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"Processing the Scape", SIM and Hvítahús Artist Residencies, Iceland

Yvonne Petkus

Western Kentucky University, yvonne.petkus@wku.edu

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Yvonne Petkus, Professor, Department of Art

International Activities Grant – Final Report

Project Title: "Processing the Scape", SIM and Hvítahús Artist Residencies, Iceland

"Processing the Scape", SIM and Hvítahús Artist Residencies, Iceland was a sabbatical-related research activity that included two artist residencies in Iceland: SIM Residency Program in Reykjavík (February 2016) and Hvítahús Artist Residency near Hellisandur (March 2016). SIM is a highly competitive, international residency program with major artists from around the world competing for their residency spots. Hvítahús Artist Residency, also competitive and for which I was the first U.S. artist selected, is situated in western Iceland on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean and Snæfellsnesþjóðgarður National Park. The objective for the sabbatical period and artist residencies was to conduct studio research in the form of paintings, drawings, and installations with an emphasis on examining new sources for the environments within the work. An extension of my current studio research, this includes the use of serial painting and installations (on plastic) as a way to wade through philosophical and formal questions, explored through the additive and subtractive act of painting and a resulting, recurring figure held in expressly ambiguous spaces. The core of the work at both the SIM and Hvítahús residencies occurred through a direct response to the extremes and the subtleties particular to the Icelandic 'scape' and the processing of that fresh input toward the needs of each new piece and larger body of work.

My expectations for what this would mean were exceeded exponentially. I thought that the Icelandic environments would be dramatic, and they were, but they were also more engaging and more intense – to a degree beyond what I could have known ahead of time. The land and seascape in Iceland is unapologetically present. The visuals are extreme and constantly changing, and incredibly beautiful. Iceland has an energy that is palpable – one that can induce fear (people died while I was there and in places I would soon go or had just been) or awe (I found myself often unable to look away as a sky and sea would rapidly go from one state to another) or a sense of meditative repetition (watching the fishing boats, working boats, make their daily movement methodically across my horizon day and night).

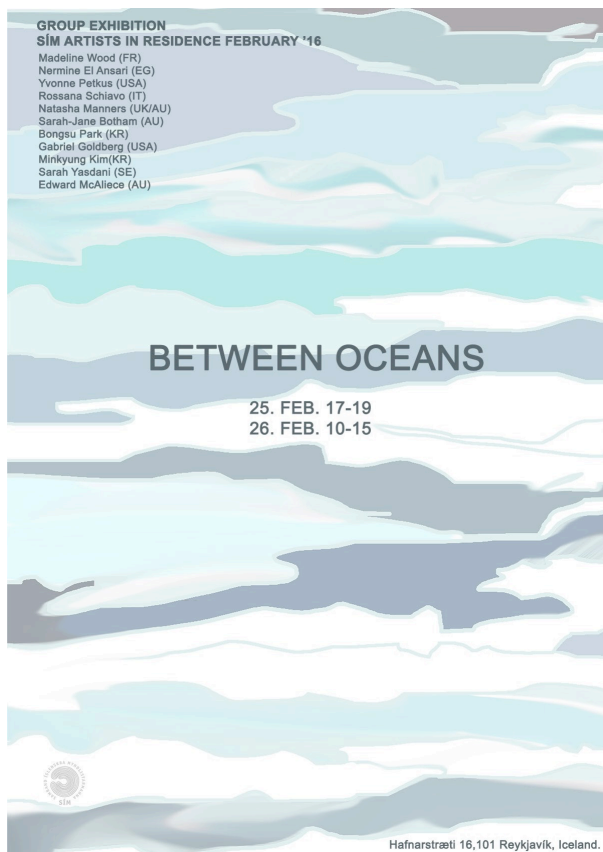
My work usually preferences the 'figure' (that is art language meaning that which is the object of the painting) – in my case literally, as large bodies dominate my works, acting within vague, psychological land/seascapes that were formerly based on input from Seattle and Greece. My goal in Iceland was to shift this and preference the 'ground' (in art theory that which sits back within a composition), shifting scale and submitting these smaller figures to the forces of nature while responding to new environmental sources. As a long distance runner, this was compounded as my body was subjected to ice and snow, cold, hail, and the ever-present winds, particularly extreme during the second month on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. As such, my work was informed not only by the visual input but also by what affected me to my physical core – I felt it – and was able to translate that into ten finished works and additional studies and smaller pieces.

