

# Elements

## "Twists & Turns"

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Icelandic Abstract Art  
August 20 - September 19, 1999

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Iceland has a rich tradition of handicraft and indigenous art dating back to the commonwealth period, AD 930-1262, but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Icelandic artist started to seek education on the European mainland - most of them in Copenhagen - and the visual arts in Iceland began to develop in tandem with current international styles. In the century that has passed since the pioneering painters brought the post-impressionistic approach to bear on Icelandic subjects the art scene has expanded rapidly. To some extent Icelandic artists have echoed the prevailing trends in Western art, but in each case they have reworked their influence to create a style that is genuinely and recognisably Icelandic.

By the Second World War the Icelandic art scene was thriving and as soon as the mainland opened up at the end of the war young artists flocked from Iceland to take up studies in the art schools of the European capitals. This time many gravitated towards Paris where the members of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles were rapidly bringing abstract painting to the forefront in European art. The Icelanders eagerly absorbed these ideas and for the first time Icelandic artists became active participants in the current international art movement. Many exhibited in Paris alongside French artists and exiles from around the world. Some settled abroad but most returned to Iceland where they introduced the nation to the new and often controversial style. Abstraction dominated the 1950s and even some of the older artists were converted though most retained the representational styles they had developed. Geometric abstraction was actively pursued in paintings, sculpture, architecture and design, and artists not only presented their ideas in exhibitions but also in periodicals and manifestoes. Yet the geometric orthodoxy soon gave way to a more poetic approach, often betraying the influence of the landscape which has run persistently through all stylistic changes, from the early painters to the concept based minimalism current today. When Icelandic artists came into contact with the New York School towards the end of the 1950s they welcomed the freedom this influence brought and the pure formalism of the geometric tradition was quickly eclipsed by a more expressive and personal style.

The four artists in the exhibition represent the younger generation of painter working with abstraction in Iceland. They also represent very different approaches to painting, echoing the wide diversity of styles current on the art scene today, in Iceland just as elsewhere in the world. All of them can be said to combine a painterly style with more contemporary influences, ranging from minimalism to the post-conceptual installation style now current throughout Europe. Nonetheless, they all retain close ties to what we may term the Icelandic tradition, which is to say that they all rework their influences in the peculiarly lyrical way that seems to characterise so much of Iceland's modern art.

This exhibition is a welcome opportunity to present in Copenhagen four strong representatives of contemporary abstraction in Iceland. This is all the more significant as Copenhagen has played such a vital role in the development of Icelandic art, even, despite the Parisian influence, in the development of abstraction in Iceland - perhaps best represented by Svavar Gudnason, an Icelander who studied and worked in Copenhagen and was a pioneering member of the CoBrA movement. For Icelanders it remains important to nurture and reaffirm our ties to this city and it is in this spirit that the current exhibition has been mounted.

