



Text Jessica Hemmings Published 25 Jan 2018

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Jessica Hemmings reflects on the textile work of Hildur Bjarnadóttir

«Hildur Bjarnadóttir's work presents a rare example of material and conceptual balance»

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Hildur Bjarnadóttir: Cohabitation, at the Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst in Trondheim
Photo — Susann Jamtøy



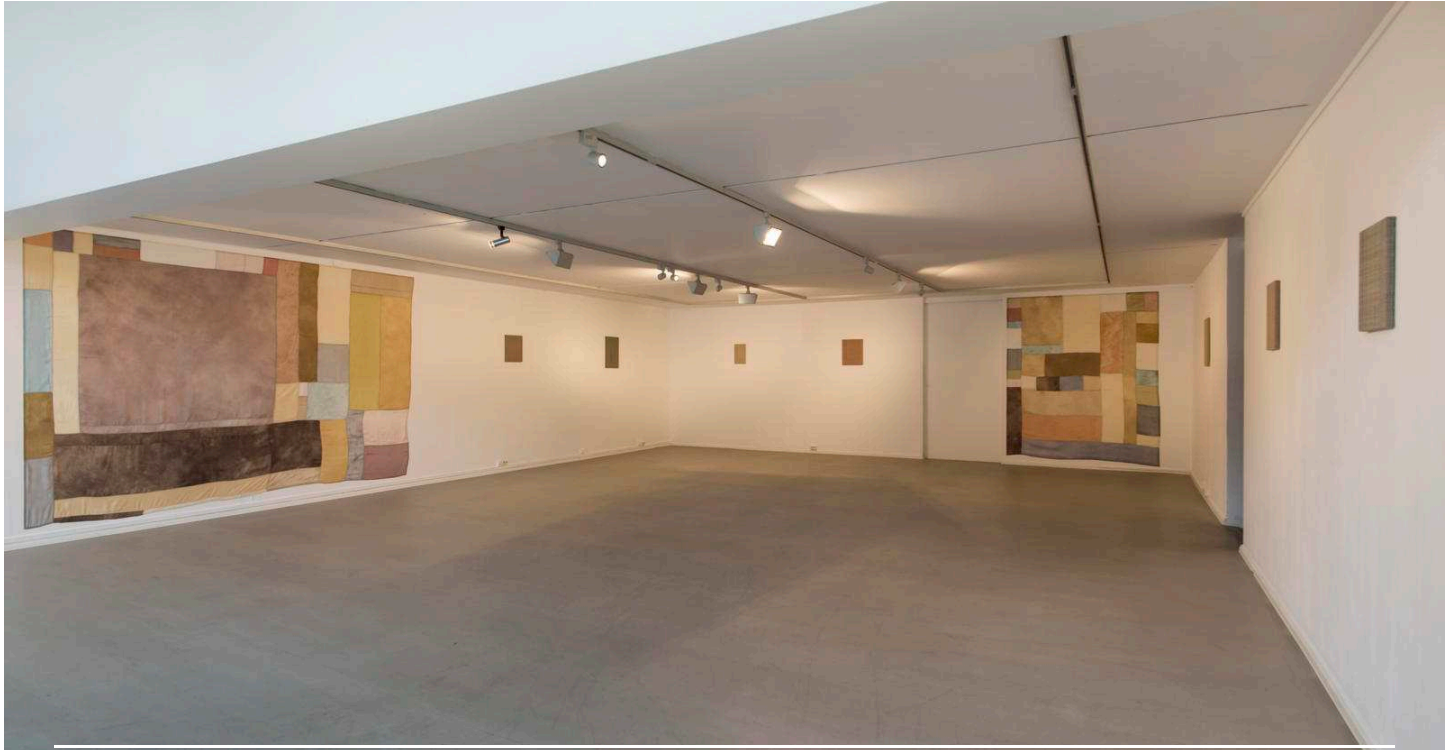
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Hildur Bjarnadóttir: Cohabitation, at the Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst in Trondheim
Photo — Susann Jamtøy

'I am more concerned with where color comes from than what it looks like.'

Bjarnadóttir's recent exhibition, *Cohabitation*, at the Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst in Trondheim is a study in belonging. Her exploration of locally sourced natural dyes first emerged during her Fellowship with the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme (2012-2017) at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. The research project - described as 'personal and existential' - focused on her relationship with a plot of land in the south of Iceland called Þúfugarðar where she planned to move when the Fellowship concluded.

Throughout the Fellowship, Bjarnadóttir focused on 'this piece of land, it's meaning as a place of my own, a place for me to form roots in and contemplate issues of belonging, ecological disruption, responsibility and the relationship between human beings and nature'. From themes that are enormous and potentially even impossible, Bjarnadóttir creates pieced and woven textiles that are extraordinarily beautiful. This observation is not intended to undercut the seriousness of her conceptual agenda, but rather to acknowledge that her work presents a rare example of material and conceptual balance.



