

TRANSCRIPT for the podcast **Object: stories of craft and design**

Season 1: Episode 5 Living Treasure: Masters of Australian Craft \ Liz Williamson

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Lisa Cahill: It's the 1970s. The decade of orange and brown, hippies, going back to the land, and... the Craft Revolution.

Liz Williamson: When I came back to Australia in '76, the great craft revolution had started.

Lisa Cahill: Liz Williamson returns to an Australia different from the one she had left.

Liz Williamson: And so this whole idea of being involved in the craft sector in ceramics or in textiles had happened.

Lisa Cahill: Inspired by the textiles she'd seen on her travels through India, Liz sets up a studio on her family farm.

A rug project travels Victoria on a train, and she sees it in Castlemaine.

Liz takes a weaving class at a local community centre.

Liz Williamson: I wove a small tapestry on a two-shaft loom, and it was very basic. Some of the yarn that I'd used I'd hand-spun and dyed with local plants from the garden. But that was the beginning.

Lisa Cahill: Four decades on, Liz Williamson is one of Australia's master weavers.

[theme music]

Lisa Cahill: This is Object ... a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host Lisa Cahill from the Australian Design Centre. In Series 1, you'll meet the master craftspeople we call Living Treasures. What makes them a Living Treasure? What has driven them to a lifetime love of their craft? Is it the material, the process, or both? How do they contribute and advocate for the arts? And what's their advice for makers who follow in their footsteps?

Lisa Cahill: Let's meet Living Treasure: Master of Australian Craft Liz Williamson. Liz Williamson is an internationally respected textile artist who specialises in hand-woven textiles.

Liz is known as a 'matriarch of Australian weaving'. The Australia Design Centre made Liz Williamson a Living Treasure in 2007, and her exhibition Living Treasures: Master of Australian Craft toured nationally until 2011.

Sometimes wearable and sometimes for display, the texture of Liz Williamson's work is distinctive. It's woven flat but materials she uses create crushed, crinkled, surfaces and three-dimensional shapes like loops and sacks.

In this episode, you'll learn what Liz's favourite 'magical' material is, how darning and repair informs her work, and how she works with weavers around the world.

Liz lives and works on Gadigal and Wongal country in inner west Sydney.

Lisa Cahill: Hi, Liz.

Liz Williamson: Hi, Lisa.

Lisa Cahill: We're at your home studio. Can I ask you to start by describing where we are, and what the room looks like?

Liz Williamson: Yes of course. My studio's in my house, it's a Victorian house, double fronted. We're actually sitting in what used to be the formal sitting room. So the looms I use here in the studio - I have three floor looms, one's a Glimåkra loom, one's a dobbie loom, and then I have a sixteen shaft loom.

Lisa Cahill: Can you tell us how you use the loom in your practice?

Liz Williamson: A lot of the things I weave are just perfect plain weave because of the materials that I'm using, or the idea that I'm exploring.

Liz Williamson: People often ask how long it takes to weave something or how long it takes to set up. Yes, you have to be precise and sometimes, if it's a very complex pattern and you have very fine threads and a lot of.. it will take quite a while to set up. And you do require some precision. It is repetitive. And it's quite meditative. It is interesting how you can do it quite automatically.

Lisa Cahill: There's a rhythm to it, I imagine.

Liz Williamson: Yeah, there is. Recently, I've been weaving panels that are about a metre twenty long, and I can weave one within a couple of hours, three, maybe four hours.

Lisa Cahill: Liz, one of your favourite materials to work with is fine worsted wool, and you've described it as magical...

Liz Williamson: So, in terms of worsted wool, most of the wraps and scarves I wove here in the studio in that period, in the late eighties and nineties, were with fine worsted wool. I've diversified since then.

But fine worsted wool is, I think, magical because you can do a lot of things with it, and there's processes that you can apply to it. You can treat it and finish it in a certain way. It's very fine, it's usually used for men's suiting and most of the wool that I've worked with has come from mills. It's been spun for men's suiting.

I think it's important in my practice that I bought plain white yarn and had it dyed to the colours that I wanted. And that was a very important aspect of my practice.

But the wool being magical... it can respond to different treatments. You can wash it, you can felt it, or you can combine it with materials that felt. The worsted wool doesn't felt that much by itself but you combine it with other wool that does felt, so you get very enhanced textured surfaces. And that was a driver for my practice for a long time.

One of the things that really interested me in the fine worsted wool was that it's appropriate for this country. It actually came from this country. The wool came from this country.

