Walking through the squalls of winter, I squint into the day’s grisaille with a hat at eye level and scarf half-way up my nose: the world becomes a cold stripe embroidered with long lines of falling sleet.

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson’s tapestries are like that. Inspired by the landscapes of her native Iceland, they seem full of frozen winds and geothermal currents, like hot tremors of geological activity meeting trembling, frost-bitten hands.

EARTH, WIND + FIRE

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson @ MOCA Cleveland

By Douglas Max Utter

Landscapes, a late subject in Western art, in like a screen or stage viewed from just beyond the footlights, a place midway between quarks and God. It stands in for the body itself, for the matrix of our perceptual apparatus where memory knits time and detail together.

But it is the immanence of the larger-than-self — a sense of the closeness of the divine — that makes some landscapes so well, sublime. For whatever reason, the emotional scale of landscapes has no limits. There are Claude Lorrain’s idyllic vistas and the tempests of Turner, Caspar David Friedrich’s melancholy pesty, speaking of edenic promise hidden in nature, and the epic abstract geology of Clifford Hill, with its roots in the bold textiles of Southwestern Native American cultures. All about or murmur about space and freedom, and the abyss of time.

Jónsson’s tapestry Ice Breaking is easily recognizable as a depiction of that natural phenomenon, yet it also recalls Brice Marden’s interstices loops of paint and ink. A tangle of sometimes jagged, sometimes gently curving lines cut across Jónsson’s horizontal space. Two monumental, composed of darker and lighter lines, create illusions of light and shadow, surface and depth. Jazz-like riffs, repetitions, quotations and sudden dissonances make the eye dance between surface and subject, as with Marden and many contemporary visual artists.

Jónsson paints her images on silk yarn prior to weaving. The weaving then translates the image, so to speak, structuring the informality of painting or stenciling via the grid of the loom. As in printmaking, where the weight of the press lends gesture toward a graver permanence, and toward reproduction, Jónsson’s loom proclaims a deeper order.

Perhaps even more striking and certainly more abstract is the tapestry Clouds. Dark grey jetsam floats toward the upper left corner, inscribed in Jónsson’s creamy silk warp. Configured in a deconstructing cluster, these irregular blotches hint at a former meaning, as if they had once formed an ideogram. At the upper right horizon a much smaller glimpse of dim marke, like a distant flick of grille. Painter’s bubble shapes oculate like land masses, poking diagonally into the picture plane from the bottom edge.

Again Richter comes to mind, in this case due to the boldness and oddness of the artist’s choices. There is nothing picturesque here, of course, or in any of Jónsson’s depictions. Nothing, in fact, recognizable. It is not even possible to determine the relation between figures and ground. Probably the Clouds of the title refer to the broad, eternally muffled opalescence of light silk. The Crossing shapes then become gaps in the low, fast-moving cloud cover of a winter night sky. The effortless elegance of the composition recalls not only Richter, but Jónsson’s materials and palette underscores a resemblance to classic Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy.

As Jónsson works manually, her subject matter expands to infinity. Her pot-holder sized embroideries at MOCA are studies of nebulae, cosmic formations and events. Core of the Whirlpool Galaxy looks like a purple protob, or maybe a cross section of a walnut, though, like many of her ink drawings also on display at MOCA, echoes Jónsson’s earlier renditions of brain scans. Quasar Companion Galaxy is like the core of a lava lamp or an illustration of a cell replicating itself. Supernovas is a circular, radial structure, like a maze or a mandala.

Steeped in the flamboyant intricacy of Chinese embroidery, those small pieces have a delightful quasi-comic flair. It’s hard to say what makes ibroider quasar funny. Then again, how could they not be? A sense of gay freedom and light-heartedness runs through the whole series. It’s partly the bright colors, partly the contrast between the soft delicacy of embroidery thread and the roughly woven fabric onto which the thread is stitched. Then there’s the outrageous cosmic-ness of this subject matter, which makes one stop and think about the whole business of gravitational images. It requires no more effortonary to stitch a galaxy than to paint a god — but no less, either. In the end, all of our efforts to render the universe in paint or yarn, words or numbers are absurd. They’re also wonderful, if description is simply an imaginative stab at a new way of being.

MOCA Cleveland
HILDR ÁSGEIRSDÓTTIR JONSSON: ENERGY-FORMS
PULSE SERIES:

Silk embroidery, 4" x 4"
QUASAR RADIO MAP, 2003
Silk embroidery, 40" x 68"

Silk weaving, 5.5" x 5.5"
EINSTEIN’S CROSS, 2003
Silk weaving, 40" x 68"

Silk weaving, 5.5" x 5.5"
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