

ARS  
FENNICA

HENNA AND PERTTI NIEMISTÖ  
ART FOUNDATION



– ARS FENNICA –  
2019

PETRI ALA-MAUNUS | MIRIAM BÄCKSTRÖM | RAGNAR KJARTANSSON |  
AURORA REINHARD | EGILL SÆBJÖRNSSON





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## ARS Fennica –foundation

HISTORY & AWARD



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## Petri Ala-Maunus

FINLAND



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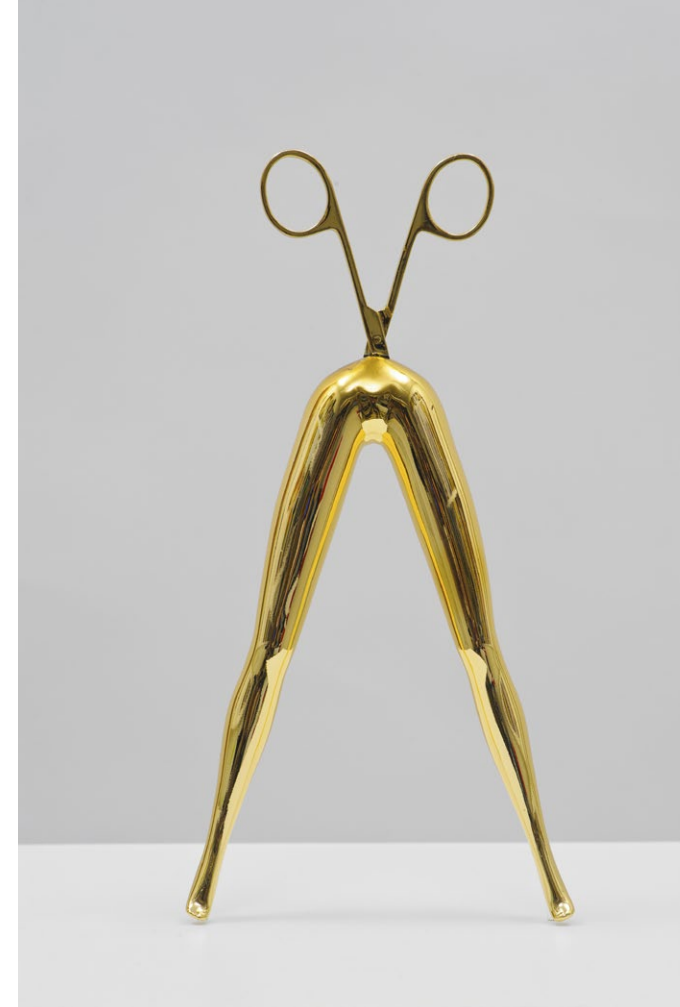
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## Ragnar Kjartansson

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### GRAPHIC DESIGN

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## HISTORY &amp; AWARD

## Foundation

The Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation ARS FENNICA was founded in 1990. The Foundation's goal is to promote visual art and to open up new international avenues for Finnish visual art. The Foundation's work is underpinned by a donation from the Finnish art lovers and collectors Henna and Pertti Niemistö.

In order to achieve this goal the Foundation presents the ARS FENNICA Award in alternate

years to a visual artist in recognition of distinctive creative work of a high standard. The Award comprises a 40,000 euro monetary prize, an exhibition of works by the candidates for the Award, and a digital catalogue that can be downloaded free from the Foundation's website.

The Award process has two stages. The Award Panel names the candidates for the award from among Nordic artists. The permanent Chair of the four-person Panel is Honor-

ary Doctor of Administrative Sciences Leena Niemistö, MD, with current members Museum Director Kai Kartio, Museum Director Leevi Haapala and the artist Jussi Kivi.

The candidates for 2019 are Petri Ala-Maunus and Aurora Reinhard from Finland, Miriam Bäckström from Sweden, and Ragnar Kjartansson and Egill Saebjörnsson from Iceland. Their works will be shown in the ARS FENNICA 2019 exhibition at Amos Rex, June 19–September 8, 2019.

The Award winner will be chosen by Roland Wetzels, The Director of the Museum Tinguely in Basel. The Award winner will be announced on August 21. Prior to that, the public will have had a chance to view the candidates' works, and to choose and vote for their own favourite.





ARS FENNICA 2019 EXHIBITION OPENING  
Amos Rex museum, 2019  
photo: Petra Kotro





JUHA-HEIKKI TIHINEN, FT | TRANSLATION: MIKE GARNER

## Petri Ala-Maunus' wilder than wild nature

Petri Ala-Maunus has investigated nature in numerous ways in his artistic work. At the start of his career as an artist he painted wilder than wild sunsets, and now his works consist of diverse scenes from nature ranging from seascapes to forests. With regard to Ala-Maunus' sunsets the powerful romanticism of his works has often been foregrounded, and generally seen as being kitsch and parodic. It is good to remember that nature is perhaps not ironic, even when the experience of the landscape and of the sunsets over it is as if it comes from a movie melodrama by **Douglas Sirk** (1897-1987). Ala-Maunus' sunsets are fundamentally paintings of paintings, but that is no reason to forget that nature is capable of surprising us with its unnaturalness.

Ala-Maunus paints his landscapes from existing works in art history, so they are always a matter of a more or less imaginary landscape. His paintings are landscapes assembled out of parts, each component existing in relation to the entire manifold tradition of the art of painting. We are in the heart of the forest, perhaps in a thicket or on wasteland. Nevertheless, we are not in some patch of commercial woodland, since Ala-Maunus' forest is not a tree farm, but a mythical, experiential place. Basing the paintings on various art-history references means that they bring with them a tradition, which Ala-Maunus then reinterprets. Fantasy and art history overlap and the viewer can sense both learned references and powerful emotions.

