Myth: A Continuation

Ragnar Helgi Ólafsson
talks to Ólöf Nordal

Yes, alright, maybe I should start by telling the readers what just happened as I walked into the artist's studio, before I turned on the recorder. I barged in and knocked over a picture which was leaning against the doorpost. It was quite a bang but fortunately I seem not to have damaged it.

No, the glass looks unbroken. It's fine.

I am so sorry. I didn't notice it, wasn't paying attention.

Well, I shouldn't have placed it so close to the door, that was risky. I am wondering whether this should be included in my exhibition. It's an old piece, a part of my Yale graduation project.

Last night, I read the manuscript that you sent me, the one with the unpublished short stories you've written. It seems to me that it combines two key elements in your art; one is history and the other collection. Most of the texts – or at least many – are connected to the creation of individual artworks. There is no story about this one here that I nearly broke, though, but the manuscript contains many other interesting things; this background information for the art, of course, but also interesting facts about leader sheep, random things, unexpected realisations, unforeseen complications … these texts actually often reminded me of prose poems, each one more unexpected and delightful than the last.

I am happy to hear that. Not least because the last person who read this called it "a kind of gossip".

I disagree with that. I view the texts as sprouting from our traditional folklore. They are those kinds of stories.

And they are all true – truth, not fiction.

Exactly. They are often humorous, these texts, but not sarcastic or mean, rather in an ironic fashion. Many of them revolve around the unexpected turns life can take with weird coincidences, like the one about the brothers who worked on the tussock, or the one of the Nobel Prize author's doll head which smashed into a thousand pieces …

Didn't you find that a strange story?

Yes, as well as the one about your old teacher, the one you used to tease when you were kids. Out of nowhere, you get an urge to drive by her house and look up into her window. Later you find out that the old woman was dying at exactly this moment. There is something mystical about many of the texts, a feeling that possibly, just possibly, these bizarre coincidences mean something, although we don't know what it is.

And then I get the urge to write the stories down, record them.

Yes, you need to record them, write them, create archives. When looking at your career, one can't help but think that this is exactly what you've been doing, creating your own archive of imaginary and real creatures, where science and fiction merge …

Yes, I have my own archive: *Iceland Specimen Collection*. Almost all of my photos fit underneath this umbrella concept. It started with the series *Icelandic Animals*, which I renamed *Iceland Specimen Collection*, and snowballed from there. For example, I call the images of the wax dolls *Iceland Specimen Collection: Father and Son*, and so on.

Are you often inspired by items like the wax images at the Icelandic Saga Museum?

I have never been particularly interested in owning things. I find the history of a thing more interesting than the thing itself. Although my work is in this way modelled on old things, I believe it has great relevance today. My purpose is not to say: "Look how absurd people were back in the old days!" but rather: "They were ridiculous and that's why we are also ridiculous." Man will always be an absurd figure.

The stories that accompany these "items" can quite often be reminiscent of folktales. I am always interested in the in-between – for example that which lies between noteworthy and not worthy of note. I could name the "skoffín" as an example. Did I tell you the story of the skoffín?

No, I haven't heard that one. It is not in the manuscript.

This is quite a good story because it relates to so many things that I'm interested in. I was once talking to a scientist at the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and skoffín was mentioned. He proceeds to tell me that

there is a stuffed skoffín in Akureyri. I was completely flabbergasted, could only quote Andy Warhol: "Wow!"

Wait a minute, isn't skoffín just a mythical creature?

According to the folklore, skoffín is the offspring of a male fox and a bitch, but he told me that there was a real-life skoffín, well, actually it is stuffed, in the Natural Institute.

So, there is a skoffín in Akureyri?

I rang them up and asked if I could photograph the skoffín. I was told it would be hard to find it in storage but a few months later I received a phone call: "Skoffín found, you can come and have a look." I asked to borrow the creature to photograph it in its natural environment, in Flateyjardalur in the north, where it originated from.

Flateyjardalur which lies between Eyjafjörður and Skjálfandi?

Yes. The story goes like this: Once upon a time, shortly before the Second World War, a snowstorm hit Flateyjardalur and all animals were barred indoors; dogs, cats, the lot. Except the bitch at the farm Jökulsá was nowhere to be found. Six days later the bitch returned home, well-kept and happy, and six weeks later she had puppies. They were peculiar looking; their coat was odd and their behaviour strange. Eventually, the family at Jökulsá decided to keep one of them, more out of curiosity than anything else, to see how it'd turn out. They named him Otur (otter), probably because of how weird his coat was. Otur proved to be completely useless, because he bit the sheep. He was better suited to playing with the children on the farm, he liked them. Otur was strange in other ways, for example he couldn't bark and instead he cackled, he didn't run but he cantered. Furthermore, he was totally uninterested in bitches, he seemed sterile, as bastards often are.

