

Transcript of Sara Kelly: On Weaving

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SPEAKERS

Sara Kelly, Suzanna Petot, Music

Suzanna Petot 00:23

Thanks for joining us for this episode of the Decorating Dissidence Podcast. In this episode recorded in May 2020, I spoke to Sara Kelly, who is a weaver and maker originally from the Northeast and now based in London. She's a recent graduate from the Chelsea College of Art with a postgraduate degree in textile design and has been working with us since our exhibition on the Bauhaus celebrating 100 years of the weaving workshop. It's been a real pleasure to get to know her in this time. And it was great to find out more about Sara's practice, her thoughts on the Bauhaus, art school and community weaving. Hi, Sara!

Sara Kelly 00:57

Hello!

Suzanna Petot 00:58

How are you?

Sara Kelly 00:59

I'm good. Thank you. How are you?

Suzanna Petot 01:01

Good. I know that we've been talking a lot about weaving and we're working together on putting together a workshop for young people. But can you just say something really briefly about what it's like to be weaving in such a crazy, working really in such a crazy time? If you are?

Sara Kelly 01:21

Yeah, I mean, that's the question. How am I working? I don't really know. It's unfortunate, fortunate enough to be able to work from home, I have my floor loom at home in my living room. And two forgiving flatmates who don't mind me, the wool and the mess. And so but it has been very slow, which has kind of been nice. Um, it's been definitely a different change of pace. But I've mainly just been doing, thinking about future projects and planning things, tried to get in touch with people to pinch to

collaborate with doing a lot of backburner stuff that usually, you know, don't have time to do or I tell myself I don't have time to do. So it's been quite productive, but very slow.

Suzanna Petot 02:11

No, that's good. I definitely know that there are so many people who are going back and forth of doing everything in lockdown and being so productive than the other who just don't know what to do. So it's good to hear that you're getting things done, but also good that you're taking time to sort of reflect and...

Sara Kelly 02:27

Yeah, it comes in waves you have one day, and it's really, really productive. Really great. And the next day, yeah, nothing happens.

Suzanna Petot 02:37

Yeah, absolutely. So Sara, it'd be great if you could just talk a little bit about how you got into weaving, your interest in textiles? Has it always been this way? Have you always been interested in textiles as a kid? Did it come in university?

Sara Kelly 02:56

So I've always been interested in making things and ever since I was young, I used to make little, especially out of fibres, I used to make little bracelets for people all the time when I was super young. And, and I remember a point when I was deciding to go to uni, there was a choice between doing textile degree in undergrad or fashion or textiles or architecture. And I ended up doing architecture, just I think it was more about you know, there's more future opportunities in architecture. And I ended up doing it and I actually loved my undergrad. I did Architecture at Newcastle University.

Suzanna Petot 03:37

Okay.

Sara Kelly 03:38

And I really loved it. And so I did three years at Newcastle, and I was really interested in conservation architecture. So my final project at uni looked at building on to the Sir John Soane Museum in Holborn.

Suzanna Petot 03:53

Oh, yeah! Yeah, it's such an interesting museum.

Sara Kelly 03:57

Yeah, such a crazy museum. So I found a lot of narrative and historic traditional building techniques really fascinating at uni. And so I was always really interested in old things and learning about traditional techniques. I experimented lots with concrete models and making and I did a lot of thinking through making then and when I left university, I got a job in a conservation architecture practice called Julian Harrap Architects where I worked on projects that again required lots of research into traditional building techniques. And along whilst working there, we worked alongside lots of crafters that worked in terrazzo stone carving, you know, traditional timber joinery. I just found it fascinating this, the making aspects of architecture. And while I was there, my boss told us about a project that he did in

architecture about designing a rug and It just kind of came full circle, but I just had a bit of a realisation that once I'd started looking into rug weaving and how rugs are made and, and textile design and, and more fibre based projects, it really found it fascinating. So I ended up doing part time working in architecture, part time, well I found a one day a week internship with a weaver in London. So it just kind of snowballed from there. And I'd started doing more and more classes and started to try and get a bit more serious about it.

Suzanna Petot 05:33

So this is when you started learning how to weave and use a loom or had you known that before?

