



Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson
The Vatnajökull Paintings



Cover:
Vatnajökull #3, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
43 x 48in
109 x 122cm

Vatnajökull #2, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
54.5 x 43in
139 x 109cm

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson
at the Vatnajökull glacier



Thread by Thread

The Paintings of Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson

Saul Ostrow

Today, the borders between what were once hard and fast categories have become porous—increasingly, hybrid practices are arising due to the changing attitudes and perspectives brought about by technology and social conditions. With this comes a sense of loss, as well as a subversion of the critical standards and values associated with past practices. Reciprocally, the questioning of the relevance of such proscriptions unleashes the potentials inherent in previously understated, untried, or prescient practices. This is particularly true in the case of contemporary abstract painters, who seek to preserve the objectives, if not its traditional techniques and skills of their discipline, by fusing their imagery with a sense of materiality. The resulting practices are circumscribed by both the modernist and feminist critiques meant to extend art's means by questioning the privileging of traditional media-based skills and techniques, over those often demeaningly associated with craft or the practice of amateurs.

This tendency to extend arts' means is found in the works of artists such as Allen Shields and Joan Snyder who used sewing, dying and beadwork to make their paintings in the late 1960s. Likewise, this orientation was again taken up in the late 1980s by artists such as Jody Lomborg who knits her paintings or Polly Apfelbaum who stains and dyes swatches or expanses of differing fabrics to make her work. In the case of Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson, she has chosen to wed the weaving process to the look associated with such color-field and stain painters as Morris Louis and the abstracted landscapes of the colorist Milton Avery. This cross-breeding of painting and fiber vocabularies and methods permits Jónsson to bypass the historical preconception concerned with the divide between craft and art. This frees her of the incumbent responsibility of upholding the heroic tradition of abstract painting, or sustaining the design aesthetics of much weaving.

Locating herself outside such considerations, Jónsson's work reveals a visual and corporeal clarity that stands in stark contrast to the chaotic mixture of affects that might have resulted if they had been made in the name of either transgression or critique.

Privileging the traditional format of painting and the materiality of color over the physical structure and quality of the resulting fabric, Jónsson's method can be likened to that of Helen Frankenthaler, whose stain paintings of the late 50s draw inspiration from nature and abstract expressionism. By bleeding dye (akin to watercolor or thinned-down paint) into each thread, Jónsson creates expanses of subtle atmospheric color and delicate tracteries of line. By these means she achieves a broad range of iconic images that conjoin her impressions of the sensuously austere character of Icelandic landscape to formalist issues. Her elegant expanses of color and massive flat forms—with their deftly modulated surfaces—do not resemble in any literal way land, sea or sky; they evoke a sense of space rather than place. This condition is fundamental to create a unity between abstraction and depiction.

The soothing and comforting quality of her muted colors generate a dispassionately cool and ephemeral expressionism, while the weightlessness and spatial effects that are a consequence of the visually receding or advancing color, re-enforce the impression of a sensuously withdrawn nature which aspires to universality. The fact these images are woven rather than merely stained into canvas, contradictorily creates a quasi-physical resistance that draws our attention back to the integrity of the works' surface. Through these means



Vatnajökull #11, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
43 x 67in
109 x 170cm
Collection of
Hahn Loeser + Parks

Jónsson's sense of material and technique is made assertively present, rather than becoming a neutral vehicle to the service of her imagery. The resulting tension marks the place of transformation, where the material signifier, with its own unique characteristics, declares its opacity and becomes unmoored from the allusions to the glaring light-filled arctic landscape which inspire them, or inversely, the associations they may stimulate.

Accordingly, an encounter with Jónsson's open and airy compositions offers up a sense of pleasure and control derived from a precarious balance between opticality and tactility; between image and its disposition.

Saul Ostrow is Chair of Visual Arts and Technologies at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

The Vatnajökull Paintings

William Busta

During the past 12 years, Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson has created series of works of art based upon images of brain scans, celestial objects, and most frequently, the landscape of Iceland.

She spends part of each year in Iceland. She and her husband, Brian Schriefer, own a cottage by the ocean where they live during the summer and return to in December.

They walk along the rivers and into the mountains and up to the glaciers. During these walks Hildur's perception is attentive to a kind of language upon the land that is formed by the silhouette of a mountain, the mouth of a glacial crevice, the twist of a braided river.

This language is recorded by photograph, as a type of note-taking. In her working drawings it loses perspective and flattens to the plane of the painting. Natural forms become marks and marks become signs—glyphs that signify and name the experience of place in the language of recollection.

Since each painting is, in fact, two paintings that are woven together and since only a few inches at a time can be seen while weaving, the paintings are not entirely visible until they are finished. There is always an element of surprise for the artist as she removes the painting from the loom and mounts it on a board. In a way, it is the same kind of surprise as experienced by a viewer, entering a gallery for the first time.

As the work of an artist leaves the studio and enters the world of public exhibition and then private ownership, it gains an experience of encounters, inspirations, and context. However, it always retains an essential self, rooted in the intuition and experience of the artist. So, in the paintings of Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson there is always a brisk wind telling of glaciers and an embracing ocean; there is always the filtered light of the north suggesting the comfort of home.