SELF PORTRAIT, photo: kansallisgalleria / Hannu Pakarinen





**FELLS AFTER THE FALL, 2017**

oil on canvas, 150 x 170 cm

photo: Kansallisgalleria / Hannu Pakarinen

Heino Art Foundation





**HISTORY AND UTOPIA OF LANDSCAPE, 2018-2019**  
oil on canvas  
*photo © Jussi Tiainen*





**WINTERFELL, 2018**  
oil on canvas, 170 x 200 cm  
*photo © Rauno Träskelin*  
*Wihuri Foundation*

#### SELF PORTRAIT

*photo © Rauno Träskelin*

## The nature of nature

Without exception Ala-Maunus' paintings depict living, organic nature. The sunsets are filled with emotions and atmospheres, and the forest in these landscapes lives and breathes. That vitality seems to be akin to the living ocean in *Solaris* (1972) by **Andrei Tarkovsky** (1932-1986) or to the malevolent or even dangerous trees found in many corners of **J.R.R. Tolkien's** (1892-1973) Middle-earth. There is a fairy-tale quality and mystery to Ala-Maunus' landscapes. His works tell us that nature is never exhausted of meanings and is always able to surprise us.

In art-history terms these landscapes exist in direct relation to the ideas about the different meanings of nature that sprang up in the Romantic period. Nature in itself became a significant and important subject, and so could also be depicted as untamed and untouched. Prior to that, almost without exception landscape art showed how humankind had cultivated nature and left its mark on it. With Romanticism nature in itself, in all its might, became a potential subject for an artwork. In Ala-Maunus' landscapes the human being is nowhere to be seen and nature is to be admired for itself alone.

Ala-Maunus is painting the biggest of the works that will be in the Ars Fennica 2019 exhibition in parts, working on a small section at a time. For this reason he has for the first time made a preliminary sketch so that painting process will have a more specific direction. Working on

the 14-metre-long painting is an eminently physical project in which Ala-Maunus is, nevertheless, creating a largely imaginary forest on the basis of ideas from art history. Out of the images of the forest there emerges a description of the forest that has a narrative quality. That narrative involves an interplay between repetition and variation, which are used to articulate something that cannot be guessed at in advance.







**ÖSTERLAND, 2018**  
oil on canvas, 150 x 170 cm  
*photo © Rauno Träskelin*  
*City of Tampere*

**BACKWATER, 2018**  
oil on canvas, 150 x 170 cm  
*photo © Rauno Träskelin*  
*Private collection*







**THE GREAT DELUGE, 2016**  
oil on canvas, 220 x 850 cm  
*photo © Vesa Aaltonen, Heino Art Foundation*



## Series and continuums

Seriality is a distinct feature of Ala-Maunus' production, since he makes self-portraits every day and posts them on his Instagram account. This is a logical, understandable method, and yet, time and time again, the variability of the end results comes as a surprise. One surprising aspect relates to the broad spectrum spanned by the portraits, and reveals what introspection has produced at any one time. A phenomenon that is intrinsic to seriality is also visible in the landscapes. In them the variation of the different views makes it clear that Ala-Maunus is investigating visual experience and how to bring out different things in order for them to be experienced.

In Ala-Maunus' hands the landscape becomes poetic. He takes the audience of his works back to a moment when nature is not the great Other or something to be made use of. He paints landscapes that reveal the nature within us, and yet still preserve nature in itself. Landscapes as represented by Ala-Maunus are concrete, and yet extremely varied.

Ala-Maunus' landscape emerges layer by layer and detail by detail. His working technique takes time, but the end result is especially interesting in terms of the landscape as subject matter, since a work of his contains innumerable layers, as does its subject. The subject and the format are similar in form, but the material composition varies. The time-consuming working process is surreptitiously stored in the work and prompts the viewer, too, to envisage the way that the landscape experience is simultaneously momentary and eternal.

Ala-Maunus' landscape paintings bear powerful witness to the way that the subjective experience is not limited to just one individual, but extends out towards infinity. One work at a time, he paints depictions of something sublime, something greater than we are, that can best be approached via a fragment of the form most beloved of the Romantics. Works constructed out of small parts most accurately depict the holistic experience that speaks of the smallness of the individual, but also of that individual's great capacity for experiencing things on a monumental scale.

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*In Ala-Maunus' hands the landscape becomes poetic. He paints landscapes that reveal the nature within us, and yet still preserve nature in itself.*

THE GREAT DELUGE, 2016, detail



## READY TO TELL ALL, 2018

Jacquard tapestry (Trevira CS on Trevira CS warp) , 272 x 4650 cm  
Karolinska Universitetssjukhuset, Solna, Sweden

SINZIANA RAVINI | TRANSLATION: PATRIK HAGGREN

# Miriam Bäckström and perceptionism

We're losing control of our reality. Artificial intelligence, big data, swarm intelligence, transhumanism and algorithm-directed drones are suspending the all-knowing subject, as well as the central perspective.

**Miriam Bäckström** who has always played with the labyrinths of illusion, like a contemporary version of the 16th century tapestry *The Lady and the Unicorn*, has recently devoted herself to observable changes in visual language and how these changes alter our perception of the world. She is convinced that the new digital perception has lead photography to a state where it no longer represents reality, to the extent that we are entering the image, indeed becoming images, not to mention our cursed production of self imagery on different media.

