

## *Form ≠ Function*

### Janet Yoon on the work of Christalena Hughmanick

The gridded compositions of Christalena Hughmanick's gabardine quilts elicit a fun array of associations: a Tetris game gone awry, an empty crossword grid, and – given recent events – Ellsworth Kelly's rendering of the water's reflections in Seine from 1951. However, it's also not a great surprise when Hughmanick tells me that she was raised in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a region known for its Amish communities and where the artist grew up in close proximity with the bold-hued and skillfully crafted quilts of the Pennsylvania Dutch. In Hughmanick's work, her combination of colors, geometric forms, and the slight unevenness of fabric tiles sewn together, signifying the labor of the maker's hands, suggests a nod to Amish sensibility.

Hughmanick walks me through the process of assembling each quilt: the choice of fabric (gabardine), the hatch pattern of the top stitch that requires a special industrial machine, and the intricate binding along the perimeter of each quilt. It is clear that she enjoys the process, and is constantly working

through ideas on how to make the traditional practice her own. Although quilting carries a rich history in which geometric designs can signify collective narratives or mark significant milestones in one's life (birth, death, marriage, etc.), Hughmanick decidedly eschews such associations for her abstract forms arranged by tan and gray squares. Rather than recounting a story, she pulls us into an artwork that elevates color and texture.

Hughmanick's quilts are large and have a commanding presence. They are anchored by a large grid that she's assembled by cutting and sewing together fabric tiles spreading across nearly five by six feet. But the grid also appears in several other forms in each quilt. The hatch pattern of the top stitch - a grid rotated diagonally - is a subtle reiteration of even lines and squares. When it catches light, the sheen of the gabardine reveals the grid naturally formed by the twill weave that alternates directions based on Hughmanick's arrangement of the gabardine tiles. Stepping back, however, we return to the abstract and geometric composition. Order and precision are cancelled out by the disarray of squares that Hughmanick delights in keeping elusive. A binary code of line and color become a place for the autonomy of her art.

We can't overlook, of course, the fact that we are looking at a blanket: a domestic object in which Hughmanick has altered its form and function. Hanging on the wall and constructed of gabardine, a fabric typically used for raincoats and men's trousers, these quilts veer far from their domestic connotations. Hughmanick effectively stretches and pulls the tension between form and function until she's created a delightfully elastic space and identity for her enigmatic pieces. To that end, her decision to manipulate notions of utility is a tendency found throughout her oeuvre. In her installation and performance of Heirloom (2012), she produces dozens of unfired clay reproductions of a found Colonial Era porringer, and sits down to chew through each mold until the vessels have amassed to a pile of dry rubble. In her sculpture and performance for Variation on Support (2014), Hughmanick constructs and mounts 30 wall shelves, the number designated by her age, all sized proportionally to the width and height of her body. One by one, each shelf is taken down and arranged (stacked, propped up, splayed, etc.) by the artist as she methodically modifies their function.

In her latest series of lithographs, Variations on Projection, Hughmanick again confronts utility and form to arrive at ambiguous and open-ended creations. Recorded from a sleep-tracking phone app, a sinuous line dips and

rises, purportedly decrypting Hughmanick's deepest states of slumber. There is nothing more universal and mysterious as the body in its moments of rest, and to measure and quantify this activity that is in all other circumstances invisible to the naked eye becomes a fascinating exercise. The physical imprint of the body's rhythms, repeated over and over on one sheet, begins to take on an elusive and fluid identity.

Taking from the purely functional, Hughmanick looks to familiar methods and forms – didactic and traditional – to maneuver a way to less concrete conclusions. For this artist, to dwell in the unknown and the incalculable is just as fulfilling as a finished quilt or a full night of rest. Not unlike the Amish who master their handmade crafts as a means to live a life that is centered on God, Hughmanick also seeks to enter a realm of the sublime.

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