Vatnajökull #7, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
48 x 43in
122 x 109cm

“One thing you do notice, however, is that no matter how internationally minded Icelandic artists are (and almost all have studied and lived abroad), eventually the country itself comes to figure in their work: as a physical locus, as a trove of images and materials or—more mysteriously for outsiders—as a comprehensive force with which one is perpetually in dialogue.”

Gregory Volk
Art in America, September 2000

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson was born in Reykjavík, Iceland in 1963. She studied architecture at Kent State University, Ohio from 1983–1985, then studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art from 1985–1988. She completed a BFA at Kent State in 1991. In 1992 she received a Graduate Teaching Assistantship at Kent, studied textiles with Janice Lessman-Moss and painting with Craig Lucas, and received an MFA in 1995. Her first one-person exhibition was at Cleveland Independent Art in 1994 and her first one-person exhibition in Iceland was at Galleri Sævar Karls, Reykjavík in 2002. Other major one-person shows have been at MOCA Cleveland in 2004, and Turpentine Gallery, Reykjavík in 2005.

She received a grant from the Ohio Arts Council (OAC) in 2002 to support her first one-person show in Iceland; was commissioned by the OAC in 2004 to create works of art to be presented as the Governor's Awards in the Arts; and was awarded an OAC Individual Artists Fellowship in 2004. Her work has been purchased for the collections of the Ohio Arts Council, Columbus; the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; and the Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland. The artist lives in Reykjavík, Iceland and Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

The William Busta Gallery first exhibited the work of Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson in 1996, had a one-person show in 1997, and featured her in the exhibition *Fabricating Memory* in 2000.



Detail, *Vatnajökull #12*, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
59 x 43in
150 x 109cm



Vatnajökull #15, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
43 x 70in
109 x 178cm



Far left:
Vatnajökull #1, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
58.5 x 43in
149 x 109cm



Left:
Vatnajökull #4, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
48 x 43in
122 x 109cm

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson

Education

- 1995 MFA, Kent State University, OH
- 1991 BFA, Kent State University
- 1985–88 Cleveland Institute of Art, OH
- 1983–85 Kent State University
- 1979–83 Reykjavík Junior College, Iceland

One-person Exhibitions

- 2008 Turpentine Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland
- 2007 William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
Dalí Gallery, Akureyri, Iceland
- 2006 *Scope New York*, Turpentine Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH
Latse, New York, NY
Turpentine Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland
- 2003 superior (an exhibition space), Cleveland, OH
- 2002 Land Fragments, Galleri Saevars Karls,
Reykjavík, Iceland
- 1997 William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
- 1995 *New Work in Glass and Textile*, FAVA Gallery,
Oberlin, OH
- 1994 *Recent Work*, Cleveland Independent Art,
Cleveland, OH

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2007 Pocket Utopia, Brooklyn, NY
- 2005 *Aqua Art Miami*, Shaheen Modern and Contemporary
Art, Miami, FL
NEO, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH
Turpentine Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland
- 2004 *Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Ormeau Baths Gallery,
Belfast, Northern Ireland
Rhyme, Reason, Repeat, Kent State University Art
Gallery, Kent, OH
- 2002 *Cambridge Art Association National Show*,
Cambridge, MA
- 2001 *Circles, Cycles and Structures*, FAVA Gallery,
Oberlin, OH
- 2000 *Mini-Textile International Contemporary Art Exhibition*,
Barcelona, Spain
Fabricating Memory, William Busta Gallery,
Cleveland, OH
- 1999 *Contained Spaces: Juried Exhibition of Contemporary
Fiber*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH
Coming Into View, The Ohio Craft Museum,
Columbus, OH
- 1998 *Body Image*, Fulton Street Gallery, Troy, NY
- 1997 The Museum of Textile, Ecomuseum of the Region
Fourmies-Trelon, France

Selected Collections

Agnes Gund, New York, NY
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
Hahn Loeser + Parks, Cleveland, OH
Hahn Loeser + Parks, Akron, OH
Landau Public Relations, Cleveland, OH
Toby Devan Lewis, New York, NY
Progressive Insurance, Cleveland, OH
National City Bank, Cleveland, OH
Ohio Arts Council, Columbus, OH
Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland
University Hospitals, Cleveland, OH

Selected Publications

Dan Tranberg, "Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson
at the Museum of Contemporary Art."
Art in America; December 2005.

Ragna Sigurðardóttir "Woven of Light and
Water." *Morgunblaðið*: October 21, 2005.

Steve Litt "Wonderful Weavings Work
Magic." *The Plain Dealer*: March 14, 2005.

Ana Vejzovic "Energy Forms." Museum of
Contemporary Art, Cleveland, 2005.

Douglas Max Utter "Earth, Wind + Fire."
Angle: Issue # 18, 2005.

Lyz Bly "A Force of Nature: Hildur Jonsson's
Drawings Echo Icelandic Landscapes."
Cleveland Free Times: November 5–11, 2003.

Niko Angelis "Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson
@ Superior Exhibition Space."
CoolCleveland.com: October 22–29, 2003.

Heida Magnúsdóttir "Woven Land
Fragments." *Morgunblaðið*: November 16,
2002.



Vatnajökull #13, 2006
silk, industrial dyes
43 x 56in
109 x 142cm
Collection of Reykjavík Art
Museum, Iceland