

Vietnam—Mai Chau – Josette. Photo: Charmaine Kik.

Weaving through other eyes

**ROBERT COOK PROVIDES A COLOURFUL
PERSPECTIVE ON TEXTILE ARTISTS FROM THE
WEST WORKING IN THE EAST**

IT'S HARDLY NEWS. SO, FAINT WITH BOREDOM, I RATTLE OFF THE FOLLOWING PROCLAMATION: cultural practices, of all types, are not universally significant but have (shifting) meanings that come into play as they are shaped by certain geo-politically defined discursive contexts. And it's only when we find ourselves completely immersed in another culture that we become truly aware of the constructed-strangeness of our own backgrounds and craft-practices. To quote Australia's pre-eminent post-colonial philosopher, Daryl Summers: "you'll never, never know, if you never, never go".

As the experience of cultural relativity was at the core of her mentorship program, this is what textile artist, Charmaine Kik, found. Mentored by Edith Cowan University lecturer and established textile practitioner, Rinska Car, the mentorship program flew the pair from the shores of Western Australia to destination South East Asia. Having used Vietnam to manufacture her Australian wool rugs since 1992 (when she found out that the Russians had withdrawn and left literally thousands of looms barren) Car believed that one of the most important things she could offer Kik was the experience of working in an alternative culture. For two weeks in May 1999, Kik accompanied Car on one of her twice-yearly sojourns to Vietnam. For Kik, it was an invaluable opportunity to both see how Car did business with another culture and to learn about alternative textile traditions.

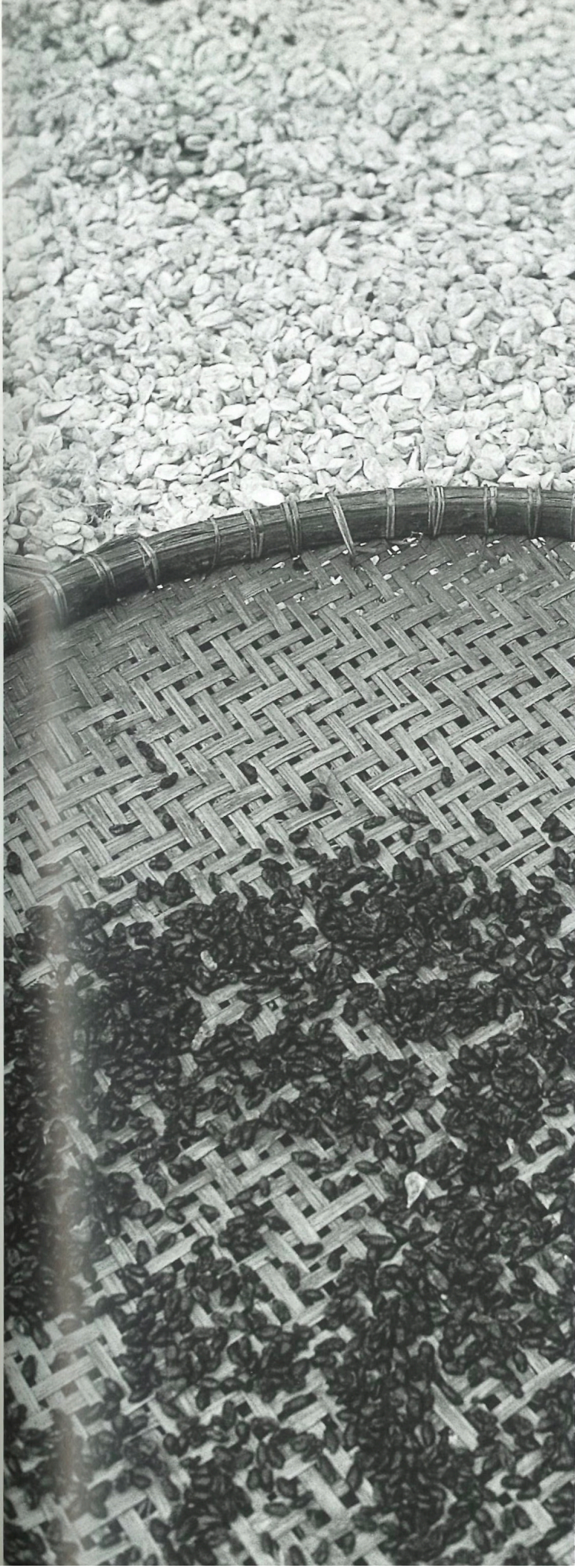
One of the first lessons Kik learnt was that in Vietnam decisions regarding textile manufacture and design are not made quickly. What would take maybe 15 minutes to settle in Australia can take up to two days in Vietnam. And it's not just the result of the language barrier. As Car points out, the Vietnamese decision-making process is 'very sideways' and Australians are not usually aware of all

the intricacies involved. Naturally, you can't just bulldoze your way through. "We have to understand where they are coming from in order to meet", Kik adds, "and it takes time, and a lot of patience. You can't just go in and expect them to understand or want to do business your way".