Sara Kelly 05:39

No, never. I didn't know anything about weaving.

Suzanna Petot 05:41

Okay!

Sara Kelly 05:42

So this is only about two, three years ago, three years ago, I think 2016-17. And I just found it fascinating. And so it just started doing, I took a class at the handweavers studio in London. And yeah, a few other classes with a rug Weaver in London as well. And it just slowly developed into something that became, I think I wanted it to be more than a hobby. So that's when I reduced my hours at the practice and started to get a bit more serious about it. And but yeah, very slow. Very interesting way to get into weaving.

Suzanna Petot 06:25

Well, yeah, exactly. And what made you really have confidence in that this is what you wanted to pursue over architecture?

Sara Kelly 06:35

So I think once I'd worked at the practice for about two years, and it was just one of them things like I knew that I didn't want to be an architect. And so I felt in my undergrad, you are finding your feet a little bit, you starting to understand what you're interested in. So it took a few years after finishing that to realise that that's not what I actually wanted but architecture is still really important to me, and it has still plays a huge part in my life. I live with architects and a lot of my friends are architects. So I do try and keep up to date with things going on and try to connect my textile interests with architecture interests as well. And so I am quite, I love working with spaces and, and people so and to try and collaborate with other architects and designers as well. So it kind of spiraled into thinking about how I never knew what I wanted to do, I think that the obvious step for me was to just do a degree in textile design. Because I didn't, I didn't know what else to do and how else to go about it. And I think I needed that time to be able to make the decision of where I wanted to be. And I knew it wasn't within architecture, I knew, I didn't know if it was actually in textiles, or in fashion, even. I was just a bit lost. And, and so I applied for to do a master's degree at Chelsea College of Art, which was a really great opportunity. And I ended up also getting a scholarship there, which helped hugely.

Suzanna Petot 08:12

Oh fantastic.

Sara Kelly 08:13

So it was the scholarship that was allowed me to do it and that year just developing a project and really thinking about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to get into textiles is just really, really helpful.

Suzanna Petot 08:27

That I mean, that's almost exactly what masters are for.

Sara Kelly 08:30

Exactly.

Suzanna Petot 08:32

It's really great that you had the sort of extra confidence of a scholarship behind to take on that degree. I know that in a similar way to, that's almost exactly what happened to me. I didn't know what exactly I wanted to do in the art world, and then getting a scholarship for my MA in Curating helped me to be like, "Okay, well you know what, I have a little bit of financial backing other people seem to want me to do this too."

Sara Kelly 08:57

Exactly. Gives you a bit more confidence. I just remember starting Chelsea not really knowing if it was the right thing to do and actually didn't get my scholarship through until I didn't get the acceptance of the scholarship until about a month into starting. Okay, so I was still very much at Chelsea and thinking I can't afford this. I don't know why I'm here. Like maybe I just, you know, maybe I should stay in architecture. Maybe textiles isn't the right thing. I have no idea what I'm doing. And it was just a couple a month or so of just frantic, I have no idea where I'm going. But it was kind of that acceptance of the scholarship which made me give, have a little bit more confidence in myself. And to just give myself the opportunity to go ahead. And it yeah, it's changed a lot. It's allowed me to develop my practice a bit more. So. yeah.

Suzanna Petot 09:49

What exactly at Chelsea and in the textile, the MA in textile design really gave you more skills or the confidence to keep going?

Sara Kelly 10:00

The biggest thing for me in terms of what I did there, I actually didn't really use that many of the facilities and which is why I went to Chelsea because it has really amazing weaving facilities. But my project kind of developed in a way that I wanted to get outside and didn't want to be stuck inside the building. But what it did really give me is, obviously great tutor support. And, and also just time, it was just time that I really wanted to be able to sit and research and find out what I'm interested in, like what you need at university. You know, when you're, in my undergrad I had three years to decide what kind of architect I wanted to be. And to lead me on to the next step. And it was just that perfect year to figure things out

and just have a bit of slow, which is great. And there's some great tutors there Chelsea as well. So it's just really nice contact.

Suzanna Petot 11:01

No, of course, and I'm sure the other students as well. It must have been really nice to be with a cohort who also really value textiles.

