

# THE EMPATHY OF PATIENCE

# THE EMPATHY OF PATIENCE

**Michael F. Rohde**

**February 1 - March 17, 2019**

**San Luis Obispo Museum of Art**

## The Empathy of Patience: Michael F. Rohde

The San Luis Obispo Museum of Art is pleased to present this solo exhibition of handwoven tapestries and rugs by Michael F. Rohde. I first became aware of his woven art when two of his tapestries were shown at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art's 2013 exhibition of Tapestry Weavers West. I thank Jo Lauria, guest curator, for bringing forth the idea for this exhibition and for giving Michael Rohde's art the curatorial attention it deserves. Mr. Rohde has shown his weavings at very prestigious venues, including The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. He is part of a close-knit

international community of tapestry artists. It is my hope that this exhibition will lead to more critical acclaim for his art and more placements of Michael Rohde tapestries and rugs in museum, corporate and private collections.

Ruta Saliklis, Ph.D.  
Curator and Director of  
Exhibitions  
San Luis Obispo Museum of Art

# Conversation with Michael F. Rohde

Conducted by Jo Lauria  
Guest Curator  
“The Empathy of Patience”

On a recent trip to the Southeast region of Thailand to visit weaving villages, I had the opportunity, and pleasure, to sit next to Michael on the tour bus. During the long stretches of traveling from one outpost to the next, I was able to probe into Michael’s background and explore the journey that led him to weave on the loom.

As for many of us, Michael’s path to realizing his creative vision was circuitous and interspersed with twists and turns that would test his mettle. While working as a faculty researcher at Houston’s Baylor College of Medicine, and then later as a research bio-chemist for Amgen Corp, Michael heeded a persistent inner voice that directed him to art and handiwork. For almost twenty-five years (1974-1998), Michael simultaneously worked in both fields of science and art. And then, before the turn of the millennium, Michael transitioned: he dropped the title of “biochemist” following his name and replaced it with the designation of “weaver.” Michael felt it was time to commit to an artistic career fully. Currently, over twenty years later, Michael is enjoying recognition for his thoughtful approach to design and his exquisitely woven tapestries, rugs, and vessels. We thought you might like to “listen in” on our conversation as Michael discusses the evolution of his work.

**JL (Jo Lauria):** What steered you toward the loom and learning to weave?

**MR (Michael Rohde):** In line with my science background, I have an observant eye and inquiring nature. I had been working as a post-doctorate researcher at Duke University since graduating from Ohio State University in 1974 with a Ph.D. in Bio-Chemistry. It was satisfying work, but I felt a

yearning to use my hands creatively. One day while standing in line at the bank, I noticed the hand-woven blouse a woman was wearing who stood in front of me. Her blouse, or rather the cloth of which it was made, caught my attention and ignited my curiosity. Questions began swirling in my head: How does thread get spun into spools that are then used to create woven cloth? What role does hand-weaving play in our post-industrial culture?

**JL:** So you started weaving in 1973/1974 because you wanted to know how cloth is made?

**MR:** Essentially, yes!

I bought a Sunset Magazine book, an instructional guide on how to weave, and I taught myself the basics of weaving on a little loom that was part of a starter kit. As I became more interested in the process, I wanted to learn more advanced techniques, so I started taking weaving lessons from a yarn shop in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. This shop is where I learned to make flat-woven rugs.

**JL:** At what point did you decide to make the leap and enroll in the Glassell School of Art in Houston?

**MR:** I was offered a faculty research position in the late 1970s at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston. During this time, I had received a big commission from a family living in Houston who wanted to furnish their house in Maine with hand-woven rugs. The process of making multiple area rugs and runners for an entire household spurred me to buy a large loom, on which I labored for months to complete the ten-foot-wide area rugs, and the sixty-feet of runners to fulfill the commission. After I finished the project, I realized that making weavings to

other people’s specifications was time-consuming and tedious. I wanted to generate and produce my own designs. I knew I needed a foundation in drawing, color theory, and design, and courses in art history for context, so I enrolled in the program at the Glassell School of Art.

**JL:** After finishing art school and establishing your studio, when did you first feel that you had forged your own aesthetic, that you were weaving unique pieces of art?

**MR:** In 2001 I made a series of four wall pieces – woven in the rug technique – that were influenced by a trip I made to Japan. The set of wall pieces represented four areas of Japan – Lake Biwa, Kyoto, Nara Deer Park, and the Ginza region, each woven in the different color-ways to depict the palette associated with each of the four seasons, and were titled to identify each season. The finished silhouette of each wall piece delineated the shape of a kimono, which further referenced its geographic and cultural association. Because of the ambitious scale, the set of four wall pieces caught the attention of curators who requested in 2002 to exhibit the full set at the Craft And Folk Art Museum (Los Angeles), and at the Lookout Gallery, University of British Columbia (Vancouver).

Looking back, I’d have to say that the confirmation, and validation, of my art career, came when the Art Institute of Chicago purchased “Winter/Lake Biwa” for its permanent collection.

**JL:** You mentioned that the war in Iraq was a definite turning point for you, in the way you approached your work. Can you explain how this event impacted your art?

**MR:** In the Spring of 2003, when George Bush gave the order

to invade Iraq, I began to think about the “wrongfulness” of war. A poem by June Jordan, in which she wrote eloquently about houses disappearing in the sand, made me think about the erasure of human life and destruction of warfare. In response, I conceptualized a series of woven tapestries where the central motif of the house gradually disappears into the weave. This series was the first time I started with the idea, and then let the design follow the concept naturally.

**JL:** Do you think your work has become increasingly political since 2003?

**MR:** I’m not sure I’d use the word “political.” I would say that my tapestries now have several layers of meaning, and one of those layers might be social commentary. In the series Houses for Nomads, I intended to illustrate the passing of the nomadic lifestyle in the remote lands of Tibet. I was fortunate to visit the grasslands of Tibet for a month in 2006 when the Tibetans celebrated the Nomad Festival. Nomadic tribes from across Asia came with their tents and festive costumes. Curiously, the small Tibetan villages were undergoing modernization, as roads were being paved, pastures were being fenced, and houses were being built where once there were none. This series of tapestries was an homage to the passing of revered traditions and old ways of living.

**JL:** Your most recent tapestries of “Faces, ” or as I like to call them, “Heroes and Heroines” – is this series meant to be a tribute to the individuals who have contributed to society because of their acts of courage, spiritual teachings, creativity, and integrity?

**MR:** Certainly the “high profile” faces of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Frieda Kahlo, Nelson Mandela, and Eleanor Roosevelt fall into the category of the vastly visible and esteemed, but since I have woven their portraits from pixelated digital photographs, I have intentionally obscured their personages. This deliberate obfuscation requires a bit of pondering to figure out. This complicating of the image is my way of persuading the viewer to linger longer on the tapestry and contemplate the accomplishments of each individual featured.

**JL:** However long the viewer lingers, it is but a nanosecond compared to the time it takes you to dye the yarns – with natural dyes you’ve formulated; to set up and thread the loom, and to weave every square inch of the portrait following the color graph you’ve made of the pixelated images. How do you make sense of the time consuming and the labor-intensive process of hand-weaving in our present day culture that runs on, and glorifies, speed and immediacy?