But the worsted wool handwoven into a wrap or a shawl was appropriate for the climate that we have here, so it was a very appropriate material for people to wear.

Lisa Cahill: In Indigenous culture, there's been a long tradition of weaving, going back millennia. I'm interested in whether Indigenous forms of weaving have influenced you and how you perceive of Indigenous weaving alongside your practice?

Liz Williamson: I'm very privileged to live in a country that has such a wonderful, rich fibre tradition. The Indigenous fibre art tradition is one of the most amazing in the world.

It's been wonderful to see that tradition come to fore with artists representing Australia, internationally with Yvonne Koolmatie.

The Indigenous weaving is with local materials, creating baskets and using structures that they would have used for centuries. But also, they've adapted some more European style of basketry tradition.

Originally when I was involved in weaving, it was what I was doing, weaving cloth at the loom.

Liz Williamson: But now we think of weaving in a much broader way that includes all of these wonderful shapes and forms and is very influenced by traditional weaving techniques in this country.

Lisa Cahill: So I think so, you know, through your practice, you've drawn on the old and the new - rag rugs, darning, photography. Can you take us through some of those and some of those experiments that I think have characterised some of your practice?

Liz Williamson: The woven loops came from a project sitting at the loom, trying to work out how I could explore this idea of protection. And I was creating a three-dimensional structure and the loops were representative of what experimentation could be.

I did a whole lot of things. And then I started playing around with this leather lacing and this gave me the structure. So it was a material that I was using that allowed that structure to happen.

And I wove things in a tubular structure and I wove things in a looser structure. So that experimentation is really, I think, vital to develop these different approaches.

And with the loops, some of them it's just plain weave, it's just plain weave with materials, but it's how I've combined them and created them together.

But very early on I did some quite complex three-dimensional structures, developing a double cloth structure. So actually, that's many years ago, must be thirty odd years ago now.

And then for a long time I wove double cloth sacks that are hung on the walls. A lot of those were my old clothes and some of them were plant dyed.

[music]

Lisa Cahill: Liz's work in double cloth is legendary. Weaver Ilka White remembers the first time she saw it, and how inspired she was by this double cloth weaving.

Ilka White: The first cloth I remember really clearly admiring of Liz's was at RMIT when I went to apply for the Textile Design course there. And Liz had been a student there prior to me, and a swatch of her double cloth was on a table or somewhere there.

And I didn't know it was Liz's but I pounced on it and asked the panel, "Oh! What's... Tell me about this fabric." And that two-block double cloth, relatively simple structure, but it was the colors, the color combinations and the interactions of the layers that really drew me and very much inspired a lot of my student work.

Ilka White: And I remember meeting her at a conference in Canberra, wearing a piece I'd made, which was pretty inspired by her work. And she commented on it and asked to take a photograph.

She was collecting photographs of people wearing their weaving. And I was embarrassed because I said, Oh, Liz it's really very much your work.

And she said, she said, We all start somewhere, you know?

Lisa Cahill: So Liz, where did you start? I want to take you back to your early years so that we can understand how you became a weaver. Did making happen in your family when you were growing up?

Liz Williamson: Definitely. My mother was a great maker and a homekeeper. There were four of us in the family, and my mother. We lived on a farm in central Victoria.

She made clothes. She knitted, she was a great embroiderer. She made furniture, she restored furniture. She painted on porcelain, China painting. And so it was very instilled in me this idea of making, to beautify a space or to make your life more interesting.

Making things that you could use that were practical, but also that people enjoyed having and got pleasure out of having was very much part of my family.

Lisa Cahill: From that early making, that early appreciation that your mother engendered in you for all types of making, what was the pathway from there to weaving?

Liz Williamson: So my mother engendered in me a great interest in making and in textiles, and that's what I was initially involved in. Weaving came a little later, and that was influenced partly by my travels, but partly by seeing weaving undertaken elsewhere.

Travelling overseas... In 73, I left Australia as did many other people at that time, to travel overseas through Asia, the great trek overland to Europe. I did that in stages. I first went to Southeast Asia. Then I went to London for a long period of time. And then I came back overland and spent a long time in India.

When I came back to Australia in 76, the great craft revolution had started, in Victoria, and the Victorian Tapestry Workshop had been set up and craft Victoria had been set up.

And in Castlemaine there was a community centre run by a friend of ours, and I chose to do the weaving class.

Lisa Cahill: So Liz, was that the beginning? What happened next? Formal study?

Liz Williamson: Then I moved to Melbourne and at Melbourne College of Textiles we learned in a very European style, hand weaving, and it was all about existing patterns.