Hildur Bjarnadóttir: *Cohabitation*, at the Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst in Trondheim

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Colors of belonging

‘When I am collecting plants to use in my work it requires me to sit on the ground for a long time and carefully pick a certain plant, I get to know the plant on a very intimate level and the plants around the plant I am picking through smell, touch and time.’

She describes the intense concentration of her harvest as akin to ‘tune[ing] into a frequency that was exposed to me through dwelling continuously on the land, a frequency not available to anyone except through this channel of time spent with the plants.’

But nature alone is not the sole contributor to Bjarnadóttir's palette. Alongside natural dyes, colours from acrylic paints are used, a ‘deliberate complication’ she explains, that aims to disrupt a commonplace reading of nature as somehow thoroughly pure. As part of the conclusion of her Artistic Fellowship, Bjarnadóttir exhibited colors of belonging at Bergen Kjøtt in 2015. The former meat processing factory occupies an industrial scale building and each large pieced silk work in the exhibition concentrated on slight variations of predominantly monochrome palettes. Subtle colours of putty, rose, mustard and ivory played off the rough, partially plastered walls of the space while drawing the viewer's eye upward to the works suspended close to the high ceiling with several suspended above visitors' heads.

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Photo — Susann Jamtøy



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The use of pieced, dyed silk continued in the exhibition *Contemplated Randomness* which followed at Hverfisgallerí, a smaller gallery space in Reykjavík. Here, for the first time, Bjarnadóttir blocked out entire walls, filling edge to edge of preselected spaces with pieced cloth. Instead of monochrome compositions, a variety of colours appeared in each piece. Randomness and planning feel at work in equal measure and Bjarnadóttir admits that many of the works are too large to unfold in her studio - she sees them in full for the first time when in the gallery.

In Trondheim, the silk textiles were again pressed firmly against the gallery walls. Here the proportions of each work covered sections of the space - measurements planned in anticipation of the exhibition. Clear decisions have been made regarding what should be straight and what to let be: one edge and the top of the work was accurately aligned with the plumb lines of the architecture. While she refers to a desire to 'stabilise the silk' by pressing it into the wall, the cloth - in particular the sheer silk she uses - has things other than straight lines in mind. The two remaining edges of each work reveal the tension and pull on the bias of the cloth that drifts away from a perfect geometry.

Painting as much as the textile is Bjarnadóttir's reference point - an orientation she admits in part reflects her own MFA education at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York in the late 1990s and debates about concept in craft practices of the time. Placing the textile tightly against the wall is not necessarily a denial of the material (the wobbly edges help remind us of that) but it is a gesture which emphasises composition over object. There remains a certain irony to seeing only one side of work that has been made with three-fold seams to ensure that there is no designated front or back. But holding the textile tight against the gallery walls ensures that the opaque palette of each is visible and relatively constant - where the textiles hung in space are more vulnerable to changes in the direction of light.

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Hildur Bjarnadóttir: *Cohabitation*, at the Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst in Trondheim
Photo — Susann Jamtøy

Two color systems

A series of face sized weavings also began during her Artistic Fellowship. Hung so that viewers meet the gaze of each weaving as they might a person, ‘the paintings are made from plant dyed wool and linen thread covered with acrylic paint. By using these two types of color systems, one industrially made and the other a natural system,’ she explains, ‘I sharpen the characteristics of each color and create a dialogue between two different substances.’

Size is dictated by the weave rather than regulated by a ruler. Dye colours from plant materials and acrylic paint colours are used one at a time in both the warp and weft so ‘the plant and acrylic colours only meet when the weft is added and creates a constant meeting between different plants and different colour substances.’ Bjarnadóttir refuses to allow herself to intervene in the resulting colour combinations.

‘As can be seen in my woven paintings, even with the acrylic paint being present in many different colors, the dominant color in the end is yellow since I use exactly the color the plant releases. I do not use any chemicals to change it.’

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A sound piece, *Belonging*, recording a common snipe bird Bjarnadóttir noticed flying in circles above Þúfugarðar also accompanies *Cohabitation*. She explains, ‘Birds are creatures of habit, they have a strong sense of belonging... Most likely this bird and its family have been coming

plays only intermittently on a surround speaker system which makes its location impossible to pin point. Hasty visitors like myself miss out entirely - just punishment for taking too little time to listen and wait.

Bjarnadóttir's large sheer works may remind some of another artist's intimate textile records of multiple homelands: the Korean artist Do Ho Suh. Suh painstakingly recreates the interiors of spaces he has inhabited in his moves between cities such as Seoul, New York and London in sheer monochrome cloth including exacting details such as light switches and pipes. But where Suh sees place in relation to his own identity and anticipation of his next physical move, Bjarnadóttir's attention is directed towards making fresh new roots. She also takes pains to acknowledge that her exploration of the possibility of rootedness is occurring during an escalating "world politics of displacement" in which millions are displaced not by choice or desire to operate as global citizens.

