

Pozia Rahid

REZIA WAHID : WOVEN AIR





feels really silky
especially when the
silk and the feather
is felt (touched together)
you can feel the
similarity.



REZIA WAHID

—
WOVEN AIR

Simon Olding

CRAFTS
STUDY
CENTRE

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by the Crafts Study Centre

Front and back cover: **Topkapi Palace**, spun silk, silk organzine,
merino wool, hand dyed with natural indigo.

Title page: **Sun set in snow 2**, spun silk, silk organzine, merino
wool, hand dyed with cochineal and weld.

Crafts Study Centre

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The shape of things: textiles of Rezia Wahid held at the Crafts
Study Centre.

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F O R E W O R D

David Kay, Project Director, The shape of things

The shape of things is an ambitious and significant national exhibition initiative generously supported by Arts Council England through Grants for the Arts that will explore and consider the relevance of identity, influence and the context of cultural diversity in contemporary crafts.

The shape of things is developed as a partnership formed by a consortium of organisations that is currently expanding as new partners join. The purpose is to commission and invest in the presentation, specific to each venue, of new work from artists working with craft media. The exhibition of woven textiles by Rezia Wahid at the Crafts Study Centre is the first of an intended ten projects to take place between 2007 and 2010.

As well as presenting craft we want to interact the process of commissioning with acquisition for public collections and explore ideas for expanding the market of private buyers. *The shape of things* hopes to support the creative and professional development of artists and other arts professionals through a programme of events. These will provide a forum for critical debate, building a network and constituency of interest in relation to issues of cultural diversity in crafts.

It is especially appropriate that this exhibition marks the visible beginning of *the shape of things* as Rezia Wahid has been an important figure in its development.

The shape of things originated in a review of the opportunity for such an initiative commissioned by Arts Council England, South West which led to a period of research and development to test its viability. Funded by a modest R&D grant from Arts Council England, also supported by Bristol's Museum and Art Gallery, artists Rezia Wahid, Vannetta Seecharan and Takeshi Yasuda took on the challenge of exploratory commissions. Rezia's articulate and thoughtful assessment of her position as an artist, the varied influences on her work and her personal journey to discover its Islamic context made a formative contribution.

Those of us involved in the development of *the shape of things* are grateful to Arts Council England, especially Erica Steer, Crafts Officer, Arts Council England, South West and Jackie Lee, Crafts Officer, Arts Council England, West Midlands for their constant support and guidance. We are also grateful to the Crafts Study Centre for the opportunity to launch the initiative through an exhibition of work by an exceptional artist that will make a positive and significant contribution to the shape of contemporary crafts in Britain.

Steering group members are: Lesley Butterworth, Assistant General Secretary, National Society for Art and Design; Kathy Fawcett, Exhibitions Manager, The City Gallery; Dierdre Figueiredo, Director, Craftspace; Sarah Lloyd, Assistant Curator, Applied Art, Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery; Alnoor Mitha, Director, SHISHA (The International Agency for Contemporary South Asian Crafts and Visual Arts); Simon Olding, Director, Crafts Study Centre.

Craftspace is the Managing Agency, and David Kay is Project Director, of the shape of things.



A R T I S T ' S S T A T E M E N T

I use fine, almost invisible yarns – spun silk, gummed silk – which allow *air* to travel through the cloths. I also use fine merino wool. With the help of air and the combination of fine yarns the cloths move. The *light* from the sun enters the translucent and transparent yarns creating a feeling of *peace* and *tranquillity*.

My work is a celebration *of life, beauty, peace, tranquillity, air, light and seeks to build bridges with the simplicity of fibres, colours, technique and feelings* which are felt within me when I am amongst the natural beauty of this earth. I suppose this can also be a form of escaping the harsh and troubled issues of the world around us. If the audience can feel this than it certainly is a great achievement as my ultimate aim is for people to escape into a beautiful dream, connect with natural light and the feeling of peace.

I design the cloths in order for them to hang in space so that *light* can travel through and create an atmosphere of tranquillity. The work can be enjoyed by walking around it and looking through the different densities of the warp. At the same time I would like my work to be versatile and I leave them free with the unfinished edge – I want them to have a purpose but not be bound to it. I guess this is due to the fact that my work is part of a journey of my life through which I see connections rather than differences. In my travels I am constantly observing and learning. I see connections within different cultures, countries, religions, people, architecture, textiles, art, fashion, landscape and food.



INTRODUCTION

¹ Conversation with Rezia Wahid, August 2007.

