

The Recent Paintings of Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

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"We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and this common property is the justification for applying the general term "game" to the various games; whereas games form a family the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* (1934)

The recent paintings of Erla S. Haraldsdóttir are concerned with the family. Based on a set of four photographs of her relatives, they are the latest addition to her artistic oeuvre, and if we take our cue from Wittgenstein, this series, like a group of relatives, bears resemblances to previous works authored by the Berlin-based Icelandic artist.

Relations

Haraldsdóttir has placed the emphasis on depictions of female members from the agnatic side of her family. The four paintings in the series are titled *Póranna alone, 1910*; *Póranna, her mother and sisters, 1915*; *Sulla and Family, 1948*; and *Saumaklúbbur, 1956*. The last painting deviates from the strict principle of the family portrait as it is based on a photograph of a sewing circle or women's association. *Sulla and Family, 1948* is based on a photograph taken in 1948 that shows five generations of the artist's family posing for the camera. *Sulla* (the pet name for her grandmother) stands behind Haraldur, Erla's father. To *Sulla's* right stands her father Þorsteinn, and seated on the chair in front of him is his father Sigurður. *Póranna, her mother and sisters, 1915* is a double generational portrait

in which the artist's great-great-grandmother and great-grandmother are portrayed along with her older sisters. *Póranna alone, 1910* is a solo portrait of Erla's great-grandmother as an adolescent.

Patterns

These photographs from Haraldsdóttir's private family archive are set against bold geometric patterns. The patterns are appropriated from the art of the Ndebele, a minority group of black women who paint their homes in the rural areas of South Africa in stark abstract patterns. During apartheid, many Ndebele women lived in precarious homesteads, working as seasonal labourers for white farm owners. Notwithstanding their daily hardship, they decorated the adobe walls of their dwellings out of a sense of pride and cultural expression. 1 The colours and designs with which Ndebele women embellished their homes echoed the beaded costumes and traditionalist dress worn by Ndebele painters. In Haraldsdóttir's work, the cruciform patterns borrowed from Ndebele culture enclose or frame the characters, as in the painting *Póranna alone, 1910*. The linear and radiating motifs create a dynamic, almost comic-striplike floor for the seated and standing women in *Póranna, her mother and sisters, 1915*. The same painting also features large-scale shapes mirroring architectural motifs that are common in many of the murals of Ndebele women. The band-like, compartmentalised meandering patterns in the background of the mid-section of the painting *Sulla and Family, 1948* interplay with the heights, ages and poses of the five persons depicted in the image. A foreground of flowers before the family offsets the hardedged abstraction that surrounds the relatives.

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Photographs

In the early days of photography, cameras were cumbersome, and the plates and chemicals used to record images were less light-sensitive than today's devices. This meant that cameras had to be mounted on tripods so as to achieve the long exposure times needed to obtain a clear image. It was also preferable if the living subjects remained as still as possible so that their facial expressions were recorded without blurring. As a consequence, the task of taking pictures of oneself or one's family was most frequently entrusted to studio photographers. *Patterns of the Family* shows a selection of pictures that span a forty-year period from 1910 to the late 1950s in which the photography industry made improvements in equipment and successfully developed a hobby and home snapshot market. In each of the paintings, we can see changes in the dress of the people in the frame. *Saumaklúbbur*, 1956 shows Icelandic women wearing the traditional Icelandic folk costume. The women are dressed in traditionalist costume harking back to the times when the majority of the populous of Iceland lived in turf houses. The sorority inclusive of mothers, daughters, cousins and friends is a proliferation of women who resemble in both appearance and costume the women depicted in *Póranna alone*, 1910 and *Póranna*, her mother and sisters, 1915. *Sulla and Family*, 1948 is the one painting in the series where the national folk costume of Iceland is not worn by the depicted: here, the family is dressed in modern western costume, and while the dress of the individuals is smart, it does not identify them as Scandinavian or, indeed, Icelandic. While the suits worn by the men and the dress worn by the only female in the picture look dated, they are not far removed from formal dress or conservative business attire of the present day.

The game of painting

Erla S. Haraldsdóttir is an artist who uses rules and instructions to generate artworks. These

instructions may emanate from her colleagues when she works collaboratively², or from the artist herself. Because of these hidden rules, her approach to figurative painting aligns her with conceptual artists from the Oulipo movement to Yoko Ono, whose classic artist book *Grapefruit* provides instructions on how to make conceptual art. The rules are 'hidden' because in many ways the instructions behind the paintings are not apparent in the final result on the canvas. *Patterns of the Family* reiterates some but not all of the attributes of previous works by Haraldsdóttir. *Ndebele patterns*, which appeared in her work as early as 2012,³ return as prominent backdrops to the family portraits. Photos from the family archive are further elements this series shares with *Day Four* from her series *Genesis*. *Plant life*, featuring prominently in *Sulla and Family*, 1948, also played an eminent role in previous works such as *The Mangrove Tree* and *The Ocean and Sun*. *Patterns of the Family* is a new and convincing addition to Haraldsdóttir's work, which explores the complex structures of multi-generational Icelandic families in a novel way.

1 See Margaret Courtney Clarke, *Ndebele: Art of an African Tribe* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985) and Wolfger Pöhlmann et al., *amaNdebele: Signals of Color from South Africa* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1991).

2 For a collaborative project, see Erla S. Haraldsdóttir and Carin Ellberg, *Difficulty of Freedom/Freedom of Difficulty* by (Reykjavík: Crymogeia, 2014). For an individual application of rules to create paintings, see Erla S. Haraldsdóttir, *Make a Painting of Trees Growing in the Forest* (Reykjavík: Crymogeia, 2015).

3 See her contribution to the M.E.E.H. collaborative project as part of (I)ndependent People, Reykjavík Arts Festival, curated by Jonatan Habib Engqvist