

WHITE

all that was possible

A question presented to Birgitta Nordström some years ago led her to undertake a research project examining the significance of a textile when the very event nobody wants, does happen.

WINTER SUNSHINE was seeping into Birgitta Nordström's studio, on Hönö outside Gothenburg. The light fell softly over the small, white, handwoven blankets, beautifully arranged in a drawer. Eighteen of them, all different.

Taking them out, one by one, Birgitta laid them on the table. There were a number in doublecloth, one was in waffle weave, one in distorted weft. All white.

The little blankets are part of an art development project, which took two years to complete. The project came about in response to a question. One which was posed several years earlier.

– It began with me receiving an invitation to take part in and give a lecture at the *Arts Health research seminar* in 2008 at Newcastle University in Australia.

– I was asked to give a presentation, *a paper*. But instead of a written presentation, which is word-based only, I had in mind an actual textile as a start-point. I wove a white funeral pall with mother-of-pearl buttons (see VM 3/09).

The pall came with her and was used as a physical presentation, which worked very well in that academic setting, where visualizing a thesis in the form of a textile is not that common.

– I told them that in Sweden there is a long-standing tradition of covering a coffin with a pall. This goes right back to mediaeval times, was forgotten for a while, but is now on its way back. A female Australian doctor came up to me after the lecture and asked if I would be able to weave blankets to swaddle children who die at birth. “I would like a cupboard with blankets ready to bring out when the very event nobody wants, does happen.”

At that point in time, Birgitta was not ready to pursue the question further, and only a couple of years later did she find some ideas surfacing.

It was occasioned by an art development project initiative, at the School of Design and Crafts at Gothenburg University.

– In considering whether I could weave swaddling blankets, my greatest difficulty was that this is not part of my history or own experience. My way in was simply to weave them as beautifully as I could.

The first samples were woven in a range of colours, such as a saturated red, a pink and also a light blue.

– Not that I had doubts about white, but I wanted to be sure, and once I had tested other options, white was all that was possible.

– I use the slow method. Not just because weaving by hand has intrinsic meaning. But something else happens on a mental level.

She chose the best, softest wool and fine, shimmering silk, linen in white and unbleached shades, a bleached, pure white as well as an unbleached cotton. The latter, combined with the other materials, tends towards pink. Something that only becomes apparent when woven up. Wool can tend slightly towards yellow. Subtle shifts that have a bearing on the outcome as a whole.

The material encounters are important. Interplay between wool and silk is like a marriage. Linen has more rigid and somewhat unruly properties. And cotton, when for example put together with easily felting wool, lives a life of its own.

All the blankets have an “in” and an “out” side. This is important. Materials are varied, as are the weave structures. >

above / Birgitta Nordström in her atelier on island Hönö.

below left / The 47 metre long wrapping cloth woven to summarize the research project, *I sin linda*, (Wrapped in their Infancy).

below right / Most of the blankets are in doublecloth, some are variations of weft-backed structures, others are variations of simple weaves in a point entry and a couple are in satin. All have an “in” and an “out” side.



Several are in doublecloth, which provides ample potential for creating totally different faces on either side.

One side could be in wool, the other in linen or cotton. When the cloth is wet-finished, the wool felts and draws in. The linen/cotton side acquires a new and interesting texture, which can vary depending on where the stitching points are placed (the points in the cloth where ends from one layer bind with those of the other layer).

The weave structures vary from one blanket to another. In some, both sides are in plain weave. Others have plain weave and twill variations. All have been woven on Birgitta's studio loom. A countermarch with 16 shafts and 16 pedals.

– Even if I'm doing plain weave in both layers, I make the entry over 16 shafts, which makes it much easier for me to alter the tie-up and position the stitching points where I want. I can easily change the set-up to a twill by re-tying the pedals.

Apart from the doublecloth blankets, some others are in weft-backed plain weave and satin. One blanket is in waffle weave, another in distorted weft.

– Waffle weave was obvious, it is the definitive hospital blanket. You will find it in our hospitals, but mostly in yellow and not such a nice quality.

In this waffle weave, the soft, lofty wool teams up with a bleached cotton. When the blanket is fulled and felts, the cotton stays put and finds its own wiggly paths (p. 3).

Distorted weft produces a fine, slightly braided looking pattern on one side, with the characteristic "honeycomb" effect on the other (p. 3).

It was in a book on domestic textiles by Astrid Sampe that

Birgitta found the distorted weft. Good design, feel for material and balance in the cloth. Inspiration was coming through different avenues and finding its place.

Another blanket is embroidered with the letter "M", like a Maria monogram.

SINCE THE RESEARCH PROJECT was a public sector initiative, Birgitta was able to make contact with people who spoke about their experiences.

One hospital chaplain shared an experience of severe misfortune, when a baby died but the mother was saved. "There was only a small towel there, just imagine if there had been a blanket".