Sara Kelly 11:10

Yeah, it was the first time in my life had been surrounded by other people doing fashion textiles. So yeah, it was quite a big step. Because I felt like I'd made a really drastic change in my career. But really exciting. Yeah.

Suzanna Petot 11:27

And so I know around this time, you also took trips to Mexico and Guatemala, can you talk more about that? And why you decided to go and how, how the trip was?

Sara Kelly 11:39

Yeah, so actually, I finished working as a part one architect. Because I wanted, I went to Mexico with a nonprofit volunteer organisation called All Hands and Hearts. And, and I was working in the state of Morelos, in Mexico for two months, which had a very architectural focus. So we were building, rebuilding a school at a very small village that had been and that had been demolished through the, because of the earthquake in 2017.

Suzanna Petot 12:17

Right, yeah.

Sara Kelly 12:18

And so it was two months of building and kind of learning a lot about architecture. And I was working quite closely with the site coordinators. So that was my, that was the reason why I ended up in Mexico. And I gave myself a couple of months after them two months working to just travel and to see. And I obviously knew about textiles at this point, I'd gotten a place at Chelsea, but it wasn't 100% sure if I wanted to accept it, if it was the right thing for me to do. And so it was in the two months post, All Hands and Hearts that I travelled through the south of Mexico and into Guatemala. And initially, I was really interested in looking into the Mexican rug weaving industry....

Suzanna Petot 13:05

Okay.

Sara Kelly 13:05

And but after two months, I became really fascinated with the significance and the value of the backstrap loom, which is used amongst many indigenous communities across Mexico, Guatemala, and a lot of South America. And I just saw it as this really versatile, portable loom, which is just made up of, you know, a number of sticks and a strap. And your tension, your warp stretches between two fixed points, one of which is yourself. So you provide the tension within the loom. And it was just really

interesting to see how the weaver is, you know, connected directly with the tool. And how sociable this weaving activity is, a lot of communities that would take the use their backstrap looms outside of the house, because you need to strap it onto something so it was a lot easier, it's a lot more light, a lot more space and you'd weave together in communities and it was just a really beautiful thing that I picked up. And it also places your body directly within a landscape. And so when I when I left Mexico and Guatemala I was very interested in urban environment, as well as woven textile process and social interaction. So after this four month trip to Mexico and Central America, it was when I came back to the UK definitely wanting to go to Chelsea and wanting to continue into textile design somehow. With... When I started Chelsea was really was fascinated by this idea of getting outside and and having weaving onsite, and putting yourself within space and also interacting with people through craft.

Suzanna Petot 15:09

No, it sounds amazing. I never heard of the backstrap loom until Jade and Lottie and I came across your practice. And it's just, I love the fact that you are sort of the centrepiece within the process. And then it's all based on your balance and your strength and also stillness to really be able to control the loom and weave a coherent and nice piece.

Sara Kelly 15:41

Yeah, there's just something really lovely about being connected with your tool. And as makers, I think, you know, the tool is almost more important than is more important than the final piece that you make. It's that skill that you learn from the tool. And because when you're working with something like the backstrap, you're connected to it, you work together. And, and that's how I say it's kind of developing ideas from this. And yeah, it was something I was really interested in was, became a foundation for this project to be built on. So I started thinking about how tools can be used for social interaction, which is why I never actually used any of the facilities at Chelsea.[laughs] In the end, because I decided I actually wanted to get out of the studio into the public and by the time that I'd started actually, in doing lots research and started experimenting, it was about this time of the year. So it was the sun starting to come out the weather is really beautiful. And perfect timing, perfect timing to just be outside and after working in architecture for five, six years is a very studio based career.

Suzanna Petot 17:06

I can imagine.

Sara Kelly 17:07

Yeah, and a lot of weaving as well, I did an internship with a rug weaver. And I loved it. But it's very isolated, very, you know, you have your loom is because it's such a huge piece of equipment you can't carry around, you have to have a big space, and it very, it can be quite an isolated skill. And so yeah, I wanted to just start experimenting with getting out a bit, I may be working with other people, which kind of formed this idea that tool could be the craft could be used as a tool for social interaction.

