

Hillu Liebelt —

Adding A New Dimension



Gillian Thornton talks to the innovative textile designer, Hillu Liebelt, whose stunning work adds to life's rich tapestry.

Ask Hillu Liebelt what she loves about weaving and she smiles with the serenity of someone who is party to a very precious secret. She will happily tell you about the creative challenge of rainbow colours, about the therapeutic effect of working her beloved loom, but it's not till you watch her actually weaving a tapestry that you really begin to understand. Even then, you know you've only scratched the surface.

The Swedish loom — bought secondhand, "as new" — stands in the front room of Hillu's North London home opposite shelves laden with cones of coloured yarn. On the walls hang woven works of three-dimensional art — hexagons bound together with subtle threads; oblong tapestries stretched over a curved aluminium base; enormous shaped insects in bright colours with wire antennae.

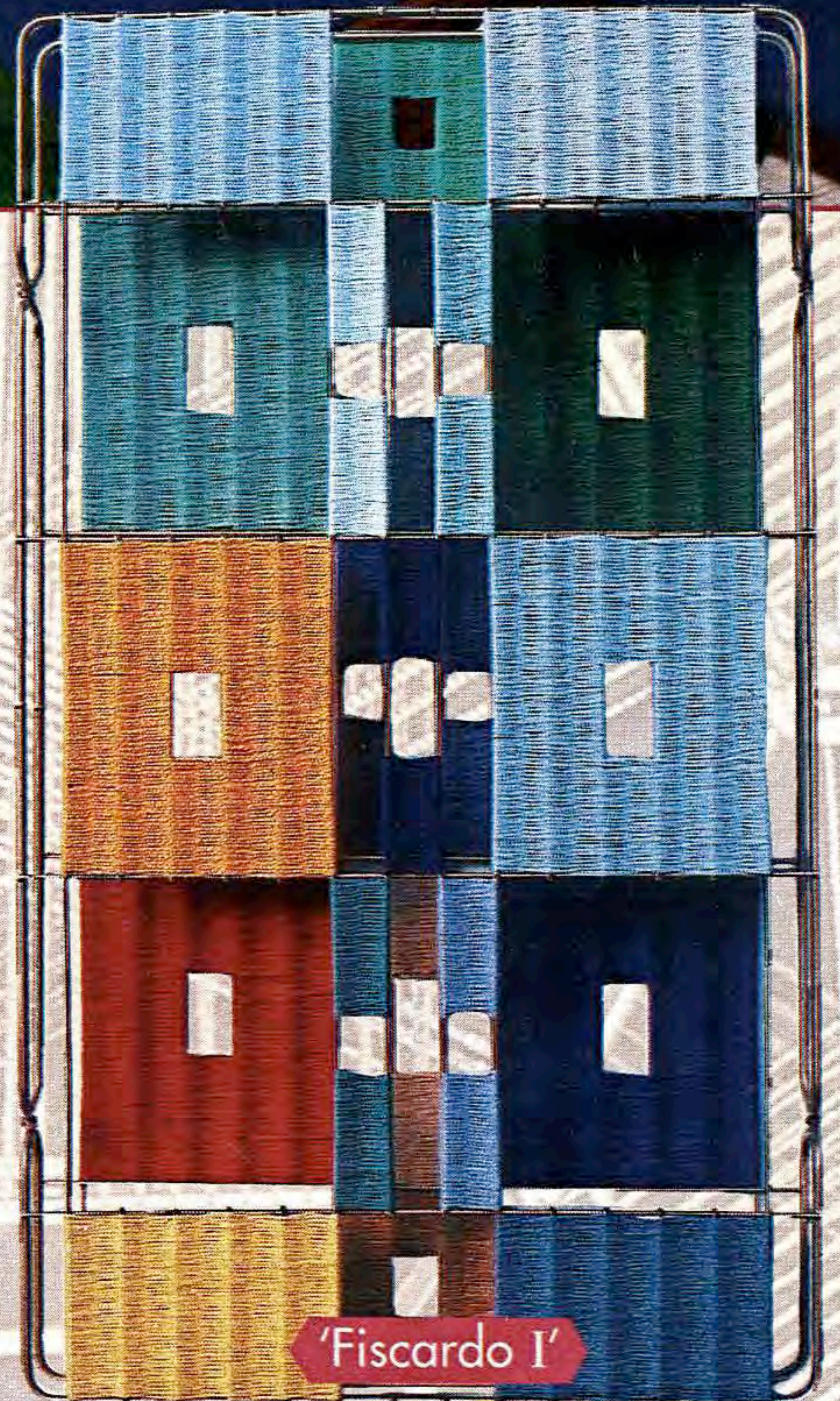
If your idea of tapestry is Medieval hunting scenes and elegant ladies in flowing robes, prepare to be bowled over. For Hillu has brought the ancient craft fairly and squarely into the 21st century. Her techniques may be based on the traditional Gobelin style, but she's taken weaving into another dimension.

