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The non-verbal poetry of Harpa Árnadóttir

by JBK Ransu

I have always loved poetry, especially the poetry of Gyrðir Elíasson. His combination of words are so effortless and dulcet.

my head

a vault

whitewashed

from within

They seem to be without a beginning or an end. Simple and soft words that call forth something melancholic and sublime.

Eliasson collaborated once with German painter, Bernd Koberling. They made a book with Eliasson´s poems and Koberling´s watercolors. I always thought Koberling to wild and colorful for Eliasson´s poems. Or Eliasson to tranquil and pastel for Koberling´s watercolors. There is, however, an artist I know of that paints watercolors like Eliasson writes poetry. Her name is Harpa Árnadóttir.

In a review on Árnadóttir´s show in Göteborgs Konstmuseum in 2004, Mikael Olofsson, critic for Götenborgsposten, called her work “En lyrisk minimalism”. It is a fitting analogy. The word “lyrical” being a form of musical poetry added to minimalist imagery, just like Eliasson´s poems. “En lyrisk minimalism”.

Harpa Árnadóttir was born in Bíldudalur in 1965, a village on the northwest coast of Iceland. She grew up in Ólafsvík, in the west of Iceland close to Snaefellsjökull, a glazier. of overwhelming beauty and tales of the supernatural. Harpa moved to Reykjavík to study history and literature in The University of Iceland and after her BA degree she turned to visual arts. She studied at The Icelandic college of arts and crafts and then moved to Sweden to study at Konsthogskolan Valand in Göteborg for two years, but dwelled on in the city for another seven years. At the start of this century she returned to Reykjavík where she continues to work and participate in the Icelandic art scene.

Being “lyrical” means taking a stand against “industrial”, say, like the minimalist works of Donald Judd or Dan Flavin. Harp´s way of working is more an organic process. In her paintings she uses layers of water-dissolving pigment and glue that eventually crack and mould their own landscape-like structure on canvas. In her watercolors on paper the paper itself shapes the structure and layers of soft pallid colors create a nebulous veil over the whole picture.

Harpa works in a tradition attributed to Russian artist Kasimir Malevich, and his “white on white” suprematist works and non-Eucleidian geometry, where forms float in time and space. With his “white on white” Malevich intended to free the work of art from all external meaning, allowing it to serve as an entrance to a new dimension and pure thought.

The “white on white” has than moved on in history to the fields of Agnes Martin´s abstract paintings, to the white mono-chrome structures of Robert Ryman and to the achromes of Piero Manzoni. The legacy of “white on white” is significant history for Harpa Árnadóttir´s contemporary work of art.

I always liked Franz Kline statement; “White is white even if it is yellow”. In Kline´s case it was a funny way of justifying that he was suddenly using colors after painting in black and white fore a decade, or so. In Harpa´s case it seems an appropriate statement. Her works are in fact never really white. The white is scaled, and naturally so. Being raised around a glazier one is bound to notice nuances in the whiteness of snow, from off-white or ivory white towards a gray and bluish color, sun reflecting sparkles of light or casting shadows and thus creating an organic motion of structures and forms.

In Harpa´s latest work we see even more color, more gestural way of painting, more forms floating in time and space. These paintings are reminiscent of natures vast organism, a microcosmos and macrocosmos, an introvert and an extrovert world. A recent “black” painting I saw from her, made with watercolors on canvas, is as much an expression of outer space as it is of inner space, of looking up into a dark indigo sky or closing ones eyes experiencing flickers of light that disappear and reappear and disappear again.

I had never seen a “black” painting from her before. She showed it to me when we were going over her works and ideas for a show titled “Silence” in Reykjavík Art Museum at the beginning of 2008. I was the curator and she was one of four partici-pating artists. She eventually did a space-specific piece on four windows of the museum facing the main street, catching the silence of the raindrops that dripped down the glass while she worked with water-dissolving glue as transparent paint, giving each raindrop an afterlife in form or structure, The piece was titled; ”Meanwhile”.

When I was shaping the direction of “Silence” and thinking of which artists could bring this theme into realization. I thought of Harpa as an essential representative of the painters approach. Her paintings possess the vicissitudes and emotional tranquility I found important for the theme and they have nuances that are quiet procedures in themselves, like a breath, soothing us into meditation and silence.

But I also saw her as a significant representative of the poetic approach. A non-verbal poetry with the same effortlessness and dulcetness as Gyrðir Elíasson´s use of words. For Harpa´s use of pictorial language is in fact a “verse libre”, like a vault, whitewashed from within.

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