The flow between the two residencies worked out perfectly. For the first month, I worked and lived with nine other artists from all over the world (France, Egypt, Italy, Australia, South Korea, and Sweden) within the city of Reykjavík. This allowed me to acclimate to Iceland, have a daily discourse with other artists, and take advantage of Reykjavík activities, including exhibitions and other cultural opportunities. Two examples that stand out were 1. being able

to sketch from the sculptures of Einar Jónsson and 2. participating in a dance workshop during the Reykjavík Dance Festival. Einar Jónsson, known as Iceland's first sculptor, created figurative works of uncommon drama, physicality, and flow. I was able to go back to the Einar Jónsson Museum several times and found a kinship with his sculptural expression of the human body combined with Icelandic mythology. These found their way into my painted works through the numerous sketches completed on-site. The dance workshop was also an unexpectedly perfect fit for the questions I was asking in my paintings. It was led by Danish choreographer, Marie Topp. Just as I am a process painter, she is a process choreographer, needing dancers in person to work out her ideas and develop her work. Our ideas and ways correspond very closely – her goals include work that investigates "forces against the body" found through a "physicality that leads to form/narrative". This is exactly what I am doing as well. The process itself was so interesting too – she would give us (14 dancers) prompts, we would respond in improvisational movements (based on a Modern Dance framework), we would discuss, then more prompts and improvisation, etc. for a three-hour workshop, fine-tuning her requests in response to our movements and taking notes along the way. This was one of the most intense experiences I have ever had and her intentions were so closely meshed with mine that it influenced my work as much as informing hers.

The work I created at SIM was a response to the water and landscapes from just outside my residency (two blocks from the sea and surrounded by mountain ranges) as well as from a trip to the southwest of Iceland, which included seeing the Gullfoss waterfall (a huge series of waterfalls frozen in their February state) and the deep, glowing crevasses of the Sólheimajökull Glacier. I would take photos but also just look and take in what I saw and then respond through painting and drawing once back in my studio. These developed as fragments and accumulations, building as layers of information that formed their own logic and meanings or connections. Informed through a process of looking and painting, as well as through running within the often tough weather, the figures shrunk and became even more embedded within their landscapes, pressured by the forces of their environments. The color, too, while an extension of my former palette, shifted and pared down while in Iceland, a response to the white of the snow and ice, the deep dark of the silhouetted mountains, and to the constantly changing blue/green/teal of the ocean and sky. This palette was punctuated with moments of orange and red, signifying a body or a movement, struggling within the vast scapes.

The SIM Residency in Reykjavík culminated in a group exhibition in their downtown gallery location. The other residents voted to use a graphic version of a detail of one of my paintings for the poster and advertising. I was extremely honored to have my work chosen to represent the group and have included below an image of the poster as well as a detail of the painting, *Processing the Scape: Steam* from which the poster was based.. The title of the exhibition was *Between Oceans*, highlighting the discourse that we, from very different places, were able to have through our work at the SIM Residency Program.



SIM Exhibition Poster designed by Minkyung Kim and detail of the painting from which poster was based.

For the second month, I shifted from Reykjavík to the Hvítahús Artist Residency on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. This is a remote location, on the very edge of the Snæfellsnesþjóðgarður National Park, with a few small towns nearby. The residency is housed in a former icehouse (used to store fish) and is the last remaining building from the Krossavík harbor, which relocated in the 1940s. Remnants of the fishing village remain visible as stone walls projecting into the Atlantic Ocean and other land works that had defined the town. The studio was a large two-story space, ideal within which to expand on the research begun over the previous month. While in a remote location, I was happy to find that Iceland is a culturally educated country and the discussions and visits I had with both those from the nearby towns of Hellissandur and Rif as well as those from all over who were traveling through, were productive and allowed me to get to know another part of Iceland through their perspectives. In Rif (3 km away), there is also a performing arts artist residency, so I also continued the dialogue with artists from around the world that I had started at SIM, particularly with two South African performer/choreographers, Mark Tatham and Daniel Geddes, from Liquid Fusion Productions in Johannesburg who were in residence for most of March.