"I get very cross when I hear people in Britain referring to needlework as tapestry," she says as her fingers deftly fill in another terracotta line of a decorative Aboriginal shield. "Tapestry is not needlework — it's always woven.

"Tapestry weaving reached its peak between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it was a difficult and expensive medium which only the very rich could afford to commission, so it gradually died out until about a hundred and fifty years ago when it was revived by the Gobelin manufacture in Paris and craftsmen like William Morris in England."

Now Hillu is weaving art of a very different kind. She started nearly twenty years ago by creating woven "pictures" with modern themes. A London taxi driver in his cab is just one example of what she laughingly refers to as her "flat" phase.

Today, she specialises in shaped and three-dimensional tapestries incorporating wire and even panels of metal. Her main materials are mercerised cotton, spun rayon and rayon filament, silk and linen.



'Fiscardo I'



Tools of the trade



'Calli II'

"It's so wonderful to sit in front of this big wooden structure and slowly create a piece of textile art," explains Hillu. She was just twenty-one when she came to London from Germany in 1980 to marry Lutz, a London-based theatre critic and cultural correspondent for German radio stations. "With embroidery, I always felt I was piercing into something — which I didn't much like — but tapestry weaving is so much gentler."

Hillu is, one feels, a very gentle person, though obviously blessed with a quiet determination to tackle whatever job is in hand. She'd loved textiles from a young age and one of her best ever childhood presents was a mini-loom on which she claims she produced some "simply awful results". But she was hooked.

Weaving classes led to tapestry classes and in 1991, Hillu decided to work for a recognised qualification. Two years later, her Greek-based portfolio earned her a certificate from the Association of Guilds of Weavers.

