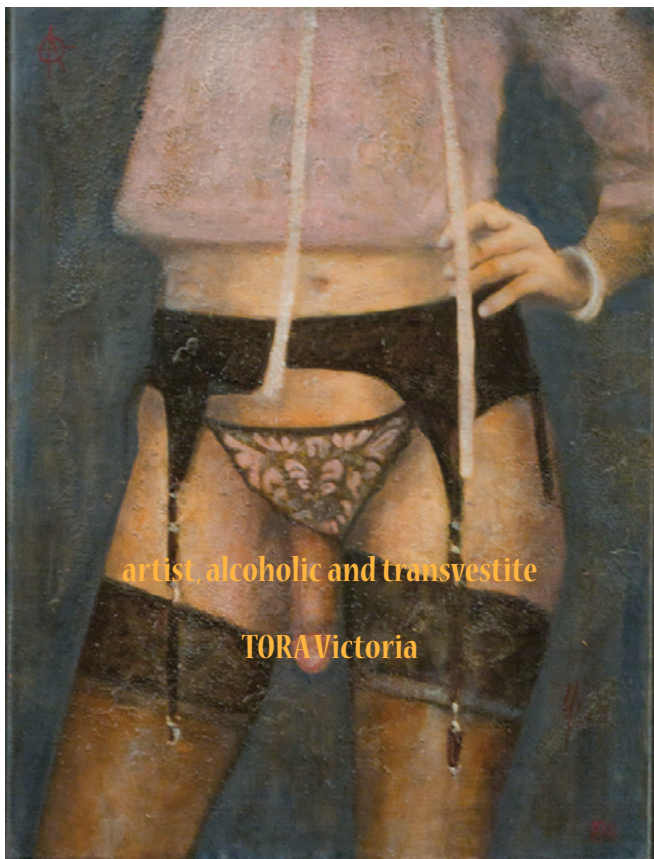


The Story of Thor



artist, alcoholic and transvestite

TORAVictoria

By Thor Ludwig Stiefel

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2022

Reykjavik

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Oil on canvas, 55x75cm. 2014



To my mother



*The au–Thor in
his studio in 2020*

So, I am finally going to do it – I am going to write my story. Mainly, I am doing this for my own benefit; “nosce te ipsum” – I need to know myself. Also, this is written so that anyone, who is interested, can get to know who I am, what I am and why I am the way I am.

This is meant to be many things. Primarily, I need to write down my story. I think it is a healthy exercise for anybody to get to know oneself and go over one's lifespan in an objective manner. It is a healing process, a growth opportunity and – for me – a necessity. I intend this to be a “brutally honest” account. I am an artist, but I am also many other things. I believe, being an artist, is my archetype so to speak. By that I mean, it is not a choice – I'm born that way. Some people are of the archetype doctors, teachers, workers, soldiers, entrepreneurs, nurses etc. There are many archetypes and probably are individuals that bear the trait of more than one archetype.

This is also to be a document about my life and art. I was always this artist that thought that my art should explain itself and people should be able to read me through the art. Who I am, as a person shouldn't matter any more than who is the person that is acting a particular role in a play or a movie; or playing the violin in a concert. I am still of this notion. However, for an artist, it is beneficial to describe oneself. When it comes to promotion and selling one's work, knowing the artist and the background is practically a requirement. Who are you? What are you doing? Why? Where do you come from? etc. Besides, for me at least, I am always curious to know about people in general – not the least artists, especially those whose work I am interested in. To know where the artist is coming from and get a little idea why a particular individual even chose the path of an artist to begin with, is also interesting in itself.

However, the motivation here is first and

foremost my personal growth by going through my own life's orbit and to acquire some clarity about who I really am: Not who I think I am, or who I want to be.

This is why. Now, the: Who.



Three year old On my bike

The first years

Where to start? – as the Hobbit said.

Well, I am an artist, born on the fifth of March 1967 in Reykjavik Iceland. My name is Thor Ludwig Stiefel. In my native tongue, Icelandic – my first name is written: Þór. Yes, we have special letters in Icelandic that are only in the Icelandic alphabet.

My mother, Thorunn Magnea Magnusdottir, was young when she gave birth to me. Perhaps not so young for her generation – she was twenty-two years of age; but that would be considered young today and it was definitely young when I had my own son about her age, twenty-one years later.

She met my father when studying to become an actress in Paris. He, a young promising artist working on scenography in the theater, fell in love with the young nordic beauty and she fell for the handsome young artist from Switzerland living in Paris. I am not aware if

I came under by accident (I suspect it to be so) but as it turned out, she became pregnant and went back to Iceland after graduation to give birth to me.



My parents the year I was born

My father, Erhard Stiefel, followed later. I have some photos of me as an infant taken by my father and there is a home movie somewhere that I have seen of him in Iceland from that time and some photos. That is the only thing that reveals his presence in my life as a child. Soon after I was born, he went back to Paris and – according to my mother, he did so to find a place to live for this little family. My mother and I were to follow later – he never contacted my mother or me after that.

My earliest memory is from when my mother left me in the kindergarten for the first time. I was two or three years old. It was a horrifying experience. I remember crying in terror when she left me with those strangers. I vividly recall that if I only cried loudly and long enough she would come back for me. So I did not stop crying. I was determined. This was a way for me to show the world that I did not want to be abandoned and I was going to do everything in my power to prevent it from happening. I remember when

my mother finally showed up to pick me up. I am sure it was not a full day, but for me it was a lifetime. I did not stop crying the entire time. To me, it would have been equal to admitting that I was okay with being separated from my mother – forever. When she finally came back for me, I remember clearly one of the nannies (as they were called back in those days) telling my mother, that I had been inconsolable and had cried all day non-stop and they had finally given up on me and put me alone in a room in the hope that I might eventually stop crying out of exhaustion.

This was a traumatic experience and my first ever consciousness in this life. I later found out, it was not my first – and definitely not my last, anguish. The reason why I acted this way, I have gathered through self inspection and therapy, stems from earlier distress in my then young life.

My mother was a young actress, starting a ca-

reer. Twenty-two year old actress beginning a career in the theater. I am pretty sure that becoming a single mom at this stage in her life was not on her agenda. She was quite frankly not ready to have a child, let alone raising it on her own. In those days the Nordic welfare system, we enjoy today in Iceland, was not so aidful for single parents as it is today. I am pretty certain that my appearance in her life seriously changed this young actress's scope. But she did what she could and I was raised in love and in many ways enjoyed my childhood.

Amma Dreki

Before proceeding with my story, I have to give you a little family background. It will explain a lot about me. Nothing happens out of the blue and everything is connected in a chain of events.

A strong influence in my own life – and definitely my mother's, was her own mother, my



*My mother with her mother,
siblings and me*

grandmother. Amma dreki, as I used to call her as a kid (means granny dragon) was a strong minded woman and the matriarch of the clan. She wanted the best for her kids and for herself. Amma dreki, had made herself. Adopted as a young girl after losing her own mother, she ended up a successful business woman in Reykjavik. She was a survivor.

It is fair to say that for a young Icelandic girl in the middle of the last century, it was not

common to go abroad to study, let alone to Paris to study theater. I guess you could label my mother's family as a working class people when she was growing up. Grandfather worked mostly as a driver – taxi driver I understand, and my grandmother was, besides being a housewife, an entrepreneur and a businesswoman – a dynamite powerful lady. They lived in Kópvogur, a small town adjacent to Reykjavik, the capital. Back then they had chickens in the garden and my grandmother, alongside raising the children and attending the home, worked as an assistant in the local grocery store and made all kinds of things to sell. It could be easter decorations for the chocolat easter eggs she sold to the chocolate factory in Reykjavik or whatever she could think of to make some money – and she had a gift for making money.

The fiton-powered lady, my grandmother, was not happy in her marriage. Strong willed lady she was, she simply couldn't take that man who was a man she thought was with-

out potential. Despite being highly frowned upon in those days, my grandma divorced my grandfather and became her own destiny maker. She left him and took her three children with her (her fourth came later through another relationship). But my grandmother was also prone to drinking and having a good time. She bore this typical Icelandic trait – work hard and enjoy life to the fullest – ‘cause you’ve earned it’! My grandmother was impulsive, hard-headed, couldn’t express emotions and eager for fun times and drinking.

Now, I am telling you this to establish the relevance of my reaction to my mother leaving me at the kindergarten – and my consequence awakening to this life. I found out, when I was quite mature, that my mother had left me with my grandmother when I was just over one year old. Grandmother was going on a holiday trip to Denmark. My mother had to work with the theater – where she had been hired as an actress – touring

around Iceland with a play. I was to travel by ship with my grandmother and her other children to Denmark and stay in her care until my mother would join all of us later. The boat trip took five days. In Denmark grandma had rented a farm and was going to spend the summer there with her children and me.

This trip must have been a horrible experience for me, a fourteen month old infant. These first months are, after all, the most influential in a person's life and the place one should be, is with one's mother.

I do not remember anything from this trip (fortunately, I should add). Gullfoss was the name of the ship and it is renowned in Icelandic cultural history. It was closest to a cruise Iceland had to offer and the stories of the feasts and glory that were going on during the sailing are renowned in Icelandic history. Often my grandmother told me about this trip, especially after a few. She said that I had not stopped crying the whole time

the boat was sailing and she had just given up on me and left me in the cabin on my own. She just went up to the hall – and knowing her, I know she went there for feasting and to have a merry time. She later always grinned when telling me about how one of the ship's stewardesses had taken pity on me “‘cause you just wouldn't stop crying and one could hear your screams all the way up to the deck”. Picture this: A fourteen months old toddler, taken away from his mother, at a crucial age in his development, handed over to an alcoholic grandmother, on a cruise where the granny was surely not in any way willing, nor even able, to think about a toddler. Crying so frantically the staff of the ship took it upon themselves to comfort him. The old lady even gave me guilt about my behavior! Yes, I am pretty sure this is not a decent way to treat a fourteen month old infant and it explains a lot about me – and definitely why I reacted the way I did that first day in kindergarten.

I was later to realize the huge effect my

mother's and father's absence in my life and upbringing, had on my personality. Knowing a parent doesn't care or gives a damn about one's existence and fate, does a lot to a kid and its self esteem and confidence which was the case about my father. My mother gave a damn and loved me – she just didn't have much time for me; in either case it made me into an insecure individual, broken, with a very low self esteem.

A little child takes it personally when parents do not show them interest or have time for them: Did I do something wrong? Why don't they like me? What did I do wrong? Every rejection, or the fear of receiving one, have caused, I have no doubt, the serious depression and gloominess that are my companions in this life – and I do have my fair share of those.

I have abandonment issues, a very low self esteem and a huge fear of rejections.



A contemplating four year old child

An artist is born

Asserting I am in a profession that triggers these issues is an understatement. All artists, I am sure, must deal with various rejections on a regular basis throughout their career, especially early on. A large portion of an artist's work is to apply for grants, shows and basically present one self for gallerists and the artworld. In simple terms the PR of an artist is simply a cry out for attention: Look at this – I made this, don't you like it? My estimation is that most of us get far more rejection than approvals. At least that has been the reality in my case. For me, as I have laid out, rejections and fear of abandonment and acceptance issues cut deep into the core of my existence and revoke these early life's traumas and abandonment feelings.

I have always been drawing and painting. It was one of the few subjects in school that got me any attention and I needed any attention I could get, as is understandable from my

first years' shaping. Draftsmanship was also something I was exceptionally good at from the outset; it is in my genes.

My mother never tires from telling however will listen, that this kid of hers was so quiet and content if only: "I gave him some crayons or pencil and paper to draw – he could be content for hours and I didn't have to worry about him". Yes, I surely enjoyed being on my own coloring and drawing, ever since I can remember. I'm guessing that many of you out there, have probably figured out where I found my happy place; where I felt safe and at ease – and quite frankly, it has remained so to this day and probably will be until I draw my last breath.

This is one of the fundamental reasons why I cannot abandon the path of an artist, despite various attempts throughout my lifetime and career – my studio is my happy place. It's where I find comfort and peace in life's struggle; where I go into my own creation, where

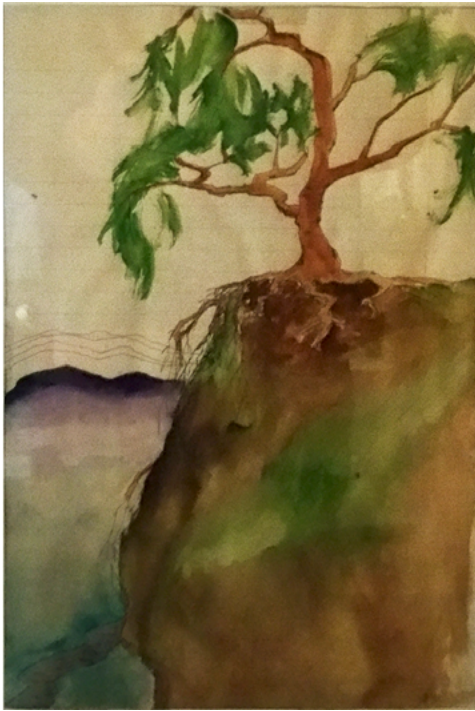
I am at ease. It's where I recuperate and heal. Take that away from me and it is like taking oxygen away – I can't live, I can't thrive.

