

Book Review

Sublime Light: Tapestry Art of DY Begay

Editors: Cécile R. Ganteaume and Jennifer McLerran

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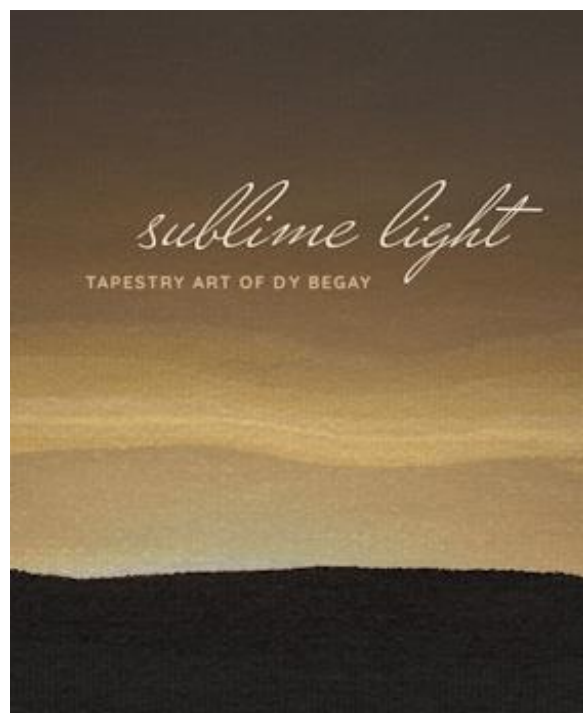
Date published: 2024

272 pages, including 175 full colour and black-and-white illustrations, essays, bibliography and index, and an exhibition checklist of 80 tapestries by DY Begay

Hardback

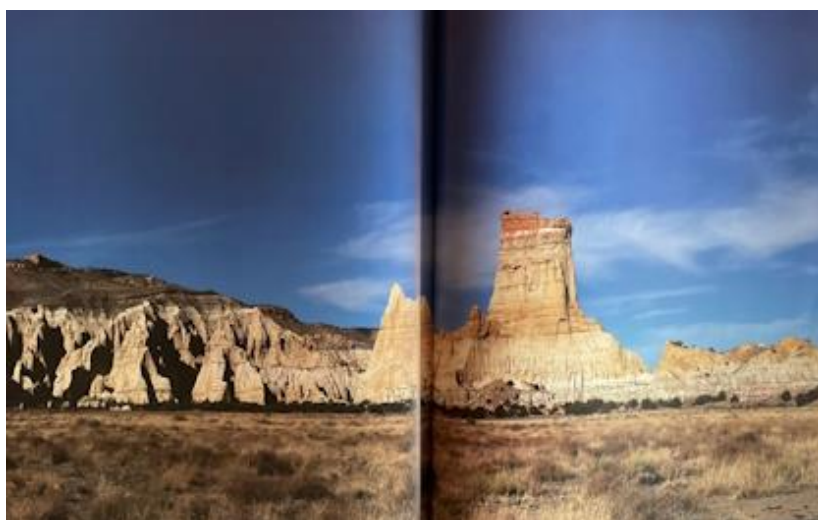
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Review by Sally Reckert, 2024



Sublime Light: The Tapestry Art of DY Begay (cover)

“Begay’s distinctive tapestry designs are rooted in the colours of the light and high-desert topography of Tséłání” (Cécile R. Ganteaume).



*Northern View of rock formations at Tséłání
(National Museum of the American Indian)*

The exhibition *Sublime Light: The Tapestry Art of DY Begay* opened in September 2024, in Washington D.C. at The National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute. It closes July 13, 2025. To accompany the exhibition the book under review was published.

Focusing on Begay’s tapestries since 2000, this handsomely produced and beautifully illustrated book with its thoughtful essays places DY Begay and her tapestry art within both her Diné culture and homeland, Tséłání, in the Diné (Navajo) reservation, and the art world of the West.

Essays in the book are by the editors and exhibition’s curators Cécile R. Ganteaume and Jennifer McLerran. Also included are essays by Jennifer Nez Denetdale, America Meredith, Rowie Shebala and Luci Tapahonso, in English and Diné.