Left: *8 Petals*, spun silk, Egyptian cotton, silk organzine and cotton slub, hand dyed with procion dyes.

Rezia Wahid has described herself most recently, and very specifically, as a ‘hand woven textile artist’.¹ There is important content in this description: the reference to material, to techniques, to the labour of craft and to the defining concept of individual artistic practice. The phrase is textually-rich as well as precise. A consideration of Wahid’s emerging body of work (she has exhibited and sold her work professionally since 2002) clearly shows up these preferences. They are bound up with a preference for, and a delight in, understatement; a feel for the absence of weight and the presence of airy grace in her cloths. The work is most effective when one can see the effect of light both in and through the materials. Wahid also insists on a democratic use of textiles. This is so, even when her practise is located at distribution to the high end of a market.

Wahid’s careful and exacting production of new work for her first one person museum exhibition at the Crafts Study Centre in 2007 reveals an artist exploring new artistic ground as well as banking on familiar skills and realisations. The grounding of her work – in lightness, delicacy and the subtle graduation of white-shades – is balanced by a more recent interest in the sharper contrast of intense colour against off-white. The penultimate length of cloth woven for the exhibition, *Sun set in snow*, represents the clearest departure from the earliest, post-Art school, works. These experimental pieces quickly graduated into reticent explorations of cloth of the lightest, finest weight, dependant on their ethereal appeal and the nearly hidden application of sparse decorative

elements; as if Wahid was searching for an essence of woven textile, pure of design and rigorously avoiding any extraneous element.

The more painterly approach of *Sun set in snow* reveals the cumulative effect of Wahid's travelling and her search for visual interest in the landscapes and city scenes of Turkey, Rome, Morocco or Granada, as well as a toughening of her attitude: a feeling that there is a wider social and political dimension to the making of woven textiles. There is also a gathering metropolitan edge to these latest lengths of cloth. Wahid is currently exploring the pattern of her textiles displayed through dance. She has become aware of the sensitivities, risks and opportunities of demonstrating her work in performance as well as in the quieter personalised environment of the studio and specialist retail outlet. *The shape of things: textiles by Rezia Wahid*² is the first widely-advertised opportunity to see the development of her work from the student 'test-pieces' through to the elegant reticence of her first full-length cloths and the most recent works where colour plays as important a role as white.

² *The shape of things: textiles by Rezia Wahid*, Crafts Study Centre, University College for the Creative Arts at Farnham. 25th September 2007 - 5th January 2008.

REZIA WAHID : WOVEN AIR

Right: *Sample* (test piece for *8 Petals*), spun silk, Egyptian cotton, silk organzine and cotton slub, hand dyed with procion dyes.





Left: *Feather*, 100 percent spun silk, hand dyed with procion dyes.

F A R N H A M

³ Rezia Wahid, 'Artist Statement' prepared for the Crafts Study Centre exhibition and printed in full in this monograph, pp 40–41.

⁴ The Institute also ran undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at Epsom. In 2006 the Surrey Institute merged with the Kent Institute of Art and Design and was renamed University College for the Creative Arts.

⁵ Conversation with Rezia Wahid, August 2007.

⁶ Quoted in Emma Tarlo, 'Weaving Air; the textile journey of Rezia Wahid', *Moving Worlds: a journey of transcultural writings*, volume 4, number 2, 2004, p.95.

'...my work is part of a journey of my life through which I see connections rather than differences'.³

Rezia Wahid's undergraduate career started in 1994–95. She took the foundation course at the Chelsea College of Art and Design. Her next intention was to continue with metropolitan study, but a half sense during her interview at Chelsea made her question the commercial emphasis she felt the degree there might have had. In looking for alternative specialist colleges, she applied to The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College, drawn by Farnham's strong reputation in textiles,⁴ and its relaxed campus atmosphere. She felt immediately at home remarking on the positive 'feng shui of the textile department'.⁵ Her time as an undergraduate at Farnham (1995–98) was settled and happy. Wahid has remarked that:

'I missed Bangladesh when I came to London. I had memories of the farm, the river, and the fields. I think I searched for that when I came to Britain. I felt at home in Farnham, surrounded by nature'.⁶

Wahid enjoyed the quieter, market-town atmosphere of Farnham, as well as the natural environment of the campus lying adjacent to open, wooded landscape on the west Surrey-Hampshire county boundary. London, an hour away by train, gave her easy access to National Museum collections and archives (most especially the Victoria and Albert Museum), as well as to her family. She could sense both the city and the country in one environment.

