

Biography

Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

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Photo: Kalle Sanner

Erla S. Haraldsdóttir works with painting, animation, video, and photomontage as a means to appropriate and restructure reality. An academically trained painter, she currently focuses on figurative painting where the physicality of paint and colour create space, light, and shadow. Her work combines figurative motifs with painterly brilliance and humor. The works often explore how memories, emotions, and perception interact. Methodology is central and Haraldsdóttir's process-driven work is often based on a combination of rules and restrictions, places or stories, and tasks assigned to her by other people.

She often extends these methods into her teaching and complex collaborations. These aspects of her work are described in publications like *Difficulty of Freedom/Freedom of Difficulty* (Reykjavík: Umeå Academy of Fine Arts and Crymogeia, 2014) based on workshops at the Living Art Museum (2013) and Verkligheten art space in Umeå (2014), *Make a Painting of Trees Growing in a Forest* (Reykjavík: Crymogeia, 2015), as well as her latest book, *Patterns of the Family*, (Uns' publishing, Berlin / Iceland, 2019).

Haraldsdóttir has among other places exhibited at Lund Cathedral, The Crypt, (Sweden), Hallgrímskirkja, (Reykjavík, Iceland), Kalmar Konstmuseum (Sweden), Moderna Museet (Stockholm), Akureyri Art Museum (Iceland),

Kunstverein Langenhagen (Germany), Bielefelder Kunstverein (Germany), Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin), Berlinische Galerie (Berlin) and the Momentum Biennial of Contemporary Art (Moss, Norway). Her work is represented in public collections in Iceland (National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík Art Museum, Akureyri Art Museum, Así Artmuseum) and in Sweden (National Public Art Council, Moderna Museet). She has completed numerous residencies including Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin), Cité des Arts (Paris), and Ateliers '89 (Oranjestad, Aruba). Recent exhibitions include *Patterns of the Family* (Gallery Marnier Noir, Berlin, Reykjanes Art Museum, Iceland) *Genesis* (Lunds Cathedral, the Crypt, Lund, Sweden, Galleri Konstpidemin Göteborg, Hallgrímskirkja, Reykjavík) *Make a Painting of Trees Growing in a Forest* (Kalmar Konstmuseum), 2016, *Just Painted* (Reykjavík Art Museum), *Project Metropolis* (Silesian Museum, Katowice), 2015, *Visual Wandering* (Listasafn ASÍ, Reykjavík), 2014, *(In)dependent People*, Reykjavík Arts Festival, 2012, and *Moment-Ynglingagatan 1* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm), 2011.

Haraldsdóttir studied at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and the San Francisco Arts Institute with a degree from the Valand Academy of Fine Art in Gothenburg, 1998. Born in Reykjavík, she currently lives and works in Berlin.



Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

Installation view of *Patterns of the Family*,
2019 at Reykjanes Art Museum, Iceland.

14 paintings, oil on canvas, 6 murals, acrylic on
wall, 4 lithographs, various sizes.



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Thóranna, her mother and sisters (2019)

Oil on canvas
150 x 90 cm.



Installation view of *Patterns of the Family*,
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14 paintings, oil on canvas, 6 murals, acrylic
on wall, 4 lithographs, various sizes.



Siblings (2019)

Oil on canvas
120 x 120 cm.



Sylvia and Family (2019)

