Rosalind Nashashibi, *Hooks*

Audio Description by Elaine Lillian Joseph

Charlotte Johannesson’s exhibition begins before you enter Nottingham Contemporary. “Human 21”, a sculptural piece from 2017 is installed in the Weekday Cross Window at the front of the building. This large double window normally looks directly into the galleries, but for this exhibition it is blocked off like a shop window display. 24 3D marching figures form a rippling line that takes a steep incline to the right. Their bodies are pixelated and the majority are wholly green (although a few are blue). Some are facing to the left and others to the right. A recurring presence throughout the exhibition, the marching person is staged in different mediums, in different settings, always captured progressing forward, one foot poised mid-step.

We arrive in airy, white walled Gallery 3. Rows of long thin ceiling lights paired with natural light from the ceiling panels and a large window with views onto the street outside, brighten the room (depending on the weather). 50 years of Johannesson’s artworks occupy three walls and hang from ceiling beams. Pixelated graphics and slogans relating to the socio-political dissonance of the 70s and 80s appear in her handwoven textiles. Through computer programming she transitions back and forth between the loom and the digital, weaving images with interlocking horizontal and vertical lines, playing with the distribution of pixels to reference warp and weft and reproducing variations of her own work.

We follow the artworks in numbered order…

1 – 7 Made in 2019, these digitally woven tapestries are suspended from ceiling beams in the centre of the room and have short fringing that dangles from their bottom edge. They vary in size but average at around 100 cm by 57 cm. Predominantly dark in hue, these banners hang before a standalone white partition wall and we can take a full turn around each artwork. They’re arranged in three rows and we start at the first row and work our way to the last. “Save as Art Yes/No” is a deep red with the title wedged between a map of the world and the first of many self-portrait’s of the artist. “Apple”, playfully reproduces Rene Magritte’s self-portrait “The Son of Man”, which portrays the artist’s face mostly obscured by an apple. Vertical lines intrude the original image and the slogan: ‘An apple in art is not an apple’ is woven into Rene’s bowler hat. “Global Rotation”, features another self portrait of Johanesson’s face flipped onto its side and the world map appears to drip from the top half to the bottom. “Brain Cell” is a blooming neuron beside a portrait of “David Bowie”. We will see another version of this image later at 48 but this blue tapestry depicts the pop star with long bangs that cover his right eye. The text in “Caravan” slopes down at a diagonal: ‘The Caravan keeps moving along’. A pilgrim leads its camel away from a trio of palm trees. The final tapestry is titled “The Brain is Wider than the Sky”. The title, which is an Emily Dickinson quotation, is repeated back to front above a tethered giant brain that’s floating towards thunderclouds and lightning. These tapestries introduce some key leitmotifs, namely an interest in science and technology and an irreverent attitude towards the artistic establishment that manifests in satirical messages and altered reproductions of iconic symbols or faces.

8 – 9 Materiality takes centre stage in these two handmade paper works from the early 90s. In “Desert Dream”, a black, calligraphic double-humped line is overlaid with an intricate square of lace that features camels and palm trees. Tightly curled thread recalls camel hair. In “Seven balls”, the paper itself is the focal point, each crease and crack preserved against a sheet of rectangular Perspex.

10 – 13 Displayed in a vitrine, these 4 handwoven laces were created between 2022 – 23 especially for the exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary. In each lacework, outlined figures appear pixelated in stitch form. Long, straight lines of raindrops descend from the sky, threatening to land on a figure sheltering under an “Umbrella”. “Robin Hood” aims his bow and arrow. Then two related pieces sit beside each other. “Work MMXXII” features a stick figure pushing a cart. “Braincell” extends this worker motif, with a string of connected brain cells bubbling up from the cart like rising steam.