Bjarnadóttir describes her weavings as woven paintings; composition is the focus of her attention when speaking of her large silk pieces. But both the woven and pieced series are also undeniably defined by material decisions about their making. The softly coloured patterns of American artist Mark Barrow offer perhaps a more accurate contemporary. Barrow, who paints pixelated patterns on the surface of linen woven by his wife (credited in the artist's credit line, "textile by Sarah Parke") play optical and conceptual games between pattern and structure that remind us of the textile canvas that underpins the entire tradition of painting.

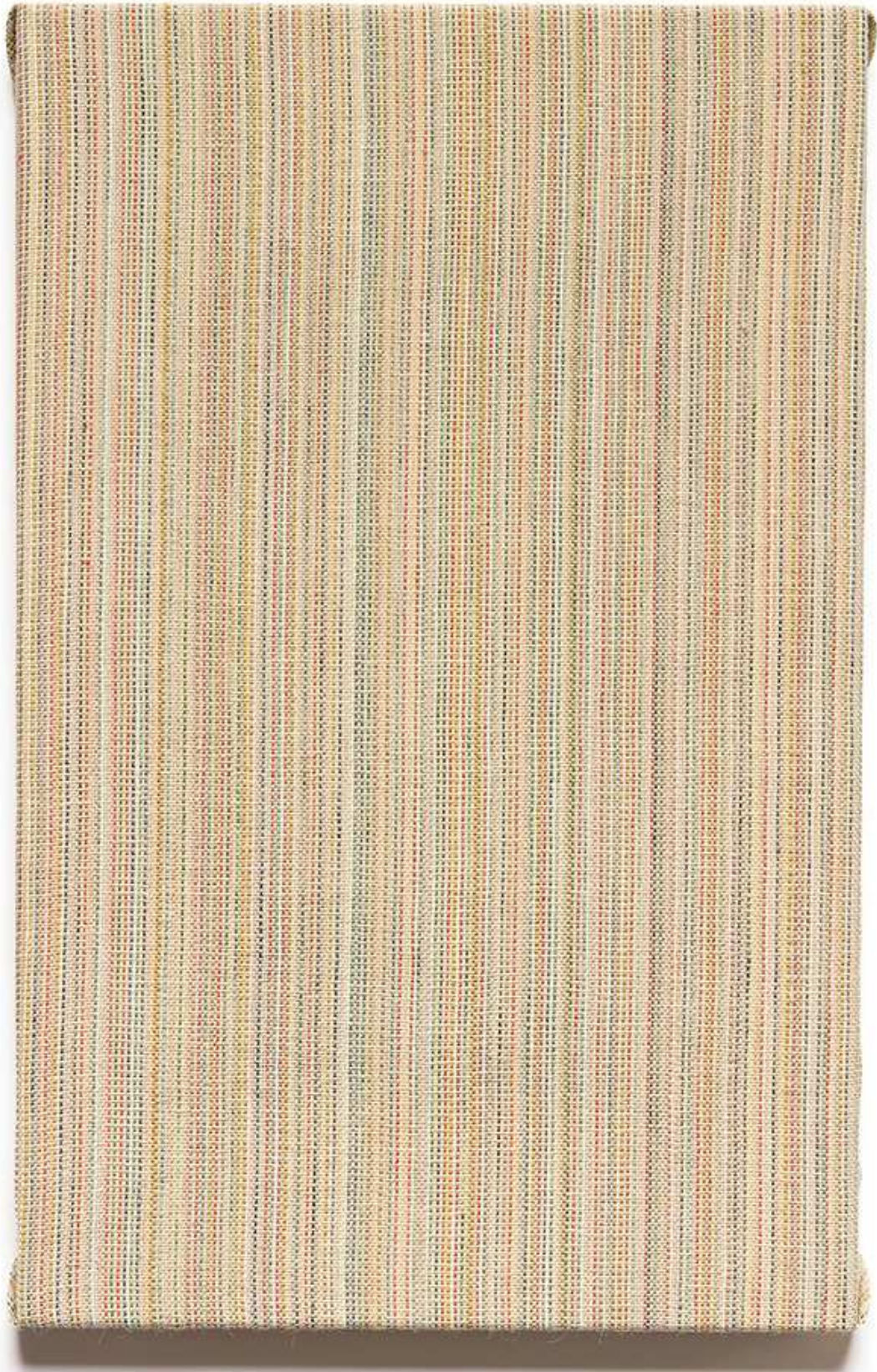
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A diligent host

stance glacier water, ocean water, fruit juice or plant dye, is how she describes the natural plant dyes and acrylic paint that provide color.

‘This method places a narrative in the fibers and the textile diligently hosts this story and makes it visible.’

The time and labour Bjarnadóttir invests in her working process limits the number of new works she is able to produce each year. But she is interested in recombining the silk works in future - taking apart the compositions made partially through chance, deconstructing some of the carefully assembled seams and building new configurations to fit the proportions of future exhibition spaces. Capable of acting as the building blocks for new works built around the dimensions of new spaces, this strategy echoes the complexities of her relationship with Þúfugarðar:

‘My presence is constantly influencing the land and the land is also influencing me. I am an instigator and subject at the same time.’

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