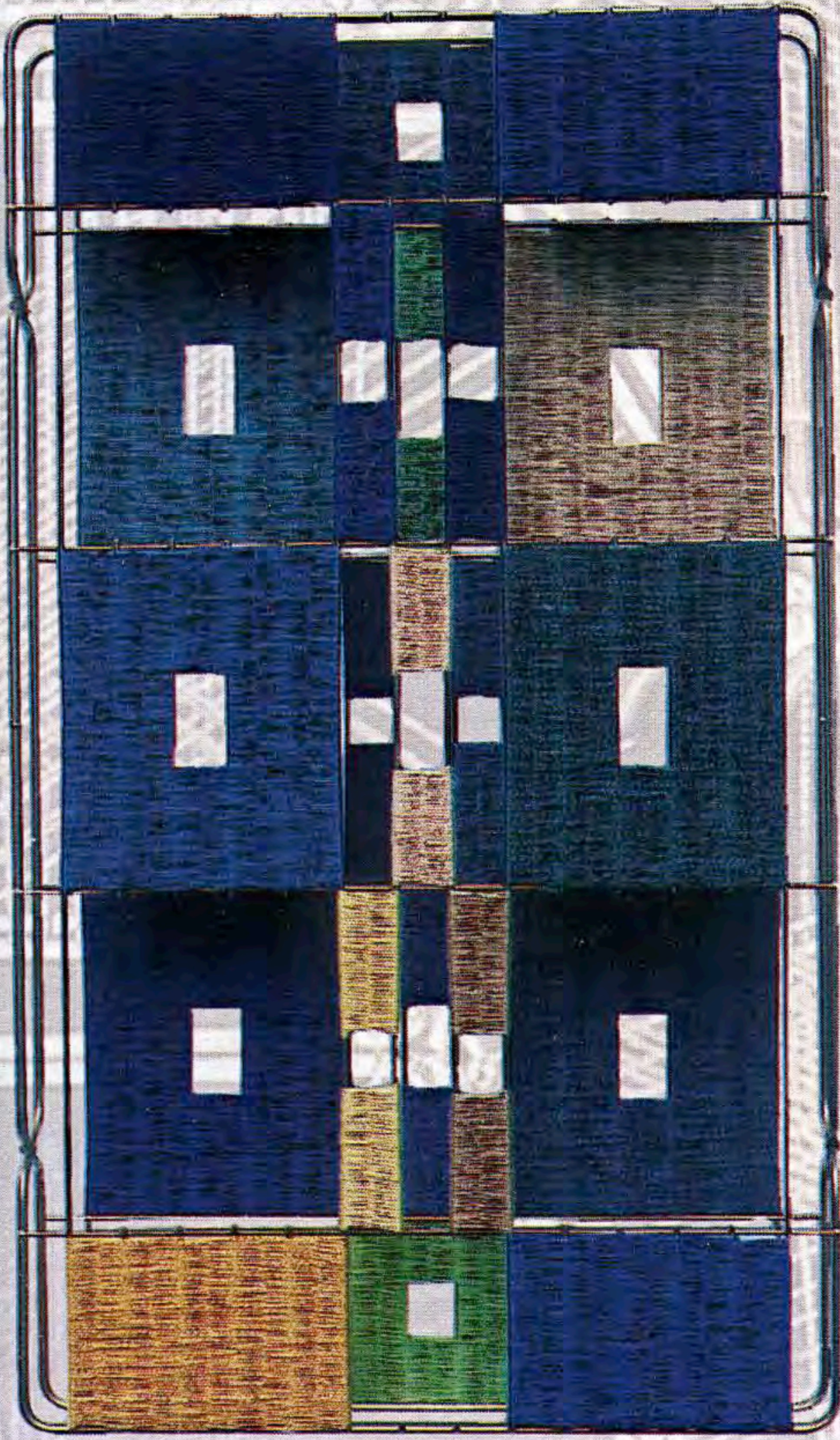
"At that point, I thought I'd better take it all a bit more seriously," She laughs. "I'd done a little exhibiting at Guild exhibitions, but once I got my certificate, I started to send work off to France and Italy, and apply to other galleries. At that time I was still weaving flat pictures which imitated paintings.

"My breakthrough came when I was offered my first solo exhibition at an art gallery in Frankfurt. Lutz and I had gone to see an old friend of his who was a well-known artist, so I'd taken a few photos of my work to show him. Amongst them were two tapestries of butterfly wings.