14 – 18 Framed plotter prints from the years 1981 – 86 are all titled “Texture”. They are each 42 x 52cm and contain 239 pixels horizontally and 191 pixels on the vertical side. They mimic the open, weblike pattern of lace and experiment with the accumulative effect of layering digitally woven textures to create depth. Overlapping horizontal columns and vertical rows form the tartan effect of “Texture 1”. An egg shape melds with a 3D cube and its inner swirls disrupt the straight lines, giving an impression of writhing movement. “Texture 3” takes the base background of “Texture 1” on grid-lined graph paper but the edges of the pattern disintegrate. Texture 8 is a collage of varying latticed materials. “Texture 7” and “Texture 4” are equally heavily pixelated. “Texture 7” plots marching pixelated figures but this time they’re overstretched and warped, barely discernible amid an assortment of graphics including spectacles and hemp leaves. The irregular bulbous shapes of “Texture 4” suggest an interconnected archipelago or a merging mega continent.

Produced during the mid-80s to early 90s, 19 – 23 develop the textures and abstract patterns further, pairing them with digital characters and locations. Ripples of zigzag lines combine to form the impression of a bird in flight in “Flag (Turquoise Brown)” and colours bleed together in “World of mystery”. This handmade paper incorporates Johannesson’s ubiquitous world map with stratified layers that imitate a cross section of the earth. “Communication” is a screen print on paper. A smaller version of this appears at number 30, titled “Computer Mind”. A figure is sitting at their computer while a stem spirals out of the top of the machine. It looks like a double helix and sprouts tendrils as if the figure’s DNA is unravelling or intrinsically connected to the computer. A crowd of square-headed figures fit together like lego pieces in “Jämlika ar vi allihopa” and a lone figure holding a balloon says ‘Ho ho’. Addition symbols abound in “Brainwaves” which is a handwoven piece. High voltages discharge from the heads of two green figures, rooted to the spot like rigid plants. The original versions of these two works were lost so those on display are remakes by Tiyoko Tomikawa, fortunately Johannesson kept the original patterns so it was possible to remake them.

24 – 29 Six computer graphics are arranged in two tight rows. They are preoccupied with space and dimensions in the virtual and real world. Hyperspace, world maps and cosmic travel link the pieces. Created between the years, 1981 – 85, they are on average 42cm by 52cm in dimension. The title, “Take Me To Another World” is stretched across the surface of a radar display. A signal pulses across map-like images, distorting some of the continents. “A Note in Space” stages a treble clef and stave ready for a composition. The musical score in this case is a pair of round spectacles merging with the earth. “Walk 3” has five marching pixelated figures (the same that appear in Human 21) progressing from right to left, encased in a triangular-shaped ship that cuts through the woven texture of space. Next, a yellow rocket blasts off from earth but also appears to be heading towards a second distant twin planet earth. This doppelganger effect continues in “Identify (Double)” where a mirror image of two figures confined in square booths type on their computers. An earlier version of “Walk” flips the direction of “Walk 3” so that five evenly spaced marching figures are moving from left to right against a yellow-hued terrain.

30 – 31 Two graphics from the early 80s feature a medley of interconnected images. “Computer Mind”, is a smaller version of “Communication” just in a different medium. A sitting figure is linked to their computer via an extending double helix that snakes from the top of the machine. Symbols from the era tumble together in “Mystery Ship”. A hemp leaf, a mermaid, a high rise building, and a sign advertising 1983 are all off balance.

32 – 34 A mixture of handmade paper works and computer graphics perform an exercise in repetition and layering, reminiscent of the “Texture” series. “Seven strips” resembles animal hide with irregular yellow spots intersected by piped vertical lines. The middle line is more like a brown smear. “Colour Test” is also made from paper and has uneven, unfinished edges. Broad blue paint strokes are slapped onto rough gridlines and a smattering of yellow strains for primacy towards the bottom. Two computer works both titled “Design” use the same core pattern of two overlapping diamonds beneath a circular outline of the world. The second version doubles the pattern creating an effect of never-ending multiplicity - diamonds within diamonds.

35 Penetrating needles and a giant safety pin secretes blood in “Attack”, a textile piece that extends out of its frame, hanging below the bottom edge. The mantra: ‘To think is to act is to be’ rises out of a smouldering pipe.