Sara Kelly 17:44

So the weave studio Chelsea, even though it was beautiful, full of looms, it had really great view of the city, lots of light, still felt very isolated, and there are obviously restrictions on how much time you could spend on the looms to make sure everybody had equal opportunities. So it wasn't something that I

wanted to determine the project, I didn't want the amount of time that I could spend on the loom to be the, you know, to determine the final piece.

Suzanna Petot 18:15

Yeah.

Sara Kelly 18:16

And it kind of comes back to the process. And I wanted the loom to be kind of the focus of the project and the process of weaving to be more of the focus. So I started exploring with the backstrap loom, which I'd bought one in Guatemala. And, and I was able to weave outside, which was brilliant. And at the beginning, I had kind of just wanted myself to be out and just practice and see what happened. And start drawing or creating by, you know, things that I saw directly in my environment. And just me being outside in London weaving and eventually and drew so much attention.[laughs]

Suzanna Petot 18:57

So would you be outside of Chelsea (College of Art)?

Sara Kelly 19:01

Yes, I was going to parks and just doing it on the streets, attaching the looms to lampposts. And to. I went to the Barbican, and attached it to drainpipes around the Barbican, like lots of different places in London, just to set yourself up for the day and see what you could create from the areas that you're in. So it's very much about like you being part of the landscape and drawing upon what you're inspired by within that landscape.

Suzanna Petot 19:27

I love this because it's so obvious where the continued interest in architecture is.

Sara Kelly 19:33

Yeah.

Suzanna Petot 19:33

Even though you're focusing more on textiles.

Sara Kelly 19:35

Yeah. So it's all... Yeah, a lot about space initially. And that was kind of how the project started. But it was this attention that people were very, very confused about what I was doing and yeah, people kept coming up to me and starting conversations asking what I was doing, you know, people would be from all over the world and would said "we have the backstrap loom back at home" and opening my eyes to countries that I didn't realise had the backstrap loom so and...

Suzanna Petot 20:07

So what other places?

Sara Kelly 20:10

Someone from Australia spoke to me, someone from Nigeria. And there's a few. There's a lot of people from South America, Central America, and also someone from Europe I can't remember where it was in Europe, like Sweden like I can't remember, Sweden or Norway. It was just something I didn't... it's an amazing tool that's been developed in basically every continent.

Suzanna Petot 20:36

It seems to be a bit more of a traditional way of making than necessarily having like a large industrial size...

Sara Kelly 20:46

Exactly. Yeah.

Sara Kelly 20:48

It's very slow. It doesn't create. You can't create material really, really fast on it.

Suzanna Petot 20:49

...loom. Sounds incredible.

Suzanna Petot 20:56

What kinds of pieces can you make?

Sara Kelly 21:00

So apparently, you can make lots of different thicknesses of and I always thought it was mainly cloth, which I think it is mainly cloth. But apparently there are some rug weaving backstrap looms, which requires a lot more attention. So instead of sitting on the ground, I think you're either kneeling or even standing.

Suzanna Petot 21:17

Oh, wow

Sara Kelly 21:18

Really like putting your whole body where...

Suzanna Petot 21:20

It sounds a bit more like acrobatics.

Sara Kelly 21:21

And exactly, yeah, it's a fitness routine to do a rug. But the stuff that I was looking into is a lot more cloth based. So very fine warp, very fine yarns to weave with, and to create something that's just a bit more thin and fabric like. And so yeah, it kind of really just developed from that, that interest of people was what I started is grabbing attention. So this idea of getting out and into the public on a backstrap loom in the same way that people do that with art. There's always people in museums drawing things, there's always people, you quite often see somebody sketching in a park or, you know, in a city land, the cityscape.

Suzanna Petot 22:09

And I'm definitely one of those people who like goes behind them and is like "oh, what are you doing?"

Sara Kelly 22:13

Exactly. Um, so am I! I think it was, it was just quite a nice way to get out and do something with fabric. And, and I think it's, it's interesting in terms of craft, I think we learn, we definitely learn through experience. And think through making, so you deepen in your subject knowledge through your relationship with tools and materials that you use, as well as the environment that you're in. And so it was kind of started to develop from that, with the backstrap loom, the connection to the body and the reliance on your body weight to create a piece.

