

## ICELAND: Artists Respond to Place

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The first exhibition in the U.S. to focus exclusively on contemporary Icelandic artists and their relationship to their national geography, *ICELAND: Artists Respond to Place* opened at Scandinavia House in October 2014.

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Curated by Pari Stave and organized by the Katonah Museum of Art, the exhibition explored the rich, complex relationship that contemporary Icelandic artists have to with the singular geography of their country: one of the most geologically dynamic places on earth.

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Featuring 11 of Iceland's contemporary artists, the works cover a broad range of formal approaches and media, including painting, photography, sculpture, site-specific wall drawings, and video installations.

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With its fiery volcanoes, glacial ice caps, powerful waterfalls, and alternating solar rhythms of summer's unending daylight and winter's unsparing darkness, the austere beauty of Iceland functions as muse and material for many Icelandic artists.

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Icelandic artists are attuned to perpetual environmental flux, to physical changes in the land brought on by shifting geologic plates and volcanic eruptions, and the alternating solar rhythms of summer's unending daylight and winter's unsparing darkness. They have a heightened awareness of the environment as a dynamic, living entity—a place of extremes and dualities.

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The 21 works on display addressed not only the concrete features of Iceland, but also the conceptual realms of history, memory, myth, and imagination as they relate to the country's unique environment.

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Eggert Pétursson's large tapestry-like paintings focus exclusively on the indigenous flora of Iceland—the minute mosses and flowers that cling to the tundra and lava fields—which he renders with near obsessive attention to detail.

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As Pétursson himself describes these works, they would seem to turn mostly on process—the way in which he teases forth the shapes of flowers from the canvas with brushstrokes of color, sometimes barely perceptible under layers of white. The artist has said of his work, “One can easily get lost in the details without ever achieving a complete perception.”

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Guðrún Einarsdóttir looks closely at patterns in nature as a source of inspiration for her work, particularly the colors and contours of the earth's surface. Her paintings evoke a range of terrestrial extremes, from the cracks and fissures of lava deserts and glacial moraines to the delicate textures of moss and lichen that cling to the land.

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In contrast, Olafur Eliasson's "The Aerial River Series," consisting of 42 framed chromogenic prints, traces the entire length of an Icelandic river as it meanders from its source in the mountains to the sea, compressing an enormous expanse of terrain into a single view.

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Documenting the variability of the natural landscape, this series includes multiple views of the Markarfljót River in Iceland. The first image, in the upper left corner, shows the river's mouth; the pictures then progress horizontally toward higher elevations, concluding at the mountain peaks where the stream originates.

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New York-based Icelandic artist Katrin Sigurdardóttir explores the way physical structures and boundaries define our perception. Through unexpected shifts in scale, she examines distance and memory and their embodiments in architecture, cartography, archaeology and traditional landscape representations.

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Her work *Haul IV*, 2004, is a series of wooden travel boxes containing generic landscapes inspired by Iceland's treeless topographies. Her miniature environments are a dramatic reversal of scale between the human figure and its relationship to the environment.

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Artist Egill Sæbjörnsson has expressed his interest in the connection between mental and physical realities; in the connection between what we think, and what is happening in the world around us. On display in the exhibition, his witty, surreal video installation *Pleasure Stones* imagines lava rocks as living beings — a sly reference to the myth of *huldufólk*, or hidden folk, who live in the land.

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Two artists, Guðjón Ketilsson and Ragna Róbertsdóttir, traveled from Iceland to create their installations on site in the Scandinavia House gallery. Guðjón Ketilsson's wall drawing *Stígar/Paths* is a text-map charting the artist's stream-of-consciousness thoughts as he wanders the streets of Reykjavík.

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First made in 2011, and recreated for the exhibition, the work consists Icelandic text meeting and diverging across different pathways, forming new interpretations based on the direction in which they are read. Written in all capital letters without spaces between words, the lines of Ketilsson's thought-map meander and intersect until the artist reaches home.

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One of the most influential artists of his generation, Postwar and Contemporary artist Birgir Andrésón's Icelandic Colors series playfully connects the landscape of Iceland with specific color tones, as in the wall painting *Pouring Rain*, which includes a brief list of the pantone colors used to create the work.

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The minimalist artist Ragna Róbertsdóttir uses raw materials found in abundance in Iceland— salt, lava pumice and shells—to create spare, textural works that are both rigidly structured and open to chance. Her wall sculpture *Lava Landscape* was created using lava pumice collected from different volcanic sites in Iceland, including from the footlands of Mount Hekla in southern Iceland.

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Working with man-made objects scavenged from the earth around rural farmlands, artist Þórdís Alda Sigurðardóttir combines found artifacts with thread, yarn and cloth to create assemblages that symbolize both the latent and spent potentiality of materials. The title of her work on view in the exhibition, *Nail Soup*, refers to a common Scandinavian folk story about creating sustenance out of nothing for the sake of survival.

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Working in a straightforward documentary approach, the photographer Einar Falur Ingólfsson seeks out cultural artifacts in the landscape, creating series based on discrete themes. His *Shelters* series captures man-made windbreaks to protect sheep and horses weathering harsh climactic conditions. Set in extraordinary landscapes, they contrast human gesture with nature's majesty.

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The son of a geologist, artist Georg Guðni Hauksson spent much of his youth in the hinterlands of Iceland. In his artistic practice, he drew inspiration from his intimate encounters with nature, ultimately conveying in his work not just the perceptual experience of space, light and atmosphere, but also evoking an intensely conscious, almost spiritual connection to the land.

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"I tried to unite the earth and sky, painting the landscape without anything except two halves meeting each other," Hauksson has said of his work. "And from this I got very interested in the line which divides and the nothing that is between."

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Together, these works reveal the indelible imprint of place on the artistic imagination, while also engaging questions of humankind's evolving, and fragile coexistence with the natural world.

## Support

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<http://www.scandinaviahouse.org/app/uploads/2015/09/ICELAND-Image-Sheet-10.07.14.pdf>