

# Nicola Redmore – Thought Position

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## The first encounter

This work was created in response to Tate's digitized archive collection of Kenneth Armitage, and specifically in response to a notebook recording details of works by Kenneth Armitage, 1957-1960 (Tate archive online, © Kenneth Armitage Foundation). Access to the Henry Moore Institute archive in Leeds provided the opportunity to look at Armitage's maquettes created for his Standing Group series (1951-52) and to investigate some of the early life drawings and photographs of the work of his wife Joan Moore.

Specific pieces to which this work responded to are:

Notebook recording details of works by Kenneth Armitage, 1957-1960 (Tate archive online, © Kenneth Armitage Foundation)

Sculptures, 'People in Wind' 1950, (image on Tate Archive T00366),

Maquette for Standing Group, 1951 (pink plaster) © Leeds City Art Galleries/Bridgman Images (LMG876190)

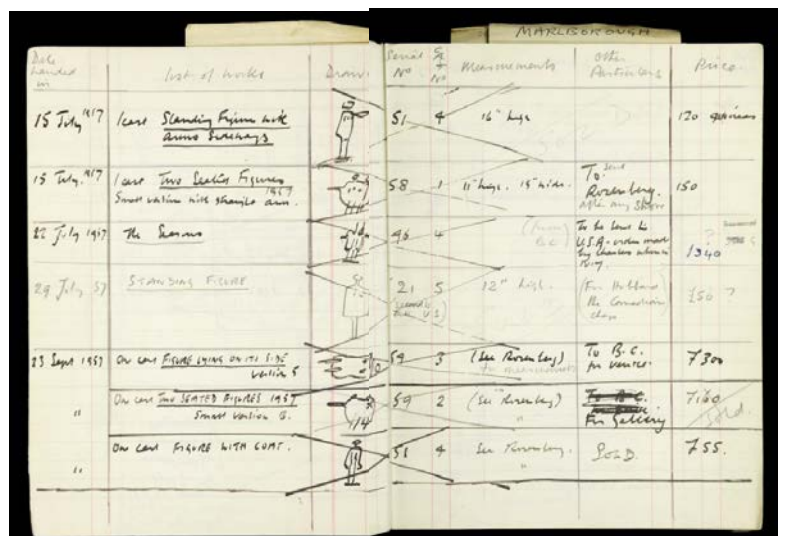
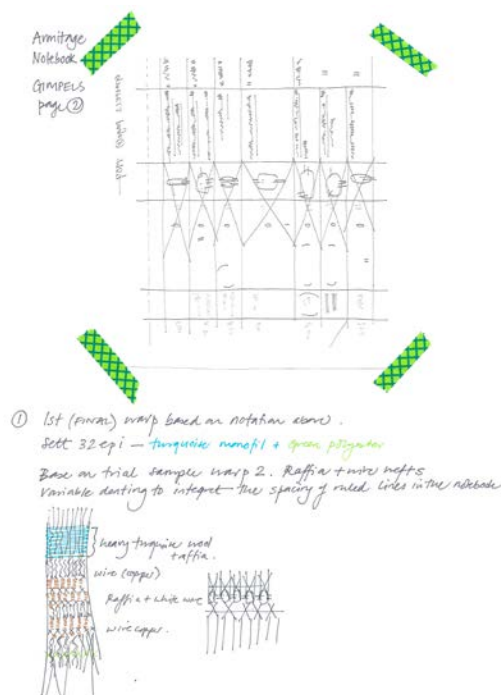
Maquette for Standing Group, 1951 (pink plaster) © Leeds City Art Galleries/Bridgman Images (LMG876191)

Maquette for Standing Group 2, 1952 (pink plaster) © Leeds City Art Galleries/Bridgman Images (LMG876187)

My initial search of the Tate online archive drew me to the notations in the notebooks recording details of Kenneth Armitage's works (1957 – 1960). These visually attractive documents, that comprise an inventory of his sculptures for this period, use hand written notes, and quick reference sketches of each piece. These ruled pages of information are subsequently overlaid with crossed lines as Armitage denotes the sales and movement of his pieces as he sends them to exhibitions or sells them to clients. This overlaying and inscription in the notebooks evoked my own interest in the structure of woven fabrics and the notation systems employed by a weaver to record the details of fabric production. My interest in this notebook led me to further study the work of Armitage, a sculptor of whom I had little knowledge, but who had his roots in Yorkshire, and his education at the Leeds College of Art.

