



# ERLA THÓRARINSDÓTTIR

SOLO EXHIBITION AT MOKKA CAFÉ, REYKJAVÍK 8 AUGUST - 18 SEPTEMBER 2019

AT A DIVERGENT BOUNDARY — A CONTINENT TO BE

CONVERSATION BETWEEN ERLA THÓRARINSDÓTTIR AND BIRTA GUDJÓNSDÓTTIR IN JULY 2019 AT ERLA'S STUDIO IN REYKJAVÍK

We met for tea on a sunny Saturday in July 2019 at Erla's studio in Reykjavík. As soon as you enter Erla's studio, a bath begins; a shower of colors that has been an integral part of her art from the start. Erla's work is like she is; radiating clear beauty and energy that expands the chest and shoots sparks into the mouth muscles, creating a glowing smile.

Erla has been working on her art in this studio for 13 years. She rides her bike in all conditions, arriving at noon after yoga practice to continue her color and form exploration, which began in the early 1980s. Erla and I have collaborated on exhibitions before and I have always been fascinated by her and her art. I wanted to explore various aspects of her art at this very point in her career. Our recent conversation starts with the subject of the artists' sketch work, surrounded by Erla's beautiful sketch books.

**Erla:** "Bárd Breivik [artist, 1948 - 2016] published sketchbooks. I have a small one by him from Brazil, a great book that was a part of an exhibition, likely at the São Paulo Biennale. Drawings and writings, a bit like a travel book and a visual sketch book. He was the ultimate traveler, a nomad. I've done this as well. Just emptying out and forgetting where I come from and then attempting to start at point zero, one's own point zero, receiving what is there at that very moment. Yet, here you are, where your roots are and you want to acquire space, a space of your own – living quarters – where letters and sketches can be stored. A reservoir of memories and layers of work accumulate and these contain a certain kind of value."

**Birta:** "Yes, indeed. Sketchbooks are travel documents. What I am thinking about in this context is that when one feels rootless and wants to create such processes – to be everywhere and nowhere – it is my experience that the collection of processes become different. The processes occur; sketches of ideas, forms and colors, and the patterns and thoughts are documented. Yet, the circumstances of keeping records and storing them, control the process to some extent."

**Erla:** "Something disappears during the nomad life, yet I miss very few things that disappear. It is a bit like memories; we remember what matters. Usually, and so it is with art, when art matters and moves the spirit, it settles into the system. It is a measure of the quality of the energy, if we remember it and it becomes part of us. It is amazing. So, this nomad life, it is a bit physical. You are reminded of the fact that you cannot escape your own nature."

**Birta:** "As a person and as an artist I perceive you as a nomad and a great wanderer. You are continually picking up subjects, both geographically and from life generally, and then sowing seeds in the same places and areas. When I woke up this morning, looking forward to seeing you, I saw a vision of you holding a bag like the sower in a painting by (Jean-François) Millet. I have the feeling that one makes such pacts with the higher powers; to give and then receive ideas and things in return."

**Erla:** "Yes, to touch something, you might expand your consciousness through touch. We don't know it but it is instinctive. We think of something that is not logical or clear, yet it is present in our senses. Through that you participate in something that is ongoing, there are others involved. If we are conscious of what we are working with, we become capable of tackling a host of things that belong to the foundation of human existence."

**Birta:** "We are raised in a capitalist society which shapes our world view. If you destroy something, you can just give something in return, like payment. Like carbon offsetting one's flight. Hopefully, this element you talk about is nothing like that."

**Erla:** "Maybe one can give back and participate. We are constantly being given something. In Morocco I have experienced a generosity of beauty. I am very grateful for that, almost like I want to go back and give back what I created from it – return gifts to the place from where I received them."

**Birta:** "I feel strongly that your works are relational. That you share your creations with us and offer us an entrance to them. You been interested in and knowledgeable of Eastern philosophy for long time, and your art tells me that nobody owns color; color experience is a part of our world heritage."

**Erla:** "A collective beauty."

**Birta:** "Yes, a collective beauty. Wherever we go in the world, we can unite with other people by sharing an admiration of colors. Not many things in the world are like that; kittens are and children and puppies. All the innocent beings."

**Erla:** "Yes, all that is Sattvic. Flowers and innocence. Beauty is very seductive and true. It is a measurement of truth, the Sattvic is true, not just sentimental. I always choose beauty if I have the choice, as a beacon of truth. That which grows, where there is harmony and some order. Wonderful beauty. Perfect beauty."

**Erla:** "Sattvic, true-wisdom. In Icelandic Satt means true and viska is wisdom. This is in a way an Icelandic word as well."