Shortly after she started on the blanket weaving project, a Maria Symposium was organized by the Swedish Church and held in Skara. Birgitta spoke there about the hesitancy she felt around the task ahead. One of the participants, a woman whose little boy had died 17 years back, told her that she still wonders if he is feeling cold. "Weave the blankets and make them warm,".

Birgitta stopped talking for a minute, it was all a bit too close for comfort, on several levels. The work now had concrete significance.

IN PARALLEL with Birgitta weaving the blankets in her studio at home, a loom was set up for doublecloth at HDK (School of Design and Crafts). Students did sampling on it and had a part in the process.

One of the most important co-workers in the project was the technician for the fibre workshop, Marianne Davidsson. Together they sorted out a lot of questions and problems. Birgitta brought out a blanket to show the edging finish, where one layer had been woven a little longer and turned over the other side for hemming down. It formed small waves. Tiny, little details, that enhance the whole effect.

– Once I get to the finishing, it is so easy to lose sight of the whole thing and revert to the handwork.

All the blankets are shown in a beautiful, poetic book with the same title as the project, *I sin linda* (Wrapped in their Infancy). The blankets are pictured with their respective drafts and techniques.

They were also exhibited in a show where people were invited to touch them, feel what they were like.

To draw the various elements of the development project together, Birgitta wove a long wrapping cloth, 47 metres long. It hangs on the studio wall. The black ends woven in represent concrete events.

In Birgitta's words: *the phone rings, I break off, take time out to eat, have a walk with the dog along the beach. His sniffing about reminds me how I investigate and do research.*

Weaving took turns with writing: She read out a piece that was about the very final picks. Weavers will know that experience. I asked if we could publish part of the text for our readers. "Oh yes, of course," answered Birgitta generously. A reflection of her own artistry – alternating dialogue between weaving and surroundings, between textiles and people.

WHEN WE MET UP a few weeks before Christmas 2013, Birgitta's research work had moved on to a new stage. In the

BIRGITTA NORDSTRÖM

born 1963 in Gothenburg

Education at the School of Design and Crafts, 1989-1995

Commissioned public artwork

2000 Textile reliefs for Växjö Hospital

2002 Back curtain for the concert hall at Kulturbruket
Mellerud, National Public Art Council

2005 Funeral pall for Högsbo parish

2006 Funeral pall for Öckerö parish

2011 Cope for Gothenburg Cathedral

2013 Bishop's cope for Gothenburg Diocese

Other commissions

2010-11 Wrapped in their Infancy, Art Development project,
Gothenburg University

Professional activity in education

2009- Lecturer in textile art, School of Design and Crafts at
Gothenburg University

Currently

Commission, Landmarks, Bishop's cope for Gothenburg
Diocese. Research project, Ritual Space.

Licentiate project at Gothenburg University, 2013-2015,
financed by Gothenburg Society of Crafts.

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autumn she had been awarded a scholarship by Gothenburg Society of Crafts, funding a two-year doctoral post to complete a licentiate project in partnership with Röhsska Museum.

The fibre workshop at HDK has a computerized loom with single thread control, TC-1. The weaver depresses one pedal that, via the pattern set up on the computer and assisted by compressed air, indicates which of the 880 ends is to be lowered or raised for each new pick.

Handweaving is all part of the picture, whilst there is now huge potential to explore new structures and qualities.

A 17 metre warp, consisting of two different qualities of wool, is being used for samples that will be developed for industry. Her intention is for production to be based in Sweden and she is in contact with a weaving mill in the Kinna area.

Handweaving swaddling blankets is out of the question.

– Once I got to the point where the blankets were to be used by people working in care, handweaving became an obstacle. The blankets should not be associated with me, they are not personal. And they need to be produced in larger quantities, to sell at a reasonable price.

AS BIRGITTA PUT IT, she will be leaving the safe studio and gallery environment to step into reality. What that will be like, she doesn't yet know. She is looking for ways to contact people working in the care sector, hospital chaplains and people with experience of the grief of losing a little child.

– What I do know is that the blankets should be soft. And they need to have a distinct “in” and “out” side.

Working on the handwoven blankets was essential for getting to that insight. A

The last day, the final metre

Returning to weaving and the studio after a week's break was a physical experience.

Winding the last bobbins.

Advancing the warp.

Sensing the silky softness of the wood of the beater, rubbed down by hands, constantly polished up.

Feeling the tension of the weft, when turning, with my left middle finger, the same with the right, the shuttle travelling from hand to hand in the open shed.

My thumb stops the bobbin unravelling.

Right foot moves to the new pedal.

Remember to breathe in and out, in time or better, weave in time with my breathing.

The rhythm in my body.

My gaze focused on what is happening, a change of yarn, five centimetres woven, some minutes have passed, what went through my mind?

The studio is warming up.

TEXT BY BIRGITTA NORDSTRÖM