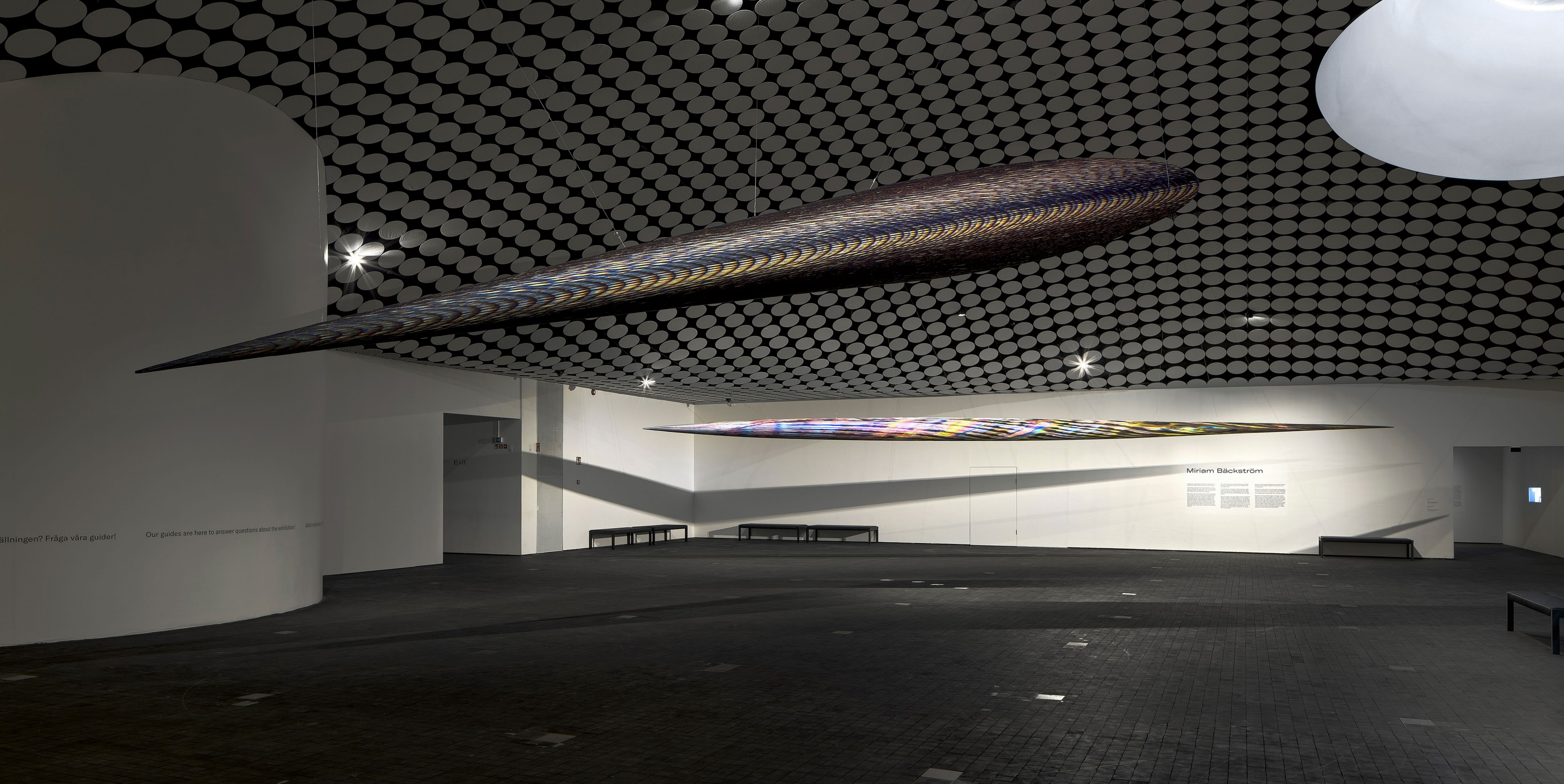
How can one escape the dictatorship of the self that most often coincides with a particular perspective where there is room only for a singular truth? What Bäckström is searching for is something as grand as the creation of a new perception, a perception that would accept our desire for self control, yet gain a more inclusive vision, perhaps even a perceptionism allowing for the co-existence of several perspectives and truths to coexist.

Already in the tapestry *Smile as if we have already won* (2012), where the imagery is generated by mirrors that reflect each other in an intricate mise en abîme, whose protagonists are reminiscent of both the machine people in **Fritz Lang's** *Metropolis* and the broken mirror



MIRIAM BÄCKSTRÖM





**ADVANCED CONE, 2019** (in front)

Textile sculpture, Jacquard tapestry (silk and Lurex on cotton/nylon blend warp) mounted on polymer core

*Installationview at Amos Rex museum, 2019*

*photo © Titus Verhe*

**PSYCOPATH, 2019** (behind)

Textile sculpture, Jacquard tapestry (silk and Lurex on cotton/nylon blend warp) mounted on polymer core

*Installationview at Amos Rex museum, 2019*

*photo © Titus Verhe*



### SMILE AS IF WE HAVE ALREADY WON, 2012

Tapestry made of cotton, wool, silk, trevira-cs and lurex, 281 x 1143 cm

in Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, she explored the suspension of the idea of photography's indexical relation to reality. Yet she also explored the possible chaos resulting from the self's narcissistic search for itself, when this search creates a shattered, kaleidoscopic subject beyond any graspable spacetime.

In *Som man brukar säga* she made a performance together with **Rebecka Hemse** in conjunction with the literature festival at Moderna Museet in 2014, in which a group of actors from the Royal Theatre had to discover and go into their character on stage, amplify or deconstruct stereotypes, play one or more roles and interact with one another, because, as Bäckström usually says: the more characters one includes and accept within oneself, the more empathetic one becomes toward others.

In *Ready To Tell All* (2018) Bäckström filled the auditorium of Karolinska University Hospital with a 50 meter long tapestry consisting of an imaginary museum of materials and souvenirs, which looks down on the audience like divine images from a syncretic world religion beyond good and evil, high and low. For *New Enter Image* (2018) she produced tapestries and textile sculptures based on extremely high

resolution photographs translated into textile fabric with computerized jacquard looms that made the image surface look both still and in motion, both flat and in-depth –indeed, like bodies without skin or embodied photographs.

