

Donald & Era Farnsworth

Donald Farnsworth and Era Hamaji Farnsworth's artwork chronicles the artists' exploration of synthesized locations. The depicted spaces are synthesized in that they are representations, composed and re-imagined as textiles or mixed-media works on paper, but also in that they combine elements traditionally considered in terms of a dualistic opposition: East and West, ancient and modern, digital and handmade, figurative and abstract. A simplified analysis might posit that the Farnsworths' work uses Western techniques to describe Eastern ideas. However, taking art historian Mark Levy's recent publication *Void in Art* as a point of departure, the relationships in the work reveal themselves to be more subtle than a simple East/West dichotomy.

For the purpose of discussion, the Farnsworths' current work can be roughly divided into two endeavors: restorations and tree portraits. The restorations involve the use of centuries-old religious images – from Tibetan thangkas and mandalas to Old Master scenes from the life of Christ – which the artists manipulate to varying degrees, from merely repainting missing and damaged areas to removing entire figures from the composition. The tree portraits begin as photographs taken by the artists of trees in various locations throughout the globe; these pictures provide a basis for hand-painted and digitally layered mixed-media portraits, which are then translated into Jacquard tapestries. Ultimately, the Farnsworths merge formal and conceptual elements from multiple traditions to arrive at a unique, contemporary perspective, key themes of which include a quiet reverence for the natural landscape and a consideration of the Great Void.



Detail: *Amiens Reflection III*, 2004 - Tapestry, 78 x 59 in. Ed: 24

The concept of the Great Void is a recurring motif that the artists take up in both the restorations and the tree portraits. Levy notes that the Void is central to Eastern religious and philosophical thought and has many names: it is the Tao in Taoism, Dharmakaya to Buddhists and Brahman to Hindus. The Void and its relationship to the phenomenal world can be tricky for Westerners to navigate: Levy explains it as the erasure of distinctions between “*dharmas, [which] are discrete entities and include things as well as doctrines, thoughts, and emotions.*” Individual dharmas are seen as inseparable





configurations of a larger flow of energy, a flow which encompasses the often contradictory forces of the dharmas. In *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, François Cheng provides the following passage by Qing dynasty scholar and painter Fan Chi, discussing the formal manifestation of the Void in Song dynasty landscape paintings from Southern China:

It is necessary that true emptiness be in some way fully inhabited by fullness. It is emptiness in the form of hazes, mists, clouds or invisible breaths – that carries all things, drawing them into the process of hidden change. Far from diluting space, these forms of emptiness confer on a picture the unity in which all things breathe as in an organic structure.

The formal means employed in the Song landscapes – atmospheric mists, indistinctly delineated objects and intentionally blank ground – are also found in the Farnsworths’ tree portraits, which emphasize the inherent beauty of nature while incorporating a sense of the Void. A hazy ether permeates and unifies the prints’ layered fragments, lending them



Altered Mythos, a restoration in progress, based on a crucifixion scene by Mantegna.



Dharmakaya, 2004 - Jacquard Tapestry, 82 x 54 in., Ed: 36



Amiens Reflection I, 2004 - Tapestry, 78 x 59 in.



Vernal Equinox, 2003 - Tapestry, 76 x 57 in.



Reflection Pool (Blue), 2006 - Tapestry, 72.5 x 55 in.

a weightless, intangible quality. Single trees and groves emerge from watery washes of color, layers of handmade paper, and Japanese calligraphy; the trees are placed in the foreground, while the calligraphy, connoting the presence of a distinctly human intelligence, is merely part of the ether. The writing is so archaic and fragmented that its communicative function is almost entirely lost, even to a reader fluent in Japanese. The calligraphy becomes sheer texture: a refined means of expression that is uniquely Eastern, even as its content remains mysterious and neutral. By incorporating these decades-old, man-made marks from across the world, the artists acknowledge the footprint left on the environment by generations of human beings.

The illusory distinctions of the phenomenal world are symbolized in the *Reflection* series, wherein pools of water reflect a blurred, indistinct vision of forms along the horizon, hinting at a reality beyond perception. Most of the trees selected for this series were actually surrounded by water in their original locations. The Farnsworths found *Reflection Pool's* scene in a Belgian garden, while *River Reflection* depicts a flooded grove outside of Villandry in the Loire Valley. The

trees of *Amiens Reflection I* and *II* grow in Amiens, where a network of canals surrounds a floating garden along the Somme River. *Amiens Reflection III* depicts a tree growing in Oakland, CA, which the artists digitally transplanted into the Amiens landscape.

The Farnsworths' collaborative restorations seek to reconcile the majesty of the techniques used in the creation of Eastern and Western religious artwork with a less anthropocentric perspective on nature and the Void. This endeavor dovetails with the artists' environmental concerns: the images used in restorations such as *Dharmakaya* are edited and transformed with an eye towards bringing nature to the foreground. The human figures, whose symbolic status as avatars of God often endows them with a supernatural significance, are erased – or to put it another way, they surrender to the Void. In their absence, the viewer realizes the beauty of the surrounding landscape, which might otherwise be ignored or taken for granted. The restorations imply that the faded fragments of the East and the solid monuments of the West are equally evanescent – that the transcendent moments of beauty achieved by the art of both East and West are actually brief glimpses into the same Void. ■