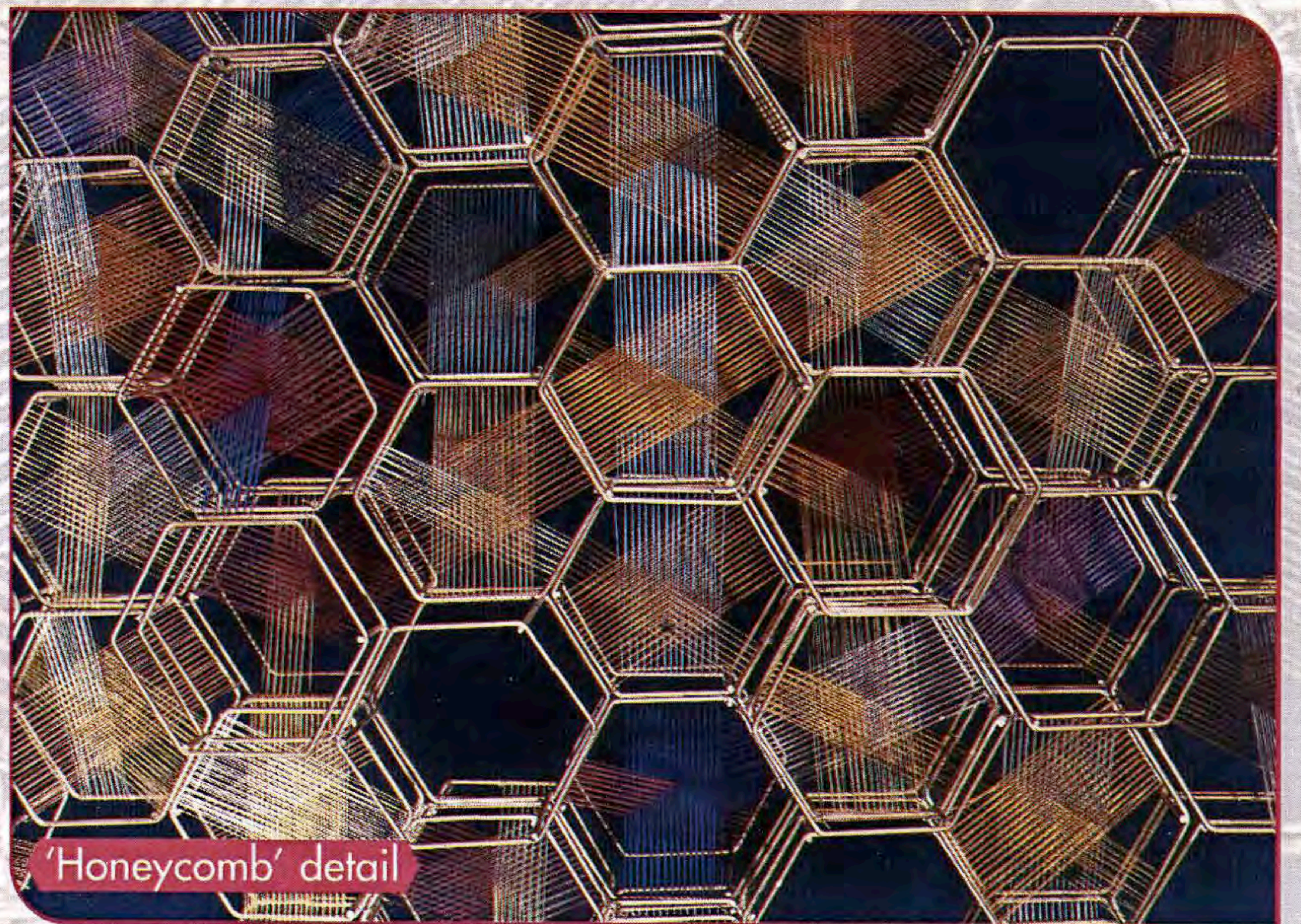
"We'd had a talk at the London Weavers by a microbiologist who showed slides of butterfly wings taken through a microscope. The patterns and colours were absolutely stunning, and I'd used them as a basis for some designs.

"Anyway, Lutz's friend liked my work but I didn't think any more of it until he phoned a couple of months later to say that he had found a gallery for me.

But they wanted a whole exhibition of butterflies, which I didn't want to do, so I turned it down. Then a few weeks later, I thought how stupid I'd been and asked if the offer still stood. Fortunately it did."



