

Anna Von Mertens BY YAELE AMIR

Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco CA August 5 - September 2, 2006



Bay Area artist Anna Von Mertens's "As the Stars Go By" provides a subtle yet far-reaching reflection on down-to-earth American affairs. From afar, the seven wall hangings are seemingly indistinguishable—black rectangular pieces of quilted cotton tacked onto a white wall flow in almost one continuous band around the room. It is only on closer inspection that the white, gray, tan, and blue hand-stitches become apparent, revealing in turn a diverse set of celestial patterns.

As with her previous work, Von Mertens translates information bytes into embroidered abstractions, making them less objective and thus more approachable. In the past, she overlaid complicated topographical, geographical, or biological data, and presented them as alternative mapping systems. For this new series, however, she refashions pivotal episodes in American history by reproducing the rotating star charts that were seen overhead at the time. To address the U.S. military assault on Baghdad of March 20, 2003, Von Mertens chose analogous rotations as seen between

5:34am and sunrise from the Palestine Hotel, where most of the foreign press was then residing. Another quilt corresponds to rotations as viewed on April 4, 1968 between 6:01pm and 7:05pm from the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN, looking in the direction from which the bullet that killed Martin Luther King Jr. was fired. Von Mertens cites these works as quasi-memorials—by compressing time, space, and world history into a single frame, she offers the viewer occasions for quiet reverie. Like the stars themselves, spectators thus become at once distant "bystanders" and active participants in these horrendous events.

At the same time, "As the Stars Go By" marks a significant departure for Von Mertens, as she no longer displays the quilts as sculptural elements on bed-like platforms. Even if she still processes hard data without compromising any of her earlier sense of intimacy, the formula has somewhat changed. Von Mertens sees the shift as having a cinematic connection, not unlike the screen or filter of a camera lens—able to offer new perspectives on past events yet (contrary to Hollywood) without affording cathartic release. What we are confronted with instead is something quite abstract, but still not entirely out of the picture, thus enabling us to look at the world in a different light.

Despite the suggested astrological nature of this new series, Von Mertens avoids conjecturing as to why or how these events occurred. By embedding alternative worldviews on the ground as it were, "As the Stars Go By" calls into question the configuration of our own national destiny.

(THIS PAGE) ANNA VON MERTENS, 5:34 AM UNTIL SUNRISE, MARCH 20, 2003, BAGHDAD, IRAQ (FROM THE PALESTINE HOTEL LOOKING TOWARD THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE ON THE TIGRIS RIVER), 2006, HAND-STITCHED COTTON, 41 x 97.5 IN. COURTESY THE ARTIST & JACK HANLEY GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO. (OPPOSITE LEFT TOP TO BOTTOM) KEVIN APPEL, COUNTRY HOME 4 (BRIDGE), 2006, SIL, ENAMEL, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS OVER PANEL, 90 x 84 IN. COURTESY ANGLES GALLERY, SANTA MONICA. DAVID NODAN, INSTALLATION VIEWS, (OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT) UNTITLED, 2006, SCREEN PRINT ON LAMINATED PLYWOOD, 74.06 x 52.38 IN. PHOTO JOSHUA WHITE. COURTESY THE ARTIST & DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.