This duality of place, from the very start of her career, has subtly underpinned her creative thinking. Wahid's first year as a textile student, in common with the members of her cohort, was spent exploring both woven and printed textiles. Her personal tutor, Amelia Uden⁷ recalls her 'considerable sensitivity' as a student. Wahid's decision to concentrate on woven rather than printed textiles at the end of her first year was not inevitable. She appreciated (and appreciates still) the more dramatic, painterly effects possible in printed textiles. Wahid had enjoyed, for example, the range of her foundation year, from sculpture to fine art. She did not feel predestined to be a weaver.

She selected a degree in textiles partly because she felt she could always return to fine art; but she was also attracted to the idea of a craft practice as a skill, a 'trade' that had to be intensively learnt. Woven textiles set her tough challenges. She not only wanted to meet the technical demands of the subject, but to surpass them. She faced multiple challenges: the complex interplay of structures; an understanding of the qualities of raw materials and dyes; and space and composition reduced to their essence.

These factors were personally and creatively attractive to her. They would also be intensely demanding in production, and Wahid set herself the challenging task of translating her initial ideas – expressed in tiny samples of woven cloths – onto the larger scale that would be demanded of a professional woven textile artist. But she was compelled to master the loom. Wahid began to work through a repertoire of ideas, enjoying the presentation of exploring image and text in her sketch books, methodically building on a natural facility for materials and systematically developing an aptitude for, and skill at, the

⁷ Amelia Uden was subject leader for woven textiles at this time. She taught at Farnham from 1984–2005. Uden was a student of Marianne Straub's at the Royal College of Art, 1968–71. Examples of Uden's woven textiles are held in the Crafts Council and Crafts Study Centre collections. She is a Trustee of the Crafts Study Centre.

⁸ Ella McLeod 'History of the department part one', in Margaret Bide, *West Surrey College of Art and Design textile graduates 1968–1980: exhibition of current work* (Farnham, 1984), p.6.

loom. The hand manipulation of her chosen and refined natural materials – Chinese and Japanese silks, merino wool, Egyptian cottons, gave her both a powerful sense of direction and a craft-based legitimacy to her practice. She began to sense in her own work the possibilities offered by a particular ethos of woven textiles at Farnham. Ella McLeod, who founded and developed the Department of Textiles at Farnham, expressed this ethos in her article on the history of the Department in 1984:

'From previous workshop experience, and with understanding deepened by research, I saw it to be a school's function to provide, within the self-discipline of a major craft, good simple tools that put the least barrier between the maker and his product: organic raw material which by its intrinsic properties and variability entices and extends his sensibility, causing a search for understanding of it: basic sensitive skills gradually built up, involving time to breathe; and the option of continuity. Then, through constantly experiencing the interaction of idea, means and end, perception grows: ultimately there comes reliance on it as a means by which to steer.

To grow from a need to impress others – or oneself – by one's making (or one's actions), to the discovery of reliable and evolving first-hand inner values, is indeed growth, though often individuals are unaware of such a possibility until it happens to them.

We measured our design ideas for cloth, not against those of Liberty or Heals, but against the pliancy and surface of leaves that we found lovely, the proportions from some growing thing that caught our focus – wing seed flower – and search for the fibre, twist, dye, weave and finish that would embody the essence as the individual would have perceived it'.⁸

Wahid was to develop, at Farnham, a creative engagement with materials, structure and process as a platform for innovation. This gave her the freedom to choose restraint over embellishment, expressing harmony and quiet composition and preferring the power of subtle marks to explosive contrast. Wahid's natural inclination for delicacy and finesse in her materials and the ability to make a scrupulous selection of colours found empathy at Farnham. The demands of simplicity have stayed resolutely with her.

Amelia Uden and her fellow tutors recognised Wahid's aptitude for weave. Her critical need to understand structure and to control the materials on the loom gave her the potential to explore the aesthetic possibilities of reticence. The course introduced her to a view of hand woven textiles as a craft to be discovered in the round. For example, some students had the opportunity to dye their cloths in natural, plant and insect based materials - madder, cochineal, weld and indigo, alongside contemporary dyes and processes, for example.⁸ This approach would have been very familiar to, and indeed was laid down as exemplary by, the pioneers of 20th century craft weavers such as Elizabeth Peacock and Rita Beales. Wahid and her fellow students worked and developed their skills in this environment that had grown out of practices held as absolute by these demanding forbears. This is not to say that Wahid found her studies constrained. She thought internationally as well as locally. Japan's textile tradition became increasingly influential.

