

SPOTLIGHT



PHOTO BY CAMERON TAYLOR-BROWN

Cameron warps the loom as she gets ready for her demonstrations at *Leap Before You Look*.

Weaving on a Black Mountain Loom

BY CAMERON TAYLOR-BROWN

In 2016, the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, California, invited me to assemble a vintage four-shaft counterbalance loom, design an original textile, and give weaving demonstrations as part of the traveling exhibit *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*. The loom had been used at the Black Mountain College weaving workshop established and run by Anni Albers. My introduction to this very special Shuttle-Craft Practical Loom was seeing it in pieces on the floor of the museum.

This storied loom is in the collection of the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, and prior to the exhibit, had been beautifully restored by Mikkel Hansen, a retired architect and avid weaver who lives in Black Mountain, North Carolina. The loom was sent from the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston completely disassembled with all the parts individually wrapped and placed in customized shipping cartons in the manner befitting a rare art object. It was a bit nerve-racking to carefully reassemble these precious bits and turn them back into a working loom. I called up Mikkel Hansen, and he gave me the pep talk I needed—yes, this loom is now in a museum collection, *but it is a piece of equipment and meant to be used*.

My challenge was to assemble the loom plus design a fabric that would not only fit in with the other textiles on display but also be easy to weave so I could talk with visitors while treadling and throwing the shuttle. Originally, I designed the piece as a warp stripe with a simple repeating weft design. That concept quickly changed as *Leap Before You Look* featured several performances of Merce Cunningham choreography set to music by John Cage, where the interaction between the two was deliberately random. The music and the dancing were in the same gallery where I was weaving, and in response, I introduced a random-weft element into the design: a yarn with multiple colors that shifted gradually as I wove. I didn't preplan where to insert this element, introducing it in the spirit of Cunningham and Cage.

Weaving this fabric on a loom used by Anni Albers and her students was a powerful and moving experience for me. With every throw of the shuttle and changing of the shed, I was aware of the profound gift the Hammer Museum had given to me and to the many people who came to the gallery



Above: Cameron's finished project. PHOTO BY GEORGE BOE



Top right: Cameron demonstrates weaving as she gives her lecture. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HAMMER MUSEUM



Jenny Yurshansky and Cameron threading the loom as they get ready for Cameron's demonstrations at *Leap Before You Look*. PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMERON TAYLOR-BROWN

demonstrations. While showing how actual woven cloth was constructed, I also spoke with the audience about Black Mountain, the Bauhaus, design concepts, and most importantly, Anni and Josef Albers.

Anni Albers and her husband, Josef, have influenced my design and teaching since my college days. Reviewing their histories and writings for the exhibit reminded me of how central an influence they continue to be. Anni Albers, artist, writer, philoso-

pher, master weaver, and founder of the weaving workshop at Black Mountain College, had great respect for "materials and processes" and embraced original design in weaving. Josef Albers established the Black Mountain College art department and taught all Black Mountain students to "see" the arts as the center of the curriculum. At Black Mountain, the couple continued to advocate the Bauhaus philosophy that all art media are of equal merit. This rejection of

the art versus craft hierarchy continues to resonate and challenges traditional thinking to this day. Josef Albers also wrote the seminal book on color theory, *Interaction of Color*, which remains the basis of many college color theory classes. To my mind, Anni and Josef Albers are the "power couple" of twentieth-century design and education, a legacy celebrated in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*.