# Llantarnam Grange Arts Centre presents Blanket Coverage, touring to Bonhoga Gallery from 21 January to 13 March 2022.

# Introduction from Louise Jones-Williams, Director of Llantarnam Grange Arts Centre

Blanket Coverage is an exhibition of contemporary woven blankets curated by Laura and involving makers from across Wales, the UK and internationally. Their interpretations of the blanket push the boundaries of traditional handweaving, designing for commercial production as well as addressing issues of sustainability. Traditional skills such as weaving are in danger of being lost as demand for them falls in the digital age. The threat to these skills, which once might have been learnt at home or at school, is having a detrimental effect not only on the creative industries; even medical professionals are reporting that they are seeing a decrease in the physical skills that are vital in surgery.

The makers in this exhibition are ensuring that traditional crafts continue to not only survive but thrive, both celebrating and innovating the rich tradition of woollen blanket production. The skills, traditions and symbolism wrapped up in blankets make them a prized procession in every home, providers of comfort and warmth, which are passed from generation to generation.

# Introduction from Laura Thomas, curator of Blanket Coverage

Blankets are perhaps one of our most evocative and emotive symbols of nurture.

From birth onwards, we envelop our bodies in these flat

panels of woven cloth for comfort and protection. Every culture in the world has a blanket tradition and as such it could be argued that they have universal appeal and implicit symbolism beyond language. The offer or gift of a blanket is understood, without need for explanation.

The large-scale format of a blanket has always offered itself as an inviting ‘blank canvas’ for creative expression, beyond its utility. A blanket’s colour, pattern and composition can command attention and provide a bold focal point within its functional domestic setting. Artists and makers have long relished this potent context for their design skills.

With a rich industrial heritage in the production of woollen blankets in Wales, it is timely to look at today’s weavers who are forging their own ground with a respectful nod to that which has gone before them. This exhibition highlights a diversity of practice, from the handwoven to the mill-woven, all with an impeccable eye for quality and attention to detail.

All demonstrate clever use of colour, weave structure and yarn choice resulting in thoroughly covetable heirloom-quality blankets to comfort our bodies and furnish our homes.

Llio James is one of Wales’s most exciting textile designers. Growing up near woollen mills in Ceredigion left an indelible mark upon her creativity, and she has forged an admirable path weaving distinctively Welsh fabrics that are yet thoroughly contemporary through her highly selective use of colour, weave structure and finishing detail.

Sioni Rhys Handweavers is another much-admired Welsh design business, specialising in handweaving the traditional carthenni in classic twills but in an updated colour palette. Lively use of colour in rich British wools create substantial carthenni of broad appeal.

Eleanor Pritchard, Margo Selby and Wallace Sewell have all established widely admired businesses that have nurtured rich relationships with British manufacturers. Handwoven designs are honed and developed in their studios before being faithfully scaled up for batch production.

This ‘hand-in-hand’ relationship between craft and manufacture has heralded new ways for contemporary craft practitioners to take their wares to a wider audience.

Beatrice Larkin has a similar approach working with her partner jacquard mill based in the UK to create her luxurious monochromatic blanket collections. Working with a jacquard loom allows for a faithful recreation of hand-drawn lines, something rather untypical in the field of blanket design.

Meghan Spielman is a recent graduate of the Royal College of Art where her graduation collection of textile artworks attracted much admiration for the highly inventive twist on traditional textiles such as gingham and checks. For this exhibition, Meghan worked with natural dye artist Madeleine Provost to prepare a hand-dyed ikat warp, before creating the handwoven silk artwork that references deconstructed blanket designs.

Angie Parker, a weaver primarily known for her colourful Krokbragd rugs and artworks, has recently widened her repertoire to include blankets. Lockdown prompted a fresh appreciation for the brightly painted houses around her home in Bristol, which led to a new blanket design that she put into production with The Bristol Weaving Mill.

Both Maria Sigma and Catarina Riccabona are passionate advocates for sustainability through their handwoven practice. Their refined, pared-down aesthetic allows their choice of undyed, natural, repurposed or recycled yarns to truly evoke luxury and a ‘slow cloth ethos’.

And lastly, no exhibition dedicated to blankets in Wales would be complete without Melin Tregwynt. The mill has been in the ownership of the Griffiths family for over a hundred years, and under the direction of Eifion and Amanda Griffiths the mill has earned a worldwide reputation for its thoroughly modern twist

on iconic Welsh double cloth designs. The extensive Melin Tregwynt archive has provided a rich resource to combine with modern colour palettes, resulting in iconic blankets with legions of admirers.

As a weaver for nearly twenty-five years, my journey into woven textiles has its very roots in blankets. I have a distinct childhood memory, laying in bed at night carefully examining the honeycomb and double cloth blankets, turning them over trying to understand why the face was different from the reverse.

It was only much later in college, when I discovered a natural affinity for weaving blankets, that I was so struck by this memory. My curiosity for a blanket laid the foundations for my future, and I never fail to be seduced by great blanket design. It has been a joy to compose this show.

# Angie Parker

Angie Parker conceived and designed The Bristol Blanket in response to the COVID-19 lockdown.

While on her daily walks, Angie was inspired by the colourful architecture of Bristol and the strengthened connections made with her neighbours and wider local community during this time.

The colour palette reflects the architecture, but has also been carefully selected to lift one’s spirits and evoke joy.

Sampled on her handloom, Angie then commissioned the local Bristol Weaving Mill, a specialist micro-mill, to produce a limited-edition, short-run of her design.

For every blanket sold, 10% of the profit will go to the mental health charity MIND.

Inspired by architecture, West African textiles and the diagrammatic notation of weave structures, Beatrice Larkin makes drawings that are then translated into monochromatic jacquard woven fabrics.

