

**W**hen artist Brent Wadden's first solo show in Britain was unveiled at Pace London during last autumn's Frieze week, it stopped art collectors in their tracks. The large-scale, geometric abstracts that Wadden calls "paintings" are, in fact, handwoven from pre-used yarns, cotton and wool. Collectors were intrigued; the show sold out.

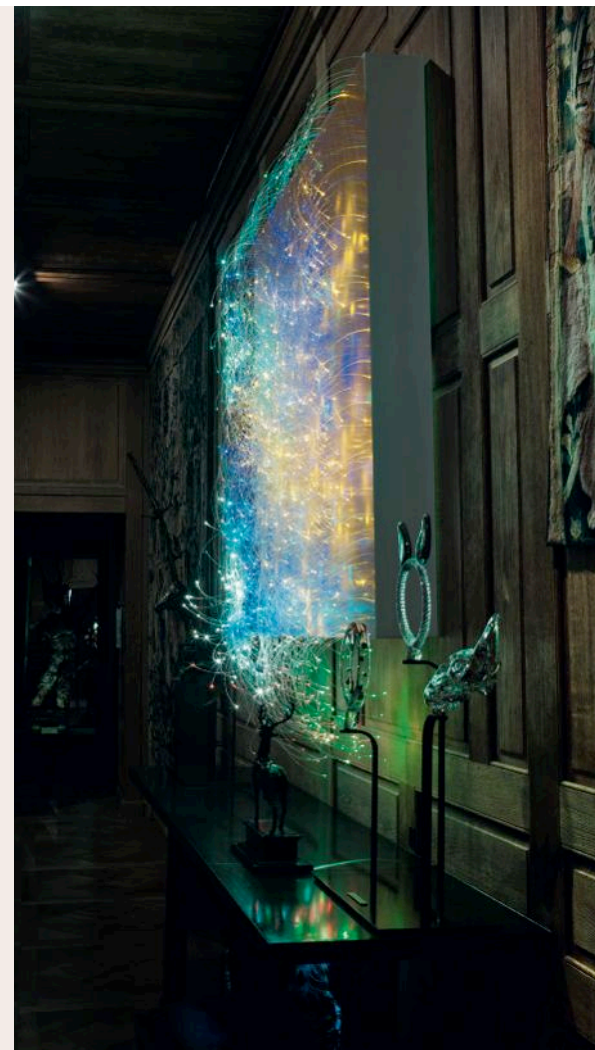
Trained as a painter, Canadian-born, Berlin-based Wadden swapped oils for yarn three years ago. The graphic lines of his dramatic abstracts (examples pictured overleaf, price on application) are now softened by fibres. "I hope my paintings create some amount of confusion in the viewer that leads to a fascination with the process," says Wadden. That process involves patiently weaving fibres on a floor-loom and stretching stitched textile panels over raw canvas. From a distance the patterns appear two-tone, but closer inspection reveals a colourful, textural mix while uneven lines, resulting from handweaving, are reminiscent of brushstrokes.

Wadden's aesthetic seemingly erases conventional distinctions between disciplines. "Textiles act as a bridge between craft and art," says Paris-based gallery owner Maria Wettergren. "Collectors love the personal,

sensual, handcrafted quality of textile art. Its slow pace is felt as a soothing counterbalance to the frenzy of modern life." The radical reworking of weaving traditions also fascinates. "There's a sense of adventure and fearlessness in some of the work – either in narrative content, unusual mixtures of materials or use of new technologies," says Christine Lalumia, executive director of Contemporary Applied Arts.

One innovator is the Danish artist Grethe Sørensen, whose alluring, wall-hung tapestries unite traditional handweaving proficiencies with a self-invented technique in which photographic pixels are translated into threads on a Jacquard loom. Her *City Light* series (from €24,000) compellingly recreates the sensory experience of urban nightlife. Based on video recordings in Shanghai, New York and Copenhagen, unfocused photographic images of traffic lights, neon signs and headlights become soft, gauzy patterns conjuring a city's colour and flow. The meditative *Water Mirrors* series (from €24,000) similarly recreates elemental patterns and silvery, surface movements in Venetian canals and Denmark's lake of Jels. "Digital technology opened up new possibilities – I have total freedom technically and in expression," says Sørensen.