**Erla:** "Sanskrit and Icelandic. True. Sathnam. It is a divine concept. We have this in our language, the archaic. The primordial. We speak one of the oldest living languages that contains primary concepts. I've often been dealing with this too. In Sanskrit the sounds, the structure and the functions are one. They have been so widely used; written and chanted for so long. So, there are concepts that vibrate as if they already exist inside your throat and your heart the moment you hear them. You perceive them immediately."

**Erla:** "To me it seems like your yogic way of life is reflected in your work. Yet, art exists on so many levels, in a sense they are neither yogic works nor illustrations."

**Erla:** "It is rather like I found yoga through my art as I began creating pieces that correlated to yoga. Yoga can be a way to cultivate, to practice and heighten perception and to deepen awareness. By practicing yoga, I can go deeper into this presence. I do not even know how far and deep it is possible to go. It depends on the blessings one receives. Good artists find themselves there, it is not necessarily a direct meditation, but it is very similar. This is a state like meditation. They can be creative and present to themselves and the work without the ego leading the way. Being rid of ego. Yoga is so good. It contains a knowledge of humanity, as we know it. It is an account of and a path for our development. If you would really follow it with stern discipline, maybe you could go all the way. Yet, the western lifestyle prevents us from following a true yogic path. We also need to meet people and participate in our lives. Living a Brahmanacharya life would be complicated, celibacy and just eating select types of vegetarian food. We sometimes need to eat fish here because we live in such a place. We also need to participate in the collective. I have somehow always known that I would go this path when I became older."

**Erla:** "Your work here reminds me of the movement on all levels of life. The movement within our bodies and that we are in a constant state of flux in life, change of being. And motivation, which is motion, movement. Emotion."

**Erla:** "And a state of being. To paint. It is a state of being, to be present in that condition, you do not always realize it."

Here in Iceland we are always expecting volcanic eruptions. I find it exiting! Will there be an eruption soon? Occasionally I find that something more powerful than myself takes over. And I must accept it. It is like dreaming a dream and surrendering, don't doubt it. I don't think I am psychic but in a painting state it is possible to hear all kinds of things and smell colors that have nothing to do with their chemical composition only their visual stimulus. Voices can be felt and heard. It is quite possible to go there; in some kind of a meditative state. I wonder how supernatural that really is. Isn't it just concentration and a state of being? To be present and enjoy the opportunity of listening, smelling, sensing. To be sensitive."

**Birta:** "Dwelling uninterrupted in the flow of art... Is your artistic practice simultaneously your teacher in how to reach that place, that state?"

**Erla:** "Yes, I think I can be. I have not thought about it in this way, but I think it becomes a habit to be in this condition at the studio. It has become a way of life and a certain discipline, a practice. It teaches you and I don't want to be without it."

**Birta:** "Do you miss the studio when you are away from it? When traveling?"

**Erla:** "Yes, I miss being in the studio for 4-5 hours a day when I am traveling. It's a tremendous habit."

**Birta:** "Does that require you to create such a place, such a workspace everywhere you travel?"

**Erla:** "Yes, it is natural to me. I find a private place to observe and draw. I need to see what I am experiencing. You become filled up with something that is not necessarily obvious. I just need to sit down. There is something on the retina that needs to be released. Perhaps to try out a color, check a structure. 'Yes, this is it!' – to recognize it. There is a need to touch, stir a bit, smell."

**Birta:** "I'm always so curious and think many others are too. When you look back, how do you think you have been able create time for your art?"

**Erla:** "Yes, I find time I have for myself. It is either to get a studio and be there or, when you are elsewhere, to just find a place. I quickly find a rhythm where I can be

working for some time, doing something. Then I need to go out to observe and meet people. Then you retreat to read, draw and explore things. Two or three months later I look back and start to see maybe what is going on; 'Yes, this!' Then I take it firmly with both hands and work with it more clearly. A definition starts forming, whether it is the tectonic plates of east and west or mother's milk, large concepts like that. Something along those lines."

**Birta:** "I feel that in your work you control the concept of time in their making. The works are timeless, yet they take a long time to create and some of them are made with sheets of silver that tarnishes over time. The works, however, are timeless. Is that element entirely natural to you, or are you exploring it particularly in your art, as a conscious process?"