She plays with line, scale and repeat format and how this in turn relates to weave structure. The fabrics are woven in short runs at a jacquard mill in Lancashire.

‘A pattern that looks like it has just been created has a life to it. I make sure that the initial sketch is still visible in the finished fabric. I love lines that don’t quite meet, an ink blotch, a blurred and broken geometric.’

# Catarina Riccabona

Catarina Riccabona is a handweaver making highly considered throws and blankets.

Every item is a ‘one-off’ as she explores the juxtaposition of blocks of weave structures and natural yarns.

She embraces and celebrates knots, joins and other usually hidden necessities of the weave process, resulting in textiles of integrity and authenticity.

‘Each piece I make is highly individual. This distinct identity is created by an intuitive and observational way of working, allowing the design to form spontaneously while weaving at the loom.

Each piece is also characterised by the slight irregularities typical of making by hand, like a natural selvedge.’

# Eleanor Pritchard

Eleanor Pritchard is widely admired for her refined aesthetic and intellectual approach to create covetable woven blankets rooted in handloom exploration.

These handwoven designs are put into production at UK mills such as Melin Teifi in Carmarthenshire, and are sold all over the world.

‘I have always loved playing with colour and pattern. My work often has a mid-century quality and I feel a strong affinity for the aesthetics and design philosophy of this era.

Alongside this runs a deep interest in vernacular British textiles and I see much of my work as a re-interpretation of these traditions and techniques for a contemporary audience.’

# Laura Thomas

While predominately known for her mixed-media textile artworks, Laura Thomas’s interest in textiles is firmly rooted in Welsh blankets.

In 1997, as a student, Laura undertook a work placement at Melin Tregwynt, which has led to an ongoing professional relationship ever since.

This has included technical and design consultancy, alongside producing occasional short runs of blankets for clients such as Heals or her own label.

For this exhibition Laura relished taking the opportunity to work with Melin Tregwynt again and explore, using 100% Cambrian Mountains Welsh Wool to produce a limited-edition blanket.

This is complemented by a handwoven, open-weave design produced at her Bridgend studio.

# Lilo James

Growing up in a small Ceredigion village that housed two traditional weaving mills, Llio James’s interest in textiles began in childhood.

This appreciation for the manufacture of cloth underpins her creative practice as she both hand-weaves blankets and also produces mill-woven, short-runs with Melin Teifi.

For this exhibition, Llio has taken the opportunity to create a new body of entirely handwoven work.

‘Colour is a big part of the design process, looking at proportion, scale and geometric shapes.

I create paper designs to see what ideas develop, and then move on to the loom.

When handweaving bespoke cloth, the design develops as I weave enabling me to adapt the work as it grows.’

# Margo Selby

Produced in 100% lambswool in Scotland, Margo Selby’s Kozo reversible throw uses the format of the blanket as an art canvas, featuring a large-scale geometric composition.

The designs of Kozo and Sakuru emulate the patchwork elements found in Japanese Boro textiles with the bold composition, a nod to American quilts.

The complex details of these designs are the result of extensive handwoven development pieces

produced on the looms in Margo’s Whitstable studio.

This process of starting with hand-produced samples is

part of Margo’s ethos of ‘art into industry’ championing

the craft of the handweaver alongside the skill and

expertise of industrial mills.

# Maria Sigma

Maria Sigma is a prolific handweaver of refined, honest fabrics made with sustainability at their core.

‘My approach to design is based on the idea of creating beautiful, functional textiles and objects through ‘zero waste’ design and craftsmanship by re-interpreting traditional craft techniques in a lively and contemporary way.

High-quality and sustainable natural fibres (British wool) are key to the philosophy of my work, in which the aspiration for textile longevity through simplicity and sensibility is essential.

Weaving is my way of putting the everyday chaos in order and make something honest and beautiful out of it.’

# Merlin Tregwynt

Melin Tregwynt is renowned the world over for contemporary woven textiles based on an extensive archive of traditional Welsh ‘tapestries’ (double cloths) and flannels.

Nestled in a picturesque corner of the Pembrokeshire coast, Eifion and Amanda Griffiths have skilfully steered the family business from strength to strength by continually developing their design-led choices of colour and pattern.

‘These fabrics are the product of a way of thinking, of working and of living handed down through three generations of our family business.

The skills and knowledge of all the staff, both past and present, keep the tradition of Welsh weaving alive at Melin Tregwynt.’

# Sioni Rhys Handweavers

Sioni Rhys Handweavers is a long-established partnership between designer Dennis Mulcahy and handweaver Stuart Neale, working together from their studio based at the edge of the Black Mountains in north Monmouthshire.

Pooling their expertise, they produce handwoven carthenni (throws) rooted in traditional Welsh design. Inspiration is drawn from the local landscape and how it alters from season to season.

This is translated in the exploration of colour relationships as checks and stripes, woven in twills to create dynamic ‘colour and weave’ visual effects.

Woven in wool, they favour characterful yarns with knops and flecks of contrasting shades to elevate the impact.

# Wallace Sewell

Wallace Sewell is a UK-based design studio established by Emma Sewell and Harriet Wallace-Jones.

Inspired by the Bauhaus for its aesthetic and design ideology, Wallace Sewell strive to unite craft and manufacturing.

The design process begins with extensive sampling on handlooms, before designs are selected to be put into production at a family-run mill in Lancashire.

Wallace Sewell are particularly well known for their use of colour, structure and yarn in dynamic, geometric formats.

Inspired by paintings, they create individual contemporary fabrics with strikingly bold, asymmetric blocks and stripes of varying scales, which bring together a plethora of elements within one piece.