Equally clever at combining new technology with traditional techniques is Astrid Krogh, who began developing avant-garde, light-infused textiles after graduating from the Danish Design School's textile faculty in 1997. Krogh handweaves optic fibres on a loom



# uncommon THREAD

The radical reworking of weaving traditions is pushing textiles into new contemporary art territories – and collectors are entranced. **Nicole Swengley** reports



From top: optic fibre, aluminium and LED light monitor *Meadow* by Astrid Krogh, €35,000. Cotton, linen and resin *Ultima* vessels by Gjertrud Hals, €16,000 each





From top: fibre/yarn paintings by Brent Wadden, price on request. Yarn-based mixed-media *New Worlds-Spells* by Michael Brennand-Wood, £12,000. Cotton, wool and aluminium *Slow Relief* chaise by Louise Campbell, £14,000

casts, sprays and cuts her way through various materials, mostly natural fibres such as flax, cotton, paper, roots, plants,” says Wettergren. Grid structures permeate Hals’ work – most spectacularly in *Arakne* (€24,000), a dazzling spider’s web of threads and fibres. Found objects – feathers, embroidery scraps, animal skeletons – are often entwined within crocheted surfaces. Sometimes fragmented letters emerge then vanish, or nature appears as a root or branch. Metaphors and symbols abound, as themes from Norse mythology, Zen Buddhism and Christianity are explored in Hals’s meditative works.

“The art of weaving is a meditation,” observes New York-based Suzanne Tick, who maintains a handweaving practice alongside work developing specialist materials for residential and commercial interiors. Privately collected worldwide, her woven sculptures are created from repurposed materials including fabric, paper and wire clothes hangers (*New Orleans Make It Right*, \$20,000), woven tape (*Silver Tape*, \$7,000), Mylar balloons (*Fire Island*, \$15,000) and even woven shredded divorce papers (*Pulp Fiction*, \$25,000).

“I come from a family of recyclers – it’s in my blood,” she explains. “My father was a third-generation scrap-metal-yard owner in central Illinois and I spent summers working at the junk yard and then creating sculpture from other people’s detritus after closing time. I try to achieve a kind of alchemy. It’s thrilling to bring people along through this process.”

“What I love about Suzanne’s work is the way she transforms ordinary materials into magical pieces,” says New York-based gallery owner Cristina Grajales. “I was speechless when I first saw *Refuse DC* (\$90,000). It’s such a timeless piece – I wasn’t sure if it was pre-Columbian or African. As I got close and saw that it was made from wire hangers, woven together. It was an incredible surprise. And this element of surprise is exactly what collectors love.”

Mixing textiles with wood, paper, metal, glass or collage adds depth – physically and conceptually – to Cambridge-based Michael Brennand-Wood’s work. “I’ve always liked the frisson of contrasting media – soft, sensuous chenille against worn wood or a silk thread entwined around a metal strip,” he says. “Materials have formal qualities –

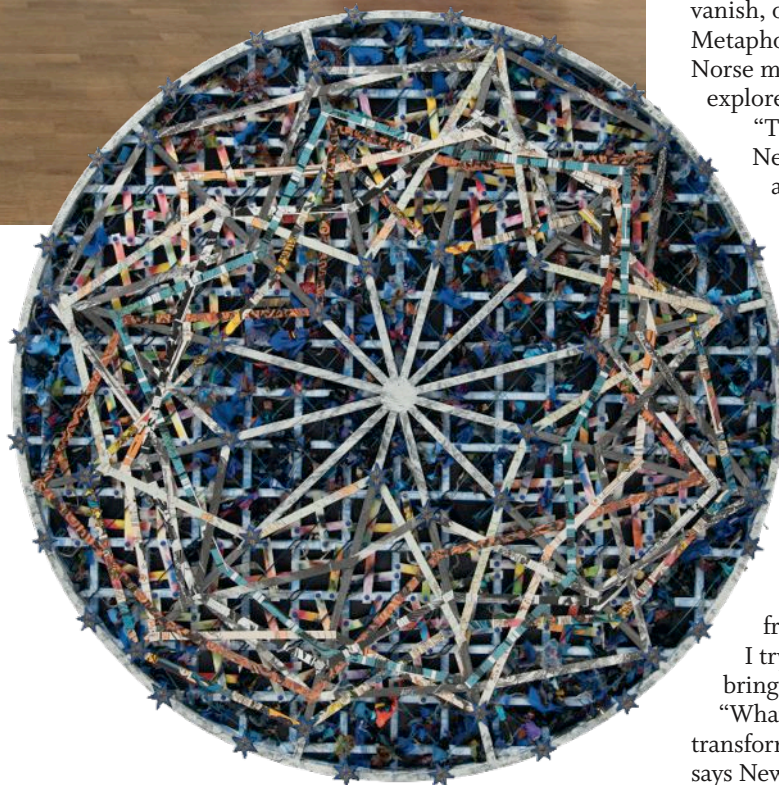
*“I’ve always liked the frisson of contrasting media – soft chenille against worn wood or a silk thread entwined around a metal strip”*

