



With a new show about to open at Farnham's Crafts Study Centre, Ismini Samanidou tells Nicole Swengley how photography informs her textiles. Portrait by Tina Hillier

MOVING PICTURES

Running your hand over Ismini Samanidou's woven fabrics feels radically different from touching standard textiles. That's because they mimic – quite literally – such surfaces as old wallpaper fragments, a mossy bank or peeling walls. So strong is the relation between the physical and material surfaces that they can even conjure the impression of a stream or clouds.

'I'm fascinated by surfaces,' Samanidou enthuses when we meet at her shared studio in north London. 'I take a pebble or a leaf or a handful of sand. Weaving its textural qualities into a fabric makes me understand the material better because I analyse it, extract information and make it into something new.'

Just how tactile – and glamorous – this creative approach can be is revealed at an exhibition at the

Crafts Study Centre, where her intricate fabrics replicating plant structures or running water or Siberia's frozen plains are paired with the photographs that inspired them. A new series, accompanied by sketches and mood-boards, explores clouds-as-textiles with fabric samples 'intentionally left unfinished to indicate work in progress'.

For anyone unfamiliar with the expressive possibilities of textiles, it's an eye-opener. The Crafts Study Centre's director, Professor Simon Olding, describes her as an 'investigative weaver, pressing the boundaries of practice and unafraid of technical challenge in her search for the most fitting, elegant and expressive outcome of an idea.' Adding that he 'wanted to capitalise on her aptitude for work in differing fields – digital, collaborative, photography-based – and in differing

scales, from huge site-specific pieces to minute and precious wall-hangings.'

Samanidou's one-off designs and limited editions are woven with a mix of linen, cotton, wool, silk, metallic threads and paper. As if interpreting a foreign language, the translation of the physical world into textiles has been her signature style for several years. Attempting this with intangible objects such as clouds is a new departure though. 'I'm looking at surfaces on land, water and air,' she says. 'Even with the more abstract pieces I try to get a narrative going. The textiles might reference a place or – like the clouds – are unspecific and more about change and shifting moments of time.'

Her new work reflects the many changes in her own life. Samanidou grew up in Athens within a scientific family (her father was a surgeon) and ini-

tially wanted to be a vet. However, a teenage interest in photography led to a wider fascination with art and design. 'Photography made me look at my travels and experiences in a different, more focused way,' she says. So when a schoolteacher suggested applying to Camberwell College of Arts she leapt at the chance. And it was on her foundation course in 1996 that textiles first grabbed her attention. 'I was intrigued by the process as much as the colours and textures,' she says. 'I liked the idea of working within a tight frame-work in contrast to the freedoms of painting.'

This methodical approach proved an epiphany while studying Textile Design at Central Saint Martins. 'During the first year's Print, Knit & Weave course we were taught to set up a loom with the warp and weft,' she recalls. 'Counting the

threads per centimetre to calculate the density of fabric is like doing a mathematical equation. When you realise you've done it right, it's hugely satisfying. I had a eureka moment when I understood the process. Once I understood the logic behind it, I fell in love with weaving. Orchestrating loose threads to create something entirely new felt magical, and although I didn't feel I was particularly good at it I was hungry to learn more.'

Another breakthrough came when she began using her photographs as textural references. Experimenting with surfaces and structures, she developed layered pieces that opened up into 3D structures for her graduation project. One sold to a private collector and the college bought another.

It wasn't all about one-off art pieces though. Prior to a masters course in Constructed Textiles

Above: Samanidou in her studio
Opposite: Water, cotton, linen, silk, paper and metallic threads, 2008

at the Royal College of Art she spent eight months as an in-house weaver for the boutique textile producer Salt. 'We were making bespoke window blinds, so I learned how to make absolutely precise edges and selvages,' she says. Still, she found the industry-based projects attempted in her first RCA year a 'great challenge'. By the second year, however, her portfolio work was already attracting attention. As one of two RCA students picked by the British company George Spencer, she spent a month exploring textile techniques in Guatemala. 'I learned a lot about structure and was out photographing peeling walls every day,'





Clockwise from above: *Wallflower* (detail), cotton, silk, linen, wool, paper, metallic threads, 2008; *Wallflower* (detail); *Ismini Textile*, design licenced for George Spencer Designs, cotton, paper, 2003; *Spoon with shadow*, Samanidou and Sharon Blakey, made for *Pairings*



she says. 'I was on a quest to make fabrics that looked like my images.' One 'peeling wall' fabric, *Ismini*, was produced by George Spencer in 2003 and remains in its collection.