'Fiscardo II'



'Honeycomb' detail

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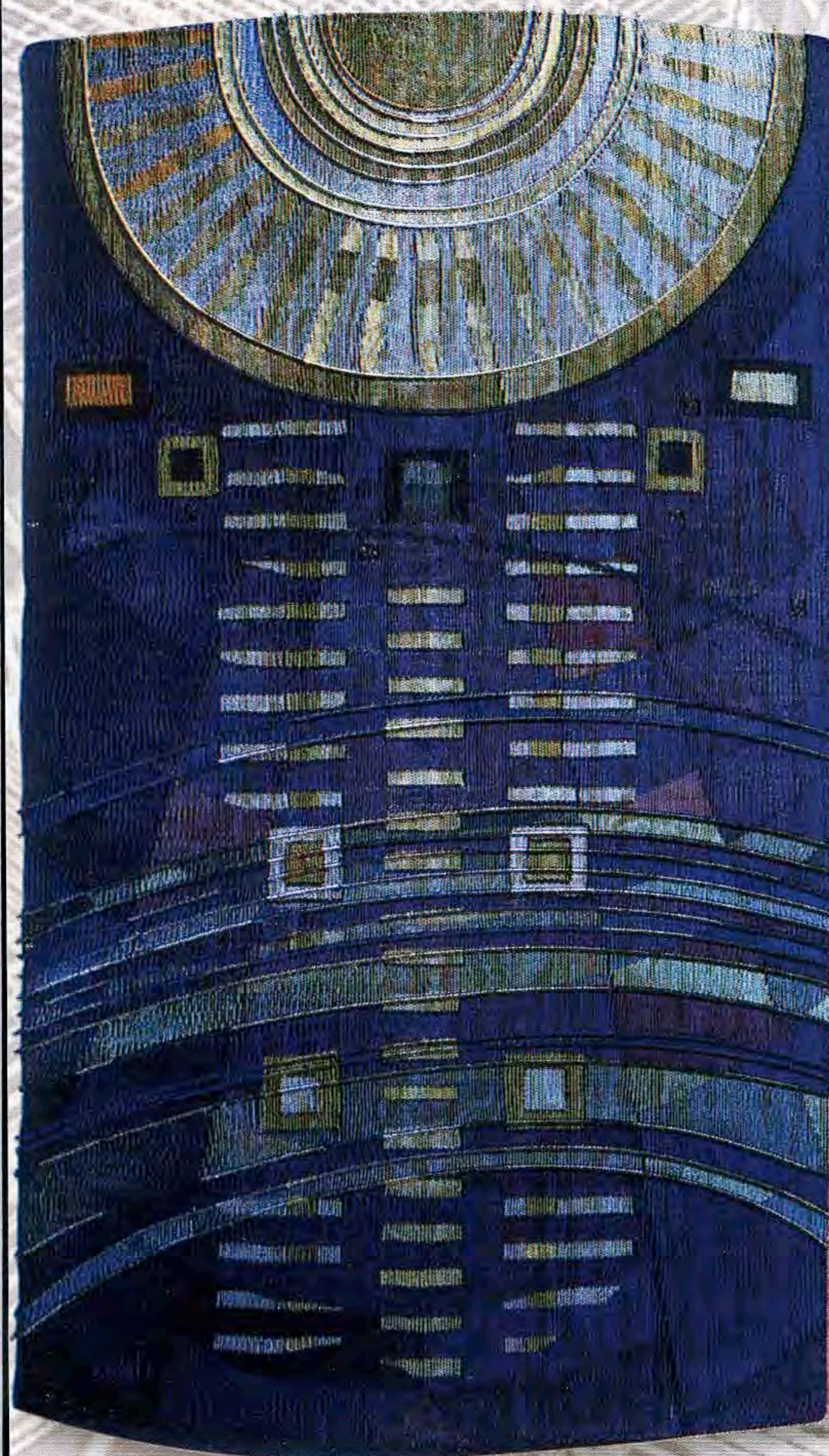
'Graugestalt'

Working largely from photographs in books, Hillu began to turn out pieces for the exhibition but after a year, found she was getting bored with butterflies and decided to slip in a few fun insects as well. She had done a summer school with William Jeffries who had encouraged Hillu to use wire and other materials to create three-dimensional pieces, so she started to experiment.

