

# Force of Nature

Hildur Jónsson weaves ethereal Icelandic landscapes

By Lyz Bly

IT'S DIFFICULT to surpass MOCA's fall/winter exhibition, Russian conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov's conceptually and corporally weighty installation, *The Teacher and the Student: Charles Rosenthal and Ilya Kabakov*. The installation not only physically transformed the space during its four-month run; it raised the bar on the institution's — and Cleveland's — intellectual and creative contributions to the national and global art community.

Yet there's something invigorating about being in the gallery amid MOCA's current shows, exhibitions of work by Jim Hodges of New York and Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson of Cleveland Heights. The sparse, clean design of the space is again evident, serving as a kind of unspoken tribute to the building's architect, Philip Johnson, who died last week at age 98.

The smaller Ginn Gallery, located near the front of the space, seems to have been made for Jónsson's work, in all its understated splendor; the size of the works, the materials and their subtle tonalities are enhanced by the glass-walled space, with its unconcealed air ducts and support beams. Ultimately, Jónsson's works — particularly her silk weavings — are understatedly beautiful and patently pristine regardless of where they are hung.

Jónsson is from Iceland; traces of her

native country's sparsely populated, rugged environment permeate her work. From a distance, the weavings appear to be finely painted abstract landscapes. In *Grey Blue*, an obviously delineated horizon line materializes, separating what reads as a cloudy gray sky and a uniformly craggy plane of land. When read as representational landscape works, the weavings evoke a sense of isolation. One gets the feeling that in Iceland, the country's small human population is well aware of the fact that nature has the upper hand. Yet the isolation conveyed through Jónsson's work is not meant to be dismal; instead, it is indicative of a reverence for the supreme forces and features of nature.

There is another level to Jónsson's weavings, made apparent as you get closer to them and examine their intricately lovely surfaces. While the works can be read as

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subtle color field paintings from a distance, upon closer scrutiny, their true material nature becomes apparent. From this point of view Jónsson's talent is patently obvious; she is not only a master of tonal gradation, she is also expert in precisely uniting weft and warp, creating seamlessly beautiful woven works.

Her silk weavings bridge the chasm between what is still deemed by some as "high" art — largely painting and sculpture — and "craft," which has historically included fiber art. Jónsson's *Glacier Tongue*, a 60- by-40-inch silk weaving that features a delicate gray and tan protrusion on the field of brown, defies its materiality, as the colors seem to hover over the surface of the work, virtually resisting the weight, texture and sheen of the silk thread.

Jónsson's drawings, a series of luminous works of ink on vellum, are also imbued with this transcendent weightlessness. Like the silk weavings, they can be read as both representational and formal works of art. The circular, organic shape depicted in *Light Echoes of a Supernova* is illustrative of the cosmic supernova phenomenon. Yet Jónsson magically captures the celestial event by meticulously rendering and refiguring it to a diminutive scale. It is paradox-

ical that the artist is able to capture the magnitude of a grand cosmic occurrence through a small pen-on-vellum drawing. And, like her silk weavings, the drawings are magnetic for their duality; Jónsson conveys the sublimity of the cosmos with the simplicity of formalist perfection.

Jónsson's work conveys her personal Icelandic roots, as well as broader, more humanly universal themes. Ultimately, it reminds us to be reverent of nature and the universe's sublimely mysterious forces. ■



**GLACIER TONGUE** Defies its materiality.