Suzanna Petot 22:54

I think that's such an important point to make. I think a lot of times when people think about craft, the focus is primarily on hands. It's so much more than that.

Sara Kelly 23:03

Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

Music 23:18

[music interlude]

Suzanna Petot 23:25

So is it around this time, as you're going out more experimenting with the backstrap loom in different environments that...were you approached to do community workshops? Or was it the other way around? Were you going to places and saying, "Hey, I could offer this"?

Sara Kelly 23:43

Yes, I started initially, just me and my loom. And the more interest that I would get, especially in parks where people would go, and during the day for a few hours to just sit in the parks, people were sitting with me. So I ended up making a second loom and created some signs to just say, you know, if you want to join, I'm happy to teach you and work so there's a few people that sat down with me for an hour and just teach them how to weave in the back strap loom and it was just really amazing. We would sit and chat about anything and nothing through craft and these are people that have never woven before or had no prior interest in weaving or knowledge. So it was just a really lovely thing. And that just kind of develop so I had two looms and then I made a third one and I made a fourth and I ended up making seven.

Suzanna Petot 24:40

Wow.

Sara Kelly 24:41

And do it continuing with this kind of like pop up, free drop in workshop style thing. But then also started to organise community work weaving sessions with spaces. I live in Southeast London so it seems

quite, I wanted to keep it local. So just getting in touch with people around Camberwell where I lived and galleries and community place community centres and just seeing if anybody wanted to host it. And even places like pubs and bars and galleries. And it was just a really interesting way to have this workshop and in completely different settings each show.

Suzanna Petot 25:25

I love the idea of this project in a in a pub.

Sara Kelly 25:28

Yeah. And I was like, I didn't know if it was gonna work or not. And when we did it on like a Thursday night, it did a few actually at one specific pub in Peckham, Peckham Camberwell. And it was so good because it was just busy with people and people were joining in for a while their friends are still having a drink, they'd come over and weave for 10 minutes, 15 minutes, and then go back to have the drink. So it was just a really nice.

Suzanna Petot 25:55

So does that mean that multiple people were working on the same piece? Like someone would come for like say 10 minutes.

Suzanna Petot 26:01

Yeah, so I had, that was.....as I was creating more of these community workshops, it takes a long time to set up the looms, and the warp, to warp each one. So if I was to cut off a piece for everybody, it would just take too long, and it would use a lot of material. And I wanted to document the process somehow. So I ended up creating backstrap looms with five metre warps on each loom, and then rolling them. So they'd be kind of compressed within, within the loom, so you wouldn't be five metres away from the, from the pole. And each usually had about five metres of water put in. And yeah, the idea was that I take the same seven looms to every workshop, but every community space or every drop in/ pop up workshop that I did, and somebody would build upon somebody else's work. So by the end of this, I did it over the whole summer of last year. So it was about eight weeks, nine weeks of workshops. So at the end of this nine weeks of workshops, I ended up having about 20 metres of woven fabric.

Suzanna Petot 27:18

That's fantastic.

Sara Kelly 27:19

That was woven by roughly about 120 people. So it was really great. And then the final piece, obviously, because no one was that interested in what they were weaving, you know, people were sitting down for between 10 minutes and two hours. So you have an idea of what you want to make. But the beginning of you sitting down and weaving is learning the process and just experimenting. So the final piece was really experimental. And there's some bits that are really, really tight, and some bits that are really, really loose, some bits that are very nice and pieces that really experimental. So it's just this, really these seven pieces seven, three or four metres pieces of weavings. And just looked completely different. And it just kind of had that an experimental process. It captured the process really nicely, I think.

Suzanna Petot 28:16

It's such a lovely work, this whole project in that I think a lot of another kind of connotation with craft is that you come away with something, a little, you know, you make a hat if you're crocheting, or you have a pot if you do ceramics, but this is the focus is entirely on the process. And those who participate in joined you for a chat, whether it was in the park or in the pub, are only doing a couple of lines, and then they don't have that end result. And I think it just it speaks to how special this experience is.