To finish off the story about my infancy, let me tell you about my second memory. I was being kept (I use this phrase deliberately) with some strangers in a farm outside of Reykjavik. I later learned the reason for me being there was that my mother was giving birth to my younger and only brother Stein-ar. Mom had met a new fellow and another baby was on the way. I have absolutely no recollection of that guy from that time and as it turned out they did not start a life together.

My second memory is about being carried down a staircase on the shoulder of some stranger into a room full of people. I remember, like in a dream, being exhibited in a drunken party. There was shouting and a lot of noise all around. I did not understand what was going on, but I seem to recall some adults having a quarrel about this not being

right at all. I was a beautiful baby, I am told and there and then I was a fun thing to flaunt for some unfamiliar drunken stranger at a party in a foreign place. I was three years old at the time.

Did I say that I have abandonment issues – and might I add I have some traumatic childhood memories?



*The oldest painting by me that has survived.
Probably made when I was eight*

Growing up

I was never sexually abused as a child (well, it is a point of view) but on a couple of occasions it was a close call, only prevented by something that I like to call a divine interven-

tion. I was abused a lot however by strangers, teachers and other adults in those farms and elsewhere I spent a lot of my childhood. The fact of the matter is, that I was babysitted a lot in my childhood by strangers, which obviously stems from the fact that my mother was a single mom and she had no support from either of the child's grandparents or family. Her mother had moved to Denmark, mom didn't stay in touch with her father, my father wasn't there nor his family – so it was only my mom and I.

A traumatic scar remains vividly scraped in my memory from one of those farms I was forced to stay at: One time (third or fourth farm I had been planted at in my life to this point) a grown up son of the farmer thought it a funny idea to sit on my face. He was around twenty, I was around eight. There he sat and farted a horrible wet and smelly fart straight up to my nose and made sure to remain sitting until he was sure I had to grasp for a breath.

There are countless other incidents like these from those years. Suffice to say I was not treated well when I was away from home and I was away a lot. There were beatings, punishments, cold shoulders and hard disciplines. Nothing of this was even seen as anything in particular. In those days it was a common practice for a lot of city families to send their kids to farms in the summers – “To learn how to work”. Today, this is regarded as child abuse and extortion and this practise banned by law. Some kids were fortunate to stay with relatives. In my case it was always with strangers and they all just saw me really as a slave – and I sure had to work for my food and lodge. From six in the morning until the evening every single day – without pay.

The biggest issue about this is not the slavery. It is the abandonment. Why did my mother send me there? Where was my father? Not all of my friends had to go through this and I certainly did not like being at those farms slaving for strangers. I understood that mom

had to work, but why send me to these strangers, my brother could stay with his father or his family – I had no-one but my mom. What had I done so horrible that I deserved this? This is how I thought until those farm days were finally over in my early teens.

So, there you have it: I was constantly being kept and “cared” for by strangers who didn’t really want me and I definitely didn’t want to be with them. Constantly I was excusing my existence: “I know you don’t care about me and you don’t want me to be here and I don’t want to be here either, but nobody else wants to have me so here I am – please don’t hurt me”.

Yeah – I have abandonment issues and a very low self esteem; welcome to my world!

Elementary school

One certain factor had a paramount effect on my development – that is the attitude I met from a horrible little old lady that was my school teacher in elementary school. She was a mean old woman, from a by-gone era. She made sure I felt un-welcomed in class. I later figured out that, not only did she hate boys, but she especially loathed kids from “broken” homes. Yes, there was a stigma in Iceland about divorce in those days, big stigma. Single moms were equivalent to whores – and their children were bastards. On top of that, I had a foreign father! Absolutely reprehensible!

This old bag did not even try to hide her contempt for me. “Why waste any time on this little bastard? He will amount to nothing”. I had to endure this horrible human being for years. Well, she did not only have it in for me. There were other boys, my school mates, of course, at least those of us not, coming from

decent families. Finally four of us revolted and actually there was a fight one day. Something had to be done by the school.

It was the first time in my life I realized that one does not have to take abuse and a fight against oppression can actually make a difference. We all wanted to get away from this horrible bitch. There was a meeting and the parents were called up. The result was that two of us rebels got transferred to other classes and one to another school. One stayed – and guess who that was? It could not be so that this old bag lost four of her students in one go. That would have looked bad for the school and definitely for her – even in those days. The class would become too small and definitely no-one from the other classes wanted to trade places.

I was taken to the principal. A whole day, I had to stay in his office. He had me hanging there while attending to his business. Towards the end of the school day, he sat down

and we had a little “talk”. He spread his legs and touched his genitals. Then he took me for a ride in his car! Honestly I can’t remember more.

I failed to get rid of the old bag and stayed in her class until that school was over and high-school took over – which was thankfully, as I remember, just one more year. I still to this day can bummer over why I did not persist in not staying in her class and not let that go over me. I did not deserve to be treated that way.

I am pretty sure she would not be accepted as a teacher and caretaker of young children today. So why was I not allowed to be transferred? Today I know that I was too broken, too afraid of authorities and felt too worthless to stay adamant and stand my ground. I was just a little boy, afraid of confrontation and easily manipulated – they knew that of course.

This added yet another defeat for my self confidence and chipped away yet another layer of my self esteem. I have been poorly equipped to stand up for myself and confront my wrongdoers. To this day, I am still fighting this inner weakness and confrontations are something I fight shy of, everytime they come up. However, our little revolt is something I look back at with pride.

So I am programmed in the way that I do not believe I deserve anything good to happen to me – quite the contrary.



From my “acting” days in the National Theatre

The National Theater of Iceland – my second home & Lenin the Cat

I had some things going for me in my childhood of course. Beside my creative retreat and my mother's love, it was my cat and the National Theater of Iceland.

When I was six years old, my mom brought home a little kitten. She named him Lenin (that name ought to give you an impression of the political environment I was brought up in). Lenin became my best friend and I have never since bounded to any other living being as strongly. He was part of my life for most of my childhood and adolescence. He always was there, with his unconditional love and affection – and I loved him deeply. He lived to be nineteen years old.

My mother was still a single mom of two and a young actress now employed full time at the National Theater of Iceland. Suffice to say, she had to work a lot – and work a lot

she did. During the day there were rehearsals and in the evenings – performances. In the summertime when the theater was closed she was a tourist guide. My brother was away a lot with his father and mostly with his grandparents. I was raised more or less in the National Theater of Iceland. When I was not at school, I was usually with my mom at work watching rehearsals and in the evening enjoying the theater performances. I saw those plays countless times and knew the lines of every role by heart. I took in the theater with my morning milk and it explains a lot about how I have acted since and the kind of art I make. Everybody knew me there and I became a kind of a theater pet. I knew every corridor, every task and everyone: The ladies in the makeup, the guys at the props, the guys controlling the lights, the chiefs in the cantine, the doorman, the actors – everybody there were my friends and that place was like a home to me.

If I was not at the theater, I was left home

alone a lot (that is, if I was not kept here and there in the aforementioned farms or just with whomever was available and willing to look after me). In fact I raised myself. I taught myself to read and of course I was always drawing and painting. For sure, in today's standards here in Iceland, this upbringing would not be seen as ideal or acceptable and I think most of you would raise some eyebrows at a father deserting his newborn child and simply disappearing. One letter is all that man contacted me ever in his life. He wrote when I was twelve. My mother told me about its content, at least her version of it, and it was pathetic according to her opinion.

Suffice to say I only had my mother and was and am very attached to her. I remember having my first suicidal thought at a very young age dreading that if she would die I would take my own life with the kitchen knife. A young child needs love and she was the only human being that gave it to me and I could not fathom a life without that love. But I got

a lot of love from my cat Lenin, tears come into my eyes even now that I am writing this.

My dear Lenin.



*With my dear and beloved cat and best
friend*

Adolescence

I did okay in school, especially given the lack of support from home. Don't get me wrong – my mother loved me and wanted all the best for me, but she wasn't there much. She had no time to aid with homework or partake in my life inside or outside of school. Always working, a single mom with two kids – go figure. For a long time I was fine with that. I recall feeling blessed not having any father bossing me around and I could stay out almost as long as I wanted in the evenings. Yes, I raised myself.

I was always the creative type. Always drawing and creating worlds in my head and my room. When the offer came, I joined the school's brass band. I chose the drums and percussion. I loved to bang on things and rhythmic, I have always been. About the same time, I started guitar lessons. That was when my mother had a boyfriend whom she later married – her first and only marriage so

far. We moved in with the new boyfriend. He could tolerate me – but he hated my brother and he really did not think much of the rest of my mother's family. It was a turbulent relationship. He despised mom's profession; acting was not a real job.

Gummi, as we called him, was a plumber. I would describe him as a rather lazy person. I remember in our home, a house provided to him by his employer, there were a bunch of forever going renovation projects all over the place. He began projects enthusiastically, but never finished anything. He was not a bad person, but he and my mom did not get along and divorced after a few years.

One thing I am grateful for: Gummi could draw and was quite a good draftsman and he taught me a thing or two; not per se, but I learned a lot watching him draw. Usually he drew something from the war. Nazi soldiers mostly and their equipment. He was a nazi, I think. Sometimes I thought he used to be

a nazi soldier in his previous incarnation. Another thing also came with Gummi. He had a son and we became very good friends, almost like brothers. We kept contact long after my mother and Gummi parted. We even formed a punk-rock band and played our own music and performed with no lesser stars than Björk and the Sugarcubes on more than one occasion. Still no father figure in my life. Gummi never really was.



Posing and playing the bass with my band

First art lessons

This was the time of youth revolt expressed through punk-rock culture. And it suited me perfectly. Life surely had not been too kind to me. Back in those days, being from a broken home (and probably still to this day) was frowned upon.

After the old bag in elementary school followed three years of highschool. There the classes were divided up. I was later to find out the reason. They divided us after family prestige and social status. They did not want to mix up the good kids with the bad ones. Of course I was put in a class with the “troubled” kids. Not the “dumb” kids – they were in another class. So of course I said “FUCK YOU” in chorus with the rest of the punk generation.

Fuck this system! I really loathed this world and everything in it. If you don't like me, I certainly don't care about you – you fuck.

The system, the school, the people in charge, the police, indoctrination, the future, a career, the fuckin' religion, greed, stupidity, the Cold War, pollution – everything! Fuck it.

But it was not all bad. My art teacher (who incidentally also was called Gummi) was a lovely and a great teacher. In his class I made my first oil painting. It was of clowns descending from the main door of the parliament building. It was all about clowns in those days. I named my band The Clown. For me the whole society was a circus full of clowns. I unfortunately have lost this painting and even the photograph my art teacher took of it. But it was a good beginners work and it got attention and not only from my art teacher. He told me that he even had shown it to one of his buddies who was an artist and he was impressed.

At the graduation ceremony from high-school, I was awarded for excellence in art and got an art book signed by my art teach-



*The first attempt for abstract oil, made in art class
in college*

er – something I treasure and keep with me to this day. And yeah, one of the girls in my class was awarded for having the highest average grade in the whole of Iceland that year (she is today an engineer and was my childhood sweetheart, but of course I didn't have the courage to act on it) – so, take that you suckers, who wrote us off as the troubled class and lost kids.

The relief of mind altering substances

Now, this is a ripe and fertile soil for a young teenager to discover drugs and alcohol – and what a relief it was when that happened. I was an alcoholic from the start – of that I am sure. I grew up with alcoholism. My mother and grandmother used alcohol and cigarettes like there was no tomorrow and they did not hide it from us kids. I remember numerous occasions waking up in the middle of the night to a party, often wondering why on earth they did not consider I had to wake

up early to go to school the next day. That was somehow not as important as having a great feast in the middle of the week. Quarrels, fights, loud music and talks, long into the night – get used to it kid.

I remember one day in highschool when there was this lecture about alcoholism. Everybody had been summoned in the hall to listen to these two – not so good looking blokes – admitting to all of us they were alcoholics. “If you kids do not take care” – you could surely end up like them. There is one thing in particular I remember from this talk. One of them said if we experienced black-out when drinking – we were highly likely to be a material for an alcoholic.

Well, I was a black-out drinker from the outset. Started drinking out of peer pressure at the age of fourteen, despite having previously promised myself never to take up that stupidity. I simply could not handle my liquor. Thank heavens I soon discovered hash. That

I could handle – and handle it I did quite well – for decades. I had found a place where I could escape into and feel at ease away from this dreadful world; not art this time, but cannabis and combine those two I did a lot, in the upcoming decades.



