

# The Hidden Paintings of Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

Craniv A. Boyd

Folder in conjunction with exhibition  
“Memory of Color” at Seltjarnarnes library  
exhibition hall, Galleri Grotta, Seltjarnarnes,  
Iceland.

“I have to change in order to remain the same”  
—Willem de Kooning

Usually when Erla asks me to write about her artwork, she arranges for me to visit her in the studio and view the works in person. So recently we spent some time looking at smaller-format paintings she executed during the past two years. These paintings, many of which have never been shown before in public, could be considered the “B-sides” of her output, and as with the singles of a recording artist, they complement her “hit” paintings. This, however, does not mean they should be considered as filler tracks on an album, but rather as experiments that accompany her through the complex process of composing her large-format works.

From our discussions it became clear that Erla viewed making these smaller, hidden paintings, which are not necessarily meant to be shown in public, as a crucial element that is intimately linked to the activity of producing more polished art. They act as a kind of safe space in which she can express her emotions more directly through color, or paint using colors that she might initially find hideous.

For Erla, the “B-sides” of her painting are a field where she can chart the twin pursuits of freedom and experimentation without too much risk.<sup>1</sup> Here, Erla feels free to alternate between nuanced naturalism based in part on photo-collages, and non-representational gestural abstraction. Much in the way that Willem de Kooning, in an effort to remain engaged in the work he made in his studio, would also switch between abstraction and figuration, claiming that the artistic process was all about freedom.

In many of these smaller works on canvas and board, Erla indeed seems to appropriate the styles of various members of the influential mid-twentieth-century New York School of painting. The influence of Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman is present in the series *Spill: One–Seven* (2017), the only “hidden” painting to be exhibited at Galleri Konstpidemin in Gothenburg and the Crypt of Lund Cathedral in Lund, Sweden. The series *Untitled: One–Three* (2018) is a return to both the dimensions and manner of Abstract Expressionism. The way these paintings are created means they are co-dependent on the larger series that Erla works on in her studio: *Spill* (2017) pairs with *Genesis* (2016–7), and *Untitled* (2018) conjoins with *Patterns of the Family* (2018). The intimate Abstract Expressionism works all proceed from a distinct concept as they are made from the cast-off colors used in fabricating the large-format figurative paintings.

*From the Outside* (2018), a square-format painting with concentric circles, is reminiscent of target paintings by Jasper Johns or the works of Kenneth Noland. However, the source Erla is quoting is older, namely, *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise* from 1445, an Italian quattrocento painting by Giovanni di Paolo depicting Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden of Eden. *From Within* (2018), a vertically oriented rectangular painting that strives to illustrate an emotion, resembles both the works of Hilma af Klint and Georgia O’Keeffe, the former a self-taught Finnish-Swedish noblewoman, the latter an art-world insider who quit New York City for the quiet life of the American Southwest.<sup>2</sup>

In the series *Hand-One-Seven* (2018), a spectrum of solid colors is contained in seven separate

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fields of off-white color. The fields of color are silhouettes of gesticulating hands. The series is both a study in color and a sequence of variations on the themes explored in the *Genesis* exhibitions (Reykjavik and Gothenburg, 2016; Lund, 2017). Specifically, Erla extrudes the gestures of God the creator as imagined by the anonymous author of the *Íslenska Teiknibókin*, a medieval model book for artists.<sup>3</sup> The thick impasto painting of the titanium white is evocative of the textures in Robert Ryman’s white paintings or, again, Jasper Johns’s encaustic paintings of the United States flag.

The safe space of pure experimentation is challenged for Erla as soon as she decides to publicly exhibit works that were initially intended for the studio. This shift could be compared to the perils of revealing your hand to an opponent in poker. Exhibiting these works places them at the risk of demystifying the charm of the artist’s process by exposing the steps and maneuvers of her thinking through painting. Just as the “B-sides” allow Erla to carry on changing so as to remain the same, they provide insights into the workings of her larger paintings that are determined for public consumption.

1. For an essay about risk and how it relates to art, see Suzanne Preston Blier, *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba: Ife History, Power, and Identity, c. 1300* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2. See Iris Müller-Westermann and Jo Widott (eds.), *Hilma Af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, exh. cat. Moderna Museet (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2013) and Lauris Morgan-Griffiths, *Georgia O’Keeffe: An American Perspective* (London: Quercus, 2009).

3. See Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir, *Íslenska Teiknibókin* (Reykjavík: Crymogeia, 2013).