



Beauty and Threat:

The Effect of the Icelandic Landscape on the Works of Icelandic Landscape Painters

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Dedication – With deep gratitude

This research project is dedicated to the living artists who so generously shared their insights and their time: Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir; Gudmunda Kristinsdóttir; Kristín Tryggvadóttir; Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson; and art critic Hannes Sigurdsson. I would be remiss not to thank my cousins and their partners, who shuttled me, fed me, and who personally invested in the work I was doing, giving insight and context to Icelandic art, history, society and ultimately, enriching the research and the experience: Gunnar Gunnarsson and Jódís Hlöðversdóttir; Bjartur Logi Fránn Gunnarsson and Mirra Sjöfn; Anna Jóhannsdóttir and Emil Ragnar Hjartarson; Sigríður Anna Emilsdóttir; Guðrún Ragna Emilsdóttir; and Guðrún Fjeldsted.

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Cover image:

Fig. 15. To illustrate the volatility of the weather in Iceland, five minutes before and after this picture was taken, it was a gloriously sunny day on the south coast at Vík, Iceland. Over the course of the two hours I spent in this community, this scene repeated itself three times.

Terry Smith 2018, jpg.

Abstract

This research paper explores the subject of topophilia – a strong sense of place – as it relates to the effects of geography, environment and social influences on the works of Icelandic painters. Regarding Iceland specifically, I was interested in how the striking duality of beauty and threat affects the artist's psyche and vision as it relates to a painted landscape.

Certainly, artists world-wide are inspired by their surroundings, either beautiful or terrible, but few people have a more intimate relationship with their surroundings than Icelanders. Few countries are as homogenic as Iceland – most of the population is related to one another within eight generations and most are distantly related to the handful of settlers who arrived in 874 AD. Historically, Iceland has been socially and geographically cut off from the rest of the world, viewed as little more than a tax base by Denmark until WWII, followed by its subsequent independence in 1944. Because of its isolation, Iceland's history of fine art is a short one – less than 200 years. These factors, along with its history of volcanic activity make Iceland a compelling study.

My personal connection to this study is two-fold: stemming from an enduring interest in the regionalism of art and music; and as a person of Icelandic heritage. My purpose was to explore how experience, place, geography and landscape drill into peoples' psyches and percolates, to later emerge from the subconscious as imagery. It is my hypothesis that deep connections to this strange and beautiful landscape – this juxtaposition between beauty and threat – would emerge and that it would relate to the fine art that Icelandic artists produce.

Introduction

This research paper is grounded in the subject of topophilia – in this instance, the physical environment of Iceland, with all its mystical beauty, in juxtaposition with its isolated location in the North Atlantic and the ever-present threat of volcanic eruption. Beauty and threat.

My initial interest in Iceland is rooted in descent, the “vesturfari” as I am called. My great grandmother was part of a wave of immigration to North America in the late 1800s.

Knowing little about Iceland’s history and culture led me to research essays on the validity of oral histories, an arts funding and education study comparing the comparatively small populations of Canada and Iceland with the more dominant influence of the U.S. and Denmark, and a study of the DeCode Genetics fiasco that played a part in Iceland’s economic crash in 2008. My interest in art led me down the rabbit hole that led to observations of landscape motifs in the art of fine artists practicing in Iceland, interestingly, both in classical and modern works. For some time, I’ve been intrigued by the many ways in which experience, place, geography and landscape drill into peoples’ psyches and percolates, to later emerge from the subconscious as imagery woven into a poem, a song or a work of art. It appeared to me that in Iceland, the phenomena seemed particularly evident.

With a basic understanding of both the geography of Iceland and its history of fine art, it’s possible to begin to understand the works of the artists I chose to study. To put context to the effect of environment, it is important to explore the threat the geography presents to the inhabitants of this small and relatively isolated island in the North Atlantic, as well as the chronology of the comparatively short history of art in Iceland. For the purposes of this study, two deceased artists whose work has marked important shifts in Icelandic art are identified as Jóhannes S. Kjarval (1885-1972), and Georg Guðni Hauksson (1961-2011). At present, there is a shortage of classic landscape painters in Iceland, the reason for this is revealed in its history. Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir primarily paints water and weather. I will make mention of

her work, however she was unable to participate in the study due to ill health. Tolli, the other landscape painter I'd identified and who was responsive, happened to be in North America during my visit to Iceland. I connected with two abstract painters whose work shows a strong relationship to sense of place. Both Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson and Guðmunda Kristinsdóttir were able to provide valuable insights to the study.

Over the course of my stay, I visited many galleries and museums, often in the company of relatives, Icelanders who helped provide context and depth of understanding. Of course, there is the experience of the landscape itself – the omnipresent landscape with all its mysterious beauty and insolent, temperamental unpredictability.

Please note: *The Icelandic naming system is patronymic. Individual given names are more relevant than family names as we know them in North America. In fact, you will search for individuals by referencing their first names in the telephone directory. For example, one of the artists I've interviewed is Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson. Bjarni is his given name and he is the son of Sigurbjörn. Similarly, Guðmunda Kristinsdóttir's given name is Guðmunda and she is the daughter of Kristin. Women keep their birth names after marriage and the children of the union acquire a new last name based on the first name of the father, adding son or dóttir. This created some issues with citations and in-copy references. Out of respect for the culture, I've chosen to refer to Icelandic individuals by their given names in the text. For citations, I've used their family name, as it is a standard we are accustomed to and the environment in which I'm submitting my research. In the case of artist Georg Guðni Hauksson, people and texts spoke of him as Georg Guðni, his given and middle names, never using Hauksson, nor did he use it himself. I refer to him in citations as Guðni, Georg Guðni within the text, and perhaps because of his notoriety, he is often referred to as "Guðni," which I've also adopted within the text. I've used the correct accents wherever possible and the alphabet in instances where it was available within the English font keyboard.*

The geography of beauty and threat

Icelanders are acutely aware of the volatility and mutability of the land on which they reside. Since first settlement, around the year 870, there have been a staggering number of recorded eruptions, beginning in 870 through to the most recent eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull in 2010, followed by Grímsfjall, Katla and Hamarinn in 2011 (Frímann). Author Nanna Gunnarsdóttir, in an online synopsis of volcanos in Iceland, reports a total of 130 active and inactive volcanos, with “30 active volcanic systems running through the island” (Gunnarsdóttir). The eruption of Eyjafjallajökull caught the attention of the world, interrupting air travel through much of Europe. There are few reports of human death as a direct result of eruptions, but damage to crops, environment and animal deaths have caused famine at different periods throughout Iceland’s history, and in the late 1800s spurred a mass immigration, mostly to North America. Compared to Iceland, settlers to Minnesota and Manitoba might have found our harsh winters more agreeable and farming more sustainable.

Iceland is situated on two tectonic plates called the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, (North America on one side, Europe on the other), the separation of which is visible at Thingvellir (Þingvellir) National Park, an hour’s drive from Reykjavík. It is also the site of the Althing (Alþing), the meeting place of Iceland’s government from the 10th through to the 18th century. Thingvellir literally translates to “government plains.” It is in a sense, the social and spiritual home of Icelanders. Lava fields are visible not only in the plains of the highlands, but also around Reykjavík, where most of the Icelandic population resides. Hafnarfjörður, a charming small community located to the south of, and at the outskirts of Reykjavík, is literally built on lava fields. It might be seen as a sort of reconciliation with nature, or a constant reminder of geographic reality.