**MR:** Well, it all makes sense to me, because I’ve been doing it for so many decades. I learned to dye the yarns I used almost at the same time I learned to weave. Dyeing the yarns is rewarding, in that I can obtain the colors I want and need. It takes very little time, relative to the weaving itself. For me, the slow pace of weaving is a way to disconnect from the speed of our modern culture. The meditative pace of the process is at times almost geological in scale, and that suits me. Then too, there is the satisfaction that the end product is at odds with the machine made, mass produced objects that surround us.



The title of this catalog and exhibition comes from a phrase by Laura Noriega, at a symposium at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2017. Her words strike at the heart of what my own work is about, so I have chosen to adopt her phrase. Noriega seemed to be referring to reverence of the handmade, executed by the originators of the ideas and the objects. I apply the phrase here to my own personal appreciation and resonance with such items: made by hand rather than machine.

The earliest works in the exhibition are rugs, created with that function in mind. The first three decades of my weaving were spent making rugs, but when it became apparent that they spent more time on walls than floors, I transitioned to tapestry by changing the woven structure and materials. Although tapestry has the advantage of wider possibilities for imagery, I've stayed true to my early choice to work within the rectilinear, right angle shapes that occur naturally from vertical warp and horizontal weft.

Many of my earliest tapestries were of houses. Repeated variations in some houses reflect the forced settlement of nomads by a government attempting control over them. In another, a house appears to be dissolving into the background of rising flood waters.

An emblem of Tibetan unity, the Endless Knot, is depicted in one tapestry only as a fragment, a reference that the culture has been dispersed over the last half century. (A situation which some supporters despair has happened, but others take as an unforeseen benefit. They see wider knowledge of their beliefs and ideas than might have been possible if Tibet had remained a closed and isolated culture.)



Another series of tapestries is large pixelated faces. Jo Lauria, refers to many of my subjects as 'heroes' (and later heroines when she pointed out the early ones were all male). I chose many role models and thought leaders: those who have spoken out in ongoing fights for social justice, human compassion and struggles for equality for all. Plus one immodest self portrait.

The most recent works are two large tapestries from a current and ongoing series with nods to language, albeit an imagined one. The spark for these originated from a supposition of a few textile scholars, proposing Inca textile patterns might contain an undeciphered language. All of these ancient textiles are striking in their complexity and refinement. Rather than duplicate their work, I imagined a language with units of communication being 5x5 inch squares, each composed of two colors in an asymmetric arrangement of the contained twenty-five smaller squares. One wonders, is each 5x5 inch square block a letter, a word, or an idea?

The final thoughts about all this work: The medium of hand-woven tapestry certainly requires patience for execution of these ideas. Empathy, compassion and concern for others is at the base of many of these weavings. And really, aren't those sensibilities connected not only in the world of hand weaving, but also with all interpersonal relationships?

Michael F. Rohde

## DECLARATIVE

2018

handwoven tapestry:

wool, mohair, goat hair, natural dyes

76" x 47"



