

Bagatelles, Anna Torma, 18 November-9 April 2012, New Brunswick Museum, Market Square, Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada E2L 4Z6, T: 1 888 268 9595, www.nbm-mnb.ca

Bagatelles is a new installation by the textile artist Anna Torma. These six richly embroidered silk panels hang in a curved space, reminiscent of the water lilies series by Monet installed in the oval rooms at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. In both works by Monet and Torma the viewer is surrounded by the artist's impression of a garden. We do not view the garden topographically but are immersed in it.

In Torma's silk panels we are confronted by pastel colour washes and dense silk embroidery. As viewers we experience something akin to 'Jouissance', an intense pleasure all at once and although we can only look we experience touch with our senses; a haptic vision, where our eyes function like organs of touch.

Torma recently completed a Canada Council artist's residency in Paris. While there she frequented the Bagatelles garden in the Bois de Boulogne. Known for its heritage rose collection, the garden was in full bloom when Torma visited. Other French gardens, such as those at Versailles, also feature in her work.

A French sensibility pervades her work, from the silk paints sourced at the colour merchant, Sennelier, to her skilled needlework that recalls haute couture fashion. The Renaissance textiles of the Musée de Cluny inform her love of mythology and medieval bestiaries. Bagatelle is also a musical term meaning a short light-hearted piece of music.

Torma, who has used musical titles such as *The*



Blues, Rondo and Serenade, says she aims 'to sing'. "I advocate for small things, out of mainstream, the overlooked and fragile. I feel I can orchestrate those elements into an organic, breathing tableau that represents a lot more than the bagatelles, the small building elements themselves." Here Torma recalls the feminist theorist Hélène Cixous, with her concept of "Écriture féminine", where the artist "Brings back to light the life that's been buried, fugitive, made too prudent. Illuminates it and sings its name."

Torma learned her techniques at the hands of her grandmother and mother, when still a child in Hungary. She sees embroidery as her "mother-tongue", saying "I feel fluent and articulate using stitches instead of trying to paint or draw. The stitching must be my language, the first, the cosy one, similar to my Hungarian."

In *Bagatelles* there are multiple sources she draws from, ranging from children's drawings of monsters to her *Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts*. The flanking panels illustrate her mythical *Gatekeepers* who guard these fantastical gardens. Alongside these wondrous creatures Torma asks the question "Who, may I ask is the BEAST?" This is a garden of plentitude with figures and flowers embellished in text and image. This is a postmodernism sensibility at its best, informed by a sophisticated treatment of layered sources and materiality from Art Brut primitive to Hungarian folklore. Adding to this is the intelligent curation of the show by the museum's Peter Larocque whose catalogue essay adds to the richness of this installation by Anna Torma.

••• Anne Koval

12, 13 & 14 Anna Torma, details from "Bagatelles" 2011, silk embroidery on silk.