In *Organic Gold* (2018) she created a new futuristic fabric for the Amalienborg Palace, which changed the castle hall into a spaceship that appeared to be entering an entirely other dimension with its organic expression and range of colors between gold and all the colors of the spectrum.

When we use VR-glasses we are forced to choose between the virtual and real worlds, but here it was possible to exist in two kinds of space simultaneously, the physical raw space and the dressed virtual space that opens onto another reality.

Like none other Bäckström succeeds at making mediating spacialities, indeed, the illusion of being inside a spaceship, not far from the intergalactic space travel described in *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Interstellar*.



### AS THE SAYING GOES, 2017

Color HD video 61 minutes and 9 seconds.

Still from video © Miriam Bäckström





**NEW ENTER IMAGE I-VII, 2016-2017**

Jacquard tapestry (Cotton, silk, wool, Trevira CS, Lurex and acrylic on Trevira CS warp) Dimension variable

*Installation view from Marabouparken*

*photo © Jean-Baptiste Béranger*







**NEW ENTER IMAGE IX (SCULPTURE), 2018**

Jacquard tapestry (Silk and Lurex on Trevira  
CS warp) 294 x 159 cm

Installation view at Art Basel, 2018

photo © Sebastiano Pellion di Persano



For her nomination for Ars Fennica 2019, Bäckström has developed the series *New Enter Image* through works such as *Psychopath*, a stretched, spool-shaped, monstrously beautiful, sometimes frightening, sometimes calming, pearl-shimmering sculpture with an unending surface and uncertain direction, that appears to come from outer space or a virtual world beyond human cognition. The post-antropomorphic sculpture may appear excluding at first glance, yet the longer we contemplate it the more we discover its participatory nature, the fact that the sculpture can make us view reality and ourselves in new ways. Even the apes in **Kubrick's** *2001: A Space Odyssey* where at first afraid of the mystical black monolith, yet it made them scratch their heads, act and develop.

The same thing might be true of Bäckström's art, if we seriously open ourselves to its real possibilities. For Bäckström has understood something crucial – true art does not reflect what is, but also what could be. The active viewer is in this way, not only a co-creator of meaning, but potentially also of a new world. The question is what world we would like to create when we no longer need the world as our point of departure?

When humanity discovered that the world was round it began exploring. Perhaps we are in a similar situation now that the world is going under and the only way out may be living in outer space.

Perhaps it is Miriam's true intention to prepare humanity for the day it must leave earth to go into space. We could start this journey mentally, right now, because space is inside us. We are made of the same stuff as the rest of the universe, yet to begin this mental travel we must alter our vertiginous unease into a joyous reception of what we cannot yet understand, and perhaps never will.

Because the future is already here, we just have to open our eyes and see it. What will it then have mattered if we disappear into nothingness and never return? At least we dared to leave our perspectives and our world, in search of a new one.

**SCENOGRAFIER / SET CONSTRUCTIONS, 1995-2000**

Cibachrome on aluminum, 50 x 64 cm



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*The spectacle is capital  
accumulated to the point that  
it becomes images.*

– Guy Debord <sup>1</sup>

JULIEN FRONSACQ | TRANSLATION: IAN MONK

## Ragnar Kjartansson: Scenes from Western Culture

**Ragnar Kjartansson** composes a body of work at the crossroads between performance and cinema, sculpture and opera, painting and music, so as to conjointly reveal an emotion through melodramatic gestures and shed light on the reality that is being played out at the foundations of any interpretation.

A little morning training in the modern pool of a villa, two people making love in an apartment decorated like an Airbnb, a couple dining out in a chic, outdated restaurant as still can be found in uptown Manhattan, upper-middle-class children playing in a park at the foot

RAGNAR KJARTANSSON Kuva: Elisabet Davids

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*Sometimes you need to add  
a little theatre to life and  
vice versa – bring reality  
into art.*

– Ragnar Kjartansson <sup>2</sup>





**SCENES FROM THE WESTERN CULTURE:**

**THE BOAT, 2015**

single channel video, 02:36:00.

installationview at Amos Rex museum, 2019

photo: Titus Verhe







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**SCENES FROM WESTERN CULTURE, 2015**  
still photos from series of 9 videos



- 1 The Dinner
- 2 Burning House

- 3 Guitar
- 4 The Lovers





### S.S. HANGOVER, 2013

boat, captain, brass instruments, musicians. Music by Kjartan Sveinsson, photo © Lilja Birgisdóttir

55th International Art Exhibition: The Encyclopedic Palace, Arsenale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni. Daily 4 hrs performance, 1 June to 24 November, 2013  
Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

of a neoclassical bandstand, the ticking of a longcase clock and a dog with no means of distraction, an electric guitar lesson, a man in a tuxedo striking poses like **James Bond**, a chalet catching fire...

These are some of the more or less tranquil or vibrant sequences that make up *Scenes from Western Culture* (2015), a series of colour movies including, in particular, *The Boat*, produced and presented for the first time at his solo show *Seul celui qui connaît le désir* (Only the One Who Knows Desire) at the Palais de Tokyo in 2015. It was deployed over 1000m², with the visitors wandering through an open space punctuated by hanging screens showing the nine films in a loop.

*Scenes from Western Culture* (2015) is the fruit of a considerable work of production – framing, costumes, locations – reproducing the artist's drawings, while coming both from his imagination and his sharp observation. When it comes to the intercourse, an imaginary scene, with real action, shot with great attention to detail, Ragnar Kjartansson emphasizes:

*"I wanted the bedroom to be sober and comfortable. Sober comfort is contemporary kitsch. I was particularly attached to the rectangular glass vase, which I'd seen on Icelandic television in the background of an interview with a right-wing politician accused of serious abuses of power over an asylum seeker. This vase lies at the origin of the entire scene."*<sup>3</sup>

Just as in this staging, the entirety of his work plays on this toing and froing between anecdote, fiction and the effects of reality.