36 – 43 The following framed graphics rework images found elsewhere in Johannesson’s collection, including the typing computer figure from “Identify (Double)” and the pixelated protagonist from “Human 21”. Computer Mind is a variation of “Identify (Double)”. This time the mirror image of a person typing on a computer is confined within a triangular booth made up of hypnotic patterns. Another version of “Walk” plots six marching stick figures who are getting larger as they progress forward. Their path is interrupted by twisted hemp leaves and a questing neuron. An ecstatic eruption of warped shapes float across a world map in Pray and a bulbous pebble-like pattern is the setting for “Where”. Two Os are stacked on top of each other with a double directional arrow between them, perhaps a play on gender symbols. “Black Hole (Purple Blue)” is a wireframe visualisation of a bending double black hole. The logo of Johannesson's digital art laboratory, Digital Theatre, is a pair of Greek theatre masks, one smiling, the other frowning. Titled, “Digital Human”, the graphic is covered in pixelated flecks that suggest paint splatter. “World of me” returns later as “Self portrait”. In the semi-profile, Johannesson's face floats like a mask and a map of the world sits in the top right corner. Her eyes and hair are absorbed into the background.

44 – 46 Three handwoven wool works convey playful and political messages with oversized slogans. The first, “No Future”, pairs a mythical angel with wings pursuing one of Johannesson’s marching pixelated figures. The pursued has its fingers pointed at its square-head as if plugging its ears. The next piece has “Drop Dead” stitched in thick wobbly text. Two stick figures, one smiling, one frowning are holding a tiny green speck beside the word ‘nobody’. Neutron is layered diagonally across the title. Finally, the bloodiest poster-tapestry depicts Snoopy from Peanuts raining down bullets on a tank from the roof of his kennel painted in the colours of the German flag with the slogan “Frei Die RAF”. The German text translates as Free the RAF, calling for the release from imprisonment of core Red Army Faction members in the 1970s.

47 – 54 Take a trip back in time via faces of the 1980s. Famous portraits of prominent figures as pixelated computer graphics plotted on paper are interspersed with portraits of other historical figures and a self-portrait of Johannesson. “Boy George”, rendered in mostly purple and yellow, is captured with his long twisted hair and ribbons under a wide brimmed hat. He’s next to “David Bowie”, who’s in yellow, black and white with long bangs that cover his right eye. Deviating from the 80s, a portrait of “Victoria Benedictsson”, a Swedish author from the 19th century, is constructed from precise black and white horizontal and vertical lines. German artist, “Joseph Beuys”, wears a ponderous expression, a hand balled against his chin, in front of a brick-like pattern. “Björn Borg” is wearing his signature headband as a tennis ball sails towards him and “Massoud” (an Afghan Politician and Military man), is made up of discernible yellow, green and red pixels. “Mask” is a skeletal half-model of a face. The colourful fragment floats against a repetition of black borderless grids. The final graphic is “Self-portrait”, a semi-frontal outline of Charlotte Johannesson’s face alongside a world map. Diagonal sunray lines emanate from the right top corner.

55 – 58 Four handwoven wool pieces from the seventies. The final two are more remakes from 2016 by Tiyoko Tomikawa. Slogans take centre stage, often punctuated with colliding symbols. “New Wave”, proclaims the slogan: ‘A hope beyond the shadow of a dream’ which is half crossed out beneath a zigzag scribble. “New wave” dominates in multi-coloured capital letters that spill down the tapestry. “Worth a World of Arguments”, features a map of the world intersected by directional arrows. “No Choice Amongst Stinking Fish”, has a bloody theme. Two pistols flank the title and shoot red bullets in the shape of stick people. Below marching stick figures with animal heads, including an oversized pig’s head, trample on the word ‘dreamwalking’. “Chile eko i skallen”, created on the occasion of General Pinochet’s 1973 military coup, translates as Chile Echoes in My Skull. Serrated guillotine blades drip with fresh blood.

