



ELIN NOBLE VOX STELLARUM



Genesis 15:5, engraving from *Physica sacra*, 1731.

October 9 - December 28, 2014

ELIN NOBLE VOX STELLARUM

LA CONNER
 Quilt & Textile
 Museum
In the Historic Gaches Mansion

Elin Noble is the award-winning author of *Dyes & Paints: A Hands-On Guide to Coloring Fabric*, with an extensive portfolio of exhibitions, classes, lectures, and television appearances, and a BFA in Fiber from the University of Washington. Those credentials alone make her exhibition, *Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum*, a phenomenal addition to the Museum's gallery schedule. There's much more to this exhibit than what you will get at first glance.

Fiber arts face the challenge, at times, of the message or meaning of the work of art being eclipsed by the study of the materials used. When I first began to see images of the pieces that would be making up the exhibit, my initial thought was, "It's so dark." But as I began to really look at the pieces, I was deeply attracted to the transparency and lightness of the art.

I realized that the pieces communicated some sort of message, emotion, or meaning that goes beyond the literal interpretation of the materials. Elin's essay helped me to understand that elusive message and was a wonderful overview of her creative process in developing this exhibition. She is truly one of those awe-inspiring stars in the heavens so distantly evoked in this installation.

"We look up at the same stars, and see such different things." - George R.R. Martin

What will you see?

Amy Green, Executive Director
La Conner Quilt & Textile Museum

Right: Detail of the first *Vox Stellarum* panel, University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.



VOX STELLARUM

In the summer of 2007, I was invited to participate in a group exhibition at the University Art Gallery at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. The focus of the exhibition was the book *Physica sacra* by the Swiss doctor and natural scientist, Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672-1733).

The book was published in 1731 in four volumes, carrying more than 700 full page copper plate engravings. Each engraving, or print, illustrates a passage from the Old Testament, and each of the sixteen artists in the exhibition was asked to create a work of art in response to a specific engraving.

The engraving I was asked to work from references Genesis 15:5 and depicts Abraham observing - and unable to count - the stars at night.

What immediately fascinated me was the complexity of the patterns in the engraved night sky. Looking into the vastness of the universe, the crisscrossing lines vibrate in a hypnotic way, making the stars twinkle.

The introduction to the exhibition stated the following:

A lifelong scholar, Scheuchzer's pursuits of knowledge were wide-ranging and diverse, from science to medicine to paleontology. Like many scientists of the late 17th and early 18th century, Scheuchzer held to the belief that the Old Testament was a factual account of the history of the earth. . . . In a period before public museums, Scheuchzer presented a seductive view of an imaginary world, viewed through lush frames depicting secondary symbols, plants, animals, heads and other objects, providing the viewer rich material for an inspired vision of the interaction between the natural and the divine powers.

The engraving does not have an elaborate frame but has an insert in the upper left corner charting the magnitude, or brightness, of the stars. This scientific approach to the reading of the night sky is then supplemented within the image itself by a divine light reaching Abraham's head, a visualization of the voice of God. Additional symbolic layers are added by the rock formations and the ominous clouds. It is an intriguing and complex presentation where Nature, Science, and the Divine merge.



Right: The first *Vox Stellarum* panel, University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.



The layered, rich image made me realize I wanted to create an expansive and flowing space, filled with darkness and light. The space created by the multitude of lines, as well as the optical flickering, reminded me of the moiré patterns created by layering silk organza, and I knew I wanted to establish a repeat pattern playing opacity against transparency.

I began by experimenting with lengths of silk organza, a sheer fabric which is naturally transparent. A protein gum, sericin, coats the outer layer of the silk organza filament thread and is responsible for making the cloth transparent.

In the studio I started out by accordion-folding white silk organza. This resulted in a long band. The band was then accordion-folded along its width. The bundle of cloth was clamped between two pieces of wood and the sericin removed by immersing the clamped bundle into a bath of hot soda ash. This process, which is known as degumming, removes the sericin, but in this case, only from the sections of the silk not protected by the wood blocks. The protected areas remain transparent, and the areas where sericin is removed become opaque.

Above: Installation view from the 2007 exhibition, *Science, Religion, Art: Greater New Bedford Area Artists Responding to Johann Jacob Scheuchzer's Physica Sacra, 1731-35*, University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Right: Detail of the first *Vox Stellarum* panel, University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.





Installation view from the 2009 exhibition, *Layered Affinities: Quilts and hand-Dyed Cloth* By Elin Noble, The Narrows Center for the Arts.

I then dyed the cloth evenly black and re-folded, but this time the blocks were placed in a slightly different location. The clamped bundle was then immersed in a bath that removed color from the sections of silk not protected by the wood blocks.