This duality is evident in her first production piece, woven in her second year at Farnham. This scarf-shawl *Feather* (appropriate for male or female use) was produced in reticent shades of black and grey. It showed that Wahid could comfortably move onto the larger scale after her first experiments in samples

⁸ See Ethel Mairet, *Vegetable Dyes: being a book of recipes and other information useful to the dyer* (Faber and Faber Ltd, 1944 London, eighth edition). A seminal text for the craft-based woven textile artist.

⁹ Wahid has said “my textile hero is Junichi Arai whose knowledge and understanding of fibres and recreating them is truly amazing.” Quoted in Remona Aly, ‘Dandelion and Chillies’, *emel magazine* March 2006, p.26.

¹⁰ Wahid had also read Emma Tarlo’s book *Clothing matters: dress and identity in India* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) and was attracted to its exposition of the everyday use of cloth and the role clothes play in defining and concealing identity.

¹¹ Ella McLeod was Head of the Department of Textiles at Farnham 1949–73. She was an influential educator and a Leverhulme Research Fellow, researching into education through the crafts. “The Ella McLeod Production Prize was a monetary prize for materials given by Ella for the second-year textile at Farnham that was the most resolved and had personal vision”. Conversation with Amelia Uden, September 2007.

of very small size. Its lustrous and elegant finish sits both within the English studio tradition of woven textiles as well as acknowledging the simple elegance of contemporary Japanese textiles, most especially the studio and commercial work of the celebrated designer and artist Junichi Arai.⁹ Wahid felt an insistent sympathy with these Japanese woven textiles which gained strength through their simplicity; where less was more. She has remarked that:

*“I like to simplify a lot. Japanese work is very abstract and free, very simple, and my own work follows that aesthetic.”*¹⁰

This scarf-shawl (Wahid has successfully made subsequent versions of it) is not typical of her professional output. But it clearly demonstrated a high facility in responding to an external brief. The same is true of an ikat scarf which won the Ella McLeod Production Prize in 1997, during Wahid’s second year at Farnham.¹¹ Although she had been given text books on Japanese ikats as reference material, Wahid found herself drawn more to Indonesian ikats. She prepared for this test piece with her customary diligence in drawing and sketching, finally determining to create an effect of brush strokes on her material (100 percent filament silk). She found a particular sea shell from the Avon banks at Portishead near Bristol, immediately identifying how the warp and the weft would interact on the loom from her observation of the natural merging of colours in the shell itself.

The shell also reminded her of the colours and texture of ikat saris. By the time of her third year of study at Farnham, Wahid was quietly gathering confidence, honing her technical skills, developing her perception and almost seeming to search for a creative break-through, a plan for her own, distinctive aesthetic. She was

involved at this time in the establishment of a group of four Farnham students (all woven textile artists) called Maka. The group committed themselves to ongoing collaboration and joint exhibitions extolling work in a restrained, graceful yet still evocative style, founded on plain weave and the use of natural materials. Maka, for example, exhibited at the Como Gallery, Tokyo in 2003, and most recently as part of the Stroudwater International Textile Festival in Stroud, Gloucestershire in 2005.¹² Maka has been a creative combination of forces, with work by makers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, unified by their interest in stretching the boundaries of innovative fibre manipulation.

Two events helped to settle Wahid in a coherent new direction: one that has sustained her creative output and enabled her to build on her firm foundation of technical ability and well realised designs. The first of these movements of personally significant discovery came after Amelia Uden encouraged Wahid at the beginning of her third year to research the exhibition catalogue of the 1988 Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition *Woven Air*.¹³ Beth Stockley's preface to the catalogue explained that the thesis of the exhibition was:

'to provide the local Bangladeshi community in Spitalfields with a chance to review its own culture and particularly for young Bangladeshis growing up in this country to see a significant expression of their own background'.¹⁴

Wahid - who had managed to secure the very last copy of the catalogue left at the Whitechapel Art Gallery - was in two minds after studying the text and images. She felt no particular enthusiasm for the textiles themselves - their complicated patterns and skilled embroidery seemed almost opposed to her

¹² Maka was a creative combination of woven textile artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds, unified by their interest in innovative fibre work. Maka was given a grant from Arts Council England, South West, through the auspices of the Stroudwater Textile Trust, to support their development at the 2005 Stroud Textile Biennale. The Maka artists are: Rezia Wahid, Tim Parry-Williams, Nana Miyagi and Tazuko Saitoh. The group's title 'Maka' is taken from Nana Miyagi's grandmother's name.

¹³ Ed., Bonaventura, P. and Stockley, B. *Woven Air: the Muslim and Kantha tradition of Bangladesh* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 1988).