Each of the parts of *Scenes from Western Culture*, no matter how varied they are, was constructed with great care being paid to the direction of the framing and the action. *The Boat* depicts a lake at the heart of a picturesque, mountain landscape, as beautiful and commonplace as a post-card. It was shot in Switzerland. The landscape of the mountain lake belongs to a long-standing traditional genre, which is particularly rich in the history of Swiss painting. It goes back to the 15th century, when **Konrad Witz** delivered a retable to Geneva Cathedral, of which all that remains is the *"miraculous catch of fish"*, the first realist landscape including a Biblical scene.





**THE VISITORS, 2012**

9-channel video projection. Duration: 64 min

photo © Elisabet Davids

*Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine,  
New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik*



On the long list of artists, who have dealt with this subject since the Renaissance, can be mentioned **Ferdinand Hodler** who, after a highly successful career, set up home beside Lake Geneva where, during the last five years of his life, he produced a good thirty paintings depicting its banks and mountainous peaks, stretching as far as Mont Blanc. The miraculous catch of fish, strangely mistreated by the first Protestant reformers, is perhaps the first masterpiece in the secularization of the sacred. Hodler liberated himself from a constrained point of view to reach, through sublime repetition, the immensity of a mountain landscape.

This five-century ellipse provides a perfect framework for Ragnar Kjartansson who mingles anecdote and the absolute, calm and the picturesque, repetition and variation. What should be specified here is the critical ambition that underpins the motif of repetition since the 1960s. Repetition freed art from the academic rule of uniqueness and cast light on how technologies have shaken up our relationship with reality. The Boat, just like the other Scenes from Western Culture (2015), has an unbearable familiarity recalling the cinema's ability to produce stereotypes and how everyday life in the West conforms to a terrible standardization.

Here, as in many other of his works, Ragnar Kjartansson, as an heir to **Rodney Graham**, **George Brecht** and **Guy Debord**, enlightens emphatically and distantly the effort at work and the theatricality of everyday life. Recently Ragnar Kjartansson stressed the fact that the female character is played by twin sisters:

*"One thought I am always fond about this piece is that mountains used to represent Sehnsucht (longing, nostalgia), but now Swiss mountains stand for capitalism and a desire for luxury. They are the background for ads for watches, pens, bank etc. Then also something can perhaps be clarified*



**RAGNAR KJARTANSSON**  
photo: Elisabet Davids

*about the elaborate staging which always picks out the same woman... as a twin trick. He met another boat always in the middle of the lake, just after he went out of frame, containing a twin."*<sup>4</sup>

What should be underlined here is how the video loop makes reality resonate, as repetition chimed with the stereotypes that cross through real life: a repetition appertaining to the hard labour of a spectacle, just as much as it characterizes a daily existence that becomes a spectacle.

**REFERENCES**

- 1 Guy Debord, passage 34, Chapter 1: "Separation Perfected", *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.
- 2 Ragnar Kjartansson, Interview by Markús Thór Andrésson "Ragnar Kjartansson – A simple Act of Forgiveness", *Flash Art*, Nr. 281, November/December 2011.
- 3 "Seul celui qui connaît le désir, a conversation between Ragnar Kjartansson and Julien Fronsacq", Ragnar Kjartansson, Palais de Tokyo, 2015.
- 4 Ragnar Kjartansson, email to the author, May 20, 2019





**A LOT OF SORROW, 2013-2014**

**RAGNAR KJARTANSSON AND THE NATIONAL**

1-channel video, duration: 6:09:35

*The performance took place at MoMA PS1, as part of Sunday Sessions*

*Courtesy of the artists, Luhring Augustine, New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik*





# ARCHITECTURE AND MORALITY, 2016

Ten paintings: oil on canvas 120 x 150 cm

Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

photo: Farzad Owrang



# ARCHITECTURE AND MORALITY, 2016

Ten paintings: oil on canvas 120 x 150 cm

Painted plein-air in the West Bank, Israel/Palestine 12 to 23 May

photo: Ingibjörg Sigurjónsdóttir





PHOTO © MARKO RANTANEN

TIMO VALJAKKA | TRANSLATION: MIKE GARNER

## Aurora Reinhard: Broken

*Broken*, a suite of artworks by **Aurora Reinhard**, comprises nine objects made in recent years, all of which ask questions about the (female) artist's identity and explore various power and dependence relationships.

Alongside staged photographs and plaster sculptures, the works include the scale-model-like *The Artist & the Collectors* (2019), which approaches the subject from a perspective personally familiar to Reinhard. On the left side of the "doll's house" is the artist in her modest sanctum, on her desk one of the sculptures from the suite. On the right is the collector with his daughter in an elegant gallery, where one of Reinhard's earlier photographic works is just being hung. The wall between the rooms reminds us of how they each live their own life in their own reality, but still under the same roof.

Reinhard has been called a "life explorer". In her earlier works she examined – often very straightforwardly – gender, gender identity and the clichés associated with being a woman.

Recurrent themes have included an almost systematic and frequently provocative critique of one-dimensional identities and stereotyped images of women. When working on her pieces she has made a habit of putting herself on the line, and of looking for answers both in front of the camera and