The main goals of this second residency were to paint/work and run. The running allowed me to experience this West Fjord environment and landscape in a particular, intimate way. The weather during March was extreme on the peninsula, adding to the forces that I was already investigating in my work. I encountered winds so fierce that I had to use every bit of strength to just move forward and stay on my feet (not always successfully). I ran with views that shifted from a moon-like scape dotted with blocks of volcanic rock, to a huge glacier atop a series of volcanic mountains that all gathered into one stunning form, to the Atlantic Ocean with its waves suddenly, forcibly crashing up stacks of black, basalt cliffs. I took photos

everywhere I explored and fed those, and my actual experience of each place, back into the work in the studio. There was also a three-day storm with winds so strong they tore the asphalt off a road just 30 kilometers from where I was. I did not go out for those three days and instead painted through the unnerving sounds assaulting my icehouse and the fear it induced.

At the completion of the Hvítahús residency, I had a solo exhibition titled *Processing the Scape: Forces of Nature*. It was open for three days and had a steady flow of attendees from the nearby towns and those traveling through, as well as visitors from a network that continued around the peninsula. What I found was that Icelanders really understood what I was trying to do and engaged in discussions that went deeper than I could have expected. I was told by one attendee that they were the lucky ones, to see their Iceland through my lens, in a way they had not seen before but recognized fully. I am not a representative artist but rather one who sieves what I see (and other sources) through a physical back and forth, a struggle of forces and marks in a continual negotiation, fought hard, until each world is found and solidified into its own language across the surface. I think they related to this battle and found the poetry that I hope for in each truce. My method, using primarily rubber painting spatulas on Mylar, was conducive for this process, allowing for a build up and exchange of marks and acting as a true extension of my physical gestures.

I believe the research activities from my time in Iceland have addressed the priorities of the International Activities Grant. As I had stated in my application, being selected for and working within these two residencies has given WKU recognition within their prestigious programs. There were more connections than I can recount here (including a reconnection – with two Icelandic WKU Department of Art alumni who had studied with me at WKU in the early 2000s) that I believe have continued to advance the relationship between WKU and Iceland. SIM, which stands for the Association of Icelandic Visual Artists (Samband íslenskra Myndlistarmanna), is the main organization for Icelandic visual artists. The SIM International Artist Residency, where I had my studio, was housed on the top floor of a building whose three other floors were comprised of permanent studios for Icelandic artists, making interactions easy and daily. And, as mentioned above, while Hvítahús was more remote, I was able to interact with Icelanders and truly connect with them through my work and through their generosity. As a result, in both working closely with artists (and a choreographer) from around the world as well as engaging with artists and the arts-interested from Iceland, I was able to foster relationships as an individual artist and as a representative of WKU. I was able to exchange ideas and strategies with others while building a dialogue and network that I know will have continued impact on my creative research and for my professional activities, as well as for what I can bring back to WKU.