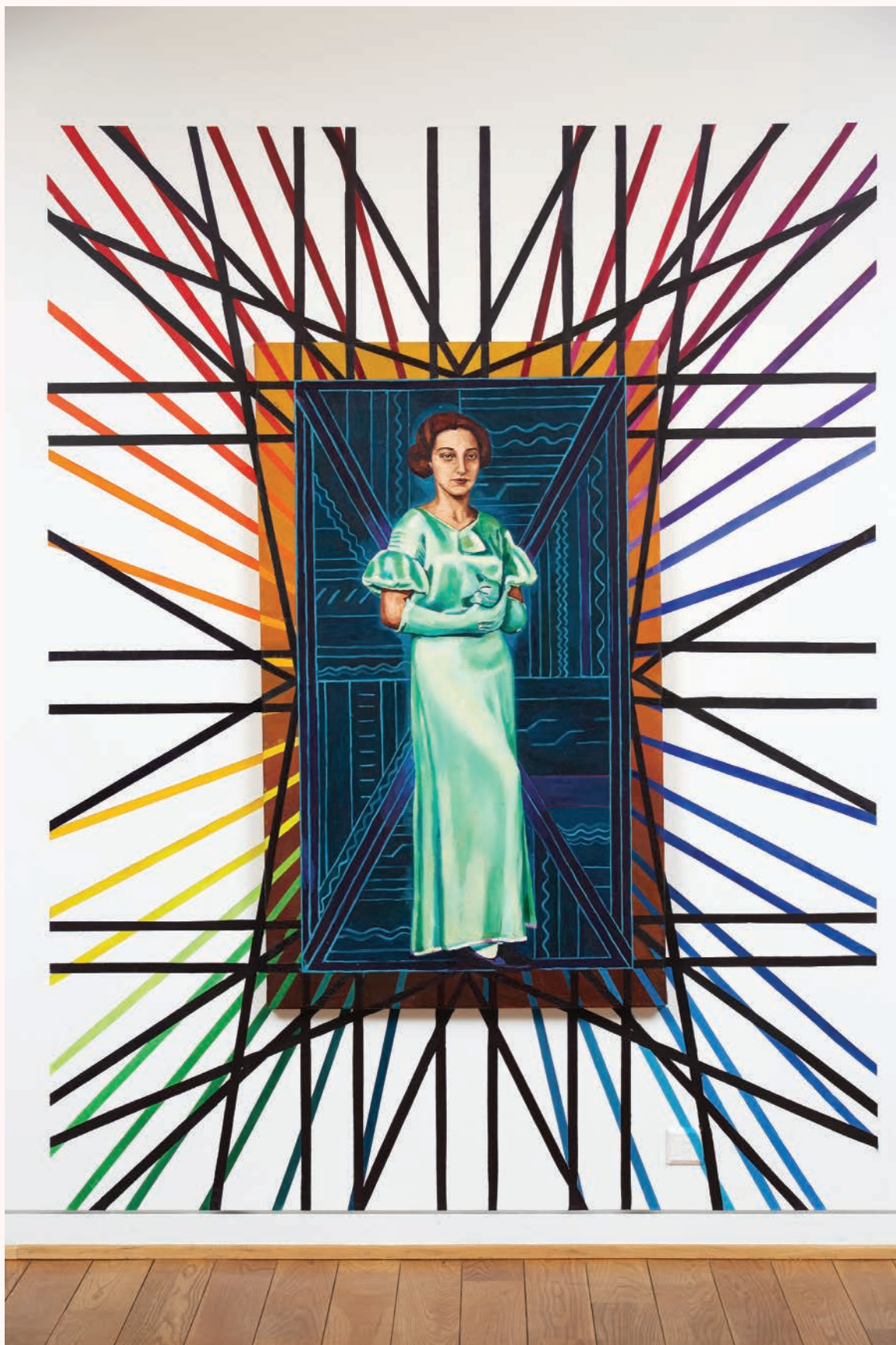
Oil on canvas
150 x 110 cm.



Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

Sylvia and Family (2019) (Detail)

Oil on canvas
150 x 110 cm.



Sylvia confirmed (2019)

Oil on canvas, acrylic on wall
150 x 90 cm.



Sylvia confirmed (2019) (Detail)

Oil on canvas, acrylic on wall
150 x 90 cm.

The Recent Paintings of Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

Craniv A Boyd

Catalogue in conjunction with exhibition
Patterns of the family at Reykjanes art
museum, Keflavík, Iceland

"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.

