

Uncommon Ground

The works presented here are from an exhibition, curated by the author, entitled Iceland: Artists Respond to Place, first presented at the Katonah (N.Y.) Museum of Art last summer and now on view at ASF's Scandinavia House.

By Pari Stave



Þórdís Alda Sigurðardóttir, *Naglasúpa/Nail Soup*, 2003.
Silk thread, nails, oil paint, wire, glue and aluminum pot.
Collection of Ambassador Charles A. and Monika Heimbold.

Working with man-made objects scavenged from the earth around rural farmlands, Þórdís Alda Sigurðardóttir (b. 1950), combines found artifacts with spools of thread, skeins of yarn and bits of cloth to create assemblages that symbolize both the latent and spent potentiality of materials. In *Nail Soup*, a strange stew of spools and nails spill forth from an aluminum pot. The objects reference gendered roles of tending the home and working the land, and the essential need for clothing and shelter as protection against the elements. The artist's title refers to a common Scandinavian folk story about creating sustenance out of nothing for the sake of survival.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA MARIA SIGURJONSDOTTIR

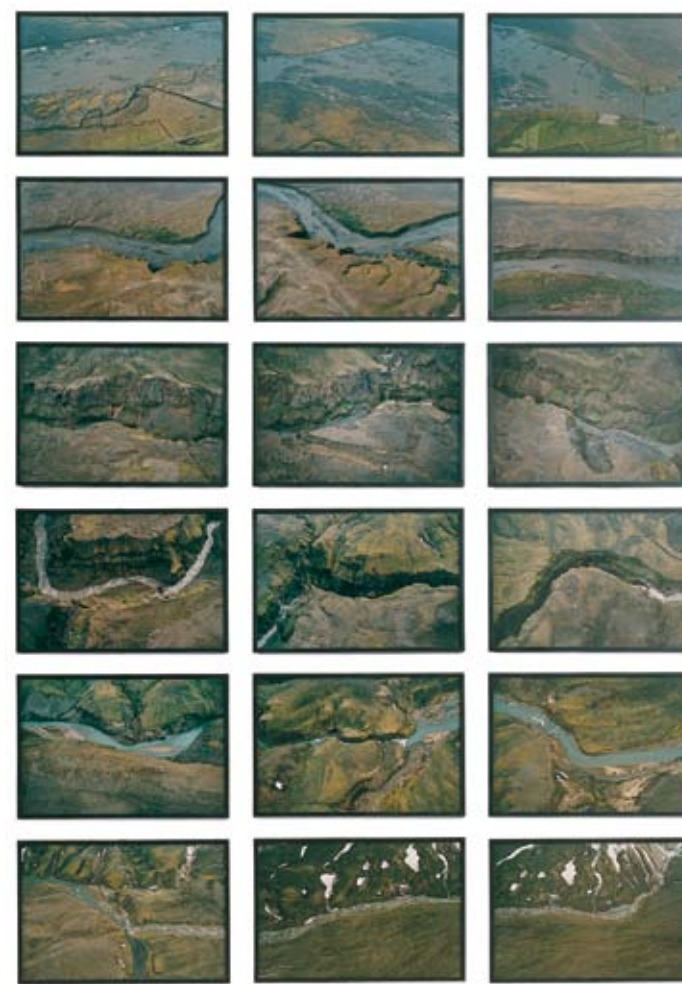
ICELAND IS A COUNTRY LIKE NO OTHER. THE SMALL ISLAND IN the North Atlantic just south of the Arctic Circle is mostly pristine, uninhabited wilderness. It is also one of the youngest and most geologically dynamic landmasses on earth, with active volcanoes, vast expanses of glacial terrain, geothermal hotspots, powerful waterfalls and unpredictable, often-violent, atmospheric conditions. The combined forces of volcanic eruption, shifting tectonic plates and glacial and wind erosion (Iceland is largely treeless) place the land in a constant state of reformation. The austere, beguiling landscape of Iceland and its evocative role as both muse and material in Icelandic

art today is the subject of the exhibition *Iceland: Artists Respond to Place*, which offers the multimedia work of 12 of the country's prominent contemporary artists and illuminates the variety of approaches taken with one common reference—the natural environment. These works reveal the indelible imprint of place on the artistic imagination, while in a larger sense they engage questions of humankind's evolving and fragile coexistence with the natural world at this critical point in time.

The article continues with descriptions of nine of the artists and their works featured in the exhibition, scheduled to run through January 2015.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN BLACKWELL



Olafur Eliasson, *The Aerial River Series*, 2000. 42 framed chromogenic prints, Ed. 5/6. Private collection.

