of their mother, who had been a landscape painter. 'At that moment, I acknowledged a few things,' says Katharine. 'I had always wanted my own identity, and I'd enjoyed working in neutrals, making structural pieces. But I was brought up in landscape and the colours of landscape. I couldn't deny it any longer. It's in my makeup.'

The landscape reference has become stronger in the pieces she has made since, but Katharine says

her work is not about landscape: 'I don't go out and make preparatory sketches.' Rather, it's a meditation on weaving itself, with a process that involves pulling out coloured yarns at random, and weaving with seven strands at a time. 'I don't have a plan. I go into a zen-like state and see what happens,' she explains. 'When I started, I didn't really know what was going to appear, I just thought it would be an abstract work. That's why, when people ask, I say it's an "inner landscape": my own, personal, inner landscape.' 📧

WHERE TO BUY

Katharine's work is available through [Atelier Weftfaced](http://AtelierWeftfaced.com), weftfaced.com, and Cavaliero Finn, cavalierofinn.com. Prices start at around £3,000.