ÉG ER LIKA NÁTTÚRAN

Í SUMAR LÍÓSMYNDADI ÓLAFUR ELÍASSON MYNDLISTARMADUR ÍSLENSKA JÓKLA ÚR LOFTI LIKÓT OG HANN GERDI Í VÉRKI SÍNU JÓKLA-
SERUNNI FYRIR RÉTTUM TUTTUGU ÁRUM. HANN SEIGR MUNNIN SLÁNANDI; JÓKULSPORDARNIR HAFI HÖRFAD VERULEGA OG RÚMMAÐ
JÓKLANNNA MINNKAD. ÓLAFUR VARAR PÓ VÍÐ HRÆDSLURÁRÖDR; LOFTSLLAGSREYTINGUM VERDI BEST MÆTT MÝÐ RÖKRÉDU OG JÁ-
KVÉDU HUGARFÆI.

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Útgøið er engi lítt úr vinnustafta Ólafur Eliassonar áður hást Marshallhallósum vestum á Grænlandi en þar dýlir hann yfirlitamót þegar hann er á Íslandi; undir blá, höfnum, eftán, móbærnum og tökiðtræfluðið Harpa í síns finasta þvísl en því tengist Ólafur af sjálftíðu óréttu bóndum, henni harnað glerhjópinum sem umlykkr byggðingum ásamt Henning Larson arkitektum. Það er í mórg born að líta á þátturanninum; hann er yklingin úr jöklaflugni og von er að gömatiðum hvernig verða en Ólafur gefur sér þó tíma til að taka á móti ökk-
ur Ragnar Axelsson lísynýruma til að segja ökum frá nýsta verkefni sínum. Hann er sumu að taka leiðmyndir af sínum jökkum á Íslandi og hann gerð því fyrir vöttum tuttugum ár-
um; verksem sem vatnið mynda af sínum tíma og mun að lókinni sjálf vetka mínna atþykki mínna – enda er mikl vítt runnið til sjóvar frá því Ólafur beinði límunni söhað að jökli-
unni. Í húsþólfstæði marktinga.

Bast náttúrunni sterkið bóndum

„þeit á tómba áratugum hafdir ég verð að mynda alla kyns lyftr, fossa, einasta klotta og stétingsgundir,” ítæktýr Ólafur spaurir um upprunaleg Jóklasserinu. „Ég gerð þetta að mestu að göngufærðum og margar af þessum lísynýrum tengiðuð forhalgum yfir lands-
væði, stýgum og göngufærðum. Í þeim skilningi hervéilti verkefnið skynni um þá hvat
ghan gogni tók lókum tíma. Með tímaðum bart ég náttúrunni stéktar bóndum og féir að hofna á hana í vitaðu samhengi. Forsta verkefnið sem spratt upp úr þessari afstofa var Jókla-
serinni, þar sem ég hryggja á því að leiga þeirri við til að lýsnaða jökla á Íslandi árið 1998 og 1999. Ég reyni að há sem fóstum jökulum og í fólum óþurrir þínum forðum tókt mér að
mynda 42 þína.”

Áhagi Ólafur á náttúrunni hervéilti upphaflega um fuguð hennar en með tímanum hafili-
ðstabil henni meðra af ferðumum sem hún hafdi að gyfma og viðlafréttunum yfirhöfða. „Þýrri
þvínumur arum eða oðr datt mér í hugsunum atvæpur Jóklasserinu vegna þess að allir eru að taka um breyttunarmann sem eru að verða að jökullum og hafaðum að norðarsölu.”

Í sumarr var þyngjing á verkum Ólafur, í real líf, opin í Tate Modern-gallerínum í Lon-
dinum og upphaflega atlagð hann að vera búinn með serína fyrir þinn tíma en niðverur
henni bætti við þyngjuna í endanó viðmerki. Þyngjiningin verður sinnið sett upp í Hafrar
húsið í Reykjavíkum lið líki. „Ég gat sýði þyrjað að mynda þegar þegar ég ættkuð mer vegna
þess að ég var að bíla eftr því að mjótrin hrafnskuð ég gati gætið þóð Jóklana almennilega.
Markmahalt var að gera alveg eins serki, þannig að ég var að verða þóðmáttur.”

