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Lucia Engstrom, “Lovers and Dreamers” by Jody Zellen

Von Lintel Gallery, Santa Monica, California
Continuing through March 23, 2024



Lucia Engstrom, “Cumulus,” 2023, hand embroidered with organic wool, silk and mohair, cotton rag paper, 27 5/8 x 42”

Lucia Engstrom’s enigmatic works in “Lovers and Dreamers” combine textiles and out-of-focus photography. By adding patches of embroidery, she changes the overall emotional tenor and spacial depth of the landscapes. Engstrom’s use of silk, wool and other woven materials differs from other artists, like Maurizio Anzeri, Julie Cockburn, Flore Gardner or Diane Meyer, who stitch on top of small-scale photographs essentially drawing over what is below and turning the surface into pixels or embellishing the image with decoration. Engstrom’s amalgamation of different types of hand dyed threads are colored by the artist to match elements within the photographs. The effect has a lot in common with Channing Hansen, who collects and dyes raw fleece, spins it into yarn, and produces complex knitted forms that amount to open weave abstract paintings.

In older series like “Diffused Landscapes” (2013-2018) Engstrom began to add embroidery to her pictures, exploring the relationship between water and sky to present the natural landscape as over-saturated and abstract blurs hovering above and below the horizon line. To create the images in the “Lovers & Dreamers” series, she pierces the printed cotton rag paper with the knitting needle to augment specific areas of the photographs with sewn textures that give the images a sculptural quality.

In “Baltic Blue” (all works 2023), tufts of blue and green threads of varying thickness emerge out of the landscape at the horizon line. The base image is an extremely blurry yet brightly colored landscape filled with a gradient of blue — the sky and sea — that surrounds a fuzzy line of green-brown hills. The embroidered shape covers the center of the composition to become something at once derived from the image in terms of color, yet completely alien from it in material and texture. This constantly moves the eye from seeing the contrasting forms and textures apart from one another to integrating them.



Lucia Engstrom, "Baltic Blue," 2023, hand embroidered with organic wool, silk and mohair, cotton rag paper, 30 x 22"



Lucia Engstrom, "Echo (Burnt Orange)," 2023, hand embroidered with organic wool, silk and mohair, cotton rag paper, 29 x 23"

In "Blue Storm," wave-like shapes of yarn cover an image of cascading waves washing up against the shore. The deep blue sky is filled with ominous clouds suggestive of an approaching storm. The sewn shapes dance in the foreground (and into the white border of the paper) like a close-up of the turbulent sea. "Mirage" is more subtle. Here, Engstrom depicts a group of small tree-filled islets surrounded by water and sky. As in the other images, the artist portrays the landscape as a poetic expanse of alternately bombastic or subtle colors. White threads appear like soft mustaches or wispy clouds, disrupting the calm sea of the photograph as they hover above the surface of the prints and move beyond the borders of the image. Some of the plant life in the lower portion of the photograph has also been stitched over, adding additional texture and dimensionality.

"Home: Blue/Yellow" is more reminiscent of Engstrom's previous work. It pictures a brightly lit and out of focus wooded area filled with blue and green trees that are backed by soft yellow leaves and patches of white sky. This over-saturated image is bracketed by clusters of embroidery that approximate colors and shapes in the landscape. These interventions once again extend beyond the edges of the printed image into the white border area. Engstrom has a strong impulse to break free of the confines of the rectangle, frequently spilling the relief of the embroidery off of the flat image and into the viewers' space.

"Echo (Burnt Orange)" displays the most aggressive application of stitching. Atop a sharply focused black and white seascape that splits the horizon line of sky and water in half, a bulging shape composed from a melange of orange, yellow, mauve, gray and purple threads jumps from the page dramatically. Like the shape in "Baltic Blue," Engstrom spins the overlay emerging out of the photographic image from her imagination. It may begin within the confines of the photograph, but the completed image transforms it to a dramatic (as is the case in "Echo (Burnt Orange)") or more subtle result. The tensions between what is first photographed and subsequently added, as well as the relationship between the flat printed surface and the imprecise or gestural dimensional stitching, is what gives these works their intrigue and appeal.



Lucia Engstrom, "Home: Blue/Yellow," 2023, hand embroidered with organic wool, silk and mohair, cotton rag paper, 25 5/8 x 44 5/8"

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com.