

CHANGES: ICELANDIC ARTISTS REFLECT ON CLIMATE CHANGES

Ásthildur Jónsdóttir

Sustainability is becoming an issue where artistic involvement and creative approaches could be crucial in creating much needed awareness of our place in the world in the context of our existence and behaviour.

Climate change encompasses global warming but refers to a broader range of changes that are happening to our planet. These include rising sea levels, shrinking mountain glaciers, and shifts in plant bloom times. These are all consequences of the warming, which is caused mainly by people burning fossil fuels and emitting heat-trapping gases into the air. The Arctic region is projected to continue to warm more than other regions (Collins et al., 2013).

Climate change is an issue where artistic involvement and creative approaches could be crucial in creating much needed awareness of our place in the world and the context of our existence and behavior. In society as a whole there is an increasingly pressing need to introduce new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole, where we all take responsibility for our actions and expressions. Art is often at the forefront of an exploration that maps unknown territories, that changes the way we see ourselves and our environment. This essay discusses artworks that reflect on changes and natural elements. The earth's climate system is very complex, and each one of its elements is changing constantly. Most of these changes are not immediately noticeable on a global scale, but over time patterns emerge, and we say the climate is changing.

All the artworks discussed deal in some way with sustainability and environmental awareness. Visual arts have the potential to cast a revealing light on these complex relationships and to provoke strong and long-lasting impressions which can stay with the individual for a long time (Jónsdóttir, 2017).

The tree artists discussed in this essay have often exhibited together. Their latest collaboration is the exhibition, *Changes*, at the United Nations in Geneva in June 2019. The collaboration has always been fortunate, and their works have created a very interesting dialogue, even though they employ diverse technical approaches. What characterizes the partnership is a slow rhythm, repetition, and reflection on the beauty of everyday life. The focus is on the Nordic sphere, with minimal drama that might affect the works' serene character. The artists respect their surroundings, carefully highlighting the bright aspects of life with an emphasis on the relationship between man and nature and the vanity that characterizes it.

The Icelandic permanent representative, Harald Aspelund, was pleased with the exhibition and said it had a very strong relevance to exhibit at the UN. Aspelund stated the importance of showing cultural and artistic perspectives in connection with international collaboration in Geneva, as well as necessity of drawing attention to the concept of sustainability and responsibility of all towards our environment. He stated: Many of these works provoked particularly interesting discussions on the nature of sustainable



Figure 1. Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir, *Hillside*, 2000.
Oil on canvas. 170x275 cm. Photograph: Guðmundur Ingólfsson.

development and how best to deliver it in harmony with nature. The works at the exhibition have inspired many interesting conversations with colleagues from other countries about the lessons that we could learn from this artwork and its different themes in relation to the international commitment to reverse climate change.

Water; Source of Life

The Arctic region has a crucial role in regulating the global climate and ocean currents because of the flow of freshwater funnelled into the Arctic. Due to climate change the Arctic environment, and its freshwater system is changing rapidly (Clic/AMAP/IASC, 2016, p. 4).

The artist Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir personal view on nature evolves around the constant weather and light changes in Iceland. She frames the everyday landscape of altering imprints and merges mediums with the aim of recreating the perpetual move-



Figure 2. Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir *Water*, Installation, Turku Finland.
Photograph: Vesa Aaltonen.

ment of nature. The snow patches characterizing her paintings (Figure 1) refer to the transformation occurring during the spring thaws when the winter snows begin to melt in the mountain slopes (Ólafsdóttir, 2011).

The water's volatility and its transformation remind the viewer of the role of temperature. With the rise of air temperature in the northern hemisphere, it can be expected that the experience of snow and ice is not self-evident. With the painting, she wants to remind the viewer of the beauty of everyday life. She noted: "we need to stop and look at the wonders that are in front of us!" (Interview, April 2017).