The images in *Sublime Light* — tapestry, landscape and domestic scenes — introduce us to Diné culture and Begay’s homeland in Arizona, Tséłání. So does the editors’ decision to include Navajo text where the essayist is Diné. Navajo is a rich and fascinating language, far beyond the scope of this review, so I’ve added a link to a Wikipedia article (see last page).

Some of Begay's sketchbook notes are included alongside the images of her tapestries. They reveal not only her creative process but also something of Diné culture, and its ability to adapt in order to retain its identity without sacrificing its heritage. The role of women and weaving in Diné culture are highlighted with references to Diné sheep husbandry, which was primarily matriarchal.

Begay's tapestries have always been evocative of Tsélaní. According to art historian, Kate Morris, the indigenous artist is inside the landscape rather than outside looking in: "thus indigenous representations stress an intimacy with the land". Unique personal perspectives of the landscape, as in Western art, are of little interest to Diné weavers. Rather, they strive for Hózhó, the balance and harmony of lives lived within the landscape and its ecology.



*'Parfleche Landscape' (2017) wool and insect dye,
43 5/16" x 28 7/8"
(photo credit National Museum of the American Indian)*

Begay learned to weave the geometric simplicity of Diné blankets at boarding school in Chinle and from an early age was attracted to the simple, bold colours of parfleches, rawhide containers painted with natural pigments by women of the Plains people. These experiences led her to experiment with her compositions.

The photographs of the Arizona mesa and skylscapes in 'Sublime Light' show powerful gradations of colour particularly at the cusps of dawn and dusk

Begay's tapestries reflect these gradations as horizontal bands of colour tones, harmonising her subject of land and sky. Her skilled use of colour is most evident in her depiction of halation, a narrow and brighter band of light, a glow either side of the horizon line. This draws the viewer into the work, while reflecting Begay's innate sense of the balance and harmony of Hózhó.

While Begay's tapestries are culturally and technically rooted in the traditions of Chinle, where she spent her early years in boarding school, and in those of her family homeland, Tsélaní, they are also modern.

In 1987 Begay met the Swedish tapestry artist, Helena Hernmarck, at a gallery in New York. Hernmarck encouraged Begay to concentrate on and expand her innate sense of colour, "advising her to weave tapestries that developed and expressed her own creativity".

Begay's sketchbook notes accompanying 'Monumental Edge 2' express her joy at weaving with red "łichíí'ígíí bee asht'óh" which she translates to "weaving with red...It gives me energy."



*'Monumental Edge 2' (2016) Wool, and plant,
insect and synthetic dyes 77 1/2 x 39"
(photo credit Walter Larrimore for NMAI)*

Supported by Hernmarck's encouragement and friendship, Begay travelled to look at the weavings of other groups and artists, such as Chilkat weaving in British Columbia and Alaska. She followed in the footsteps of Annie Albers, Lenore Tawney and Sheila Hicks in exploring the woven techniques and dyes, particularly indigo, of Central and South America and the Far East.

"The indigo colours I applied in 'Enchanted Indigo' describe my admiration for and obsession with bił doottł'izh (blue)"

Begay is a dyer of great skill and experience always experimenting with plant and insect dyes and selecting wool tones from her Churro sheep to expand her palette. Although she is not averse to using synthetic dyes, she values the opportunity to explore and experiment with dyes from Tsélaní's plants. "The plants give me permission to obtain colours...they are fragile, and I have to give them blessings. There are places on the reservation where there are no longer any signs of the native plants".

For those of you able to get to The National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC before July 13, 2025, you'll find a rich, colourful and thought-provoking exhibition in Sublime Light: The Tapestry Art of DY Begay.

For those of us less fortunate, this book, published to accompany the exhibition, is an introduction to a tapestry weaver whose work and origin are definitely worth getting to know.

Links

Link to Wikipedia article on Navajo language: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navajo_language
[Sublime Light: Tapestry Art of DY Begay exhibition details](#)



'Enchanted Indigo' 2002, Wool and plant dye 24 5/8 x 26"
(photo credit Walter Larrimore for NMAI)