Add to the volcanic nature of Iceland – consider also that it is at the 66 parallel – it is surrounded and isolated by the icy North Atlantic. Its geographic location, coupled by its social and political isolation under Danish rule, put Icelanders in the precarious position of contending with the temperamental nature of their island home, completely on their own. “Violence in nature will have its sublime expressions but also its ugly ones: a predator chasing and devouring its prey” (Brady 104).

Water is another geographical feature that figures prominently in the Icelandic landscape. The island is surrounded by the North Atlantic, but the land itself oozes water in the most interesting ways. “Iceland is a geothermally active sub-arctic island. This set of conditions means that water, in all its states, is cognitively present in the Icelandic landscape. In a single day, in any season, one can see ice, water and steam” (Thoren 41). Indeed, over the course of two days, exploring the landscape within a day’s drive of Selfoss, I saw the thundering waterfalls of Seljalandsfoss and Gullfoss, geysers spouting and hot pots boiling at Geysir, observed the snow-capped peaks and was mesmerized by relentless waves at Reynisfjara, (the Black Beach), that receded, leaving the white foam to provide stark contrast before drifting slowly back to the ocean. In her essay entitled “The Sublime, Ugliness and ‘Terrible Beauty’ in Icelandic Landscapes”, Emily Brady best describes the aesthetic reality available to the relatively insignificant human spectator:

“Many of Iceland’s volcanoes are still active, with devastating eruptions occurring in recent time. The results of this activity are calderas, vast lava fields and black sand deserts. The lava fields are uneven, dull-colored, with many easily accessible from populated regions such as Reykjavík. The calderas and deserts are a more common feature of the highlands in the interior of the country, presenting moonscape-like places which can be both eerie and breath-taking. Below the ground are geothermal areas with hot springs, boiling mud and extraordinary geysers. In sharp contrast, huge glaciers cover vast areas in the interior, with powerful waterfalls and glacial rivers and plains flowing through the landscape,

and dramatic fjords cutting into the edges of the country. Looking upwards, there are sweeping high mountains, and in many places free from light pollution, there is the immense night sky" (Brady 102).

Over the course of Iceland's short history of fine art, there was a marked shift from the depiction of idealized object beauty, to a more realistic sublime. I contend that the more recent art of the rare, pure landscape painters and those who work with abstraction, are grappling with a reconciliation of sorts – an acceptance of the state of the constant flux of their mutable and volatile geography. In *Confronting Nature*, the catalogue that accompanied a 2001 exhibition of 20th century Icelandic art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Chief Curator Jacquelyn Days Serwer recognizes the challenge of the Icelandic landscape: "The exhibition constitutes an unblemished record of the way in which Icelanders have engaged with their unusual environment in a manner that has sustained them as a people and, at the same time, has guaranteed the survival and preservation of their unique natural world" (Ólafur and Krisjánisdóttir 7).

Aside from the "terrible beauty" (Brady 106) evident in the geography of Iceland, there is the matter of the light, or the absence of it, and the angle of the sun that permeates the consciousness of inhabitants. Author Tim Edensor dedicates his paper, "Aurora Landscapes: Affective Atmospheres of Light and Dark," Edensor describes light, not as separate and distinct from the earth, but an integral part of the landscape, essentially making the horizon a construct (Edensor 173). It's more possible to understand Edensor's intent in studying the art of Georg Guðni, who literally painted air, the atmosphere between himself and the landscape. In my interview with abstract artist Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson, he also expressed a disdain toward the literal concept of horizon, preferring to view the sky, light and darkness as being interconnected.

The history of landscape in Icelandic art

Iceland has a long and rich history of oral traditions, story-telling and poetry. The history of fine art in Iceland however, is a short one, dating back to the mid-1800s. It was around 1830 that national idealism began to blossom and a more than 100-year fight for independence from Denmark was beginning to take shape. Before this, there was little binding Icelanders together, other than literature and a unique language (Sigurdsson 1).

“The National Poets, active mainly in the latter part of the 19th- century, not only prepared the cultural ground for independence, but they radically altered the culture’s previous indifference – or at least lack of passionate interest – to the Icelandic landscape. Their romantic vision of the Icelandic scenery became at the end of the 19th century, an integral part of the nationalistic sentiment and the single most important reason for the breakthrough of the visual arts in Iceland around the turn of the century” (Sigurdsson 2).

Painting became a way to round out the gamut of art that Icelanders were engaged in, showing Denmark and the world that they were a culturally mature nation. The government of the time believed landscape painting would successfully mirror the sentiments of the National Poets by bringing landmark visuals to the Icelanders and the world. Iceland began sponsoring the education of artists, who were largely schooled in Denmark. It was also decided that painters would preoccupy themselves with landscape. Because the path of art was shaped by the elite, in his master’s theses titled *Recolonizing the Land: Politics, Nationalism and the Icelandic Landscape Tradition*, author Hannes Sigurdsson felt it was important to illuminate the role of politics in Icelandic art. “In fact I intend it to be a case study in, not just ‘how the artists reflects his society,’ but rather ‘how the society creates the artist” (Sigurdsson 4). Art historian Adalsteinn Ingólfsson compared the Icelandic school of landscape painting to the nationalistic sentiment of Canada’s Group of Seven. What differed was that the approach the Canadians took in depicting the landscape was the blatant honesty they engaged in



Fig. 1. In Ásgrímur Jónsson's version of *Mt. Hecla*, the scene is pastoral and windless, a windless being a rarity in Iceland – note the smoke rising vertically from the chimney of the farmhouse.

Ásgrímur Jónsson, *Mt. Hecla*, oil on canvas, 150 x 290 cm, 1909. National Gallery of Iceland. <http://www listasafn.is/english/associated-collections/asgrimur-jonsson-collection/web-exhibiton-asgrimur-jonsson/landscape/>. Accessed 20 April 2018.

representing their geography. “The opposition the Canadian artists encountered centered on their honesty, as their landscapes were simply too harsh and chaotic for “cultured” tastes in Toronto or Ottawa” (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 118).

The efforts of the National Poets to glorify the landscape in the eyes of Icelanders was not immediately successful either, as the reality was that Iceland was a largely agricultural society, farming in Iceland proved to be a difficult – not idyllic. The winters were long and harsh, volcanos erupted and only a small portion of the land was arable. Unable to explain many of the natural phenomena that dogged Icelandic farmers, they turned to superstition and legend to explain the environment. This point will become important later in the discussion of artist Jóhannes Kjarval's work, regarding both, the landscape and the politics of art. Despite the harsh reality of the environment, the effort to revision the landscape in the eyes of Icelanders fell to the painters. “... it was thus left to the first pioneers of painting to reconcile man with nature before it could ultimately take on the symbolic identity as the locus of national pride and freedom” (Sigurdsson 5).