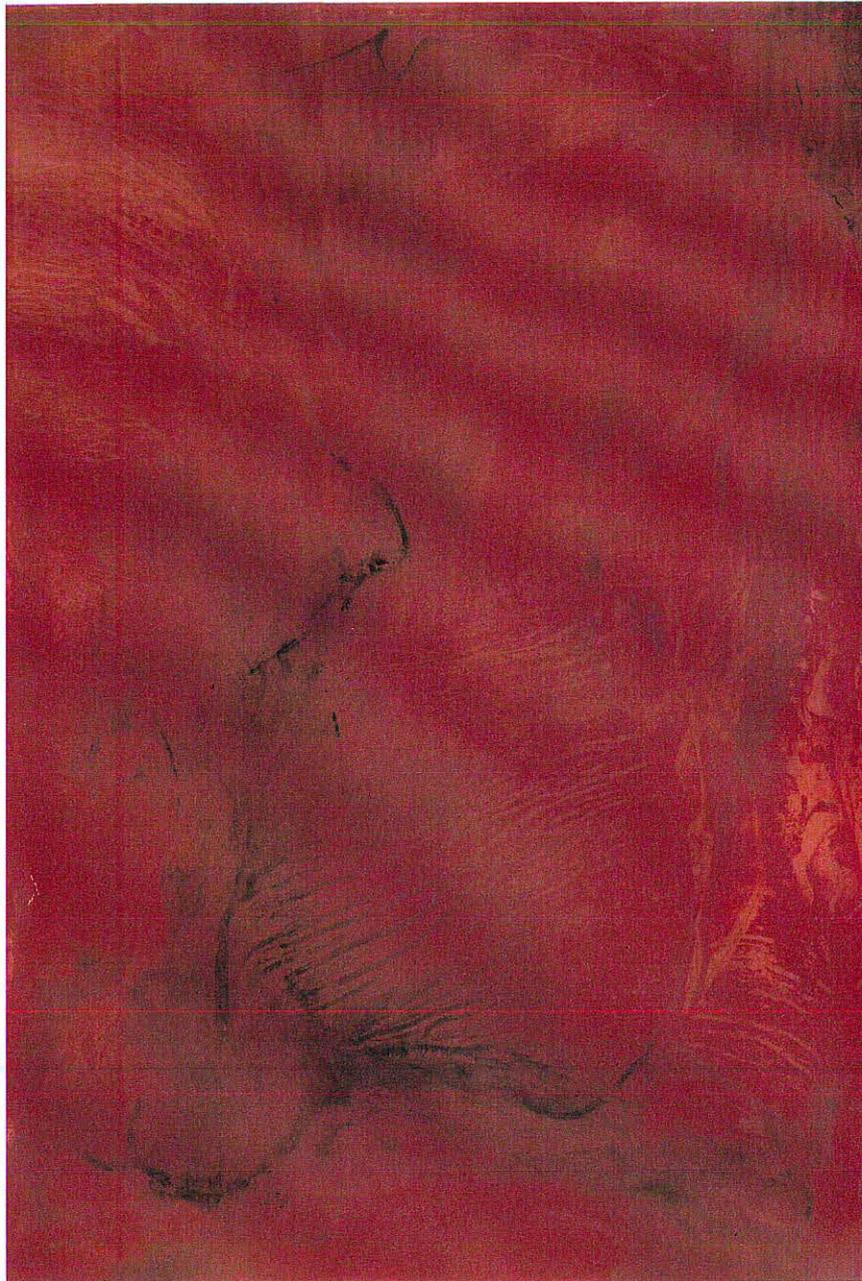
Jon Proppe, art critic

Jon Proppe (b. 1962) studied philosophy at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, and has since worked as an editor, writer and lecturer. He writes art criticism for the Reykjavik daily Morgunblaðið and writes and lectures on art, philosophy and cultural studies. Jon Proppe has also worked as a curator and directed various projects in the field of art and culture.



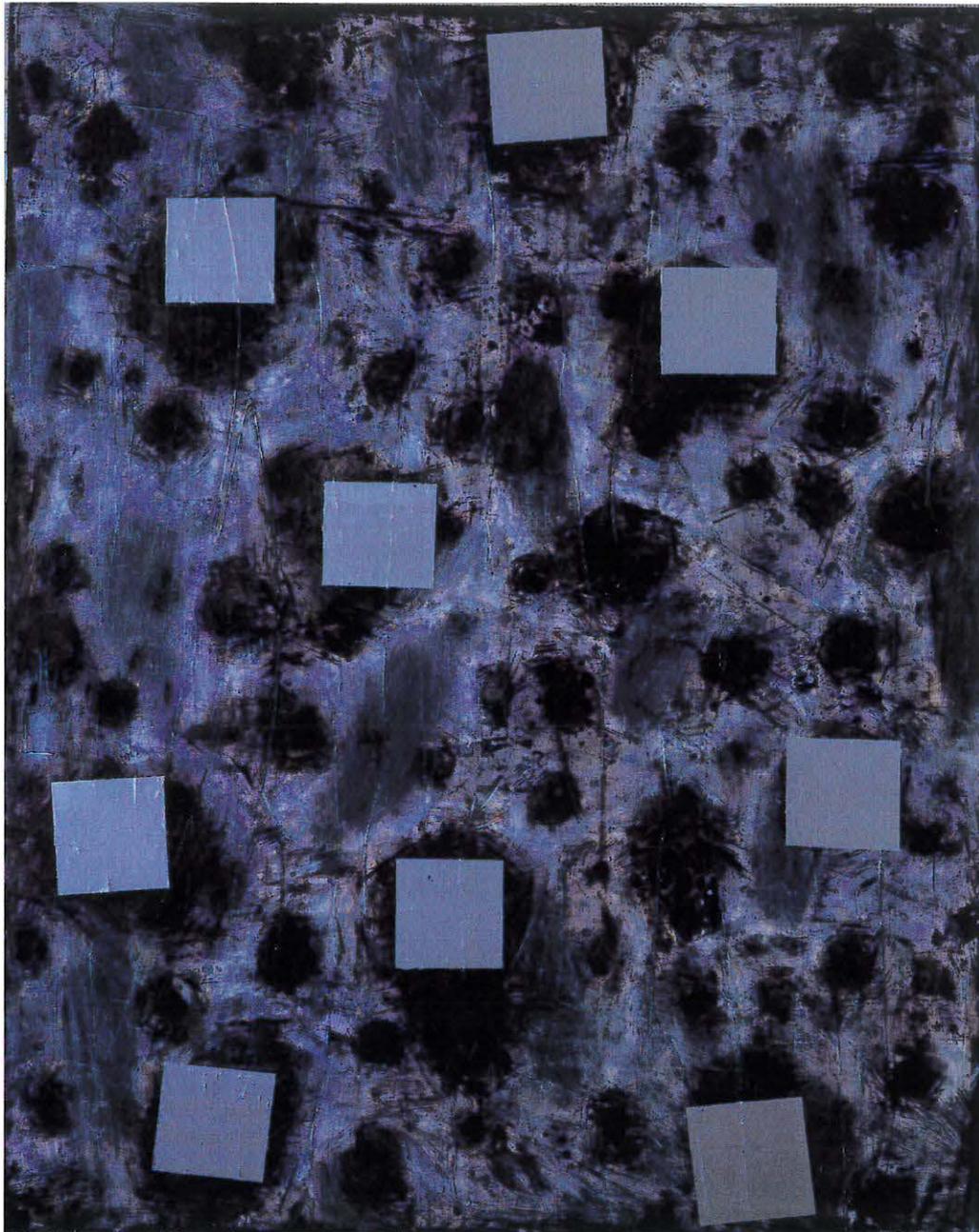
Gudrun Kristjansdottir, "Landscape", 1999, 170 x 275 cm, oil on canvas