Ólafur gættir ekki leynt eftirvarðanum sínnum vegna þessu verkefnis. „Þetta er mjög spenn-
andi og myndalatanum um börði í flagvællum minnið miði þá hvartu magnað hælandi Ísland
er. Stórhver pullar hafdi sín verð þessari lit. Þat mín grótar, hvað það var giggjað að flejja
hanna yfir.”

Undrandi og sjókkerslæð

Ólafur eru af íslensku foreldri en ólítt upp í Danmarku. Spaurir hvenær hann hafdi upp-
götutíð hælandi Íslandi svarar hann: „Fastr mín, Úlafur Hjaltefsson malari, og göðviðurn hann, annar malari, Gunnar Örn, forðubót mikstum um landið en það malari að svæðinu milli hælindiins og láglandisins, ekki síst i gylfdunum, þar sem þeir voru miklar expressjonístar. Sjálfsarbæt hælti ég mikstum um landið sem unglingur og fell smemma fyrir stíðum á börði við Speyngisal og Geyzi, að öldu að tal-
I AM NATURE TOO


Photos: Ólafur Eliasson  Text: Orri Páll Örnasson orri@mdl.is

The view is breathtaking from Ólafur Eliasson’s studio in the Marshall Building in Grandi, Reykjavík, where he stays when he is in Iceland, the Fanafloi bay, the harbour. Mt. Eiðar, the city centre and the concert hall Harpa in its Sunday attire. The latter building is strongly associated with Ólafur, who, together with Henning Larsen Architects, designed the glass façades that cover it. It has been a busy day for the artist, who has just returned from a glacier flight and is expecting guests for dinner, but he still finds the time to meet myself and photographer Ragnar Axelsson and tell us about his most recent project. Ólafur is taking photographs of Icelandic glaciers from the air just like he did twenty years ago, a photo series that received a lot of attention at the time and will probably turn no fewer heads this time around – since much water has passed under the bridge since Ólafur last turned his lens on the glaciers. Literally.

More intimate with nature

“In the late nineties, I had already been documenting various bridges, waterfalls, special rocks and minerals,” Ólafur explains when asked about the original Glacier series. “It was mostly done during hiking trips, and a lot of these photographs had to do with movement over land, paths and hiking routes. In that sense it was also about the slowness of walking. Gradually, I became more intimate with nature but also started looking at it in the larger perspective of things. The first series to develop out of this stance was The glacier series, where I started by renting an airplane to take photos of glaciers in Iceland in 1998 and 1999. I tried to reach as many glaciers as I could, and over four or five trips I captured 42 of them.”

Ólafur’s interest in nature was originally based on nature’s beauty, but as time passed, he became more enchanted with the systems of nature and ecology in general. “A couple of years ago, I came up with the idea to do The glacier series again, because everyone is talking about how much the glaciers and the polar ice in the Arctic are changing.”

This summer, Ólafur’s exhibition In real life opened at the Tate Modern gallery in London and he originally intended to finish the series before that, but now it will be added to the exhibition at the end of November The series will also be exhibited at Hafnarhús in Reykjavík around the same time. “I couldn’t start photographing as early as I wanted because I had to wait for the snow to melt before I could see the glaciers properly. The aim was to do the exact same series, so I had to be patient.”

Ólafur cannot hide his enthusiasm for the new series. “It’s very exciting and the photo sessions in the airplane reminded me how amazing the Icelandic highlands are. Every little bit of water has a different colour. My God, it was amazing to fly up there.”

Surprised and shocked

Ólafur was born to Icelandic parents but grew up in Denmark. Asked how and when he discovered the Icelandic highlands, he responds: “My father, Ólafur Hjörleifsson, was a painter and his good friend, another painter, Gunnar Örn, travelled the country a lot, but they were more in the area between the lowlands and the highlands, typically, as they were very expressionist. I did a lot of travelling myself as a teenager and quickly grew fond of places like Spreng-
Er ég nægilega abyggar!

– Hvad fínnt þur um þetta?