The first painters, Jón Stefánsson, Thorsteinn Gudmundsson and Asgrimur Jónsson, practiced a style known as national romanticism, producing paintings with blue skies and windless days, always set in the bliss of summer. Hannes aptly points out, “The blissfulness emanating from the slumbering valley below us in Mt. Hecla (Ásgrímur Jónsson, 1909) makes it difficult to imagine that the mountain we are faced with is in fact the most eruptive and potentially dangers volcano in Northern Europe” (Sigurdsson 24). (see Fig. 1.)

At first there was a level contentment, despite that European artists were already deviating from tradition. “Icelandic artists, on the other hand, had no domestic visual art tradition to rebel against: on the contrary, they bore the responsibility and duty to lay the foundation for one” (Ólafur, and Krisjánsdóttir 23). Any deviation from the pleasant or the glorious was met with opposition by the elite, and because the artists were state sponsored, they correctly

practiced within the parameters of national idealism. "Painting a landscape was not merely an innocent, aesthetic act during the first decades of the century, but rather almost synonymous with loyalty to the nation" (Ólafur, and Krisjánsdóttir 25). Those who did not paint to the vision of the government wasted in obscurity (Sigurdsson).

It is interesting to note that it is primarily inland scenes that became the subjects of early painters – possibly they were more relatable to this largely agrarian population. Fishing around Iceland at the time, was largely left to other countries. Given the penchant for the pastoral, the ocean might have been viewed as too unpredictable. "It can be argued that for most Icelandic landscape painters the ocean seemed too changeable, too lacking in calm to idealize the timeless and static quality of nature" (Ólafur, and Krisjánsdóttir 29). Icelandic painter Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir currently makes water and the ocean her primary areas of study, but she is an anomaly, both in that she paints the North Atlantic, but also that her work can be considered traditional landscape.

As schools of thought progressed and new movements in Europe transpired, Icelandic painters became impatient with the traditional landscape, wanting to experiment. In the mid 1920s artist Finnur Jónsson returned to Iceland and held a show of abstract art, which was duly chastised and "within a year, he abandoned his Abstract-Expressionism in favour of landscape and seascape rendered in a more or less naturalistic idiom" (Sigurdsson 36).

Jóhannes S. Kjarval was the first to deviate from the style and survive the critics, somehow paving the way for a new generation of Modernism. He was in fact revered by both the public and the state. By his 50th birthday in 1935, "the Icelandic state sponsored an exhibition of his works that declared him a national painter. In a word, he became an institution" (Sigurdsson 52). His art employed the techniques of modernism, specifically a cubist composition he developed (Ólafur, and Krisjánsdóttir 62), though he experimented with a wide array of techniques. I expand on the work of Kjarval further on.

In 1940, Iceland was occupied by British troops and by the following year the American army had arrived, which for all intents and purposes brought the world to Iceland. Most artists who were abroad returned to Iceland, most of whom had been born in Reykjavík, creating a critical mass of Modernist thinkers that the establishment could not continue to ignore (Sigurdsson 55). Also in 1940, the Ministry of Education was given the budget for art and the responsibility to apportion it. When the state tried to dismiss the painters they held an exhibition of their own (Sigurdsson 55). They petitioned the Alþingi in 1941, asking that arts funding be handled by an arts specialist, rather than a political representative (Sigurdsson 55). This action and the government's response launched the "controversy known as the "Listamannadeilan" (The Fine Arts Altercation). The minister responded by holding an exhibition of degenerate artists, followed by a show of distinguished artist. By October 1942, the ruling party lost five seats in government and the committee responsible for art in Iceland was replaced by non-political members (Sigurdsson 59).

It is elements of the sublime that emerge in many of the newer works of both landscape painters and abstract artists whose work engages with the concept of landscape. "... the sublime presents an aesthetic moment in which we come to some greater awareness of our relationship to the natural world and our inability to control its astonishing qualities" (Brady 107). Thus began an era of Modernism and experimentation in Icelandic art, though motifs of the landscape remain present in many works. The next landscape painter to emerge was Georg Guðni (1961-2011), a move his colleagues suspected would be a death knell for the painter. Over the course of my initial research, there appeared to be a general disdain for traditional landscape painting and in fact, there are very few classic Icelandic landscape painters, excepting amongst the very low-brow amateurs, generally referred to as 'sunday painters' (Horizon qtd. Guðni). But, there is a rationale for this trend that points to state control, illuminated only by looking at the history of art in Iceland, in consort with parallel social and political movements of the time.



Fig. 2. Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval's painting, *Skjaldbreiour*, illustrates his style of landscape painting, employing aspects of Cubism, and Expressionism, constructing his own style of abstraction.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, *Skjaldbreiour*. <http://art-now-and-then.blogspot.ca/2014/08/johannes-sveinsson-kjarval.html/>. Accessed 27 May 2018.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval

Without knowing much about Icelandic painters, I chose to study Jóhannes Kjarval purely on the aesthetics of his paintings, his attention to the smaller details of landscape, for his finding of colour in lava rock and beauty in the things up close. His work spoke to my heart and I felt, to a truer view of Iceland that had been ignored by the earlier masters. Of the three City of Reykjavík art museums, the Kjarvalsstaðir is dedicated to this artist. (see Fig. 2.)

Jóhannes was born in southeast Iceland in 1885, largely living in Reykjavík from 1902 onward and until his death in 1972. He studied under Ásgrímur Jónsson, considered one of the pioneers of Icelandic fine art, before attending Det Tekniske Selskabs Skole in Copenhagen and later at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (Kvaran andKrisjánsdóttir 62). As mentioned earlier in the art history section, nearing the end of his stay abroad he began experimenting elements of modernism, eventually incorporating a form of cubist composition into his landscapes that are present in many of his works that are inspired by Thingviller. Jóhannes would have developed an intimate connected to his subject matter, often living in a tent, spending much of his time painting outdoors and in all seasons. In his essay entitled "Landscape and Art," using "Summer Night at Thingvellir" as an example, Mikael M. Karlsson describes the genius of Jóhannes in evoking a sense of the familiar through his own interpretation of it.

"We are often told that the artist see things that most of us do not see; that Kjarval, for instance, saw in the Icelandic landscape things that most of us overlook, and which Kjarval's paintings teach us to see. They teach us to see the landscape as Kjarval saw it. There is a lot of truth in this. A painting like this one not only evokes the magic of the Thingvellir landscape, it points it out; it teaches us how the landscape may be seen" (Karlsson 59).



Fig. 3. *Land and Air* is an example of Jóhannes's later progression into the abstract.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, *Land and Air*, 1965. <http://art-now-and-then.blogspot.ca/2014/08/johannes-sveinsson-kjarval.html/>. Accessed 27 May 2018.