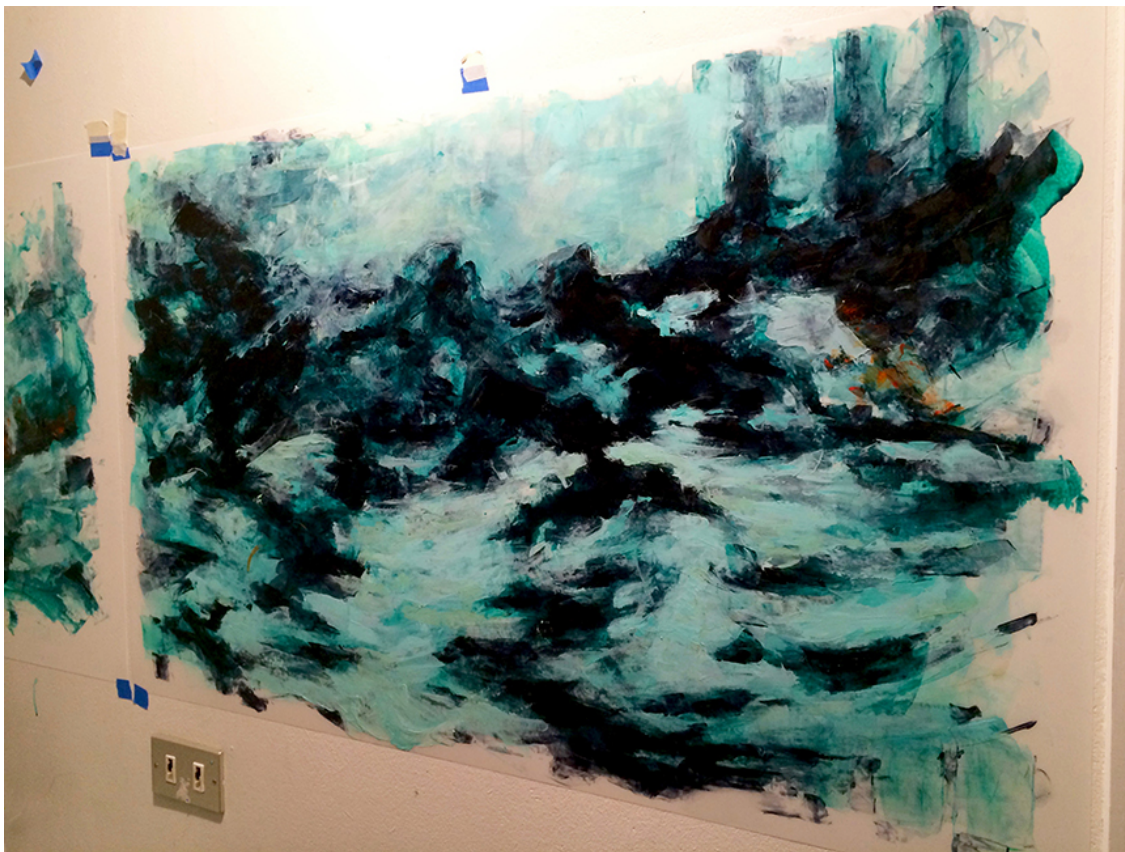
I thank you for the support that the International Activities Grant represents and the Office of International Programs has shown for my current research. I look forward to continuing to process this experience within my U.S. studio and will continue to note your support as I present the work through lectures and exhibitions. Thank you.

List of Images:

