

Sublime beauty pervades Maysey Craddock's "Unfolding Shores"



Maysey Craddock, "Archipelago," gouache and thread found paper, 47.5-by-62 inches, and 2016
(Photo courtesy of David Lusk Gallery)

If you see Maysey Craddock's show "Unfolding Shores" with other people, chances are that you'll hear a lot of the phrase, "That's beautiful!" or even, "Wow, how beautiful!" And those viewers would be correct. The work in this exhibition, on display through Dec. 23 at David Lusk Gallery, is of surpassing beauty, to the point of being hypnotic, seductive, ravishing. Let's not attempt to parse the meaning of beauty or its relationship to the imagination in an unbeautiful age, and let's not rely on what has become the current cliché: that we require beauty as a salve to our

bruised psyches in this dismal, brutal time. Let's, instead, tell the truth, that beauty exists in and of itself, for its own purpose, that it keeps its own counsel, perhaps consoling, if that's important to you, but also a little indifferent.

That expression accounts for the stillness and sense of enclosure that pervade these works, all gouache and thread on found paper, which is to say that they are painted on common paper sacks sewn together with prominent stitches. Occasionally, the manufacturer's imprint shows through the pigment. Those elements — the bags, the stitches, the logos — lend the pieces a foundation in the ordinary, the humble edge of consumer culture, while the imagery elevates them to the sublime.

Craddock pursues the theme that has occupied her for at least a decade, the nebulous and uncertain boundaries where water and shoreline meet and dissolve into a misty, indeterminate blur, where the path is tenuous and the foothold insecure. Sea coasts and river banks are her natural element, not just on a personal scale but also in the scope of geographical watercourses and geological or glacial movements. A large and stunning work like "Archipelago," for example — 47.5-by-62-inches — takes her method toward monochrome abstraction while seeming to encompass a cosmos of watery dissolution. Similarly, "River and Tide" — 49-by-32-inches — looks down from god-like altitude on a mythical landscape that joins a map of a circuitous river, like the Mississippi, with a chart of oceanic tidal flow, creating a conjunction of water's eternal envelopment of the land.

The artist is as fond of roots and branches as she is of water and shore, and she uses these elements for a fruitful juxtaposition of spiny, twisty tree motifs and the intricate, secret networks on inlets, seeping waterways and inconspicuous channels. These notions are particularly effective in such pieces as the epic-size "Tasting the Storm Dark Sky" and the slightly more intimate "Unbroken, broken sea," with its dazzling midnight-blue background and cream-colored networks of reaching branches.



Maysey Craddock, "Deep Sea Rise," gouache and thread on found paper, 62-by-47 inches, 2016
(Photo courtesy of David Lusk Gallery)

Let's say that beauty and fear are more closely related than we ever thought. Why should we fear beauty? First, because it takes us out of ourselves, cutting the ground away from our habits, certitudes and circumstances, and, second, because beauty is finite and must end as assuredly as we ourselves will die, as assuredly, to make the point, as the river bank crumbles under the action of the river, as the tree on that shore rots and eventually falls, as the ocean works its energy on the sands on the continents. Do we need Maysey Craddock's frankly beautiful and Olympian work to remind us of these facts? Of course we do.