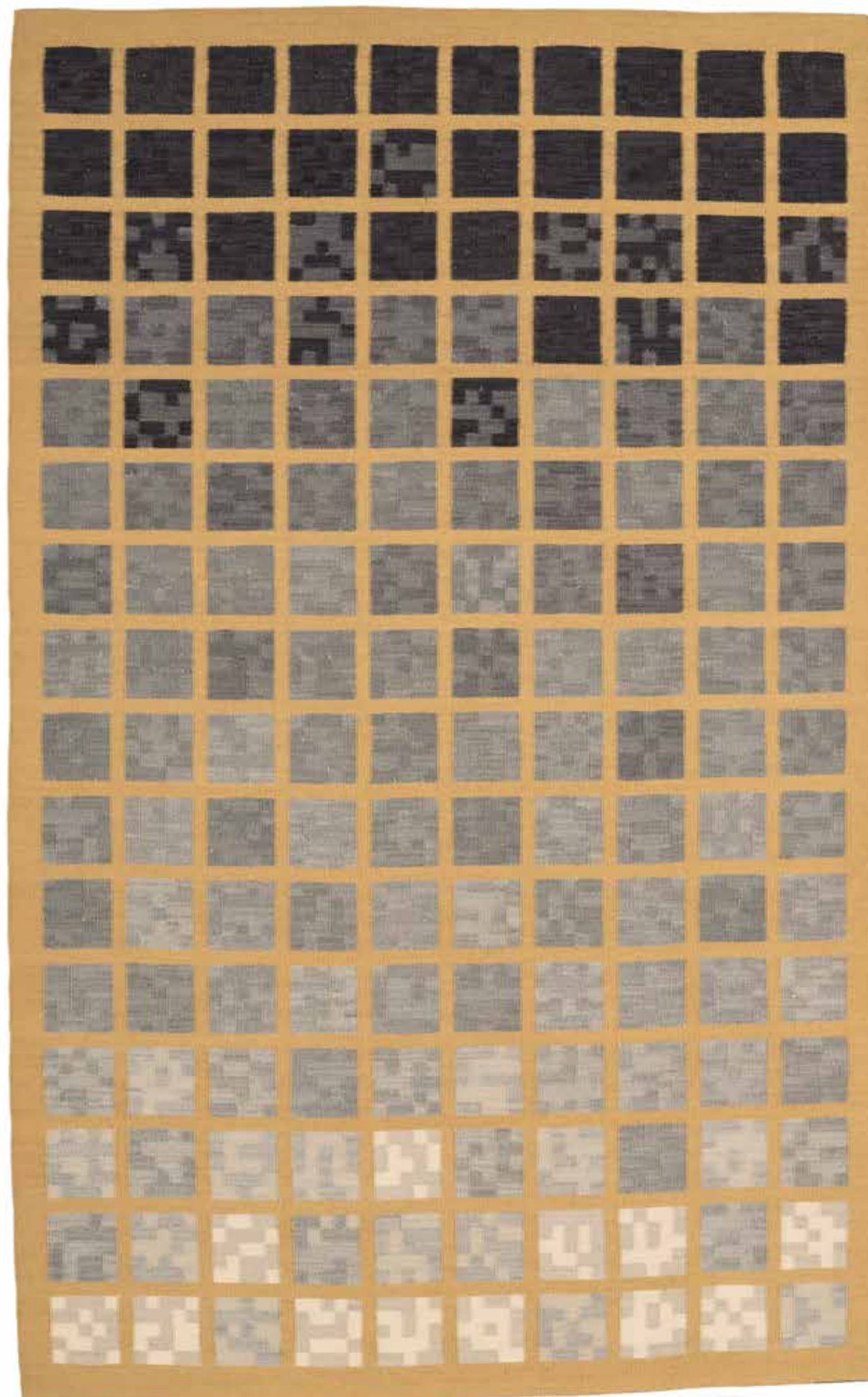
# IMPERATIVE

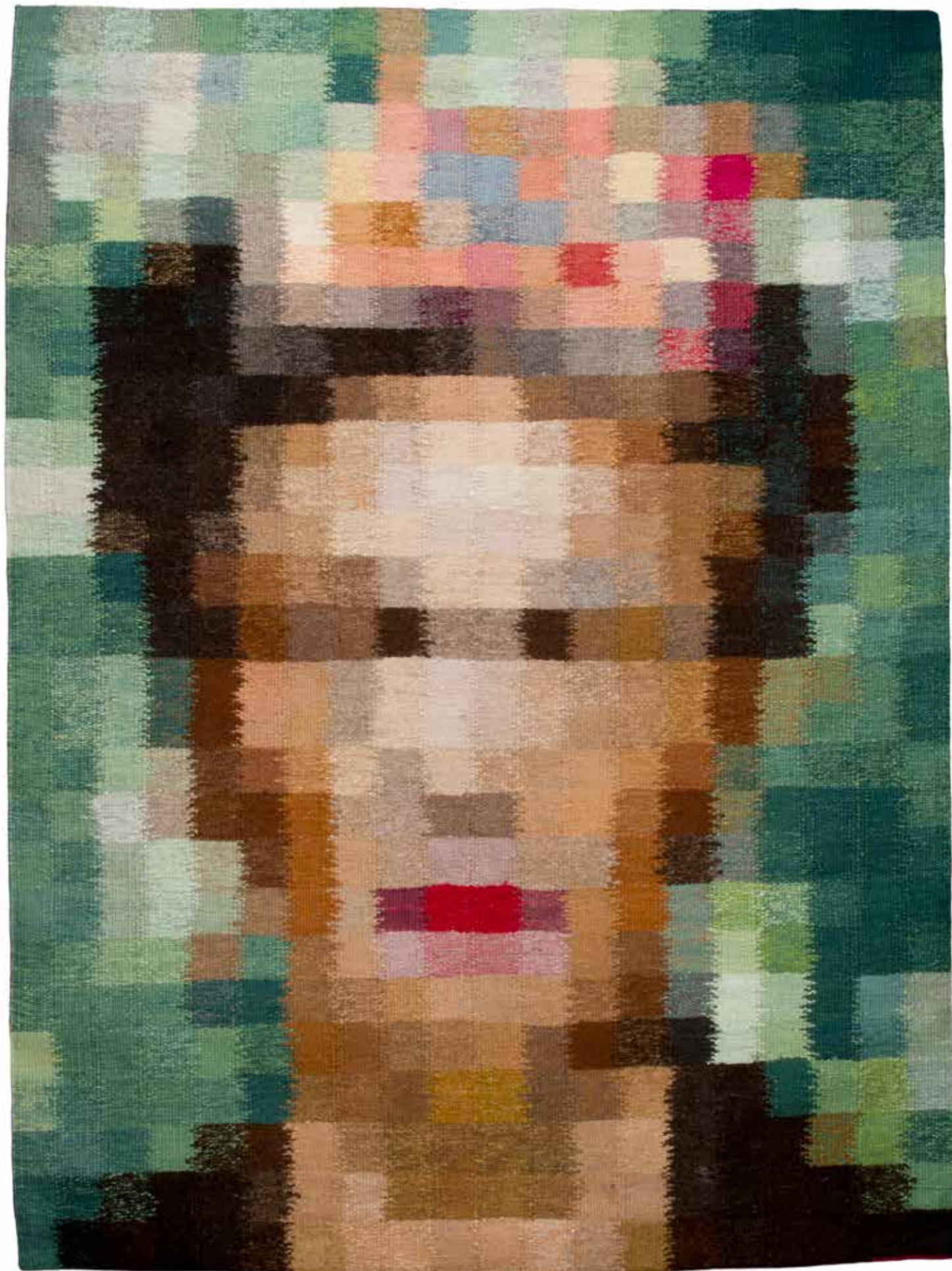
2018

handwoven tapestry:

wool, natural dyes

75" x 47"





## REALITY

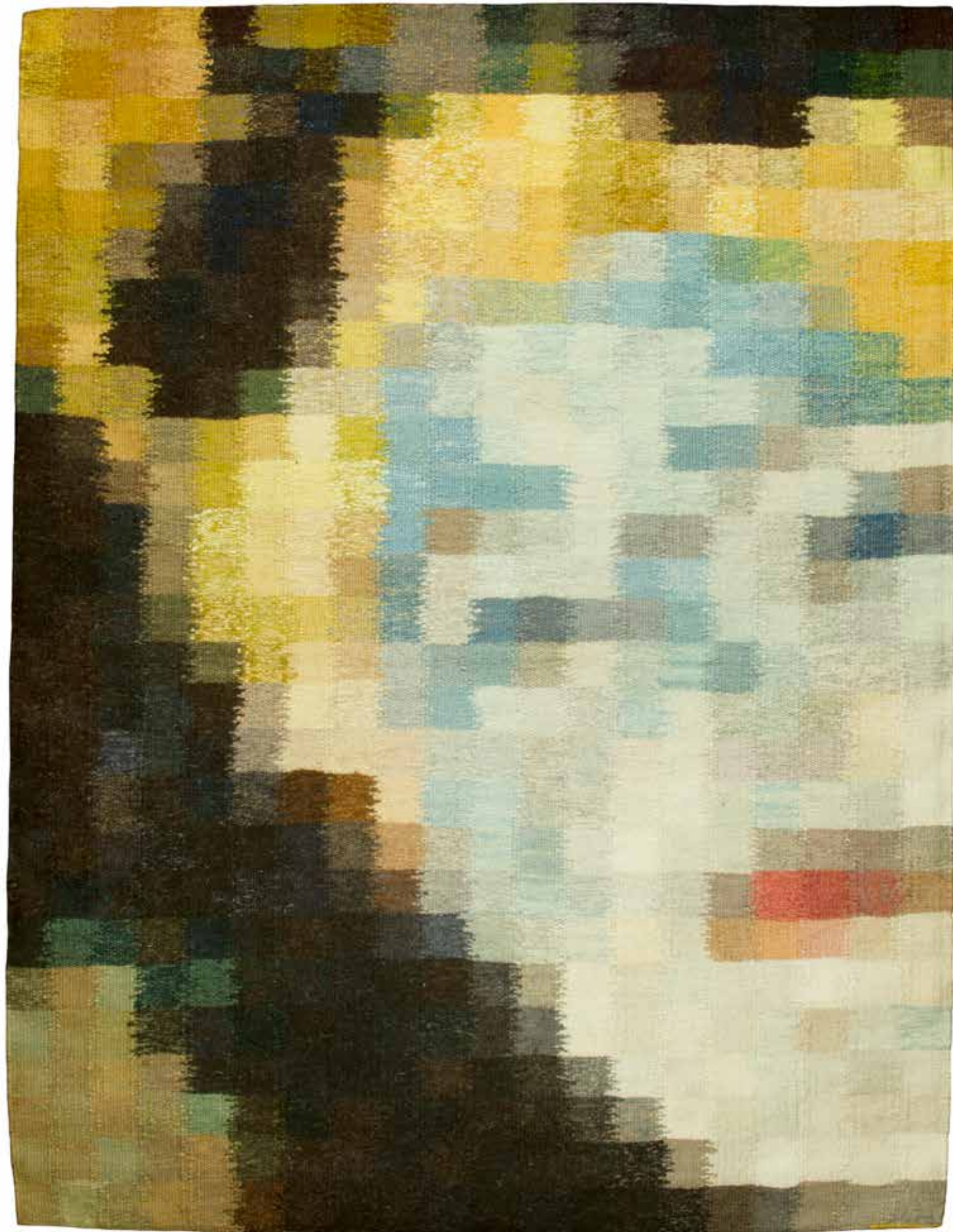
2016

handwoven tapestry:

wool, alpaca, silk, llama, natural dyes

44" x 33"