On the film set in south Iceland. My mom has written in Icelandic: “Thor with a young girl” Well it is a boy – but who cares about gender anyways?

College

So I was growing up becoming a teenager. The teenage revolt was in full blast. I left highschool with recognition for excellence in art and above average grades in the rest. It was my strategy then and all the way through college: Put all my effort into art and to do just enough – and no more – to pass, in the rest: Why waste more energy than needed? I chose to go to Hamrahlid college. Most of my highschool mates chose the neighborhood local prestigious Reykjavik College – or MR as it is called (that's where most of the privileged kids go). The reason I chose Hamrahlid college was that it was a progressive educational institution and it did not have the class system. I always hated being stuck in a class. I am a loner by nature and I really fit poorly in a group. Considering my upbringing and background – how could it really be otherwise?

Another thing was a relatively new thing on

the Icelandic pedagogical scene: Hamrahlid college had a unit system similar to the University system. Students could choose subjects within their field of study and pretty much choose their own pace of study. It was also an art prone favorite. I could choose my subject and pace and I could get points for art and acting classes – even music! Now, why would anybody choose another school?

This was the school where the cool and creative kids went (yes Björk was there too concomitantly). Back in those days in Iceland, there was no college that specifically offered college graduation in the field of the arts, but Hamrahlid was as close to that as it got. I had long been aiming to become an artist and this was my first advanced step in that direction.

In many ways my college years were good years. I am a good student when I put my mind to it. I sank myself into art classes, making music with my band, and taking theater classes. I enjoyed the philosophy classes and

acquiring knowledge in psychology, political science, economics, history and law; the rest I endured and passed. Grades were of no importance to me – at least not in those days. My mind was already made up on going to art school after graduation anyway and I excelled in art as before.

I formed an art club and we had art exhibitions in school. It was cool and felt like I was becoming a real artist and I was ambitious about my works and was painting everytime I had free time from schoolwork and was not playing with my band. I made artwork for the school plays, election posters for some students, designed the hang-out room, gigged with my band and acted in films and in the National theater. It was a creative time.

All through my childhood and up until the college years, I had been acting on stage in the National Theater. Acting would perhaps be an overstatement: We, the actor's kids, were used as "statists" as it was called in the

theater. Basically backgrounds in children's plays or used in minor roles, with one or two lines. The acting made me some money, as did some of the gigs with my band. I had purchased my Fender Jazz Bass and an amp for the money I made that way. I also took a sabbatical year from college to take a job as a traveling book salesman, selling door-to-door, in villages around Iceland. Besides, it giving me the chance to visit every village in Iceland and discover Iceland in a whole new way. I made a lot of money on that.

I was also involved in a theater group in Iceland at this time. It was called "Svart & Sykurlaust" – meaning black & sugarless in english. Also with them, I traveled around the country doing performances. I played a real role in a film by famous director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, who is renowned for his viking films. So I was basically living the life of an artist from the early on.

Yes, those were good days in many aspects.

Of course I still had the same low self esteem and on top of that I stopped growing at 175 centimeters. Not small in size but not tall either. I was considered a good looking though and the looks helped, so I was okay with the ladies – and the guys. I was this awkward arty type with locust social skills and an eccentric. My group was mostly based around my band. We met in our rehearsal space and partied and smoked a lot of weed. Let me tell you that it did not aid with my social skills. So, there you have it – yet another hand-down on my confidence – too short, smoking weed all day and basically a punker that doesn't give a fuck.



*Oil painting made in memory of the fight for freedom
in the Baltic during the collaps of the Soviet Union*

Being different

Ever since I can remember I felt different and out of place. I am not just saying that. Constantly being pushed into the hands of strangers, I very early on felt unwanted, unworthy and dirty somehow. Being abandoned and neglected as a child, I was constantly justifying my existence. I didn't have a father like the other kids. Although fit and strong, I didn't like sports much. Always drawing and creating something, growing up in the theater living in that world knowing about ballet and opera; no-one around me was like that.

Raised by a single mom under the influence of my grandmother's matriarchy, with the absence of any father figure, surely affected how I regard gender. My role models and heroes were predominantly females. Pippi Longstocking, a character created by writer Astrid Lindgren, was my childhood hero. My mother was a source of love and my grand-

mother was the stronghold and the achiever. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir the first ever democratic female president in the world. Margaret Thatcher was the prime minister of Great Britain. Women had formed a female political party in Iceland and the so-called Red Stocking female movement was strong in those times. Perhaps, not surprisingly, I wanted to try on my mother's clothes and sometimes I did.

At a Christmas party, with my brother's family (my mother tried to squeeze me in there sometimes so I didn't feel left out – or maybe simply because she needed a babysitter). I remember playing with some dolls, owned by some girls who were also there. I recall my brother's grandfather snatching them away from me with the discontented tone that “boys do not play with dolls” remark. I was petrified. Obviously, I had done something terribly wrong. We never spoke about that incident again. I am pretty sure the old man's good intentions,

– but what a traumatic experience for a five year old!



*The Christmas party after the “doll” incident –
playing with my own toy car*

I was a boy but I was odd in this regard – that I could tell. I was attracted to girls and had no conscious affection for boys. I sometimes wondered if my admiration of girls was that I wished to be like them. I really felt that my sexuality was pretty “normal”. Today, we would probably say that I was in touch with my feminine side. I had long hair when it was not in style, even among the girls. I had long hair during the punk era, when literally everybody around was either skinheaded or wore a mohican.

Becoming something I was not – somebody else was perhaps not so out of tune for me. Dressing up as a girl became an escape for me; a safe place. For me it was the space where I could throw away my protective, aggressive, persona; shut off the outside world, relax and just be myself. Without excuse, without anybody governing me or resenting my presence, I could be me – when I became another. It was exciting, transgressive, and relieving. In a sense, it was like I was unpacking a part

of me that had been suppressed and it felt so honestly – me. It had nothing to do with puberty, I was withdrawing into that space long before. It was an existence, where I could be myself more than in any other context. This was prior to the internet and the information age. Little knowledge did I have about what I was going through, or what the heck was “wrong” with me; but I had a notion that it was not “right”.

The only idea I had about what I was experiencing was that it had something to do with what was called – transvestism. Obviously and in perfect accordance with my life, it usually was associated with something wrong, hideous, foolish, bad or even evil; as for example in the Buffalo Bill character, in the Hollywood film, *The Silence of the Lambs*. Of course – if it feels good to be me, it is wrong, pathetic and even evil.

*One of the earliest depictions
of TORA Victoria. Vector
drawing 1998*



TORA Victoria

I hid this side of me from everybody, since it was not “right” – just like it was not “right” for boys to play with dolls and just as it was not “right” to be me. All throughout my life I had been excusing my existence. Dressing up as another person – another gender – was therefore logical in a sense: Always at odds, unwanted and wrong, becoming someone else and a girl – made so much sense. Forbidden, wrong, completely out of place, perverted and ashamed – yes it was me.

I discreetly, gradually, got myself a wardrobe that would be considered a woman’s style wardrobe. I simply went into the women’s clothing section and was shopping for my “girlfriend” – and in a sense that was the case. I won’t lie: I got something sexual out of it for a period. I felt so alive! It was like I was making love with myself – Two parts in one body; a male and a female. It felt so right and yet so wrong at the same time. I felt

whole, alright and at ease, it was magical. But I was also ashamed about this and guarded this “dirty” secret as my life depended on it. If only I could be open about this and society would not scowl this as it surely did.

Outwardly, I portrayed a tough guy, oozing with masculinity; somebody who definitely had no sissiness in him. This was my secret and no-one was to find out. A little human being feeling unwanted of course hides from everybody. If anybody found out about this, it would have equaled death – that could never happen. Being unable to be openly me in this way, I got an outlet for it in my art. I drew and painted girls and women in all kinds of situations, often in gorgeous garments with garter belts, stockings and in peaceful contenting situations and poses. I was portraying myself as a she. TORA Victoria my alter ego was coming fourth. She was the part of me that was confident and relaxed, a complete opposite of my daily self. I had always been at odds. Everything I was, seemed un-

wanted and prohibited. I had gotten used to laying low and swallowing oppression, only to wait until I was alone to open up and allow myself to be me, in solitude.

Realizing TORA Victoria, both in my art and in my physique, was a magical and a mystical experience. But it was a fierce battle with my unconsciousness: Between what I wanted and felt and what was acceptable by society and what I had learned to be right and wrong. For the years that followed, I struggled to reconcile these contrasts in my existence. This conflict struggle nagged me from the inside out for a very long time in my life. In a way it was such a logical continuation of my life up until that point.

Periodically I fiercely tried to suppress this side of me. I destroyed all the artworks of early TORA Victoria, I threw away my female wardrobe, or burned it ceremonially. I wished I could escape this “anomaly”. Nobody could ever find out about this! With

out a doubt, this is why I so furiously acted when gay men hid on me back then. I was not going to be outed – at any cost. It was a ferocious battleground and for years I was playing a part that I thought was right but felt was wrong.

Always, it was art that was the mending ground. It was through art that I could breathe and be me and reconcile myself into me. Art is an alternative dimension where free expression and the subconscious can be accessed.. TORA Victoria – Me – was openly visible and unchained in my art. Best of all – nobody could see it! Not even I to begin with. I was getting away with being me after all! But she had to wait until she could fully materialize and these two parts of me Thor Ludwig Stiefel and TORA Victoria could coalesce.

It took some serious mental exploration and time before I was able to realize that those women, this character in my art – was really

me. It was TORA Victoria.

All of that accumulated in my art philosophy SNART that later became my art-statement and creative, expressive guide and mental revelation.



Face. Aquarelle on paper, 21x30cm. 1990

A son and a wife

It was in the Hamrahlid college when I met my soon to become wife. I chose her simply because she was just as disturbed as I. She was the turbulent party girl. I guess not the ideal wife material nor the daughter-in-law, I would wish for myself. I did not love her. I liked her and we could drink and party together – so why not? She was the punk princess, witty, smart and dark. After a while we moved in together and soon after that we married and Elias, our son, was born.

I have thought about that countless times why no-one of the adults around us never tried the slightest to stop us kids – or at least tell us to take it easy. I guess on both sides, our relatives were just happy we were starting a family and hoped for the best, for those miserable lost youngsters. I was twenty-one, she twenty-two, when our son was born.



*Elias and a Swan. Aquarelle on paper,
95x70cm. 1993*

He was born in fall of 1988 and a month later I began studying at the Icelandic Art and Handcraft College – a school that was the predecessor of the Icelandic University of the Arts and quite a prestigious school to get into. A dream was coming true for me. In the spring of my graduation from the Hamrah-lid college, I had attended the entrance exam and was accepted with flying colors.

That summer my wife was pregnant and we moved to Isafjordur in the west of Iceland, to

live with her parents. I got a job on a boat as a fisherman and a cook and made a decent amount of money to start our little family. I was working on a boat at sea when my son was born, so I was not there to witness his birth. I regret that to this day – but one has to earn a living, right?

We rented an apartment in Reykjavik that autumn and I started my dream study – I was to become an artist, finally. I had patiently waited those four years of college. Now life was beginning.

So this is the scenario: Two alcoholics, basically still kids, with rather disturbed backgrounds, raising a child. One a stay at home mom and the other starting a new school studying art. I had become close to my father in-law during the summer. He was as close to a father figure to me as anyone had been in my life and I looked up to him. He was on the same page as my grandmother and pretty much all of their generation in Iceland: Art

was at best a hobby – nothing one did for a living. I recall him telling me on various occasions with an authoritative vigor, only a father-in-law can have, to give up this art nonsense and enlist rather in the University and become something useful to earn a decent living now that I were to become the provider of a family. All of his children, except my wife (she was the black sheep), were doctors or managers of some kind – real achievers

Yes, this is something that I was not un-accustomed to. It is safe to say that although I was talented, did well in art classes and really loved making art – I was not encouraged to follow that path by people around me except the person who matters the most, my mother.

Altering course

It takes its toll when those grown-ups close to you, reduce you from going your way and encourage the notion that you are making a

huge mistake. The pressure was too much.

With a one year old child and a wife, I decided to let go of my dream to become an artist after a year of study. I quit art school – something that had been my goal for as long as I could remember. I did this for my family and out of outside pressure. I decided to let go of my dream and enrolled in the University of Iceland – to do the “sensible” thing. The choice was between law, economics or business. I chose business. If I could not become an artist, I was to become a successful businessman or an accountant, make tons of money and settle for art as a hobby. I could make money and have the world’s best hobby – how bad could that be?

The year in art school had been good though – for the most part. A huge drawback was the fact that the teachers were hired for life in those days. That meant that most of them were burn-outs, long overdue, tired old farts. They really resent us kids, full of vitality and

talent – at least some of them. Typically, I had the biggest fart of them all as a supervisor. He reminded me of my primary school teacher, that horrible woman. That supervisor teacher in art school triggered a lot of angry resentful memories and I hated that man. He was the head of the department, a real misogynistic jerk. Yet another dinosaur that had crawled its way into the Icelandic education system, doing more harm than good; literally spoiling an education of a generation.