¹⁴ Op.cit., p.6.

¹⁵ op.cit., Dr Enamul Hague, *The textile tradition of Bangladesh* p.10.

¹⁶ Conversation with Rezia Wahid August 2007.

own creative yearning for restraint and a minimal use of pattern. What affected her was the metaphorical and conceptual notion of ‘Woven Air’.

In Dr Enamul Hague’s catalogue essay *The textile tradition of Bangladesh*, a historical context to the development of fine cloth is described. In the 16th century, the:

*‘production of the legendary Bhakai muslin received a new impetus... this high quality transparent textile received various poetic names to denote its great beauty and extreme delicacy. Of even greater fineness were the ... shabnam (evening dew), and bafthana (woven air)’.*¹⁵

Wahid had found a new way of thinking about the resonant qualities of cloth, and a sense of a personally significant cultural history. Bafthana cloths offered her a grounding in a Bangladeshi creative heritage, as well as a inspiration to her own contemporary craft practice. She could see that lightness, airy grace, and the elegant use of shades of white in her fine materials, could give her a deeply satisfying means of expressing her chosen aesthetic sensibility, perhaps even her own complex cultural identity. If this research helped Wahid to enrich a personal creative style and give it a new direction of travel, then a more romantic episode of inspiration from nature (always important to her) settled the content of the woven lengths that ensued. Wahid has described how ‘I don’t just have an idea; I have to have a journey and walk into things’.¹⁶

This process happened literally during a spring country walk near Farnham in 1997. Wahid found a field covered in dandelions. Here was impossible lightness and moments of idiosyncratic delicacy in the natural world around her. Here was the sensitivity of lightness and movement that deeply motivated

her practice. Wahid set out to recreate that extraordinary delicacy in her cloths, 'to create a fabric that captures air'.¹⁷

¹⁷ *ibid.*

She was to find these twin tools of research (one text-based, one based in nature) the evidence for a compelling artistic direction. She had identified an approach that created an intense personal discipline in which to work. This approach now underpins all of her work as a professional practitioner, as well as it had enriched her most advanced student work; this of such quality and individuality that she was awarded a First Class degree from The Surrey Institute of Art and Design in 1998.

The excellence of her student work was seen in a silk and cotton length such as **8 Petals**, inspired by her affection for the Surrey countryside. Autumn leaves and white roses are evoked by eight falling petals of forming a border of the material. The edges, as usual in Wahid's lengths, are left unfinished. In this work, as in others, light is a vital factor, creating shade and patterns of its own as it is reflected against the subtle folds of the fine silks, cottons and wools and additionally passing through the cloth to add to this ethereal effect. A collection of scarves called **Tiraz** based on the studying of different flowers from Kensington Gardens, and woven on a table loom, also developed this notion of cloth capturing the spirit of the open air. Wahid began explicitly to realise the look, feel and symbolism of the work she wanted to create. She briefly considered further research, studying for a Masters' degree; but making new work in a studio environment was more important. So she returned to London to establish herself as a hand woven textile artist and to combine this career with employment as a secondary school art and design and textile technology teacher.

L O N D O N

¹⁸ Conversation with
Rezia Wahid, August
2007.

Wahid's return to London was accompanied by the imperative to earn a living, the imperative to continue weaving, and to succeed as an artist selling her work in respected professional environments. She spent a short spell first working as a design assistant for a small textile company. She began her teaching career after gaining a PGCE in Art and Design at secondary school level at the Institute of Education, University of London (1999-2000). She teaches at the Warwick School for Boys in Walthamstow, East London. Here, Wahid introduced textiles to the school curriculum as part of the Design Technology foundation subject. In this innovation, Wahid has succeeded in daily proof that textiles have a significant place for her students in everyday life. She has answered the conundrum 'Why do you need to give time to making something when it's cheap and convenient to buy it' by exploring creativity and its craft expression both for their own sakes, and for the sake of variety and usefulness. Her determination to succeed in the school environment (not always a comfortable place for artistic expression), and the aptitude of her own students, have led to notable successes, for example in a 2006 exhibition of Warwick School's textile work at the Brunei Gallery. Wahid finds that her teaching helps her to explain very sincerely how:

'cloth integrates everything. It's a necessity for us all'. ¹⁸

There has been no let up to Wahid's determination to succeed as a woven textile artist, despite the extensive and time-consuming demands on her as

a teacher. She has consistently produced work for sale and exhibition after graduation in 1998, in London, Japan as well as on one previous occasion in Farnham¹⁹ (at the Farnham Maltings Arts Centre). Her woven lengths have all exemplified the search for a translucent, ethereal simplicity, with the fine structure of her cloths, always in subtle shades of white, set off either by an elegant series of geometric marks or edging (in indigo or the palest of blues) sometimes reminiscent of leaves or petals. There are other motifs, too, deriving not from the natural world, but from the architecture and landscape of travel.