Gudrun Kristjansdottir (b. 1950) studied in Iceland and in France. Her works, whether in paper or paint, are marked by a strict and highly developed sense of form. As many critics have noted, her works tend to evoke echoes of the stricter schools of abstract painting, the geometric abstraction that was popular in Iceland in the 1950s, yet their primary force is in the landscape which somehow seems to inform all her work and to lend it a dimension that transcends the formalism of earlier schools. Landscapes have long been prominent in Icelandic art, and although Gudrun approaches her landscape in an entirely new way, the parallel to the earlier and well-established tradition is clear. But whereas the older painters sought out the specific in the landscape, Gudrun searches for the general, using landscape as an experimental ground to examine the possibilities and limits of simple and sharply defined forms.



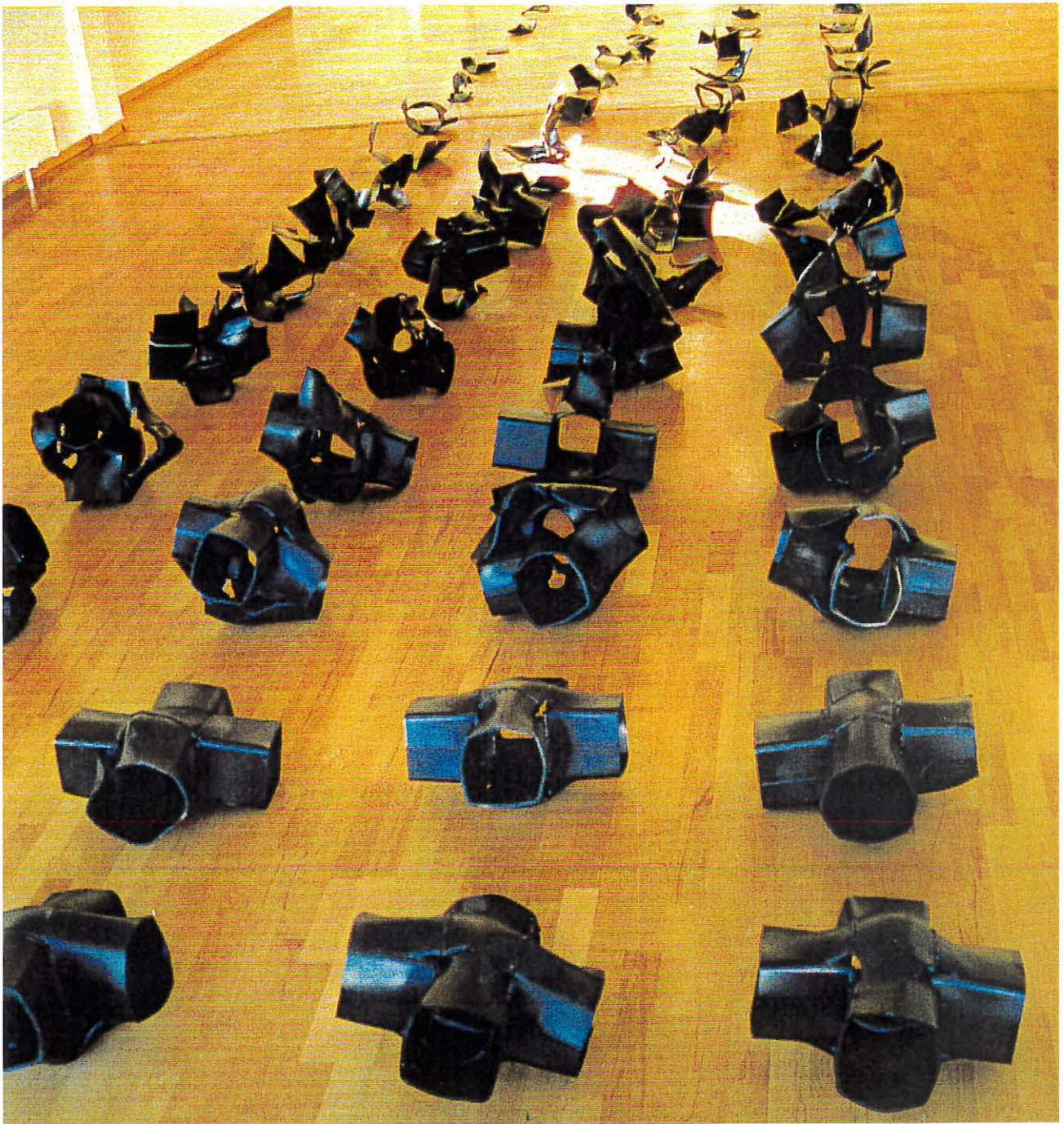
Bjarni Sigurbjornsson, "Unidentified", 1999, 305 x 205 cm, oil on plexiglass