In Kristjánsdóttir's installation *Vatn* (e. Water) she intertwines light, reflection, and music to create an ambient environment, highlighting the complex relationship between perception, art and nature. Symbolic of water and life cycles, water drips into a bowl that rests on black lava sand shaped like a well that Kristjánsdóttir found in the Icelandic highlands (Figure 2). The water surface is ruffled by water drops falling from the ceiling to murmuring notes composed by Daníel Bjarnason, played on a stone harp. The installation was originally exhibited in a church festival in Iceland in 2013.

12 photographs created in collaboration with the marine institute in Iceland reflecting on a performance, where Kristjánsdóttir began pouring tap water in a bowl. She then took six specimens from it and placed them on glass slides. The water in the bowl was then consecrated and the people present sent good thoughts to it. After the consecration Kristjánsdóttir took six more specimens. The 12 specimens were dried out and photographed under a microscope. Each drop had its own structure, but the consecrated ones had in common that they were all structured from the center (Figure 3a & b) (Gíslason, 2013).

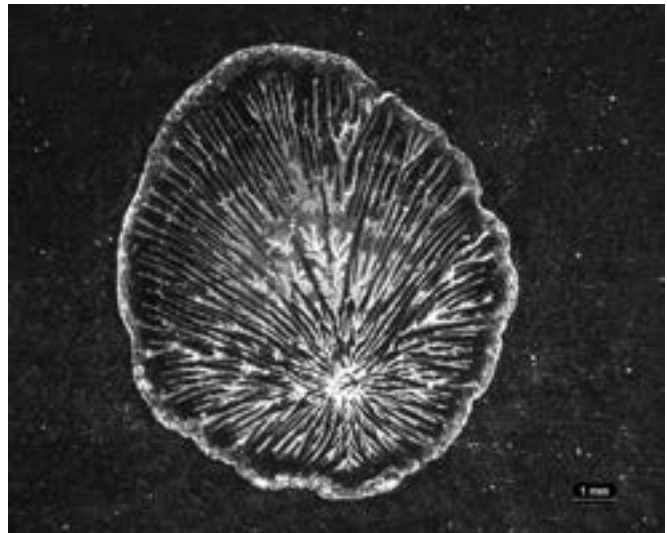
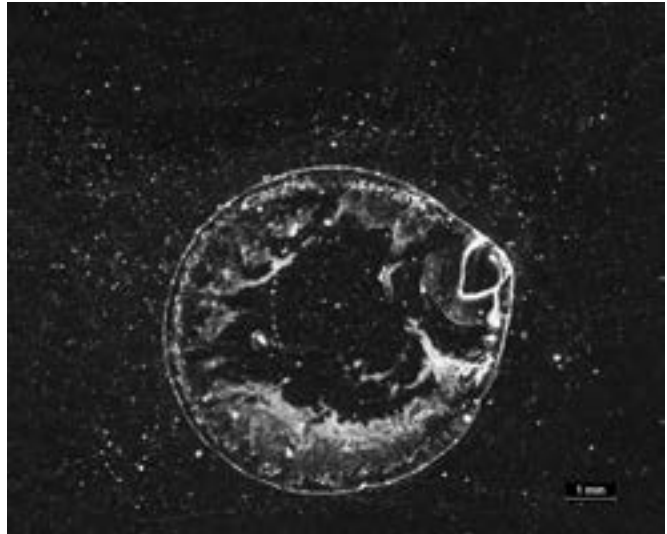


Figure 3a & b. Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir: 2013. Photographs: The Icelandic marine and freshwater research institute.

Contemporary technology-driven society tends to regard nature and the material world as raw materials for human processing and consumption. In accordance with this view we have been taught that nature is inanimate matter (Olafur Gislason, 2013). With the installation Kristjánsdóttir reminds the viewer of the importance of protecting valuable water systems. It reminds us of cycles of life; death and rebirth as the water evaporates as fast as the drops fall. The drops fall with the help of the device most commonly used to pump a medicine into a patient's vein. The rhythm reminds us of the pace of life that can be lost if we do not care about our surroundings.

