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angle

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jonsson

—SAUL OSTROW ON SOL LEWITT —ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH
—SPACES —BETH WOLFE —SHIMON ATTIE
—MUSIC: FAUST, CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA —FILM: SIDEWAYS

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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 Jonsson'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 Jonsson
@ MOCA Cleveland

By Douglas Max Utter

Landscape, a late subject in Western art, is 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 us and the matrix of our perceptual apparatus where memory knots 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 reasons, the emotional scale of landscape has no limits. There are Claude Lorrain's idyllic vistas and the tempests of Turner, Caspar David Friedrich's melancholy piety, speaking of solemn promises hidden in na-

ture, and the epic abstract geology of Clyfford Still, with its roots in the bold textiles of Southwestern Native American cultures. All shout or murmur about space and freedom, and the abyss of time.

Jonsson cites the sparely poetic Icelandic landscape painter Georg Gudni as one of her influences, along with Gerhard Richter. Richter's conceptually-grounded realist paintings seem clearly related to Jonsson's seemingly digital renditions of place. In his black and white paintings from the 1960s, the real subject is neither person nor event, nor the photographic sources those paintings so closely resemble. They're not even

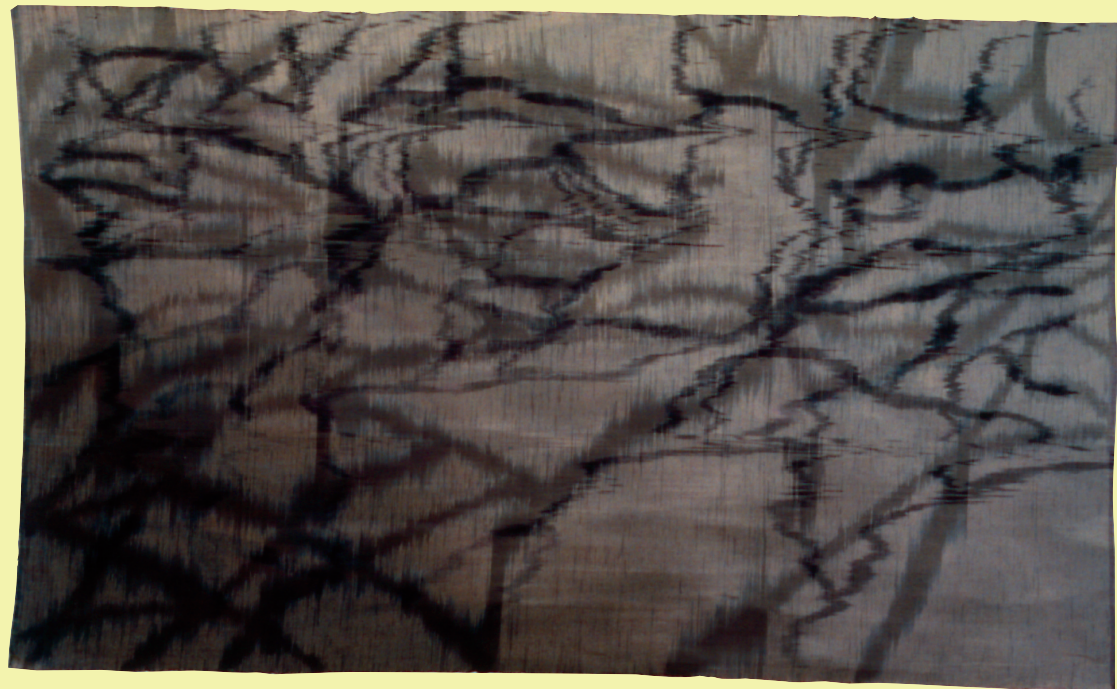


Photo: Michael Ledwith

about the distances from eye to camera and paint to hand. They're about all these things at once, and about the mysterious nature of perception itself.

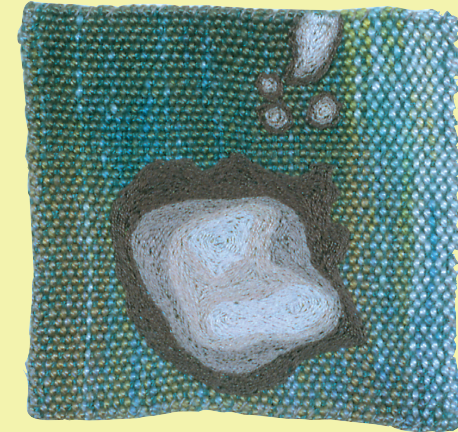
Jonsson's tapestry *Ice Breaking* is easily recognizable as a depiction of that natural phenomenon, yet it also recalls Brice Marden's intersecting loops of paint and ink. A tangle of sometimes jagged, sometimes gently curving lines curls across Jonsson's horizontal space. Two movements, composed of 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.

Jonsson paints her images on silk yarn prior to weaving. The weaving then pixilates the image, so to speak, structuring the informality of painting or staining via the grid of the loom. As in printmaking, where the weight of the press leads gesture toward a graver permanence, and toward reproduction, Jonsson'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 Jonsson's creamy silk warp. Configured in a decaying cluster, these irregular blots hint at a former meaning, as if they had once formed an ideogram. At the upper right hovers a much smaller ellipse of dim marks, like a distant flock of gulls. Fuzzier, bulkier shapes obtrude 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 Jonsson's depictions. Nothing, in fact, is recognizable. It is not even possible to determine the relation between figure and ground. Probably the *Clouds* of the title refer to the broad, faintly mottled expanse of light silk. The floating shapes then become gaps in the low, fast-moving cloud cover of a winter night's sky. The effortless elegance of the composition recalls not only Richter, but Jonsson's materials and palette underscore a resemblance to classic Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy.

As Jonsson works smaller, her subject matter expands to infinity. Her pot-holder size embroideries at MOCA are studies of nebulae, cosmic formations and events. *Core of the Whirlpool Galaxy* looks like a purple pretzel, or maybe a cross section of a walnut, though, like many of her ink drawings also on display at MOCA, echoes Jonsson's earlier renditions of brain scans. *Quasar & Companion Galaxy* is like the ooze



of a lava lamp or an illustration of a cell replicating itself. *Supernova* is a circular, spiral structure, like a maze or a mandala.

Steeped in the flamboyant intricacy of Chinese embroidery, these small pieces have a delightful quasicomic flair. It's hard to say what makes embroidered quasars

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 fabrics onto which the thread is stitched. Then there's the outrageous cosmic-ness of the subject matter, which makes one stop and think about the whole business of graven images. It requires no more effrontery 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.

PULSE SERIES.
HILDUR ÁSGEIRSDÓTTIR JONSSON: ENERGY-FORMS
MOCA Cleveland
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216.421.8671
www.contemporaryart.org
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QUASAR RADIO MAP, 2003
Silk embroidery, 4" x 4"

EINSTEIN'S CROSS, 2003
Silk embroidery, 5.5" x 5.5"

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ICE BREAKING, 2004
Silk weaving, 40" x 68"