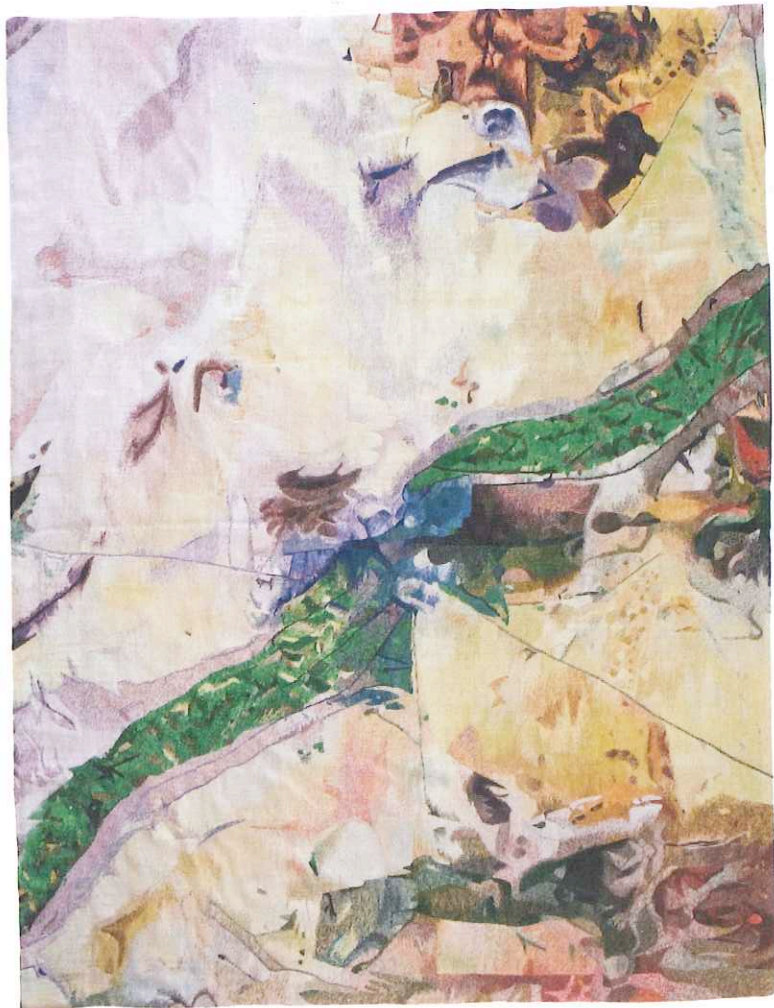


## NOELLE MASON: BLUE SKIES/ BLACK DEATH

Thomas Robertello Gallery - Chicago

By Jeriah Hildwine



Noelle Mason, *El Paso/Ciudad Juárez*, 2012, wool, 141" x 94". Courtesy of Thomas Robertello Gallery.

"BLUE SKIES/BLACK DEATH" presents three related bodies of work, two of which refer directly to the sport of skydiving and to its inherent risks, while the third is related more obliquely. The title of the exhibition comes from the skydiver's mantra, a salutation and a reminder of the fragility and preciousness of life.

*Decision Altitude* presents photographs taken while skydiving, using a pinhole camera. The title refers to the altitude at which a skydiver experiencing a malfunction must begin emergency procedures to ensure sufficient time, if necessary, to jettison the main canopy and open a reserve.

The photogravures of *Incident Report* begin as pinhole photographs similar to those in *Decision Altitude*, but the photogravure process renders them into smoky gray monochromes, like dreamy visions of purgatory. They are presented behind glass, into which the text of the eponymous reports is etched. The legibility of this etching varies greatly depending upon the viewing angle: from straight ahead, the etching is almost invisible, and the image behind it almost totally unobstructed. Viewed obliquely, the text is revealed, describing in cold, clinical terms the circumstances leading to a particular skydiver's death.

The pieces in *Ground Control* are brightly colored, hand-woven wool rugs, presented on the floor. At first the imagery appears abstract, a mille-fleur tapestry interpretation of a Robert Delaunay painting. Closer inspection reveals them to be faithful representations of false-color satellite photographs of the region depicted in each piece's title. The colors shown in this kind of photography are based on temperature, with cities showing as green and vegetation as red. The result is rich with information but looks nothing

like the landscape seen by the naked eye, even (as a skydiver like Mason must well know) from above. It's the sort of thing someone's charming old grandmother might make—if she was secretly an operative for the CIA in a Tom Clancy novel.

The title *Ground Control* functions as a pun, referring on the one hand to the on-the-ground coordinator of airborne operations, and on the other to the idea of the control of territory central to any border region, but especially to the hotly contentious border between the United States and Mexico. The territory depicted is the subject of efforts at control by various parties, from the Border Patrol and self-appointed Minutemen attempting to prevent illegal immigration, to the drug cartels vying for territory for their lucrative trade. The false-color satellite maps, presented in the one-step-removed medium of hand-woven rugs, suggest that no perspective on this situation can be simultaneously accurate and complete. The association with the other two series in the exhibition transforms the satellite's view into the skydiver's, adding a sense of dramatic urgency to *Ground Control*, implying that in regard to some of the social issues facing this troubled border region, we may be approaching a decision altitude of our own, a test which we must pass if we are to avoid reading the future history of this region in the form of an incident report. ■

(September 7 – November 3, 2012)

Jeriah Hildwine is an artist, writer, and educator based in Chicago. He is a regular contributor to *Art Talk Chicago*, *Bad at Sports*, and *Chicago Art Magazine*.