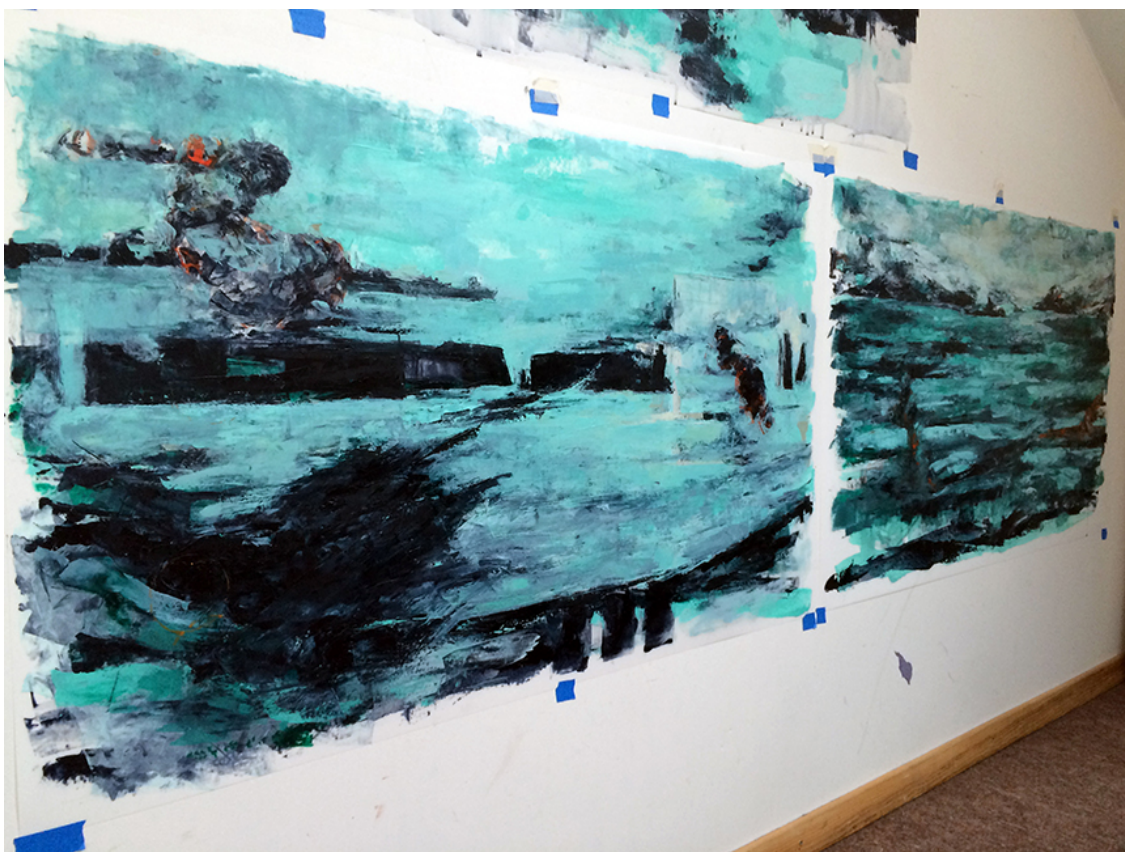
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- 16.17_Petkus_Hvitahus_studioshot_by_Petkus_2

Note:

Inga Dora Gudmundsdottir (class of 2005) and Sigurdur Bragason (class of 2004) are both Icelandic WKU Department of Art Alumni.



1. Petkus SIM studio shot, photo by Petkus



2. Petkus SIM studio shot, photo by Petkus



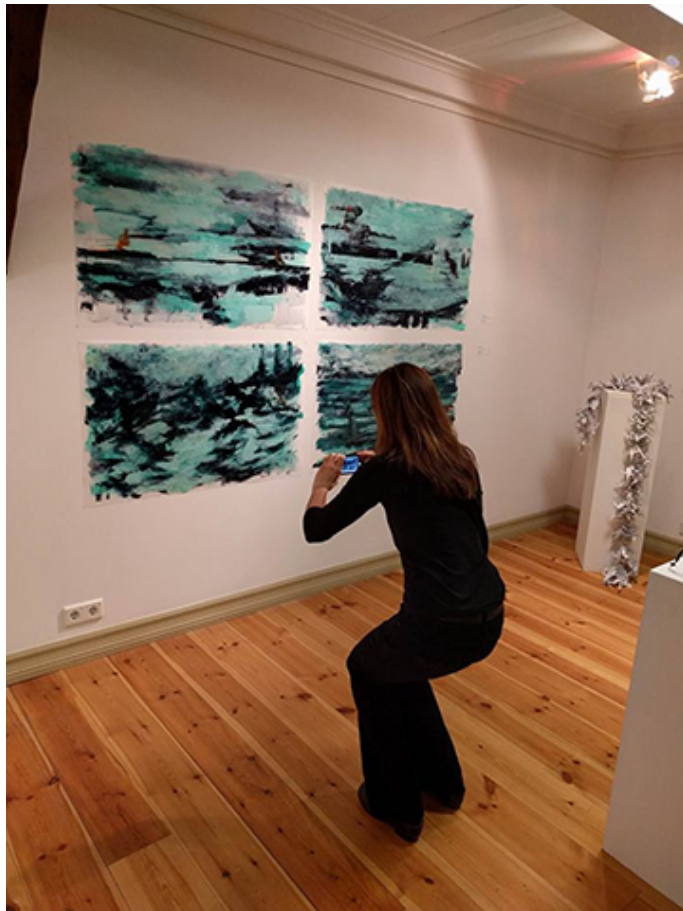
3. Petkus SIM studio shot, photo by Petkus