"Very few people were weaving shaped tapestries at that time because it was really fiddly to get rid of the waste," she explains, handing over a giant locust with curling antennae and a shaped, rigid body. "You have to cut through the vertical threads — the warp — and stitch them behind out of sight, but you can create some really eye-catching pieces."

The Frankfurt exhibition ran for two months over the winter of 1996/7 and was a big success, so much so that Hillu was invited to stage another one in December last year. This time she produced some very different types of tapestry.

'Moonshield'



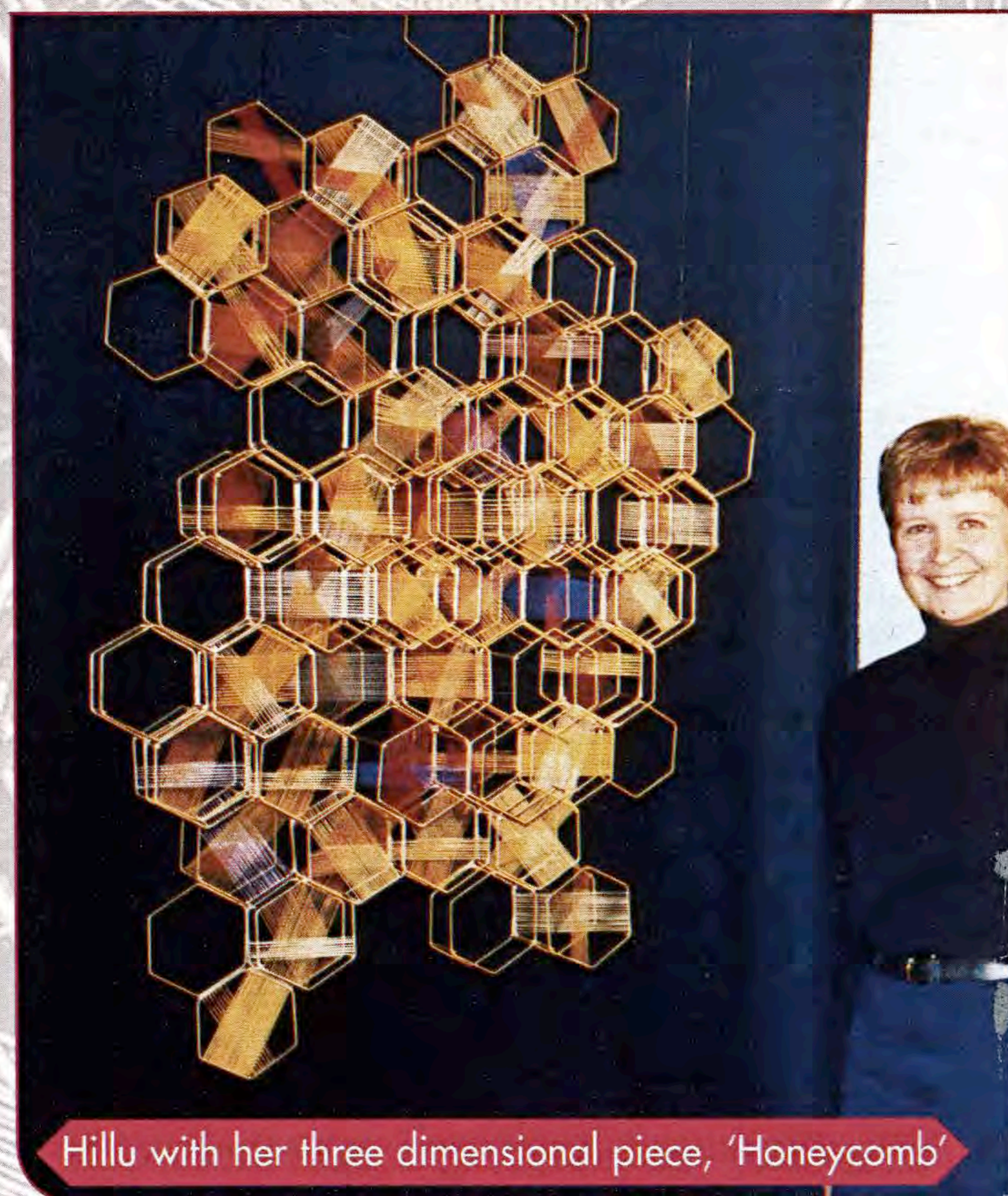
"The insects proved really popular whenever I put them on show," says Hillu, who can frequently be seen at exhibitions around the UK. "But I didn't want to get labelled as the butterfly and insect weaver, so I began playing with colours and moving away from realistic pieces."