But it's not just the pace that's a challenge. For practitioners like Kik, educated in Australian universities and TAFEs, where modern and post-modern conceptual backgrounds taught them to challenge weaving techniques and traditions, the Vietnamese approach is radically different. Having been involved with weaving carpets since 1912 in specifically prescribed ways (with a certain number of knots per square metre, etc.) it's a textile culture that does not readily embrace change. On this recent trip Car was able to verbalise an idea she'd been mulling over for some time for a new type of rug with a different number of knots. When she described it to the Vietnamese workers, though, it was met with complete incredulity. As Kik says, "their eyes were like saucers, saying "no way, we can't do this, it's just not possible". The idea did get off the ground, but not without a lot of negotiating. The different approach to the warp is also a challenge. When, in Laos, Kik cut the warp - frustrated at it taking so long and being so physically painful—the other workers were positively horrified and a minor international incident nearly erupted. The warp, Kik quickly learnt, is precious and must be used to the very last.

Perhaps less surprisingly, Kik's fondness for hair—the material that's been the basis of most of her recent work—also caused some concern. As Trish Kent has pointed out in a recent article on Kik's work, "hair in Western cultures often conjures up complex and confronting feelings of abjection"¹. It seems that this material is equally challenging in Vietnam. Keen to work





effects of health on hair, and who practised a daily morning ritual of parting her hair to connect her body with earth and heaven. The encounter offered Kik yet another perspective for her medium. Car considers such synchronistic events to be commonplace when you are travelling "...you meet people with similar ideas—there is an openness".

For Kik, the mentorship program was not about easily definable results, but more about making connections with another culture. But she admits that two weeks is hardly long enough to begin to know a culture. Understandably, then, the impact of the experience may not be immediately apparent in Kik's work, and she is intent on experimenting and exploring rather than pushing it in order to get work out. "I've done that", she says, "and it's fallen flat". For Car, the process has allowed her to see aspects of the cultural dialogue that, being so closely involved in the process, she might not have otherwise seen so clearly. Indeed, in terms of her understanding of the complexities of working in Vietnam Car notes that: "I might have already forgotten about that, because I've learnt the slow pace of it all". Seeing her practice through Kik's eyes was one of the most significant aspects of the program for Car. In this sense, the relationship was not based on any hierarchical structure. "It's about working together", not one being the mentor and the other the apprentice, "It's really about equality". And about reciprocity also, it seems. Working more closely with Kik than she had in the past, the younger practitioner's experimental focus may well have rubbed off on her Mentor. Car thinks she might now move beyond the rug format that has been her base in the exhibition they plan to have together in the near future.

This exhibition will not, however, mark the end of the mentorship process. On the contrary, it will be ongoing, as will its impact on their work. Seeing their practices through 'other eyes' has increased their sensitivity to the personal and political factors that shape textile making. As they each continue to travel and practice, the program's rewards will unfold as their more sophisticated understanding of both the difficulties and possibilities of textile based cultural dialogues enriches their own work and that of those around them. So, as Deborah Conway sings "...it's only the beginning..."

endnotes

1. Kent, Trish (1999). "Hair-play: transgressing civilised boundaries." *Craftwest*, 1999/1.

Dr Robert Cook is mid-week visual arts reviewer and a regular contributor on the arts for *The West Australian*. He also edits *Craftwest* magazine, Perth, Western Australia.



Vietnam—Blue Hmong children outside school. Photo: Charmaine Kik.

with her own materials, Kik brought a whole suitcase of the stuff to Vietnam. Getting it through customs was hard enough, working with it in Vietnam was to be harder still. At her first meeting with the Vietnamese workers, Kik relates that she “pulled out this long plait of beautiful human hair and they were horrified. They physically moved back! I felt very awkward, so I put that away and brought out the horsehair. They were curious and didn’t know what it was”. It was all made clear when Kik put the tail on and pranced about like a horse. After this, her mollified fellow workers were more intrigued than disturbed. Kik thinks it has to do with horsehair having a very specific cultural connotation that allowed them a way in. She stumbled across this meaning in a museum featuring horsewhips that were used to ward off evil spirits. “At the time I didn’t know it, but I was working with a very loaded material”. Out of an awareness of the possible cultural difficulties involved if she persisted in her hair-play, Kik gave

away the idea of weaving with it in Vietnam. It was simply too complicated an undertaking to rush into. Car, who watched this process unfold, agreed, stating that “weaving hair in Laos has made Charmaine understand the need to look at using it in her own culture”.

Nevertheless, hair was the basis for at least one of the really significant connections Kik made with a fellow traveller in Mai Chau. Having trekked to that remote village on the recommendation that the textiles were “something else”, Kik and Car were disappointed with what turned out to be crassly commercial poorly made work. At dinner that night, however, they witnessed a woman at a nearby table suddenly pull out her hairpin to let her gloriously long grey hair cascade toward the floor. Naturally, Kik introduced herself and the trip wasn’t wasted after all. The woman, Kik found out, was a chemist from Paris interested in the