Sara Kelly 28:54

I think so. I think it's important with any craft, but with weaving as well. It's just it's a really slow activity. And it's there's a lot of effort that goes into the final piece. And that's the same for a lot of crafts. But people don't understand that effort. We don't people don't understand the process of weaving. So I think in workshops, there is a... I think we do feel like we have to you know, especially if you're paying for a workshop, you have to be like people can take something away with them something physical, they can frame or they can drink from you know, something that's tangible is that there's something really nice about just you experiencing something and taking that experience away with you, and being able to talk about it, being able to go home and do more research on it. And you can take that craft in your own way. If you want to continue it that's great. If not then it was just something that happened.

Suzanna Petot 29:53

Do you know if any of the people who have participated ended up continuing making In their own room or asking you to help them with their own home practice or...?

Sara Kelly 30:04

I spoke to a few people who it's mainly the people who were already interested in textile. But I have spoken to a few people who have made their own frame looms and have been weaving out of like offcuts of gardening string, you know, just things that they have in the house, which is really nice. It's just their own way of creating and making.

Suzanna Petot 30:30

And it's so great that you kind of helped inspire them to keep going and try new ways of making.

Sara Kelly 30:36

Yeah, it's really nice. And especially in this in this climate. Yeah. It's great. It's great to see people. There's lots of people doing more weaving recently, which has been great.

Suzanna Petot 30:49

Oh, no, exactly. I mean, another conversation that we've been having over the past couple of months is weaving seems to have its moment right now. There was the Anni Albers show.

Sara Kelly 31:00

Yeah of course.

Suzanna Petot 31:01

And, of course with the Bauhaus centenary last year, there's been a lot more reconsideration of slower art activities and that craft, you can do anywhere, particularly in the home. And I think it's why, especially during lockdown, of course, there's all these different art clubs and a lot of images of people embroidering or experimenting with different weaving, bringing in fabrics, old scraps of T shirts and things.

Sara Kelly 31:36

They are getting inventive with what they've got in the house.

Suzanna Petot 31:38

Yeah. Which I think is why this project is even more important because of that in a way that it shows you can have, you can take this activity outside and make it more social.

Sara Kelly 31:49

Yeah.

Suzanna Petot 31:50

And I'm sure you can socially distance a bunch of backstrap looms. And have people reintegrate into social settings again.

Suzanna Petot 32:02

So at the end of the summer, you have you said an eight metre long, no 20 metre long?

Sara Kelly 32:08

Yeah

Suzanna Petot 32:09

20 metre long piece? And this is what became, I'm guessing your thesis? And how did you did you exhibit it for your final project?

Sara Kelly 32:21

So that was the kind of the next step was, after eight weeks of making and documenting the process of weaving for all of these different people and all of these workshops that I was doing at festivals and galleries and other places across London, how to show that. And so we decided to, the backstrap loom is very long, very narrow, it creates very long and narrow pieces of fabric, which traditionally, you could stitch lots of pieces together to get some width. But generally, you can only really weave something that's about as wide as your hips.

Suzanna Petot 33:02

Okay.

Sara Kelly 33:03

But length isn't really an issue. So I want you to kind of keep the idea of long and narrow and I had this 18 - 19 metre piece of material that, so it was made up of seven, three or four metre pieces that I

stitched together. And yeah, I created a frame. So how I wanted to show this in the final show. As on it's kind of show people like the research process, this educational process of the loom and how I start to understand about it and letting other people see the loom itself. So within the final exhibition, the loom was shown hanging in the middle of a frame and I made a frame that would allow all of the fabric to kind of drape throughout, the frame itself is actually five metres or something in length and about three metres tall.

Suzanna Petot 34:11

Where did you create this?

Sara Kelly 34:13

That was when I did use the Chelsea workshops.

Suzanna Petot 34:16

Of course always at the end.

Sara Kelly 34:18

Yeah, the last two weeks. Lots of a lot of joining and sanding and days and days spent in the woodwork in studio. And but yeah, that was actually really nice. So it was kind of split up into three sections: education, the tool and the material itself. So I wanted it to be like an interactive thing again, where you could touch and feel so people were encouraged to feel the process and feel the fabric and I had all the photos all of this stuff. The workshops were documented through photos and videos. So I've been playing as well within the frame. And so I really wanted people to engage and interact with the final piece. And, yeah.