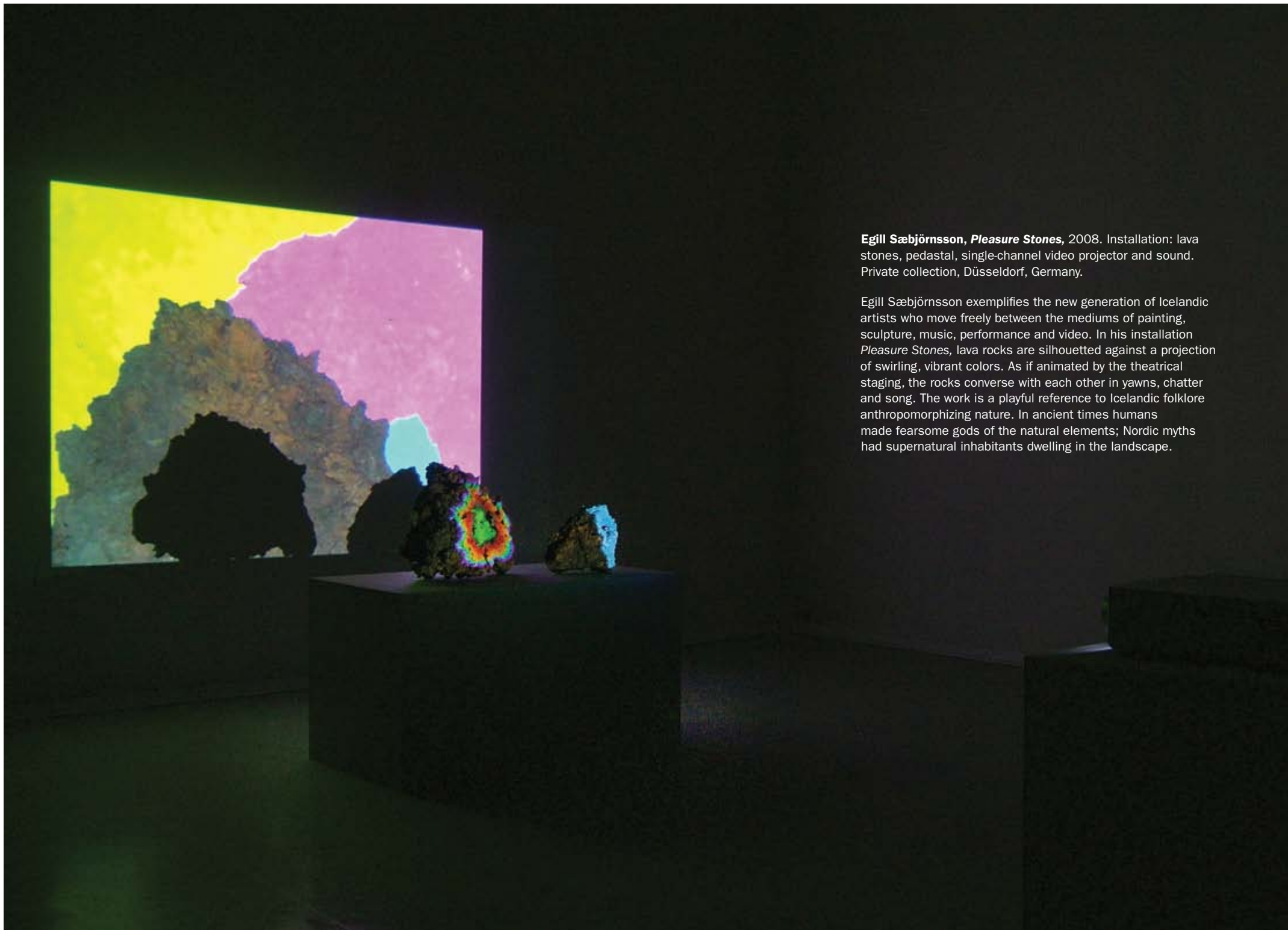
Born in Denmark of Icelandic parents, Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) is renowned for his installations based on transient atmospheric conditions (fog, sunlight) and natural forms (waterfalls, glaciers). Over many years he has returned to Iceland regularly to pursue a meta-series, photographing Icelandic landforms from above. The *Aerial River Series* traces the entire length of a single river, the Markarfljót, as it meanders from its mouth to its source in the mountains. Eliasson creates a narrative fragmented into discrete photographic units, recontextualizing an incomprehensibly long expanse of linear space into a single, gridded view.

Einar Falur Ingólfsson,
By Lake Þingvellir, 2012,
Mt. Kirkufell, 2009 and
Vatnsdalur Valley, 2010,
 from the series *Skjól/*
Shelters. C-prints.
 Courtesy of the artist.

