

## The Seventh Day

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

Folder in conjunction with Exhibition *Genesis* at Hallgrímskirkja Reykjavík, Iceland

The nuisance of creativity is a re-occurring theme in the work of Erla S Haraldsdóttir. For many years she has created hidden systems as a tool for her artistic methods. Because, she feels her work to be process driven. Accordingly she is sceptical of the romantic notion of "divine inspiration", and the attendant belief that an artist can create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) which belies it. The basis of her procedure has been to create a space of artistic freedom through self-imposed restrictions. Mainly this has been accomplished through the use of instructions given to her either by friends or through systems created for each project. Recent motifs in her work are often composed through a sampling of art historical references that, in turn, question the hegemony of Western Art. In this series, produced specifically for an exhibition in Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavík, Haraldsdóttir draws on the story of creation from the monotheistic religions. It is a well-known theme in the history of church art and a common theme for both commissioned and assumed work by artists and artisans throughout history.

The basis of this series is a compilation of medieval iconography in drawings made by Icelandic draughtsman between 1330 and 1500. Most artists in the Middle Ages and in the early Renaissance compiled model books or *exempla*. However, few of these books have survived and only 30 such medieval manuscripts are known in Europe today. In Scandinavia, only one survived: *Íslenska teiknibókin* or *The Icelandic Model*

*Book.* Íslenska teiknibókin was recently compiled and re-published in Iceland, and Haraldsdóttir's series of paintings is based on the seven drawings describing the seven days of the story of creation as recounted in this book. The artist appropriates both the format, subject matter of each drawing and the pattern that can be found on the perimeters different drawings. In particular a frame which in turn replicates early Islamic art and also can be found in Tarot cards. Haraldsdóttir has fashioned her own story of creation by using the frame of the drawings as a restriction for her series of paintings. With her characteristic bold palette of thick paint she uses the story of creation in order to create.

In Haraldsdóttir's paintings, the pattern found in the frame is also merged with a pattern that the Ndebele people in South Africa use in their beadworks and murals. As with most of Haraldsdóttir's paintings there are numerous associative and seemingly eclectic art historical references including ancient Egyptian low reliefs, Jewish mysticism, Michelangelo's murals, Katsushika Hokusai's woodcuts, William Blake's mystical painted engravings, and the landscapes of Icelandic painter Þórarinn B Þorláksson. These references can also be found in many of her paintings from the past years that periodically resurface throughout her practice in various guises.

*Genesis* consists of six paintings 150 x 90 cm and the final one 150 x 180 cm. They present

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us with familiar elements from the story of the Genesis of the Earth, and introduce us to obscure moments from the world of Haraldsdóttir: reflections, water mirrors, tropical plants, falcons and fish are mixed with iconic motifs from art history, Icelandic landscapes and personal snapshots. Each painting is composed on a complementary under-painting, which brings out a luminous palette that appears to glow from within. The images she presents are full of information, communicating with abundant chains of visual metaphor. Yet there is a palpable sense of tranquillity in Haraldsdóttir's version of Genesis, which is at odds with the well-worn tradition of artworks that depict the story of creation. While both *Íslenska teiknibókin's* Seventh day, God is busy blessing, Blake's *Ancient of days* depicts the creator measuring the heavens with a divine compass, and Michelangelo's six paintings in the ceiling of the sixteenth chapel omits the rest day, Haraldsdóttir makes the seventh day the most prominent painting of the series. Twice the size of the other six paintings, this canvas dominates physically vying to become an "altarpiece", and focal point. The motif of this centrepiece is based on a slothful smartphone photograph of the artist's legs while lying in bed. In the background we see the vernacular of an untidy apartment with a lob-sided frame on the wall. The theological discussion contrasts the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, with *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 might be suggesting a combination of the three. Kazmir 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 Stilinovic ended his now iconic 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, in fact, a day of creation.