



Photo: Lefteris Sotiropoulos

Above: Ismini Samanidou

Facing page: *Forest*, fabric sample by Ismini Samanidou woven on a computerised jacquard loom using viscose and metallic threads

BORN TO WEAVE

Young designer **Ismini Samanidou** has a rare ability: to create woven textiles that are snapped up by the fabric industry and individual works of art, both using a tool of mass-production, the jacquard loom. **Lesley Jackson** spoke to her about her latest commission for a Norman Foster building in London

In August 2003, shortly after completing her MA in Constructed Textiles at the Royal College of Art, Ismini Samanidou returned to her native Greece to mount an installation called *The Revenge of the Spider* on the island of Kea. The venue was a disused enamel factory, once a hive of human activity, now derelict and colonised by chickens and goats. Using the dilapidated buildings as a framework, Ismini wove a giant freeform spider's web from silk thread. "The inspiration derives from my own heritage – Greek mythology," she explains, alluding to the myth of Arachni, who was transformed into a spider by the goddess Athena (the inventor of weaving) in a fit of jealous pique at the girl's weaving prowess. "A curse was laid on Arachni to weave beautiful webs for ever, which would always be destroyed," recounts Ismini. "Being a weaver myself, the myth made me want to undo the curse. When my web was completed I was amazed to see a spider beginning to spin her web on it!"

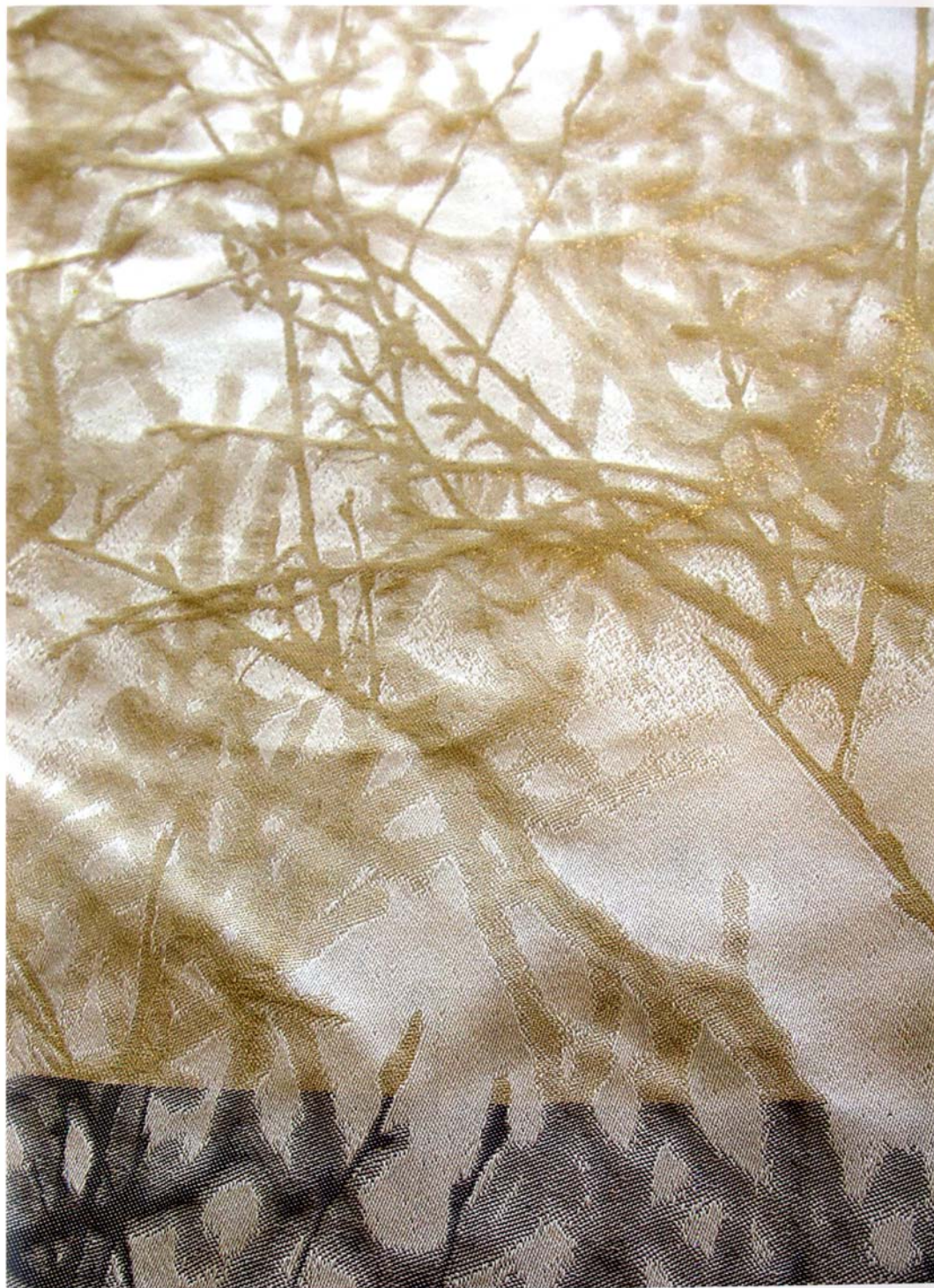
Ismini's enthusiasm for textiles is infectious. For her, one senses, weaving is much more than an expression of creative aptitude, more even than a professional vocation, it is her destiny. Her latest work, a triptych of three large jacquard-woven panels called *Feather Grass Scape* for the offices of Allen & Overy in the new Norman Foster-designed extension to Spitalfields Market, embodies her belief that textiles have special powers. "In Greece women used to stitch their dowries with red silk thread to protect