Liz Williamson: Gerlinde Binning, who was the master weaver, her practice was ragged rug weaving because her family's business had been rag rug weaving in Bavaria in Germany. So her family had a mill, a weaving mill that wove rag rugs for people, mainly in farming communities during the winter months when they were inside. They collected their old clothes and cut them up into strips. And then they were taken to the mill to be woven in the set of three rugs, which were given as a trousseau of 60cm. But they use the old clothes as the weft.

At the end of that time, I left with a whole lot of samples and I knew I wanted to do something with them, but I didn't know how I was going to do it. And I then went to RMIT and studied textile design and the two lecturers there, David Green and Hugh Raper, were instrumental. At the end of that three year full-time study, I was very

interested in being a textile designer in the industry. Most of the industry at that stage was furnishing fabrics.

Then not long after I finished that course we moved to Sydney. And I essentially set up a studio here and I did do quite a lot of sampling for the industry - wool furnishing fabrics. But I became more interested in the process of weaving individual pieces.

And that's the mid-eighties, my whole emphasis, and my practice shifted to weaving wraps and scarves that people could wear.

Anna Waldman: I bought one of her land wraps, a woven wrap predominantly in shades of brown, orange, and copper with a crinkled surface texture.

Lisa Cahill: Anna Waldman was a curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and was director of the Australia Council's Visual Arts and Craft board.

Anna Waldman: And I thought bridged the space between a useful wearable product and a sculptural abstract work of art. And most importantly for me was the useful beauty of her scarves. That's what resonated with me. That's what I loved.

Lisa Cahill: Liz, repair and reuse is a recurring theme of your work. And you've also done historical research into darning?

Liz Williamson: For my Masters, I looked quite a lot into the history of darning. The skill of darning was an acquired expertise for a lot of women in the 1700s and 1800s, because it allowed them to get a job. And the way that they learned was by doing darning samplers.

A lot of the women that came here to Australia in the First Fleet and as convicts, they got opportunities because they knew how to darn and could repair household textiles and clothing. So I think that, darning plays a really interesting place in history.

It's not regarded highly now, although there is a lot more about repair. When I was looking into darning people would say, "Oh yes, I remember my grandmother darning socks", like it was something of people's memory only.

Liz Williamson: But, with our concern now about materials and reuse and sustaining the life of objects, darning is coming into its own, as with repair.

Lisa Cahill: Yes, I think you're right. And also, the darning is actually less hidden perhaps now than it was. In the past darning was to repair invisibly, but now the darning seems to be coming to the surface of the fabric and being shown and worn as a kind of badge of ... showing that repair on the outside, I guess.

Liz Williamson: In my practice, I've created things on my shafted looms here in the studio that elaborated on a darn that really emphasised the contrast that had darn makes.

So there were...the idea of darning I used for quite a period of time - in my practice in terms of weaves, wraps and scarves, but also in the Jacquard weaving that I did, which was all digital. And that was using photographs initially that I elaborated on.

[music]

Lisa Cahill: At the moment, I think you're honorary associate professor at the University of New South Wales. So teaching has obviously featured large within your career, but also you've traveled and worked extensively in India. And you mentioned when we first started talking about that early experience in India, before you returned to Australia after your travels... How did working in India later in life come to be, and what have been the standout moments for you from that experience?

Liz Williamson: So, India is fascinating and a lot of my time has been consumed with travel and trips to India, in the last 20 odd years.

My engagement has been through groups of artisans and working with artisans.

So I traveled there in the 1970s I mentioned. And then I didn't go back again until 2001, and that was essentially for a holiday. That was fantastic to be in India again.

In that same year, I was invited to teach into a program. It was a conference that went for three weeks. It was called Vital Traditions. It was held in Vietnam, but it brought together artisans from 14 different Asian countries with their facilitators. It was supported by UNESCO. It was to assist those artisans to develop new designs, to engage in their tradition and develop a design that referenced their tradition, but was more marketable.

So I ran the weaving workshop and it was a great, wonderful experience. It gave me an insight [into what I could do as a weaver that could contribute back into weaving communities](#) in various countries. And it allowed me to engage with artisans in a different way.

Liz Williamson: So following that I've taught workshops in Pakistan, I went to Pakistan twice, to Lahore, I was in India of course. And I also went to Tibet to teach a weaving workshop.

But then I also started commissioning some of my designs being woven in West Bengal with the people I've met at Vital Traditions. So it was my experience of going to India in the early two thousands and engaging with artisans that led me to develop an elective course at the university called Cultural Textiles, which took students to India. Initially to Gujarat and then more lately to West Bengal. To take students there to engage them in handmade textiles. I wanted to give them an experience related to what I'd had of going to India.

