

Neotectonic Period: A Radical Proposal for Beauty

Neotectonic Period: A Radical Proposal for Beauty is a new solo exhibition of mixed media sculpture by Susan Hensel. Running from March 15th to May 15th on the Susan Hensel Gallery's online Artsy platform, the show exhibits the artist's groundbreaking digital embroidery techniques combined with a variety of materials.

The stunning array of objects blends Hensel's familiar mastery of textile sculpture with many new ideas and approaches.

Part study in color and form, part art-as-a-call-to-arms, *Neotectonic*... is provocative and engaged with the world while still pursuing that ancient goal of producing mesmerizing beauty for its own sake.

The term "neotectonic" refers to the study of motions and deformations of the Earth's crust as they are happening today. As a science, it seeks to understand and predict earthquakes. The discipline also points to the seismic changes occurring under our feet — a nod to other major calamities we face, like climate change, cultural upheaval, the pandemic, and political turmoil.

But Hensel's art is not looking to show us images of these tribulations. Instead, it opens up visions into beauty that allow us to see through the challenges and into a deep well of meaning and, eventually, hope.

At the same time, the folds in the bodies she creates do buckle under forces and appear to morph through collision. In this way, her pieces fulfill the promise of the tectonic activity she names while pursuing the artist's idea of *radical beauty*.

Radical Beauty

"Even amidst chaos and disorder, something in the human mind continues to seek beauty."

— John O'Donohue, Poet and Priest

The reminders of our precarity are all around us. There is nowhere to turn to avoid seeing the signs as our daily lives become a glut of dark auguries. Wildlife populations collapse, and wildfires consume swathes of the planet's surface. Institutions are in free fall, with no alternative at hand. We are told to enter virtual realms as the new frontier, as if the species is abandoning the physical world. Our oligarchs take flights into space and build lavish safe havens in far flung parts of the world in preparation for times ahead. Masses of the sick and dying choke our

anemic healthcare systems, and rage pulses through every sentence uttered in the public sphere.

Yet in a time as divided as ours, there is one opinion that finds universal acceptance: the world is broken, and we are living among the shards.

Hensel's idea of *radical beauty* is a response to this condition.

It begins with questions. Must the artist comment on the destruction by placing a mirror up to it? Is the only answer to the crisis a fixation on it?

In a world where we feel the inevitability of a bleak future, our instincts will always tend toward stillness, isolation, quiet despair. The caged rat will, in time, give up the food bowl.

Hensel's approach looks not through a glass darkly but instead uses the visionary power of the artist to reawaken our sense of yearning. It gives us glimpses of a world that arises out of the dark soil of the present into a full flowering.

We do not need reminders of the crisis. We need to be reminded of what's worth fighting for.

Awe, meditation, surprise. These moments remind us of something we almost forgot, something that we could not keep hold of during the months of lockdown, the years of climate chaos, the decades of societal erosion. Hensel's work reminds us of why we stay here, and why it's worth going through the catastrophe and looking after each other as we make it to the far side to build something new.

Whereas the gnashing of teeth is debilitating and disempowering, radical beauty as an artistic ethos is political in the most essential sense of the word. Creating and upholding radical beauty is an act of spiritual succor — not to distract from the world, but to breathe life back into us so that we regain our strength.

And how Hensel produces this radical beauty illuminates the foundations of her practice as well as this new idea's ability to bring it in line with a greater purpose.

Weaving Color

This idea of uniting the purely aesthetic pursuit with socially meaningful implications is not unlike the pressure of two tectonic plates pressing against one another to make a mountain.

Hensel's entire journey into digital embroidery began with a pure aesthetic experience, one that haunts her work into this current series.

While visiting the Minnesota State Fair many years ago, the artist witnessed a computer aided embroidery machine using thread to produce an ultramarine blue. It was what psychologist

Abraham Maslow might call a peak experience. That vision of blue sent Hensel on a years-long odyssey to master color through this new process.

Grant writing and loans secured the equipment, and the artist poured time into training in the form and experimenting with what it offered.

Today, her work begins as images designed in software before being sent to the embroidery machine. These produce the “modules” that Hensel pieces together with other material to form the final piece.

She works with triangular thread, allowing for a diversity of tones. The play between the different threads, the background fabric, and light produces shimmering fields of ever shifting color.

The structure of the thread scatters the light, giving birth to variations in the color that change with the viewer’s position. And because of the nature of embroidery, Hensel can use the close proximity of colors to produce new ones — reminiscent of Georges Seurat’s chromoluminarism, where dots of two colors are arranged closely together to create a third. Similarly, Hensel also uses the vibratory effects of complementary color configurations and close saturation split complements to heighten the drama of her fields.