When I went north to photograph the skoffín, I met one of Otur's former playmates, doctor Ólafur Grímsson. We met by the old farmhouse in Flateyjardalur. Ólafur told me how he used to play with Otur and how Otur would sniff him out when they played hide-and-seek. Ólafur believes without a doubt that Otur was a skoffín. People said that Otur's father was a silver fox which escaped from a fox farm somewhere in the north, wandered into the valley and met the bitch while the snowstorm raged.

Eventually the family moved from Jökulsá to Akureyri. Otur went with them, but two weeks in he was hit by a car and died. The taxidermist took the carcass and stuffed it and Otur was displayed as a skoffín for years.

The director of the Natural Institute wouldn't let me take the stuffed skoffín to Flateyjardalur: "You can't take it all the way there. This is a rarity, perhaps the only one in the world!"

We were allowed to photograph the animal just outside Akureyri, and the director watched us the whole time. He then placed the skoffín on a shelf in his office, where Otur sat for years, until a new employee came to the institute. He was a genetics expert and when he saw the animal in the director's office, he asked: "What is this?" The director proudly answers that this is a skoffín. "Well, we shall see about that," said the genetics expert, took a sample from the animal and examined it.

To cut a long story short, Otur was proven to be a dog, as dogs and foxes are not biologically compatible for breeding. This result was announced on a slow news day and made headlines around the country. This announcement from the Natural Institute erased in one swoop the remarkable story of Otur. The story of the skoffín became worthless; all the facts about its behaviour, the stories of the boy who had played with him ... it was all bull, although at the time it had been covered in at least two magazine and newspaper interviews – it was all worthless because of the new technology. The scientist steps forward and tells us what everything means – the old stuff disappears.

I am extremely interested in the collision when these two worlds meet and how we always seem to favour the logical. It's like we are immediately ready to forget the other view.

Sometimes it seems like science is like a bulldozer which clears everything – all other ways of looking at the world – away.

The scientific viewpoint can sometimes make things appear a bit flat. I am sure it is very exciting to be immersed in the world of science, a lot of fun. But the other kind of awareness – that is also knowledge.

Exactly. It is also knowledge, and you'd think it could stand beside the scientific one, without one pushing the other out of the way.

Yes, not least because this sort of knowledge is often so weird and interesting. My work often originates there, in the space between different types of knowledge.

Scientist, storyteller, artist ... were you always determined which profession you'd choose?

Yes. As a girl, I always wrote in memory books, as an answer to "I am going to become ...", that I was going to become an artist. I don't know why.

That's funny. But you do come from an educated and musical family ...

Yes, and artistic. My mother, Solveig Jónsdóttir, studied ceramics at Skolen for Brugskunst which is now called Denmark's Design School. That may have influenced me, although I think the main reason was that I just always liked drawing. Or, you know, liked creating.

What about music, you must have grown up with music, being a composer's daughter?

Yes, yes, but I wasn't very talented in that area. Of course I grew up with a lot of music – and there is music in a lot of my work, although I don't write it myself. I get asked that a lot, about my grandfathers' and my father's influence on my art. For a long time, these questions really annoyed me for the simple reason that I had never considered them influential at all.

That changed when I created a piece for my father's ninetieth birthday. My parents got married in 1956, they moved to Rome and stayed there for a year. Dad had just finished a long symphonic composition and thought now he'd have time to start making a completely different kind of music, find his own sound. So, he sat down with his music book and wanted to start composing but nothing happened. For a whole year he scribbled in this book – tried to make something happen – but very little came out of it, almost nothing. When I started working on this piece, dad lent me this music book, as well as his diary from his stay in Rome in 1956.

I ended up going to Rome myself, literally travelling in my parents' footsteps and held an exhibition which I dedicated to my father. I got Snorri Sigfús Birgisson to play the scribbles from dad's music book, these lines and fragments, all of which was thought worthless and useless. When I heard him play, something unexpected happen: The soundtrack of my youth appeared.

How so?

This was the music which I fell asleep to at night and even woke up to in the mornings: Dad playing fragments and lines ...

Could you detect that in these fragments from Rome?

Yes, it was all there, the endless ding-ding-dong – piano chords which mean nothing to the listener but have meaning in the ears of the composer. When I listened to Snorri Sigfús play, I thought: "This is my influence." It seeps in through the subconscious.