Sea Temperature and Disappearing Land

Climate change has already had observable effects on the environment. Glaciers have shrunk, ice on rivers and lakes is breaking up earlier, plant and animal ranges have shifted, and trees are flowering sooner. Effects that scientists had predicted in the past would result from climate change are now occurring: loss of sea ice, accelerated rise in sea levels and longer-lasting, more extreme weather conditions (EEA Report, 2017).



Figure 4. Guðbjörg Jónsdóttir, 1998, *Á Breiðarfrði*. Oil on canvas, size 160x130 cm. Artist collection. Photograph: Guðbjörg Lind Jónsdóttir.

Guðbjörg Lind Jónsdóttir's perception of landscape is rooted in her upbringing in the West Fjords of Iceland. She creates her own visual world connected to her memories and nature (Ingólfsson, ed). The relationship between climate and the world's water is an all-embracing one, and the climate-related impact on water sources is documented in Guðbjörg's works.

Jónsdóttir's works tell a tale of a journey out into the world, where the sublime may be sensed in simplicity itself. When looking at her islands one wonders how long they will last with rising sea levels caused by melting ice sheets and glaciers. In the painting *Á Breiðarfirði* (e. In Breiðarfjörður) she has gathered many of the small islands that can be found in the fjord Breiðarfjörður (Figure 4). This is a kind of island museum, or a monument to the islands that have disappeared beneath the surface of the ocean



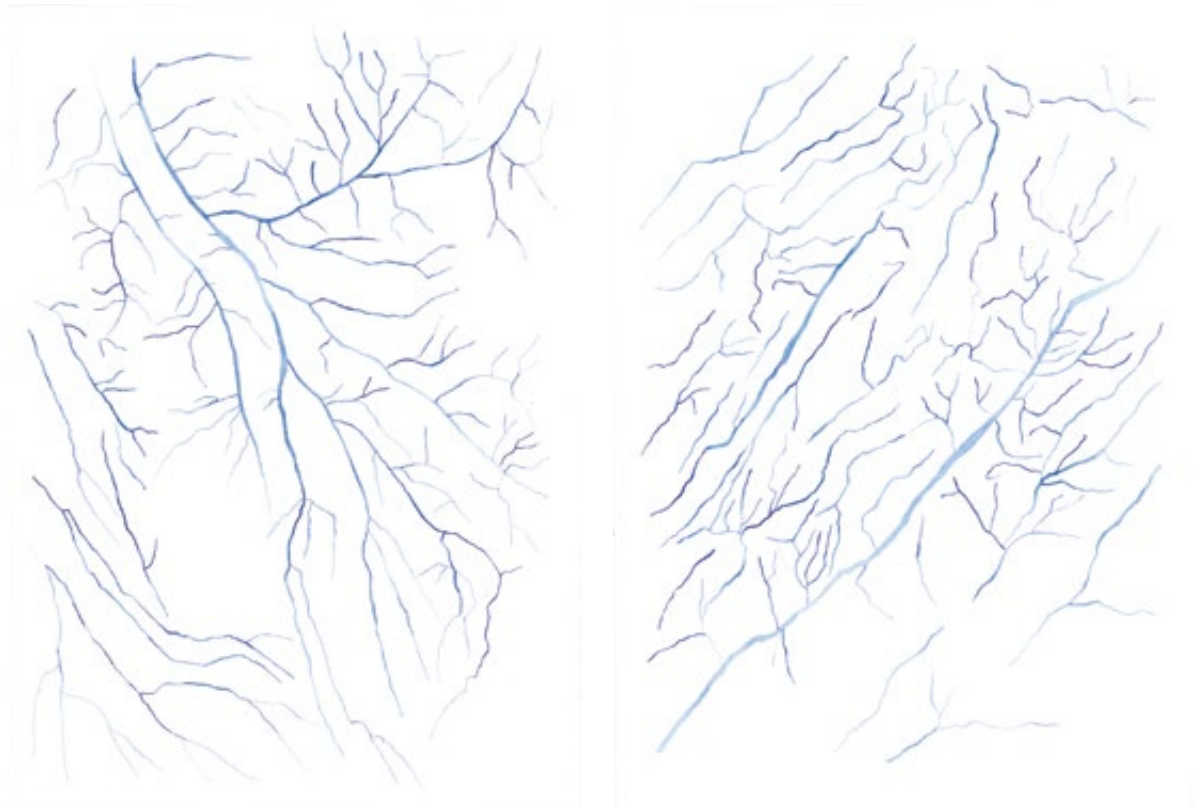
Figure 5. Guðbjörg Jónsdóttir, 2016, studio view.
Photograph Guðbjörg Lind Jónsdóttir.