All of this occurs through the participation between the work, the physics of light, and the biological structure of the human eye. And her control over these three things in relation shows the alchemical magic underneath the quest for radical beauty.

The result is a terrain of living color. This can then be contextualized with other material to form bodies that give the eye a diverse field to adventure in.

Despite fabric’s reputation as a flat material, Hensel’s sculpture is anything but. She is able to achieve sharp corners and intricate surface texture with a parsimony of armature. This allows the fabric to hold its own against the bold features of aluminum, plumbing fixtures, acrylic rods, reclaimed barnwood, and plaster forms that combine to create her final pieces.

In both her small and large-scale works, these forms present us with an opportunity for a visual delight all-too rare. They are abstract yet so purposefully embodied that they contain a kind of humor — their unexpected logic so serenely complete yet alien that we have no response but to grin. Behind this grin lay a more contemplative repose, encouraging a certain slowness to grasp at a definition.

This effect opens up a window of time where we pause and playfully puzzle at the beauty of the thing presented. And perhaps in this time, we have a chance to fall back in love with life in this world and the people here with us.

The Work

Neotectonic... is a collection of work that slowly builds on itself. Each piece adds a new view to the perspective and narrative, increasing the pressure until it finally erupts.

Through names and a few visual cues, Hensel gives us enough to see something of the natural world, even in the most abstract pieces.

In *Firmament* (2022), we are given three blue stars set in a black arc over a hallucinatory approximation of what we presume is planet Earth. The sky is framed in wood, creating a juxtaposition of textures as well as many interpretations to play with. The stars could just as easily be passengers in a boat floating over a body of water, or this could be an elaborate headdress.

Despite the use of digital technology and advanced optical science to complete the piece, it is at home with what survives of humanity's most archaic artistic works. And why shouldn't it? The stars are perhaps our oldest spiritual and artistic obsession — yet Hensel manages to give us a unique view of them. That again returns us to the hope at the center of radical beauty.

Firmament is not the kind of art on view at the end of the world, it is the art of a species still in love with its home and the view from it.

We draw in closer with *Atmospheric River* (2022), a mixture of textures and materials that evokes a snapshot of flowing water. Aluminum and reclaimed wood act as the source and fastener of the image, which is predominantly made out of dazzling textile overlaid to produce the river's surface. Rising off this surface are gray tendrils, reminiscent of morning mist rising off a body of water as we come out of our dreams and into our day.

Hensel plays more directly with the field of neotectonics in several pieces, including *Amplitude* (2022) and *Tidal Amplitude* (2022). Here, the wave functions captured by the instruments of science are abstracted for their own aesthetic purposes. The surfaces of these pieces make full use of the artist's grasp of light, color, and the human eye. The control and play with color is itself another manipulation of the waveform toward the end of beauty.

Her most direct representation of the exhibition's core themes appear in her embroidered paper pieces of the *Neotectonic Period* series and the more three dimensional *Neotectonic Ancient Period* series. Using paper, she makes striking graphical expressions of plates moving and interacting with one another, an artist's interpretation of active seismological charts.

Pieces like *Neotectonic Ancient Period 2* (2022) show strips of these plates ramming together, shockwaves rippling through their bodies. The formal explorations in the likes of *Amplitude* are brought to bear here in their lived reality.

A narrative begins to emerge, then. We start by seeing the world as it exists from afar, under a firmament of stars. We gradually move in to examine the movement of water over its surface.

The physical features on the surface of the water are abstracted into waves, and these waves are found again deep in the surface of the Earth. As we zoom back out, we see the way that waveforms and the physicality of the planet create change that has the power to sculpt continents and carve oceans.

It is a captivating journey through fundamental forces. It is a mystical trip through the grandest narratives of our planet. But to gather these insights we have to take in color and shape, revel in the texture and the virtues of light. And if we do, we might remember something: our home is worth staying on and staying with, and its future is worth fighting for.

About the Artist

Hensel's work spans a fifty-year career and hundreds of exhibitions, dozens of solo shows, and beyond. Her pieces appear in more than 30 public collections, and she has worked as a teaching artist and lecturer throughout the United States. She established the Susan Hensel Gallery to serve as the home for early and mid-career artists working with material in new ways. She is the recent recipient of grants and residencies from the Jerome Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, and Ragdale Foundation.

Jonathan M. Clarke, independent critic