

ART

Wonderful weavings work magic

STEVEN LITT

Plain Dealer Art Critic

Absolutely smashing. That's the best way to describe the current exhibition of 26 weavings, embroideries and drawings by Cleveland artist Hildur Asgeirsdottir Jonsson at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland.

The show easily ranks as one of the finest by any artist in Northeast Ohio in the past decade. But Jonsson's work is more than local in significance. Her talent is large and deserves the widest possible audience.

Inspired by the stark, primordial landscapes of her native Iceland, Jonsson has created eight large weavings in dyed silk, with austere imagery that hovers between realism and abstraction. They form the unforgettable backbone of the show.

On the one hand, the weavings suggest a rugged world of icebergs, glaciers, leaden skies, rippling waves and blackened, volcanic earth. At the same time, they function beautifully as abstractions that bring to mind gestural paintings by Jackson Pollock, Brice Marden and Cy Twombly.

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REVIEW

Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland

What: "Hildur Asgeirsdottir Jonsson: Energy Forms," a solo show by a leading Cleveland artist.

When: Through Sunday, May 1.

Where: 8501 Carnegie Ave., Cleveland.

Admission: \$4 (suggested); free on Fridays. Call 216-421-8671 or go to www.mocacleveland.org.



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Hildur Asgeirsdottir Jonsson's weaving, "Ice Breaking" (2004), retains vestiges of the photographic image on which it is based.

The weavings are full of choreographed marks that suggest the dancelike brush movements and all-over surface patterns of Abstract Expressionist painting. Then again, the textiles also seem to suggest that Jonsson's gestural marks somehow appeared of their own volition, without direct intervention from the artist.

Despite their abstractness, the weavings also strongly hint at landscapes. One looks like a telescopic view of cloud filaments torn apart by a sudden blast of wind. Another suggests wind-whipped waves viewed through a scrim of icy rain. A third suggests the snout of a glacier carving its way through two mountains.

Jonsson's palette is wintry; it consists of misty grays and whites, like the plumage of seabirds, or earth tones that tend toward rich, resonant blacks saturated through with undertones of dried blood, rust, algae and lichen.

The tension between representation and abstraction is never resolved in Jonsson's art. Her work leaves the eye and the mind suspended in a state of delicious curiosity, always seeking and finding something new.

Jonsson's drawings in ink on vellum, inspired by satellite photographs of galaxies, quasars and supernovas, are both cosmic and intimate. While it's easy to see how Jonsson derived the images from their original sources, it's also possible to imagine that her space-age drawings represent highly complex microorganisms, not exploding stars. They bring the universe down to size, expressing wonder and awe.

The same is true of Jonsson's small embroideries, at most a few inches square, in which she zooms in on the shapes of distant celestial bodies as

if they were tiny organisms living on the surface of a pond. These works are sublime - and still small enough to hold in the palm of one's hand.

But it is the weavings that fuse opposing visual qualities with remarkable ease. They are both visually flat and suggestive of spatial depth. They meld the spontaneity of painting with the systematic logic of weaving. They seem to consist of surfaces on which liquid paint has been applied directly, and of surfaces in which marks and colors appear to emerge from the cloth itself through a kind of alchemy.

Yet while the weavings oscillate between one type of visual communication and another, Jonsson's work possesses at bottom a simple, stark serenity, a lean and bracing minimalism. Seeing her art is like encountering a deep reservoir of meditative alertness.

Although they feel effortless, Jonsson's latest pieces are actually the result of years of hard work. The artist has lived in Northeast Ohio since 1983. Originally interested in science, Jonsson moved here to pursue training as an architect at Kent State University.

After two years, she enrolled at the Cleveland Institute of Art, where she majored in fiber for

three years. She later returned to KSU to complete her bachelor of fine arts degree in 1991 and her master of fine arts degree in 1995.

Jonsson's technical process is elaborate: She begins by photographing landscapes during visits to Iceland and selecting images for further investigation. She then crops her photographs, enlarges the details and projects them onto sheets of paper, on which she makes a drawing - or cartoon - in preparation for a weaving.

Jonsson then separately places strung sets of warp threads and weft threads atop the cartoon, paints the threads with fabric dye, and weaves the threads together to produce the final work.

It's fun to seek vestiges of the photographic origins of the weavings. These can be found in soft edges that suggest a fuzzy exposure, or perhaps a blur caused by the superimposition of two images painted on the warp and weft threads, which didn't match entirely when they were woven together. It's also exciting to seek signs of painterly processes in the weavings, such as drips and bleeds. They're there, in a ghostly manner.

Jonsson's technique is an incredibly complex and demanding way to make art. But her art is far more than a showcase for skill.

Fundamentally, Jonsson's images distill something clear, sharp and profound about the landscapes that inspired them. They are marvelous, powerful, memorable and very much worth seeing.

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