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| **Northwest Perspectives**

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| **Unraveled**November 26, 2005 through March 12, 2006HildurA native of Iceland and resident of Portland, Oregon, Hildur Bjarnadόttir is internationally recognized for her contemporary reinterpretations of traditional textile handwork – the arts of weaving, needlework and crocheting. She invests conventional forms such as doilies, embroidery, and table coverings with novel qualities that often incorporate humor and surprise. Within her work Bjarnadόttir questions notions of “high” and “low” art, functionality, and classic handwork techniques. In addition to her textile creations, Bjarnadóttir has ventured into photography and computer imaging technology, re-visualizing fiber and textiles as large-scale images that further challenge conventional ideas about art-making.Home and relations are particularly important to Bjarnadόttir, whose skills draw upon her family’s practice of knitting and crocheting, taught to her by her mother and grandmothers and based in traditional Icelandic utilitarian and decorativetextile crafts. Growing up in what she terms “a textile environment,” Hildur mastered the complexities and dexterity required to knit, crochet and sew. The act of creating beautiful objects from thread demands talent, patience and many years of handling the materials and learning the intricacies of needlework. Although technically proficient at a young age, Hildur became fascinated with how to represent the traditions of her ancestresses in terms of contemporary art.[Click on the image for detail.](http://www.boiseartmuseum.org/exhibit/images/hildur/reconst.htm)Bjarnadόttir’s quest to recontextualize the medium of textiles, as well as the medium of fine art painting, has inspired her to transform seemingly standard pieces into innovative creations. With each effort, Hildur raises questions about art and textiles, their functional use and how they are perceived. In doing so, she has chosen a variety of approaches – it might be through the materials – fish line, Formica or photography – or by taking the customary forms of knitting and crocheting out of context and presenting them in wholly different and original ways. What might have been yarn destined for a sweater instead becomes a minimalist “painting.” In other delicate works, eight-pound monofilament fishing line is elegantly tied into flat weave patterns intended for the wall. There is no pretension about the materials, just wonderment as to how she came to devise intricate pieces with such an unlikely and difficult medium.*Reconstructed Canvas* is made from Belgian linen, the same linen that is used to make painter’s canvas. Instead of weaving a canvas, Bjarnadόttir crochets the thread into an undulating textural design, its allover cream color emphasizing the elegance of this refined, yet minimal work. A variation called *ReconstructedCanvas II*, is actually an unraveled painter’s canvas with a crocheted border created from two year’s accumulation of unraveled canvas. While echoing more typical handwork shapes and patterns, this fabric is also conceived to be hung vertically.In many works things aren’t what they seem – Bjarnadόttir’s *Untitled* circle of Formica mimics the linen texture of unpainted canvas; and in a large untitled photograph, the viewer struggles with the realization that the image is not a spattering of physical threads mounted to board on the wall. These works also beg the question of time commitment – what is more valid, the precisely executed photograph or the prolonged process of handwork completed over many months?[Click on the image for detail.](http://www.boiseartmuseum.org/exhibit/images/hildur/skulls.htm)Another apparent issue is whether crocheting, normally considered a woman’s task, is doomed to gender bias. If men crocheted, how would the process be different – would skulls and guns become integrated in their applications? Bjarnadόttir uses the iconography of military weapons in such works as*Shooting Circle* to address topics of political content. In *Untitled (skulls)*, the artist’s finely executed table covering is outlined in crocheted skulls and presented on a round dining table – the effect conjures strange and powerful associations between death and domesticity. We are gently reminded that there are no rules when there is imagination, and subject matter is not necessarily gender specific.The unsuspecting viewer must constantly look for visual trickery. In two pieces entitled *Tatting* and Gingham, Bjarnadόttir urges the onlooker to consider the contrast between the presentation of textile as artwork and painting as artwork. Hildur colors the yarns with paint (not dyes them) and then tats or weaves the fabric. What in reality is a painting? When does a textile become a painting or a painting a textile; and when fabric is mounted on stretchers and placed on the wall, how do we define the difference in what we see? She purposefully blurs the boundaries between these mediums.[Click on image for detail.](http://www.boiseartmuseum.org/exhibit/images/hildur/frippery.htm)In *Class 9JÍ*, a “group portrait,” the artist pays homage to minimalist artworks and pushes the limits of what is termed “fiber art.” Faint variations in color are created from various shades of lint picked up on roller tape from clothes worn by a class of students in Reykjavík, Iceland. The tape coated with fiber is mounted to panels and exhibited in a simple arrangement of rows. At once a very personal remembrance, these small portrait-size rectangles of color, when placed side by side, become not only a symbolic expression, but a commemorative artwork.In her examination of textiles, Bjarnadόttir enjoys riding “the line between decorative, usable crafts and conceptual art.” *Frippery*, a tablecloth with velvet pile embroidery takes on an ironic touch when placed on a pedestal – the small islands of velvet green pile cover the platform surface in simulation of raised mounds of moss. This is not a tablecloth on which to set objects – the artist alters its utilitarian function.[Click on image for detail.](http://www.boiseartmuseum.org/exhibit/images/hildur/splash.htm)Bjarnadόttir’s humor shines in much of the work. The surface of *Untitled (moss)* is a splat of tightly stitched yarns – seemingly hurled onto the surface with exuberant motion. In fact, the surface texture is tediously sewn and worked in a time-consuming process. In*Tchotchke*, an intricate velvet pile floral bouquet harkens back to old-world still lifes – beautifully executed and then ironically juxtaposed with the sewn phrase “Painting is the only real art form” embroidered on the linen. Bjarnadόttir challenges us to examine our preconceptions of what art truly is and poses the question of what difference there is between high and low art, if any.Firmly based in critical thinking and a conceptual approach, Bjarnadόttir entices us to think about what we are actually looking at and to discover something new for ourselves. Within the framework of traditional methods, she stretches the parameters of textile art and follows her own intuitions – “I work contrary to everything I learned during my upbringing…. I was taught to make useful and beautiful objects, but I wouldn’t and I don’t.” While Hildur Bjarnadόttir celebrates the handwork of her ancestors, she unravels its traditions within the context of contemporary art.-- Sandy Harthorn,*Curator of Art* |

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http://www.boiseartmuseum.org/exhibit/hildur.php