

Transcendent, Reykjanesbaer Art Museum, 2008. Text by Adalsteinn Ingólfsson

The origins of the paintings of Arngunnur Ýr Gylfadóttir can be traced to the reassessment of the Icelandic landscape tradition that occurred amongst younger artists during the early 1980s. Ever since the emergence of new and radical art movements on the Icelandic art scene during the 1960s, would-be progressive artists had either written off the landscape tradition as obsolete or turned it into symbols of a sentimental nationalism, as in a concrete relief from 1969 by Sigurður Guðmundsson entitled simply Landscape, consisting of a crudely shaped effigy of mountains, topped by real pancakes

During the early 1980s, after Conceptual art, performance art and other experimental art forms had shaken up conventional ideas about the nature and purpose of art, Icelandic artists again turned their attention to landscape. This time their interest was fueled by the ongoing debate on the proposed harnessing of hydroelectric energy in the Icelandic highlands, nature conservation and the link between „nature“ and Iceland’s national image, a debate that often took on strong romantic overtones. In art this new Romanticism manifested itself in the emblemization of well-known Icelandic mountains or the highlands as a whole. This gave rise to a new type of iconic or transcendent landscapes, emblematic constructions with built-in sub-texts that were often more important than the actual depictions of nature on the canvas.

Arngunnur Ýr’s variations on landscape have always been characterized by just such transcendence. The works that she produced in the 1990s are suffused with a desire to describe not only landscape, but through it, time, transience and eternity. I am also reminded of an exhibition of Arngunnur Ýr’s in the Hafnarborg cultural centre in 1996, where she dealt with the romantic image of the pristine Icelandic landscape. She would create perfect likenesses of „typical“ Icelandic scenes only to dismantle them or tear them apart during the painting process, thus revealing the powers, human as well as natural, constantly undermining them. The changeable natural world was even incorporated into the show in the form of seismographs which continued to „draw“ their own versions of nature.

In recent years Arngunnur Ýr’s landscape studies have taken on an increasingly metaphysical slant. They depict a natural environment mid-way between creation and destruction, arousing in us a gamut of feelings ranging from awe at nature’s powers of renewal to fear of its destructive powers. We are left with the notion that Arngunnur Ýr’s visual language, irregular patterns abstracted from the shapes of such incommensurable elements of nature as clouds and mountains, is essentially a metaphor of a primeval state in which, to paraphrase Robert Rosenblum, no human presence or will has yet intruded. In this her paintings may be likened to W.M. Turner’s transformations of destructive natural forces into pictures of the world when it was a vortex of air, earth and water, untouched by divine will. In this Arngunnur Ýr aligns herself with the large flock of Romantic artists who have sought to bridge the gap between the natural and the supernatural.

Adalsteinn Ingólfsson, Transcendent