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

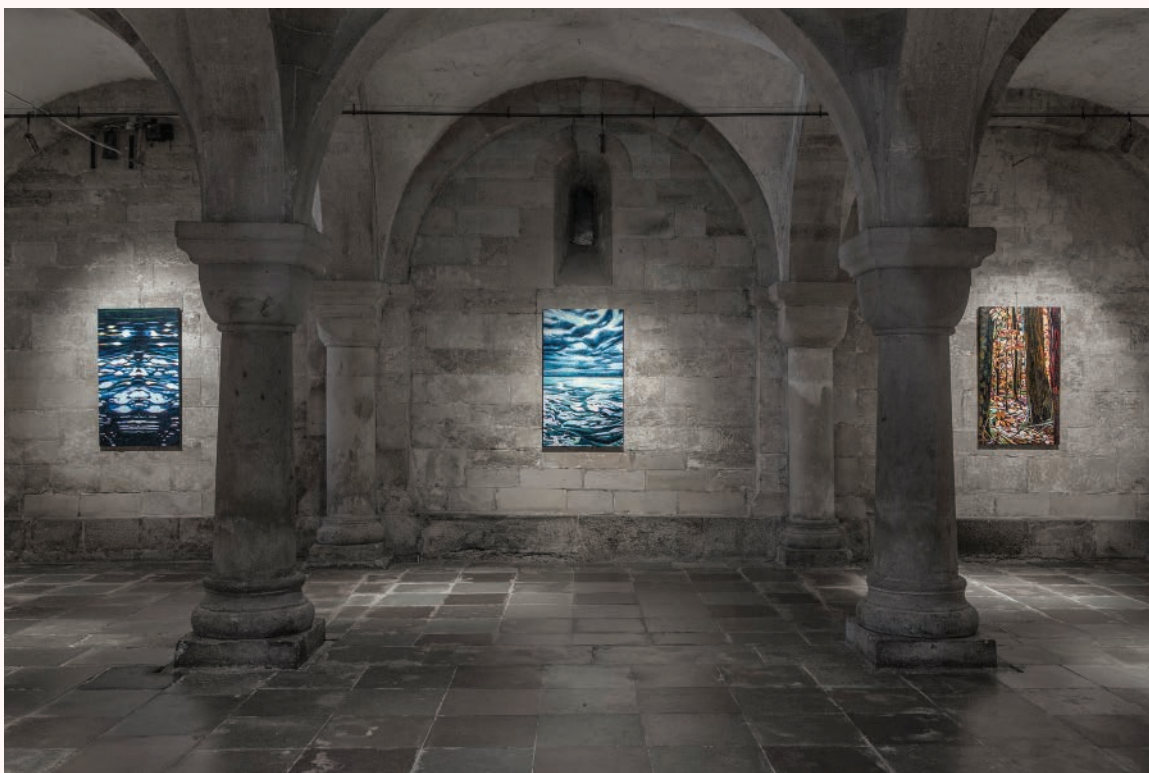


Genesis (2017)

12 paintings, Oil on canvas
Various sizes

Installation view. Solo exhibition. Lund
Cathedral, The Crypt, Lund, Sweden.

Photo: Kalle Sanner



Genesis (2017)

Installation view. Solo exhibition. Lund Cathedral, The Crypt, Lund, Sweden.