Subsequent study at Slade School of Art, (1937-39) saw Armitage focus on the direct carving technique, a skill also used by Henry Moore, Constantin Brâncuși and Barbara Hepworth. Armitage however moved into modeling with wire mesh and plaster from which evolved his highly innovative series of 'linked-figure' sculptures. He had a growing fascination with the structure of things (animal, vegetable and man-made), and much as a weaver must balance structure with the final aesthetics and functionality of a fabric, his preoccupation was with the human figure, led to his representation of tensions between the vertical and horizontal elements barely hidden behind the outer skin or form.

The visual impact of the recorded works in this notebook, brought to my mind the notations used in the practice of weave, where symbols represent the formation of a design, and where logical movements and accurate records are essential to the craft of the weaver. My investigation into the sculpture of Armitage from the early 1950's, and subsequent reading of reviews of his work further piqued my curiosity into Armitage's contemporaries including Lynn Chadwick, Eduardo Paolozzi and also Henry Moore. This new wave of sculptors 'Bernard Meadows, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Robert Adams, and Armitage himself – were launched into fame abruptly by their sell-out success with the British pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale, at that time a central event in the arts calendar' (Service, 2014)



Notebook recording details of works by Kenneth Armitage, 1957-1960 (Tate archive online, © Kenneth Armitage Foundation)

Nicola Redmore, *Weave Development* [drawing]  
Notebook recording details of works by Kenneth Armitage 1957-60, pages 6 & 7.

Further research into Armitage's influences and the processes used in his practice, led to me to draw parallels between my own practice of weaving and his skill in building up the underlying structure in the development of his armatures.

Armitage references influences on his work, which include his time in the army (as a enemy plane spotter), his passion for engineered architectural structures, and also from folding screens placed in his studio. Armitage did not consciously seek these inspirations, but he notes that on reflection he was probably unconsciously referencing his surrounding environment, previous experiences, or his army knowledge, in the development of the grouped, linked figures prevalent in his work in the early 1950's (Woollcombe, 1997). My own work also references environments I have been exposed to, a fascination for architectural forms and the development of dynamic tensioned structures in the landscape.

As a sculptor he started as a carver, but soon became a modeler and caster. It is noted (Service, 2014) that 'Armitage brought humour and a certain dancing movement to the works of the post-Moore generation of British sculptors.' The work he commenced during his time teaching at Corsham led to the original bronze series that included *Linked Figures* (1949) and *People in the Wind* (1950, the most famous of his pieces, both at maquette size and later in a larger form).

### Supporting structures

Visually delicate supports central to the engineering of suspension bridges (Clifton Suspension bridge for example), where the method of support is laid bare, had a profound effect on Armitage. He was interested in 'modern architects' like Brunel, who made a virtue of the load-bearing frame as an integral design element. The process of weaving under high tension and the structure of a woven fabric relies on a similar understanding of the relationship between threads to interlink different elements in order to create a beautifully engineered cloth.

Armitage developed his own enquiry into support systems early on in his studies at Slade. His experience at art school taught him that he could build a bridge between delicate arms and the main body of a figure to prevent them from snapping off, drawing parallels with the necessary joining and sharing of parts of the body as seen in Siamese Twins. Armitage trained in carving initially and it is fascinating to see his move from this reductive process, where material must

be removed to reveal the desired form to the additive system approach required in creating armatures in preparation for casting. I became interested in what knowledge and skills he would have used to perfect the creation of these surprisingly diminutive pieces, pieces in which he conveyed a certain humor and passion for life?

Although his work was the product of careful study and preparation, he wished always to convey a sense of immediacy and playfulness. "I like sculpture to look as if it happened, to express an idea as simply as possible," he said. (Barnes, 2002)

In July 2015 I undertook the sculpture course: Breaking The Mould, at the Hepworth Art Gallery in Wakefield thus enabling me to experience first hand the challenges that Armitage would have had in sculpting such small and delicate pieces in plaster. He made (as is the tradition) armatures in plaster over wire and netting with scrim to stiffen the top edges. Working with the fine metal wire meshes, was for me akin to manipulating a fabric where, greater control is achieved through the warp and weft. It was a challenge for me to work with the open wire meshes and the rough hessian required for bonding the plaster. These fine meshes had their own beauty and transparency when manipulated, torn and molded into shapes reminiscent of the small pieces made by Armitage that I encountered in the archive at the Henry Moore Institute archive.