So, it's not only your father's fully formed work which matter to you, but maybe even more the scribbles in the music book, the half-formed motifs, that surround you growing up?

We recorded this in my father's studio, using his instrument. Dad was out for the day and didn't know me and Snorri were there. When he came home late that night, we were still at it. He opens the front door and hears familiar chords from the studio. Of course he was quite taken aback: For the first time he heard himself compose. He later described it as feeling like he attended his own séance.

To me, these chords were a constant murmur. Although I was never really able to hear what he was playing and thought it all sounded the same, this was always in the background, this initial creation.

So, do you see any influence from your father in how you work and approach creation?

It's kind of hard to answer that. I was drawn to art because I like making stuff with my hands. I enjoy that more than anything else.

In time, this manual pleasure stops fulfilling you on its own and you start seeking something more. That's part of the reason I turned to Icelandic folklore. Then you might say that one's ancestors have started working through you.

I guess we all experience this, whether you are a mechanic or an artist. You feel it as you get older, it's a bit of a shock to feel the older generations manifesting in yourself.

Yes. Our language, our culture, it is very special and unique. We are responsible for it, whether we like it or not. Sometimes I feel like I don't pick my subjects, that it wasn't necessarily me who chose to work this way. I sometimes thought that I could have done something more fashionable, because particularly at the start, this kind of thing wasn't very cool at all, on the contrary it was believed rather lame.

I also utilise this cultural heritage during my work process. I rarely start working on a piece without first flicking through the folktale collection of Jón Árnason. Even if I'm not using the tales in any way. I just like grounding myself in this culture.

I know what you mean. There is something about this culture which grounds you, calms you to the point of meditation ...

And then you can find the most amazing connections. For example, when I found the story of Jesus and the birds. Are you familiar with the altar piece I created for Ísafjörður Church?

No.

I was asked to come up with an idea for an altar piece in the church in Ísafjörður and of course I immediately turned to Jón Árnason's collection. When I opened the book at random, I saw the story of the Saviour and the golden plovers.

This story takes place when Jesus is still a child. He is playing with the other children, they are making birds from clay, just playing in the mud. An orthodox Sadusei walks past, is angered to see the children working during a holy day and starts smashing their bird statues. Then Jesus lays

his hand on the remaining birds, which come to life and fly away. According to the story, this is how the golden plover was created.

This is beautiful: The children creating the world from earth and water, mud which comes alive ...

That is why the golden plover sings "glory, glory" in the spring, to praise its creation, freedom and God. I knew this story. I remember my mother telling me the story at some point. She thought it had been in the apocryphal books of the Bible, but the best-known version is in The Infancy Gospel of Thomas ...

Which is one of the gospels which the church doesn't fully recognise, is it not?

Yes, it is not a part of the New Testament. But this story can also be found in the Koran. It is basically just a myth which travels through Europe, from Palestine and up to Iceland. On the way, the birds have undergone a transformation and turned into golden plovers which bring us spring and hope.

And "tuu-u-ee" has become "glory, glory" ...

I eventually recreated this story in the west. I got the locals in Ísafjörður to work with me, they created the birds. We made 749 birds and I used them to create the altar piece.

This is also an interesting twist on what we call ethnic, because the folktale does not originate in Iceland, maybe these ethnic stories are ethnic everywhere.

Exactly, they are often universal.

I think you need to add this story to your manuscript – the one I mentioned earlier. You are quite the storyteller ...

... Well, I see myself as more of a "grúskari" (person who explores things unsystematically). I can flick through books and google endlessly ... But a storyteller, yes, maybe I am that as well.

It's one of my favourite words; "grúsk" (the act of exploring things unsystematically), and typically Icelandic, if there is such a thing.

But "grúsk" can never come from nothing, the subject at hand must always have a personal dimension. I need to relate to it; it has to concern me.

Am I right in thinking that it was one of these myths, related to your ancestor Björn Gunnlaugsson, which led to you discovering a collection of casts of Icelanders in the 19th century which became the basis for the work *Musée Islandique*?

Yes. Björn was the head of the "grand side" of my family, on my paternal grandmother's side. Björn was a mathematician and head teacher in The Learned School, a scientist and prolific cartographer in the 19th century. Once, I was at a family reunion and my cousine mentions that there exists a death mask of said Björn. Also, he said, the mask was being kept in the Canary Islands! I found this so surreal that as soon as I got back to my studio, I started exploring.

