

ANNA TORMA

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With the advent of digital technologies and the infinite reproducibility of images has come the lamentation of what is lost in the shift from analog to digital, notably, the metaphorical “flattening” of the image, calling to mind Walter Benjamin’s enduringly prescient dictum that “authenticity eludes technological reproduction.” Anna Torma’s “Book of Abandoned Details,” which presented major works made over the last five years, serves not only to

reinforce this boundary, but also to underline the etymology of “digital”: *digitalis*. According to media theorist Kris Paulsen, *digitalis* refers to “finger or finger’s breadth,” while in botany, the *digitalis* plant, or foxglove, derives its name from the object it resembles—in German, the plant is *fingerhut* or “finger hat,” also known as a thimble.

A needle worker combining formal and ancestral training in embroidery, Torma works in the tactile place of textiles, including organza, linen and silk. What from a distance look like loose sketches and doodles were actually tightly controlled, richly textured surfaces—Torma’s revolt, in her skill, of modernist dogma around medium-specificity and of a view to the historically discrete and hierarchical categories of art and craft. In exposing the backsides of her finished panels, while leaving others seemingly unfinished, Torma reveals the evidence of her process, working out theoretical concerns through formal experimentation. *Random Landscape I-III* (2015) betrays a corporeal preoccupation that carries over in many of Torma’s series. Three large-scale organza panels were suspended from the gallery ceiling and dangled just above the floor. While the front surfaces depict overlapping figurative outlines—most strikingly, in one panel that shows what looks like a crude anatomical drawing of a torso exposing a branch-like circulatory system complete with lungs, veins and arteries—the translucent quality of the organza exposes an intricate underpinning of needlework, a grid-like scaffolding supporting the entire system. The effect is one of a bodily mirroring, incited by the work’s scale and fleshly texture, evoking in particular the mesh of post-minimalist grids and seriality here brought to life via devotion to the handmade.

The diptych *Carpet of Many Hands* (2012–18) was made up of two vertical panels that extended almost the full height of the gallery wall and continued along the floor. The work’s collaged panels comprise curtains, tablecloths and other domestic textiles collected by Torma, as well as Hungarian *falvédő* (decorative wall coverings), signalling the rich textile histories of Torma’s native Hungary and the skilled labour of generations of needle workers both familiar and unknown. *Red Fragments* (2017) is a collaboration

between Torma and her late mother-in-law, a skilled needle worker. Eight panels were presented in a row along the gallery wall. While the first three suggest completed works—Hungarian cross-stitched patterns, embroidered in red—the panels that followed became smaller, and appeared unfinished, with the fifth panel’s intricate pattern left hanging mid-stitch. A white fabric column with an incisive red line running down it appeared following the seventh panel, suggesting a traumatic break, a formal and narrative interruption. Before her death, Torma’s mother-in-law had suffered a stroke, and the final panel was bare, yet in its bareness spoke loudly of ancestral inheritance and loss. *Abandoned Details I-VII* (2018), from which the exhibition borrows its name, extended Torma’s corporeal preoccupation, depicting a series of icons and words, like a lexicon, encyclopedia or game board—all grid-like, taxonomical manners of ordering the disorderly. The natural world reigns supreme in the form of embroidered beasts and humans alongside plants and flowers, interspersed with words referencing the digestive tract. While not always possible to crack, Torma’s intricate source code, countless stitches in the place of 1s and 0s, resists flattening; as the exhibition title implies, details lost in certain forms nevertheless find their place elsewhere. —ERIN SILVER ■



Anna Torma *Pedagogical Charts II* 2016 Hand embroidery and appliqué on linen with silk threads 1.43 x 1.16 m PHOTO JOHN DEAN