Everything finally gelled when Samanidou began working with a technician on the RCA's computerised jacquard loom. 'We scanned my photos into the computer software and I used the images like a map to apply various weave structures in the coloured areas. It was a very analytical way of working, and gave me an insight into how I could develop things in the future.'

One of the wall-hangings created for her RCA graduation project was bought by National Grid Transco's collection, following its sponsorship of a competition that she won. Harsh reality struck, however, when a visitor to her graduation show

asked her to make fabrics for a domestic screen. 'I had no access to a jacquard machine after leaving the RCA so I lost the commission,' says Samanidou. 'I tried everywhere but no mill would let me work the way I wanted – actually being present during the weaving process and working intuitively at the loom while stopping and starting the machine.'

During her mission to access a jacquard loom she worked as a studio assistant with the weave and design partnership Wallace Sewell. Then, hearing that University College Falmouth had purchased a loom, she successfully applied for the Crafts Council's Next Move residency scheme in 2004 and uprooted to Cornwall. 'I didn't know anyone there but just thought I had to go for it,' she says. As the college had no technician she took on this role in addition to teaching. 'It was a very

steep learning curve,' she recalls. 'Jacquard looms can be quite scary – people have lost their fingers using them – but once I'd mastered it I felt I could make anything I wanted.'

Samanidou's efforts were rewarded by her first big commission that year – a wall-hanging for the Worshipful Company of Weavers' office (now in the V&A Textile Collection) inspired by images of rust enamel. 'They'd never previously commissioned a jacquard-woven piece – normally the work is hand-loomed – so it really boosted my confidence,' she says. A further fillip came in 2006 with her successful application for a Crafts Council Development Award and an Art for Offices commission for a textile wall-panel for law firm Allen & Overy, in a new Norman Foster building in London. The triptych's design motifs, inspired



SPoon PHOTO: BEN BLACKALL | ALL TEXTILE IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

by Samanidou's photographs of feathergrass, are a reference to the building's roof-garden.

Increasingly adventurous in her approach she made a fabric-covered screen (in collaboration with upholsterer Richard Hooper), its weave recreating the surfaces of 18th century wallpaper and tapestry at Godolphin House, near Helston, for the Crafts Council's *Hidden Art Curated* exhibition. Her experimentation reached its apogee when she was selected to exhibit at the Jerwood Space, winning the Jerwood Contemporary Makers Award.

Her Jerwood proposal followed a visit to North Carolina's Oriole Mill, where jacquard looms can be hired for art projects. The three-metre wide loom sparked the idea of creating an all-fabric 'room' and the result was *Timeline*, a large-scale 3D installation which maps out the character and

history of the Jerwood Space site from the 17th century to today. Originally displayed in London and at Edinburgh's Dovecot Studios, this hugely ambitious piece is currently in storage but surely deserves permanent museum space.

Exhibitions, however, are invariably temporary, and Samanidou is now pursuing a variety of paths. Following a nine-week British Council residency in Bangladesh in 2010, she bought a hand-loom and has begun creating research-based pieces for development into fabrics for fashion and interiors companies in the US and Europe. She mentions some impressively big names, then calls me later to ask me not to mention them as brands like these are notoriously keen to protect their sources.

She enjoys the contrast provided by this way of working and has returned to London to focus



Clockwise from left: *Timeline* (detail), made for *Jerwood Contemporary Makers*, paper, cotton, linen, silk, 3 x 16 m, 2009; *Woven Wood*, collaboration with Gary Allson, CNC milled honeycomb experiments in oak, 2008; *Wisteria*, (detail), inspired by wisteria plant from Godolphin House, 2006



on similar opportunities. 'I want to "apply" the work more,' she says. 'I feel I need to take a more realistic approach which could mean working with interior designers on site-specific pieces or with product designers.' Showing her textiles at the Crafts Study Centre is a key way to communicate this message. 'I hope it will encourage people to look at weaving in a different way, and give them a sense of the possibilities of these textiles,' she says.

It seems we should be looking beyond those fascinating surfaces after all. *'Topography: Recording Place – Mapping Surface' is at the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Falkner Road, Farnham, Surrey, until 22 September 2012. For tour dates, see Crafts Guide. www.cac.ucreative.ack.uk.*