The black dye I used was a deep brown/black. Removing, and partially removing, the color resulted in a range of warm brown tones, leaning at times toward a golden brown or a reddish brown, spanning from light to dark.

The final lengths of silk was the result of multiple processes of degumming, dyeing, and the removal of color.

The original lengths of cloth were 45 inches wide and 108 inches in length. For the final work I exhibited at the University Art Gallery, I cut two lengths measuring 22 inches wide and 108 inches in length, and hung them, one in front of the other - as a panel - suspended a couple of inches from the wall.

In the panel, the overlapping of the two pieces create a layered image of abstract geometric forms and spaces, and a complex interaction between transparency and opaqueness. When the cloth gently moves - or the viewers eye moves in space - it creates the desired play of moiré patterns.

I decided to title my response piece, *Vox Stellarum*, meaning voice of the stars, or music of the spheres. Stellarum is actually written in the upper left corner of the print, and *Vox Stellarum* also happens to be the name of the famous 18th and 19th century British almanac by Francis Moore. My work was displayed in the gallery next to the print that had inspired me.



Installation view of the 2013 exhibition, *Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum*, at Fibreworks Gallery, Madeira Park, BC, Canada. A twenty-four hour pinhole photograph titled, "Dreams," by Troch.



In 2009 I had a one-person exhibition at the Narrows Center for the Arts in Fall River, Massachusetts, which is located in an old textile mill. This exhibition featured a range of work spanning approximately five years. The configuration of the gallery spaces gave me the opportunity to create an expanded version, or installation, of *Vox Stellarum*.

I prepared an additional four panels. This time all the new panels measured 45 inches wide and 108 inches in length. All panels were suspended from the ceiling and approximately fifteen inches from the wall, allowing for a greater display of shadows.

For the new panels I again used the deep brown/black dye, and began a more varied exploration of degumming, dyeing, and color removal, especially emphasizing horizontal and vertical bands. One prominent panel was arranged with three individual vertical sections on the front seen against a single large piece behind. The center front section had a horizontal patterning, and the two side sections were vertical.

In this, the first installation of multiple panels of *Vox Stellarum*, my desire was to create a meditative space, a space both visually engaging and poetic.

Installation view from the 2012 exhibition, *Fold and Unfold: The Cloth and Quilts of Elin Noble*, Schweinfurth Art Center



For my 2012 exhibition, *Fold and Unfold: The Cloth and Quilts of Elin Noble*, at the Schweinfurth Art Center in Auburn, New York, I again had the opportunity to create an installation of *Vox Stellarum*, but this time in a separate gallery space. The space could accommodate ten large panels and it also allowed for the introduction of three sculptural forms.

For this installation I decided to prepared new panels. I again used white silk organza. However, the deep black/brown dye was no longer available. Instead, I used a black/blue dye, resulting in a slightly cooler black with subtle ranges of blue, and I was for the first time able to introduce bright white. This happened to harmonize with the blue/grey carpet in the gallery.

The panels were hung from the ceiling, but unlike the more meditative space at the Narrows, the Schweinfurth installation had the panels placed close to each other and situated almost floor to ceiling. This created an environment where the panels became the three walls of the gallery, and where the viewer was confronted more directly by a range of horizontal and vertical forms, and encountered a stronger contrast between lightness and darkness. This energized the space and gave the installation a theatrical feel, emphasized by the three sculptural forms in the center of the gallery.

Detail of the sculptural form



The sculptural forms grew out of a desire to introduce an enigmatic element. The form I arrived at can be seen as a cross between a flower and a seed pod, and as signifying a gesture of either gathering or releasing. The forms were created by layering and gluing strips of torn organza over a solid shape.

For my retrospective exhibition, *Elin Noble: Color Alchemy*, at the New Bedford Art Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 2013, I was able to create an even larger installation of *Vox Stellarum* in the Heritage Gallery. The size of the gallery allowed me to suspend the panels freely in space, establishing a surprisingly intimate environment. For each wall I arranged three panels in a triptych fashion, with the center panel approximately two feet from the wall, and the left and right panels an additional two feet into the space.

It was the first time the presentation of *Vox Stellarum* gave the viewer the freedom to move in and around all the panels. The panels were activated - would move slightly - due to the viewers presence. And although arranged in a grid of four triptychs, once the viewer moved within in the space, the panels would visually slide in and out of view and in and out of focus, resulting in an almost labyrinth-like experience, while confronted by slivers of light breaking through darkness.

Installation view from the 2013 exhibition, *Elin Noble: Color Alchemy*, New Bedford Art Museum.