Working in a straightforward documentary approach, the photographer Einar Falur Ingólfsson (b. 1966) seeks out cultural artifacts in the landscape, creating series based on discrete themes. The man-made windbreaks that are the subject of his *Shelters* series, poignant in the simplicity of their construction, attest to the human effort to bring order to an inhospitable environment and to offer protection to sheep and horses weathering harsh climatic conditions and high winds. The fact that these shelters are seen in the foreground of extraordinary landscapes contrasts human gesture and nature's majesty.



Einar Falur Ingólfsson,
In Laxardalur Valley,
 2009, *Vatnsdalur*
Valley, 2010 and *In*
Biskupstungar, by Geysir,
 2009, from the series
Skjól/Shelters. C-prints.
 Courtesy of the artist.



Egill Sæbjörnsson, *Pleasure Stones*, 2008. Installation: lava stones, pedestal, single-channel video projector and sound. Private collection, Düsseldorf, Germany.

Egill Sæbjörnsson exemplifies the new generation of Icelandic artists who move freely between the mediums of painting, sculpture, music, performance and video. In his installation *Pleasure Stones*, lava rocks are silhouetted against a projection of swirling, vibrant colors. As if animated by the theatrical staging, the rocks converse with each other in yawns, chatter and song. The work is a playful reference to Icelandic folklore anthropomorphizing nature. In ancient times humans made fearsome gods of the natural elements; Nordic myths had supernatural inhabitants dwelling in the landscape.



PHOTOGRAPH BY EGGERT PÉTURSSON

Eggert Pétursson, *Untitled*, 2013–14. Oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavík.

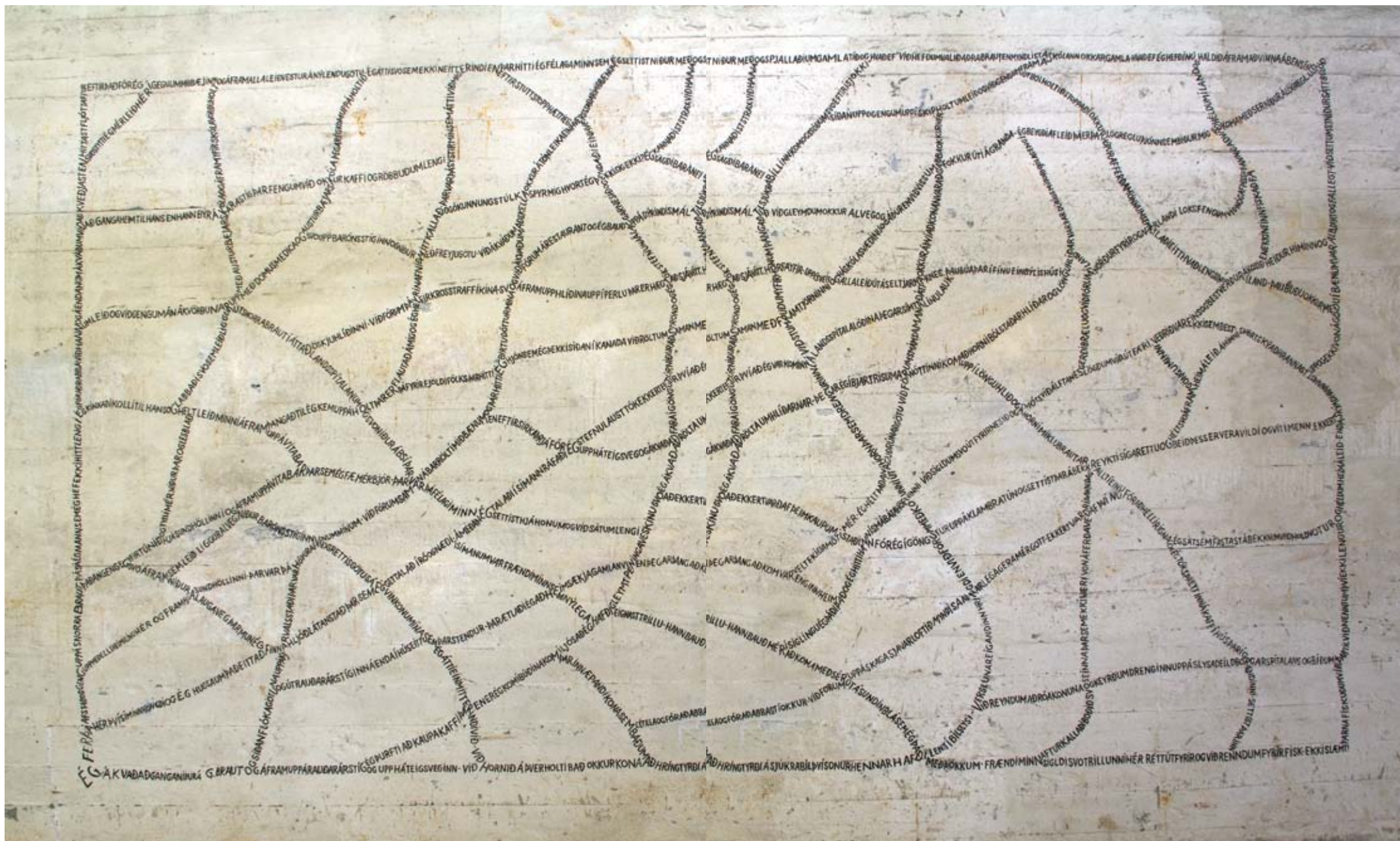
In his tapestry-like paintings, Eggert Pétursson (b. 1956) focuses exclusively on the indigenous flora of Iceland, which he renders with a near-obsessive attention to detail. The plants found in the heathlands and lava fields of Iceland are symbols of fragile life forms and their heroic adaptation to an uncompromising climate. The artist works slowly, not from life but from memory, building up the surface of the canvas over months so that it is encrusted with thick layers of paint that become the ground against which he renders the delicate plant forms. The dizzying, all-over compositions are also flights of imagination, suggesting vital life forces within a barren terrain.