Suzanna Petot 35:14

That sounds fantastic. And I really like the multimedia approach to having people who just walk into the room experience what obviously is taken hours and hours and hours of time.

Sara Kelly 35:28

Yeah.

Suzanna Petot 35:30

And so what did you end up calling this huge project?

Sara Kelly 35:33

I called it Woven through Experience.

Suzanna Petot 35:36

I like it.

Sara Kelly 35:39

Yeah. Which is nice, because it's so woven to experience - the whole thing.

Suzanna Petot 35:47

Um, I saw from your portfolio that you are really interested in Hellen Ascoli, the Guatemalan weaver and artist. And I love how you've quoted her saying "the language of weaving is indicative of how textiles are the most intimate materials intertwined with human experiences" Can you talk about why this specifically - from I believe it's a lecture that she gave at the V&A in 2018 - is so important to you and how it relates to your practice?

Sara Kelly 36:26

So I kind of took this there was a... I went to a lecture, a conference of the Victoria & Albert museum a few years ago, which was on the back of the Frida Kahlo exhibition that was there.

Suzanna Petot 36:38

Ah okay.

Sara Kelly 36:39

So Hellen Ascoli was speaker, it was a symposium, she was part of the symposium and yeah, she's really, really interesting. She's backstrap weaver, from Guatemala, as well. And this quote, it kind of made me thinking of weaving as more of a metaphor, as well as a physical process. And, and for me, weaving, even though it has so many great qualities, it can, like anything else can become quite restless. There's a lot of uncertainty within a project. And there's lots of practising to get the final thing that you've envisioned, you know, there's lots of things that can go wrong or right, and it can be very fiddly and so this, like, the nature of weaving encourages, like its natural incorporation of many like diverse materials, and how the backstrap weaving allows us to situate ourselves within a place. So this thinking of weaving as a metaphor, as well, as a physical process, you can start to make connections between the craft and the body. And I think that was constantly that was interesting within this quote when she said, like, materials are intimate and textiles are intimately intertwined between within human experience. And I just think it's something that's really great backstrap loom is almost a tool that, you know, is an extension of the body. It's an extension of the arm, which alters your normal capabilities. And it's a really brilliant tool that transforms your body into an entirely new species of organ. It's like, it's a really, I was just mesmerised by that quote, and the work that she does.

Sara Kelly 38:31

Yeah, she's a fantastic artist. I am. I'm surprised I had only come across her when I went to Frieze last October. And there was a whole section in sort of the new emerging galleries, all about weaving, and she was featured in a pretty large display and her work is incredible. A lot of textiles that were moving, so kinetic, kinetic textiles, which is a whole other topic.

Sara Kelly 39:02

Definitely.

Suzanna Petot 39:03

But yeah, it's a it's a really beautiful quote. And I really, it's such a nice idea to think of the loom as another extension of the body, and how much of a physical but also intimate experience it is.

Suzanna Petot 39:20

So we first met talking about your work in relation to the Bauhaus and our project around celebrating 100 years of the women's weaving workshops that were both fantastic in that it showed how experimental the school and the artists were but also, women were sort of discouraged from taking the more traditional Bauhaus design architecture courses, yeah, and sort of pigeon holed into well, weaving is a woman's thing. This is what you should do. Can you talk about - obviously having an architecture background I'm sure the Bauhaus came up in your degree - when did you learn about the weaving workshops? Or come across, say Anni Albers and her work? And how did different aspects of the Bauhaus, if at all, influence what you work on now?

Sara Kelly 40:27

So I actually didn't know Anni Albers existed until really recently, well, probably once I started researching more into weaving. But I discovered her through Joseph Albers.

Suzanna Petot 40:41

Which I think is quite similar to how a lot of people, she always from this actually the same way that I discovered her. Her work was always shown alongside his.

Sara Kelly 40:50

Alongside his yeah. And it was a book that I had of Joseph Albers in Mexico.

Suzanna Petot 40:58

Oh his photographs.

Sara Kelly 40:59

Yeah, the photographs. I have that book. And I was reading that and it mentioned, his wife, Annie Albers's a weaver. And I was like, "Oh", [laughs] so it was only from that, which is kind of ridiculous, because she's crazy, done so much work. And so in that true, extraordinary work, and that trip together!

