



"Diamond-Square Algorithm Four Extrapolations" by Heather MacKenzie is one of the works on display at the Bird Island Cultural Centre through the month of March.
Shelby Lindrud / West Central Tribune

WEAVING THE CODES OF LIFE INTO TEXTILES

Minneapolis artist showcases unconventional art style at Bird Island Cultural Centre

By Shelby Lindrud
West Central Tribune

Bird Island

One might not think there is a lot in common between weaving and computers. But, in fact, they both use very simple base ingredients — 0s and 1s for computers and threads for weaving — to create very complex creations. Textile artist Heather MacKenzie, of Minneapolis, has merged those two components into her art.

"Weaving is a very systematic pursuit," MacKenzie said. "In part, that is how my mind works."

For the month of March, MacKenzie is showcasing several of her pieces in an exhibit at the Bird Island Cultural Centre titled "Textile in Code." The pieces, ranging in size, color and material, span a number of years and different themes of Mackenzie's art.

"They come from a few bodies of work I feel have resonance. And maybe that resonance is just in me and interests I gravitate towards," MacKenzie said.

For the love of math and weaving

MacKenzie said she has always enjoyed math and computers.

"I was definitely a nerd growing up," MacKenzie said. "I loved math and I was in the computer science club in school."

Her private high school in Michigan also offered her the chance to use her creative side through a tremendous art program, including a loom. MacKenzie, who did art crafts with her parents, was able to start weaving at 15, and a new passion was created.

"Weaving brought in a lot of mathematics that I already loved," MacKenzie said.

She attended Brown University where she earned her bachelor's in visual arts. But it wasn't until she received a fellowship to travel and learn weaving in the West Africa country of Ghana that MacKenzie said she really found her calling.

While the United States has a rich handicraft history, weaving is woven into the culture in other nations. In Ghana, as well as India, Iceland and France where MacKenzie was also able to study and create art, she learned how weaving and textiles can be more than just pretty, but have much deeper and complex meanings.

"It really is part of the world, embedded in the political landscape," MacKenzie said.

The relationship between weaving and computers became even more realized for



Contributed / Rebecca Lawrence

Heather MacKenzie, a textile artist from Minneapolis, works on a piece of art. MacKenzie has studied, taught and woven across the globe, and now has a show at the Bird Island Cultural Centre.

MacKenzie while she was earning her Master of Fine Arts in fiber and material studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There, she first was able to try a computer-assisted loom.

MacKenzie still does all the weaving by hand, but most of the preparation work for her designs is done in the Photoshop software program. She enjoys creating on these looms so much she is getting her own this summer, perhaps one of the first in the state.

"That really changed my mind on what cloth could be, what textile could mean, and made a very direct connection for me in my mind between weaving and computers," MacKenzie said.

A process of creation

MacKenzie doesn't have just one way she creates her art. Sometimes she has a specific weaving in mind; other times it is a theme or thought that she wants to build a show around.

"It is often a very slow progression," MacKenzie said. "It is a lot of thinking, a lot of writing, a lot of researching, digging in."

MacKenzie's pieces deal with varied, complex and even controversial issues and themes such as gender, sexuality, class and geography. She wants her pieces to show how humanity has woven itself into many different shapes to try and fit into a box, but also the exact opposite. Humans can create many codes and systems that allow a person to thrive, either individually or in a larger group.

"I am much more interested in complicated things," MacKenzie said.

A theme MacKenzie has dived into extensively is queerness, a topic to which she has a personal connection. A few of her pieces in the Bird Island show have that woven into their meaning. In her explanation on how she represents queerness in her art, MacKenzie said she loves to create weavings that illustrate not fitting into a "normal" box.

"To be queer, behave queerly, peer through a queer lens is in simple terms to not fit neatly into a box, and might mean using the box for a very different purpose than what may have been intended," MacKenzie said. "Rewriting the code, the meaning."

MacKenzie's love of complicated themes also flows into how she weaves. Even her most two-dimensional pieces are intricate in their own ways. The creation of the actual piece can take MacKenzie in many different directions. She has learned to try to be patient, especially with her more complicated pieces, because sometimes she won't know how a piece will turn out until it comes off the loom.

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Heather MacKenzie weaves on a wooden loom. She uses a variety of different looms in her work.