

# Audrey Walker obituary

**Subtle and sometimes unsettling textile artist who oversaw a globally respected degree course at Goldsmiths**



The Big Blue Bowl, 2013, by Audrey Walker. Photograph: Ruthin Craft Centre

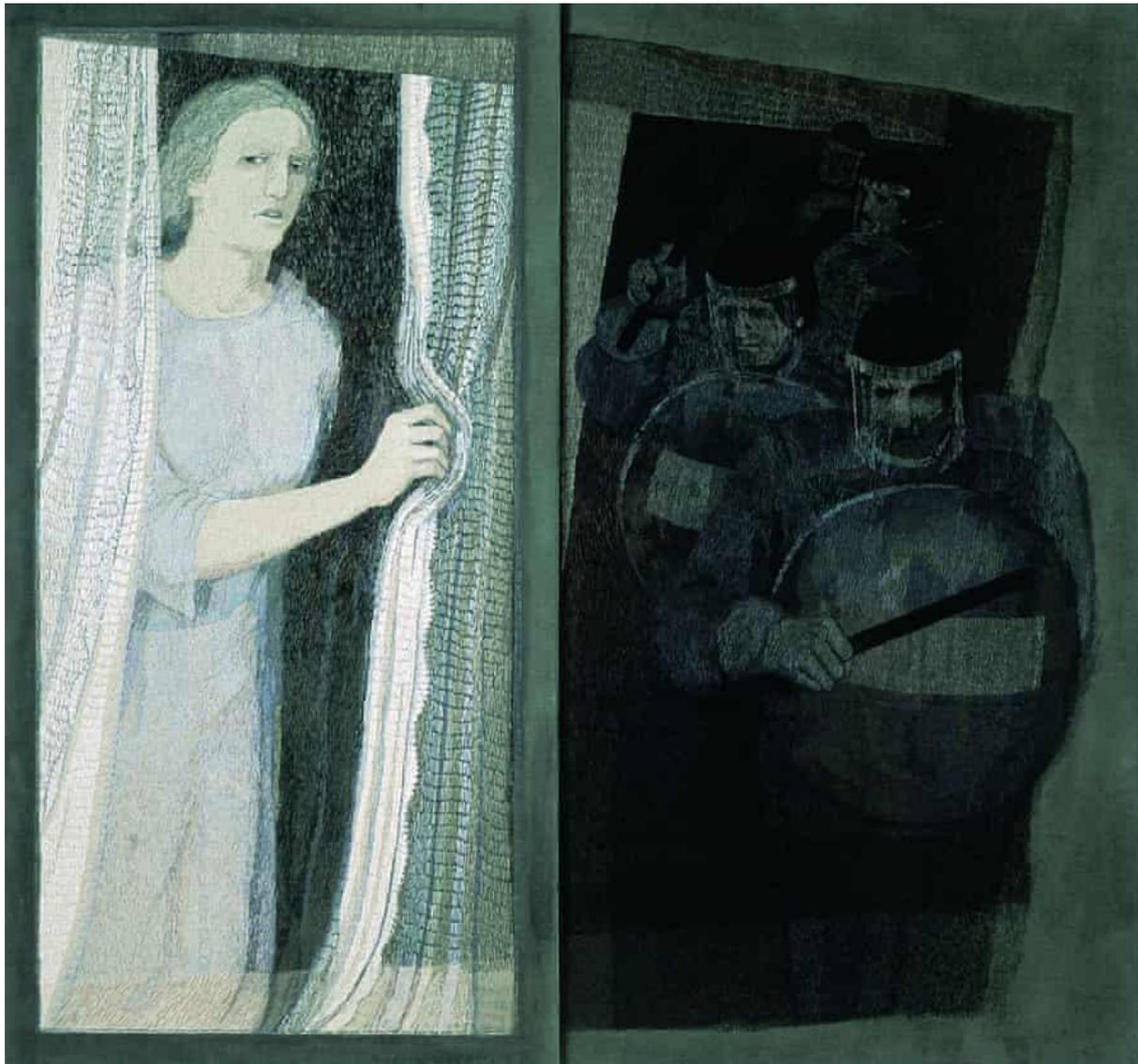
[Tanya Harrod](#)

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The textile artist Audrey Walker, who has died aged 92, was renowned for embroideries built up from pointillist layers of thread – machine and hand-stitched. Her finest works, seen at a retrospective exhibition in 2000 at Ruthin Craft Centre in north Wales, were created after her retirement from teaching in the late 1980s.

Psychologically unsettling figurative wall pieces, monumental in mood, they were inspired by historical textiles, by archaic Greek sculpture, and by the art of the early Renaissance. Capturing subtle gazes and glances, Walker's haunting embroideries led Philip Hughes, the centre's director, to observe: "If Virginia Woolf had stitched, this is what it would be like."

Walker also had a distinguished career in teaching, culminating in her leadership of the textile and embroidery department at Goldsmiths College, London (now Goldsmiths, University of London) from 1975 to 1988, where she built on the achievements of her predecessor, [Constance Howard](#).



Observed Incident, by Audrey Walker. Photograph: Dewi Tannatt Lloyd/Ruthin Craft Centre

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She arrived as head of department on the eve of the course's transition from the diploma of art and design to BA degree status, during a golden age for the funding of art education. With the encouragement of Jon Thompson, the principal and then dean of the school of art, Walker oversaw the creation of spacious, well-equipped studios and workshops in the Millard Building in Camberwell, shared with Goldsmiths' fine artists and art historians.