Lisa Cahill: So more recently you've collaborated with furniture designer maker, Jon Goulder. Can you tell me what was involved in that collaboration?

Liz Williamson: So it was a suite of furniture that referenced his history of making really. His family's involvement, three generations of Goulders, involved in making furniture, restoring furniture and repairing furniture.

Jon Goulder: I was exploring four generations of my family and my family's practice. So within that is a huge amount of fabrics and I really wanted to explore that materiality, and so started to look at collaborating with weavers

Lisa Cahill: Jon Golder is a designer maker, based in Adelaide.

Jon Goulder: And naturally Liz Williamson is the matriarch of Australian weaving, I would say. We approached Liz to ask if she'd like to be involved. And she was, so we were over the moon.

And then what transpired was a series of workshops and studio visits and just time. It was such a privilege to get to know Liz in a more intimate way, I guess, through our craft and, and share many cups of tea.

Liz Williamson: In the middle of 2019, I wove 15 meters of fabric for..well, for one of the designs for the chaise I wove 15 meters...

Lisa Cahill: That was a chaise chaise lounge that had a beautiful arc to it?

Liz Williamson Yes, a beautiful curved back. And the curve was quite high on one side and went right down and right straight to the floor. So this is an absolutely amazing curve and a very large chaise lounge, which is now in the Art Gallery of South Australia's collection. So I wove the fabric, which was strips of leather.

It was a great experience because to see his response to weaving the looms and here in the studio. Right away when he came here, he knew the kinds of things he wanted, and that was realised through the leather in particular.

Jon Goulder: Walking into Liz's studio for me, especially in relation to the exhibition we were making, was like being a kid in a candy store. It's the materials, the colors, everything, the looms, it just speaks of creativity.

Jon Goulder: It was a beautiful experience and I kind of miss it. I wish I lived closer.

Lisa Cahill: Interesting, isn't it? Because, you spoke earlier about you starting your career, weaving textiles for furniture and then this recent project has brought you back to furniture after years of working in wearables.

Lisa Cahill: It sounds like the projects that you're engaged in now are actually giving you that opportunity to continue learning about materials and techniques and that lifelong experimentation.

Lisa Cahill: So looking back, Liz, is there one thing that stands out from all you've achieved?

Liz Williamson: Well, the Living Treasures award was very significant, Lisa. It was really the highlight of my career and it was a wonderful acknowledgement, a great honor and acknowledgement of my practice.

Lisa Cahill: How did you feel when you were invited to be part of the Living Treasures program?

Liz Williamson: It was a little overwhelming. The whole process was a huge undertaking at the time to have the exhibition, because although I'd had solo shows, I hadn't had a major touring exhibition or a publication. So these were wonderful aspects of the award, to have an exhibition that toured for two years, the publication.

Lisa Cahill: So a Living Treasure can be seen as a kind of role model for other makers. What's your advice to other makers today?

Liz Williamson: What I could say is that they have to be true to themselves.

You have to come up with something that's very individual and original and linked with your interests. That idea of experimenting for me at the loom has been central to my practice. And I think that's given me quite an individual approach to weaving.

Lisa Cahill: Liz, thank you so much for your generosity and what you've shared with me today and for welcoming us into your home studio.

Liz Williamson: My pleasure Lisa. And it is very interesting to be asked these questions and to think about the Living Treasures Award and how important it's been in my career, now that I'm back in the studio essentially full time. It's great to be reminded of some of the things that have happened in the last, forty odd years now.

Lisa Cahill: That was Liz Williamson, Australian Design Centre's fifth Living Treasure, master of Australian craft.

What I learnt from Liz was the value of ongoing experimentation, such as Liz's continual evolution of double cloth weaving... and how Liz's ongoing interest in community led to skill sharing with other weavers textile artists, both overseas and in Australia.

You can see photos of Liz's weaving on the Show Notes of the podcast, on the Australian Design Centre website.

In the next episode of Object, you'll meet ceramics artist Les Blakebrough.

Les Blakebrough: Well I was intrigued, that was the thing about it. I got caught up in it because I was fascinated by the process.

Lisa Cahill: If you're enjoying Object, please tell your friends to listen, and your colleagues, and anyone you know who loves contemporary craft and design.

Object is a podcast by the Australian Design Centre.

The Gadigal people of the Eora Nation are the traditional custodians of this place we now call Sydney, where the Australian Design Centre is located, and where this podcast was made.

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