

# THE ALL-BLACK RAG RYA

TEXTILE ARTIST PASI VÄLIMAA WOVE HIS FIRST RYA AS A STUDENT AT KONSTFACK IN THE MID 1990S. A RESOUNDING SUCCESS IN THE WEAVING WORLD, HIS RYAS THEN FOUND THEIR WAY TO ART GALLERIES. HE TELLS THE STORY ABOUT ONE OF THEM – MADE IN MANY SHADES OF BLACK.

OUR NORDIC RYAS are some of the loveliest things I know. Intriguingly imaginative and simple, they hold their own in everyday and celebratory settings. It was when I decided to weave something heavy and dark that my journey began. A larger scale was important for accessing the physical impact of a rya. So my swatches also turned out large and expressive, necessary stages of the process for me to acquire new hands-on knowledge and experience. One rya sample in white and one in black.

This rya was woven in one piece, the flat surface in plain weave with black linen in both warp and weft. The other side is covered in knots consisting of hand dyed strips of wool, silk, cotton and linen fabrics. These were all dyed in different blacks, then knotted round the warp ends into a powerful relief. The fabrics range from matt to shiny, coarse to sheer, soft to hard.

I had some kind of connection to each of those cloths. Some were from the very first cloths I wove myself in a Finnish linen for sauna towels, others were from my grandmother's home in Karelia, from a dress my mother wore when pregnant before I was born. All were immersed in dyebaths so they would blend together. Hand dyeing meant making several different baths to bring out the diverse tones, while the protein fibres and cellulose fibres required separate dye methods for successful results. The exhaust baths with all their attractive nuances were used until there was no dye liquor left. Nothing got chucked.

This was an unforgettable experience, being able to compose with these materials at the loom. The project consisted of days of dyeing, dealing with the material itself

before the knots could be tied into the rya. The weaving width was close on 3 metres and the big rug loom gave this work the stability required. Rows of knots grew slowly with the shuttle woven blocks of weft between, as I had to lock both pedals because of the width of the weave. I did have the aid of a long bench with a sliding seat so as to move along the width of the weave. On the shelves behind me I had the fabrics all prepared, ironed and arranged in different groups, ready to be selected and knotted round the warp ends. On the most intensive days, the strips of cloth were suspended over the loom. It was important to be able to see them from the corner of my eye close up to the finished area. That created opportunities for aesthetically pleasing cloth blending and juxtaposing in the weave. Sketches were needed largely at the outset and then it was a matter of being able to weave so as to give the woven surface vitality and plenty of diversity. Pick-up and shuttle weaving alternated on a daily basis, through the days and months. The atmosphere in the studio felt almost holy, as though a strong presence accompanied me. My whole focus and all my concentration now homed in on the loom. The work slowly rolled round the cloth beam; finally there was no more space to weave. I had reached the end, 320 cm. That is the height of the rya.

During the journey I did have help. With beaming this wide warp and also at the end for unwinding the completed work, lifting it and then finishing it.

The rya makes me think of nature and the power of growth. It is both strong and powerful, as well as inviting and meditative, like a state of being or a particular mood. A

monochrome relief in which countless dark tones shift about as light catches the lustrous or matt fabrics. In my first big solo show, *The Forest is Eternally Faithful*, held at Galleri Doktor Glas, it was exhibited with two other rag ryas. One in shimmering bronze tones and one a faded pink, both made with hand dyed and hand painted silk satin. At the same time a major craft exhibition opened at Liljevalchs Art Gallery where two of my ryas were on show: a colourful festive rya I wove with a birdseye ground in wool and alongside it, the rya, *Year*, for which my design drew inspiration from Nordic slit ryas used in the boats from our coastal towns. My rya adventures then continued with hand dyed feathers instead of yarn or cloth for the knotted side. Designing new ryas with the specially produced UllMa yarns also turned into a new, significant and quality sideline.

The repetitive actions in both the dyeing and weaving of a rya produce special qualities in the finished work. When one repeats actions by hand, a kind of natural transformation takes place with little shifts, inevitable because of the human factor in the process.

With the black rya, I experience these slow motion repeats and little shifts as a quality where making and technique have become the content.

I wove the rag rya in the 90s, when there was hardly any textile input. The rya as such had not been seen either for decades. For me there was a freedom in being able to express myself by highlighting something beautiful and weighty in a textile relief like this on a monumental scale. Even now, this textile has an up-to-date and timeless feel.