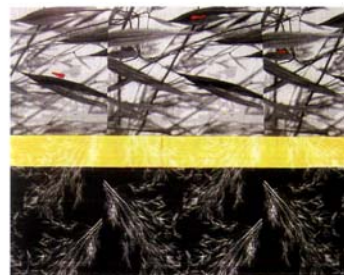
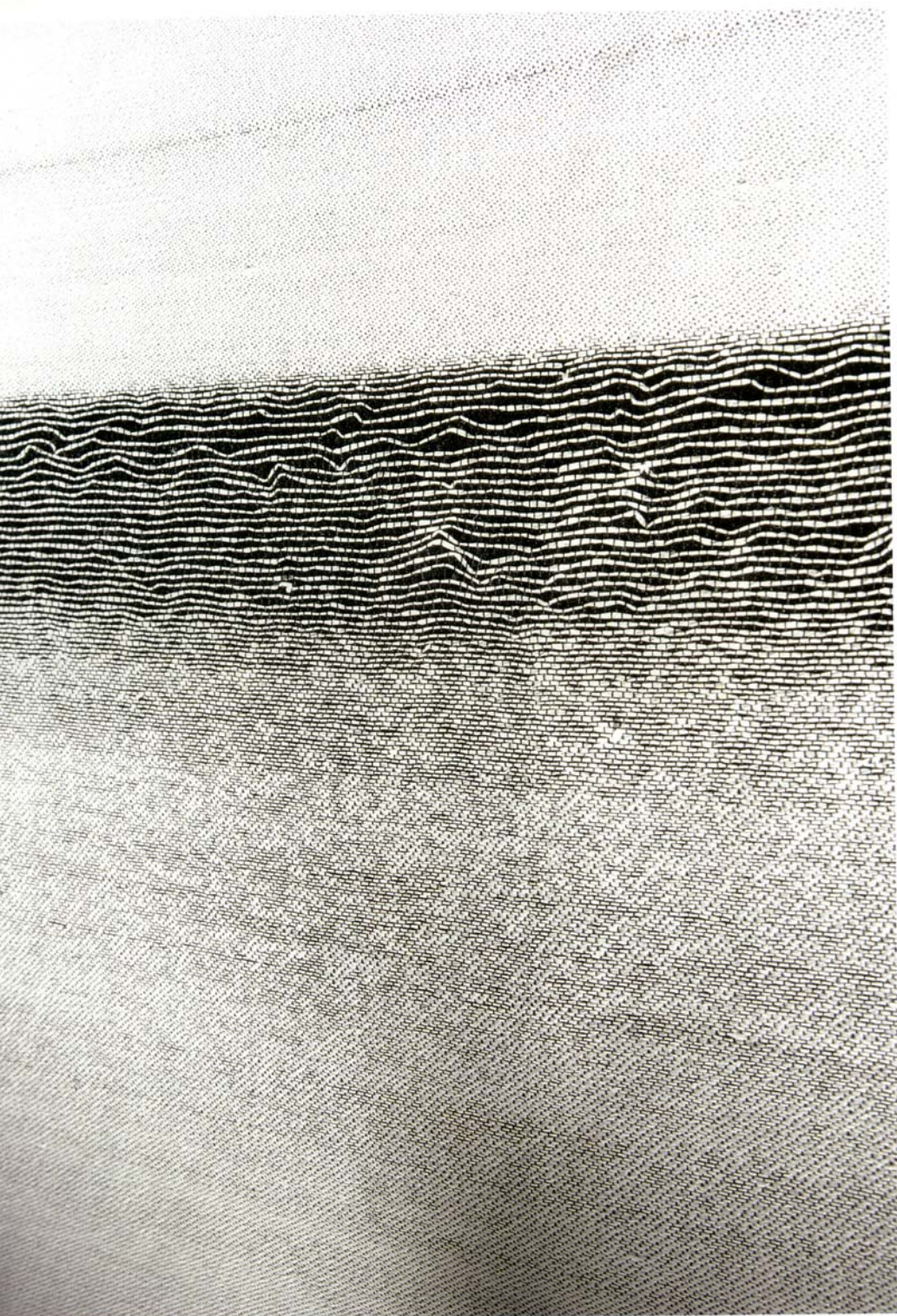
them from the evil eye," she points out. "I have hand-stitched over areas of the finished textile pieces with red silk thread so the hangings and the buildings will be protected too."