On her work Guðbjörg states (Figure 5):

My subjects have long been concerned with water: first waterfalls, and later the sea where islands and boats float on the surface, or mountain slopes and spit stretch out into the ocean. (Interview, April 2017)

Guðbjörg Lind Jónsdóttir is dealing in her works with an old subject in a new way: how motion becomes stasis and time a still-life. A long process lies behind the production of each work, and the time from start to finish takes months. Which is one way to make the timeframe of the still-life visible, almost tangible. (Olafsdóttir, n.d.)

The universal legislation for access to clean water as a human right remains largely unenforced (Centre on Housing Rights & Evictions, 2008). The paintings remind us that the many sides of the global water crisis must finally be addressed to ensure that in our future access to water as a common good is a right, not a privilege.



Figures 6a & b. Kristín Jónsdóttir frá Munkaþverá, *Riverbeds III Riverbeds and VI*, 2004. Water colours on paper, Size 67x50 cm. Photographs: Guðmundur Ingólfsson.

Rivers and Streams: The Interconnectedness of Flowing Water

Streams and rivers have a localized role in the surrounding landscape, both upstream and downstream. The water current pervades every facet of existence for life in flowing water surroundings (McCabe, 2010).

Kristín Jonsdóttir frá Munkaþverá's works seem quiet at first glance, but on closer inspection one can read the strong message reflecting on the past and the future where nature, culture and human impact play a big part. Her lake paintings remind us of how humanity is reshaping the planet. Her works reflect on people's will to shape nature in accordance to their liking. This human tendency, the need for controlling the nature, is dangerous.

Today this unique artist paints in watercolour of Icelandic rivers and lakes. She takes sides with them, floats above and researches the forms from a bird's point of view before their wet existence is registered in water because nature is evanescent like the words and people. These pieces are not just recollections. Hidden in them is also a suspicion of something that will happen. From under the brush the lakes change shape, the future takes form and is moulded by the whims of nature, not the corner of it that is man. (Helgadóttir, 2017, p. 35)

When Kristín paints the works *Riverbeds*, she uses map of certain areas of Iceland. When she works from the map, she pays attention to all the names. Even the smallest springs have names and all of them have a specific purpose in nature (Figure 6 a & b). Kristín stated about the work: "I fear some people who can make big decisions have forgotten how the water-systems are interconnected". (Interview, April 2017)

After painting the rivers Kristín developed paintings of the large lakes of Iceland titled *Portraits of Lakes*. In those works she developed new lakes from the well-known Icelandic ones (Figure 7 a,b,c,d). She transforms nature to remind us of how humans seize the power to manipulate nature. On the work she states:

I put together fragments from several lakes and create one new. When I leave parts unpainted, I'm representing what's going to happen. I create new landscapes on their terms and depict how too often nature is drowned in the name of large-scale industry.

