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DREAMWEAVER

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It's one of those high tech dry cleaners with a computer and a keyboard labeled with colors to identify what's to be cleaned. The attendant glances at the folded shawl on the counter and pushes the "blue" key. Glancing at the shawl again, she presses "red". Unfolding it, she presses all the color keys and then asks, "What is this?"

It's a Randall Darwall. Its vibrant palette shifts so often that no two square inches are precisely the same. "Why use five colors when fifty will do nicely?" is this master weaver's motto. A Darwall is a chameleon. You can wear almost any of his pieces with any color clothing. This suggests that one is enough. But Darwall aficionados don't stop with one scarf, any more than a collector that nabs a Monet would hesitate to go after another one--and another. One Darwall fan owns more than 60 of his works, a considerable commitment given that the average price of one of his shawls is \$500. His collectors feel that it's money well spent. Anne Spirn, a professor of landscape architecture and planning at MIT and a Darwall devotee, says that "Randy's scarves aren't accessories, they're the main event."

Darwall, 54, Harvard-educated and a Cape Cod resident when he's not on the nomadic craft-show circuit, is among America's premier weavers of wearable work. "actually," says Beth Gerstein, executive director of Boston's Society of Arts and Crafts, "it doesn't get any better."

Darwall is resolute about making functional art, rather than wall hangings that look as if they are trying to be paintings. "It's a reaction to my elitist education," he explains, "the Harvard art historical view of the world that says there are only three good paintings." But there are some ranking members of the art world who consider his work museum worthy. Anne d'Harnoncourt, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, bought one of his pieces and then donated it to the museum's permanent collection.

Like the schedule of parents with schoolchildren, Darwall's year is built around a cycle of regular events. In his case, it's craft shows all over the country. The circuit's timing is the same each year: if it's February, it must be Baltimore. Over the past quarter century, Darwall has done 115 shows, which involves not only making the work, but packing and transporting it, then setting up a booth eye-catching enough to entice passersby.

A craft show, says Darwall, "is like Brigadoon. It goes from nothing to something on a Thursday, and at 5pm on a Sunday it all disappears until next time." A show is also a form of theater. "I get to do the sets, lights, and costumes, and be the star. It's a kind of egomaniacal performance."

His costar and life partner is Brian Murphy, a clinical social worker nicknamed the "drapemeister" for his wizardry at wrapping 9 foot shawls on prospective buyers and

encouraging them to luxuriate in the cloth. Murphy sends new Darwall owners away with an instruction sheet on draping, the equivalent of bringing a copy of Dr. Spock home from the hospital with the new baby. Wrapping is harder than diapering, though. Darwall novices who merely hang the scarves around their necks can look as if they are wearing a pair of curtains, albeit gorgeous ones.

This year Darwall is participating in a new show staged by a 105 year-old institution: The Society of Arts and Crafts is plunging into this highly competitive world with CraftBoston, which runs May 16--19 at the Hynes Auditorium. Like Boston's Crafts at the Castle, which happens in the thick of the Christmas shopping season, CraftBoston comes just in time for people to buy wedding and graduation gifts. Darwall says that the Society's venture will be distinguished by heavy educational programming, lectures and such. This is important to him. Although he gave up full-time teaching of art two decades ago, he still gives workshops. This fall, he's off to Australia to teach for several weeks.

"He's revered among younger weavers,:" says Spirn, who uses his work in her own classroom. She connects examples of his work with the way she sees landscape: as the juxtaposition of " deep structure"--the geology and climate of a place--and "surface structure"--the more ephemeral manmade additions like gardens. Darwall's "deep structure" is the warp; the "surface structure" is the weft which plays off of it.

Spirn wrote rhapsodically about him in her 1998 book, *The Language of Landscape*, explaining how his hues evolve: "Brown at one end, slipping through green, to purple at the other end, many stories or one story line with many phrases; the shawl ends in a palette of knotted twists. Once you have seen such a fabric others seem routine and regimented. Darwall is like a landscape author who sets the frame within which the future landscape will develop, to be shaped by many others."

Darwall is sitting in the dining room of the mid-Cape Cod cottage that he bought 15 years ago, "because it has a mother-in-law apartment with a second kitchen where I can cook colors all day." He talks about his craft: "I originally wanted to be a painter, but somehow all my colors blended into mud. Weaving is a way to set up conversations among them instead." When the cloth is worn, it becomes kinetic sculpture.

Darwall's father was a chaplain whose posts included the Cranbrook School outside Detroit, a campus designed by the great Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen. "It's where I saw amazing weaving for the first time," Darwall recalls, in the form of tapestries by Saarinen's wife, Loja.