59 – 61 We begin with an early work titled “Bird” from 1983. The outline of a pixelated bird in flight with its wings spread wide is multiplied, as if the bird in question has vacated the frame. Similarly dynamic, “Vote?” from the years 1981 – 86, has squiggles of orange spiralling across the image as a ballot paper slots into a box. “Parsifal” from 1986, is a more formal affair with solid, non-pixelated blocks of colour. The knight, Parsifal draws his bow and arrow. Our attention is drawn towards an arched doorway within a doorway. Bound together by colour, these three works all grab the attention with their vivid treatments of the mystical or the mundane.

62 – 63 The mysticism of the caravan and the endurance of the camel is explored in vivid colours. “Fairy-tale”, from 1992, takes place in a desert. The handmade paper piece shows a nomad and camel crossing the sand in silhouette and a desert-crusted planet hanging above the dunes. camille “Kamel 1” resumed this theme in 2003, this time in painting form. A series of multi-coloured silhouettes are layered on top of each other. The recurring image of a camel is sandwiched between a sprig of berries, a blue hooded figure, an umbrella, castle battlement walls, and a dome.

64 The final painting is titled, “Spinning our own fates” from 2006. A hollowed-out earth rotates, reduced to its spherical outline and a horizontal flat disc. It’s pierced through its centre by a needle and its contoured continents peel off, ballooning above it.

65 – 73 are displayed in a vitrine. Behind the glass top, are tapestry and digital patterns as well as a collection of photographs that capture the Johannessons from the mid-70s to the mid-80s. Charlotte is white with blonde hair and often in bohemian outfits. Sture is also white and is pictured in hip, dark shades.

Two patterns are drawn on vellum graph paper with ink or pencil. The first is a fragment of “Frei die RAF” which is meticulously plotted within grid lines. “No Choice Amongst Stinking Fish” has handwritten comments at the bottom. A young Charlotte Johannesson is snapped at her studio-cum-exhibition space, Studio 11. She’s hanging a tapestry on the wall and a framed version of No Choice Amongst Stinking Fish is propped up on the floor. There are two versions of “The Digital Theatre logo”. Both are black and white and feature a pair of Greek theatre masks. A digital version of the comedy mask has addition signs for eyes and the frowning tragedy mask has subtraction signs. A series of photos show Charlotte and Sture Johannesson at the Digital Theatre workshop and abroad. First, they are standing in their office surrounded by computers and printers. Another photo shows Charlotte posing with printouts from the Apple II computer. A colour photo of Sture captures him talking to the founder of Apple, Steve Wozniak, in California. Sture, who’s in his 30s at the time, has his hands resting on his hips. Then Charlotte’s kneeling on the floor of the Digital Theatre workshop, peering at an array of plotted graphics that are spread across the carpet. As she contemplates them, her hand idly rakes through her wavy hair. The final artefact is a long sheet of paper that lists out the programme code behind “Running Man”. Completed between 1981 - 86, the graphic at the top simulates the effect of a man in motion constructed from dots and dashes.

We enter Gallery 4, a cavernous, irregularly shaped space, via a brief connecting passageway. Subdued lighting greets us, eased by the flickering glow of slideshows playing on three screens. The first screen measures 390 by 273 cm, the second screen which is installed at a slant further to the left is 200 by 282 cm and the final larger screen is positioned at the back of the room and comes in at 390 by 273 cm. Thin taut cables connected to the ceiling, keep them upright and recall the suspended tapestries (1 – 7) in the previous gallery. The screens become looms, supporting computer woven graphics made between 1981 and 1985. With pixels as the building block, Johannesson recasts and augments work previously encountered in Gallery 3. Familiar faces return: Joseph Beuys in grainy black and white, Rene Magritte complete with apple but each iteration introduces a new element, a textural shift or a colour inversion. Rainbows burst out of screens, double helixes sprout from computers. These remixed posters depicting icons from the 80s are striking in size and vibrancy.