**ARTIST & MODEL, 2017**

3d color print, harts, 17 x 70 x 36 cm

*photo © Aurora Reinhard*







**BROKEN, 2017**  
porcelain plaster, 9, 5 height x 26 x 18 cm  
photo © Lukas Vogt

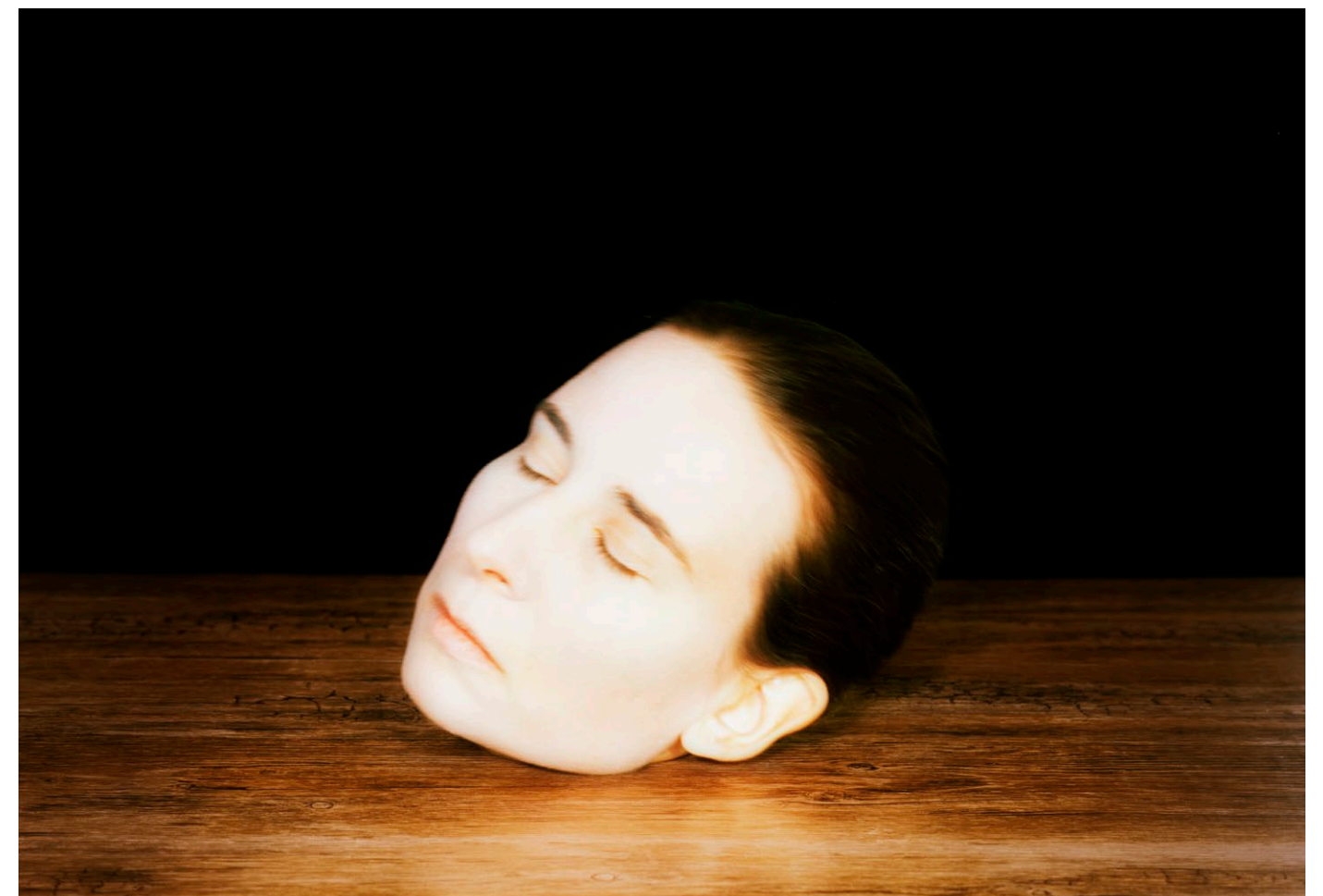
behind it. The mythical Venuses and Madonnas wear far too much make-up and their attire and bearing make allusions to the fantasy imagery of pornography. And yet the hyperbole is so obvious and the means used to construct the illusions so transparent that it is impossible to miss the message contained in these works.

Using her own body as both subject matter and material makes Reinhard's recent works more clearly personal. The cracked "perfect" plaster cast of the artist's hand in *Broken* (2017) speaks of the contradictions that create a fracture between mind and world, but it also offers hope: everything can be fixed as long as all the pieces are still there. Another work that speaks of life's conflicts is *In Progress (self-portrait)* (2019), a cracked and partly reassembled 3D model of the artist's own face.

**UNTITLED (SELF-PORTRAIT), 2018**

inkjet-print, 42 x 55 cm

photo © Aurora Reinhard





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*The mythical Venuses and Madonnas wear far too much make-up and their attire and bearing make allusions to the fantasy imagery of pornography. And yet the hyperbole is so obvious and the means used to construct the illusions so transparent that it is impossible to miss the message contained in these works.*

MADONNA, 2018  
inkjet-print, 118 x 100 cm





A certain kind of perfection is intriguing and tempts us to take a long, close-up look at of Reinhard's works. But it is not an end in itself. As a goal it goes too far and serves the same end as the exaggerated masks and costumes in the photographic works. It brings out things that go on unseen in the mind, and in so doing reveals the mirage-like nature of the desires and hopes that sustain them. One example of this is *A Happy Moment* (2019), in which a stylized breakfast still life in its enticing colours presents itself as a unique, fleeting moment.

Reinhard finds the subjects for her works in the myths and stories that fuelled classical art, and mixes in ingredients from the often idealized, but sometimes also grotesque and overblown world of popular culture. She interprets what she finds through her own life and experiences, and thus brings age-old tales into the heart of the present. The way that the sculptures are displayed, with their glass cases, and the plaster used as their material also connect them to art history and to the long continuum of displaying it.

*Reclining Nude (self-portrait)* (2019) is a photograph in which, as the title says, a naked woman lies on a bed on top of a burgundy counterpane against a midnight-black background. Although the woman's eyes are closed and her hands are in repose behind her head, she does not look like she is sleeping. The slightly coy position of her legs suggests that she is not asleep, but enjoying being the object of the gaze.