The 2013 exhibition, *Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum*, at the Textile Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the first time I created a large scale exhibition/installation focusing solely on *Vox Stellarum*. The Joan Mondale Gallery at the Textile Center has two levels, in a sense two gallery spaces that flow into each other, separated by steps and a ramp. It also has a wall of windows towards the street which made it necessary to work with both artificial and natural light.

Since the upper level gallery has eight foot ceilings, requiring shorter panels, I decided to create new panels not only for the upper gallery, but also for the lower gallery, in order to create a unified presentation of color, shapes, and patterns.

This time I created the new series of panels from black silk organza. This limited my vocabulary to the processes of degumming and removing color. I decided to emphasize the vertical space within the cloth and to bring in a greater degree of irregular folding, resulting in a more organic feel.

Ten panels were placed in the upper gallery, and eight in the lower gallery, all in an alternating pattern, some suspended freely, others closer to the walls. An open space was kept in the middle of the lower gallery allowing for the display of the three sculptural forms.

View toward the windows at the Joan Mondale Gallery, The Textile Center, Minneapolis.



Installation view from the 2013 exhibition, *Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum*, at Fibreworks Gallery, Madeira Park, BC, Canada.

The final installation created an immersive and contemplative space where the viewer could move freely and at random, not unlike an immersion in nature. The airflow in the gallery created a constant swaying of the cloth, in some areas forcefully, in others areas gently, like a quiet dance.

In the fall of 2013, I was invited to participate in the exhibition, *East & West: An Exhibition of Asian Influence on Contemporary Craft*, at The Ohio Craft Museum in Columbus, Ohio. Eight panels from the *Vox Stellarum* series were displayed in a pyramid pattern, and seen against a floor to ceiling window wall. The two center panels were furthest into the gallery space and the panels to the right and left stepped gradually back towards the windows, with enough space for the viewer to walk between the panels.

This exhibition placed *Vox Stellarum* in the larger context of an Asian sensibility, and within a tradition that merges contemplation and spirituality with the encounter between material and hand.

Also in the fall of 2013, I was invited to exhibit *Vox Stellarum* at Fibreworks Gallery in Madeira Park, British Columbia, Canada. The gallery is a unique space occupying a yurt. The round space, with an opening of light in the center, made it possible to suspend an inner ring of panels complemented by outer spokes. The installation became an experience of centering, which was further suggested by the yurt's Central Asian nomadic roots.

In the summer of 2014, I was one of five artists in the exhibition, *Paint, Pattern, Print, Texture*, at the Dedee Shattuck Gallery in Westport, Massachusetts. In addition to displaying large scale quilts in the main gallery space, five of the *Vox Stellarum* panels were presented in the entrance gallery in a display that played on the triptych format, with one panel in the center and two panels in front, right and left, and two panels behind, also right and left. Again the viewer could move freely between the panels. These panels emphasized a vertical flow as if reaching toward the skylights above.



Installation view from the 2013 exhibition, *Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum*,
The Textile Center in Minneapolis.

While working on the different installations of the Vox Stellarum series, I have been contemplating their meaning and what has drawn me to their manifestation. This quote by Immanuel Kant from *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), has become especially important:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.

I started out the series inspired by the engraving included in *Physica sacra*, in which Scheuchzer attempts - what is still attempted by many today - to connect religion and science. In my search to establish a quiet and meditative space I slowly moved closer to an appreciation of how nature and the awe inspiring starry heavens reinforce, as Kant points out, our presence as ethical beings. At times my installations have been more directly, or less directly, theatrical but I have constantly attempted to manifest a spiritual transcendence, a feeling of how we are connected to something higher, something beyond ourselves.

Vox Stellarum Exhibitions

2014

Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum
La Conner Quilt and Textile Museum, La Conner, WA

Paint, Pattern, Print, and Texture
Dedee Shattuck Gallery, Westport, MA

2013

Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum
Fibreworks Gallery, Madeira Park, BC Canada

East and West: Asian Influences on Contemporary American Craft
Ohio Craft Museum, Columbus, OH

Elin Noble: Vox Stellarum
Textile Center, Minneapolis, MN

Elin Noble: Color Alchemy
New Bedford Art Museum, New Bedford, MA

2012

Fold and Unfold: The Cloth and Quilts of Elin Noble
Schweinfurth Art Center, Auburn, NY

2009

Layered Affinities: Quilts and hand-Dyed Cloth By Elin Noble
Narrows Gallery, Narrows Center for the Arts, Fall River, MA

2007

Science, Religion, Art: Greater New Bedford Area Artists Responding to
Johann Jacob Scheuchzer's *Physica Sacra*, 1731-35
University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, New Bedford, MA

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Installation view from the 2013 exhibition,
Paint, Pattern, Print, and Texture, Dedee Shattuck Gallery.



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