and connects them to light monitors that infuse them with coloured light via a colour wheel she designed herself. Slowly, almost hypnotically, iridescent colours pulse through her tapestries. *Morild’s* (€60,000) gently glowing patterns resemble sea-algae phosphorescence, while the limited-edition Meadow series (€35,000, example pictured on previous page) evokes sunlit fields of greens, blues, pinks and gold. Changeable atmospheric phenomena are explored in the Horizon series (€55,000), with *Sky* poetically evolving from dawn to sunlight, sunset and into inky evening. The effects are emotive, mesmeric and engaging.

Three of Krogh’s tapestries – *Ikat 1*, *11* and *111* (from €35,000) – combine optic fibres, paper yarns and light monitors to mimic traditional ikat-weaving techniques, using light instead of dye to create the patterns. And that’s the charm of this work. Although technically advanced, the pieces still relate to historic textiles. “My reference point is almost always Gobelin tapestries or ancient kilim carpets,” says Krogh. “The aim is to create meaningful connections between materials and people, function and decoration.”

While Krogh is primarily concerned with visual effects, Danish architect Cecilie Bendixen focuses on sound absorption. Her PhD thesis on acoustic textile architecture led to sculptural designs like *Draped Nimbostratus* (price on request, pictured overleaf) – a monumental cloud-like, woven-wool hanging installation that turned heads at Design Miami in December. The shape is the visualisation of muffled sound – a kind of cotton-woolly experience. More domestically scaled is *Volumes* (limited edition, €16,000), a sound-absorbing pendant light made from PVDF (polyvinylidene fluoride) textile. “My intention is to make sound absorption an architectural parameter that, like light and material surfaces, can help to construct sensuous, nuanced spaces,” says Bendixen.

A three-dimensional use of textiles is also explored by French design siblings Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec in *Paravent* (limited edition, price on request), a steel-framed screen flanked by woollen panels, and in Danish designer Louise Campbell’s *Slow Relief* chaise (limited



edition, €14,000, pictured below), in which threads of cotton and wool are the main feature rather than an invisible element of the upholstery. More sculptural still are Norwegian artist Gjertrud Hals’s *Ultima* series (€16,000, pictured on previous page) of tall, feather-light vessels knitted from cotton and linen threads and hardened with resin using a self-invented technique. Despite their delicate, perforated structure, the vessels convey resilience. “For me the visual effect goes hand-in-hand with tactility,” says Hals. “She constantly explores new technologies as she weaves, knits,







From top: woven-wool *Draped Nimbostratus* installation by Cecilie Bendixen, price on request. Yarn, cotton, nettle and raffia *Barnscape* by Susie Gillespie, \$3,900. Handwoven cotton wall piece by Ptolemy Mann, from £2,000

and I love the work of Paul Klee, Josef Albers, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin.” Refined, sophisticated weaving underpins Mann’s crisp geometrics. “The line of warp and weft is really important,” she says. “I stretch the textile over a frame like a canvas because I want it to look like a painting.” Sometimes panels are bolted together to create a multidepth sculpture with contrasting edges. Other pieces are circular or

cube-shaped. One client commissioned a vibrant wall piece to hide an overmantel television screen; another ordered three artworks for a double-height space using a colour palette that reflects the furnishings.

