

Organic Structures: Natasha St. Michael

by Tony Girardin

SOME THINGS have the unscientific ability to add up to more than the sum of their parts. So what do you get when you add up 230,000 beads on 2,341 meters of thread? You get more than a beaded work by Natasha St. Michael; you get a snapshot of her world and of life as a whole.

St. Michael's goal is to show, within one piece, the progression of that piece. She aims to portray cycles of life and the progression of organic structures over time. Her focus is to depict matter that is decomposing and its mutations as it does so. But, because her glimmering pieces often have the appearance of something that is blooming, viewers are often surprised at her intent, to show cycles of decline and organic decay.

"No element can be born or sustain itself independently," she writes. "In creating pieces inspired by organic elements, . . . my intention is to embody the essence of a collective entity and emphasize the intricacy of existence. Through the simultaneous effect of the crystallized glass bead and the deliberate appearance of its supportive woven threads, each piece in and of itself captures the omnipresence of complexity and continuum."

With a B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, St. Michael has been threading beads all her life, but now focuses solely on three-dimensional suspended and sculptural structures. Her ultimate aspiration is to produce an installation that people can walk into: a floor-to-ceiling structure that viewers can interact with and experience from within.

Each piece represents a snapshot of St. Michael's life. Taking up to five months to complete a structure, she takes no shortcuts. It's hand to needle, thread to bead, often working sixteen hours a day on her couch in Montreal, Canada.

St. Michael's work experience as an industrial weaver has taught her to embrace the efficiency that results from the repetitiveness of her craft. Her movements are broken down to achieve productivity that would make Henry Ford proud. She uses the mental liberations made possible by the droning motions of her weaving to allow her thoughts to flow freely, away from the physical world.

The repetitive, almost hypnotic motions of St. Michael's needle tackle a piece of life's puzzle—until she finally understands something new when a piece is complete. "In the same way that my work is repetitive, there exists a repetitive element in most aspects of life," she says. "Some people make the same mistakes over and over again without ever learning to do things



differently. Much in the same way that history repeats itself.”

Each work brings St. Michael an answer, and each answer is added to the last and the next to form a greater understanding. It's as if she's threading a needle through all the stars that make up our universe and slowly pulling them together to get to the pure brilliance of origin, one galaxy at a time. Or as if she's racing against the genome project to weave together the fundamental strands of DNA that make up the code to human life—one bead at a time. ●

A solo exhibition by Natasha St. Michael is on view at the Galerie des Métiers d'Art du Québec in Montreal through November 14. Her work will also be shown by the gallery at SOFA Chicago (November 5–7) and at PalmBeach³ in Florida (January 13–17). More of her work can be viewed on her website, www.natashastmichael.com.

OPPOSITE: Natasha St. Michael. Photo: Jessica Wolfe.

RIGHT, TOP: Natasha St. Michael, Congeal, 2003; 10½" x 8½" x 1". All works shown are bead weavings with glass beads and nylon thread. Photos of work: Paul Litherland.

RIGHT, BOTTOM: Natasha St. Michael, Coil (detail), 2004; 29" x 27" x 2".

BELOW: Natasha St. Michael, Fragmented (detail), 2004; 21" x 12" x 2".

Tony Girardin lives in southern Québec. He writes, makes videos, and records music.

