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NICOLA TURNER

artist residency  
Skaftfell Art Centre  
Seyðisfjörður  
Iceland  
november 2022



view down to Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner



Foreword by Pari Stave,  
Director of Skaftfell

An artist residency is a place of retreat. Ideally, it is a period of uninterrupted solitude in which to gather inspiration and nurture creativity. It can also lead to exploration and discovery, looking both inward and outward.

For British artist Nicola Turner, a residency at Skaftfell Art Center, in East Iceland, was an opportunity to become immersed in a singular place: the small harbor town of Seyðisfjörður, population ca 700. Initially settled sometime in the 10th or 11th century, and sustained over centuries by sheep farming and fishing, Seyðisfjörður is geographically remote (it is only accessible by car via a high mountain pass) and yet connected to the outside world. This is where, in 1906, the Atlantic telegraph cable enabled the first modern communication between Iceland and Europe. It is also home to the only ferry service between Iceland and the continent.

After arriving in Seyðisfjörður, Turner immediately set out on reconnaissance, undeterred by the cold, rainy weather. She wandered along the shorelines and up steep mountainside paths, taking mental notes of the landscape from various aspects. Her observations led to questions about geological and human histories, but also to inquiries about the curious objects she

observed in the landscape: scrappy piles of discarded wool found on the farmlands, and, in the fjord itself, a large, mysterious floating ring.

The wool caught her eye as potential material for a project that was taking shape in her mind. Turner often uses wool in her sculptural practice, its substance being deeply resonant and simply practical. She explains that her mother worked as an upholsterer. Some of Turner's most evocative sculptures are composed of chairs and settees in which the inner wool batting appears to be exploding from the seams. These works have a cathartic effect, as if exposing the inner stuff of objects that by design intimately conform to the body is an act of liberation from confinement.

A practical consideration for the sculptor, wool fibre possesses both tensile strength and malleability. At one extreme it can be formed into elegant tendrils of thread; at the other, it can take on bulk and heft. The matted wool Turner found near local sheep farms had an added appeal: as "waste wool" it was available as material. Having brought fishnet stockings to use as casings, Turner packed the wool in the tapered mesh, creating forms like giant octopus arms. She then headed into the landscape, where she staged temporary installations of the

woolly limbs. By folding them into sharp crevices or perching them in neat bundles on lichen-covered crags, Turner altered the wool to respond to the contours of each site. Coiling and sinuous, these variable forms took on the appearance of mythical creatures in the landscape, like strange offerings to the souls of the myriad sheep that have roamed the slopes for more than a thousand years. Careful to leave the landscape as she found it, Turner photographed the wool works before removing them. The ephemeral installations were well documented by iPhone in the series of spectacular photographs published here.

And the floating ring? This is where the story's circle closes, for the ring is part of an apparatus used by the Icelandic Coast Guard to contain oil leaking from the SS El Grillo, a British tanker sunk by German air attack during World War II. Like the slow bleed of a wound, the oil seepage is a reminder of the less pastoral side of life in Seyðisfjörður, marking that moment when this peaceable place was thrust into the miasma of modern warfare.

In the end, the waste wool was not wasted. The fleece was donated for use as a boom, absorbing oily slick from the wreck.



El Grillo sinking 1944: photo Harald Sigmarsson  
floating fence, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner





waste wool in Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner  
Turner collecting waste wool in Seyðisfjörður: photo Julia Martin





installations in Vestdalseyri, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner



installations in Vestdalseyri valley, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner



“I could feel it.  
That unwholesome  
air had thickened,  
coating everything with  
an oily heaviness.  
Miasma, it was called.  
Pollution.  
It rose from unpurified  
crimes,  
from deeds done  
against the gods,  
from the unsanctified  
spilling of blood.”

Madeline Miller, *Circe*

installation Vestdalseyri, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner







installations in Vestdalseyri rocks, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner





installations in Vestdalseyri valley, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner





installations in Vestdalseyri, Seyðisfjörður: photo Nicola Turner



installation in the Vestdalseyri Valley: photo Nicola Turner







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