"I tried working on different levels — an upper and lower plane, which would cast shadows and allow the piece to be viewed from different angles. I was lucky enough to be given a large quantity of unwanted yarn by a tassel manufacturer — ends of cones that were too short to be of further use — and that gave my work a real boost."

It's hard not to be inspired when you've got twenty shades of gold to play with!

Inspiration also comes from collections in galleries and museums. In 1997, Hillu completed her first woven shield — an idea she had been wanting to work on for a long time but only turned to when the death of her father in Germany interrupted her normal work routine.

Hillu had been captivated by the great variety of battle and dance shields she had seen at the British Museum and the now defunct Museum of Mankind in



Hillu with her three dimensional piece, 'Honeycomb'



Amongst the shields is a trio of curved, upright pieces with an Egyptian feel — Rainshield, Sunshield and Moonshield — which feature the same design in different colour combinations. Worked in rayon filament thread and textured with woven wires, the shields catch the changing light to give different effects according to the time of day.

They are slim oblong shields in bright primary colours with openings for the metallic base to shine through, a shaped Aztec-style piece with a tail like a swordfish and an eye-catching Goldshield with treated metal panels in gold and green.

Catch them if you can at some of this year's UK stitching shows and prepare to be amazed.

'Goldshield'

'Nachtaus und nachtein' (top) 'Im Spätrot' (bottom)

London. So working from her sketches, she set about producing something radically different from the exotic flying creatures of previous years.

The following year, with family life back on a more even keel, Hillu tackled one of her most stunning pieces to date — Honeycomb — a three dimensional hanging featuring interwoven wire hexagons.