Karlsson's opinion is that Kjarval's interpretations are not reality, not the way the landscape actually appeared. I would largely agree with his assessment, with qualifications to the eye of the individual artist, whereas no two people will see colour exactly the same way. As an artist myself, I see colour in nature when viewed up close, whereas the effect is muted at a distance. In the Icelandic landscape the lava fields for example appear quite black, some capped in green moss. Up close, the light refracts in interesting ways that can emit blues and yellows that one would not see at a distance, and smaller vegetation might be present that add to the palette. In my own work, I have focuses on these pearls of colour, exaggerated them in my own interpretation. It is possible Jóhannes was employing this technique. However, his work did lend somewhat toward the fantastical. (see Fig. 3)

Later in Jóhannes's career and much to the delight of many Icelanders, he began blending and weaving mythical creatures into his works. "He evolved a highly personal symbolism rooted in Icelandic folklore and personifications of various nature spirits which merged into his landscape interpretations" (Kvaran and Krisjánisdóttir 62). For Jóhannes there was importance in naming the paintings, connecting poetry, folk tales and landscape to the memory and experience of those who inhabited or travelled the scene (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 131). "Which is why we find familiar landscapes by Kjarval teeming with the unfamiliar: faces of men and women, ethereal beings flitting in and out of rock faces, stylized harps or boats, signifying perhaps poetry or the power of the imagination and finally reminders of the artist's part in the colonization of the landscape in the form of painted palettes (131). In Arthur C. Danto's comments in his essay, "Impressions of Iceland," he mirrors the connection between the spiritual world and nature (Ólafur and Krisjánisdóttir 11). "The Icelanders – settlers and sojourners – knew they had to interact not only with one another, but also with the powers



Fig. 4. *The Sisters of Sapi* is an example of Jóhannes's inclusion of elves and spirits in his works.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, *Sisters of Sapi*, 1948. <http://art-now-and-then.blogspot.ca/2014/08/johannes-sveinsson-kjarval.html/>. Accessed 27 May 2018.

that preside over their landscape. Even its secular art bears witness to the belief that nature is a theater in which the human and the spiritual worlds intersect and even collide (Ólafur and Krisjánsdóttir 11)". (see Fig. 4.)

"Liberal in his attitude to style, he employed an array ranging from realistic naturalism to unrestrained expressionism and analytical cubism" (Kvaran and Krisjánsdóttir 62). Jóhannes's style was distinctly different than preceding artists, with elements of foreign influence, and might have been relegated to obscurity had he not maintained an acceptable proportion of Icelandicness. Sigurdsson said few painters with Modernist leaning were able to supersede scrutiny, where Jóhannes succeeded. "Kjarval is not only an interesting case for the theory of reception, but his tremendous inventiveness within the narrow parameters of landscape painting and his capacity to breathe new life into advent-gardism soon earned him the status of cultural hero and a reputation which exceed even that the National Poets" (Sigurdsson 32). While studying in London, Jóhannes experimented with a myriad of styles, sometimes mixing them in ways that confounded critics, but when he returned to Iceland, shortly before Iceland's millennia anniversary in 1930, he turned his focus to landscape (43). His approach did continue to veer away from traditional depictions of distant vistas, rather, focusing with a great deal of detail on the immediate. He painted what was directly in front of him, without the interference of or reference to ill weather. Perhaps that explains why his unusual work escaped scrutiny. The introduction of phantoms and ghosts in his paintings differed from Ásgrímur (44), who painted Icelandic legends that were more literally depicted, Jóhannes's hidden beings were mysterious and to the populace, delightful and fun to discover, and appealed to the Pagan roots of Norse mythology. "As the country's principal 'ghost buster,' his was the task of introducing the population to the heroic phantoms of the forefathers who roamed the earth, thereby effectively bridging the gap between past and present" (44).

In later years Jóhannes undertook portraits of peasant, still in a similar rocky style, which Hannes calls “peasant landscapes” (51). Still later his work became quite abstract and in the last few years of his life he unabashedly moved into the genre of Modernism. “Kjarval’s discreet quotations of and references to the language of Modernism soon came to dominate the works and ideology of the next generation in the same way the landscape had dominated painting in the first four decades of this century” (53).

No matter how critics characterize Jóhannes’s work, as Traditionalist, Modernist, Cubist or Expressionist, it is evident there existed a deep connection to the land and the culture its people. In a 2001 review of the Corcoran Gallery exhibition *Confronting Nature: Icelandic Art of the 20th Century*, author Jo Ann Lewis points to Jóhannes’s works as standing out, “as the most powerful and intensely expressionistic of these early works” (Lewis). She points to “Summernight at Thingvellir,” as the result of the artist’s 1931 camping trip to observe the light play of the midsummer midnight sun on the landscape (Lewis). “Clearly obsessed with the geology of his homeland, he intended to convey the sense of a landscape that never rests” (Lewis). Quoting Jóhannes himself, she wrote:

“When the lava is a fiery mass, it isn’t thinking about solidified lava and after the molten rock congeals, it forgets the fire. Then the moss comes and spreads a gray quilt over the land... The fire survives in the moss, the moss in the heather in the painting. And everything becomes green” (Lewis qtd. Kjarval).

“The image which Kjarval presented of the land was indeed so captivating that the nation even today chooses mainly to view it through his eyes” (Sigurdsson 52). In visiting Thingvellir and travelling a short distance from Reykjavík, northerly up the coastline on the west coast to Bogarnes, I witnessed Jóhannes’s Iceland. It was raw, jagged, coloured in the aura of history and unforgotten ancestors. It was filled with the mystery of possibility. Sublime.

Georg Guðni Hauksson

“I’m outside, standing or sitting on a stone. I look around, toward the horizon, at the amplitudes and the mountains. Some stand close by, others further away. Automatically, the mind starts roaming or perhaps gliding around. I go into the distance, into eternity, where the mountains have impenetrable tranquility, where they cease being mountains and become areiform. I enter and pass through them. What exists in the mountain exists also outside of it, and in the surrounding quietude both dread and gloom reside. And in the air all the thoughts of the world can be accommodated.”

Georg Guðni: from his sketchbook, dated January 8, 1989 (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 25).

Georg Guðni might be one of the most fascinating of Icelandic painters and one of the few landscape artists to emerge in recent times, though his work could also be categorized as sublime. Guðni was born in Reykjavík in 1961 to geologist Haukur Tómasson and Karitas Jóndóttir, a dressmaker. As a youth, he frequently accompanied his father while he worked, experiencing the landscape as few Icelanders would, in the remote wilds of Iceland and in every incarnation of the island’s unpredictable weather. He continued his relationship with the environment throughout his teens, working summers for the Energy Authority collecting water samples. In an April 1998 interview with the *Icelandic Review* that is reprinted on his website, Guðni said, “It inspired me as an artist, standing in the rain all day where nothing was to be seen (Middleton).” These early encounters with landscape would shape his future and his vision as an artist. In 1980 Guðni enrolled at the Icelandic College of Art and Crafts, and like many of his colleagues, practiced in the popular genres of the time, surrealism and pop art. He slowly gravitated to landscape, at first working with geometric shapes and slowly merging these principles into landscape. Icelandic art historian, artist, curator, and colleague Hannes Sigurdsson said Guðni had been engaged, as everyone was, in the avant-garde SÚM-movement that emerged in the early 1960s, which had practically banished landscape painting, rather engaging in minimalism and progressive artistic expression

(Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 9). Painting on canvas had recently experienced a renaissance in Iceland and the incarnation was Abstract Expressionism, though Hannes describes Guðni as being more influenced by the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980 “that formally put an end to the era Modernism” (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 10). Hannes claims that Guðni’s foray into landscape was pivotal and deliberate, occurring suddenly, but other evidence shows that his experimentation with geometric shapes and significant exposure to the environment of Iceland, slowly morphed into landscape, a practice he first did in secret. “To our astonishment, in 1983 an unassuming landscape appeared abruptly out of the chaos of primary forms and experimental dabbles. The landscapes emerged on the artist’s canvases, and then the artist himself emerged: Georg Guðni, landscape painter” (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 10). Rather than catapulting Guðni into a career of abject obscurity, the subject matter and his level of painterly skill captivated both the art world and Icelanders alike. “Guðni had broken the ice and cleared the way into the painted landscape, that had for over two decades been virtually sealed off as an intellectual no-man’s land by the SÚM-movement” (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 10). By 1985, Guðni left Iceland to study at the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Holland. This was also a turning point for Hannes, who abandoned his career as a painter and moved on to other pursuits in the art world. He claimed that in retrospect, that decision was spurred by the contrast of “the unwavering strength of Guðni’s vision as an artist” (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 10). Icelandic art historian Adalsteinn Ingólfsson, a contributor to *George Guðni: The Mountain*, the catalogue accompanying Guðni’s 2007 exhibition at the Akureyri Art Museum suggested that the artist’s approach to native landscape was largely conceptual; “it was about ideas such as “stillness,” “awe,” “memory” and “empathy” rather than about natural landmarks with hollowed names such as Thingvellir or Mt. Skjalbreidur” (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 112). By 1995, Guðni had become a cultural icon.

In *Strange Familiar* Guðni said his search for something he could grab onto, a theme he could connect to and build on, came out of boredom with the current trends (Mortensen 25).

In response, he started studying the Icelandic pioneers, Johannes Kjarval, Jón Stefansson, Ásgrímur Jónsson and Thorarinn B. Thorladsson, all of whom were foundational in the development of fine art in Iceland – all of whom were landscape painters. He had wanted to stay away from the cliché of pure landscape and the symbolism of site specific themes, such as Thingvellir, which was a passion of Kjarval's. He studied the different techniques of the masters and found himself more connected to the subject than the painting. "At this point I felt sure that I was doing something right that would be of use to me, but I didn't dare show these works to my colleagues until six months later" (Mortensen 24). It's easy to understand how colleagues might have felt his art transitioned overnight, when for Guðni, it began as a progression of exploration that brought him to the simple shapes, the isolation of the mountains from their surroundings or the extraneous distractions of symbolism. "These works differed radically from the landscapes of the past which contained a large number details that I simply wasn't interested in, like grass, streams, all kinds of cloudscapes, and so on" (Mortesen 24).

Gunnar J. Árnason's description of Guðni's work in *Confronting Nature* recognizes that the artist's treatment of light vastly differs from the more traditional red and blue hues reminiscent of the midnight sun. "In his works the light seems to come from within, not from above, as it is a light characteristic of drizzly weather with low clouds. It is as if the land is radiating from a green glow which illuminates the drizzle veiling it" (Kvaran and Krisjánsdóttir 58). Guðni's method of layering, using horizontal and vertical strokes of lightly tinted glaze, amplifies the depth and luminosity of his work. In the 2015 documentary film *Horizon*, artist and colleague Einar Garibaldi describes Guðni's work as closer to metaphysical, less about the view and more about the way we experience the world, "In some strange way, he managed to blend together perhaps a scientific perspective and the child of nature that always resided somewhere inside of him" (Horizon 08:22) Guðni was considered painterly, and largely in the Icelandic tradition, but as Ingólfsson points out, there were dominated by degrees of



Fig. 5. Gudni's painting *Mt. Akrafjall and Skardsheidi*, is an example of his earlier work, showing his obsession with geometry and the mountain.

George Gudni, *Mt. Akrafjall and Skardsheidi*, 1987, oil on canvas, 10 x 50 cm, Galleri Lars Bohman, Stockholm. *George Gudni: The Mountain*, p 50. Listasafnid Á Akureyri/Akureyri Art Museum. 2007.

transparency, weather, and designed to be experienced (Sigurdsson and Ingólfsson 121). (see Fig. 5.) "Moreover, emphasizing that these paintings are to be experienced by the whole body, not just the optical nerves, Guðni paints his natural scenes on the vertical scale, the human scale, rather than the horizontal" (121).

Danish American actor, photographer, poet and publisher Viggo Mortensen met Guðni at the National Gallery of Iceland where the artist's work was on display. Mortensen was struck by a strange familiarity in viewing Guðni's work and initiated a conversation that resulted in both a friendship and the publication of *Strange Familiar*, a collection of essays, Guðni sketches and paintings, produced with the cooperation of Guðni. In it, author Jane Johnson describes a 1995 untitled painting that extrapolates on Garibaldi's perceptions of Guðni's technique of layering:

"Now step back into Georg Guðni's work and appreciate once more not only the profound respect he has for this uncompromising landscape, but also the way in which he too can take you by surprise. Bands of color conjure depth; a semitransparent glaze traps the light. The paintings are built up like layers of lava or glacial moraines: you get the sense that if you were to take a geological core sample through the picture, it would render up a record of time, of time spent in the wild absorbing the landscape; of time the artist has spent wandering the landscape of his imagination, seeking out the ineffable; of time spent in creation, painstakingly building up the layers of paint and subtleties of meaning" (Mortensen 19).

Guðni himself describes his relationship to the Icelandic landscape as an attraction to what is between the spectacular, the ordinariness of everyday life. Following his works with the mountain, other early paintings focused on horizons, the point where the earth melts transparently into the sky. When he returned to landscapes, it was the valleys between the mountains, the layers of vertical and horizontal layers working in consort with the



Fig. 6. Gudni's primary obsessions were the mountain, followed by the valley and later on, the horizon. His untitled canvas of 1998 is an example of the one of his many valley paintings and a good example of his technique of glazing, using horizontal and vertical strokes.

George Gudni, *Untitled*, 1998, oil on canvas, 135 x 165 cm, private collection. *George Gudni: The Mountain*, p 130. Listasafnid Á Akureyri/Akureyri Art Museum. 2007.

geometry of the valleys, a technique he describes as weaving (Mortensen 31). "I was thinking of landscape, nature, weather, and geometry and emotions" (33). Hannes recognized the significance of Guðni's layering: "When you look at it, these layers of the mountain, it's like he doesn't want to forget anything, it's the past. But you see through all the past, the layers of the past. It's there. He doesn't want to drop it, it's all relevant." (Horizon 16:56)

In *Horizon* Guðni describes a 1990/91 painting, discussing his use of horizontal and vertical strokes as manifestations of land and air: "I was painting vertically and horizontally, and felt that the land was moving into the painting horizontally, and the air vertically covering the land. You see the land disappearing underneath it" (Horizons 15:07). (See Fig. 6.) One enduring concept that appears in nearly every interview or paper regarding Guðni, is that he paints himself into the mountain and the mountain into himself, indicating an intimate connection to his subject matter, also a reflection of the amount of time spent in nature, both as a child and as an adult. "Iceland is very important to me. It is my source of inspiration, from which I get my nourishment. It is important to me that I know it well. My search for my subject matter takes place in the dark or in a fog, as it were. During this time, I am procuring a picture in my head—and this is built on what I know" (Horizon 17:54). Mortensen formed the following observation of Guðni's intense relationship to his work: "It goes beyond a point-by-point understanding of this layer, and that layer, and this colour, and this kind of light. It's something that he has inside of himself" (Horizon 19:00).