*Painting from my art school. Aquarelle on paper,
40x30cm. 1989*

Just as before, I did not have the guts to request a transfer to another class and besides he was the head of the department. It was that old nightmare all over again, being ostracized and bullied, by a tiny little person that was taking its own personal issues out on his pupils.

The Icelandic Art- and Handcraft school was not the best school, I can imagine – how could it be, employing this kind of staff? To be honest, most of the teacher's were failed artists and quite frankly a very, very few in Iceland have ever been able to live off art anyway; most who go into art end up teaching as a way to earn a living. The school was founded and based on an obscure ideology, imitating the backwards art academies in Europe and that without having even the resources those Akademies had to offer. With strict rules and red tapes between disciplines, ill equipped in then the approaching computer technology, it was a dying beast.

As it happened, the school was terminated a few years later and conglomerated into the new Iceland Academy of the Arts (now The Iceland University of the Arts); a great institution today – I might add – incumousing visual art, performance art, music, architecture and design. That I can safely state, since I attended both of them.

My father

Literally everybody around me, except the person who matters the most – my mother, discouraged me to follow my heart and become an artist. Even my father, himself an artist, disheartened me about following my passion. Yes, I had found my father as a seventeen year old.

The story is that I had increasingly been itching about the fact that I didn't know anything about my father – not a single thing. It was eating me from the inside. Who was I? What was from my mother and what from my fa-

ther? And what was just me? I had to find out. I was traveling Europe on an interrail trip as a seventeen year old and had as one of the objectives with the trip to try to locate my father. I had no clue where he lived: No contact info, no address, no phone number – nothing. My mother and I thought he still lived in Paris.

Mom had been a president of the Alliance Francaise in Iceland for some time and through that she had made some friends from the French embassy in Iceland. One of them had later begun a career in the French foreign office. Mom contacted the fellow and asked if he could help locate my father. I was in the south of Italy when I, for some reason, decided to call my mother and let her know I was alright and alive. She was very excited when she told me that her friend had located my father and I was to call him and he would give me the info I needed to get to my father. Great, I thought, and I called the man.

It was one of those stings in the chest that followed. I have had several of those, but this one was one of the all time high. My mother's friend answered the phone. I introduced myself and – yes he had the information I wanted. Only one thing: Was I aware that my father was a prominent and respectable artist and did I realize that he could of course think that I was just after some money? What a jerk! I just hated that man after that – how dared he? Who the fuck did he think he was? I think he really thought this was my motive – to demand some dole! I was numb with anger and fury. My motives were way above the thought processes this petty little viesel could conjure! Anyways, I got a phone number and called my father. He actually sounded happy and excited when I called. Yes, he wanted to meet me of course. The only thing was that he was going with his theater group to represent France at the summer olympic games in Los Angeles in a week, so this was the summer of 1984. If I came right away I could meet him before he left. I changed my

traveling plans in an instance and was in Paris two days later.

It was spectacular to meet him; my father – wow! We have the same hands and I could see a lot of myself in him. I began to see who was my mother, who was my father and who was I. We had a wonderful time in Paris. He introduced me to his city and I stayed in his studio. I visited him several times after that and he came to my wedding. I also stayed with him after my divorce and worked as an assistant in his Theatre de Soleil for a while. I can't recall exactly, but either the second time or the third time I stayed with him, he told me that I should not become an artist – it was not a vice choice.

Gradually, our connection became sour. I think he really did not like me. It could have to do with my incredibly low self-esteem, or simply be my deduction about the fact that he wasn't there for me and has never contacted me – ever. I resented the fact that he

had abandoned my mother and me and not even cared about if I was alive or dead. I was his only child and it affects a child to experience this negligence and scorn of a parent. Quite frankly, I thought – and still think – he is a selfish egoistic human being. But he has his issues and I hold no grudges – I am free of him. We have no contact today, but I am glad I got to know him and myself in the process.

Divorce and a crash

My business study at the University of Iceland started well enough. But things soon took a turn for the worse. It was simply not me, I did not feel I was in my element. I felt I was wasting my talent. I began to have second thoughts about quitting art school and abandoning my dreams.

At home things became sour. If I was to forfeit my dreams, those people at home should support me and play the happy family we



Tiananmen Square. *Oil on canvas 95x65cm. 1989*

were to become. During the pregnancy and after our son was born, my wife and I stopped using and drinking alcohol. All of my happy places were gone: My art, my cannabis – and TORA Victoria was packed away, deep into my mental dungeon. I was oppressing myself with brute force and increasingly, I became bitter, irritable, discontented and angry. Being a mom was not the role my wife was any good at either – and a housewife was even way further away from her mentality.

It was only a question of time before the divorce. Our marriage should never have been. We were simply too young, too disturbed individuals, too far apart and neither of us could handle having a child. Two immature, strong minded individuals, coming from troubled backgrounds – and not at all in love to begin with. Well, it was a crash bound to happen.

After the divorce – and it was a messy one – I quit the University. My aim was to resume my study at the art school the following au-

tumn. In those days the custody of the child automatically went to the mother; the fact that she was a raging alcoholic, didn't even change that. The failed father was just to pay the alimony, be a babysitter every other weekend and shut up. This I did. Well, way more than that actually. Following the divorce, I moved out of our apartment and I left everything to her and my son. I took the car. I had it anyway already before I met her, so I deemed it only fair.

Another sting to the heart was one day when I came to the apartment to pick up the rest of my personal items a few days after I had moved out. I was expecting to meet my ex and my son there, have a talk and work on some closures. Well, my son was there – she wasn't. Instead I met tons of empty liquor bottles, dirty diapers all over the place and some passed out stranger knocked out in our bed. She had resumed her pre-motherhood lifestyle and was obviously on a bender. Our son was crying so frantically in his crib that

I heard it on the street. He was scared, wet with urine and had been crying obviously for a while. Seemingly there had been a heavy party the night before and who knew where the mother was now. I gathered my things and took my son with me.

He stayed with me most of the time until his mother had sobered up some years or later after going through rehab. She stayed in our apartment that I had paid for, with our things that I had left for our son – not for her.

Single dad

I had taken a job at the post office after the divorce and dropping out of my business studies. I rented a place where I lived and had my studio. I was able to do my art and have my son with me and the postal job paid the bills. I was getting back on track and mentally ready to become a single dad. It was relatively rare in those days although not unheard of. The divorce came through after



With my two year old son

this mandatory evaluation year and consultations with a priest, as well as with some government officials and the regular fighting over material things and blaming. Yes, we wanted to see this divorce through and the sooner the better.

The bitterness was unbelievable. She was drinking heavily. I had commenced on re-

turning to my old self with my cannabis, art and TORA Victoria was no free – and now a single dad. She was in no condition to raise a child and quite frankly neither was I. My mother came to our son's rescue; how she has always been there for me, I can only thank God – and she absolutely loved her little grandson. She gave him all the love she has to offer – and that is quite a lot. To be fair, she raised him just as much as we the parents did, for his first years. I, who had promised myself that my son should not have to go through life as a child from a broken home, had to swallow that pill. At least I was there for him, a big part of his life for the first nine years of his life, until I later moved to Copenhagen.

I raised him, when his mother was drinking and when she went through rehab. The system did not allow joint custody and I was to be just a site-kick parent, with no authority, no saying and it hurt. That was the system back then – thankfully it has changed. I was

part of a group for a while called “Fathers without custody”, that pushed for long overdue changes in how society regarded single fathers and treated divorces and the right for children to be around both of their parents. Today, joint custody is the norm in Iceland.

I deeply loved my son. I gave him all the love I could muster. And my mother was there as well. But I was broken and scarred. My life was in disarray. I was not accepted again into my art school that following autumn. I guess that supervisor teacher did not give me good recommendations. My artist dream was shattered and the lack of self esteem gradually gave way to self loathing. I tried, I tried, but I failed as a father and I felt I had completely failed as a human being and as an artist.



From my first solo exhibition. A figure that has been frequent in my works. Acrylic on canvas, 85x120cm.

1990

First solo exhibition

No art school, no university – no future. No! – I still had some fight in me. I was to become an artist damn them all, damn this miserable life. Who needed art school anyway? This was my destiny. Now I was to demonstrate my determination – did I really want this? Yes, I did. There is nothing they can teach me in school anyway. It is all a matter of attitude and learning art is self learning – if there is a will, there is a way. I began a systematic self study in painting techniques. Reading anything I could get my hands on about art and artists. I was painting like crazy. The post office job I had chosen since I could hurry up my route and get off around two or three in the afternoon and still get paid for a whole day. After the shift, I went straight to work in my studio, often long into the night. I worked like my life depended on it – and in a sense it did.

I had my first solo exhibition that year, it

was 1991. It was incidentally at the women's house in downtown Reykjavik. The women's movement, which was very active at the time, had established a political party and got candidates in the Reykjavik municipality and in parliament. The movement had acquired a large building in the city center where they had their headquarters. A beautiful large wooden building called Hlaðvarpinn. There was a hall there where they had their meetings and was also used for happenings and exhibitions. The hall was also rented out and in there I had my first solo exhibition with 15 paintings in oil and acrylic on canvases. My first solo show – my first real art exhibition.



"Finding the way". Oil on canvas 120x100cm. 1990

Moving on

I exhibited yearly, sometimes twice a year in the following period. I learned a lot and was growing as an artist. I was serious about educating myself in art. I had some wonderful girlfriends in this period. None of the relationships lasted long however. Burned from the marriage experience, a year and a half was the norm. I also did not want anything to come in my way as an artist again.



With my son in one of my openings

“I” the real me was still in the closet, but TORA Victoria was always at home, just waiting for me – absolutely every man’s dream girl. I was not fully a self-employed artist. I did sell in a local gallery and usually I could sell some of my works when I had a show. You are defined by the way you earn a living. Was I an artist working a day job – or was I a day time worker, making art on the site? This became my struggle for the next few years. I quit the post office and worked

hard labor jobs that paid better. Usually, I worked long hours for months to be able to sustain myself in the upcoming period, being able to focus only on my art. Often, I was working daytime jobs for six months, following a six month period only working on my art. I chose work that was hard physical labor but paid relatively good. First of all they were easy to get and I used it as a way to stay in shape. There were criterias a job would have to fulfill: Relatively good salary, task based work (finish the task and go home to paint) and I wanted to learn something doing my job. It was on one of those jobs – on the pier, working servicing the fishing boats – I met one of my best friends, Gerhard Zeller.

Zeller was a German who'd been living in Iceland for some years. A few years older than I, he, like me, had been discouraged to follow his artistic ambitions. Pushed by a dominating father, Zeller became a mechanic. He met his fiance, an Icelandic girl, in Germany and they had settled in Reykjavik a few years pri-

or. He had since been working various jobs, never really giving up on his artistic ambitions. We connected immediately. We used to talk for hours, many winter nights about art, politics and philosophy. I valued his opinion about my work and likewise did he appreciate my remarks on his. We taught each other a lot about art and we talked for hours and hours about Freud and the subconsciousness, the Ego, Id and the Super-Ego.

We respected each other. Zeller was a devoted communist – I, always the hard-core anarchist. We became involved in the workers union and were active for a while, although never wanting to become fully involved in either politics nor labor struggle; we were artists. Our approach was the one of the artist, the intellectual and analyzing social structure and real political motives according to Karl Marks, Lenin, Freud and Reich. There were some heated debates in those years and I know we were lights for each other, in an otherwise hostile and non-understanding,

unsupportive world. In 1997 we exhibited together in the Nordic house in Reykjavik. Zeller was dear to me. I lost him to the next world in 2013. He died of a stroke, only 54 years old.



The “sofa” performance. In connection with Zellers and my exhibition in 1997. From left to right: My mother, Zeller, Elias and Villi

Struggling young artist

I was doing alright as an artist, exhibiting at least once a year, working constantly in my studio, mostly on paintings. In 1992 I became part of a group of young artists who established a youth independent art festival in Reykjavik we called “Loftárás á Seyðisfjörð”; a name one of us came up with that literally means “airstrike on Seydisfjordur”. It is a quote to a headline from an Icelandic newspaper reporting an airstrike by a German airplane on the harbor in Seyðisfjord, during the second world war. I never really got that name, but that is not important here. All over town we had venues: Art exhibitions, theater performances, concerts and fashion shows. It was a big event in Reykjavik’s cultural life and the festival lived for a couple of years.



*Auto portrait.
Aquarelle
on paper
21x30cm. 1994*

I also got involved in a theater group named “Bandamenn”. It was established by an Icelandic theater mogul Sveinn Einarsson, the former director of the National Theater. My involvement was through my mother who was part of the group. They focused on portraying the Icelandic Sagas and the name – Bandamenn, stems from one of them and means “Coalition”. I made some artwork for the group, publishing posters, the group’s logo and scenographed one of their produc-

tions. They traveled around theater festivals all over the world with their plays and are an important contribution to Icelandic theater history.