Kenneth Armitage *Maquette for Standing Group*, 1951 © Leeds City Art Galleries/Bridgman Images (LMG876190)



Kenneth Armitage *Maquette for Two Standing Figures*, 1951 © Leeds City Art Galleries/Bridgman Images (LMG876190)

Armitage's early plaster works saw him compulsively joining more and more figures to create unified, entanglements of bodies and limbs, to create figures caught together in a common

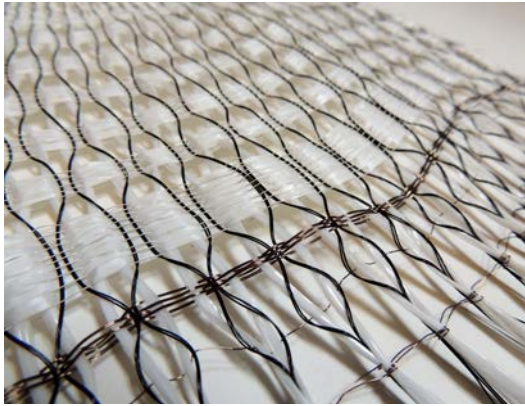
purpose. 'People in Wind' (1950) is one piece that captures the dynamism of a group struggling against the natural elements, and redolent of the weather on the moors in Yorkshire where Armitage grew up. My own work strives to create pieces that may be sited in the exposed conditions of the West Yorkshire Moors, building an elasticity, durability and transparency into meshwork leno-woven fabrics.

The word sculpture has connotations of weight, scale and material, but at an early stage in Armitage's career, he demonstrates a certain delicacy of approach in his pursuit of plasticity. The contours and textures expressed in his work are akin to the erosion of the landscape in his native Yorkshire. The raw and unpolished textures of his early pieces can be found in the marks made by each tool. Armitage's "move from direct carving to modeling was occasioned by a fascination with the structure of things" (Bennington, 2000). I have also, in my response to these plasterworks taken erosion and structure as a mode of revealing the process where, additive and reductive traces underpin the scaffolding of the plaster armature.

### Thinking through weave

My practice is centered on weaving leno fabrics, a technique in which the interlacing of the structural warp threads with the horizontal weft yarns in a cloth form stable; flexible and most importantly open structures. This method of weaving creates a fabric where the structure is fully revealed. My interest in the ribs and wirework structure of Armitage's armature, bundled together in places, (as in the indistinguishable legs of 'People in Wind') and then drifting apart to reveal a surprising delicacy, lies in the moment where the structure is weighted down at intervals, grounded and held back. With the structuring of weave at some point the individual threads start to be considered surfaces brought together by their density, a finishing process or through the addition of a skin.

Threads set up in the warp in the cloth can appear to all follow the same path a system of planned entanglement following a notation of lifts. This is a sequence in which the warp threads are lifted over the weft) and crossings can be formed by the doup leno set-up.



Nicola Redmore *Doup Leno development* (detail), 2015



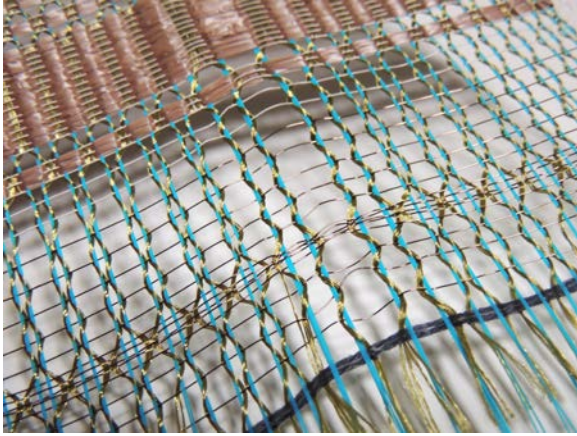
Nicola Redmore, *Setting up the loom* (2015)



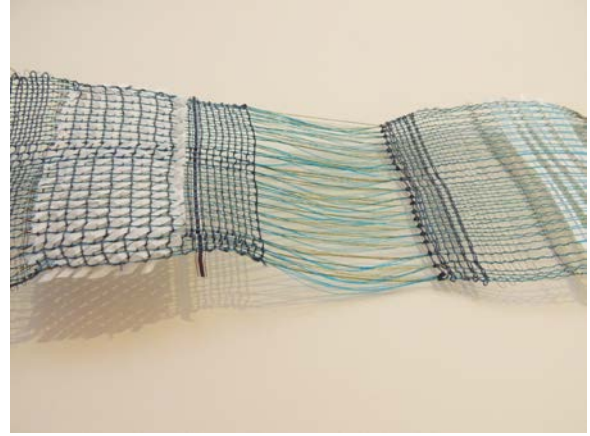
Nicola Redmore, *Design Development* 2015 [acrylic/pen]

Working with the archival material through methods of observation, sketching and photography led me to develop exploratory collages of threads, layered and bonded with a translucent medium. This is one area of my initial practice-led enquiry. These pieces play with the concepts of scale, transparency, colour and the contrasting weight and density of line. Entanglements of threads to create meshes were then further developed through handmade net making, sketching and additive methods of weaving to create a path of threads on the surface of woven cloth.

