

illuminating art tapestries that dazzle

Barbara Broekman (Amsterdam 1955), artist, but above all a woman.

Since graduating from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and the California College of the Arts in 1981, Broekman has primarily created art tapestries and wall hangings of monumental proportions. Hand embroidered or hand woven.

Those who have stood in front of her work know what it does to them, without necessarily understanding why.

That is how I felt, rooted to the spot in front of *Arabic* at Art Paris in 2007. Inside the Grand Palais, which had been transformed into a huge white cube, a Broekman wall carpet, embroidered by hand, hung metres long and metres high. In search of the unknown, the new, I find it in her work. I see the colours of desert sand, icon blue and sweet tea, interwoven with images of the terror thundering over Iraq and the region surrounding it. I also travel as a feather back in time, to the grandeur of the court of the early Renaissance in ancient Persia. Fascinated, my thoughts run free and I want to partake, standing so close to the work that my nose is almost touching. What I see is a painting five by five centimetres in which each silver thread strives to climb over another. Vermeer. That yellow dress. Countless other threads try to emulate the first, and if only eyes could feel. No. Eyes can feel. Nonetheless, furtively, very briefly, I stroke what hangs before me. Pure silk.

In a time of overwhelming multimedia, animation, graphic design, print media, photography and video, I have forgotten how this feels. Broekman selects material because of what it stands for. In the case of textile: tangible, earthly, sensual timeless, free of cultural ties, rich in material, technique and beauty. Simultaneously interwoven into the fabric of everyday life.

But there is more. Broekman's work moves. And I am not talking about the miraculous theatrical display of light and dark that plays so prominent a role in, for example, the black and white embroidered work entitled *Laura*, named after her daughter. There is something else.

At the beginning of the 1980's, Broekman's work displayed a primarily abstract style. Geometric patterns. And a few years later she introduced figurative elements above which layers were added on as if by a breeze. What it's all about is the story that the artist has to tell. Her reflections about life, which turn out to be universal in nature. At the same time both intensely personal and intensely human. The very Grand interwoven with the very small, the universal with the personal. In which it is unimportant if the issue is something beautiful or perhaps a loss. Primitive power and destruction. We all experience it and we all see it on television.

A good example is the woven prints in her series *Woman nr. 1 – 9*. They are all about the naïve power of beautiful girls over men. They give you butterflies in your belly. The men in uniform, soldiers, stockbrokers, orthodox Jews. All

hungry for a tasty snack.

In her series *Mother and Child*, each 2 x 2 metres and fully embroidered by hand, the power of the woman is ever present. Her unlimited determination to stay alive to care for her child. And her creativity. Whether she be part of a tribe in Somalia or living in a village called Balk in the Netherlands. Broekman, mother, artist and business woman, is touched by this universal truth and embraces it with open arms. Proof of courage. Mothers are mothers, end of story. Whatever the culture they're part of.

For the Antonie van Leeuwenhoek Hospital, specialised in the treatment of cancer, Broekman is currently creating two truly gigantic pieces. One of these is an expanded scan of hundreds of images of human cells, crowds of people and satellite photo's of the earth. 22 metres long and 2.6 metres high, the total picture is full of life, including it's emotions, memories and dreams. From close by you might perhaps discern the contours of the face of Broekman's mother, whom she lost to cancer. Heavy for her. Personal and universal.

For the second work, measuring 4 by 2 metres, Broekman has embroidered the original cell drawings made by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek in 1670. It would appear that human cell division is suspiciously similar to that of textile. Or perhaps it's the other way around. Either way, the combination of this miniscule, unbelievably thin cell, seen together with the bigger picture, creates an extraordinary feeling of happiness and completeness.

Broekman's vision of the large and small is not only to be seen in the results of her work, but also in the way that she works. She designs her blueprints with the help of selected photo's or images from documentaries. Depending on how these contribute to one another or overlap, on what she wants to be seen or exactly the opposite, she reduces and distils things to the basics. Out of which she makes cartoons for tapestries that are then woven, by highly skilled craftsmen all over the world, into the carpets and tapestries of such magnificent proportions with which we become familiar.

Broekman's work attracts museums. The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Museum for Modern Art in Arnhem, the Kunsthal in Rotterdam and the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York have all cleared the high walls of their art temples to accommodate her pieces.

Alongside this work, Broekman has an almost continuous stream of commissions from multinationals, and her free art is already part of collections such as those of the ABN AMRO, DSM, Organon and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague.

Because of its proportions and what lies underneath. Universality.

Fiona van Schendel, journalist, Paris