

A meditation on Eva Hesse's images

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This exhibition of work by Runa Boger consists of textile pieces of coarse and woven woollen blankets from the Norwegian Armed Forces. The forms that make up the motifs have been glued or sewn together edge against edge using small, regular whipstitching. All the surfaces have been coloured by hand, then printed or painted with etching dyes that give the surfaces varying degrees of saturation and colour changes.

This brief, terse description is enough to reveal important aspects of the pieces. Wool has an extremely matt surface, and when woollen fabric is dyed or coloured, it results in a surface which initially has colour characteristics. When the dye is applied as here, with variations in saturation level and colours, pulsating and live surfaces arise that set the eye in motion. It seems as if various sections retreat slightly or become prominent in the image surface. These pieces have to do with working in colours on a two dimensional surface, as painters traditionally have done in painting. In minimalism, the work on formal and material-related issues became to a great extent the very content or meaning of the work of art. These pieces by Runa Boger can therefore be seen as being part of the painting tradition of minimalism.

The principle of composition here is an interaction of open-worked forms, executed in such a way that certain forms can be read as part of a background that becomes visible between the forms. This contributes to a spatial effect, three-dimensionality, because there are various levels in the surfaces. In the history of textile art three-dimensionality in pieces was not desirable during certain periods. The textiles would then create 'holes' in the walls on which they were hung. Therefore, the ideal for a long time was two-dimensional image compositions. So by adding forms that create spatial effects, Runa Boger's pieces diverge from a central convention within textile art.

At the same time, this manner of composition links up with the collage traditions of art history, where various forms are juxtaposed and new contexts arise. The recurring formal element in Boger's images is a rectangle, demarcated by a frame. This can be interpreted as a window. The window motif can be a symbol of openness, insight, overview, but also as a partition, as seclusion. By reflecting on what lies inside and outside windows we get a feeling of important aspects of both our everyday lives and emotional lives. In this presentation there are few motifs in the actual image – most of the windows are 'blind'. They have different colour-fields and atmospheric expression and invite a meditative reflection, one closely related to the effect of Mark Rothko's images. In some of the windows we can see trees. These more realistic presentations are linked to Runa Boger's earlier window images, where the windows were parts of houses and reflected light and motifs from the

exterior or the interior. But even then, the windows could be understood as something more, as expressive eyes that looked at us and that we looked through.

The window as a motif means that the surface is divided up into squares, the image becomes like a grid or mesh. In modernism there has been considerable interest in the grid as a motif and principle of composition, right from Mondrian to the contemporary Norwegian artist Harald Fenn. A tension exists in every grid as to whether it is flat or spatial, whether something lies behind the lines that define it. The concrete image can be seen as a segment of a larger grid. By nature, textiles are basically interlacing, a weaving of threads placed above and below each other. So by looking at a segment and enlarging it one will encounter a three-dimensional situation, the threads lying on various levels, and a background between the threads. In weaving it is precisely the programming of the grid resulting from woof and warp that create the pattern, the motif. So by applying forms that imply a grid, Runa Boger's pieces are also connected to a tradition in textiles.

The types of stitches have both practical and decorative functions. The use of stitches as a device reveals that the artist is familiar with the art of textiles. Embroidery can be said to be drawing with coloured threads instead of crayons.

There is a gender aspect linked to the choice of devices. Embroidery and other textile art has at certain periods been viewed as a female occupation, while pure painting has been a male domain. By choosing techniques from both fields, Runa Boger creates an 'impure' work and contributes to the blurring of traditional conventions. Other artists have also done this previously. Runa Boger states that she has been inspired by Eva Hesse. Eva Hesse (1936-1970) was one of the earliest and most striking artists within modernism, someone who developed an artistry based on 'female' effects such as textiles and thread. She is known for her spatial installations, in which threads leave the two-dimensional picture surfaces and turn the pieces into three-dimensional objects. The aesthetic expression is not typified by traditional aesthetic ideals of beauty, but has a rough, aggressive and incomplete appearance.

Eva Hesse's final pictures were done in gouache on paper. The painting is both transparent and dense, and applied in layers that partially cover each other. There are clear traces of the paintbrush as well as scraping done with the wooden point of the brush. The motif is rectangular, bordered by frames. There are small variations in the pieces and it is unclear whether windows or a grid is the motif. The expression lies in the delicate scratches in the painting surface and the sensitive use of colour. The constant repetition of the same motif gives the pictures a transient feel, as if it is the process of capturing the motif that is the actual content. For Hesse, the serial nature of the series of images was both a reference to minimalism and a way of repeating absurdity.

By taking on the task of transposing these paper images of Hesse to other materials, to textiles and embroidery, it seems to me that Runa Boger freezes the moment to a greater extent. Boger's images become more lasting and monumental than Hesse's. There is more tranquillity in the coloured textile surfaces and embroidered lines.

Although Runa Boger's colours also vary and spread out like watercolours, and the strokes in the embroidering are sensitive and searching, Runa Boger's images nevertheless create a different expression from those of Eva Hesse precisely because the TIME it takes to make these pieces is infinitely longer than the time it took for Hesse. Runa Boger has to colour/dye materials, print/paint/draw and sew the pieces together with small, regular stitches, and embroider Hesse's searching lines with precision. That this time-dimension becomes visible gives Runa Boger's work an extra quality, in my opinion. Her pieces become a kind of meditation on Hesse's images. By converting the images Runa Boger has to make many choices and interpret and simplify the image-creating elements in Hesse. These are not copies of Hesse, nor direct appropriations, but pieces that arise in a meeting with a motif that strikes a chord in both artists. Perhaps long experience in both artists leads to a need of simplification, of going back to an exploration of the image-field, a segment of the world, a section of the grid. In textile art, the material challenges contribute to extra concentration and calm, because such work takes time. Hesse was also preoccupied with 'workmanship', a knowledge of the expressive force and conventions of the media.

In this exhibition, Runa Boger is building further on earlier experiences, and drawing together the threads from workshop practice and studies of art history into a convincing accentuation of 'workmanship', insight and skills through these pieces. The pieces have required time. And now they challenge us in our own time to engage in active visual work which also takes the time necessary to complete it.