**Erla:** "I have worked consciously with time processes especially in the silver works. Indeed, that which is given an immeasurable time seems to become timeless. I think I have acted like this from the beginning. Games were infinite in my youth as a child in the small town of Hvarfusstangi in north of Iceland. I occupied the garage. My father was a doctor of the province and he never used the garage. There was only one Beuys (artist Joseph Beuys, 1921-1986) sledge. I was constantly collecting stuff and packaging and doing something. There were games that never ended. Timeless. In the Icelandic twilight, everything is constantly changing. And then we were to clean it all up. I was distraught when the games were stopped, the setting broken down and destroyed. 'It's not done, not ready!' I think it must be a part of the character, a need for activity, arrangement and playing."

There weren't many things to play with for kids in small villages in the Icelandic countryside, neither toys nor paper dolls. We created everything ourselves. It was innovative. My mother was sewing hats and kimonos, dresses and curtains. You know everyone was doing something, weaving floormats and everything else. It was normal. Then there was baking and the slaughter season and everything just merges with the next thing. I think maybe I became accustomed to this or just had it in me. Isn't it possible that we somehow have it in our system, the need to do our own thing? The possessive 'you must not disturb this' is ours but when in the company of others, it becomes a collective game.

The life, the flow, it melts into one. It is a bit of what happens when one is always active. Of course, we have periods where I have been living in my studio and never resting, always active. You become completely exhausted after a few years. It is possible to draw yourself with overactivity during such a period. You learn it; the need to pause and attend to other parts of life. Cooking food in a clean kitchen."

**Birta:** "Yes, caring for yourself. I think this relates so much to your works shown at Mokka Café. They flow out of the frame, outside of the canvas. A pattern is there and my feeling is that you see patterns for a split-second, a bit like a frozen frame from an endless flow."

**Erla:** "Yes, a glimpse. It is not tangible, not made of granite or earth, rather a bit like handwriting. In fact, it becomes a bit abstract."

**Birta:** "Yes, and perhaps related to photography."

**Erla:** "Yes, that frozen moment."

**Birta:** "In the way that the body approaches the device."

**Erla:** "Exactly. And then when I put silver on the canvas – as I often like to do – I am freezing time. When I block the transformation process, the oxidation. A process that has taken place. It has a time-space element to it as well. I found it fascinating when I realized that it could become a different time. Process-time that is also light-time."

There are many other things that affect silver. Everything that is in the air, humidity and sulfur. Especially the sulfur."

**Birta:** "Yes, here by the sea it is different from other countries, more sulfur in the air."

**Erla:** "There must be. I have never tried to work with silver in other countries. It is strange. I have only done it here. It has something to do with returning it to the light where it came from. It is a part of the light. Some testimony of a becoming. You know how pictures can be sensed like that. I would like them to have such a presence. Be something that emanates energy and gives within its own context."

**Erla:** "I've often experienced your work as pulsating, possessing an inner movement. I experienced it when I came into the studio, with your work here on the wooden easel, there are lights or pulses radiating from it when I am not looking directly at it, in the rear-view mirror of my own eye. I feel that these works are subtle, I think you are consciously using the strength and the strength of each color is perceived by the eye. We know that red calls for our attention and yellow is more subdued, etc."

**Erla:** "Yes, how the color embraces us and blue creates space."

**Birta:** "Yes, and you trust it so well, I would say that by looking at these works that the painter knows the field of colors very well. One drop of black color."

**Erla:** "Affects another. This is perhaps like listening to work, having some good ambient sounds running there go like this bzzzzzzz. You must listen to that. And give this... Thin layers top of thin layers. It is fun doing this. Dive into this, one falls into it rrrrrr; I didn't plan to do this but I just thought it was so much fun. I just let it happen."

**Birta:** "I also imagine... You choose these forms and I don't know it unless I ask you; what is your working process like? One sees your work on a photo, but when one comes closer to it there is a lot of movement in each surface and then one sees, like in the blue colors, some sort of reflection or echo, in a similar color, which still keeps its shape. There is a lot of such ongoing movement."

**Erla:** "Also, because this is always the same shape. It has a three-dimensionality to it with the round form and it is assembled from all directions. It is quite possible to explore the colors, their affects and just to use that knowledge, as I do here, where I decide not to use certain colors. As you know from Matisse and Warhol: using contrasting colors and tilting one color just a bit – one step away from contrasting – a movement occurs. Skipping e.g. the yellow color completely so one starts to create it through red. Something like this is happening. It is captivating, to let go of color and limit the color scheme. Not always but allowing it to happen, and then you continue. After a while I say to myself: 'Well, now I know this, so I take a bigger canvas and bolder colors, make it a challenge!' Use warm and cold colors, mix them together. Then the charkas seemed to appear. I have been practicing yoga long enough for it to slip in and energize. It's really emanating energy (Icelandic: aðr orka) because I am processing it."