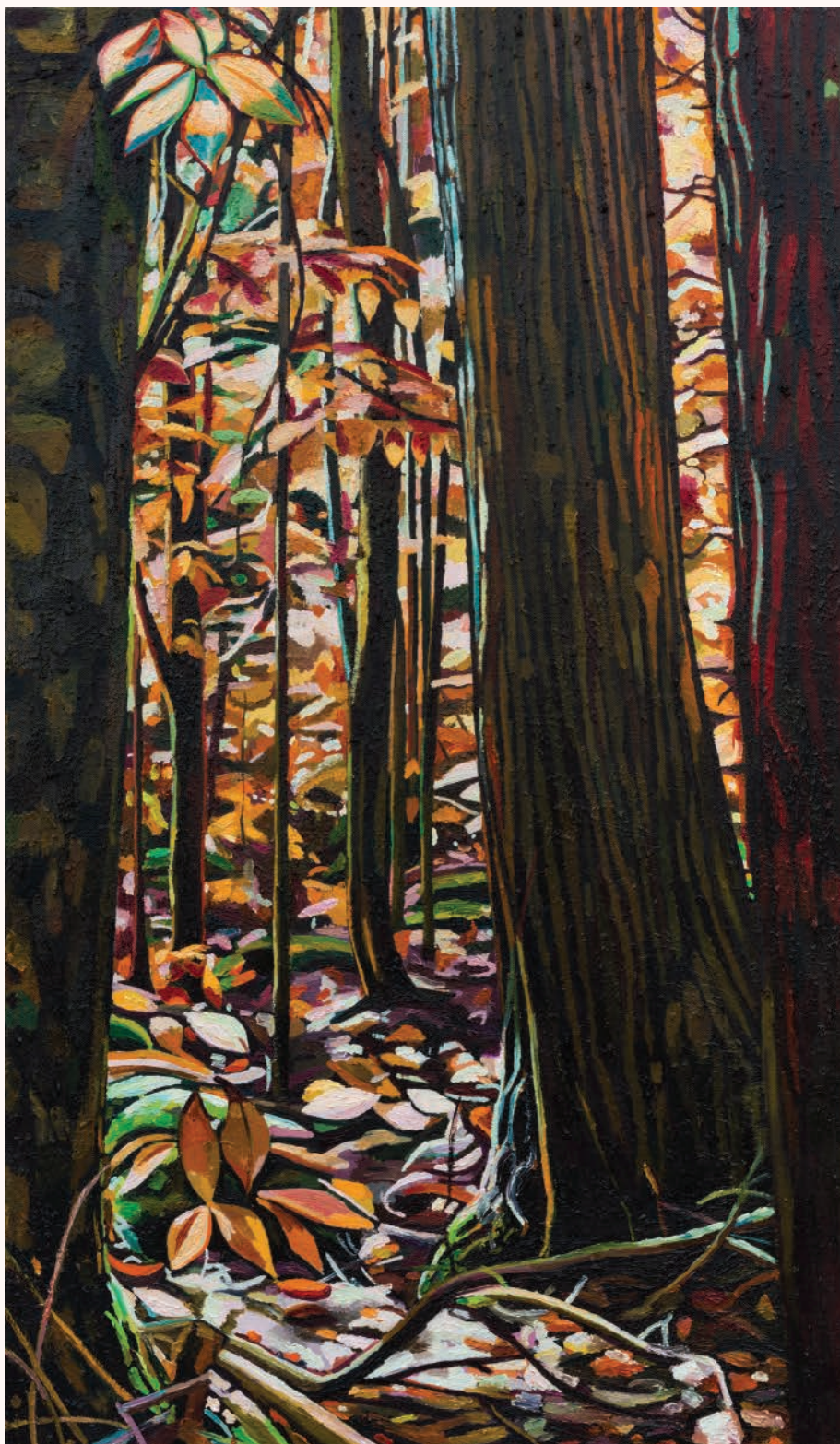
Photo: Kalle Sanner



Genesis (2017)

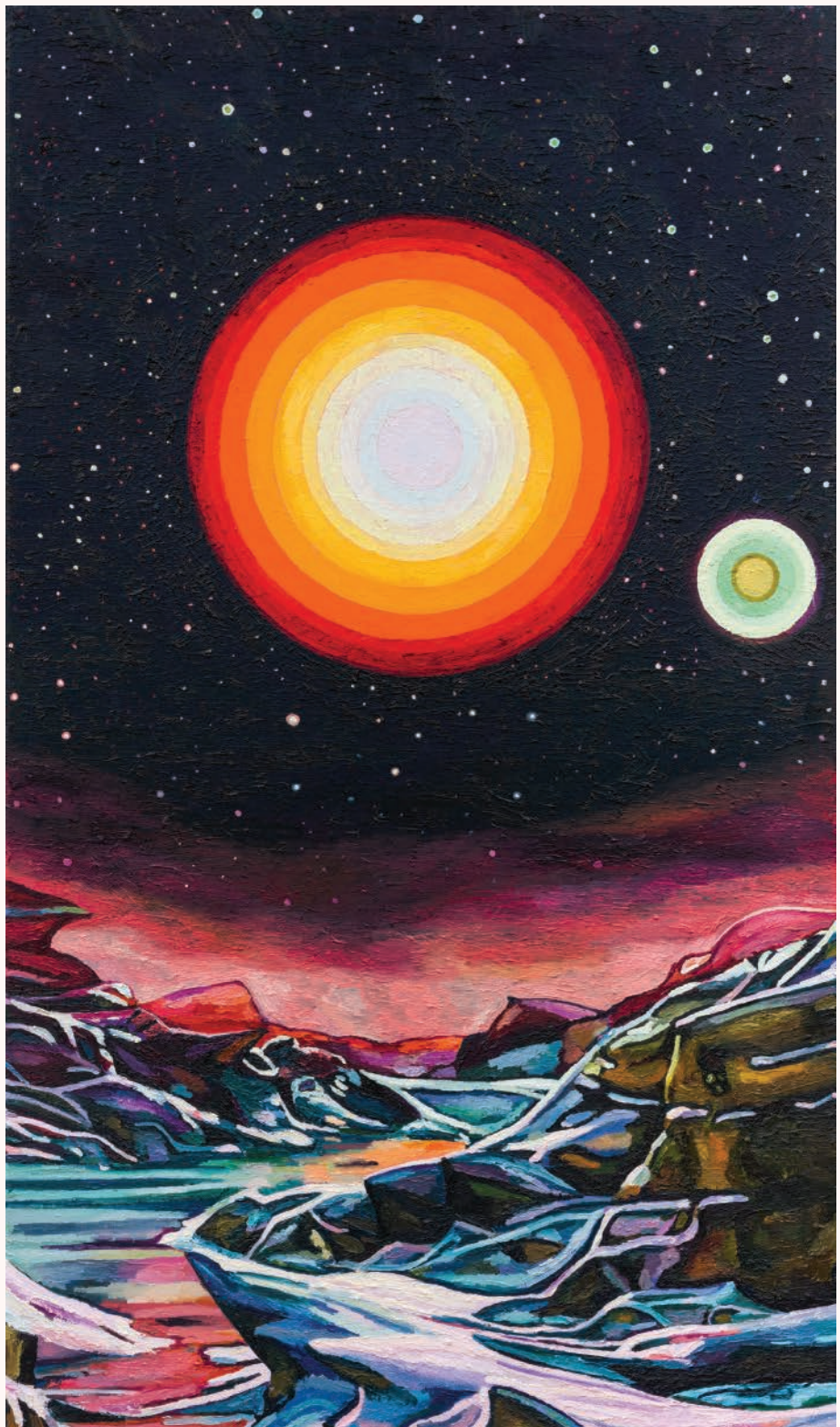
Installation view. Solo exhibition. Lund Cathedral, The Crypt, Lund, Sweden.