In an informal meeting in Reykjavík with Hannes Sigurdsson, he talked briefly, both about Guðni's rise to fame, economic success and his enduring and sustained following throughout his career and until his sudden death in 2011 at the age of 50. Despite Guðni's success and that his career marked a pivotal return to an interest in landscape painting that will be his legacy, Hannes feels that the artist is on already on a path to obscurity and irrelevance. I disagree. As per directive by Hannes, the meeting was not recorded, release forms were not signed and most of the discussion revolved around a current nihilistic



Fig. 7. Later in Gudni's career, he became obsessed with the horizon and largely painted within this concept until his death in 2011.

George Gudni, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm, private collection. *George Gudni: The Mountain*, p 138. Listasafnid Á Akureyri/Akureyri Art Museum. 2007.

obsession that includes the irrelevance of Guðni's works, art and life. Fortunately, Hannes has penned many excellent and valuable pieces in the past that helped inform both the history of art in Iceland, as well as the work of Guðni. As irony will present itself, the meeting ended with a clear sky that quickly transitioned into what would be the beginning of five straight days of apocalyptic three-season changes that gloriously presented themselves in rotation – every hour. It was like living in a snow globe. If anything, it punctuated the drama of the Icelandic environment perfectly. In a three-day side trip to the south of Iceland, I experienced Guðni's shrouded mountains, valleys and indiscernible horizons, witnessing the tangible air between myself and the landscape. It was sublime. (See Fig. 7.)



Fig. 8. *Cloud Bank* is a 2018 painting that was part of Hrafnhildur's April exhibition, "Yellow Warning" at Gallerí Fold in Reykjavík.

Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir, *Cloud Bank*, 2018, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, Gallerí Fold. <https://www.artsy.net/show/galleri-fold-1-yellow-warning/>. Accessed 27 April 2018.

Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir

Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir is one of the few Icelandic painters of any notoriety working in the style of classic landscape, working almost exclusively with motifs of water and weather. During my time in Iceland she hosted an artist reception at Gallerí Fold and I had the opportunity to meet her and see her work. Unfortunately, she was experiencing poor health and didn't feel capable of participating in this research. Despite that, I feel her art is worth mentioning.

She studied at the Icelandic Art and Crafts, graduating in 1984 with a degree in graphic design and later studied oil painting at the Kópavogur School of Art. The start of her painting career was a little more unorthodox than some, creating a few pieces and renting a space to host an exhibition, which she said was well attended and she sold work. She decided to keep at it

Hrafnhildur Inga grew up in the farming district of Fljótshlíð, on the south coast of Iceland, where the sky and ocean unfold in a drama of duality that defines the North Atlantic. These are the motifs she expresses in her work. (see Fig. 8) One of the reasons I became interested in her work is the blatant evidence of both beauty and threat. Upon further research, I learned that Fljótshlíð is nestled between two major rivers and in the shadow of some of Europe's most dangerous volcanos: Hekla; Katla; and Eyjafjallajökullj. The area is within 20 km of the ocean and the view would be toward Surtsey, an island volcano that was formed in a 1960s eruption. In my drive from Selfoss to Vík on the south coast, I would have passed near the community.

My purpose in visiting the area around Hrafnhildur's childhood home was to see some of what her mind would hold in memory, which is the inspiration she draws on (Gallerí Fold). In her interview with Gallerí Fold she said, "Indeed, it is quite amazing clouds that are formed in Fljótshlíð, where I spend the weekends. Between Eyjafjallajökull and Þórsmerkur there are always some mysterious clouds that can be completely crazy (Gallerí Fold). She has no interest

in painting beautiful pictures, or works that challenge either social or political commentary.

What she says she wants people to feel when they look at her paintings, is “energy (Gallerí Fold)”. Travelling the south coast, the energy is so striking it’s nearly palatable. Around every bend of the road there is yet another jaw-dropping vista that is not only the earthen landscape, but also the ocean and sky. They are dynamically connected. During my visit the weather changed dramatically, sometimes three seasons in an hour, even more dynamic and awe-inspiring in the south than in Reykjavík region. I was able to get a real sense of the mutability of this landscape and how it played out in her work. I will leave you to view her work, as I feel it speaks for itself. Little interpretation is necessary. It is beauty and threat. It’s possible to understand how an abstract painter might interpret that energy.

Guðmunda Kristinsdóttir

Guðmunda is an abstract painter whose work is deeply entrenched in the spirit of both abstract and landscape. Her paintings are dramatic and commanding interpretations of her relationship with world. She paints largely in oil and of late, she's been using volcanic ash in her work. I met with Guðmunda at ArtGallery 101, located on Laugavegur in Reyjavík, not far from my hostel. The gallery is a women's artist-run co-op, representing 14 female artists who each take responsibility for the operations of the gallery. Similarly, she shares studio space with 10 other women at Art 11. It is interesting to note that ART67 gallerí operates only a couple blocks away, a collective representing another 14 female artists. Guðmunda began her career by earning a degree to teach art, and did that for a short time before moving abroad to Norway (Kristindóttir). At this point in time she wasn't painting, rather, she and her sister had a ceramics studio (Kristindóttir). Painting has become an obsession that has grown over the course of the past 10 to 15 years (Kristindóttir).

Connection to the Icelandic landscape is an important aspect of the inspiration for her work. "I've travelled a lot in the wilderness of Iceland, and it gives me very much to do that, energy" (Kristindóttir). When Guðmunda approaches a canvas, she has colours in her mind and she's imagining an abstract painting: "Sometimes I begin and think I'm going to paint abstract, but it is always landscape, of some sort, more or less" (Kristindóttir). She doesn't seem to mind that people will interpret her work in different ways, have it evoke a response. When I look at her work, I see beautiful volatility, an acute awareness of the ever-changing geology of Iceland. On the ArtGallery 101 website, her work is described as both observing the immense and the minute: "Guðmunda's romantic vision is in the spirit of what Robert Rosenblum focuses on in his book, *Modern Paintings and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, which is the leap between the infinitely small and the infinitely large, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic" (ArtGallery 101) "In this, there is a progression of sorts, and a theme evolving in Icelandic art that will



Fig. 9. During my visit with Gudmunda at ArtGallerí 101, I took this photo of one of her pieces, *Creation*.

Gudmunda Kristinsdóttir, *Creation*, 2018, oil and volcanic ash on canvas, 160 x 160 cm, ArtGallerí 101. Terry Smith 2018, jpg.

become more apparent in exploring the work of Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson, later in this research. In context, here is also a nod to the past and the work of Kjarval, a nod to the superstitions and the unexplained and imagined: “The vision suggests that the divine, the creator, appears as a part of our world rather than beyond it, a vision that the forces of nature are divine” (ArtGallery 101). “Human beings have always been fascinated with nature’s unexplicable forces, which are often believed to be supernatural. That is where our faith in a higher power that we must obey, meets our freedom to be, to be a human being that is its own creative force” (ArtGallery 101).