Bjarni Sigurbjornsson (b. 1966) studied in Iceland and the United States. In his works he takes the viewer beneath the surface of the painting. Instead of using wood or canvas he paints on a transparent medium and then presents the back of the painting to the viewer. In effect he shows us the painting from the point of view of the canvas. His current paintings explore the chemical mysteries of painting itself but with a strong concern with transparency. Working with thin-flowing oil paints of a single colour mixed with water, he allows these opposites to shape through their reaction the forms of the painting. As the liquids dry what remains is in effect a documentation of their struggle to achieve an impossible solution, the solution of oil and water. When hung, the panels are raised from the wall allowing light to enter the painting from behind so that the thin layer of colour becomes luminescent. The effect is quite striking, giving a sense of incredible clarity and brilliance. The experience of seeing these paintings, as one viewer pointed out, is not unlike seeing a large Cibachrome print for the first time. The large panels seem to document a momentous engagement, a heroic battle involving the entire surface, yet every detail emerges with perfect clarity.



Helga Egilsdottir, "Ekko I", 1999, 250 x 200 cm, oil on canvas

Helga Egilsdottir (b. 1952) studied in Denmark, Iceland and the United States. Her large-scale abstractions reveal an organic world of forms and hues, though with remarkably little use of colour. But though she uses only a narrow spectrum of colour in her recent paintings, they seem to present the viewer with a full range of emotions and gradations, not least because of Helga's expert brushwork and mastery. Her paintings are often inspired by nature, as can sometimes be seen from their titles, but in fact their association with nature is only incidental. From nature, she derives a study of form that transcends any representation and gives the viewer an insight into the very nature of painting itself, its possibilities and the endless worlds that can emerge on the canvas. By denying herself the a fuller palette of colours, Helga in fact emphasises the expressive potential of the painting. Not only do her paintings no need any reference to nature, they can even achieve a full range of expression with only the most basic colours and forms.