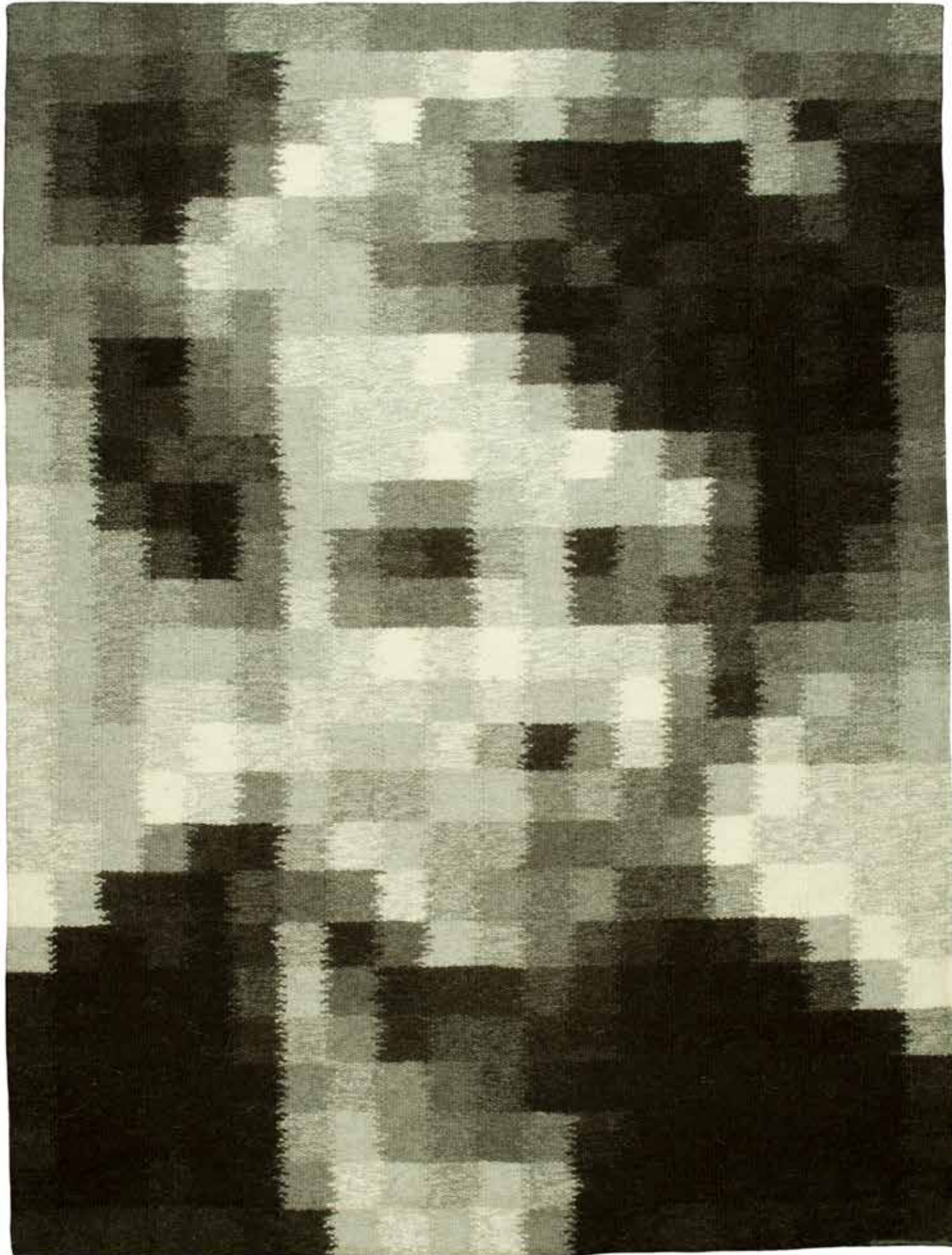
## DANSEUSE

2016

handwoven tapestry:

wool, alpaca, camel; natural dyes

43" x 33"



**GRACE**

2016

handwoven tapestry:

undyed aplaca

42" x 32"



**DIGNITY**

2016

handwoven tapestry:

undyed aplaca

38" x 32"