I was active in the art scene in Reykjavik, working on my art and making my name as a young artist. For a while I was working at the Living Art Museum in Iceland as an assistant. It is an important institution in Icelandic visual art history and one of the main venues for contemporary art in Iceland. However, I could not sustain myself on art alone. I didn't have the guts or self esteem to just go all the way and rely solely on art as a way of living. Always the day-time worker, taking on various jobs; being distracted from doing my thing – making art. And not having a diploma was not helping. I could hear people in the cultural circles – the people with authority whisper: “He is not educated in art, he is not a real artist”. I do know what I am worth and artist, I truly am. But, I was also a broken individual, with low self esteem and a really

skewed view of the world.

Being an artist really is not for everybody and it can be hard and most of us struggle. When you lack support from your backland (or if you don't have a backland) all the more difficult. So many obstacles on the way – so many people ready to let you down. There is envy and back-stabbing and it is a world of suber egoism and charade of self gratification and pretentitiveness. I love art. I love making art, I enjoy art – but I loathe almost everything around it. The snobbery, the hierarchy, trying to push myself into galleries, hoping for media coverage, making appearances at openings ... The business around art is, in many ways, a parody – and to be honest: There is a lot of stupidity and bad art out there.



Solla.

Terra cotta charcoal scetch 1998

Denmark

I decided to drop art as a means to earn a living. It wasn't happening anyways. I had no intentions of becoming a day time worker earning a low wage and desperately trying to make art on the side. Approaching the millennium shift I had met this wonderful beau-

ty – Solla and together we decided to move to Copenhagen and start a new life together. I went there with no particular objective other than I wanted a change. Working in the beginning cleaning, I decided it would be wise to get a practical education and enrolled in a business college where I started studying International Marketing at the Lyngby' Business College. It was kind of a rerun of the university try from before, but it was international and I wanted to get away from Iceland. I was determined – this time I would finish something. It was not out of interest for the subjects per se, I completed the study and saw it through. I felt just as out of place as I had previously; but It was essential for me to prove to myself that I could graduate and I wasn't a total failure after all!

One good thing came out of my business study besides me being able to finish something for once; I met the love of my life – Ida. Solla and I had broken up soon after we moved to Copenhagen and I had moved to

the school's dormitory and there I met the her! I have never been so much in love – before or since. She was the one. I couldn't get enough of her.

After my graduation we rented our own flat in the center of Copenhagen and moved in together. She was studying to become a teacher and our future seemed bright. Working as a market economist however turned out to be – well, not so successful. I really felt at home in Copenhagen, but the Danes were a prejudistic bunch and since my origin was not Danish and it could be heard in my accent that I was a foreigner, getting a decent position was practically out of the question ... and I am an artist – not an economist.

But, I loved living in Copenhagen and although not painting at the time, I went to the museums and galleries in Iceland's old capital and it was a much bigger and more interesting scene than in little Reykjavik. Instead of painting, I was moving into the arena of

digital art. The computer and the internet were steadily entering the scene and it would soon change the world.

It is said that love conquers all. It certainly takes away the grief and depression – for a while – and love is a drug, so that too. So what went wrong? Love can actually be too strong, I believe. At least that is how I see it. Perhaps, it is a poor explanation and there certainly are other factors at play in this case, but Ida and I parted ways. I was so desperately in love with her, that I almost suffocated her. My insecurity resulted in sick jealousy. I was struggling with my inner self and suppressing mostly my urges to allow TORA Victoria to come out. I couldn't really suppress myself any longer. Ida, a few years younger than I, was somewhat baffled about TORA Victoria, but she accepted this persona – at least for now. I also had a son from a previous marriage. I had a diploma in market economics now, but no job prospects and there wasn't much to go for. Basically, I was in the same

situation as before in Reykjavik – the business diploma didn't change anything in that regard. Love could not concur this. I got depressed and we drifted apart. I couldn't face it that I lost her. I miss her still when I think about her – she was simply my girl.



Ida and I in Copenhagen

This was a major shipwreck and they have been a few in my life. After Ida I went deep into self pity and started using a lot of cannabis. The depression was overwhelming and I wished for this all to end. My grandmother had bought a house in Florida and she invited me to stay with her following the breakup. It was nice just being with her in the sunny state. I painted in her garden and even gave the old lady some painting lessons that I know she loved. It was a time of contemplation, painting, reading and thinking.

After Florida I decided to go to Iceland for rehab. How could I have fucked this up? Ida was everything a guy could ask for and more. Quite frankly most, if not all, my girlfriends have been. There was obviously something seriously wrong with me – not them; that I had realized years ago. But what? Did I not stand a chance of having at least something that could resemble happiness? I had realized for a long time that I was abusing cannabis and alcohol – perhaps that was to blame?

Shattered after my breakup, I decided it was time to stop using and seek some help. However, as the old timers in Alcoholics Anonymous used to say: “If you stop the drinking, you are stuck with the thinkin’” and so true that is. Drinking and drugging was a symptom – not a cause of my problems. I had to dig deep, very, very deep, if I was to face myself, in order to get better and begin enjoying life.

These writings are yet another charter in that journey.



“More Bang for your Buck”
Oil, newspaper clippings on canvas, 120×150 cm.
2002.

Scott and Mark

Life has a way and this time it touched me in the form of an American gallerist from New York and his boyfriend. Mr. Scott and Mark enter the scene. Scott was retiring from a successful career in the hotel industry and had recently fulfilled his dream of opening a gallery in New York. He had been traveling in Iceland for some reason a few years back and fell in love with the country. That had resulted in him wanting to introduce Icelandic and Nordic artists in his gallery he dubbed Gallery Boreas. Scott and Mark were fond of antiques and coincidentally my mother had recently retired from the theater and taken over my grandmas' antique business. Scott and Mark had gotten to know my mother as regular customers and Scott saw some of my artworks on my mother's walls and liked it. Well, to cut a long story short, they were on their way to Copenhagen to scout for some artists there and if I would not meet up to introduce myself? Sure I would.

I met them at hotel Marriot in Copenhagen and a few months later I exhibited in Gallery Boreas. Art had come back to me in the form of a gay couple that are among my dearest friends to this day. I exhibited in Gallery Boreas 2002, around the one year anniversary of the twin tower attacks. In a way, deeply symbolic to my own turning point: An old world shattered, crumbled to the ground, in the form of two towers and on the ruins, there was to begin something new.

Scott and Mark invited me into a residency program, associated with the gallery to work on the show. I was working on my art and enjoying New England, where the residency and their home was located. It opened that fall and it went well. I sold some paintings and got some positive responses. But I started drinking again and the typical alcoholic that I am, of course I made some blunders and Scott was not impressed. I don't think he has really forgiven me since, but Mark has – although there was a period Mark simply

wanted nothing to do with me. Yes, I have a way of tearing down things that are positive around me; a typical trade for many, who suffer from low self-esteem and alcoholism. But, I did some good work there and the show went great and it was a fresh start for me as an artist and a painter.

Mark fell in love with me. I had only once before had sex with a man. Mark and Scott are in an open relationship, but I wasn't ready for Mark – not yet.



Preparing the show in Gallery Boreas.

Yoga school

When I returned to Copenhagen I felt I had to try something fresh, something to heal myself. I was still hurting from the divorce with Ida and had lost almost all contact with my son. Art or no art, I had to face my inner demon and get rid of this melancholy and depression. I found a Yoga school, operated by a Danish yogi in the south of Sweden. I decided to give it a try.

Yoga has been a part of my life since teenaghood. I had stumbled on it in my religious search early on. I am not a Christian although brought up in a Christian society. As a kid I had found out that in Iceland there is a religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution and one could not be forced to study Christianity. So I stood my ground there and I did not get a confirmation, as the rest of the kids: Always at odds. I am very spiritual and certain that there is a lot more to this world than we humble humans can even begin to grasp. I believe there is a higher power than

myself and there are events in my life that can only be explained as interventions. There is a purpose and life is to find out what that is.

As a teenager I began reading a lot about all kinds of religions, spirituality and the occult. The only thing that grasped me really, was Yoga. I started doing yoga daily and incorporating yoga philosophy in my life. Yoga has mostly to do with the spirit although most people know it only as a physical exercise. I read all I could get my hand on about Yoga. I practiced yoga at home and went to a yoga center and this was way before yoga became mainstream. Back in those days, it was more pure and the people practicing it were regarded as eccentrics and that suited me just fine. So after New York, I enrolled in a three month long Yoga school in the Smålandarna in the south of Sweden.

It was located in an old boarding school, in the middle of a forest. A magical experience in many regards and I really needed this ca-

lamity and the meditation and pranayamas did me good. One particular fact drew me to this retreat: Out of the three months – a whole month was to be spent in total silence: No speaking, no reading, no listening to music, no writing. Of course it is a healthy environment in any regard. No coffee, no substances of any kind, vegan food, daily asanas and meditation. I was fabulous when I left there; practically hovered above the ground. I didn't care for the yogi himself, though. He reminded me of all my grumpy old teachers and in some ways the whole affair prompted like a cult. But spending three months, only doing yoga and meditation, in the Smålandarna in Sweden, was truly a life altering experience.

I met a wonderful girl there, Kirsten. She was from Denmark and lived in Copenhagen. I moved in with her after the yoga adventure. Everything was fine for a while, but yoga had not healed me. It had given me some momentary peace, but “I” was still struggling to be



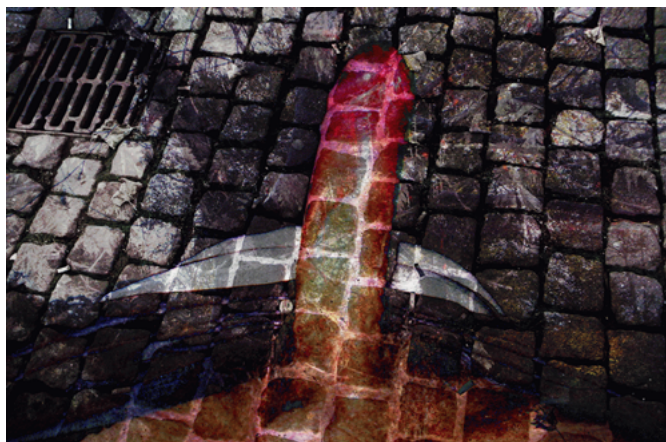
*TORA Victoria personal logo.
A vector drawing 1999*

“me” and just as in rehab earlier, I knew deep down inside that I still had to face my demon and really change my whole program, if I was ever to be able to live life in prosperity and happiness. I wasn’t making art in this period but spent my time reading, meditating and doing yoga. I got some jobs doing this or that to make a living.

Eventually, I picked up my old habits and started drinking and smoking again and Kirsten and I broke up after the typical time period. Nothing had really changed. After Kirsten, I moved back to Iceland for a while. I applied for a job as a market economist at an advertising agency and was hired. It was a respectable agency and the position was a good one and a really fine reverberation of my market economist study. But I am not a market economist by heart, I am an artist. Besides, I was suppressing a vital side of me. I was an alcoholic, suffering from depression with a very low self esteem, living in total denial of who and what I am. Needless to say,

I was fired from that job after less than two year employment. I had met up one time too often, smelling of booze, from the drunken stumble from the previous night.

Here is the thing: I was constantly fleeing away from art. It conglomerated in TORA Victoria, my alter ego, myself really. This cowardness and circumvention – that was my demon, my problem. Constantly, I wanted to become something that I was not, because I was afraid to be me – ashamed. All my life, I had been suppressing my feelings, my urges – myself, and it was killing me. It is clear to me now that TORA Victoria is a manifestation of a suppressed part of me and intrigly linked to my art. If I was to suppress TORA Victoria, I was to suppress my art and not the least myself and I would never be the artist I was destined to be. Slowly, it was dawning on me that my path is nothing that I choose – it is something that I have to follow. All attempts to avoid that journey, only makes it all the more miserable.



“The Drain” Digital painting 2000

I had one thing going for me all along – my art, and I was constantly trying to stray away from it. My art, my freedom, my happiness – is TORA Victoria! Letting her out was therefore not only essential to my development and growth as an artist – it was the requisite for my vitality. I am an artist. I can’t escape it. The only thing holding me down is I. Me, not being able to go forward, had nothing to do with you, but all to do with me. It doesn’t matter what you think – but it matters all – what I think and what was holding me down, preventing my development, wasn’t even

what you think of me – it is what “I think” you think of me! If I suppress TORA Victoria, I am suppressing myself and I will get nowhere, not as an artist, not as an individual – I will simply wither and die. It is not about technique or art school graduation, prestige or anything else: It is about letting TORA Victoria out and let her do her job.