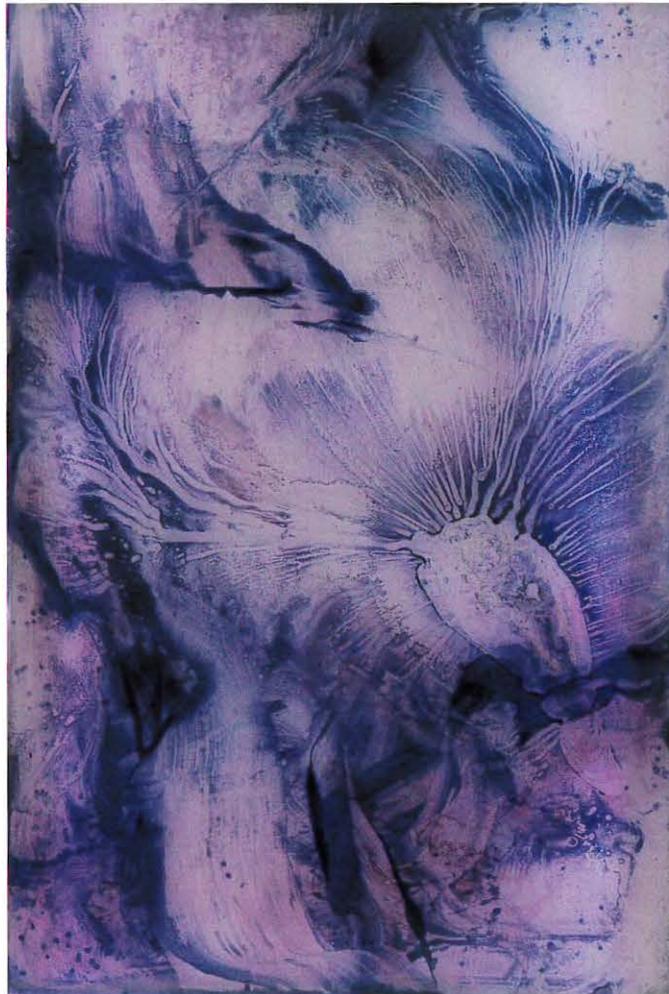


Gudjon Bjarnason, "100 Crosses", 1999, 4 x 12 m, exploded steel

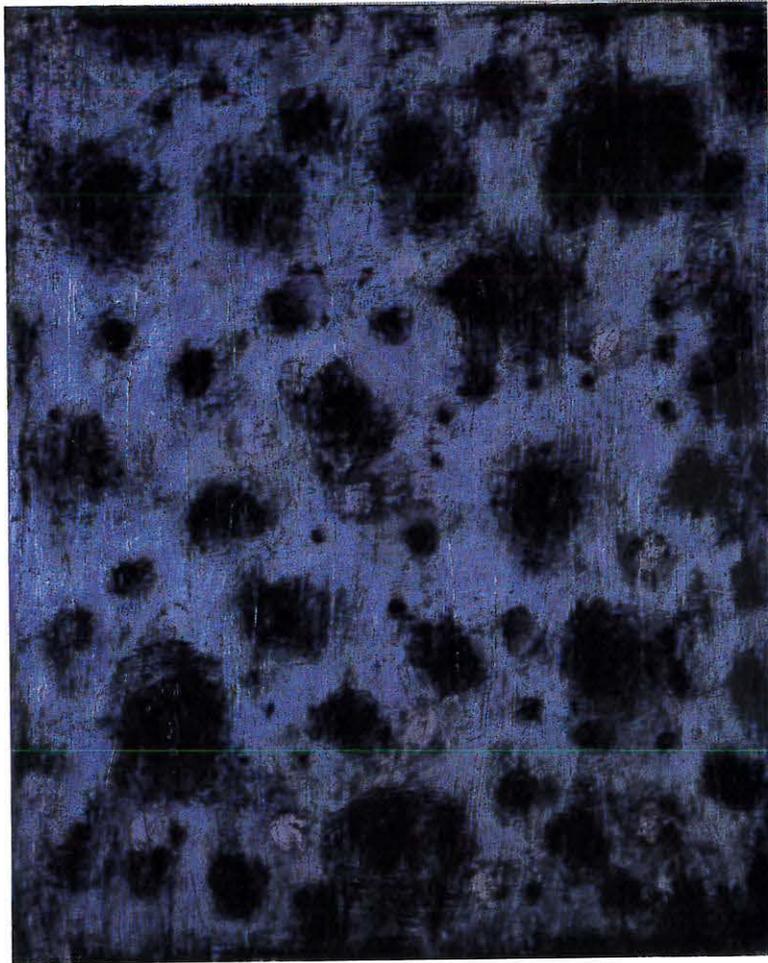
Gudjon Bjarnason (b. 1959) studied in the United States. He works in sculpture as well as painting and often combines the two in large scale installations, and has developed a unique visual language that evokes the tensions of chaos and order, understanding and transcendence, as well as raising challenging questions about the relationship of art, meaning and environment, audience displacement and the future course of artistic efforts. A primary theme in Gudjon's work is the relationship of chaos and order as experienced in nature and in thought. His works frequently involve an element of chance - for example using dynamite to shape his large steel sculptures - and his paintings play organic forms against geometric ones, controlled order against nature's chaotic diversity.



Gudrun Kristjansdottir, "Landscape", 1999, 170 x 275 cm, oil on canvas



Bjarni Sigurbjornsson, "Unidentified", 1999,  
305 x 205 cm, oil on plexiglass



Helga Egilsdottir, "Ekko II", 1999, 250 x 200 cm, oil on canvas



Gudjon Bjarnason, "Blue Print", 1999, 300 x 200 cm, alcohol paint and earth on wax cloth