The reclining nude is a visual motif favoured by classical art, and in its day particularly ap-

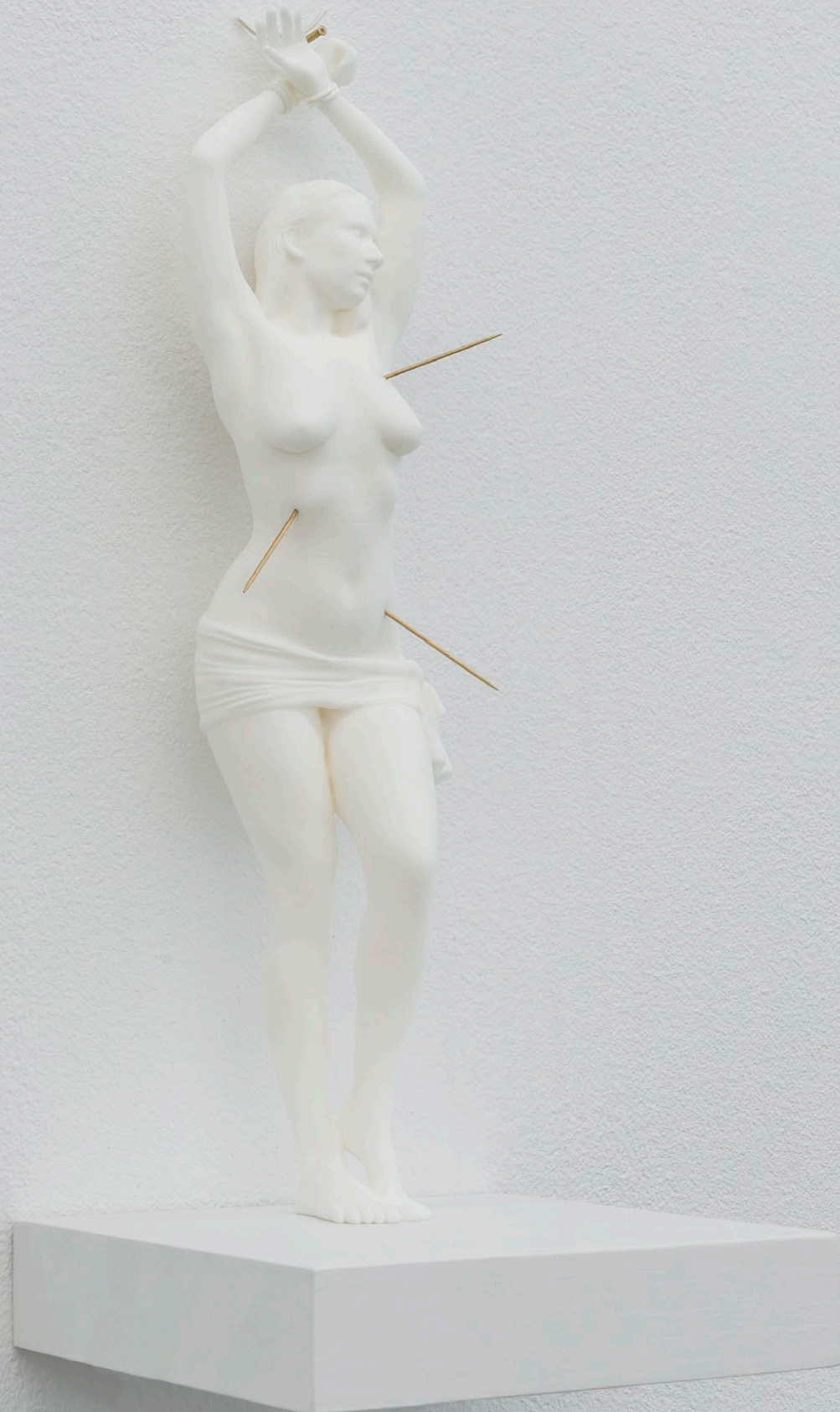


pealed to male viewers, with variations on it made in their paintings by **Titian**, **Rubens** and many others. The background to the theme here is the maiden Danaë, familiar from Greek mythology, who, imprisoned by her father and knowing the future, awaits her liberator Zeus to arrive in a shower of golden rain.

 **RECLINING NUDE, 2019**  
inkjet-print, 43x55 cm.

*The slightly coy position of her legs suggests that she is not asleep, but enjoying being the object of the gaze.*





*Martyr*, 2018, is a white plaster sculpture nearly half a metre high, in which a naked woman's body is pierced by three golden arrows. It is based on a 3D scan of Reinhard's own body. The arrows refer to romantic encounters.

The background to the Martyr sculpture is the **Saint Sebastian** familiar from Renaissance art – an officer in the Roman army and a Christian who lived in the 3rd century CE – who is said to have miraculously survived execution and, judging by some artworks, does not even appear to have suffered very much. By replacing the male saint with her own body, Reinhard gives the almost two-millennia-old story a personal, but also a universally comprehensible significance, linked not with divine relations, but with those between human beings.

As a wife Lucretia was the most virtuous of the virtuous, and killed herself after she was raped by **Sextus**, son of **Tarquinius** the king of Rome. In Reinhard's photographic work *Lucretia* (2019) she is a caricature, a giant-breasted sex bomb who is slashing herself with a cartoonishly large knife. Even though the work is outwardly over-the-top, it is not funny, but tragic, and reminds us of everyday conflict situations and experiences of guilt.

**MARTYR, 2018**

3d print, polyamide, brass, string, 38 x 12 x 8 cm

photo © Lukas Vogt





**LUCRETIA, 2019**  
inkjet-print, 118 x 100 cm

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***Lucretia is a caricature,  
a giant-breasted sex bomb who  
is slashing herself with a  
cartoonishly large knife.***



TIMO VALJAKKA | TRANSLATION: MIKE GARNER

## Egill Sæbjörnsson's Imaginary Friends

The Icelandic artist **Egill Sæbjörnsson** is probably best known for his two imaginary friends. They are Ugh ja Boogar, 36-metre-tall, coffee-loving trolls who eat people, and who rose to worldwide fame at the Venice Biennale in summer 2017. On hearing that Sæbjörnsson had been invited to the Biennale, the resourceful, art-aficionado trolls hijacked the Icelandic pavilion for themselves and staged a unique exhibition that was widely reported in the international media.