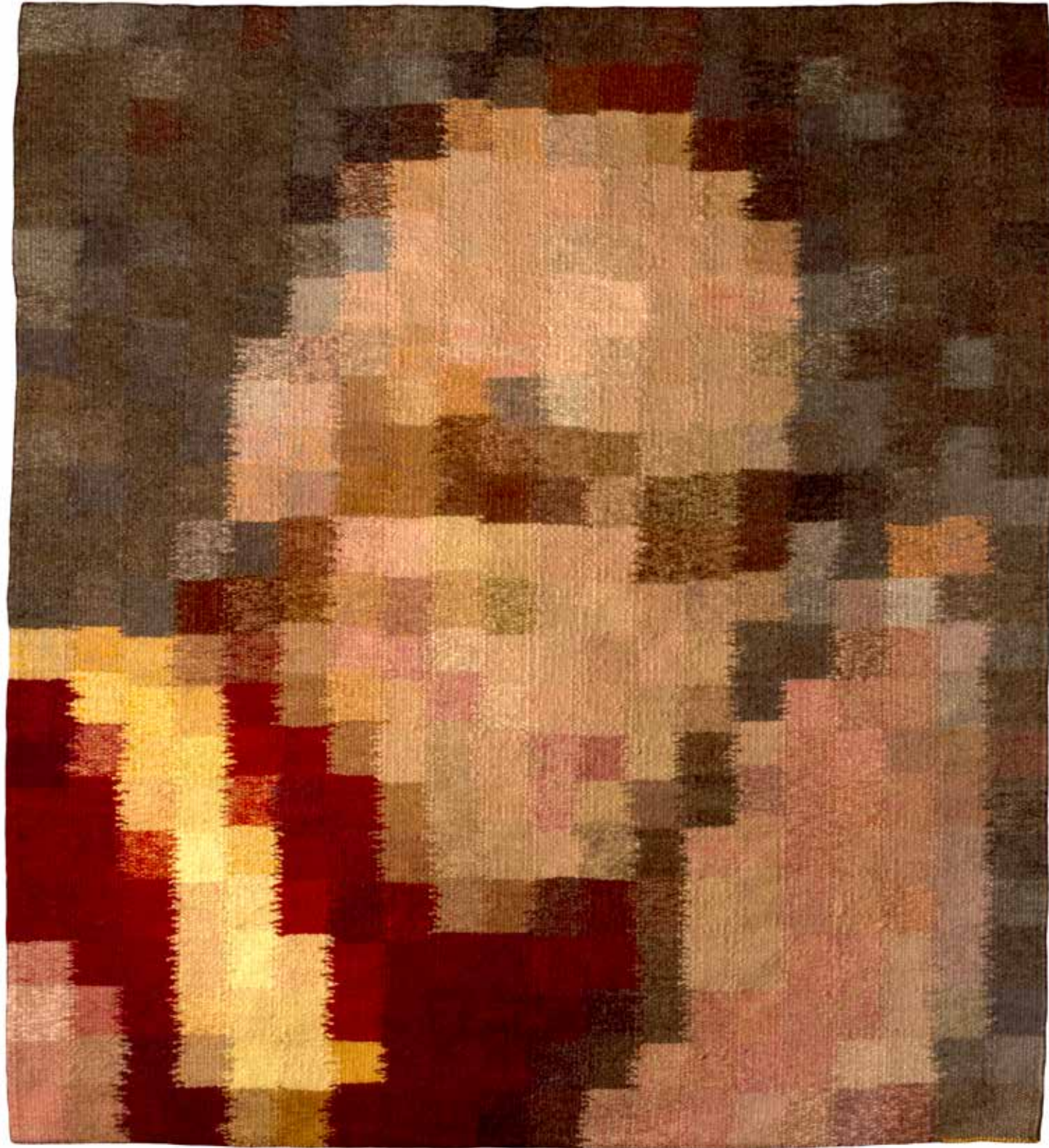
**AHIMSA**

2016

handwoven tapestry:

undyed aplaca

43" x 32"



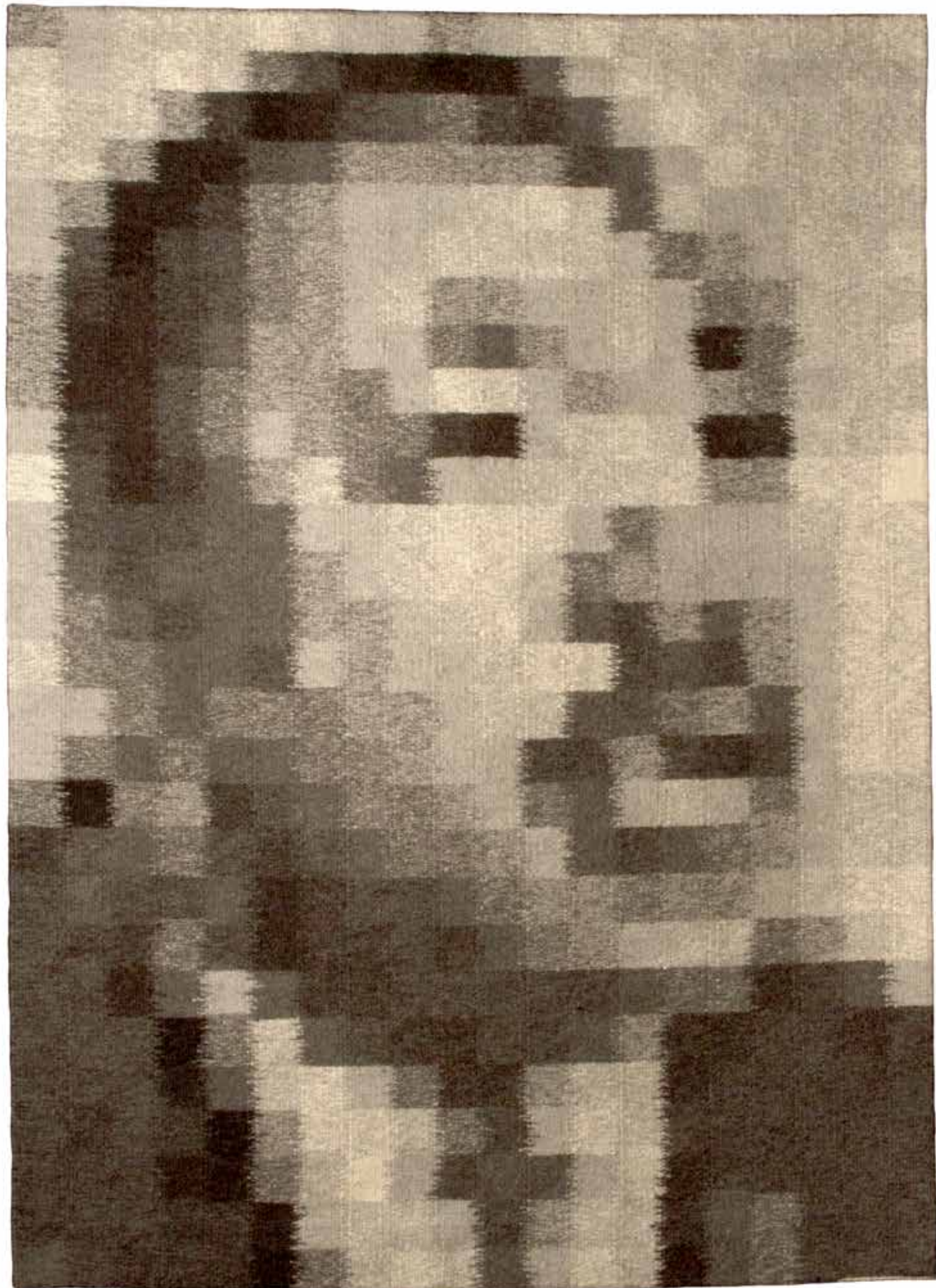
## COMPASSION

2014

handwoven tapestry:

wool, alpaca, camel; natural dyes

35" x 32"