**Birta:** "These are wonderful terms and words in the Icelandic language; aðr orka (emanating energy onto or having an energetic effect on, to energize). That something emanates energy onto a person."

**Erla:** "Yes, isn't this a very Icelandic term? That something emanates energy into a person, is it different than function. It energizes us, this understand. It is like the energy inside of us."

**Birta:** "The term indicates that one is not quite sure. If something affects a person in this way or another way, then it is an activity that has little to do with your opinions.

But if something is energy that is experienced in some way by a person, then you are aware of it. I think there is a big difference between these smaller paintings and the larger ones. The smaller ones seem like it is possible to embrace them, they are human sized. But the larger ones start to embrace me in a way."

**Erla:** "Or they are spaces that one has to enter diagonally."

**Birta:** "Yes, one has to run and jump into them."

**Erla:** "Yes, to plunge into them. Yes, it has a lot to do with their size. The large works are a kind of space for entering. They can completely embrace a person, or a person gets lost in them. Or they can say; 'don't come here, these doors are closed.' This is a space. I am so primitive that I am confronted by paintings on a physical level."

**Birta:** "I thought a lot about you when I was in Egypt recently, in the Egypt Museum. I realized the connections between your work and the shapes in the museum where they keep the mummies, and very physical forms, the gold and strong colors."

**Erla:** "Yes, and lapis lazuli, the blue."

**Birta:** "Yes, exactly. I feel a strong connection between these and your work, the elongated and physical forms. And perhaps a connection to the mummies. Your stone sculptures are related to these museum objects. The smaller, pattern works I experience as if being on another continent. You have traveled far away from Iceland, on paths of color, disparate color palettes from the ones we have in Iceland and northern Europe."

**Erla:** "Yes, the Indian culture is colorful. I am very fond of Egyptian art. It is eternal, it belongs to eternity. And lives in the present. It is not contemporary art but eternal; made to last for the afterlife. Made to be everlasting. Carved in stone so it can withstand everything. I love this art and I look at Egyptian books every now and then. These works I am working on here are maybe some kind of hieroglyphs. I think; 'do these symbols exist somewhere else?' Is this the heart chakra? Yes, this is something related to the heart chakra. I know that the work is and should be light green, but it also calls for a contrasting color, it should also be pink. So, I leave this to be. Yes, perhaps it is a

hieroglyph. Let's just see how many of these paintings will come, what happens. Right? Just go with the flow. And then someone so lovely like yourself comes and sees it as a Shiva lingam (one of the most recognizable representations in Hinduism, representing the deity Shiva) and then it dawns on me that of course it is the energy. I have been invoking Shiva, last year in southern India. Om Shiva, Om Shiva. And people covered with ash around me. There is no wonder that Shiva appears. I don't always know what it is, but I have to do it."

**Birta:** "It is quite amazing. And even more amazing that these are very unusual colors, one almost never sees these colors."

**Erla:** "This pink, white and red, this is a color pigment I bought in Morocco. This is a purple color pigment but when mixed with water, another crazy-bright pink color is revealed. These are water-soluble colors but I mostly use oil, so I got into trouble and started to use tempera color but I couldn't resist it."

**Birta:** "These are natural neon colors."

**Erla:** "It might be some oxide Minerals and oxides. This is Marrakesh red; no other red is allowed as house paint there."

**Birta:** "Tell me about this Marrakesh red. I have been there but I do not know the history of use of this color."

**Erla:** "There is the Marrakesh red that Yves Saint Laurent used, Majorelle Blue. It is a bit brighter than the Ultramarine but very close. This red color, I just couldn't figure out what it is. It is Crimson. It is probably some mineral. I think of it as a Rothko color. Rothko uses this stuff a lot, with orange and magenta. This is a basic color, perhaps iron oxide."

**Birta:** "What will you exhibit at Mokka Café?"

**Erla:** "I am going to show the Tectonic Plates paintings, hang them high up on the wall. I am thinking of the creation of this material; that when you touch it, pay attention to it, do we grant it an awareness? Is there an awareness? Man, as awareness in this environment. This is not just basal erupting. This is also a becoming, what we create from it with awareness."

To me Iceland is extremely sacred and I become very hurt when the land is not being regarded as such. It is in a constant state of becoming. I think this is the only place on earth where the plates are drifting apart above sea level and land is being created. We see the creation if we want to. That is in fact what I find most important in all this. But, how do you portray that?"

**Birta:** "Yes, how can you share it so that others perceive the environment that way? To me, this relates to farmers' perception of the past and present. The people who know how to read nature and its changes. Then artists are attentive to it and do their own reading."