Spitalfields, of course, is an area with a rich textile heritage, a place of refuge for persecuted French Huguenot silk weavers during the late 17th century. Ismini is acutely aware of the historical context, which gives added resonance to the commission. Even her choice of yarns takes on a symbolic significance. The panels contrast natural fibres (cotton, linen and silk) with metallic silver and gold threads (traditionally signifiers of grandeur, wealth and artifice). Although the work is not representational, she hopes that "the viewer will see the piece as a story, moving from light areas to darker ones, with dramatic gold sections interwoven in the design."

The woven motifs were inspired by the giant feathery grasses (*Stipa Gigantea*) growing on the roof terrace of the building. However, as with most of Ismini's textiles, the patterns are highly abstracted, and the fabric is as much about texture, sheen and patina as about colour or graphic design.

Ismini's accomplishments as a textile artist have been built up steadily over the last ten years. She originally came to England in 1996 at the age of 19 to do a foundation course at Camberwell College of Art. She then went on to study Textile Design at Central Saint Martins. It was there she discovered her affinity for woven textiles – "suddenly it all seemed to click," she recalls – emerging in July 2000 with a First Class Honours degree.





Facing page: *Thalassa*, fabric sample by Ismini Samanidou using cotton and paper yarns

Top left: *Feather Grass Scope*, jacquard-woven panels by Ismini Samanidou for Allen & Overy's Spitalfield offices, London

Above: *The Revenge of the Spider*, installation by Ismini Samanidou in a disused enamel factory, Kea island, Greece

Top right: Chair with Ismini fabric for George Spencer Designs

'For Ismini, one senses, weaving is much more than an expression of creative aptitude, more even than a professional vocation, it is her destiny'

After a year's work experience in the design studio at Salt, Ismini decided to go back to college to hone her skills further at the RCA. Here she had access for the first time to a computerised jacquard loom, which not only excited her technically, but stimulated her artistically as well. "I got hooked straight away," she admits. Currently based at University College Falmouth, a deserving recipient of a NESTA scholarship, she is part of the Crafts Council's Next Move scheme, a 'fast track' system for gifted graduates.

Computerised jacquard-weaving now forms the core of Ismini's practice, although she often combines low-tech manual craft processes, such as embroidery, with digital design and automated production techniques. Keen to experiment further, Ismini recently teamed up with the 3D Digital Design Research Cluster at University College Falmouth. Last summer as part of a project called Repeat and Variation – a competition for members of Hidden Art Cornwall, a lively organisation promoting designers in the region – Ismini developed a series of 'hybrid' fabrics: flat textiles embossed with low-relief patterns. The fabrics are woven from metallic or paper yarns (or a combination of the two), which retain their shape when bent. The embossing of the fabric is carried out using traditional paper printing presses.

Multi-layered imagery and textural richness are the hallmarks of Ismini's jacquard-woven textiles. This is what makes them so appealing from a visual and tactile point of view. As well as weaving one-off hangings (some

commissioned, others self-initiated), she also designs samples for production. *Ismini*, a furnishing fabric produced under licence by George Spencer Designs, features a fractured pattern woven in paper yarn and linen evoking the dry qualities of a peeling wall. 'Distressed' effects of this kind clearly intrigue her, as she often simulates worn, abraded, cracked or striated surfaces in her designs.

Photography – another of Ismini's great passions – also plays a key role in shaping her aesthetic. As well as layering multiple photographic images on the computer, she often plays around with depth of field. In a pattern called *Forest*, depicting abstracted branches, some of the motifs are sharp, while others appear distorted and out of focus.

Until now the jacquard loom has been associated almost exclusively with high volume production. Although Ismini is happy to see her designs mass-produced, she is also keen to explore the potential of jacquard-weaving as a vehicle for one-off textile hangings and bespoke furnishing fabrics. Earlier this year she collaborated with furniture designer John Miller on the *Cuadra* chair. He designed the form while she created the stunning customised upholstery fabric. The results were presented at the Milan Furniture Fair. In February 2007 Ismini's hangings will be showcased by the Lesley Craze Gallery at Collect – an ideal platform for her prodigious talents and no doubt a trigger for further exciting commissions.