She brought in extra technicians and eminent part-time tutors – including Rushton Aust, Shirley Craven, Michael Brennand-Wood, Mary Restieaux and Marta Rogoyska – to join a strong existing team including Eirian Short and Christine Risley. Students were able to investigate textile printing, weaving, knitting and embroidery interchangeably and with unusual freedom: “My whole approach to teaching was to put students first.” Alumni include Alice Kettle, Sally Freshwater, Lesley Hanney, Nicola Henley and Annie Sherburne.

Walker's graduates were as innovative as the college's Young British Artists (YBAs) of the late 80s and 90s, if less focused on individual fame and more on networks, communal activity and non-hierarchical learning. The work made in Walker's department all through the late 70s and 80s anticipated the art world's turn to textiles by several decades.



Audrey Walker in her studio, 2000. Photograph: Dewi Tannatt Lloyd/Ruthin Craft Centre

There were no set projects or continuous assessment, and nor was the course vocational, geared to the fashion or textile industry. Kettle, with a first degree in fine art, recalled an interview with Walker asking “probing questions about artistic references, subjects in the paintings, concepts of materiality, feminist theory and my own fragility. I came away convinced and excited to enter this new world that appeared to be carving its own narrative canon and points of reference”. Despite its global reputation, the degree in textiles that Walker developed disappeared 20 years after she retired, her department’s collective pedagogy subsumed into the fine art department.

Audrey was born in Workington, Cumbria. Her father, Stanley Walker, was a travelling salesman for the local brewery and her mother, Jessie (nee Sewell), a housewife; both came from large working-class families in the town. When Audrey was 12 her father died, weakened by long-term injuries suffered in the first world war. As an only child, she became the focus of her mother’s ambitions, going to the local grammar school, where her artistic gifts were recognised by her art teacher, Maurice Campbell-Taylor.

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A scholarship from her local education authority took her in 1944, aged 16, to Edinburgh College of Art, where she specialised in painting in her final two years, her teachers including William Gillies, John Maxwell and Leonard Rosoman, all fine colourists. Deciding she was too young to marry a fellow student and ex-serviceman, James Cumming, she took up a scholarship to study at the Slade School of Art in London (1948-51).

At the Slade, she was the contemporary of Bernard Cohen, Philip Sutton and Victor Willing, and came under the influence of William Coldstream, who admired the perfectionism of her figurative work, suggesting she had a future as a portrait painter. She was involved in setting up the important Young Contemporaries exhibitions, which showcased the work of recent graduates, and, to her mother’s dismay, became a member of the Labour party.

As a prize-winning young female painter at the Slade it was nonetheless evident that the teaching posts in art schools would go to her male peers. After a first job at Leeds girls’ high school, Walker moved back to London to a rewarding post at South Hampstead high school. Idealism took her to an early comprehensive, Parliament Hill school, from 1959 to 1966, where she was head of the art department.



The Collectors (Temptation), by Audrey Walker. Photograph: Dewi Tannatt  
Lloyd/Ruthin Craft Centre

Walker had previously rejected her mother's passion for domestic making - dressmaking, knitting, rag-rug and embroidery - and was dismayed when at Edinburgh the textile tutors had invited her to study in their department. But an exhibition of work by Margaret Kaye at the Roland, Browse & Delbanco gallery in London opened her eyes to the possibilities of textile collage.

Teaching pupils of different abilities at Parliament Hill, she began to see the value of the crafts – textiles and ceramics – as a way of reaching out to the children. She began attending evening classes at the [Embroiderers' Guild](#) and studied historical textiles in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. In the mid-60s she joined the pioneering [Sixty-Two Group of textile artists](#), working [outside the mainstream](#), many of them women who had received a conventional fine art training but found liberation through textiles.

Burnt out by school teaching, Walker moved in 1966 to Whitelands, a teacher training college in Roehampton, south-west London. Although appointed principal lecturer in painting, she had begun to create landscape-inspired collage-embroideries, and abstract hangings that were pieced, collaged, overlaid and embroidered, with an effect not unlike the recent work of the Nigerian artist [El Anatsui](#).

In the early 1980s, influenced by feminist discussions at Goldsmiths, not least by Rozsika Parker's [The Subversive Stitch](#) (1984), she paid a belated tribute to her mother by incorporating her tablecloths into witty trompe l'oeil pieces. On retiring from Goldsmiths in 1988 she moved from her elegant house in Peckham to a cottage on Dinas Head in Pembrokeshire, with views up the coast to Cardigan Bay and the Llŷn Peninsula.

There she made some of her finest work while helping to launch the Fishguard Arts Society, becoming the creative force behind the [Last Invasion Tapestry](#), an ambitious communal embroidery project begun in 1993 marking a French attack on the Welsh coast in 1797. Inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry, it was completed in 1997 and is now housed in Fishguard town hall.

Walker pursued an independent life of friendship, travel and creativity. Her work is to be found in private collections in Australia, Canada, Ireland, Italy and the UK, and in the V&A, the Pump Room, Bath, the [Embroiderers' Guild](#), and in education authority collections in Bedfordshire, Kent, Leicestershire and Reading. In 1993 she was appointed MBE for services to art. A [substantial interview](#) with her forms part of National Life Stories in the British Library.

- Audrey Walker, textile artist, born 3 July 1928; died 17 November 2020