TORA
Victoria.
Ink on paper.
2001

Becoming who I am

TORA Victoria is my alter Ego, my inner self, representing the courage to be myself as I am, fearless of what others think. The name is not arbitrary. TORA is related to my name Thor, that can also be written Tor. The female version of my name is Thora with an -a ending and consequently can be written Tora. A is the first letter of the Alphabet and there are two a's in my name – that has a significance for me. Emitting the 'h' in my name I did so It would not be seen as an anagram for Torah, although I like the occultic indication implied in my name as it is; as a matter of fact: Torah can also be written as Tora in English. It is a four letter word written in capitals. Four, is a complete number: $2 + 2$ and represents wholeness and completion: two halves twice together.



A 3D model of TORA Victoria from 2000.

Victoria means victory – the act of defeating an enemy or opponent in a battle, game, or other competition. TORA Victoria is exactly that for me - a victory of an opponent. The opponent is myself or my environment, depending on how you look at it. In fact it is the same thing, just as TORA Victoria and Thor Stiefel are the same thing. As a decorative twist the abbreviation T.V. is used to annotate a transvestite; but is also the abbreviation for a television, representing a show, a projection of an image that is an illusion of something that seems to be real. I also use TORA Stiefel and then the abbreviation: T.S. can be seen as Trans Sexual.

I was going to re-create myself: Use my body as a canvas – become an artwork myself – and that I did. My life became my art, my body my canvas, the medium my soul. It all accumulated in an appearance manifested in TORA Victoria that was to encompass my life in the following decade. I was not to succumb to self suppression any more. Finally, I

was ready to come out, be me, to be free and become the artist I was destined to be: The artist was TORA Victoria and TORA Victoria was the art!



TORA Victoria performance 2007

Art is about experience, it is about expression and exploration. But above all it is about courage and having the guts to be who you are. What is it like to live as the opposite sex? Would I dare go against what I was conditioned to be? Sail upstream against society's norms and confront its taboos? How would I be as a woman? Was I perhaps just trapped in the wrong gender? Would I dare take that step? Letting TORA Victoria be was an artistic experiment – artistic research into the fabric of society, myself and what it is to be a human being – to be alive. The fear, this horrible little secret, I was determined to take with me to the grave, had lost its grip.

I was now ready to move back to Iceland and settle there. Little Iceland had always been too small. I had previously only felt secure about TORA Victoria in the big city, hiding in the crowd, but now I was ready to come to Reykjavik and face my roots and stand up head high. In my visits to Iceland previously, I had progressively been opening up for this



TORA Victoria performance 2007

side of me and experimenting with being seen as a transvestite strolling the streets of Reykjavik. My appearance there had caught attention and the media started to interview me to portray this strange phenomenon sporadically appearing on the streets of Reykjavik; a guy in high heels, painted nails, a skirt with a make-up. Now, I was moving back to Iceland and the person coming back was not the insecure suppressed broken individual from before, but the whole of me.

I saw TORA Victoria not in context as an art project to begin with. Initially I separated TORA into the artworks about TORA Victoria and TORA Victoria as such. I cept on depicting TORA by painting, drawing, making digital paintings, photography and videos of TORA Victoria, making self images in fact, but gradually realized that “creating” TORA Victoria was in fact the ultimate artwork in itself.

Ultimately, I understood what art really is all about – it materialized for me in the form of TORA Victoria – the artwork – the artist – the art.



TORA Victoria. From a media performances called “Wo-Man”. DV newspaper interview 2015

The living performance

I sold my flat in Copenhagen and bought a place in Reykjavik. My mother was also on the lookout for a new place to live so we decided to buy a house together in the center of Reykjavik. We found a place that suited our needs – an old nordic house with two apartments: One for her and one for me. We became neighbors and I felt that it was my time to be there for my mother as she has been there for me. The house was in bad shape so a lot of renovation was needed. I had a lot of experience renovating, so I did most of the work myself. A new roof, new electrical wiring, new kitchen, new windows; incredible amount of work, mom and I put into this house. It is our safe haven. I made my flat into living quarters and a studio to work in. My mother got to know TORA Victoria and I was happy and getting strong. Elias, my son, however could not cope.

When I had moved to Copenhagen, I had of course withdrawn from his life a bit since he stayed in Iceland with his mother. He was with me some summers in Denmark of course and I saw him when I came to visit Iceland, but we grew apart. The last bastion of insecurity in my development was my son. I was not going to let him suffer from the other kids picking on him for his perverted transvestite father – art or not. I decided to wait until he was old enough and then reveal who I really am to him.

After the move to Iceland, one good day I thought it was time and came to the door as I was dressed, literally speaking. He was shocked. In hindsight, probably not the best way to go about it, but it was what I deemed best. He shut me off after this. He was bearing a huge resentment against me. Of course not only about me coming out to him like that. I had failed him as a parent and now this? I don't blame him and really I understand. All I can say is that I am there for him if he needs

me and I love him and I am flawed. Our relationship has been mending slowly since. He needs his time and I need to be who I am and I have to answer about my nature to nobody.



My mother and I in 2012



TORA Victoria performance 2015

Trans–Iceland

After I settled in Reykjavik, I met a small group called Trans–Iceland. It encompassed a bunch of male-to-female trans individuals, who met once a month. It was really a support group for individuals, that were seeking to get aid around the government sexual transition program. I was not there however – never was, and never will be. TORA Victoria was certainly my female persona, but I did not seek to hide or reject my masculinity, nor did I want to become a woman – whatever that may entail. Most of the individuals in Trans–Iceland were, what is called stealth, i.e. they obscured the fact that they had been born males and were somewhat ashamed of their past. The goal of most of them was to “pass” as a woman and blend easily into the crowd as such. In a way they were my complete opposite from before: They guarded the secret that they were born males as much as I used to hide TORA Victoria. I introduced openness and pride to them. I am not saying

they never encountered the notion before, but being open and proud as a trans – not being ashamed and hiding their past was not in their scope at the time. Being a trans was something these individuals hid as much as they could at that time.

I spoke for the notion that sexuality was a spectrum – not an either or deal. We are all somewhat masculine and feminine. Men have nipples and the clit is just a tiny penis; some men have wide hips and some women have facial hair – we are just humans. After I arrived and was seen walking the streets of Reykjavik, in high heels, a skirt with painted fingernails and a make-up and my long blond hair, the scene in little Reykjavik exploded. Who was this guy that openly went about his business dressed like that? You get noticed when you are at odds in a little city. I met some hostilities at first and even got into fights on occasions, but I persisted. I had arrived and slowly, but surely the attitude towards me changed and gradually I was just



TORA Victoria 2011


part of the picture.

TORA Victoria is my personal art project and a life-performance, made out of necessity in my own artistic and existential struggle. However, I actually contributed to changing the attitude towards trans people with my performance – and of that I am very proud. I became the president of Trans-Iceland and the little group grew to become an advisory body to the government on the issues of transgenderism and the membership grew. There was I – TORA Victoria – an individual who not only was not ashamed of being a trans, but actually proud of it! The fact of the matter is that gender equality and the legal rights of trans people in Iceland, are among the best in the world today. Other countries are looking towards little Iceland as an example, that is a fact. It is easier to change a little society than a large one. But, it is also easier to change a large one, after a change has been done in a little one. There is a precedent! And what do you know: Suddenly trans people all

Tora Victoria / Þór Stiefel



5. - 19. febrúar 2011

 Listamenn
Söluvegata 52 · 101 KÖP

Exhibition poster

over the western world are visible, demanding equal rights and acceptance! “Look at Iceland – why can’t we have it like they do?” Call it coincidence, I don’t care, but I know TORA Victoria had something to do with all of that.

But this was not my battleground. I am not an activist. I am an artist and my battle is with my inner self and that is why TORA Victoria exists. I retired from the Trans-Iceland, my venue was elsewhere. My aim was never to become anything other than I am – quite the contrary. Certainly, my path was not to become a woman. I am not TORA Victoria. TORA Victoria is a part of me – the artist Thor Stiefel and an essential development and a coping process for a little boy in a harsh and a hostile world. Above all, TORA Victoria is a manifestation, a proclamation; a statement, manifesting itself as an art project: A living performance, where I use my life and my body as a means for artistic expression, simply because I had to. I had no other

choice in the matter – it had to be done, it was my path to follow.



TORA Victoria 2013

Sexuality and gender in art

Predominantly the TORA Victoria project preoccupied my art during the good decade it lasted and gave birth to the SNART, my art philosophy, which amalgamates my art today. SNART is the mirror script of the word TRANS. I had realized early on that I was in fact mirroring myself in my artwork: Thor Stiefel looked into the picture and saw TORA Victoria look back at him. I could, especially in hindsight looking at my works, see myself in a way I really was. My subconsciousness was trying to reveal itself. SNART as an art statement and art philosophy was taking shape. It's based on the principle of reflection, the mirror, in a sense a photograph is a picture of one self, but not oneself now – another self. Art is the narration, the story of our true self and imprint a footprint in time.



Coitus study. Mixed media on paper, 40x43cm.
2013

Of course, I kept on painting in oils and aquarelles besides being/performing TORA Victoria. I have always kept on painting and traditional painting in oil is a joy for me – to make and to look at. I had some shows with paintings in Reykjavik following the millen-nium shift and after my move back to Ice-

land. I also kept on developing my works in digital media, making music, video, digital paintings and 3D.

Exploring oneself as the opposite sex must have to do with sexuality. Gradually, realizing TORA Victoria as an artistic approach and as such, a method of sustenance in my art, I began to shamelessly explore sex and sexuality through my art and the ever forbidden fruit of homosexuality. Intermittent advances became a systematic study and something to celebrate in the open. Making countless sketches and digital paintings, oils and aquarelles, exploring erotic art, was my main artistic focus in this period. TORA Victoria and her kin were enhancing my art and I was exploring new boundaries.



Study of a penis. Oil on panel, 40x60cm. 2010

The Penis

Parallel to working with sexuality and eroticism in my art, the involvement with Trans-Iceland affected my art in a distinct way. A significant turn of event artistically for me, was when I was once in an open panel discussion, as the president of Trans-Iceland. With me on the panel was, among others, the psychiatrist and the head of the medical team in Iceland, who oversaw the treatment of transgender people. At the time it pivoted around deciding who was to perceive a sexual change treatment and who not; and consequently, operating on and treating trans individuals with hormone herapy.

First of all, I was intrigued with the fact that being trans was officially going from being defined as a mental illness to something else – what exactly remains to this day an open question. What struck me most from this panel discussion though, was the psychiatrist's remarks about the definition of trans-

genderism and accordingly, who was eligible to receive treatment. According to the official guidelines, the largest part of a diagnosis of a trans gendered person, is when an individual has contempt for one's own genitals. That really was something that obsessed me for years afterwards. Did I hate my penis? No, I did not. In fact I liked my penis – at least as much as I liked the rest of my body. I became fascinated with this however. My self loathing had almost exclusively to do with something mental.



Eat-Me. Digital painting 2011

When I present as TORA Victoria, I tugge away my penis and I don't not like it to bulge out, especially not when going to the swimming hall in my maillot. But, I was and am very fascinated with women with penises. I have been using them in my art and it is totally coherent with TORA Victoria, who factually is a girl with a penis. Women with penises are actually a well known phenomenon – especially in the porn industry. They have a name: Shemales. In other cultures, like in Thailand, the phenomenon of a girl-boy combination has prevailed for ages. There the term “Kathoe” is used to designate a trans person. It even extents to the infamous Thai sex turist industry, where they go under the locution of “ladyboys”. Overwhelmingly it is about being a “girly” boy – or as one could describe it: A girl with a penis.



*Girl with a dick. Silk screen print
2013*

Through my research, I had found that women with dicks are nothing new and occur in all cultures and probably have been a part of humanity since it began. In north america's indigenous cultures some tribes have many gender definitions and certainly many cultures talk about the third sex. The "Hermaphrodite" is of course well known and inter-sexed individuals, who are gender-physically ambiguous are well known as well. All of this can be, but is not exclusively, associated with homosexuality. In one of my researches, I stumbled upon interviews with professional shemale pornstars, where they referred to their penises as a "lady-sticks" or "big-clits" and some simply talked about their dicks. And they were gorgeous, feminine and proud with absolutely no issue with their genitals. Quite the contrary, it was an asset for them. Were they not trans-individuals?

I had for years looked at female Hollywood stars like trans individuals, with their plas-

tic surgery, silicone breasts, dyed hair and make-up. In fact, a make-up is to transform oneself and every woman or a man who puts on a make-up is a trans in a sense. For me, being a trans is exactly that: To transform into something that one is mentally and manifest it in the physical. Marilyn Monroe was trans: She was born a poor redhead but the image the world has of her was of a blond Hollywood, a sex symbol and a megastar.



Monroe. Oil on canvas, 105x120cm. 1992

I started studying penises in an artistic way; this extraordinary, fantastic organ. I painted penises, either as objects in themselves, or as a part of a body, in action, aroused or limb.

