



The  
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# Ismini Samanidou

Interviewed by Claude Delmas

In March 2007, a small exhibition in London's Commercial Road featured the work of a Research Group from University College Falmouth titled *Autonomic*. The innovative exhibits were the result of digital design applied to ceramics, furniture, glass, metalwork and a textile installation, *Siberia*, by the talented weaver Ismini Samanidou. Claude Delmas met her at the gallery.

'I came to England when I was four, first time round; my father was working at the Chelsea & Westminster Hospital at the time. I went to primary school in Putney for two years. Then I came back to study when I was nineteen – that was over ten years ago. I wanted to study Art and Design and I started off doing a Foundation course at Camberwell College of Art. I chose textiles because I loved the colours and the textures and the collages I could do. Then I went on to do my BA at Central St Martin's. The reason I chose weaving was I was really interested in the mathematics, in the various ways you can set up threads to create a fabric and the technical properties of weave. I was weaving layers that can open up to form a concertina-like shape that divided space.

When I left St Martin's I did a year's work experience at Salt Design Studio and then I applied to the Royal College of Art where again I was interested in fabrics for interiors but looking more at structure

and that is when I began to use the jacquard loom, because I felt that I could combine my photography with the weave structure, making more complex fabrics than I could possibly weave with a hand loom. So it opened that possibility to me. After the MA I did some work experience with Wallace Sewell, the well known weavers and designer makers, and then I applied and got a Crafts Council scholarship on the Next Move scheme which is a residency programme placing, not necessarily designers especially, but graduates, recent graduates, back in a university where they are offered studio space and access to the facilities. That's when I relocated to Falmouth because they have a jacquard loom. That was the main reason I left London. I have always lived in cities, and Cornwall is very far away. I wouldn't choose to move there otherwise, but I am very glad I did. I love Cornwall. I have completed my residency and now I am setting up my business within the University under the Incubation Scheme, using their facilities and also teaching.

Having access to a jacquard loom is wonderful as it means I am there seeing the fabric being made. I don't design on the computer and then send an email of the design somewhere and wait for the fabric six weeks later. As I can operate the loom I weave it myself. I am there weaving the design so I can stop the loom

and change the weft and everything you do when you weave. I can say Oh what if I tried this? I am very interested in that, so I want to continue doing that. I would love to bring more of the hand process into this technique because at the moment I design the fabric and then I weave, sometimes I stitch over the cloth at the end because I like to see that my personal view translates into the digital operation.

## Wisteria

The *Wisteria* hanging was a computer design and woven on the digital jacquard loom. (see right, p23)

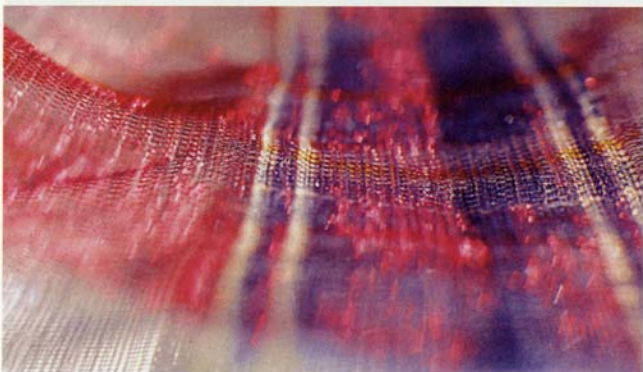
It was made in response to a 300 year-old wisteria plant at Godolphin House in Cornwall. It was originally made for the curated area of *Hidden Art Cornwall* design fair. I was allocated the cellar of the house, a few metres away from the old wisteria, and I chose to make two textile hangings inspired by this beautiful plant. *Wisteria* was also exhibited at *Collect 2007* at the V&A with the Lesley Craze Gallery.

My other passion is photography. I look at something and I want to take a photograph. I have been doing that since I was a kid really. I have always been taking photographs and looking at things before I knew I wanted to be a weaver, so now I am a weaver I am conscious of how one can use photographs, how they can change, and how they can be translated into fabric. With the wisteria, I took pictures knowing that I would turn them into fabric. With *Siberia* though I didn't, I was just mesmerized by this beautiful landscape with the frozen rivers and the mountains and the valleys from above, it was incredible.