Gradually – this enquiry took a few years – I got to the bottom of this. When Icelanders began travelling to the Canary Islands in the 1960s, they started by going to museums, like good tourists do. In the Museum of Anthropology in Las Palmas, one of them, Halldór Pétursson illustrator (which is also descended from Björn), saw Icelandic names on the cards on the walls, beside bones, head casts and other anthropological stuff at the museum. Halldór took a photo of a head cast which was labelled with the Icelandic name Björn Gunnlaugsson. And so the story was born that the death mask of Björn Gunnlaugsson was to be found in Las Palmas.

I finally got through to the museum staff in the Canaries and slowly the pieces fell together. The cast was certainly of Björn. It was made by French scientists who travelled around Iceland late in the 19th century and carried out measurements and research and made casts of many Icelanders. The items in the Canarian museum turned out to be copies of the originals which were in a museum in Paris.

And you created *Musée Islandique* from this …

This is how it often happens with me; I get inspired by something personal.

This French research, this exploration of what people believed were different races, this was prime science of the time. Today, this is at best outdated knowledge, and feels more related to folktales and "skoffín" than to proper science. You are still dancing on the line between science and myth …

Yes. But I don't need to place any judgements, the pieces speak for themselves. The items carry their own history, so the work often largely revolves around its own historical context.

Icelandic culture obviously gives you such an inspiration. You use everything – nature, book culture, folktales, but also modern society, political history and even crime stories, as we can see by the Leirfinnur bust

which stares at us from a shelf. We live in a time where the concept of nationality is often doubted and criticised. The question arises whether you have ever been misunderstood as promoting nationalism in your work. If this might even be called chauvinism.

I felt this a bit in the beginning, but it probably played a part that I came home after staying in USA for a long time, where race was very much being discussed, way more than here at home. This is such a fine line, this chauvinism. My work is also often very critical of Icelandic society.

But I do feel that the foundation we have in stuff like Jón Árnason, this is a culture I trust. I understand it. If there is something I don't fully understand I can get to the bottom of it, figure it out.

You are at home in this culture ...

Yes. It's just something in our blood, this culture which is extremely rich and exciting, and I can say anything because I have access to this language.

You mean that the culture enables you to express yourself?

Yes. If you have a good grasp of the language, you can express yourself. If you have a good grasp of the culture, you can also use that, create and express yourself without it being superficial. I was in USA for six years and I didn't plan on coming home. Then I came home to have a baby – and meant to go back there. But I never did. The main reason was that once I was back, I felt I could use this culture more effectively, I could delve deeper into it, where I had my own audience which understood what I was doing. If I'd stayed in USA, this would've become more shallow and kind of touristy.

That the work would have been limited to an outsider's view of the country and its culture?

Yes, possibly.

I know exactly what you mean. I feel this has increased in recent years, since Iceland became such a popular tourist destination. I sometimes think Icelanders, also the artists and writers, have started pandering to this attitude in their work – this limited tourist view of the country and its people, which again limits our own chances of moving and creating within our culture.

Yes, it feels like a certain kind of attitude has been created, one which is manufactured and ready-made. It leaves no room for interpretation, everything constantly becomes more narrow.

Precisely. I sometimes feel that "Icelandic culture" has started to shrink into clichés. At such a time, one feels that art which digs down around the roots is almost vital to open up our universe of discourse and broadening our horizon.

Absolutely. This is extremely dangerous. One of the thing that pleases me the most when I am talking about my work and telling folktales, is when someone butts in and says: "No, no, I've heard this, you are wrong, Ólöf, this is not a skoffín, it's a skuggabaldur ..." or something like that. You feel that the story hasn't got this ready-made attitude, it's not been set in concrete form, because once we start regulating our myths and pushing just one version of the story as the "correct" one, then it all becomes dead and rigid.

Yes, we start using the concept of truth about things where it simply does not apply.

Exactly. When I was a child, these folktales were extremely real to me. I had a crippling fear of the dark and was so frightened by the ghost tales that it caused me real problems.

It would be interesting to examine how this fear of the dark translates between generations. I was also very afraid of the dark when I was a lad. I wonder if kids today have this same problem.

Good point. I grew up in Skerjafjörður, there were no streetlights at the time, just endless darkness and the sea, of course. I heard ghost stories of dead fishermen who were still seen fishing. I pictured all kinds of monsters. In retrospect, this feels very morbid. On top of this, my grandfather Sigurður was constantly reading the Icelandic folktales, collecting stories, arranging them into new collections. One day he came to me and said: "I am going to give you my new folktale collection for Christmas," and I yelled: "No! Please, don't!" This made him very happy and of course he gave me the book next Christmas. He was so happy that someone could believe so strongly in these stories.