My objective was to celebrate the penis. It can not be bona fide for anybody to reject a part of their body and be ashamed of it. I am certain that “fixing” individuals in that manner is not a healing process. There actually is a stigma and a “taboo” in the trans society called “regret” and hundreds of individuals are suffering from that. The aforementioned panel discussion was actually about that is-

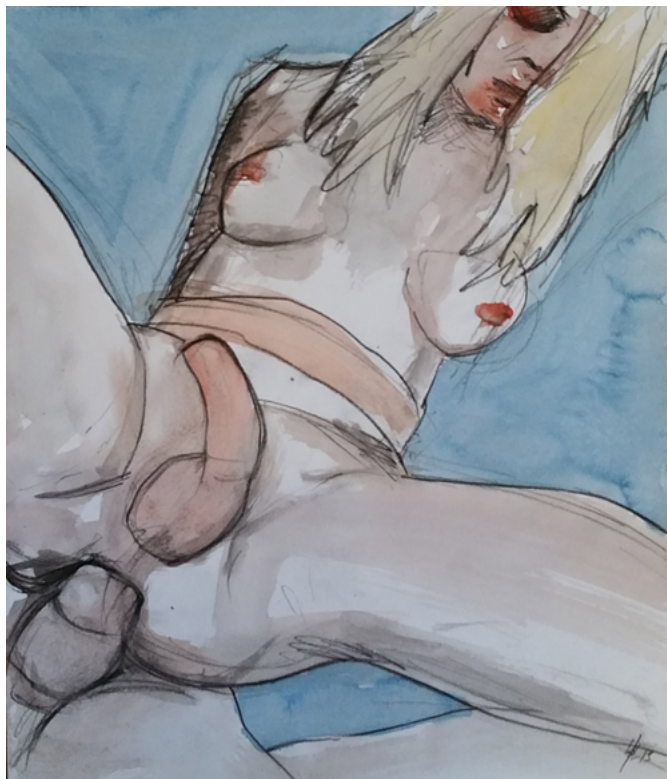


Phallus. Oil on board, 35x50cm. 2014

sue. Consequently, I started celebrating homosexuality in my art and I mean that in the absolute literal sense – in fact you can chop off the prefix and just leave sexuality; or better yet, simply say: Human sexuality.

It had been my fault previously – to fruitlessly renounce who I really was, suppressing TORA Victoria. The way forward for me, was to endorse and be proud of whoever and whatever I am – with all my flaws, body parts or lack thereof. I admire women with penises. I am attracted to girls with natural small tits. I understand if some girls want to get breast implants and I get it if some trans want to get surgical vaginas or penises, but for me it is like removing the mind altering substance – it's addressing the symptom – not the cause.

It went beyond my previous study about TORA Victoria and myself as female. It is about taboo's, provocations, sexuality, beauty, society and oppression. But it essentially



*Red riding hood. Mixed media on
paper, 30x35cm. 2013*

addressed freedom and shame. Something, like the penis, that is hidden away, covered with taboo. You only get it out occasionally, normally behind closed doors. My art is as much TORA Victoria as TORA Victoria is part of me. My art is who I am. It is about openness, acceptance, freedom and pride.

In this period I pictured kathoy's, sehmales, women with dicks and myself in my art and projected them as proud, lustful, normal and sexual, in various media and forms. The penis is a fascinating subject and touches upon the stigma we have about nudity, sex – and of course gender roles. This artistic research study resulted in a show in 2016, I had in connection with the Reykjavik Pride – a week dedicated every year in Reykjavik, to celebrate diversity, pride and of course homosexuality.



The auThor in Thailand 2015

The Iceland University of the Arts

My New York gallerist Scott and Mark had retired and closed the gallery. They decided to move to Iceland. They had already had an apartment in Reykjavik for years. Scott however had his eyes on something new – Vietnam. He wanted to move there and so he did. Mark was not so anxious.

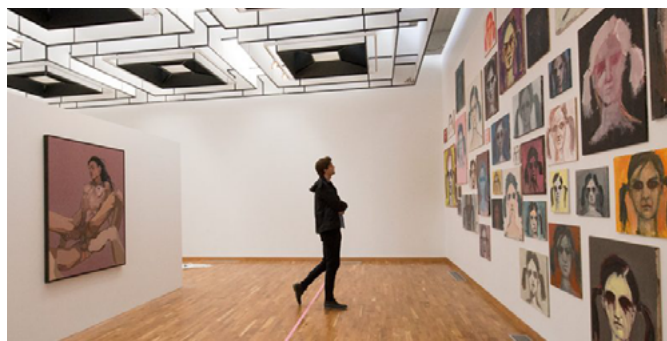
This is when Mark and I became lovers. It was a beautiful time. Mark and I traveled around Iceland and then Mark took me to Thailand. He said it was our honeymoon. We enjoyed two months traveling in Thailand and Myanmar. I loved every minute of it. Mark was not



Mark and TORA Victoria in 2014

so impressed with Thailand as I. He went to visit Scott who was in Vietnam at the time preparing for a permanent move, after our Thailand adventure. Mark and I parted ways soon after that and we remain good friends.

In Thailand I finally found the courage I needed to face an old nemesis and heal an old wound. Embraised with Mark's love, I gradually became ready to take a step I had dreaded for so long: I decided to apply for the Iceland University of the Arts. I needed to get that closure and finally get my art degree – finish the journey I started over two decades ago. What if they would reject me? Me, who was an artist with decades of artistic practice on my back? Wouldn't that finally crush me? One thing is certain – it was Mark's love that gave me the courage to apply, and apply I did. As previously with the old Icelandic Art- and Handcraft school, I handed in my portfolio and went to the entrance interview. This time, I was ready and of course I was accepted.



From exhibition in The Reykjavik Art Museum 2018

This was the year 2015. Three years later, I graduated with a Bachelor degree in fine arts; with an average grade of 9.2; one of the best grades ever in the University's history – yes, I was dedicated to study and get the most out of my stay there, it was a privilege and this time, I really got that fact. Finally, finally, I got my degree in art. It was like getting rid of a nagging itch that had been bothering me for decades.

I used the opportunity to deepen my SNART philosophy in my Bachelor thesis. My supervisor was so impressed he got me an exception regarding the length of the paper. So many

things I had on my mind and it all needed to be in there. At last, I could look to the world and shamelessly call myself an artist. After graduation, I sought for a Master's program and was accepted into three Universities: In Lucerne, in Rome and in Prague. I chose the UMPRUM Art university in Prague.

An end of an era

I felt I needed to make a statement to distance myself away from the trans environment and activism. Moreover, I could feel the TORA Victoria performance had done its job and fulfilled its purpose. It had been over a decade since its commence – a long endurance performance indeed. The performance was also taking me over; becoming too large a part of me and beginning a life on its own. I woke up to the fact that I was beginning to suppress Thor Stiefel as I had previously suppressed TORA Victoria.



Pieta. C-print digital photograph 2017

been my intention. I am Thor Stiefel and all along the TORA Victoria project – and when I felt like it, I portrayed myself as such; I was after all Thor Stiefel. But being perceived as TORA Victoria, especially after my association with Trans-Iceland, I found myself increasingly perceived only as TORA Victoria. It was as if it was expected of me to become a transwoman. Furthermore, my study at the Iceland University of the Arts made a lot of things clear to me and enabled me to strengthen my artist statement and put things into context. I felt that the act of freeing myself was beginning to trap me on the other end. I commenced the journey of TORA Victoria to find myself, let a part of me out, to free myself of suppression, anxiety and depression and to express myself. Now, it was time to find the balance between TORA Victoria and Thor Stiefel.

I made an art exhibition in 2020, in collaboration with a small Gallery in Iceland, under the name: “An Artist on a Crossroad”. As a part of the exhibition I contacted the TV2 station in Iceland and performed an act, announcing that TORA Victoria was an art project, a life-performance and explained what I had been doing. It was the endpoint of an artwork that had made me what I am today – but it had been a long and exhausting journey. I felt satisfied with the result.



Au-Thor-a

The television interview was broadcasted and It was a sad moment in a way. In order for TORA Victoria to work, on a personal and artistic level, an essential part was the authenticity: TORA Victoria could not be perceived as an act – it had to be real. Now that the word got out, TORA Victoria would lose potency and power. But the performance had done its job and was very effective and successful, so I had no regrets. I knew that only a handful of people had grasped what TORA Victoria really was during the course of the performance and the declaration would come as a shock to many.

I had finished my project, my biggest and most ambitious art project to date. TORA Victoria was a personal art project, a decade-and-a-half long living, life-performance. Was this all a show? Just a sick joke? No it wasn't. It was a necessary path for me as an artist and a person. I am still trans and TORA Victoria, of course, is still an integral part of me and always will be.



TORA Victoria media performance 2011

I am first and foremost an artist and TORA Victoria was an artistic expression. TORA Victoria was as deep an artistic conjure as art can ever be. TORA Victoria was an artistic performance and a self revelation – a self creation; an essential part of my artistic evolution and individual development. This artistic act laid the foundation for the SNART-art statement and philosophy – everything I base my art on today. As a side-effect to the TORA Victoria project, the performance also happened to contribute to a societal change:

Can there be any more purpose, or success with an artwork, than that?



Thor-a-Victor



Oil on canvas, 150x200cm. 2020

Post graduation

After years of schooling, now middle aged, I needed some solitude. The years at the Iceland University of the Arts were fruitful and good for me – artistically as well as personally. They gave me a chance to explore new territories. It was refreshing for me to be around so many people every day and it did me good to be around so many youngsters: Above all I had my art degree. Although approaching fifty, I was not the oldest student. Most of the students, however, were about my age when I started art school back in the days and I could see myself in them – so full of vitality, optimism about their future in art and – this arrogance, a youth has about his or her own immortality and abilities. To see that from my angle was highly cultivating.

Now it was time to put that all into my own artistic practice. In my study, I had deliberately stayed away from painting. I am a good painter and technically, I could have taught

the classes, so it wasn't much to get from there anyway. More importantly, I wanted to use this opportunity to dive into other mediums. It was the right time to revisit my good old friend the painting. In the following period, I painted mostly large abstract paintings on canvases or found materials. I had been practicing visiting construction sites scattering for thrown away plates and panels – or anything I could use in my art, for a long time. There is a story already in a used material, it adds to the dynamic of an artwork to feel, more than see, that some of it has a previous life – a former purpose that was not art. The idea of converting some garbage into art captivates me – something that was less than useful, has the potentiality of being valuable and even priceless.

To be perfectly honest this practice, of using found materials, started out of necessity. It is obviously free and at times I couldn't afford canvases to paint on. I also like the various surfaces I randomly get; sometimes rough

and sometimes smooth and the sizes are already marked out. In a way the artwork has already started when I pick it up.

Another important factor is the environment. I have always been environmentally conscious and hate pollution and waste. I have strained from jobs that abuse nature or pollute. My lifestyle has always been minimalistic. Most of my lifetime, I have not owned a car and go about my ways on a bike or by walking. I buy most of my clothes second hand. I use things until they break and then I try to fix them myself. One of the things I really hate about modern society is the fact that manufacturers and stockholders demand shorter and shorter product life-cycles.

Just a little sitekick story: I have a smartphone that works fine, despite being a few years old. The battery is giving up though, but I can't get a new battery for my phone in a store. I have to order it online and it really costs



“More” A proposal for an open call for ad billboard competition 2020

more than a brand new phone – with a new battery. This is deliberate and creates waste and pollution and it is reprehensible. On top of this, the operating system in my phone is obsolete and I can't get the latest apps. They are forcing me to buy a new phone and my old one seems to be destined to become a garbage somewhere in Africa, where the mindless west dumps its waste. Recycling wasted materials and using found materials in my art is a statement against this.

I am conscious of what materials I use in my art. I stay away from turpentine and use linseed oil to thin my oil paint. I clean my brushes in soap and stay away from pigments that are hazardous or synthetically produced or harm nature. In general, I do my business with environmentally conscious companies and that goes for food as well. My philosophy is, and has been for my whole life – to live in a way I do not leave waste behind my actions.