4. SIM exhibition Petkus installing, photos by Sarah Yasdani



5. SIM exhibition Petkus installing, photos by Sarah Yasdani



6. SIM Petkus shooting exhibition, photo by Inga Dora Gudmundsdottir



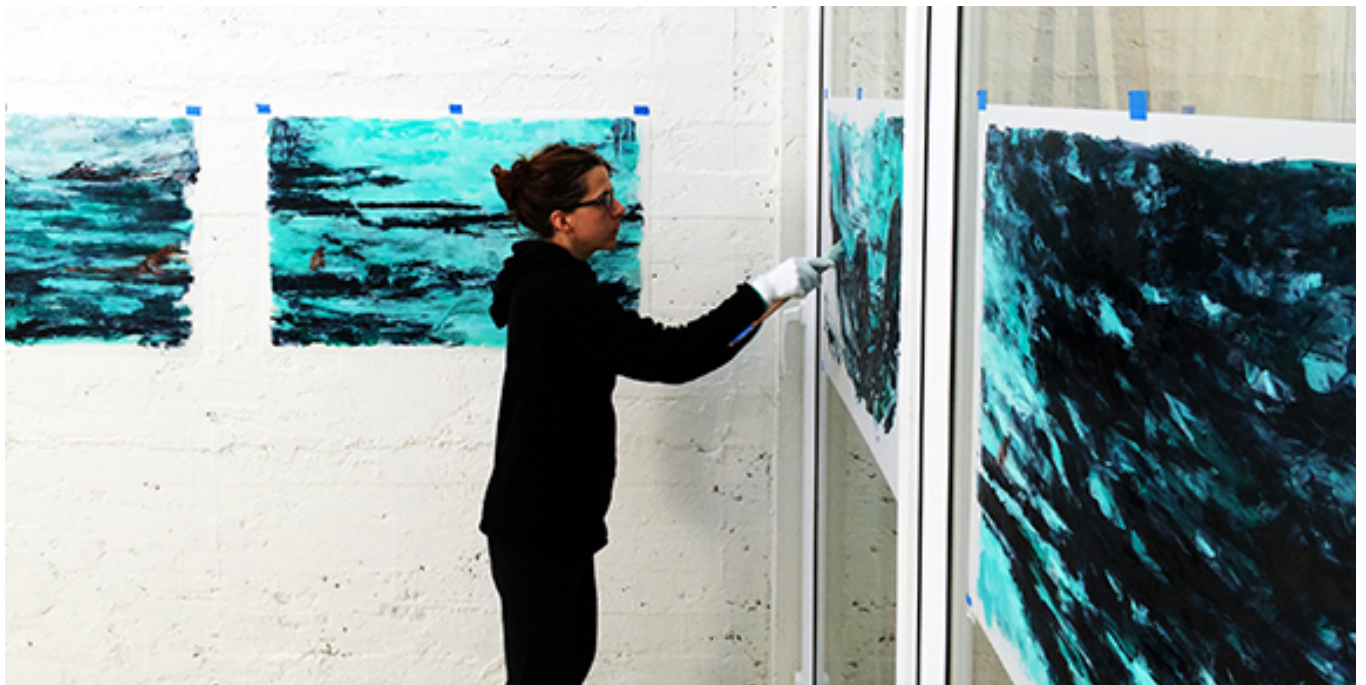
7. SIM exhibition viewer, photo by Sarah Yasdani



8. & 9. SIM Opening, photos by Sarah Yasdani



10. Hvítahús residency sign, photo by Petkus



11. Hvítahús, Petkus at work, photo by Petkus



12. Hvitahus, Petkus at work, photo by Sigurdur Bragason



13. & 14. Hvitahus, Petkus at work, photos by Sigurdur Bragason



15. Hvitahus, studio shot, photo by Petkus



16. Hvitahus studio shot, photo by Petkus