

PERSPECTIVE: Michelle Stephens

‘There has always been a textile root in my family’ recalls Michelle Stephens, the Northern Irish born and trained artist. In the 1950s her father ‘used to draw patterns out for jacquard looms as well as creating the actual jacquard punch cards for a local mill.’ Like many artists growing up in Northern Ireland the history and legacy of the linen industry, a colossus of world-class technology and pioneering manufacturing in the early global marketplace, is hard to shake off even if it is now falling out of living memory. What Stephens has shaped from these familial and cultural memories is a sustained investigation into weaving as a craft that unifies conceptual art and precision-driven technology. Weaving’s unique algorithmic and computational resonance in our digital age, she suggests, can offer the artist as much as the designer a coded language that may be decoded and recoded in visual and material terms.

Working off the loom and employing diverse material [as this sentence is shortened it should read ‘materials’] such as wood, metal, Perspex and paint as well as thread and deploying different techniques, from hand-weaving to steel forging and digital laser-cutting, Stephens desires to reanimate historic textiles not purely as a sort of aesthetic exercise and end in itself but as a means to draw attention to skill as a broadly-framed conceptual and technological exchange. The results can only really be described as constructed textile installations such as the recent *Plain Weave* or *Basket Weave*. By concentrating on their facture Stephens creates open-ended materialisations of the making process itself. Exacting and mathematical as this may seem Stephens’ textiles are subtly sensitive and highly visual. Slippage and serendipity are important too. Indeed, her works can often look unfinished, unmade, perhaps in the process of unravelling or conversely maybe in mid-construction. Other works such as *Order (Chaos)* seem to abandon reference to textiles altogether and materialize the illusionary space between the warp and weft. Taken together they reveal textiles to be ‘dramatic, rhythmic and holographic’ and weaving to be far from the flat and static craft it is often characterised to be.

Stephens trained at Belfast School of Art, a college with a rich and historic textile heritage, which stands on the city’s famous York Street, the industrial heart of its former Linenopolis. After gaining a first class degree in 2010, Stephens was resident in Craft Northern Ireland’s *Making It* programme at the University of Ulster and R-Space Gallery in Lisburn between 2011 and 2013. Most recently she completed an MA in textile practice at Manchester Metropolitan University, another historic centre of industrial textiles. She has been busy. Over the past few years her distinctive textiles have been shown as part the prestigious 62 Group in Britain and as part of CultureCraft in Ireland as well as at international venues such as the Triennial of Tapestry Łódź in Poland and the Koyo Gallery in Tokyo, Japan. Currently, Stephens is undertaking a practice-led PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University, which will hopefully open up new directions for her interest in abstract weaving and ‘coded cloth.’