



ANNA TORMA
BAGATELLES & FURTHER LAYERS

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StFX Art Gallery

FROM STORIES TO FRAGMENTS: AN ANXIOUS PLEASURE

Today’s world, Anna Torma contends, is in transition from one that can be meaningfully expressed in a narrative line into “a world of fragments that does not come together as a story. We can make statements only by fragments, now,” she argued during a studio visit, “our physique, domesticity, environment, etc., our world [can only be expressed as] a mosaic or collage, layer by layer, in black and white lines.” Consequently, in her new work we see her letting go of loosely connected, colourful scenes of richly experienced and imagined life and turning towards fragmented motifs and abstract gestures separated into overlapping layers, in black and white, in a language that is struggling to re-find itself.

Bagatelles (2011) is an extravaganza of storytelling achieved through integrating silk embroidery, fabric painting and printmaking that enfolds viewers in a two-sided, immersive environment. Torma stands at the forefront of artists who are reclaiming “craft” skills as fine art as she engages post-feminist concerns with the environment, home and sexuality. In a manner recalling Paul Klee, her favourite artist, Torma walks lines of thread through linked vignettes, a style also found in the Bayeux Tapestry (c. 1070s) or Sung dynasty landscapes, where scrolls were to be unrolled at one end while re-rolled at the other. Unlike the former, which chronicles events, in Torma’s work, remembered reality and its fantasy counterparts run together as related and equal which, her production suggests, is how we really experience them before imposing conventions of making sense.

The lines swell into multicoloured rivers and paths meandering through blooming gardens with little houses and fruit trees. Without a hitch, threads change domains to become script naming families of favorite plants, or towns and cities from Torma’s life. The bagatelles are not heroic dramas, but scenes from everyday life and its nightmares, myths, and our fantasies and dreams. We find people of all ages, some fashionably dressed, some naked. Careful scrutiny will reveal garden scenes of joyful, even rowdy love and lust full of lively genitalia that might also be flowers or trees or, appropriately, new life forms altogether. Life, in Torma’s universe, is not only fecund but shape-shifting. Tigers and birds can have human faces; bubbles have fins and huge human eyes. A large number remain of uncertain form. Some figures derive from Torma’s children’s drawings, as well as that compendium of historical monsters, *A Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts* (R. Barber, A. Riches, 2000).

Beneath their serpent-loaded tree, Adam and Eve warn that the garden has two sides; it is a place of choice and negotiating one’s future. Enormous, thick beasts spewing fire stand firm amidst this chaos. Are they threats or guardians? “Who, now, is the beast?” an embroidered text asks. What kind of future can we negotiate from our history in this garden? The garden turns into a metaphorical, political and psychological quagmire with many opportunities for disaster, dream, or a balanced happiness. In *Two-sided Dragon Blanket* (2012), a little girl watches Adam and Eve while beasts enclose the world in fire around a space sheltering a little family of uncertain form, all orchestrated by a smurf. What will you find, and decide to do?

Anna Torma was raised on a farm near the village of Tarnaörs, Hungary, just east of Budapest. Her mother and grandmother taught her traditional embroidery and sewing skills. Serenely at ease in her garden and home, domesticity is the core of her life and practice. Always interested in biology and art, she almost chose to study medicine. Instead, she graduated in Textile Art and Design from the Hungarian University of Applied Arts (1979) in possession of the skills needed to bring these interests to expression in her second mother tongue, that of thread. Not just any thread, but lustrous silk, “one of the great human inventions from the natural world,” she says. For her, thread is as “cozy” a language as Hungarian. Everyone intuitively understands thread as a medium, in her mind, because everyone wears clothes.

Over the last year, Torma has turned from narrative to follow the graphic line at its most fundamental level: the trace of bodily gesture. A 2013 printmaking residency in Alberta found Torma working with some English anatomical charts for nurses. During days of what she calls “maniacal drawing,” she produced large screenprints on fabric of tracings from these charts, fragmented and layered until they became tangled, dispersed fields. They are like an exorcism--not a story in sight. Denis Hollier’s conclusion on reading Geroges Bataille leaps to mind: “For painting is nothing if it does not destroy the architecture of the human body” (*Against Architecture*, 1989). Architectural-style conventions of hierarchy and order govern realist representation of the human body; thus we speak of the body’s “architecture.” The deeply abstract nature of the expressive, tactile gesture of marking, however, destroys this language of objective figuration as its only inherent reference is the marker’s body. Bataille argued that this type of destruction is not only liberating but even charged with pleasure. Certainly I (and maybe you) feel a surge of excitement as my body empathetically overflows through Torma’s representational fields constituted by conflict between the “architecture” of scientific illustration and its undoing.

In her new body of work, Torma strips her previous language down to elements of pure gesture dispersed through multiple

transparent layers that she calls “superlayers.” In the first “superlayer” construction, *Fibonacci* (2014), text is reduced to alphabet, image to rows of simplified forms, while “fibonacci” refers to a basic numerical sequence that governs the golden section and describes the order of many natural phenomena. Transparent, loosely overlapping sections juxtapose these elements in tentative expressive experiments.

Just as gestural abstract painting focuses attention on paint and its application, Torma’s fabrication makes us aware of thread and stitching, of time and the tug of thread pulling silk base layers into miniature landscapes. While a gestural paint or pencil stroke sweeps in a continuous whole, embroidery breaks the continuous line into tiny stitches that measure time as stops and starts. The stitches’ line promises to keep going, unless it doesn’t. They stutter as they crawl by, possibly uncertain about their direction and continuity. You hope, but promises, in thread and life, are never secure. Another kind of rupture is visible in the linear screenprints incorporated into some works. While lines may not be interrupted, the screenprints themselves are fragments of a larger whole. Torma’s use of screenprinted photographs imparts yet another temporal dimension, an experience of deeper time that remains elusively out of reach, but still influences the present surface where time is measured out in increments of the stitch. In all her techniques, fragments of previous motifs drift through the layers, isolated references in search of new contexts. However, Torma has willfully set them adrift, in a metaphor for our present time, able to make only contingent promises about meaningful connections, surely an anxious pleasure.

Tila Kellman, Guest curator
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FROM THE GALLERY DIRECTOR: BRUCE CAMPBELL

