

# MINNA ROTHMAN EMBRACING CHANGE

Minna Rothman's life has been shaped by monumental changes that inform the tapestries she weaves. A Yugoslav-born atmospheric physicist, she came to the US on sabbatical from teaching at the University of Belgrade to conduct research in atmospheric dynamics using supercomputers. Politics at home led Serbia to the brink of war and her to an unplanned emigration to the US in 1979. In the decades that followed, her work on climate modeling involved data analysis that had to be synthesized and depicted in ways people could understand.

"As a scientist for 40 years, I was also a graphic designer, creating visuals so others could understand my research," said Rothman. Meanwhile, she studied drawing and painting in workshops and at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Then a serious accident left her unable to walk for a long time. Rothman retired as a physicist and looked for something new to do. Rothman has a Kilim rug in her home that was made by her grandmother who was a gifted weaver in Pirot, a city famous for that centuries-old art.

BY JANET MENDELSON



"I am a perpetual designer," said Rothman. "As a little kid, I was always drawing and designing. I never learned weaving from my grandmother, but I remember her watching me sew doll dresses when I was four or five. She told me, 'You have golden hands. You can make anything you want in your life.' Indeed, I always had the ability to figure out how things are made. So, as an adult, weaving tapestries came naturally to me. It's genetics," she laughed.

Learning the kilim technique was impossible because there are no teachers in the US. In Pirot, where an effort is underway to revive the art, girls were traditionally trained from a very early age. The closest Rothman has come is to study Navajo weaving in New Mexico.

In retirement, she plunged into weaving classes and books. She heard it takes a weaver five years to reach a certain level, but Rothman's intensive study was fed

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Deeper Roots** (detail; 2021; wool, cotton lining; hand woven; 26 x 13 in.

THIS PAGE LEFT: Minna Rothman at the Arlington Center for the Arts, Arlington, Massachusetts

RIGHT: **Migration 2015: Integration**; 2019; wool, metallic thread, linen warp, cotton lining; hand woven; 55 x 32 in.

Excellence Award, Lausanne to Beijing International Fiber Art Biennale XI, 2021

Best in Fiber Award at the exhibition, *REAL!*, Arlington Center for the Arts, Arlington, Massachusetts, 2021





by her need to problem-solve. She worked at it day and night, 16 hours a day.

In 2014, she had her first piece exhibited in an American Tapestry Alliance show. In 2017, her first piece was accepted for an international exhibition at West Dean College in the UK. Initially, she entered three juried shows a year; soon it was seven or eight. Most recently, from among more than 1,000 entries from 56 countries, two of Rothman's tapestries received an award of excellence at the *From Lausanne to Beijing* International Fiber Art Biennale XI in China.

Her two careers share many parallels. "The scientist makes a hypothesis much as an artist says, I want to render this thought or idea," said Rothman. "Then the scientist has to prove the hypothesis by conducting research. The tapestry artist also does research: a lot of studies." Rothman works with color values when developing tapestry composition and small-scale samplings for exploration of techniques, yarns, and colors. The artist proves the idea with the finished piece. Rothman uses only the highest quality tapestry materials. She works on high-warp looms (often known as *haute-lisse*).

"Climate research requires you to be a good observer," she said. "The planet is your laboratory. So, there is a



component of scientific practice that I use in designing my tapestries. I observe the light and landscapes. I often want to capture a contrast between geological and human time scales."

*Svalbard: Arctic Glacier Melting*, for which Rothman received *Fiber Art Now's* 2021 *Yarn/Rope/String* exhibition award for excellence, depicts a glacier whose melt is forming a creek, flooding an area that was under ice for centuries. "I wanted to make a piece that captures a sense of space in the arctic ice desert, the ragged terrain in the background, the vast expanse, and in the foreground, lichen growing, providing a source of life for reindeer." The colors are typical of those seen in the Arctic Circle.

Currently, Rothman participates in the *Waterline* project, led by Joan Baxter in Scotland. This international project is planned to be a traveling exhibit in 2022/23 with accompanying monograph. Rothman is one of 15 artists whose tapestries will have a common element—a golden/silver waterline visually connecting their works. [mzrstudio.com](http://mzrstudio.com)

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OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: **Svalbard: Arctic Glacier Melting**; 2021; wool, linen, recycled silk, linen warp, cotton lining; hand woven; 20 x 31 in.

BOTTOM: **Svalbard: Arctic Glacier Melting** on loom.

THIS PAGE: **Wind Doesn't Know for Borders**; 2020; wool, metallic thread, linen warp, cotton lining; hand woven; 27 x 38 in.

Fiber Art Now, Excellence In Fibers VI, 2020

Excellence Award, Lausanne to Beijing International Fiber Art Biennale XI, 2021