This unexpected success also filled the trolls' minds with commercial dreams. Later that same year, they exhibited luxury goods they had designed and made in a Helsinki gallery, which they had taken over for the occasion. The elegant sales tables were laden with jewellery and bottles of perfume, but all of them





enormous and coated in glittering gold. An external observer might, however, deem the trolls taste to be somewhat vulgar.

In spring 2019, Ugh and Boogar paid a visit to the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in Texas. Subsequently, news got back to Europe indicating that during rehearsals Boogar had eaten the entire orchestra, which had to be speedily replaced by the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra. All the performances were sold out and the audience loved the trolls.

Ugh and Boogar got a new cause for rejoicing when they heard that Sæbjörnsson had been invited to the Ars Fennica exhibition in Helsinki, and to an underground museum at that. They had long wanted to show their new paintings. Now, they demanded to get to stage an exhibition that would give viewers a chance to delve deeper into their art. The room was to have tables and chairs, homely ceramic lamps and, of course, their beloved coffee. Muted piano music would complete the whole.

"I myself would never have made such clumsy, clunky-looking paintings," Sæbjörnsson says of the six ponderous slabs that the trolls have made in a studio they found in Helsinki, having driven its regular users to take refuge in the city's bars.

Ugh and Boogar were born in 2007, when Sæbjörnsson saw some long-nosed troll figures in a souvenir shop. "It started as just me flirting with the phenomenon of trolls and then they became these imaginary characters that I was playing with, without really even



***Art-aficionado trolls  
hijacked the Icelandic  
pavilion for themselves***

**EGILL, ÛGH AND BÖÖGÂR, 2017**

Representation for Iceland at the 57th Biennale di Venezia  
Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik





**UGH JA BÖÖGÂR – JEWELLERY, 2017**  
View from his exhibition in Galerie Anhava, 2017  
*Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik*

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***As they got bigger and bigger, they eventually took over my life***

intending to make art with them. But as they got bigger and bigger, they eventually took over my life,” he says. “They are a little bit like megalomaniacs with a really big temper.”<sup>1</sup>

The two trolls are not Sæbjörnsson’s first imaginary beings. He began developing them with his brother as a child and, for instance, created his own doppel-ganger. Before the giant trolls entered the picture, he made humorous installations that sporadically took potshots at the conventions of art.

*Wall to Wall* (Ghent 2008) was an imaginary exhibition, in which the walls at opposite ends of the exhibition space were able to talk, commenting on the works on display and on the members of the public who chanced to be there. A previous creation, *Mr. Piano & Mrs. Pile* (Berlin 2003/2004) was a philosophical discussion between the faces of a “piano” and a “pile”, plus a performance and concert.

The universally recognizable troll figures round out the story, especially when we think of Icelandic folklore, according to which the land abounds with elves, goblins and other beings. As an Icelandic conceptual artist Sæbjörnsson is aware of the clichés, not just of art, but also of his Nordic home country, and is able to have fun at their expense.

Apart from art and music, Egill Sæbjörnsson (b. 1973) has studied, for instance, Tibetan mind control,



**THE EGG OR THE HEN, US OR THEM, 2011**

6 channel video projection with objects and sound

*Installation view from This Rare Earth – Stories from Below,  
at Stuk, Leuven, 2018*

*Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik*

*photo © Kristof Vranicken*







**THE PAINTINGS, 2019**

installation, video projection, animation, continuous loop

*Amos Rex 2019, photo © Jussi Tiainen*

**THE PAINTINGS (DETAIL), 2019**

installation, video projection, animation, continuous loop

*Amos Rex 2019, photo © Jussi Tiainen*







#### FROM OUT OF CONTROLL IN VENICE, 2017

Egill Sæbjörnsson representation for Iceland at the 57th Biennale di Venezia  
 Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

clowning, 3D animation and interactive programming, in both Reykjavik and Paris. He is a multidisciplinary artist, whose art is based, on the one hand, on using technology as an extension of painting and sculpture and, on the other, on combining real objects and projected illusions with sound, music and performance. In real life, the trolls' paintings are sophisticated video projections.

Children's books and authors have had a major influence on the formation of Sæbjörnsson's art. He particularly mentions **Astrid Lindgren's** legendary Pippi Longstocking and the Moomin characters created by **Tove Jansson**. What fascinates him in children's books, apart from the skilfulness of the stories, is their multi-layeredness, and the way the authors create imaginary characters that in turn invent imaginary characters, places and events, as Anna and her brother do in Lindgren's books. He

says he experienced Jansson's multifaceted artist profile and art as both inspiring and liberating. The trolls, in contrast, even seem to be slightly afraid of the Moomins.

Egill Sæbjörnsson's art is clever, sincere and profound, all at once. It surprises, entertains and perplexes. It poses serious questions, not only about existence, but also about the nature of art and creativity, and yet does so in a way that both the artist himself and viewers can enjoy. Although Sæbjörnsson's works are experimental and seek out something new, it is important for him that understanding them does not require separate instructions, education or background information.

#### REFERENCES

1 Hannah Ellis-Petersen: "Biennale Icelandic trolls discuss eating their Venice audience". *The Guardian* 12.5.2017.



#### KASKADEN, 2014

video installation

Permanent video installation for the Kunstmuseum Ahlen  
 Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik



#### OUT OF SHOES HUMANS GROW, 2013

single channel video projection with cowboy boots

Installation view from *The Sun and the Rainfall*, at Galleria Zero. Milano, 2017  
 Courtesy of the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik