AIS Spotlight *Travis Meinolf*

Written By:
Betty Davidson



Travis Meinolf on the streets of Berlin (2010)

Travis Meinolf is a weaver, artist, and educator from Marin County, CA. Through their weaving school (Meinolf Weaving School) and involvement in GRO's Artists in the Schools programs, they share the grounding and artistically empowering qualities of textile arts with students of all ages. Here, Travis sits down with us to discuss how textiles can preserve stories, communicate ideas, and connect people through the physical process of making.

Q: How did you get involved with Artists in the Schools?
Travis: I had been doing a similar program in Contra Costa County because I was teaching weaving at the Richmond Art Center over in the East Bay, and Jennifer, who was the director of the Artists in Schools program at the time, became aware of me for doing stuff in the Shoreline School District and had me in a bunch of different locations... But they were just really great opportunities for me to have more teaching experiences with different populations, which is kind of my next passion.

"A lot of my impulses when I am teaching are developed from remembering how it felt to be told no by different teachers in my life."

Q: What is it about weaving and working in textiles that continues to inspire you both as someone who teaches and individually in your own art?
Travis: Well, just to get to the weaving process itself, I have found is such a grounding and satisfying thing to engage in. It offers a direct feedback and a feeling of personal agency where you can see the actions that you are taking forming into something that you will then benefit from later, whether it's a blanket or beautiful artwork to hang on the wall. And as a person who has easily overwhelmed in the world, having that as a thing to touch base with helps me be the person that I want to be the rest of the time. And I know that not everybody needs it the way that I do, but I've found that everybody is able to benefit from it.

Q: I'm of the understanding that you have your own weaving program?
Travis: Weaving school. Yeah. I grew up in the Bay Area, actually mostly in Forest Knolls, one town over from where I live now in Lagunitas. But went to school in Central Marin. Over in San Anselmo. So luckily, when I was looking for a commercial space to do my thing, I ran into a woman who I went to elementary school with at Wade Thomas in the '80s, and she had a storefront that she was able to get me in the door and get started at a friend discount. And I filled it up with looms and didn't really know what I was doing, but as soon as people saw through the big open doors that there was a guy in there weaving, there started being questions and also offers of more looms. I'm going to pick up a loom from somebody tomorrow in Mill Valley. It's just a thing.

Q: Would you say that most of your students at the weaving school are adults?
Travis: It's mostly adults at my weaving school. I do do like family workshops and get people of all ages. That's one of the things that I love about doing the Artists in the Schools program though is that it just gets me that kid energy, even though teaching a whole bunch of people at the same time is way harder than the way that I have people kind of wander in, in dribs and drabs to my school.
But the way that kids approach the practice teaches me a lot that I can then present in all different ways, because no matter what age everybody kind of perceives communication differently, which I find really liberating to finally understand. To not expect people to receive my words the way that I'm hearing them in my head. In a group of 20 kids, you'll get a really unfiltered version of all of these different modes. And then when you bring on that with an adult or whatever age person, you remember what worked with the child version of that...

Q: Because you work in a medium that is so grounded in the physical senses of touch, what would you have to say about the importance of visual storytelling in weaving and textile work?

Travis: Yeah, what it makes me think of is when my students are making something to give to somebody as a gift, building that context for the receiver so that they understand what went into it. Whether it is by photographing the process, something simple like that, or building something into the end result that shows the process, so it's not perfect like something from the store... And that's always a great conversation to have with people because very few of us are ever satisfied with our outputs. And so to say that edge that is a little bit pulled in or that thread that is missed serves to buttress your visual storytelling.

But it is complicated. I recently had students measuring out the yarns for their weaving and then painting pigment onto them, and everybody was trying to figure out the way to then weave those painted threads into something that would be beautiful and present the process that they had already engaged in. And again, just seeing everybody's different answers was really cool.

"The medium just embeds the story in it. And I guess that's one of the things that I want to do is spread that perspective to more people. So whether or not they're looking at a thing that they or somebody that they know wove, they can decipher a little bit about that process."

Q: (On Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*) How did you get involved?

Travis: I mean, they just called me. And when whoever texted me about meeting, I was just like, sure, that's great! And then they were like, 'but now we're going to send you an NDA and until you sign it, don't tell anybody we've had this conversation.' And I was like, what's happening?

But I had helped a friend do an independent film that they let me do some weaving in the summer before. So I was just like, weaving in a movie sounds great, however I can help. And then gradually, gradually I came to understand that it was the summer blockbuster by the big-name director with all the movie stars in it. Having not like seen a lot of these people's movies, I think made it a lot easier for me to just be in rooms with them and do the task at hand, which was trying to give Anne Hathaway a good background so she could make a convincing weaver on screen.

Q: With teaching Anne Hathaway to weave, what was the timeframe in which you had to do that?

Travis: 4 days. And then I had made her this practice loom to bring home, and I don't think that she practiced at all because we came back for the scene and I was like, 'hey, how'd it go?' And she said, 'ahh I couldn't put the loom together and I figured we'd be fine.' And I was like, 'yeah, you're gonna be fine.'

The thing is that actors have to learn really complicated stuff for movies, and weaving is pretty chill, compared to horseback riding or whatever.

Travis (cont): Truth is, I feel like it was on the second day that was the screen tests. One of them involved bringing the loom and her sitting in front of it, and she didn't know what to do with her hands yet, but her face was all like, 'I'm doing this, like a pro. I've been doing this forever.' And I was like, we're gonna get the rest of the thing, but as far as like stature and projection, she is a good actor.

"A screen is a textile. And so, we're all still just communicating through textiles."

Q: Do you think mythology and the mythology of The Odyssey impacted your process in any way?

Travis: I feel especially biased about textiles in cultural production, but it did feel like it confirmed in some ways how much textile production has meant to humans in different societies throughout the ages.

Even when I was thinking about– when I was watching the movie and like having had weird conversations with the cinematographer and different things about the way that it was, I felt very cognizant of each scene of the movie having these big images projected on this big screen. I kept being like, this is the same thing. This is contemporary mythologizing through cloth.

Q: Being around the level of craftsmanship that you were around on that set, how did it feel to be a part of that?

*Travis: It was really amazing. And props department is now- to any neurodivergent creative young person, I would highly recommend. Like, they're just throwing sh*t at you. They're like, we need 60 axe handles from the local Home Depot and then carve them to fit into the spear shafts and paint them...*

***Q: W*ith more people looking at weaving, more people making weavings, is there anything in particular that you would want people to know about your own practice?**

*Travis: My personal weaving practice is very much a self-care thing. I don't have an easy time slowing down and meditating or doing somatic body sh*t that I should be into, but the process of weaving offers me those things, offers me a physical practice and a mental practice.*

Q: Do you have a story that stands out to you from teaching weaving?

Travis: Because we're talking about Artists in Schools program and we are just down the street from West Marin School reminds me of one touchstone moment of bringing a spinning wheel to the classroom, because they already have the looms there that were generously donated by local weavers and set up. But seeing kids gravitate towards the pedals of the spinning wheel and just start putting it in motion and kind of zone out on that kind of more dynamic repetitive process. And then thinking about that same focused attention and for the kids who dial into the weaving process and just sit down there and they're just throwing the shuttle back and forth and pulling on the thing... Having been weaving for now like almost 30 years, seeing that physical response that people have to the process reminds me of what it is that I'm in it for. It's very inspirational.