Photo: Kalle Sanner



Forest in Maine (Third day) (2017)

Oil on canvas
120 x 70cm



Erla S. Haraldsdóttir

Binary Solarsystem (Fourth day) (2017)

Oil on linen
120 x 70cm



Colored Raven (Fifth day) (2017)

Oil on canvas
120 x 70cm



Unicorn (Sixth day) (2017)

Oil on canvas
120 x 70cm

Genesis

Lena Sjöstrand, Cathedral Chaplain,
Lund Cathedral, Sweden

In conjunction with exhibition "Genesis" at
Lund Cathedral, The Crypt, Lund, Sweden.

Erla S. Haraldsdóttir's paintings for Lund Cathedral take as their starting point one of the stories of creation from the Book of Genesis (*genesis* is the Greek word for "beginning" or "origin").

The structure of Haraldsdóttir's work follows the seven days of creation, while its form draws inspiration from a series of medieval drawings by Icelandic artists. As is common for her work, Haraldsdóttir approaches the subject matter at hand via the work of anonymous colleagues. By setting up a series of rules for her own work, she then tries to reach deeper, gradually moving inwards towards the core of the subject.

The paintings made for Lund Cathedral are more abstract than the artist's first series on the theme of creation. It's as if she had shifted from contemplating a scene to painting the subject from within the point in the biblical text where light comes into being, where water is separated from water, where dry land emerges and the earth brings forth plants. What we see is a meeting between the Creator and the creative artist in which the story of creation unfolds through the image of man. The ability to create is part of our likeness with God, part of the connection between man and God.

The Hebrew word used for the Creator's achievement can mean both "create" and "play". In play, we use our imagination to test, deepen and transform reality. Haraldsdóttir's return to the subject of creation is clearly marked by the exploration and experimentation characteristic of play.

Through the act of painting, Haraldsdóttir accesses images and moods that otherwise remain concealed. The paintings hold traces of her own

story, merging with Icelandic landscapes, myths and symbols.

In *Lund Cathedral*, Haraldsdóttir's paintings appear alongside other representations of the biblical story of creation, for instance on the canopies on the northern side of the choir and in sculptures by anonymous artists from the 1300s. Experiences from different eras are thus woven together. Visitors discovering the works in the crypt thus take part in the process of creation, in a work in progress.



Genesis (2016)

7 murals, 7 figurative paintings, 7 abstract paintings.
Oil on canvas, acrylic on wall

Installation View, Galleri Konstpidemin, Göteborg



Genesis (2016)

Installation View, Galleri Konstepidemin, Göteborg



Day One (2016)

Mural, acrylic on wall
200 x 180 cm



Day Four (2016)

Mural, acrylic on wall
200 x 180 cm



Day Seven (2016)

Mural, acrylic on wall
220 x 180 cm



Spill Six B (2016)

Oil on canvas
30 x 50 cm

GENESIS

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

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

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 Pórarinn 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.

GENESIS

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

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 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 *sephirot* 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.



Genesis (2016)

Oil on linen

90 x 150 cm, 150 x 180 cm

Installation View, Hallgrímskirkja, Reykjavík Iceland



The Third Day (2016)

Oil on linen
150 x 90 cm



The Fourth Day (2016)

Oil on linen
150 x 90 cm



The Seventh Day (2016)

Oil on linen
150 x 90 cm