

THE ARTS

BAREFOOT INFINITIES

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson at William Busta

BY DOUGLAS MAX UTTER

ICELAND IS ABOUT AS CLOSE to being the proverbial end of the earth as you could find, a titanic landscape composed of fire and ice. Almost two-thirds of the island's total area is a dramatic wasteland punctuated by glaciers, volcanoes, geysers and waterfalls — a backdrop for Ragnarök, the ancient Norse version of Armageddon. As a subject for art in our own resolutely unromantic time it is perhaps almost too violent or full of destructive potential. But for Icelandic-born artists it's an unavoidable, crucial fact, visually and psychically, like a parent. In the process of photographing Picasso's private collection of his own work, the photographer David Douglas Duncan ran across a little study of a faceless man in a flowing overcoat. Picasso explained that it was his father, and that once the painting that this fragment remembered had been huge.

"This is all that's left," he said.

Icelandic-born Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson's works are something like that. Her unblushingly lovely, low-key, nearly abstract visions of fault lines and cracks and mysterious openings are based on details of glaciers and other features of her native landscape. They seem to speak of the body as much as the eye, of the physical depth at which home is located, and the ineradicable impressions of early experience. At the same time, by focusing on small passages of earth, water or ice, they manage to evoke the tremendous scale of the places they quote.

Jónsson is a weaver with a painter's training and sensibility. She lives both in the Cleveland area and in her native Reykjavik, and in the years since she earned her 1995 Kent State University MFA, her unusual mingling of strategic patience and subtle visual response has produced a body of work surprising in its beauty and power. For the past several years especially, since she began to compose misty, minimal landscape portraits of vistas or details of Iceland, the cool process of weaving has been warmed with a flame of process borrowed from the language of abstract painting.

During the years at Kent, Jónsson studied with two Northern Ohio masters, the textile artist Janice Lessman-Moss and the painter Craig Lucas. A legacy from the technical prowess of both of these artists has been evident in Jónsson's work from the beginning. On the one hand her woven work, produced on a loom, is physically all about technique and pattern, complexity and the qualities of a deliberately tactile surface, bringing with it the immemorial association of woven cloth, and warmth, and flesh. On the other hand, she applies color to the threads of both the warp and woof before weaving them together. The end result is a map plotted from shimmering intersections. Like Lucas she is very aware of the unconscious of her imagery, the conceptual and emotional complexity that any image or random series of marks can summon, and she plays with the ambiguity of her lines, which could be as abstract as any loose system of calligraphic strokes by Mark Tobey, or as referential as a sea strand by J. M. Turner. That her technique at times can look almost like an enlargement of a digital photograph is an associative coincidence, but one that adds an extra dash of the contemporary to her pieces.

Vatnajökull is the largest of Iceland's four glaciers, and is the subject of all eight of Jónsson's paintings on view at William Busta. None are particularly easy to interpret visually in terms of landscape. They could be a lot of things, but the arctic green of certain bleeding lines, the deep blues contrasting with opalescent grays, and the sense the artist conveys of fracture combine to evoke the uncanny pallor and ghost-like presence of a glacier. Fear and fascination are built deep into these strange woven paintings, which hang around the interior gallery room like windows to nowhere, each melting in a puddle of light.

"Vatnajökull #1" and "#2" are both about 4 feet square. Though based closely on Jónsson's photos taken during long walks with her husband, they seem entirely abstract, as in a minimalist painting. The first shows a wobbly brownish lozenge entering at a slant from the middle of the left-hand edge of the silk weaving, like an errant mitochondria caught in the lens of an electron microscope. It approaches a patch of dark blue, edged with a bleed of lighter blue. A few other indefinable short lines in the upper half of the canvas accompany these two major elements, soaking into the creamy gray background. A brief, vague arc of the same colors occupies the lower right corner, anchoring the composition as if by accident. "Vatnajökull #2" seems slightly more referential, like a study by Arthur Dove or a detail of a Milton Avery painting. Irregular blue and brown and yellow horizontal striations cross the middle of the space at intervals, like waves in relation to dark blue, rock-like shapes placed at the top and bottom of the frame. A sinuous vertical line of the same hue seems to swim upstream near the left-hand edge.

Jónsson's silk and industrial dye works often suggest the swoop of calligraphy, or at least the otherworldly poise of a Taoist brush. Sometimes they're reminiscent - or nearly so - of classic Chinese landscape painting. "Vatnajökull #15," for instance, while as much a crack in the ice as all the other images here, looks more like a collection of ink stains at first, and then like the outline of a mountain rising from a forest at the margin of a lake. Other shapes jutting in from the top, bottom and sides mess with the purity of this image, which is just as well. It remains

a drawing/painting/weaving thing that has no certain visual ambition, but vast potential.

More literal, panoramic landscape images and hints of autobiography, of the self, emerge slowly from Jónsson's tranquil surfaces, like another world glimpsed in still waters. She seems to be feeling and touching her way to new vision as she treads over the frozen skin of a land that has known no thaw in countless millennia. The Swiss Dadaist poet Hans Arp once wrote, "Infinity comes into this world barefoot." Certainly Jónsson's barefoot works, at once intimate and remote, catch something of the infinite between their toes as they walk over the fissured ice of time and process.



VATNAJÖKULL #7 Colored thread weaving, 55" X 43", 2006.

HILDUR ÁSGEIRSDÓTTIR JÓNSSON: THE VATNAJÖKULL PAINTINGS

Through October 13
William Busta Gallery
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