"Nýtt skáð er angílsklega runnið upp í samkefirmum manns og lefslags. Hvad fínnt mér um þat?" Tilfinningar minna eru orbuar partur af tilfinningum almennings. Ég er ekki frá því að ég hafi vanmetið neyðna, þannig að ég velti eftirfarandi spurningu íteskað fyrir mér.

Er ég nægilega abyggar? Samþykktu með þetta ekki lengur um hvað mér fínnt. Það er tími til komina að umsótti spurningum „hvad fínnt mér?” og spyrja í staðhun. „Hverning á ég að breytað við?” Eins og við ólítt við þátta að舍不得 skipum en ekki tilfinningar.


Ölufur er spenntur fyrir því að nota framleiðslu til að leða lêitann man að um leið hafa svág-rirá fyrir dráma og geda ínghvarnmálirnæ umsana tauminn. „Manyt á þessu hovfjall um endurstillingu, að nota ekki megvinsbyggjum, tungsinnin og stjórnaralakjardurum sem við þoxtum. Við þarfrum að óllum líkkindum liða á rýnju lagakörfu að haldla fyrir allt sem líf og rýnju dfarvski að rýnjumrækum. Efurr að sendi hólmeyrstjórninni, líkum setta Samsinsins þjóð- Ármar núvoterumarlegur vatnandi mannfréttina og komið hafur á daginum að ekki skjólaplaði að óllum líkkindum varðandi eitt veilagið atvöru; ég gert mér grein fyrir því að
sandur and Geysir, not to mention Landmannalaugar, where I had my first hike at fifteen. Later I started hiking in Snæfellsnes, Leitisvatn and other beautiful places."

— What have you discovered this time around photographing the glaciers?

“Obviously I was worried, because in geological time, twenty years is usually like a nanosecond. Therefore, there could very well have been no change at all. To be honest, I was hoping for a little bit of change but actually it turns out that the change is so big that I now regret not doing another series ten years ago. I’m surprised and shocked at the same time. Not only have the glacier tongues changed in terms of becoming a lot shorter, but the overall volume of the glaciers has changed as well, diminished. I noticed this quite early on because it was so difficult to get the pictures to fit. The mountains sticking up on either side of the glacier tongues looked a lot larger, making me wonder, looking at the old photos, if it was the right spot. It’s not like the mountains were likely to have grown. It was shocking to discover this. Another thing that surprised me is how consistently the glaciers have all become smaller; they have decreased a lot. For example Hofsjökull, which is located at 1,765 meters. Shouldn’t the glacier be melting slower up there? It certainly was colder taking the photos.”

Am I responsible enough?

— How does this make you feel?

“Obviously the relationship between humans and the climate has entered a different age or time. How does that make me feel? My feelings have become a part of a civic feeling. I feel that I might have underestimated the urgency, so I’m constantly facing the following question: Am I responsible enough? Probably it’s no longer a question of how I feel. The time has come to turn the question, ‘how do I feel’ into ‘how do I act?’ As we all know, acting makes a difference but feeling doesn’t. Feeling or thinking isn’t enough anymore. That leads us to the question: What type of activity is enough? Doing a little is incredibly important and maybe a foot in the door for doing more. In my work, I consider the distance between thinking and doing and all the small steps in between. We live in a time when we have to organise present activities from the perspective of the future. That is contrary to my generation’s thinking — we have organised all of our activities based on the past. I mean, we stand on the shoulders of people who paved the way to where we are now. Everything we know, every notion of education, is based on what somebody did in the past. In a way this is conservative, a safe low-risk way of evolving. But it now turns out that the past was actually wrong; people made mistakes. A lot of them, actually. Let’s take fossil fuels for instance, which are about 175 years old. Imagine that we had hundreds of millions years of biomass on the planet and then in a tiny split second of geological time we have messed up the whole thing.”