## Siberia

I was flying back from Japan and for six hours we flew over Siberia. It was just huge. At first, I just looked out of the window and thought Wow I'd better get my camera out quick, thinking in a few minutes it won't be there. Six hours later I had filled up my camera, I had run out of batteries, filled up my memory card, I was using my phone to take photographs, then in the end I decided to just look out of the window so I would remember what

Butterfly – early work woven while at Central Saint Martins Ismini Samanidou







Above: Thalassa fabric inspired by images of the sea and waves. Thalassa means sea in Greek. Fabric prototype for interior textiles. Woven on a computerized jacquard loom using cotton and paper yarns. The variations on the weft density were achieved by manually changing the weft ratio whilst weaving. Ismini Samanidou

Right: Siberia textiles at the Autonomat show. Ismini Samanidou



about my process and the way I do things. I handwrote what it is I do; how I take photographs and that these were photographs of Siberia etc. I put my handwriting into the computer to make it into a design. You can see it in the weaving, you can read part of it, because that's the idea, that you can see things and my objective was to reveal what I saw in woven fabric, in my medium. Not to show my photographs and say this is what I saw, but this is what I saw and what I felt, this is how it felt for me. That's what it is, it's a digital presence. It's not that I particularly want to tell people what I am about, no, but for this show we wanted to exhibit ourselves so to speak, that's why all the designers here have shown where their work came from and I wanted to weave myself instead of documenting or writing about my work.

I was asked to join the *Autonomat Research Group* because of my direction as a weaver, the fact that I use this computerized loom. That is what the group is about. They are interested in the way digital means can be used by designer makers.

I did a project with them before through *Hidden Art Cornwall*. It was quite an experimental project, looking at milling metal plates of my weave designs to try and emboss into the fabric I was making. It was trying to bring together two digital technologies, the computer controlled milling machine and the jacquard loom and merge them into a final process which is embossing, print-making using a hundred year-old printing press, and combining these two to make a more individual fabric with an embossed surface. I really enjoy research work but at the moment I see myself more as a practitioner than a researcher. My own vision would be to create roomfuls of fabrics, huge fabrics that look like walls so you can walk around them and they are almost layers dividing space. That's what I am trying to do here.

#### Feather Grass Scape

A while ago I completed a commission for the offices of the international firm of lawyers, Allen & Overy, in the new Norman Foster building in Spitalfields. It was for a piece to hang in their meeting

room at the top of the building. I made a triptych for them. It had to fit in a particular space. I wanted to keep the project site-specific so I went up and had a look at the tenth floor roof garden, because I wanted it to be relevant to them and bring the outside inside. I was very struck by the feather grass. So I took some photographs which I used for the design because you can really see the abstract quality of plants. And this idea of banding as well, the way you are looking at it from different angles. It's not about me recreating a photograph on woven fabric. It's about trying to show what I saw, looking from here, from there, looking upwards, from above. There is also some stitching on the fabric, a red silk thread which goes back to my tradition of the Greek weavers. The women would sew their dowries with red silk thread to protect them from the evil eye. I really like that story so I sewed in different areas of the panels to protect the lawyers, which is a bit mad, really!

That commission initially came from my being on the Crafts Council register. I was contacted by *Art For Offices*, a commissioning agency, and I had to send work and a detailed proposal for selection. It was a very lengthy and difficult process. But it was fantastic to be offered it, to have work in a corporate building. No, I didn't get to hang it myself. I had to deliver it and they had professionals hang it, it was difficult. I haven't seen it in situ. I would love to. I know there is an event planned for September where the artists that created work for the building will be invited. I am really looking forward to it!

#### RCA Scholarship 2006

It was wonderful to be given the John Dunsmore Scholarship and to go and see traditional craft in Sarawak and Malaysia. Because I think when you are a student you learn to weave, you collect samples all from the university point of view and sometimes you forget that there are people out there who do it because their mother taught them, because their grandmother taught them, because it runs in the family and in their tradition. It was wonderful to see people who have been making fabric since they were children,



Left: Feather Grass Scape by Ismini Samanidou. A triptych designed to hang in the meeting room of the international firm of lawyers Allen & Overy in the new Norman Foster building in Spitalfields. It was inspired by the tenth floor garden (see below).



people who were weaving mats because it is their destiny, in a sense. I got this really strong sense of history and of tradition and of the power of the textiles. I think if it doesn't go through to the younger generation it will be very difficult to keep the skills and traditions going. I think what they make for the tourists can vary from beautiful work to very badly made products.

#### Japan

Last November I joined a group of students from Bath Spa University for a trip to Tokyo and Kyoto, looking at workshops and galleries, meeting craftspeople like Shindo, who is a master craftsman with indigo. He lives in a small traditional village and he has made his house into an indigo museum. It was just

I was looking at. But it was extraordinary. We were following the sun so it was a constant sunset with an incredible twilight, grey, it was magic. After being in Japan for ten days, on this research trip which was very, very packed with information, you are on the plane, feeling very tired, looking out of the window and suddenly I thought: This is design, this is

what I was looking for. This meditative state, which I didn't get because the trip was so busy. But then I could really think about what I saw, and looking at Siberia it just made sense for me. That's what I tried to do with these fabrics, to give that sense of what I saw while on the plane.