Georg Guðni Hauksson, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas. Collection of Jennifer and David Ford.

The son of a geologist, Georg Guðni Hauksson (1961–2011) spent much of his youth in the hinterlands of Iceland, learning firsthand the physical properties of its natural phenomena. 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. Nearly all of Georg Guðni's works include a horizon line, as if to locate the viewer in space, though very often scale and distance are intentionally left vague. The artist constructed his works by applying the paint in gossamer layers of color, often daily over a period of months. "I tried to unite the earth and sky, painting the landscape without anything except two halves meeting each other," Georg Guðni says. "And from this I got very interested in the line which divides and the nothing that is between. I am trying to paint the air, the invisibility, between me and the horizon, between myself and infinity."

PHOTOGRAPH BY IVANA VASIĆ



Guðjón Ketilsson, *Stígar/Paths*, 2011. Wall drawing. Courtesy of the artist and Hverfisgalleri.

Maps are graphic constructions of space emphasizing the importance of a particular viewpoint. Guðjón Ketilsson's (b. 1956) wall drawing *Stígar/Paths* is a text-map charting the artist's thoughts from his perspective as an urban dweller in a technological world as he moves through the streets of Reykjavík. In spare, stream-of-consciousness prose, the

narrative traces the artist's course as he sets out from home on a walk, becoming distracted by various encounters, interruptions and conflicting decisions. Written in Icelandic in all capital letters without spaces between words, the lines of Ketilsson's thought-map meander and intersect until the artist reaches home.



Guðrún Einarsdóttir, *Untitled (Efnislandslag/Material Landscape)*, 2001. Oil on canvas. Listasafn Reykjavíkur Art Museum, Reykjavík.

Guðrún Einarsdóttir (b. 1957) looks closely at patterns in nature as a source of inspiration for her work. She is particularly attuned to 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. Significantly, Einarsdóttir also looks to geological transformations such as soil erosion and sedimentation to inform her handling of the paint itself, pushing its limits to extremes of high relief as exemplified by *Untitled (Efnislandslag/Material Landscape)*.

Ragna Róbertsdóttir, *Mindscales*, 2010. Salt and crystal. Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavík.

The minimalist artist Ragna Róbertsdóttir (b. 1945) 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. In her series *Mindscales*, encrustations of salt are encapsulated in crystal dome-like specimens, calling to mind island landscapes such as glaciers seen from above. Róbertsdóttir composes site-specific wall installations of lava pumice collected from the foothill of Mount Hekla in southern Iceland. She has said that Hekla and another volcano, Katla, “have influenced me, both psychically and as historically important phenomena.” In constructing her wall installations the artist confines the random application of black stone granules within a precise rectangular frame, as if to bring order to nature's indiscriminant chaos.



Pari Stave is a freelance curator based in New York. Other recent exhibitions include *Magnetic North: Artists and the Arctic Circle*. From 2011–2013, she served as consulting curator for the ASF, where she worked on *Munch/Warhol and the Multiple Image* (co-curated by Patricia G. Berman), *Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America* and others.