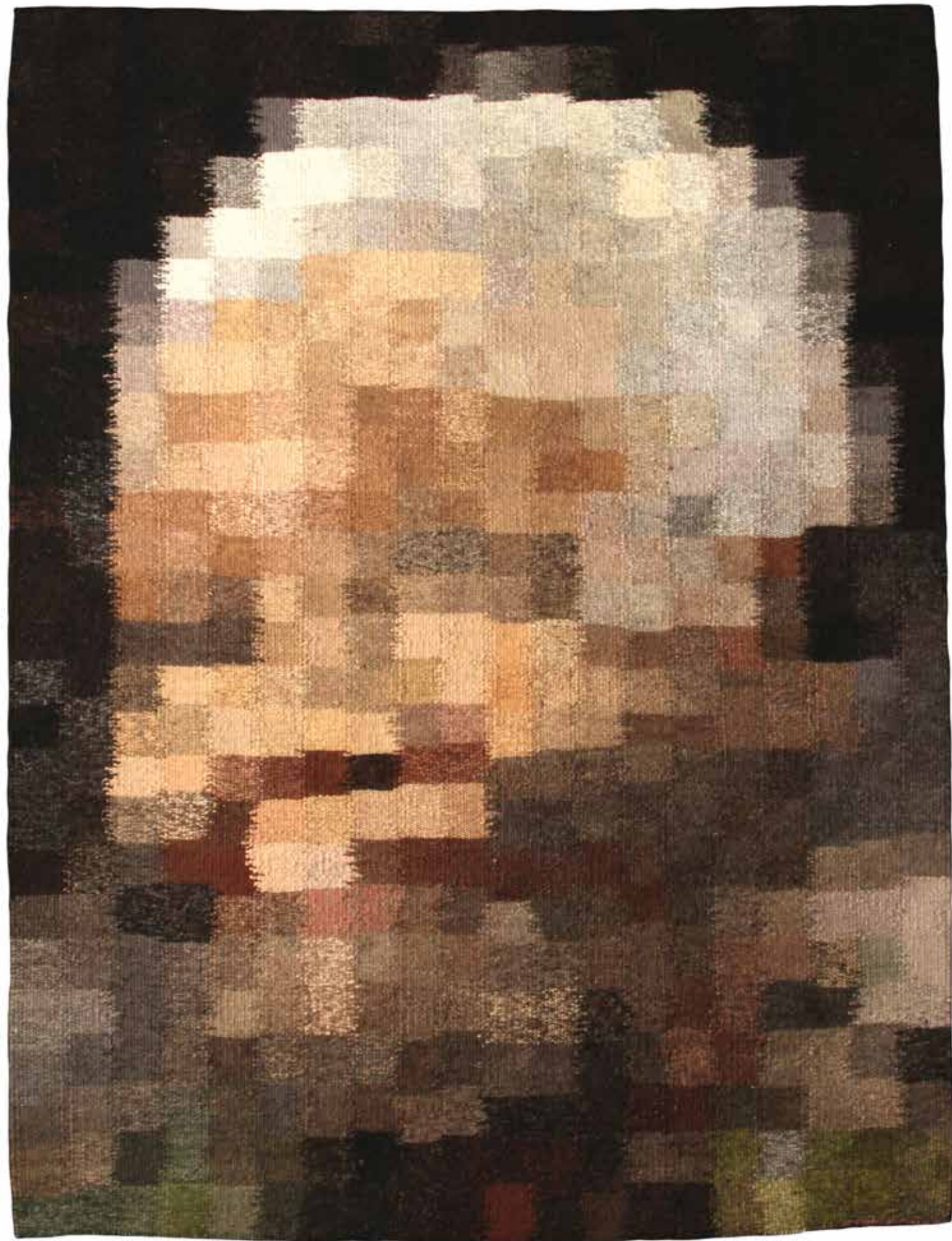
**DREAM**

2014

handwoven tapestry:

undyed aplaca

44" x 32"



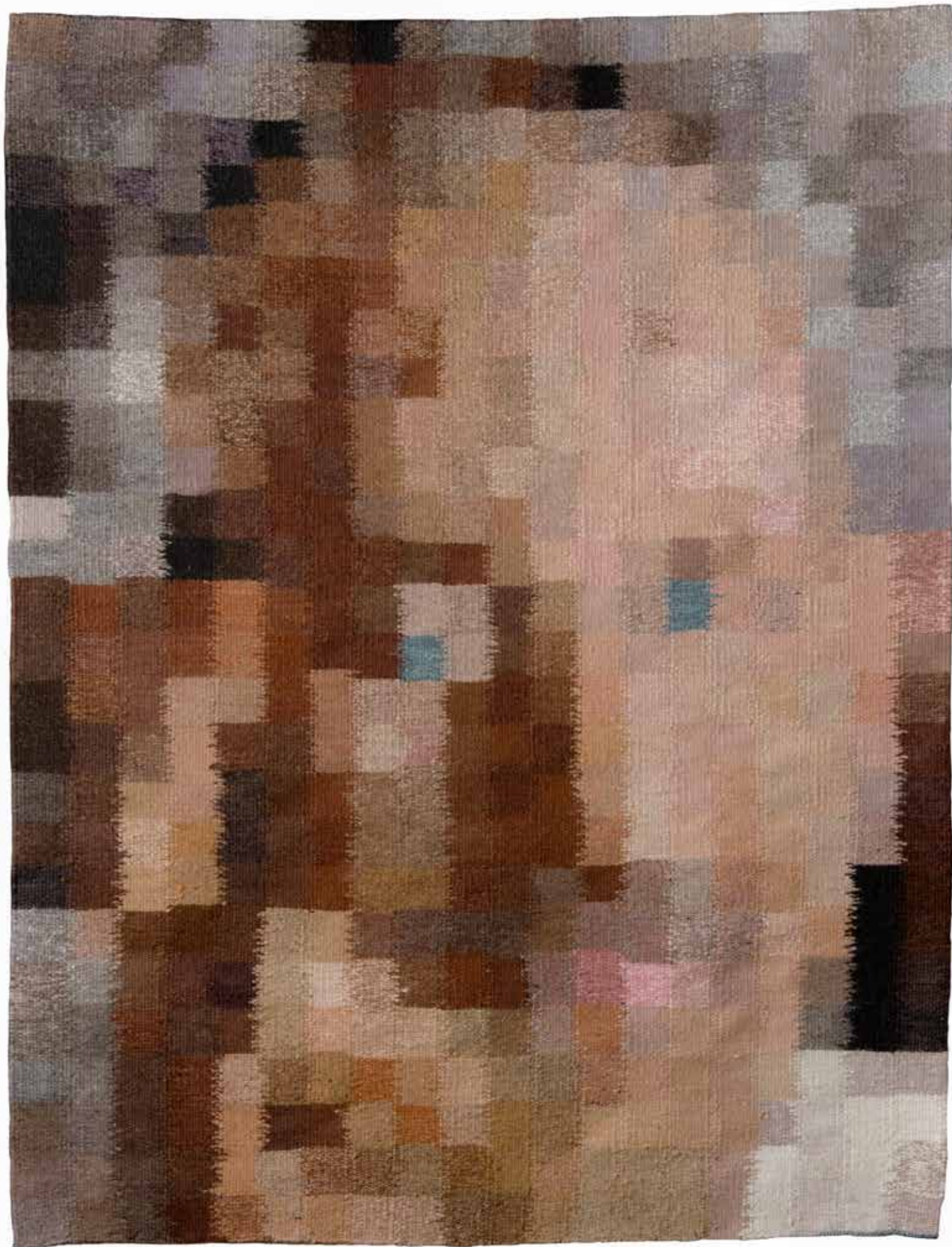
## RECONCILIATION

2014

handwoven tapestry:

wool, alpaca, camel; natural dyes

42" x 32"



## **CONTEMPLATION**

2013

handwoven tapestry:  
wool, natural dyes

41" x 32"



## STEPPE

2008

handwoven tapestry:

wool, alpaca, mohair, silk, cochineal, madder

63" x 38"



# ENDLESS FRAGMENT

2008

handwoven tapestry:

wool, natural dyes

33" x 18"





**LABRANG**

2006  
handwoven tapestry:  
wool, camel, dyes  
25" x 25"



**BAOAN**

2006  
handwoven tapestry:  
wool, silk, dyes  
25" x 25"