The practice of weave provides a fresh look and a new emphasis on the hidden importance of the underlying support systems in the additive sculptural processes adopted by Armitage. As in many material-designated disciplines, the craft of textiles is understood to be a way of making things by hand, but also as a way of thinking with the hand in manipulating a material. It is “a dynamic process of learning and understanding through material experience” (Nimkulrat, 2010)



Nicola Redmore, *Sample 1* (detail) 2015  
[wire/raffia/monofilament]

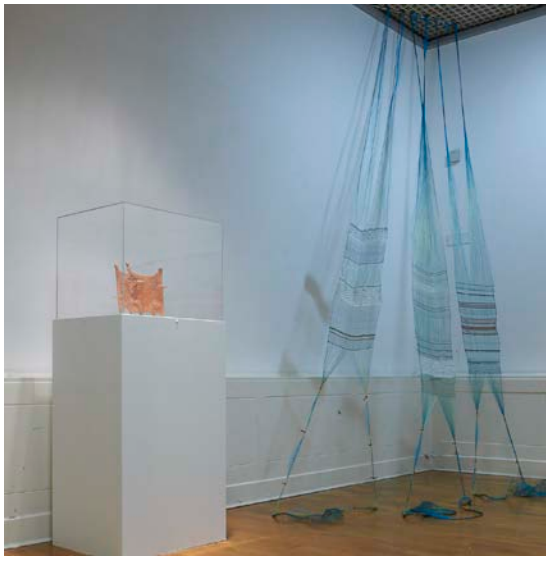


Nicola Redmore, *Sample 2* (detail) 2015  
[viscose/paper/monofilament]

### **Sculpturally woven**

Working with archival materials provides a source of captured details representing many aspects of a sculptor's thinking, making, and recording of the creative process. The archive gave light to personal details and potential influences, which would be otherwise hidden or left unarticulated and which are not always apparent in a final finished sculpture. There is a great satisfaction in gaining knowledge of the influences that may have formed the work of Armitage, his personal relationships, and the environments he worked within. Decoding the impact these influences may have had on his ideas and development makes us view his publicly displayed and commissioned pieces from a fresh perspective.

For example Armitage's Model for the Krefeld Monument (1956) gives us a mere glimpse of the mechanics of the sculptural process. In a similar manner to the honesty of approach used by Lynn Chadwick in her Inner Eye Marquette (1952), yet so many sculptors hide the inner working or soul of the pieces, hidden inside monolithic castings and engineered volumes. An analysis of the pieces on loan from the Henry Moore Institute reveals a surprisingly delicate beauty and diminutive scale in Armitage's maquettes. The delicacy of the forms, and fragility of the wrapped skin of plaster on these conjoined figures for his Standing Group sculptures (1951) reveal Armitage to be a master in manipulating materials on a small scale. We can only guess at the lengthy process, and skills required in engineering these apparently effortless pieces.



Kenneth Armitage, *Maquette for standing Group*, 1951, Nicola Redmore *Mesh* [Installation view] Photograph © Jamie Collier, University of Huddersfield, 2015

The final piece produced for *Thought Positions in Sculpture* retains the flexibility and openness emblematic of woven cloth, whilst at the same time highlighting the structure of interconnected warp and weft threads. A triptych of tensioned woven forms, my response has emerged out of a deeper understanding of the use of wire, mesh and scrim at the core of the armature process in Armitage's work. In weaving, elements are brought together to create an emergent system, tension is required in a fabric to enable the interlacing and intertwining of the vertical (warp) and horizontal (weft) threads in the weaving process, and this relationship is exposed in this leno-woven piece. 'Rarely is empathy for materials greater than it is in the textile and fiber-related media, where they are felt and experienced beyond their physical presence as if they were animate and alive.' Walter Seelig (2005) also recognizes the increase in the use of materials that re-sensitize, through exposure to the primal reality of raw material, a reality that is celebrated here.



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