In the very long, thin piece in this exhibition, I tried to weave something





Detail of Forest fabric, inspired by images of branches in the winter. Woven on a computerized jacquard loom using viscose and metallic yarns. Ismini Samanidou



Detail of Moss fabric Ismini Samanidou

amazing. We went to Nuno as well. From what I understand, textiles have a very broad meaning there, they use them in many different ways, as banners in front of the doors, to wrap presents with, and of course for their beautiful kimonos.

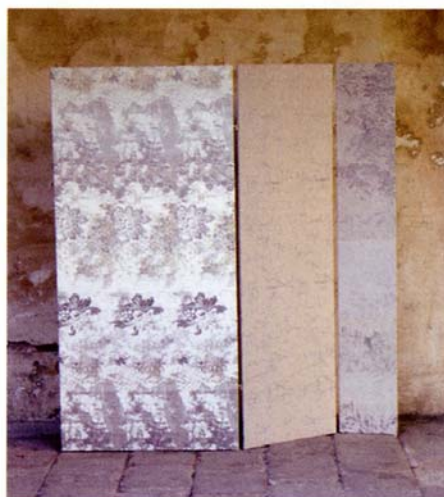
## Lace

Not long ago, I felt that I would like to do some more hands on activity, so I joined the Penzance lace making circle, two Sundays a month. My teacher is a famous expert on Honiton lace. She was also given an MBE for her contribution to lace! She has a very structured way of teaching. First you have to make a sample, then a bookmark, next a little coaster and now I am on a collar. She says she wants me to design. It's great because I can really learn the technique, and there is a true technique to lace like there is of weaving. And yes, I am planning to use this lace making in my work! Last summer in Greece I inherited two boxes of lace samples from an aunt I didn't know I had till then, who was also called Ismini. The family gave me all these samples when they found out I was lace making. I have all the 'prickings' so I want to use these. I think I'll find a way to incorporate them and the samples directly. I haven't started yet.

## Materials

I use a combination of synthetic and natural materials and also metallic threads. I use a lot of silk, linen, and cotton, which is the warp. On a jacquard loom, one can't change the warp easily and we use cotton; most of my hangings have a cotton base. The warp at the University starts off as 300 metres, so it's not just for me, it's for everyone. To change the warp is a very laborious

Below: One of Ismini's latest projects for Hidden Art Cornwall. A textile upholstered screen at Godolphin House. Drawing inspiration from the Mortlake Tapestry covering an eighteenth century wallpaper. Taking these surfaces as a starting point and playing with the hide and reveal elements of the layering process, the new screen illustrates this relationship of layering and concealing.



process. In industry, there are machines to lace the threads, but at the University there aren't, so you have to tie the new threads for the new work individually to the old ones, something like three thousand six hundred threads. The students also use the loom. And now the college is developing a bureau to open up this facility for people outside to come and weave on the loom, which I think is fantastic, to try something on such a beautiful machine.

It is very difficult to make a living from weaving, but my advice there would be to keep going, to have faith, because in a sense I think it's more important to do what you love than to make a lot of money. I am a weaver because I love weaving, not because it's a profession that will bring me money. With the number of years of study I have done I could

probably be a doctor by now. But I am not. I am a weaver because I love it. So I think sometimes you don't make money out of your passion, you have to be prepared to make money in other ways and do the thing you love.'

Ismini has won a number of awards, and taken part in exhibitions in England and abroad. She has created an interiors fabric for sale by the metre, licensed to George Spencer Designs, as well as the fabric for the Cuadra Chair designed by John Miller and exhibited at the Milan Furniture Fair in 2006. She was a speaker at the fourteenth European Textile Network Conference held in London in September, and exhibited a collaborative piece created with the research cluster from Metropolitan University. One of Ismini's first shows was an installation she mounted in a disused enamel factory on the island of Kea in Greece. The Revenge of Arachnae was a reference to a Greek myth with a deep resonance for all weavers. The goddess of weaving, jealous Athena, punished skilful Arachnae for outstripping her in a contest by condemning her for eternity to weave webs doomed to destruction. The Spider's Revenge was a large silk web filling the disused space and sometimes incorporating some of its decaying objects. This work was made after Ismini completed her MA in 2003. It involved a lot of free weaving, entangling threads and working in a site-specific way as opposed to the structured woven textiles made for her degree show. The photographs Ismini took of the cracked enamel on the surface of some lamps formed the starting point for a hanging for the Worshipful Company of Weavers. The rusty marks were manipulated on the computer and combined to form a landscape. The design was woven with linen, cotton, silk and wool and embellished with stitch. The wall hanging is now in the Weavers' offices in London and from 2008 will be on permanent loan to the textile collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Also last September, Ismini exhibited two new projects at Hidden Art Cornwall.

Visit: [www.isminisamanidou.com](http://www.isminisamanidou.com)