A visit to Turkey led to an interest in the use of blue in ceramic tiles, especially in the Mosques of Istanbul, where layers of gradually differentiated shades of white could be compared to her own textile output and interests. The atmosphere of the Mosque is an important inspiration for Wahid's work, offering her the revered sense of serenity and tranquillity she aspires for both in her creative work and in her own spiritual life. Wahid began to express her creative thinking in 'word-poems' in her sketch and notebooks, arranging a pattern of significant words in individualistic sequences across these private pages. Turkey was also important to Wahid, because it helped her to develop her own sense of spirituality, as well as encouraging a deeper (and ongoing) meditation on her own personal identity. She also began to reflect again on Muslim art and culture, and its expression and meaning for her as both a British and Muslim citizen. She remarked that at this time she felt motivated by "light, the essence of a Muslim artist".²⁰

She draws with equal intensity on the theme of light whether reflected through the English countryside or a Mosque in Istanbul. In Rome, Wahid first bought

¹⁹ *Yatra: a journey*
The exhibition was also shown at the Riverhouse, Walton-on-Thames, January to March 2003.

²⁰ Conversation with Rezia Wahid, August 2007.

²¹ Wahid remarked “I’m not a public-eye person; it’s the hearing that is important to me”.

²² Quoted in Aly p.25.

linen thread, and found herself transfixed by the water-like, marble-like blue of a Mosque there. Now she introduced a yellow-red into her textiles, and began to explore a size of cloth shorter than her previous lengths (appropriate for wall-hangings or room dividers). This new length was also symbolically, as well as creatively, significant. Wahid began to make individual lengths the size of the hijab, enough to cover, comfortably, the face from forehead to the edge of the neck. Wahid admired this size of cloth both for its spiritual significance but also for its practical adaptability. It could express Islamic or Western modes of wearing according to the personal choice of the wearer.

Creating work that intimately reflected her personal cultural heritage and her developing cultural and social interests in the uses and presentations of cloth has engaged Wahid since 2005. This was a significant year in terms of external recognition, too. Just seven years after leaving college, Wahid was awarded the MBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours in June 2005 ‘for services to Art in London’. Accepting the award gave her some cause for thought. Wahid is a very modest person, and does not seek out a limelight.²¹ Some around her were critical of this ‘engagement’ with an ‘Imperialist’ honour. Wahid, however, strongly felt that her MBE should be seen both as an expression of support for the craft of weaving, and enabling to communicate ‘something positive in an Islamic context and in the multi-cultural society that currently exists’.²²

Wahid was also invited by David Kay, the facilitator of a major new craft initiative *The shape of things* to join a small team of selected craft artists to create new work, reflecting the dynamics of craft, from emerging and established

makers from diverse cultural and ethnic communities in England. Wahid made a length called *The five prayers* for the starting point of the project, a forum held in Bristol exploring with the artists and curators issues such as influences and identities, building up a critical and reflective context for the series of exhibitions and events planned from 2007-10. Other makers in the shape of things development phase included Takeshi Yasuda and Vannetta Seecharran. Wahid's exhibition under the banner of *the shape of things* at the Crafts Study Centre is the launch exhibition of the three-year programme, facilitated by a major grant from Arts Council England, with partner exhibitions planned for a range of museum and galleries running craft programmes in England.

The shape of things commission has had a dominating effect on Wahid's output since 2005. She has set herself, in accepting the offer of the exhibition at the Crafts Study Centre, the daunting task of producing a new portfolio of lengths especially for the show. Wahid has produced this work in a studio at Cockpit Arts, located in Deptford, which she shares with her sister Fathema (she also trained at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design at Farnham), who designs and makes highly coloured printed textiles in complete contrast to Rezia's minimalist style. Wahid's steely determination to meet this latest challenge has been remarkable. She has fitted studio time around her extensive teaching commitments, working late evenings and holidays at the loom in Deptford (involving, in itself, extensive daily journeys across London). She has, if anything, increased her workload by additional exhibition and presentation commitments, although plans for a further involvement with the Maka group have been temporarily put on hold.