Glacier is curious about using the future to guide the present and also to be able to dream and imagine. “A lot of this has to do with re-engineering, not using the principles, the languages and the political systems we know. We probably need a new legislative system as well for living things and a different application of the rule of law. After World War II, the United Nations made a new human rights guideline and as it turns out, we were probably wrong on one massive thing; I realise that animals and the
planet were not playing a big role in that post-war narrative but still we should have given fundamental rights to animal life and the planet in general."}

Controversial rights

The artist is aware of the controversy of this notion. “Let’s take whales for example. I know that giving them rights is controversial because the idea has long been promoted by a marginal group of green activists. But it turns out that they are right. We humans should no longer assume that we are somehow chosen, the most important species on this planet. There are a lot of people who have been saying this recently, who were previously at the periphery of the academic world – people like James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis and Bruno Latour – and today they are beginning to get more attention. Suddenly the research scientists have provided data for turns out to be very valuable. It turns out that they were progressive and were doing honourable things by protecting animals.”

He then grins at Ragnar, better known as RAX, who is present during the interview. “When RAX says he has never shot a polar bear in Greenland because he was being passive, it turns out that he was actually being visionary as well. I admit myself that I didn’t realize this before. When I was young, I thought nature was unimportant and out of my reach, I couldn’t harm it in any possible way. Now I need to reconsider that. Nature is not disconnected from me at all and everything I do is interconnected and not outside but inside me. I am nature too. Or if you like, nature is culture too. In that sense we need a whole new fundamental understanding of the systems in which we live.”

He points out massive movements in social theory, natural sciences and philosophy, with people like Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton and others. “They have been re-examining the authority with which ecological questions are asked.”

Making invisible things visible

— How do you see your role as an artist in all of this?

--Meh in the spirit in which RAX inspires me, I first of all see my role as being part of the dialogue. I don’t think that as an artist I have a solitary role in a sort of avant-garde or disconnected way. Like every person, I have a responsibility to participate. If we can all participate on a civic level, we can influence the macro stuff, the politicians, the private sector, the big decisions. As an artist I can of course make invisible things visible, untouchable things touchable. I can show things in a different context, where they appear to have gained more urgency and relevance. Artists speak a language in which things can be said that otherwise cannot be said. That doesn’t mean it’s a better or more important language. Just a different language. Artists are by nature part of a critical inquiry into what exists means on a fundamental and deeper level.”

He pauses briefly and then continues: “I think we underestimate the importance of the culture sector. Despite its shortcomings, it enjoys an interesting degree of trust from society, whereas politics seem mired in populism, nationalism and general mismanagement of responsibility or authority, and the private sector is going from one financial crisis to another through egotistical, arrogant capitalist lack of responsibility. Having said that, I can see many people within the private sector taking more action and initiative and pushing for more progressive things than in the public sector. But all in all I do think that the culture sector has a lot to offer to greater society. It provides spaces in which one can have difficult conversations about things you cannot talk about otherwise. Am I allowed to say that?”

He smirks.

Difficult conversations

““The Arctic Circle Assembly is similar. We need to make sure that it actually allows disagreement. There is no need for everybody to meet if they already all agree. Normally the parliament would also provide such a space. Iceland can be proud of its political system, although you usually don’t say this in Iceland. During the recession, civic society demonstrated and stood in front of the Parliament building. Most Icelanders think this is ordinary, but it certainly is not. It was amazing. Unbelievable. It was progressive, active, forward thinking.”

— This supplement is dedicated to the Arctic in general. What does that word mean to you, the Arctic?

“Because of my interest in politics, I have become more interested in the Arctic in recent years. For many years, for instance, I have collected driftwood, which typically begins its journey in the north ocean of Russia. After ten or twenty years, I have been told, the wood eventually ends up in the north of Iceland or in Greenland or Canada. Because of this I became curious about the ocean currents, the ice, the tides and the quality of the wood. And I have become more and more interested in Greenland. My good friend Minik Rosing, with whom I created Ice Watch, is a geologist and he has taught me a lot about the melting of the Arctic. The Northwest Passage, for example, has become free of ice in recent years, enough so that it is navigable by ship. I did a work of art for MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, about the Northwest Passage and gradually came to understand that those massive container ships are flushed by high-carbon fuels, really the worst fuel possible. There is also a noise issue, creating noise pollution under the ocean. I have been listening to some very interesting podcasts about marine life, particularly ones from the BBC.”