Some artists, in contrast, let the natural yarn speak for itself. Devon-based Susie Gillespie makes one-off wall hangings (from £1,625) and framed wall pieces (from £600) with irregular surface textures, using antique linen yarn, nettle imported from traditional spinners in the Himalayas and homegrown flax. “Handspun nettle and antique linen yarn retain traces of life in their unevenness, creating an essential ‘clothiness’ that I don’t find in machine-spun yarn,” she

says. “This ‘clothiness’ – the way it shimmers in certain lights and the yarn’s texture and life – is satisfying to me.”

Gillespie’s interest in archaeology and landscape pervades her work. “I try to achieve a sense of earth, stone, vegetation and decomposition,” she says. Earth pigments were added to yarns in *Barnscape* (\$3,900, pictured near left), while natural cave pigment was used with yarns and handmade paper in *Settlement* (\$9,300, both available at



Browngrotta Arts). The

look is sophisticated, not homespun. “Susie’s work is incredibly tactile and utterly alluring to the finger, but also looks subtle and supremely elegant,” says Lalumia.

No matter how radically the ancient art of weaving develops, its timeless, laborious demands touch us deeply at an emotional level. As Krogh predicts: “We will increasingly see that the cutting-edge of art and design is not razor-sharp but as sensuous and soft as a textile.” ♦

## MATERIAL WORLD

**Alice Kettle**, [www.alicekettle.com](http://www.alicekettle.com) and see Contemporary Applied Arts. **Astrid Krogh**, Sturlasgade 14, 2800 Kobenhavn S, Copenhagen (+4520-823 771; [www.astridkrogh.com](http://www.astridkrogh.com)) and see Galerie Maria Wettergren. **Brent Wadden**, [www.brentwadden.com](http://www.brentwadden.com) and see Pace London and Peres Projects. **Browngrotta Arts**, [www.browngrotta.com](http://www.browngrotta.com). **Cecilie Bendixen**, see Galerie Maria Wettergren. **Contemporary Applied Arts**, 89 Southwark St, London SE1 (020-7620 0086; [www.caa.org.uk](http://www.caa.org.uk)). **Cristina Grajales Gallery**, 152 West 25th St, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-219 9941; [www.cristinagrajalesinc.com](http://www.cristinagrajalesinc.com)). **Galerie Kreo**, 14A Hay Hill, London W1 (020-7499 4611; [www.galeriekreo.com](http://www.galeriekreo.com)); 31 Rue Dauphine, 75006 Paris (+331-5310 2300). **Galerie Maria Wettergren**, 18 Rue Guenegaud, 75006 Paris (+331-4329 1960; [www.mariawettergren.com](http://www.mariawettergren.com)). **Gjertrud Hals**, Kringstastien 10, 6411 Molde, Norway ([www.gjertrud-hals.com](http://www.gjertrud-hals.com)) and see Galerie Maria Wettergren. **Grethe Sørensen**, Bastrup Skolevej 24A, Vamdrup 6580 (+4529-808 925; [www.grethesorensen.dk](http://www.grethesorensen.dk)) and see Galerie Maria Wettergren. **Louise Campbell**, [www.louise-campbell.com](http://www.louise-campbell.com) and see Galerie Maria Wettergren. **Michael Brennand-Wood**, 01767-631380; [www.brennand-wood.com](http://www.brennand-wood.com) and see Contemporary Applied Arts. **Pace London**, 6 Burlington Gdns, London W1 (020-73206 7600; [www.pacegallery.com](http://www.pacegallery.com)). **Peres Projects**, Karl-Marx-Allee 82, 18243 Berlin (+4930-2759 50770; [www.peresprojects.com](http://www.peresprojects.com)). **Ptolemy Mann**, 020-7357 7101; [www.ptolemymann.com](http://www.ptolemymann.com) and see Contemporary Applied Arts. **Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec**, [www.bouroullec.com](http://www.bouroullec.com) and see Galerie Kreo. **Susie Gillespie**, [www.susiegillespie.com](http://www.susiegillespie.com) and see Browngrotta Arts and Contemporary Applied Arts. **Suzanne Tick**, 44 East 3rd St, New York, NY 10003 (+1212-598 0611; [www.suzannetick.com](http://www.suzannetick.com)) and see Cristina Grajales Gallery.