We can all make a difference to climate change. Kristín's work remind us of importance of healthy, sustainable approach to living in our environment where focusing on listening to the nature and gazing at natural elements can help us to understand it. The inspiration for the work *Clouds on Shelves* (Figure 8) came to Kristín as she was on a flight from Iceland to the USA. The sky was clear blue and through the plane window she saw a big group of tiny clouds which seemed to be hurrying on their way in a certain direction. Suddenly the clouds became still and looked as if they were taking a rest on invisible shelves.

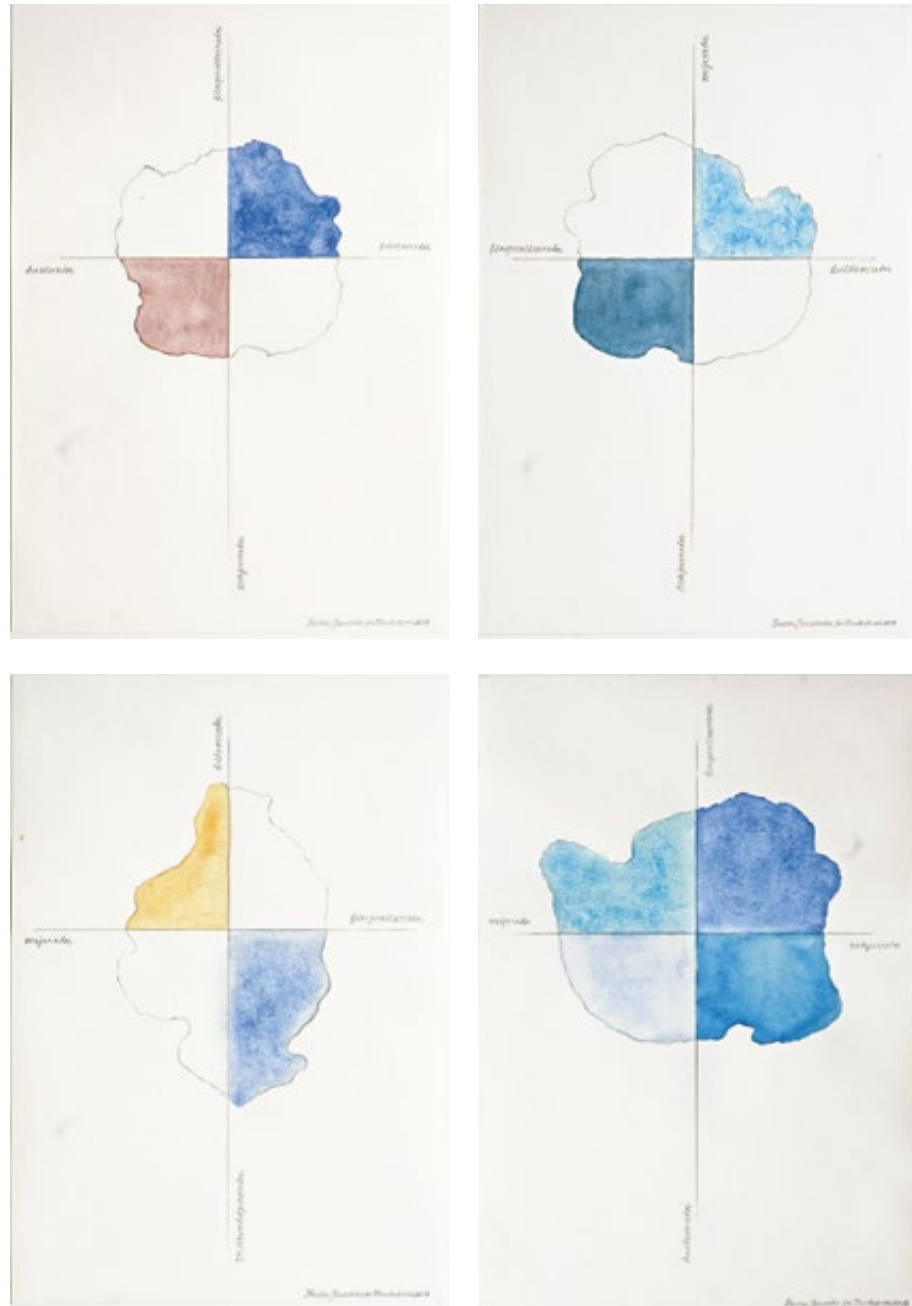


Figure 7a, b, c & d. Kristín Jónsdóttir frá Munkaþverá, *The transformations of lakes*, 2013. Watercolours on paper, Size 44,5x30 cm. Photographs: Viktor Smári Sæmundsson.

