

## Genesis

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

Folder in conjunction with Exhibition  
*Genesis* at Galleri Konstpidemin in  
Göteborg, Sweden

The question of creativity is a recurring theme in the work of Erla S. Haraldsdóttir. One might say that she ceaselessly questions the idea that an artist can create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) and the romantic notion of 'divine inspiration'. For many years she has been creating fictional systems as tools for her artistic processes, as is perhaps most evident in her paintings. This process consists essentially of creating a space of artistic freedom through self-imposed restrictions such as instructions given to her by friends or specifically devised systems. The themes of her works can be described as a sampling of art-historical references that implicitly questions the hegemony of Western art. This exhibition is no exception. As the title suggests, it draws on the story of creation as portrayed in the monotheistic Abrahamic religions. A well-known theme in the history of Western church art, it is a common subject of commissioned and self-determined work by artists and artisans throughout history.

The starting point of this exhibition is a compilation of medieval iconography from drawings made by Icelandic draughtsman between 1330 and 1500. Most artists in the Middle Ages and in early Renaissance compiled model books, or *exempla*. However, few of these books have survived, with only thirty such medieval manuscripts known in Europe today. In Scandinavia only one of them survived, *Islenska teiknibokin*, or *The Icelandic Model Book*, which was recently compiled and re-published. The series of paintings that forms the core of Haraldsdóttir's exhibition is based on the seven drawings describing the seven days of the story of creation as found in this book. In *Genesis*, Haraldsdóttir appropriates both the

subject matter of the drawings and the pattern surrounding them – a 'frame' that replicates early Islamic art and can also be found on Tarot cards. Using this frame as an instruction for her series, she articulates her own story of creation, while also reflecting on her own creative processes.

Haraldsdóttir's paintings merge the pattern of this frame with a pattern used by the Ndebele people in South Africa in beadworks and murals. As with most of the artist's works, they incorporate numerous associative and seemingly eclectic art-historical references, including to Art Nouveau, ancient Egyptian reliefs, Jewish mysticism, frescos by Michelangelo, woodcuts by Katsushika Hokusai, as series of mystical watercolours by William Blake and the landscapes of the Icelandic painter Þórarinn B Þorláksson. Several of these references can also be found in the artist's paintings of recent years and seem to form a kind of meta-narrative layer throughout her practice. *Genesis* consists of six paintings of equal size (150 x 90 cm) and one larger canvas (150 x 180 cm). They depict recognisable elements from the story of the Genesis of the Earth but also from the artist's formal vocabulary: reflections, water mirrors, tropical plants, falcons and fish are combined with iconic motifs from art history, Icelandic landscapes and personal snapshots. Using a characteristically bold palette of thick paint, each motif is articulated on a complementary sublayer so as to achieve an effect of glowing from within reminiscent of stained glass windows.

Each of the seven paintings is accompanied by a smaller, vivid and abstract composition (30 x 30 and 30 x 50 cm, respectively). These abstract

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painting experiments were made with residue paint from Genesis series. Together with four art students, Haraldsdóttir also executed a series of mural paintings based on *Islenska teiknibokin*. These are applied directly on the walls of Konstepidemin. The palette used here, and more explicitly the colours used to portray the hand of the creator that appears as a large patch of colour in the background, point to another recurring theme in the artist's work, namely, the sephiroth colour scheme. This scheme is depicted in the *Tree of Life*, a composite symbol representing the cosmos in its entirety and showing how it relates to the human soul. Colour symbolism plays a defining role in the *Tree of Life* diagram (and in all systems of magic): the colours each represent a human concept as well as the stages of creation and how things come into being. Haraldsdóttir's abstract paintings also remind us that the pioneers of early and mid-twentieth century painting (Kandinsky, Klimt, Malevich, Mondrian, Pollock, Rothko, Rozanova . . .) shared a common spiritual motivation to develop an art that expressed a reality beyond the material, a consciousness similar to that of a meditative state in that it transcends everyday reality.

There is a lot of information in Haraldsdóttir's images, and a lot of information that can be drawn from them. But contrary to traditional depictions of Genesis, they radiate a sense of tranquility. In the *Islenska teiknibokin* and in Blake's *And God Blessed the Seventh Day and Sanctified It*, God on the seventh day of creation appears as a sanctifying figure, and in Michelangelo's six paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he is never shown resting. Haraldsdóttir, in turn, makes the seventh day

the most prominent painting of the series: at twice the size of the other six paintings, it becomes an 'altarpiece' of sorts. The motif of this centrepiece is based on a smartphone photograph of the artist's legs, taken while she was lying in bed. It is framed by a pattern composed of what appears to be tubes of paint, and encompasses a wide spectrum of colours. While the rainbow symbolises the second creation, the sign of the covenant between God and all life on earth (Genesis 9:17), it is the background that immediately catches the viewer's attention: here we see the vernacular depiction of an untidy apartment with a paintbrush stuck in a vase and a lopsided frame on the wall.

Theological discussions generally contrast the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* with that of *creatio ex materia* (creation out of some pre-existent, eternal matter) and *creatio ex deo* (creation out of the being of God). With this final painting in her series, Haraldsdóttir proposes to combine the three. Kazimir Malevich once claimed that laziness has been branded the mother of all vices when, in fact, it should be regarded as 'the mother of life'. Mladen Stilinović ends his seminal text *The Praise of Laziness* (1993) with the words: 'There is no art without laziness.' Similarly, Haraldsdóttir seems to suggest that the seventh day is not a well-deserved rest after a job well done – it is ultimate creativity.