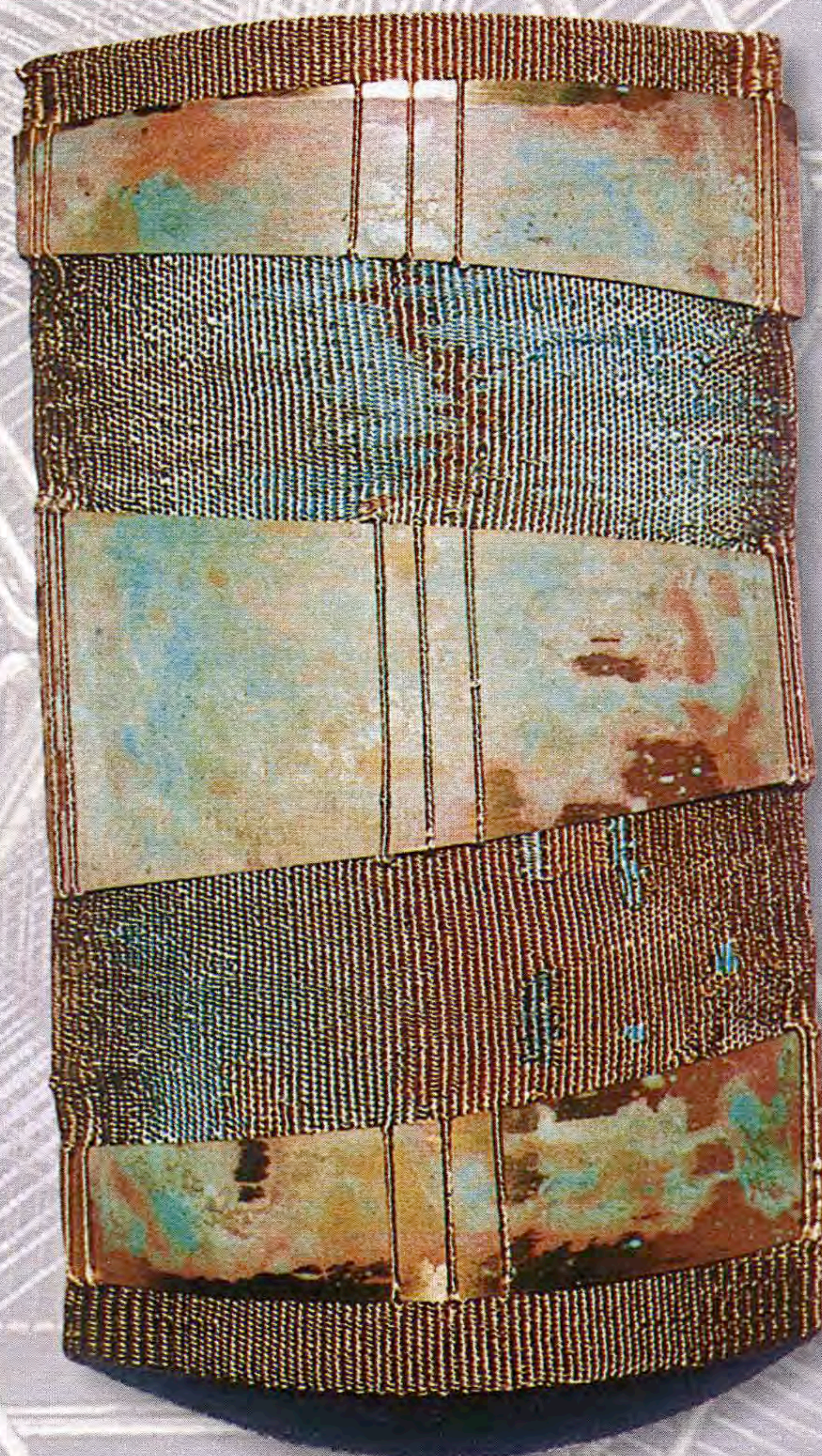
"Determined though I was to get away from the flat butterfly tapestries of my early career, I was still fascinated by their shapes and colours," explains Hillu, opening a book of butterfly photographs.

"I'd seen these pictures of butterflies with almost transparent wings divided into delicate hexagon shapes, so I found a company who produced skeletons for lamp shades and asked them to make me a whole series of wire hexagons on different levels. I then wove different-coloured yarns through them to link them on different planes.

"It was tremendous fun to do but it took ninety minutes to weave each unit, so I used to make myself do one hexagon a day. Some of them I left blank on purpose, but a friend reckons those were my Sunday units!"

Much though she enjoyed doing Honeycomb, Hillu still found herself being pulled by the idea of a series of shields. She carried on planning different shapes and colour schemes, so when the Frankfurt gallery offered Hillu a second solo exhibition, she knew exactly what theme to adopt.

A large shield can represent more than two hundred hours of work and the collection has taken two years to complete. Hillu generally works around seven hours a day — planning colours, drawing out designs, and then working at her loom as the piece takes shape, line by painstaking line. But as pre-exhibition pressure mounts, she can often work late into the night.



WANT TO TRY?

Three or four times each year, Hillu opens her home to around eight students to teach them basic weaving techniques using wires, metal foils, papers and veneers. Courses run from Monday to Friday, 10.30 am to 6 pm and cost £105, including all materials.

The courses are suitable for all standards from complete beginners to experienced weavers, and whilst most students are women, Hillu has also taught two enthusiastic men. "I'd love to teach more men," she reveals. "Their approach to colour is quite different from ours and the results can be amazing." (Tel: 020 8340 7785 for details).