Speaking about the Arctic, Ólafur tells me that he also went to Svalbard during the winter and realized that it is never really actually completely dark there. “I’m not saying that it was easy to see, but it turns out that if you make an effort, we are never actually completely blind. If we make an effort, we can always see the path.”

A kind of dystopia

— Back to the glaciers. Scientists have predicted that all glaciers in Iceland will have melted within 150 or 200 years. How does that strike you?

“Of course it is hard to believe. Addressing that in my artwork, there is something fundamentally sad about it. But we need to find ways to talk about the future in which we can imagine that tomorrow is better than yesterday. In order to act, we need to envision a positive future and move away from the fear-based narrative, which is counterproductive to building a sense of trust in each other. I understand that fear-based narratives can be communicated very easily, as in a data-driven lecture by former US Vice President Al Gore, for example. Sadly the press also often mismanages its fundamental and deeper responsibility. Maybe because it is very difficult to find something positive among all the sadness. I can understand that; it takes a lifelong commitment.”

Ólafur argues that the continuation of this fear-based narrative about the end of the world can be harmful. “In history, fear has created more conservatism and lack of change than it has progressive, optimistic, confident and trust-driven ideas. I like to think that even though my documentation of the glaciers in Iceland represents a loss to our world, it is also very beautiful. For me it is important that the work isn’t just beautiful but amazing as well. I think the same when I look at RAX’s work; it has this inhabited beauty. Glow or warmth comes from it and in that sense it is so important because it gives us confidence and hope for the future. We must not exclude the trust-generating positive way of addressing each other.”

The younger generations will not wait for us

— Do you feel it is easier to reach younger generations with this message?

“Before we got to articulating something together and creating a message to reach out to the younger generations they have already got it. While we are sitting here, they have stood up and left. The beautiful thing about the younger generation is that they are not going to wait for us. They are able to address this issue and process it ahead all by themselves because we are being unbelievably slow about it. What we can help the young people to do is to quickly turn all their dreams into systems, political, legislative
og svo framvegda. Ekkis er nög að hafa skýra sín, hugna og dreyta; hreyta þarf henni í dørfamiklar ákvæði sem hafa skert í þa sem sýnað með hugsumi helstartúnar."

I því samhöll er Ólavur þeirrar skólahúr að listar séin að járnæði tíu árum á undan stjörnalmum. „Stjörnalm eru lýðin áfram af kjölsendum og atlygðinglum þeirra spannar að járnæði því til sex mánuði, í mestu lagi í ött ár. Það lýði í stjórnumálum meðu aldrei ræða neitt í kosninguþarðinnunni sem er í tíu ára fjarlægð. Fyrir vísst er ekkil miðla sýrg-ríum fyrir drama í stjörnalmum."

Að því sögu er Ólavur í þeim skólanum að Ísland að botur sett en mórg innri ríki. „Það sost og vegna þess að mórg geyma svo vel að Katrín Jakobsdóttur forsættiráðherrí. Eg þættir þann frá því að hún var menntafélagið, þar sem skýr sín hennar og rannsóri vígna hvert annað vel upp. Hún hérust móri sem miður trastuvkjandi mannskja. Á móti kemur að hún á chaust eftir að áttu sig á því að hafði hún verði að þeim framhættum á evró leiðlagum líma hafi geyti tryggð politíka framstíd sína botur. Úm þetta er ég ekkir í neikrum rafa en kjölsendur eru móður samfyllda – en sem komið er."

etc. It is not enough to be articulate, to think and to dream; it needs to be turned into impactful decisions that can change the macro decisions.

In that respect Ólafur believes that typically art is ten years ahead of politics. “Politics is driven by voters and the attention span of the voters is about three to six months, maybe one year. This means that in an election campaign, politicians will never talk about something which is ten years away. Hence, there is not a lot of dreaming in politics.”

Having said that, Ólafur believes Iceland is in a better place than many other countries. “I say that because I like Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttur so much. I know her from her time as Culture Minister, where I think she had a great sense of vision balanced by pragmatism. She appears to me as someone very trustworthy. But then again she probably will realise that had she been a little more progressive on climate issues in the past, she would have made a better investment in her long-term career. This is something I can say for sure, but the voters do not seem to agree with me – yet.”

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