**LAKE YILHUN LHATSO**

2006  
handwoven tapestry:  
wool, silk, dyes  
25" x 25"



**DEN GOMPA**

2006  
handwoven tapestry:  
wool, silk, dyes  
25" x 25"



**YUSHU**

2006

handwoven tapestry:  
wool, alpaca, dyes  
25" x 25"



**GELUPKA**

2006

handwoven tapestry:  
wool, alpaca, dyes  
25" x 25"



**NIAYENDU**

2006

handwoven tapestry:  
wool, dyes  
25" x 25"



**MANIGANGO**

2006

handwoven tapestry:  
wool, alpaca, dyes  
25" x 25"

**TRANSITION**

2006

handwoven tapestry:

wool, dyes

31" x 39"



# NAIVETÉ

2005

handwoven tapestry:

wool, silk, linen, paper, ramie, cotton

42" x 30"



## SOLEMNITY

2005

handwoven tapestry:

wool, silk, alpaca, natural dyes

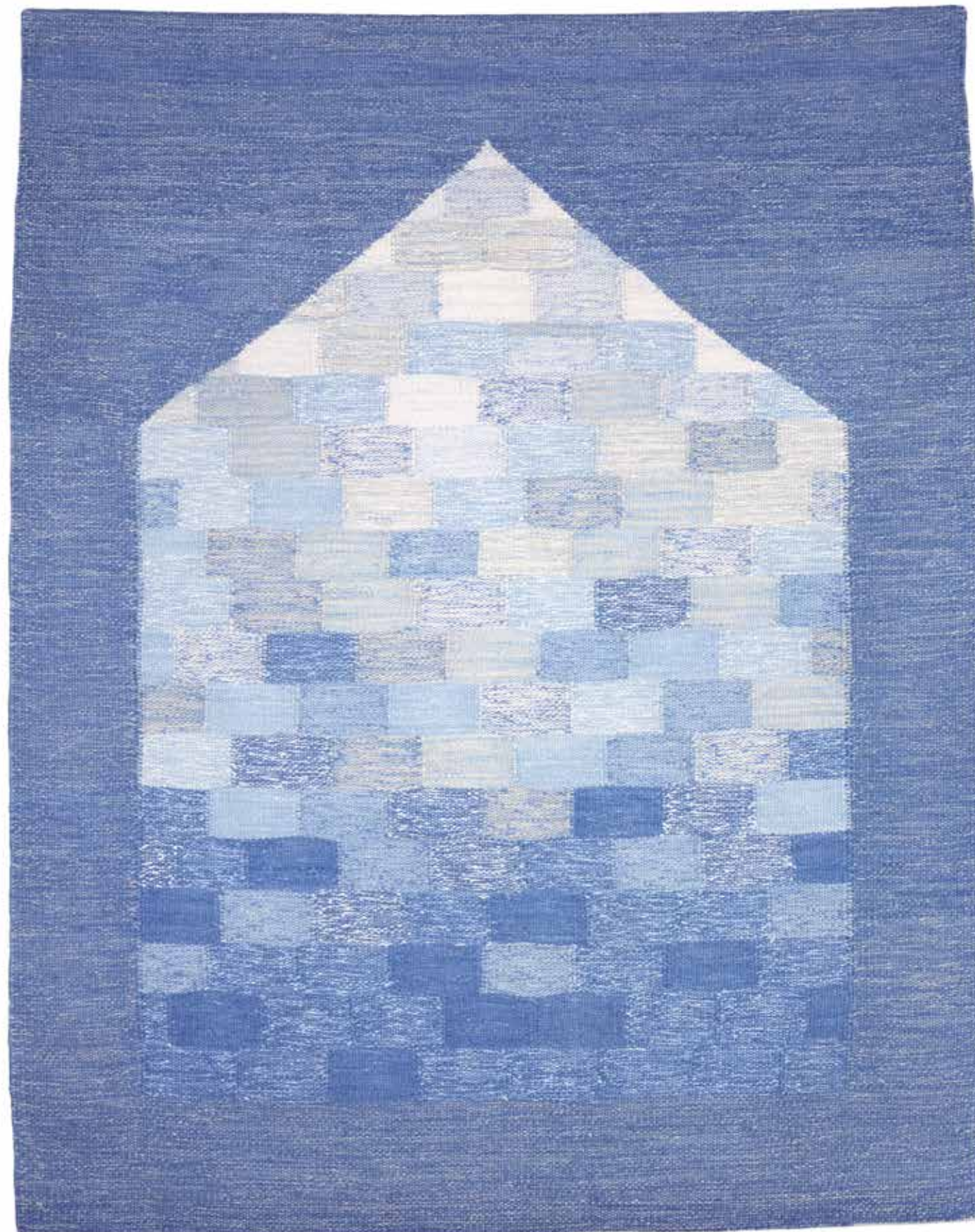
44" x 30"



## ILLUSIONS

2005

handwoven tapestry:  
wool, silk, indigo dye  
45" x 36"