²³ Sanders had previously seen Wahid's textiles at the Yatra exhibition at the Farnham Maltings in 2003. Sanders presented *The Art of Integration* in order to capture 'a spirit of Island in Britain, featuring a rare collaboration of contrasting styles which represent Islamic and spiritual art through photography, fabric and spoken word.' Rezia Wahid was joined by 'spoken word artists Poetic Pilgrimage... and Urban Folklorists from the award-winning Khayaal Theater Company' *The Art of Integration* press release, 8 August 2007 www.krossarts.com/article.cfm/id/184892

²⁴ Conversation with Rezia Wahid, August 2007.

²⁵ Wahid started wearing the hijab herself in 2001, one month after September 11th. She noted that at the time 'people saw it as a political gesture but I see it as a natural part of my spiritual journey'. Quoted in Tarlo, p.98.

In June 2007, Wahid was given the opportunity to present a range of her textile work (shawls, scarves and full lengths) in the context of a dance-fashion performance. This was a performance that precisely met Wahid's interest in the way cloth is seen in motion, the opposite effect of the woven length framed on the wall. She was commissioned for this presentation at the Rich Mix, London by the photographer Peter Sanders. Wahid's textiles were shown in a dance performance at the opening of Sanders' exhibition *The Art of Integration*.²³ Wahid, who enjoys dancing, was closely involved in the artistic direction of the dance performance, which set original movements to reveal the airy lightness of the cloths reminiscent, perhaps of the Surrey field of dandelions floating in the breeze as well as their appearance under intense urban stage lighting in the context of a fashion show.

This performance, integrating dance music and cloth, was delivered by Wahid's Laban Centre student friends, and her aim was to find a new means of expressing both the characteristics of her materials and 'to celebrate British craft and British integration'.²⁴ The show had both cultural and creative motivations, but it also set its own challenges, with ironically, some overt criticism that her female performers did not wear the hijab.²⁵

C O N C L U S I O N

Wahid's production of new work for her first solo museum exhibition at the Crafts Study Centre has seen a gradual development of her imagery, and a new interest in a bolder and more emphatic use of colour. A length called *Sun set in snow*, deploys a more expressive area of muted orange and yellows. This length was produced after Wahid's visit to Morocco and Granada in 2006, and evokes a view of the mountains from Alhambra, with the red-orange sun setting revealing intense colours melting into the snow. This work is, perhaps, Wahid's first 'painting' on a textile and her preparatory full-size drawing for the piece could also be seen as a sketch for a larger painting. The work develops Wahid's long-term interest in the feeling and texture of fabric. Indeed, Wahid notes that 'the loom gives me a canvas, not just a structure'.²⁶ *Sun set in snow* recalls Wahid's earlier interests in fine art practice in her foundation year at Chelsea, and her own promise to herself that she could always 'return to painting' after her degree in woven textiles.

Rezia Wahid's woven textiles have, in a short space of time, revealed her to the craft artist (a 'hand woven textile artist' in her own preferred phrase) with a distinctive range of work; her cloths emphasise lightness and the effect of light as it passes through the open structure of the woven fabric, or reflects from, and within its white folds, touched by fragments of colour. These works recall Islamic, Japanese and British craft textile traditions, but set any such references into a contemporary idiom and usage. The fine bafthana fabrics of traditional Bangladeshi manufacture, and the jamdhami technique where motifs such as leaf patterns are inlaid into

²⁶ Conversation with Rezia Wahid, August 2007.

²⁷ Conversation with Inge Cordsen, September 2007.

the muslin cloth, are acknowledged in Wahid's body of work. But there is, too, a reflection of the essence and even the scale of British craft weaving expressed, say, in work by Rita Beales, Elizabeth Peacock and Jean Milne. This intense sensitivity to materials is also seen in the work of contemporary woven textile artists such as Sue Hartree. Wahid's interests and her collaborative work in the Maka group also strongly connect her to Japanese contemporary textile developments. Inge Cordsen notes, for example, that 'Rezia Wahid's work blends and integrates elegantly with a contemporary Japanese aesthetic'.²⁷

Wahid's work is intensely personal. It communicates instantly her need to express lightness in cloth and light seen through it and within it. Her contemporary approach uses imagery drawn from the natural world, evoking the spiritual calm of the tile of the Mosque. Her textile lengths are both poetic and practical. If her cloths are 'political' or if they have, by recent events been seen to be reviewed in a social and political context, then they are graceful and tough enough to hold their own. Wahid's woven textiles seem to position cloth in a world of hope for moments of subtle beauty. Their usefulness is democratic: a cloth may be used as a scarf or a hijab, neither one less or more important. These are cloths that may aid warmth or prayer.