Suzanna Petot 41:18

Yeah, that trip that they did together influenced so many of her own textiles. But keep going I interrupted.

Sara Kelly 41:22

No no no. So it was actually interesting now, having known a bit more about Anni Albers and a bit more about Joseph Albers, and, and about the weaving workshops in the Bauhaus, which was, was it one of the most commercially successful I think departments at the Bauhaus was very inventive, very successful. And, of course, all the women, all the artists were women experimenting with both traditional and industrial methods of textile production. So because of that, you know, products were made in bulk to increase profitability. And, and started, I think, at some point, they started to turn away from traditional weaving and move towards more industrial weaving techniques, for obvious reasons, which give students to work more upon textile techniques and creating this more Bauhaus-ian fabrics that we see. And but it gave women more opportunity to really express with natural dyeing, and form

and colour, which I think, if anything is definitely influenced my confidence in working with them things as well.

Suzanna Petot 42:40

What specifically about colour - just going beyond natural tones or...?

Sara Kelly 42:45

Yeah, being a bit more experimental with the colour that you use, I think it's very easy to, to stick with simple and lighter colours, because it's more readily liked or readily available. But it's, I think, it's, it takes quite a lot of confidence to just be bold, and to experiment with things. So I think I definitely have been influenced a lot by Joseph Albers in that sense, with all of his colour theory work, and but I think, looking at some of the Bauhaus fabrics that were woven, you know, within in the 20s 30s, I think there's some really interesting things to look back on. But it's definitely given me, yeah it gives me more confidence to express my ideas and to form, colour, and materials in way that pushes the boundaries a bit more. And, yeah, give me give me a bit more of a reason to slow down in my work and practice weaving processes. So I think in taking, taking the, the industrial weaving away from the Bauhaus and trying to look more on traditional techniques and trying to slow down and focus on how you're making things and what you're doing. And that's, I mean, that was a huge part of my projects at Chelsea. And it's still quite a huge project in my personal work I'm doing now. And I really like to collaborate. So I've been collaborating with a videographer in London, at the minute we're working on a video that's solely focusing on the process of weaving on the floor loom.

Suzanna Petot 44:26

Okay.

Sara Kelly 44:26

a floor loom. So it's just really interesting to share that. The warping, you know, the effort that goes into measuring out a warp and then putting it on the loom, threading, and all of that effort and all of that work that goes into the woven project without the before you even start weaving. So yeah.

Suzanna Petot 44:51

I really look forward to seeing that. That sounds like a fantastic project.

Sara Kelly 44:55

Yeah. Hopefully it should be good.

Suzanna Petot 44:58

I'm sure.

Sara Kelly 44:59

He's very talented, he'll make it look good.

Suzanna Petot 45:03

I'm sure, it's always good to have a very talented duo.

Sara Kelly 45:07

Yeah.

Suzanna Petot 45:09

Well, Sarah, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me about your practice and your influences. It's been really great to hear about how you got to where you are and the different paths that you've taken to come to this really special way of making.

Sara Kelly 45:30

Thank you. It's been great to have to chat to you as well.

Suzanna Petot 45:35

We're really lucky, us as Decorating Dissidence to be able to now work with you on our next project. Yeah. Where we are going to, we've commissioned a weaving workshop with you, which seems perfect. And I'm really excited to see how it turns out in June.

Sara Kelly 45:58

Yeah, I think it'd be great. And it's going to be done throughout the lockdown as well. So social distance workshop, which I've never done before, so I think it'll be really interesting.

Suzanna Petot 46:10

Another way to experiment and find new ways.

Sara Kelly 46:14

Exactly, yeah.

Music 46:15

[music interlude]

Suzanna Petot 46:39

Thank you very much for listening to this episode of the Decorating Dissidence Podcast. It was produced by Decorating Dissidence, and supported by Queen Mary University of London's Centre for Public Engagement. A special thank you to our featured guests. Leo Garbutt is our sound editor and music producer. You can get in touch with us by emailing decoratingdissidence@gmail.com if you're a fan of the show, please feel free to share it online and give us a follow on Twitter or Instagram.