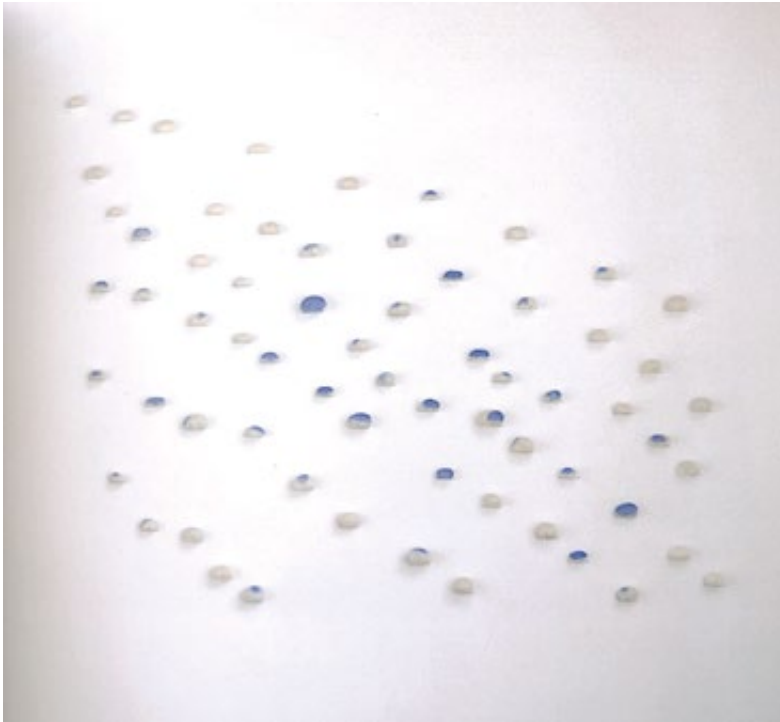


Figure 8. Kristín Jónsdóttir frá Munkaþverá *Clouds on Shelves*, 2004–2017. Wool, plexiglass, oil crayons. Size 130x165x6,5 cm. Photograph: browngrotta arts, Connecticut, USA.

Conclusion

In society as a whole, there is an increasingly pressing need to introduce new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole, where we all take responsibility for our actions and expressions.

The artworks discussed in the essay remind us of how very important it is to understand that with our behaviour we are reshaping our planet's climate. All of those works invite the viewer to pause and think of their connection to inner harmony. They reflect on the fact that we are a part of the earth's ecosystem, part of all that constitutes the earth. Every thought we have and every action we take has a direct effect on our well-being and the environment. We have to think about the consequences of our actions and rethink our way of living. Understanding climate change has traditionally been the domain of natural science. Visual artists have the potential to point out issues often hidden in our society. Sometimes their perspectives can help us discover our role in the natural world and in society, making it possible for us to connect different events and see them and ourselves in context, as part of a whole.

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BIO

Ásthildur Jónsdóttir has PhD from University of Iceland and Doctor of Arts from University of Lapland. MA from NYU and MEd from University of Iceland. She is an artists, researcher, curator and art teacher. She has studied artistic actions for sustainability, community based art and participatory art practices when finding a balance between well-being and the integrity of nature. Concepts from critical, place-based education for sustainability, participatory pedagogy, relational aesthetics, collective efficacy and places /spaces are fundamental to her research interests.

