

Hildur Bjarnadóttir, 1969-, Reykjavik, Iceland

Come with me to Iceland--The last European country to be inhabited. In the 9th and 10th centuries, settlers came from Norway, other provinces in Scandinavia, and Celtic settlements within the British Isles. Iceland is a country of less than a quarter million people today mostly clustered along the southern coast. Iceland enjoys natural resources and gifted and talented citizens. One of Iceland's most renewed fiber artists is Hildur Bjarnadóttir.

Let's picture a little five year old girl in a home in the South of Iceland with a mother, and grandmothers sitting around a fireplace amid piles of wool, yarn, balls of string, a cat or two, and a steaming kettle on a stove. In this picture, in 1971, we see the mother and three grandmothers (possibly one great grandmother) knitting mittens, shawls, doilies, and afghans. The mother may be sketching designs for the traditional yarn crafts that are in demand in a country that has snow, ice and blustery winters. A little girl is intently watching all this activity and quickly learning the way of the needles. "I was raised immersed in a textile environment. My mother was knitting and sewing teacher and I would constantly be knitting or making crafts. One thing my Mother did not teach me was to follow patterns; everything I made she had me design myself".

The little girl learns so quickly that she bores easily and her mind wanders to imagine what she might do with the yarn, the needles and the designs that give different expression to the high craft adopted by her family. While she works with the traditional stitches of knitting, weaving, tatting, crocheting and embroidering, she gains fine skills and she dreams of the day when she can put expression to her imagination. Later in life, we learn that she asks herself how one can turn a craft into an art. How can she praise the women who taught her the craft of stitchery and honor them with her ability to find artistic impressions beyond the production of usefulness produced by the craft they taught her?

Following her mother's lead, Hildur told an audience that she searched for artistic concepts for her works and rejected conventional ways of creativity within the craft of textiles. On this journey, Hildur was not praised by her professors in Iceland for her departure from the norm when she attended the Icelandic Arts and Crafts College where she received the BFA degree. In 1992 Schnoor relates that Hildur created an exhibit piece, "Re-rubber", from sliced up car tire inner tubes woven together with fish line on a loom and later wall-mounted it.

At age twenty-five, in 1994, Hildur entered an MFA program at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, and her training and career from 1998 to 2005, culminated in an exhibit at the Boise Art Museum, entitled "Unraveled". Christopher Schnoor speaks glowingly of Hildur in an article in the Boise Weekly, February 15, 2006, "It is a show of surprises that challenge and undermine our received notions of supposed boundaries and imposed hierarchies of creativity. Bjarnadóttir's intelligent, multimedia art is visually intriguing and thought-provoking, encompassing textiles, found materials, porcelain, video, digital photography and computer imaging. Interchangeably sculptural and two-dimensional with a strong conceptual streak, it examines issues of gender, culture, and technique while tweaking the definition of "fine art"."

A prolific German artist, Dieter Roth, 1930-1998, who lived in Iceland for a time with his Icelandic wife, may have influenced Hildur. From Roth's work, Hildur saw Icelandic words of cultural lore emerge as themes in his art. Hildur related to Dieter as he was trained in traditional arts of print making

and book making, but used differing art forms to produce brilliant works of art. His revolt against traditional forms seemed to fuel Hildur's passion for new expressions.

In January of 2006, Hildur returned to Iceland, completing her "American period", according to Schnoor. In 2007, Hildur says "The line between art and craft is hazy, and is based on context as well as concept. In my art I explore this fine line between decorative, usable crafts and conceptual art. My work takes the focus from the usefulness and beauty that textiles are generally connected with and places it more on simple techniques and the inherent properties of the materials. I work with as well as against the materials and traditional textile rules."

In February of 2007, Hildur Bjarnadóttir receives a review in "Flash Art", a leading arts magazine, "After a brilliant start in the late nineties with her enormous crochet circles of cotton yarn where high reliefs of swan heads, or of human skulls, circumscribed otherwise common tables, Hildur Bjarnadóttir continues to deconstruct textile art in every possible way". Some of the most outstanding pieces of Hildur's works (www.hildur.com) include

- "Tchotchke" in 2003, a still life "painting" in velvet Pile embroidery on linen that says "Painting is the only real art form"
- "Untitled" in 2003, a piece of Formica cut round and mounted representing densely woven ground
- "Gingham and Tatting", two works in 2005, are dyed threads of Belgian linen that are woven into an abstract painting during the weaving process
- "Shooting Gallery" in 1998, a large doily crocheted from silver yarn sculpted into multiple miniature 9 mm handguns that aim at the viewer
- "Untitled" in 2000, an enlarged digital print on mounted watercolor paper of lint, winding threads and other debris collected from clothing.
- A series of lace pieces: "Doodling" and "Black Doodle"—tatted cotton and tatted lace doily
- A film "Lassoing" in which the rope flies in perfect circles around a cowboy riding a horse
- Three porcelain statues representing Hildur's three grandmothers

Hildur's ability to confuse and hide the meaning of her works appear to be the main challenge for those who follow her progress on her journey to turn textile craft into art. On a recent visit to an exhibit of Hildur's work, Audur Olafsdottir describes "five pictures which look like empty canvases ready for an oil painting is what clearly faces the viewer. The installation itself- bare canvas grounds hung on a wall like fully qualified and finished pieces of art—must on the other hand create a suspicion that everything is not what meets the eye." Olafsdottir goes on to explain that Hildur has chosen "to weave the canvas herself from scratch, thread by thread...what we are presented with is in fact a time-consuming and demanding work of art that is based on age old textile tradition". Hildur's search to find an expression to claim as she believes that "painting is *not* the only real art form" may be found here where she deconstructs a view of a canvas to show the viewer that the woven screen is a real art form.

Hildur currently lives in Iceland and was recently honored by her countrymen on September 22 at the Icelandic Visual Arts Awards in Akureyri. The first award for art went to Hildur Bjarnadóttir. The jury said of her work: "In the work "Gingham", Hildur has hand – colored the thread with yellow, red, green and brown acrylic paint and woven it together to make four different canvasses that she then has stretched onto stretcherbars. The outcome is work that is tapestry and painting at the same time, in canvas rather than on canvas. Hildur has previously treating painting as subject matter, playfully deconstructing the ideas around its status by literally unraveling the canvas and crocheting it to create Reconstructed Canvas II, a work that is simultaneously a canvas, a crocheted cloth and an image in the style of monochrome painting...Hildur questions the validity of this binary opposition (between high and

low art) by transposing handicrafts to the realm of high art, utilizing her knowledge, Hildur Bjarnadóttir erases the line between physical matter and the mind, between object and concept. She works within a post-conceptual framework that calls into question traditional notions of high and low art, gender and technique. By introducing new materials into traditional needle-art forms, she subverts notions of the sanctity of categories such as drawing and painting.” (Pulliam Deffenbaugh artists biography)

Hildur admits to an audience at an exhibit in Boise, Iowa, that she found herself working contrary to tradition by using ideas more than just materials to bring textiles into an art context. And , finally that little girl sitting at the knees of her mother and grandmother, stops short of denying or rejecting her upbringing, when she says, “I try to pay due respect to the craft tradition of my ancestresses while still working with critical ideas.” (ibid)

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*Biography

*Personal Statement

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