Fear of the dark was – and perhaps still is – deeply rooted in our tradition. I always find it odd to read about, as you often do in traditional, ethnic literature, when old farmers, probably very strong and have never complained about anything in their lives, talk about how terribly afraid of the dark they always were. These people lived in an almost totally dark world ... I imagine it must have been challenging to be afraid of the dark in the Middle Ages.

Yes, but nobody was scaring me or trying to make me afraid of the dark. I created the fear myself.

The flip side of things like fear of the dark is, of course, the imagination, in the same way as a nightmare is the dark side of dreams. Fear of the dark connotes a belief in something invisible and mysterious, in a meaning which is hidden to us, at least for now. Maybe you also need to be afraid of the dark to be able to believe in fairy tales …

I sometimes say to myself: "Now everything is boring and too mundane, I am going to open up my senses and make everything into something." You see? Then, out of nowhere, you've opened the door and let the adventures in …

This surprised me but you can control it up to a point. When you are very busy, for example at work, these doors close. You need to be aware and open them up again.

Open your eyes, take the time to admire the coincidences and so on …

Which may not be coincidences after all. This picture, the one you almost broke when you came in, this is a part of my final project at Yale, as I told you earlier. In it, you can see my grandfather Sigurður. He sits in the living room in Eyjólfsstaðir in Vatnsdalur, studying for his finals. My grandfather was born in 1886, so this must be around 1905. I did this work early in the 1990s, in the early days of Photoshop, and I managed to add myself to the image, this is me in the foreground, sitting opposite my grandfather.

So, right there at the start of your career, you've begun trying to place you within this system – this image – which we call Icelandic culture?

Yes. The story behind it is this: Yale has an enormous library, twelve floors if I remember correctly. One day I learned there was an Icelandic department in there, with books and Icelandic artefacts. I set off trying to find it, in the long and winding passageways of the library. I walk up some stairs, down a corridor and towards a specific shelf. There, I take a book at random, open it and see this picture, from Iceland, of my grandfather.

I didn't think anything of it at the time, just borrowed the book, scanned it and created this image we have here. Later, I told my classmates how this work had come about. They did not believe me, thought it was too much of a coincidence. Therein lies the difference. They did not believe me. But you do.

I think you simply must add this story to your manuscript.

Yes, now that you mention it, I might want to write this down.

I don't think you have a choice.

I once created an installation based on the story of the county magistrate's wife at Bustarfell, where I worked with similar things. It had sandblasted Icelandic patterns, a picture of a lady in a riding suit with my

profile and such things, all surrounded by much light and white water, so light that it almost became invisible, elevated, vague. The viewer is close to the work but still doesn't have full access to it.

You are not far from these works yourself. Is it possible to say that you are both inside and out of this Icelandic cultural fog of the ages, which the work is inspired by?

Yes, at least I am somewhere around this cloud. This exhibition about the magistrate's wife was of course based on the famous folktale of the rich wife at Bustarfell in Vopnafjörður who was summoned to help an elf woman in labour nearby. Once the elf child was born, she was supposed to put salve in its eyes. The woman did so, but also managed to put a tiny bit of salve in her own left eye. When she returns to the human world, the elves gave her a magnificent embroidered cloth to thank her.

As strangely as it sounds, doesn't this cloth still exist, a real elf cloth, in safe keeping at the National Museum of Iceland?

Yes. Well, the magistrate's wife detects a change in herself as she can now see the elf world with her left eye. She sees the elves' grand dwellings, sees when they make hay, when they expect rain and so on. She uses this information for the benefit of her own household.

This goes on until one autumn when the magistrate's wife goes shopping in Vopnafjörður. Who does she meet there but the very elf woman that she had helped give birth? The elf woman is wandering around the shop, picking up things, when the lady walks up to her and says good morning. However, their communication is cut short when the elf woman turns around quickly and spits in her eye. The magistrate's wife lost her ability to see the elf world and never regained it. I think this is a very beautiful story.

Yes, weird and beautiful, that is a good mix. Vision is not a given, not for magistrate's wives or artists, it is a fragile gift. It is also fun to note that the wife basically catches the elf woman shoplifting. These stories are full of surprises.

But listen, I think we must stop now, I am sure this has become way too long an interview. I am turning the recorder off.

Yes, sorry, I can't help it, I always start telling stories ...