The volcanic ash. I would argue, there is no more testament to an artist statement – in relation to physical environment – than employing Gudmunda’s evidence of change and imminence. (see Fig. 9.) Incorporation of the ash gives texture and life to Gudmunda’s work, as well as context – a mutable landscape. (see Fig. 10.) It is a reminder of the youth of this island and the unpredictable nature that is a reality for Icelanders. “The technological society strives to insulate our world from the merciless forces of nature, but is constantly reminded that it is indeed powerless against it” (ArtGallery 101). She was gifted a bucket of volcanic ash by a friend after the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010 (Kristindóttir), the one that disrupted air travel across Europe and drew attention to Iceland as a travel destination. It’s not the first time eruptions have caused havoc in the environment of other locales. These events however, are so much more present for Icelanders.



Fig. 10. This image is a detail of Gudmunda’s painting *Creation*, which illustrates the effect of her use of volcanic ash.

Gudmunda Kristinsdóttir, detail, *Creation*, 2018, oil and volcanic ash on canvas, 160 x 160 cm, ArtGallerí 101. Terry Smith 2018, jpg.



Fig. 11. Another image of Gudmunda's work, *Ash and Ice* is an excellent example of her abstract painting that naturally become accidental landscapes.

Gudmunda Kristinsdóttir, *Ash and Ice*, 2013, oil and volcanic ash on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. http://www.gudmunda.com/munda_en.pl?p=mm&s=9/. Accessed 27 May 2018.

An important aspect of Guðmunda's work is related to environment. She cares deeply. The interference with nature in Iceland is two-fold: tourism and climate change. "Yes, very much so. Fear for the nature. Glaciers are getting smaller all the time, which is a danger for the animals also" (Guðmunda). Climate change adds to the volatility of the landscape – glaciers begin to melt and the North Atlantic gets warmer. (See Fig. 11.) A 2015 article on *Science Daily*, reports on a University of Arizona study that concluded that the reality of glacier melt in Iceland is causing some sites to rise as much as 1.4 inches per year, a result of the rebounding of the Icelandic crust that corresponds with the onset of warming (University of Arizona). "There is a longstanding tradition of viewing landscape as a visual scene or as a frame around a picture with some objects. Landscape is therefore aesthetically grasped similarly to an artistic object, but that results in detachment of the landscape from nature or the ecosystem, as well as a separation from the object and the aesthetically appreciating subject. This very fact has also been one hindrance in forging a link between aesthetics of nature and environmental ethics" (Thorgeirsdóttir 24).

Tourism has been a boon to the Icelandic economy, which was crippled after the 2008 economic crash, but it comes with a strong downside as well, the sheer impact tourism has on the environment, an island accustomed to hosting 320,000 humans. As of 2017, it now takes on more than 2,000,000 tourists per year. In the two-week period when I visited in late spring, many of the most popular back-country sites were closed because of environmental damage. It is not only fine artists who echo their concern, as statements delivered through art. Björk, perhaps Iceland's most well-known exported commodity is very involved in the environmental movement, and through her persona, embodies herself as nature (Dibben). From Björk's website, she reported: "I would like to point out Iceland's uniqueness: and its pure untouched nature are synonymous. If that is lost our uniqueness is lost. Just as if Paris lost its

fashion, New York lost its skyscrapers, Los Angeles it Hollywood” (Dibbin qtd. Björk). These are the common concerns I heard echoed by Icelanders, and the concern is clearly echoed in the work of many of Iceland’s artists and artisans.

On the morning of my arrival in Iceland, a cousin who is also an artist, spirited me off to visit the studios of two of his colleagues, both in the suburb of Kópabogur, one of them being Kristín Tryggvadóttir, who shares studio space with Guðmunda at Art 11 (a collective of 11 female artists). I was wholly unprepared to do an interview, without release forms or recorder. Regardless, Kristín was generous with her time and insights, pulling out pieces of her work to discuss the relationship of each piece to a particular aspect of geology, landscape and environment. Her connection to the landscape and environment exactly mirrored my hypothesis and I had only been in Iceland for a few hours. It was exciting. As with Guðmunda, Kristín works are deeply connected to the landscape, acutely aware of the beauty and the threat. “The experience of the sublime does not only entail being moved by the beauty of something, but so to speak to be shaken to the core” (Thorgeirsdóttir 24).



Fig. 12. The plexiglass art that greets visitor to Bjani's home.

Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson, mixed media on plexiglass, 2 x 4 m. Terry Smith 2018, jpg.

Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson

Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson lives and works in a quasi-industrial area of Kópavogur. He and his wife's living space is separated from his studio by a foyer. Stepping into the living space you're greeted by a 4-metre high work of art painted on plexiglass. It hangs from the ceiling, set out slightly from the wall to allow light to cast dimension on the white wall behind it – it's a fantastically dynamic explosion of colour and movement. (See Fig. 12) Inside the large open room, the seating, kitchen and dining areas are vaguely separated by three similar pieces hung at an angle, like vertical levered windows. Bjarni said they were designed for this space – designed to live with – never part of an exhibition. In his studio, hang three large, luminous red pieces that show a striking sense of his command between light and dark. His sense of light is so strong, they trick the eye at first, making you believe they are backlit, but they're not. This room has the same high ceilings, necessary for the scale of many of his works. (See Fig. 13.) Again, this was a surprise encounter and I was unprepared to properly interview Bjarni, but I returned later in my visit to hear him talk more about his work and his relationship to place. Bjarni drills down the very inception of the earth, the environment, geology and the formation life. He describes the island as relatively young – its youth being the thing that excites him.

"I myself, am more about how the earth is always in the flux of changing. We live here, but we have a ground that is always moving around – geologically it is very young. What interests me, is like when you go up to certain places here, you kind of go before time, the earth before anything existed, anything like vegetation flowering, or animals, or whatever. It's like when you have a glacier and a volcano, just rocks and stuff like that, and there's nothing living there. You go up to a glacier, you don't hear a bird, anything, total emptiness of living things. Because the earth is so young, it reminds you of the beginning of the creation, that's kind of what I like" (Sigurbjörnsson).



Fig. 13. This image shows the scale of some of Bjarni's pieces.

Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson, 2014. Kópavogsbladid. <http://www.kopavogsbladid.is/bjarni-sigurbjornsson-og-kristinn-mar-palmason-anarkiu/>. Accessed 25 May 2018.

Bjarni is working with the concept of creationism, the beginnings of earthly formations, the beginnings of flesh and a sense of the oneness that we are with the planet (Sigurbjörnsson). In his work, he is the creator. (See Fig. 14.) "According to etymology one of the meanings of conversation is the act of living with and keeping company with. Metaphysical experiences of nature can make us aware of how we live with nature due to the fact that we are part of it" (Thorgeirdottir 24). In his chapter in the collection *Conversations with Landscape*, author Tim Edensor reflects on a concept that resonates with me in relation to Bjarni's work: "This young landscape, seething with geothermal, volcanic and climatic energies at an earthly level, is complemented by the unearthly energies which churn about the earth" (Edensor 176). While Edensor's chapter focuses on the affective atmospheres of light and dark, the Aurora's, it is also the dynamism of light dark that exists in Bjarni's creations.