Harvard came next. He studied art history there in the late 1960's, when Color Field painting was at its zenith. Darwall remembers regular encounters with a painting by the great color theorist Hans Hoffman, hung in the stairwell of the Fogg Art Museum. "That Hoffman taught me so much," says Darwall, who has become something of an authority on color himself. He's written about it in musical terms--pitch, rhythm, melody. "I can't hear all the subtleties of sound, but I can 'hear' color," Darwall once wrote in a weaving

journal, adding that his answer to the "Who's your favorite weaver?" question is jazz pianist George Shearing, who combined various themes and melodies into a seamless whole.

Harvard has never been particularly hospitable to art-making, never mind craft, and it was only after graduation in 1970 that Darwall tried weaving. In 1972 he moved on to graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he traded easel for loom. His studies complete, he began teaching at the Cambridge School of Weston, where a fellow faculty member, choreographer Martha Armstrong Gray, enlisted him to create the decor for a dance called Primus which premiered at the Harvard Summer Dance Center in 1974.

It was the era of organic forms and earth tones, fiber art that looked as if it wanted to attack you. Gray's commission incorporated all these giant growthy things that I'd been doing in grad school," Darwall says. the production was a Star Treckie thing, with the dancers emerging from a huge web. A relic from it--a 100 pound, all beige hunk of braided, knotted, tasseled and quite tortured looking fiber--hangs on Darwall's living room wall.

It's hard to see how he got from this galumphing extravaganza to the extreme refinement of his current work. Reaching into a stack of shelves, he pulls out the bridge: a 1978 scarf in a much cruder weave that he subsequently developed, with a sculptural element still present in the form of fiber lumps. Even when unworn, his work is sometimes still 3-D, but more subtly so. Scarves will erupt with short thread he calls "eyelashes"; he will add wool to give heft he can't achieve with his favorite fiber, silk. His purist reverence for silk has also softened: he will use synthetics if they seem right.

By now, Darwall runs a cottage industry that employs about a half dozen people, on and off. Murphy, whom he met in 1986, designs clothing, pillows and quilts made of Darwall textiles. As the two travel the world, they collect fabrics. Back home, Darwall takes out some colors and adds others to the cloth. "We value the potential the cloth has rather than what it is when we buy it," he says. The re-dyeing process is "trial by water instead of fire." Together, Darwall's team turns out 100 or so pieces a month. He's still hands-on--he does all the dyeing and strings most of the warps--but "after that, I'm the cheerleader." This workshop approach is typical for successful artisans.

Rachel Switzer, one of the weavers who work for Darwall, stands in a tiny room in his house, stringing a wooden loom with 30 yards of colored threads that will become the warp. She's one of the few entrusted with this task which Darwall used to do exclusively. Once the warp is in place, she'll weave a weft in reaction to it. "I feel I contribute a lot to the design," she answers when asked if she feels more like an employee than a fellow artist. "It's making different decisions all the time." She's a true collaborator, although it is Darwall's name on the result.

Darwall's is in many ways a no-tech enterprise. A battered, brick-weighted briefcase he inherited from his father holds taut the threads that haven't yet made it to the loom,

providing tension " like the tension that existed between my father and me," Darwall is fond of saying. Outside more threads that Darwall has just dyed are drying on a clothesline. While most of his work is created with the same means that existed before the power loom, for several years now he enlisted computers and computer experts to aid in designs that grow ever more complex.

Calling Darwall's work "craft" would seem to link it with the world of macrame plant hangers. He has clear views on the distinctions among "art," "craft," and "decorative arts." There isn't any, he says, between the first two, a position the "fine arts" world is gradually accepting. Craft and decorative arts differ in intent, he says. "Contemporary craft is not just making patterns, but giving people something to think about. It's the difference between Dale Chihuly's glass and Tiffany's."

Darwall's work is more wonderful than any painting to me, says collector Mary Eleanor Toms. "You continually see new things in them. I have them on my wall. I wear them. I use them as table runners if I'm sure that no one is going to spill." Her Darwalls play a significant part in her professional life as head of palliative care service at Kent Hospital in Warwick, Rhode Island. "They bring happiness to patients who don't have much joy in their lives at that point," she says. "They always want to touch and feel them."

Peggy Taylor, a top Washington DC lobbyist for the AFL-CIO, owns more than 60 Darwalls. She may hold the record. "Washington politics are pretty grim," she says. "Randy's work helps me get through the day." It's her one indulgence, she says. "I drive a 16 year old car."

For Darwall's 50th birthday, she gave him back one of his early pieces. "He didn't have anything from that particular period," she says, "because he couldn't afford to keep his own work back then." Taylor intends eventually to give her collection to a museum of Darwall's choice, so that the story of his career can be told fully and publicly.

Darwall inspires that kind of devotion. On the other hand, collectors are people who lust after objects, and not all of them are equally magnanimous. On hearing of Taylor's intentions, another woman with dozens of Darwalls says, "I'm glad you told me that, because it means I won't have to give mine away."