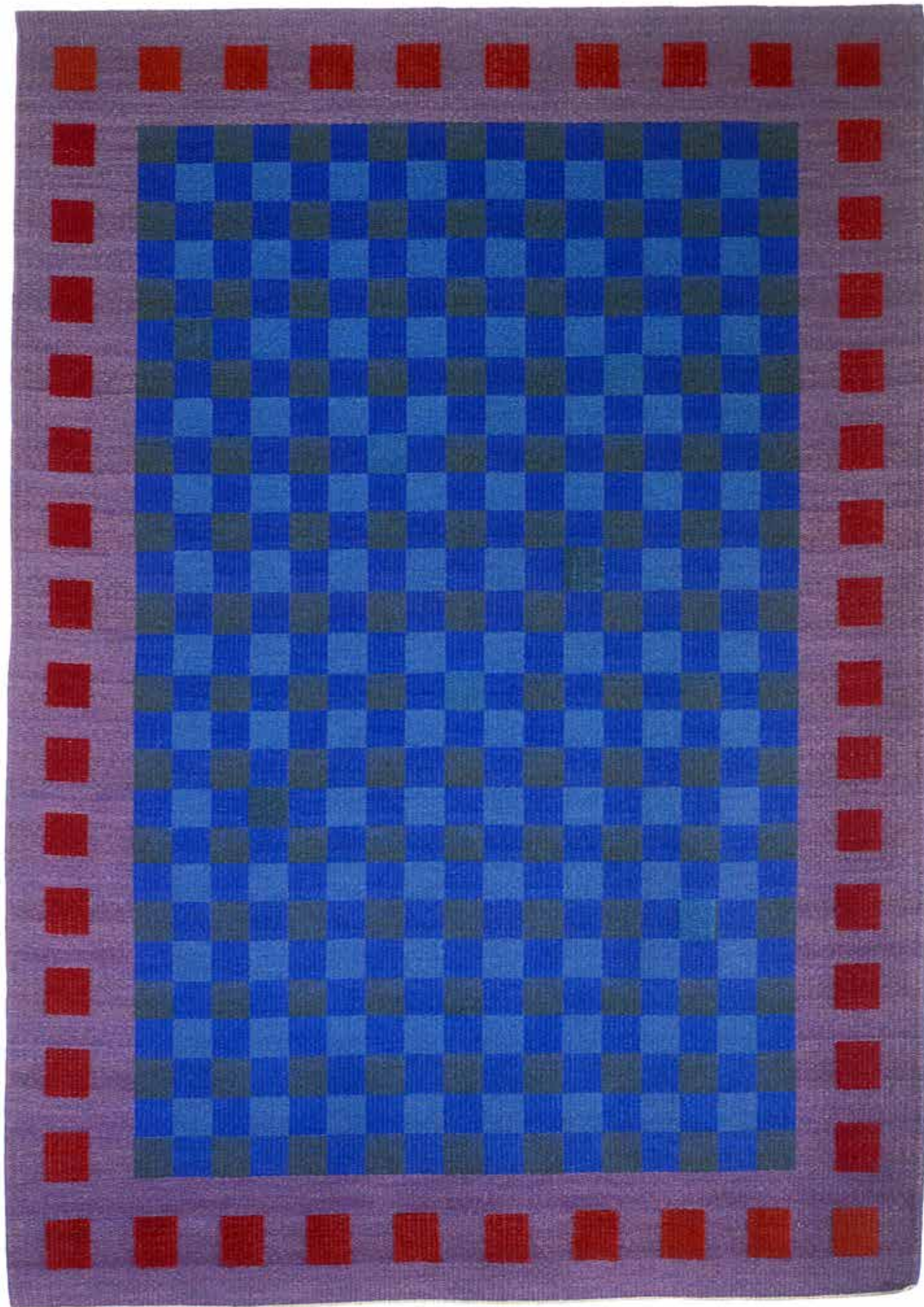
**SITA**  
2004

handwoven tapestry:  
indigo and lac dyed wool  
25" x 24"



**CANDRAMAS**  
2004

handwoven tapestry:  
hand-dyed wool and silk  
25" x 24"



## ARTEMIS

2001

handwoven rug:

hand-dyed wool on linen warp

80" x 58"



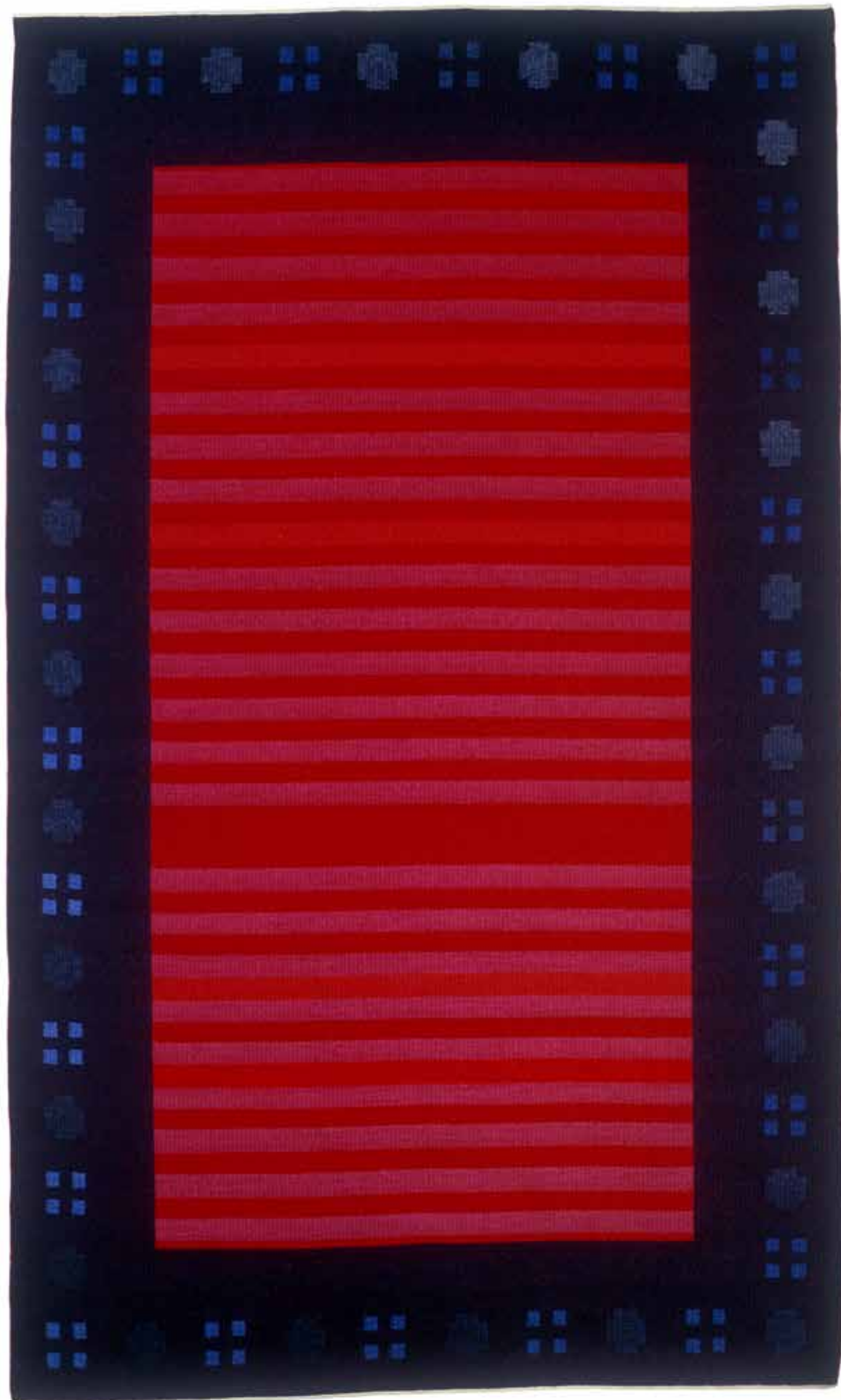
## EARTH, FIRE

2001

handwoven rug:

hand-dyed wool on linen warp

92" x 39"



## SISYPHUS

2000

handwoven rug:

hand-dyed wool on linen warp

97" x 58"

## THANK YOU

Many thanks to Ruta Saliklis and Jo Lauria for the opportunity to present my work at the San Luis Obispo Museum. It has been an absolute delight to work with both of them, and I appreciate their confidence in what I do.

Thanks also to Deborah Jarchow and Jo Lauria for careful proof-reading of my clumsy typing and lackadaisical re-reading of what I had written.

Lastly, my heart goes out to Regina Vorgang, whose knowledge and impeccable sense of design has made this catalog possible.

**Photo Credits:**

“Declarative” and “Imperative” by W. Scott Miles.

“Artemis” and “Sisyphus” courtesy of Gail Martin Gallery.

All other photos by Andrew Neuhart.



# THE EMPATHY OF PATIENCE

Michael F. Rohde  
[michaelrohde.com](http://michaelrohde.com)

February 1 - March 17, 2019

San Luis Obispo Museum of Art  
[sloma.org](http://sloma.org)