*“The relief works have a kinetic dimension; I like that sense of flux and ambiguity as to whether a piece is a textile, painting or sculpture”*

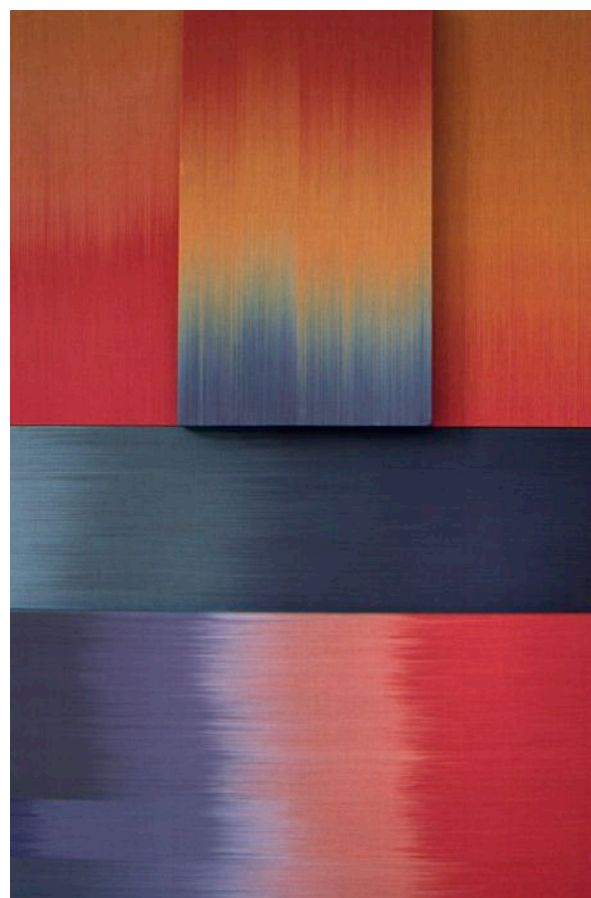
hard, soft, shiny – but also embedded ideas; a series of past associations that can enrich a concept.”

This idea was at the core of his *Seeds of Memory* solo exhibition at the National Centre for Craft & Design last autumn, in which nine circular works (£12,000 each, pictured on previous page) from his New Worlds series were shown. His intensely detailed relief works (from £600) are colourful and rhythmic with almost holographic configurations. “Their physical depth enables viewers to interact with the work as they move across the visual field,” he says. “They have a kinetic dimension. Elements literally project into space. I like that sense of flux and the ambiguity as to whether a work is a textile, painting or sculpture.”

Painting, however, underpins every aspect of Alice Kettle’s work. “She’s a master of narrative and layered storytelling on an ambitious and large scale,” says Lalumia. “I like big works and this comes from painting,” says Kettle, who trained as a fine artist before taking a postgraduate diploma in textile art at Goldsmiths College. One of her largest commissions – a huge (16.5m x 3m) narrative work called *Looking Forwards to the Past* – is permanently housed in Winchester Discovery Centre. Kettle’s work also hangs in Manchester’s Whitworth Art Gallery and she recently completed a large-scale piece for Lloyds Register.

In all her work (small framed wall pieces, from £650; large, from £15,000) tiny, individual stitches merge to create great washes of colour against which stitch-sketches of people move in a dream-like way. “I like layering and building ideas – drawing with thread so to speak,” says Kettle. “I work a lot with the fabric reversed and upside down so I’m led by images in my head. I think my painting background helps, as I like this risky, unpredictable quality, and then reworking and revising. This seems to add to the richness and depth – thread laid upon thread.”

Painterly traditions are handled differently by Ptolemy Mann. Hand-dyed threads build geometric chromatic



bands in her handwoven wall pieces (example pictured above, from £2,000). “The thread-dyeing is almost like painting,” she says. “Recently I’ve got bolder and more experimental with colour, allowing something unconsciously emotional to take place. I’m a fan of abstract expression. Mark Rothko is my favourite artist