Rezia Wahid's signature cloths are graceful, translucent hangings expressing the symbolic attribute of *bafthana*, 'woven air'. Her work is always restrained and minimalist. But in the quiet sway of her silk, wool and cotton hangings, there is a deep underpinning belief in the ability of hand woven cloth to induce the moment of spiritual and reflective calm, an oasis of beauty in a sometimes troubled world.

Soft and smooth
- Petal observations.

TRANSPARENT

light

"WOVEN AIR"

shine

simple

Air and light passing through = transparent
Spaced and crammed = Tone?

subtle

TONE



Left: *Topkapi Palace*, spun silk, silk organzine, merino wool, hand dyed with natural indigo.

Right: *Ikat scarf*, spun silk and filament silk, hand dyed with procion dyes.



a beautiful world
a saree a world
a country x a
a feeling of side her
a feather of a love
a field pull a
a natural light
a peaceful place
a grand father at prayer
a cloth in air
a smell a
a dandelion's
a catalogue a
a tranquil
a shrine
a mosque
a celebration

Right: *Sun set in snow 1*,
spun silk, silk organzine,
merino wool, hand dyed
with cochineal and weld.





Left: **Sample** (test piece for **8 Petals**), spun silk, Egyptian cotton, silk organzine and cotton slub, hand dyed with procion dyes.

REZIA WAHID : WOVEN AIR

Right: *The Hearts*, spun silk, silk organzine, merino wool, hand dyed with natural indigo.





Left: *Mosque in Rome*,
spun silk, silk organzine,
merino wool, linen, hand
dyed with procion and
natural dyes.

Right: *Dandelions*,
Egyptian cotton, silk
organzine, fine spun silk,
hand dyed with procion
dyes.





Left: *Sun set in snow 5*,
spun silk, silk organzine,
merino wool, hand dyed
with cochineal and weld.

Right: *Sun set in snow 2*,
spun silk, silk organzine,
merino wool, hand dyed
with cochineal and weld.





Dance performance at the opening of *The Art of Integration*, at the Rich Mix, London, June 2007.

REZIA WAHID : WOVEN AIR



CURRICULUM VITAE

Rezia Wahid MBE

EDUCATION

- 1994-95: Foundation in Art and Design, Chelsea College of Art and Design
-
- 1995-98: BA(Hons) Woven Textiles First Class, The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College, Farnham
-
- 1999-2000: PGCE in Secondary Art and Design, Institute of Education, University of London
-

EXHIBITIONS

- 1998: *The Cloth Show* – New Designer Award, Business Design Centre, London
-
- 1999: Textile Exchange Exhibition, Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts, Japan
Society of Designer Craftsman – Annual Winter Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
-
- 2000: PGCE Exhibition with countermarch and weaving demonstration/workshop, Institute of Education, University of London
-
- 2002: *Designer Crafts 2002*, Mall Galleries, London
Best of British Islam Festival 2002, ArRum, London
-
- 2003: *Yatra - A journey*, a collaborative exhibition, Riverhouse, Walton-on-Thames and Farnham Maltings
Designer Crafts 2003, Mall Galleries, London
Summer Show, Livingstone Studio, Hampstead, London
Maka Textile Collaboration, Como Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
Crafts / All Set for Christmas, Ropestore – The Studio Gallery, Gloucestershire
-

REZIA WAHID : WOVEN AIR

- 2004: *Islam in Europe*, Open Trade Fayre, Millennium Plain, Norwich
Globe Souk, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London
Designer Crafts, Oxo Tower Gallery, South Bank, London
-
- 2005: *Language of Materials* - Maka Textile Collaboration, Stroud, Gloucestershire
- 2006: Charity exhibition, Cancer Research, Birmingham
-
- 2007: Ethical fashion show, Fair Trade, The Albany
Woven Air Cloths with Dance - Art of Integration by Peter Sanders, The Rich Mix, London
-

A W A R D S

-
- 1997: The Ella McLeod Production Prize
-
- 1998: New Designer Award, TexPrint 1998
-
- 1999: Awarded Licentiate with Distinction, Society of Designer Craftsmen; Invited to exhibit at Annual Winter Exhibition
-
- 2002: Elected to Full Membership, Society of Designer Craftsmen
-
- 2004: Alhambra Award for Excellence in Art, *Muslim News*
-
- 2005: Commission and Award - *The shape of things*, Arts Council England, South West
MBE for Services to Art in London
-
- 2007: *The shape of things: textiles* by Rezia Wahid solo show at the Crafts Study Centre, Farnham
-

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www.woven-air.com

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Simon Olding, September 2007



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