According to the artist, his works aren't interpretations of landscape, they are closer to the truth than say, a photograph or a traditional landscape (Sigurbjörnsson). As we understand it by now, the Icelandic landscape in particular, is dynamic, every changing, shifting and resurfacing. A photograph or classic painting is a record that captures a moment in time, a reflection of reality, one step from a reality that has passed, and not the current truth of it (Sigurbjörnsson). It's easy to relate to his thought process. If we are to look at a 2014 photo or painting of the Peace River Valley in Northern Alberta, the vista would look completely different than it does in 2018 after preparation for the Site C dam, vegetation cleared and settlements displaced, void of the natural habitat that existed. The dramatic changes are the cause of human development, but no less striking than a landscape might be after a volcanic eruption, or the erosion caused by a waterfall that exists because it once flowed from glacial fields over riverbed, rather than a cliff. Edensor echoes Bjarni's understanding of landscape as, ever mutable, rather than being static. "In these conceptions, landscape is alive with energies, eternally fluid, its rocks, earth, vegetation and climate continually undergoing change as



Fig. 14. Bjarni's work from the series "Red Rock."

Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson, mixed media on plexiglass. <http://www.bjarnisig.com/?p=works&w=redrock&n=1/>. Accessed 27 May 2018.

elements from near and far, and from different times, are entangled and folded together in a continual making. This re-vitalization of landscape thus moves away from sedentary, static, visually apprehended notions of landscape that suggest being and permanence" (Edensor 175-176).

Bjarni holds a Master of Fine Arts degree, having graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1996 and feels his style is somewhat affected by his time spent in the United States. It's his use, knowledge and manipulation of unusual materials that aid the drama and dynamism of his creations, as well as his choice of canvas. Gunnar J. Árnason discussed Bjarni's process in the exhibition catalogue for "Mynd," a group exhibition at the Harbour House, Reykjavík Museum. By his painting on plexiglass, the art is turned inside out, with the viewer experiencing the back of the painting, unseen by the painter until it's dried and cured (Árnason). In Bjarni's past he worked at an auto body shop, painting vehicles, which Árnason wrote, helped acquaint him with a variety of industrial materials (Árnason). "For Bjarni the material of oil paint is not merely an opportunity to evoke impressions of nature, for him nature itself is bound within the material itself, the pigment, oils and solvents" (Árnason). The making of these large pieces are an undertaking, at 2 x 4 metres the canvases are laid flat and he works on them from a very physically engaged perspective. "In Bjarni's vision the painting is not the final product but a testimony of action and process" (Árnason).

Conclusion

A sense of place – topophilia – exists within most cultures and regions of the world. I hear it in song, as references in lyrics, and I see it in art. Culturally and geographically, how could one not be affected by their environment and culture? This is strikingly evident in the works of the Icelandic painters I studied. Each of the painters were affected similarly by the sense of place and its impact proved to be deeper than I first hypothesized. The elements of place that surfaced in the works of the artists I studied can be broken down as follows: abject beauty; volcanic threat; mutability of the landscape; power of the landscape; weather; superstition; geology; social culture; governance; Nordic mythology; Icelandic history and culture; the effect of light in a northern locale; and environmentalism.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval was one of the first to document the effects of volcanic activity. His works also reflected cultural history, power of the landscape, superstition, geology and governance, as well as the effect of the northern light. Georg Guðni Hauksson was deeply influenced by weather, geology and light. Hrafnhildur Inga Sigurðardóttir, the only traditional landscape painter in the study is deeply affected by the mutability of the landscape, weather, the power of the landscape and the only painter in this study to confront the ocean as her primary subject. Like Georg Guðni, her works blur the horizon, resulting in a oneness of the elements. Moving into the abstract painters, Guðmunda Kristinsdóttir and Kristín Tryggvadóttir are both deeply moved by the mutability and power of the landscape, volcanic eruption and especially, both artists shared a deep concern for the environment. Guðmunda goes as far as incorporating volcanic ash, collected after the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull. Both Hrafnhildur and Guðmunda grew up in the south of Iceland, the area most affected by the eruption. Bjarni Sigurbjörnsson's art is grounded in creationism – fascinated by the youth of the geology, but he is also influenced by the mutability and power of the landscape, as well as Nordic Mythology. Kjarval is the only artist in this study to paint specific scenes on-site, though his paintings can still be regarded as imaginative interpretations, they



Fig. 16. The façade of the Harpa, designed by Icelandic/Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, as viewed from the inside. To the left you see the hexagon tubes and on the right are the shapes that harken to lava fields.

Olafur Eliasson. *The Harpa*, Reykjavík, Iceland. Terry Smith 2018, jpg.

are recognizable. The other artists drew on memory, experience and emotion, including Hrafnhildur, the only traditional painter. Regarding this group of artists, I haven't mentioned "beauty" as being an influence. Perhaps beauty and respect for the power of the landscape go hand-in-hand. In each of these artist's works, there is incredible depth of beauty that reflects an honest awe of their environment. "It could be called a "terrible beauty" (Brady 101).

One of the most interesting findings was a general disdain by many artists for classic landscape, described as old-fashioned and tired. However, the landscape – the environment – is deeply entrenched in the psyches of Icelandic painters. The landscape is ever present, the threat is imminent and the breath-taking beauty is sublime. What is inescapable is an almost genetic recognition of the power of the landscape and the sense of powerlessness it evokes and the respect it demands. The impact of the geography is embedded in the culture of Iceland. The geography of Iceland is very much present in the abstract works of today. I saw the impact of the environment in all disciplines of creativity, including pottery and architecture.

One striking example that illustrates the environment's effect on Icelanders falls outside of the scope of fine art – the façade of Reykjavík's relatively new concert hall and convention centre. It's construction was nearly abandoned after the financial crash of 2008 and finishing it was a point of contention amongst Icelanders. Some were inclined to allow it to decay, to stand testament to the folly of unregulated stock markets and greed. Others wanted it to be envisioned as a sign of optimism. I mention it now, because it now stands as an icon on the skyline of Reykjavík and it's fantastic. I mention it, because it is art. It's a massive installation. It's a landmark already, and it truly harkens to the landscape. The Harpa reflects the collective consciousness of geography. It was designed by Icelandic/Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, whose work is primarily installation art and very rooted in the geography of Iceland. The façade of the Harpa is a canvas of hexagonal tubes that not only refract and reflect colour, but hold

it inside. (See Fig. 16.) It's reminiscent of ice and the Aurora Borealis. When you walk past, it twinkles with colour and one evening I stood on a hill with a cousin and watched it from afar – a light show designed to impersonate northern lights. The side walls are geometric glass shapes fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, also reflective with colour and perhaps harkening to the lava fields and rock formations found in Kjarval's works. It's modern, interpretive and akin to the art I studied, and rife with landscape – fantastically Icelandic.

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