Berlin

After graduation, I got a grant that enabled me to go live in Berlin for a period. It was through the University and the purpose is to allow graduates to connect into the artworld. I contacted an Icelandic artist living in Berlin – Egill sæbjörnsson and applied for an internship with him. He is a few years younger than I and it is fair to say that he is a successful artist. I wanted to learn from him how it is to be successful in the art world. Admittedly, I am not. I mean, I am a great artist, in my humble opinion, but successful in terms of being able to live off art and enjoying recognition and prestige – I have not. Egill has never taken a day job since he graduated from art school, he told me. I am convinced that is a key element, but there are other important factors that I could see Egill has as a natural way in his life and practice and how



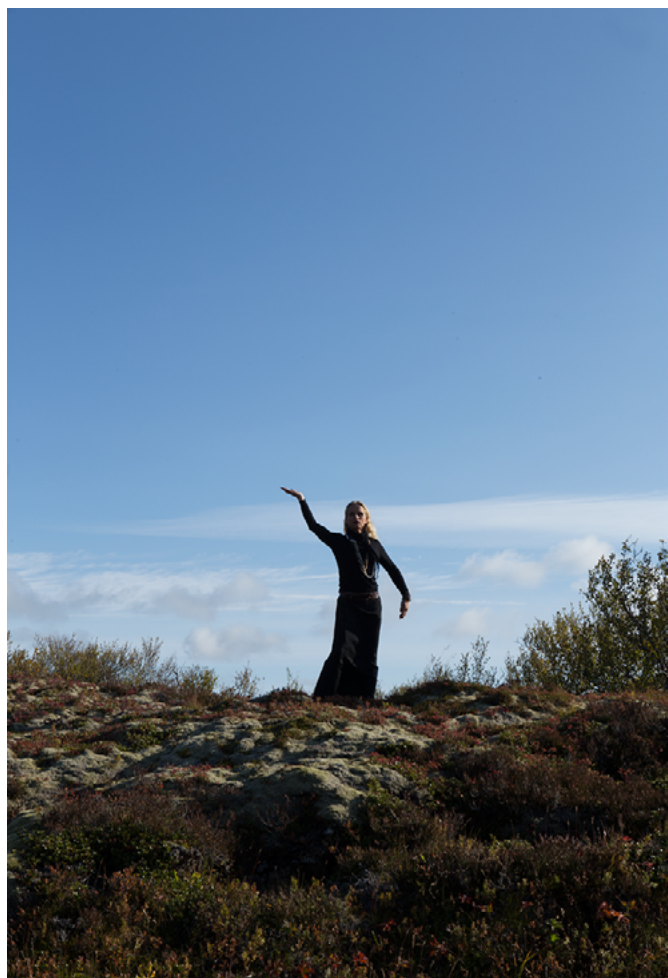
The auThor in his studio 2020

he sees himself and his art practice.

An artist must believe in his or her ability and bet everything on his or her art: If you don't believe in yourself – why would anybody else? It is all about attitude and how you portray your self image – just like it was in the

case of TORA Victoria. Success is a matter of confidence: One must dare to claim one's place in this world. Perhaps, the main effort is in making yourself believe you are worth the effort and trust. Whatever goes on it is a lot of work and stamina. I have always been an etiquette hard worker and so is Egill. The difference between us two is (and that I knew beforehand really) is Self confidence. I have told you my story to explain (not the least to myself) where I am coming from and why I lack self confidence and what is really holding me down. I do this in order to change that. I am wagering everything on art now – It is the only way for me, like TORA Victoria was – and still is – the only way for me.

I have been struggling all my life as an artist and never really “made it” as an artist. I am confident that it has nothing to do with my art and neither to do with laziness. For a long time it had a lot to do with futile attempts to avoid being myself and allow TORA Victoria to thrive. The post graduation time has



TORA Victoria performance "As above so below" 2017

been about finding balance between my two halves TORA and Thor. But the TORA Victoria project, and the deep introspection that followed made it clear to me that I had been playing the victim. Yes, I was not dealt the best cards and my upbringing has made it harder for me to believe in myself and the depression has spiraled me down into a vicious cycle of self pity and mental morbidity and alcoholism. But it is my responsibility to break that cycle. I am an alcoholic. That is a disease. I am born that way. I am physically different than the average person when it comes to physical reaction to alcohol. But alcoholism is first and foremost a spiritual malady and a mental obsession. I am an artist, alcoholic, TORA Victoria and a trans – and my name is Thor Ludwig Stiefel.



Pilot. Oil on board
30x40cm. 2022

The spiritual malady and reconnection to the source

I realize now that no matter the worldly prosperity, professional success, talents or love around you – “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” My life was meaningless. There was absolutely no purpose with my life other than surviving from one day to the next – and what for? I was spiritually sick!

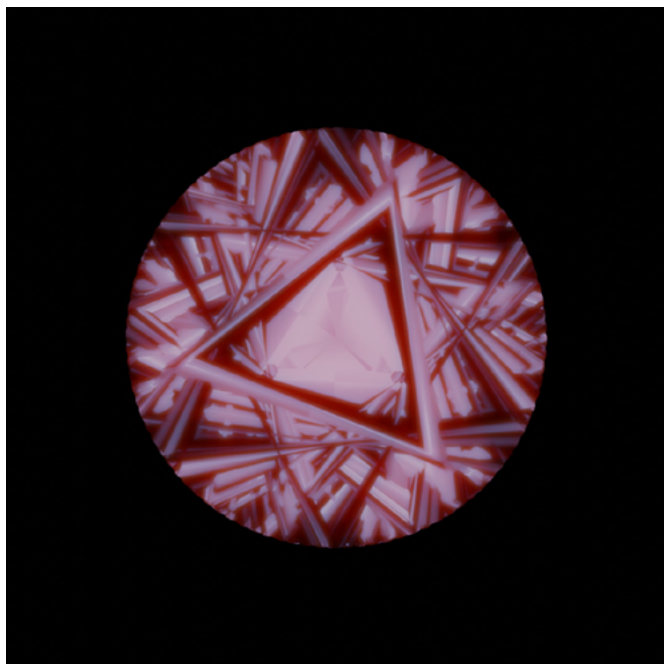
There is something in this world that is above all else and it manifests itself in various ways. One thing I find especially intriguing is when I stumble upon eternal truths. Those are logical contradictions that are true without exceptions. One of my favorites is: Nothing lasts forever – forever! Another good one is: Nothing is Something! What is especially relevant for me is: Surrender is Victory!

I have always been spiritually seeking. I did not find anything in my extensive religious

search, not in philosophy and not in Yoga. I had to go to the gutter to find meaning and purpose with this life. Again and again I had slipped into booze and cannabis and again and again I had promised myself to stop that silly derogatory behavior, in vain. I had to find a purpose – I had to find God. And I found God. I found God in my surrender. In the fellowship of “losers”, drunks, addicts and “not so good looking fellows”. I gave up – completely. The intellectual I thought I was, the smart guy that had renowned God all these years ago, wrote God off as a silly thing for simple people and nothing more than wishful thinking, finally gave up and shouted in despair: “God can you help me?” And God replied: “What took you so long?”

With blessings and hope for prosperity and happiness:

Thor L. Stiefel TORA Victoria



Kabbalah. Still from a video. 2021



From an Installation exhibition in 2019



*Psychomanteum. SNART Installation Performance,
various media duration 15. min 2016*

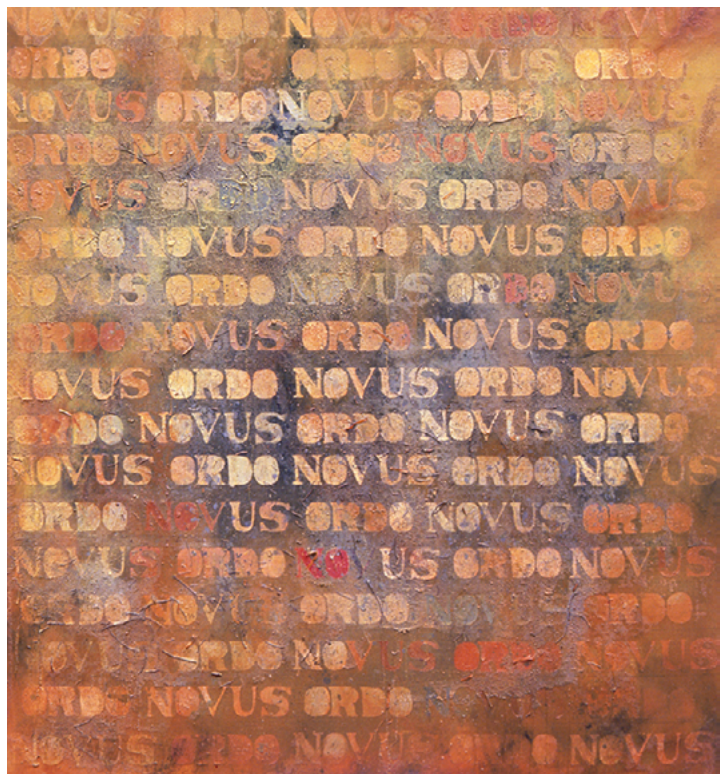


*Autoportrait with yellow. Oil on panel,
50x55cm. 2022*



Working on a SNART installation in 2018

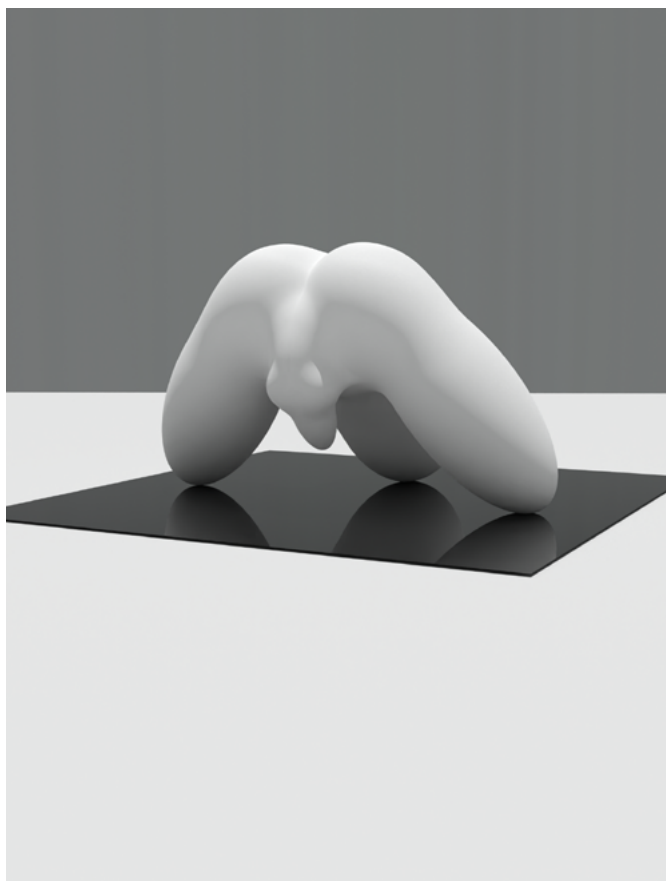




*Novus Ordo. Oil/mixed media on Canvas,
100×115 cm. 2002.*



Working in Le Théâtre du Soleil 1993



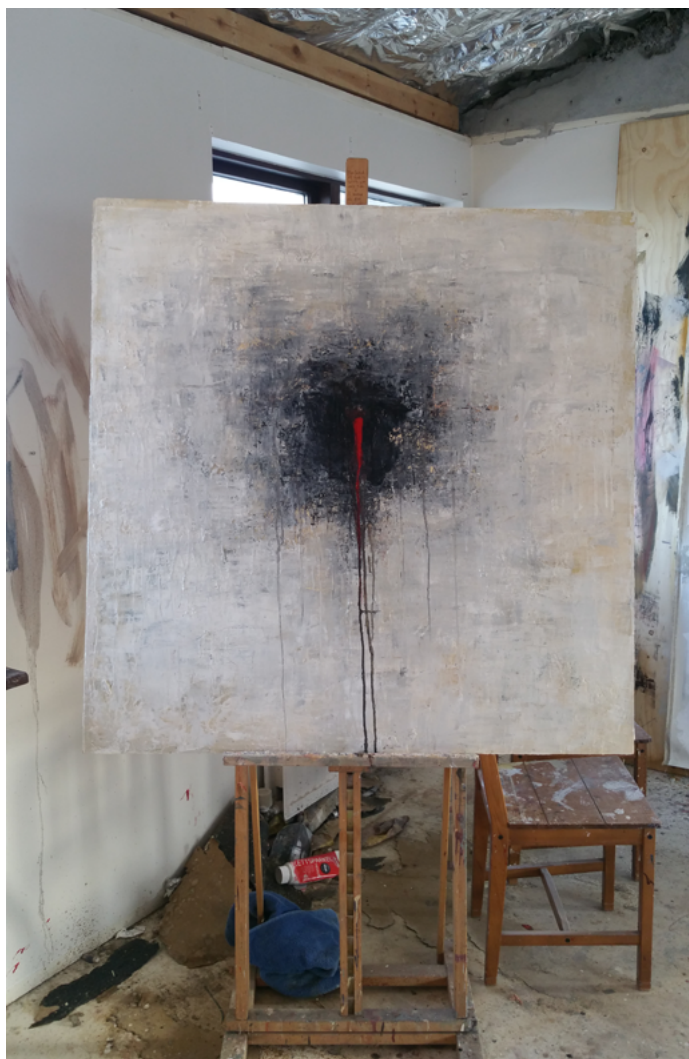
Flower. 3D sketch 2020



Kathoey. Digital painting 2011



Milestone". Oil on plasterboard, 75x110cm. 2014



Oil on board, 125x125cm. 2020



From an opening and my studio





Icelandic landscape. Oil on board 2014



The au-Thor-a-Victoria