**Erla:** "Exactly, the fact is that the land is drifting apart and it can happen during earthquakes. It is at least drifting by 1 cm in each direction, every year. That is a lot, and fast in geological time. These motions are directly connected to the magma chamber, so it is constantly in motion and creation. We are just a small unit that has adapted to some kind of a life here and we are still finding out about this land. We have attitudes like; 'what; can't something be gained from this? Or can it be enjoyed?' It's a subject of constant change. It is wonderful to live where there is a bedrock like in Finland and Sweden. No change, but then you realize that everything is stable and there is nothing going on. But, in Iceland we constantly experience the changes. I think we know it deep inside of us that something is permanent."

**Erla:** "Do you feel this most strongly when you are painting?"

**Erla:** "Probably not the strongest when I paint. I feel this when I travel the country and whenever I am conscious of the land. I always feel it, yes. I become sad when I know that roads are being built in the highlands."

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**Birta:** "Is a painting a holy place to you?"

**Erla:** "Perhaps it is. At its best, I would like a painting to be a sanctuary, a place of refuge."

**Erla:** "Yes, when I am traveling and search for paintings in museums or in churches, I find them to be sacred places, holy and I take great pleasure in connecting to the same works over and over again."

**Erla:** "Sometimes I go to see a piece again and I feel an urge to embrace it and kiss it, I just find it hard not to. But you can't laugh. There is so much love inside. Feels good to dwell inside this work."

**Birta:** "It is so beautiful to visit the Greek and Russian orthodox churches where people can kiss the icons. This is a kind of perception of the painting as a holy place."

**Erla:** "Yes, it tells us that it is a part of us. We very easily love paintings and project something religious and respectful onto it. We love it and wish to share it. It is probably what the kiss is in its essence."

**Birta:** "In this context; I find it beautiful to think of travelers in earlier times who paid for their accommodation with paintings. Painter Jóhannes S. Kjarval and others in Iceland, for example. Today, the art market is depleting art to some extent."

**Erla:** "At the same time there is a great need for sanctification because it is so deep in us. It is not something we can censor or intellectualize. This is a part of humanity."

**Birta:** "Yes, if we assume that the painting, in particular, is a haven, then one can say that many people want to become a part of the painting, to own it. The fact that color palettes made from earth and oil placed on a canvas cost an arm and a leg."

**Erla:** "Isn't it remarkable that this is even possible?"

**Erla:** "Sure. People are buying history."

**Erla:** "Yes, and myths. Then many of these artworks end up in storage, without affection or care. They are just put in a storage."

**Birta:** "I think there are far more people who appreciate these havens in their daily lives. I have never worried that art is becoming obsolete or too elitist. People want to dwell in sacred places."

**Erla:** "Man has always needed to create; new works are being made and more beauty created. Several sacred places."

**Birta:** "You are using a pattern in your work. Does it have a name?"

**Erla:** "It comes up again and again in my sketch books, but does it have a name?"

**Birta:** "Regarding colors and color-magic, do you remember particular artworks from when you were young, where the color had a strong influence on you?"

**Erla:** "I remember the paintings in my grandparents' home; these were old Icelandic paintings. I especially remember a work by Gunnlaugur Blöndal in the dining room, depicting Thingvellir national park, all in pastel, madly beautiful. This was just a genuine Gunnlaugur Blöndal-esque work with light green and pink colors, and one sees mount Skjaldbreidur and the water. I remember there was this expansive color license and it was always nice to look at this painting. Then there was a painting by Jón Stefánsson, like a gray ocean and a huge painting by Jóhannes S. Kjarval where I always saw a large elephant appearing. These did not express this joy of color, rather a rainy-day gloominess. But I think it must have had an effect, seeing real paintings in a bourgeois living room. Must have, several paintings."

**Birta:** "Did you say, 'color license'?"

**Erla:** "Yes, a color license. We give ourselves a license for color."

**Birta:** "Yes, this is quite right. And having a color license, I think it is mostly reflected in how people dress. I really like this; to give oneself a color license."

**Erla:** "Yes, and everywhere you are here in the studio, the colors behind you change how you appear, and I get the pleasure of seeing it. Iridescent."

**Birta:** "Have you always given yourself color license in your own work?"

**Erla:** "Yes, always, and quite effortlessly. I can use all colors, and I also wear all colors."

Erla Þórarinsdóttir (b. 1955) is an artist based in Reykjavík, Iceland.

Birta Guðjónsdóttir (f. 1977) is an artist and curator based in Reykjavík, Iceland and Berlin, Germany.

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