

## Prisms of the Abstract: Material Relations in Icelandic Art

This article seeks to re-imagine the concept of abstraction as a material mechanism for art-making. Abstraction is traditionally divorced from the discipline of anthropology, which is rooted in social context and descriptive particulars. Within this debate abstraction, as a mental capacity, is contrasted with contextual understanding, and entails a removal from the life of the people studied. But for the artist this conclusion may be premature and abstraction is more accurately regarded as a constitutive function of art-making. This article draws explicitly on this proposition and proposes that abstraction affords the artist a material means of transforming how they relate and re-imagine the world and offering the artist a means of separating the properties of things from the things themselves. Integral to these affordances is abstraction as an art historical construct. Thus abstraction is not the erasure of context, whether conceptual or material, but its imbrication. To illuminate this proposition this article will focus on the working practice of one Icelandic artist, through which I suggest that abstraction can be envisaged as a prism of open connections that lead from the artist into the world.

Keywords: abstraction, representation, ethnography, art, drawing

### Introduction

The concept of abstraction would at first glance seem anathema to a discipline such as anthropology which is rooted in social context and descriptive particulars (Carrier 2001). Indeed, much recent work has been done to reassert the social context of art making, and of skill more broadly (Gell 1992; Chaiklin and Lave 1993; Dormer 1994; Taylor 1996; Moeran 1997). Within this debate abstraction is contrasted with contextual understanding, and entails a removal from the life of the people studied. When abstraction has been accounted for within anthropology (Morphy 1991; Paternosto 2002, 1996; Taylor 1996) it is often at the service of a contextual model of analysis. Conversely, for contemporary practicing artists abstraction can be the guiding conceptual and methodological frame that determines how their work is conceived and subsequently interpreted. Its centrality is a reflection of the status it enjoyed in modernist art, in which it was claimed to be the mechanism through which all art originates (Worringer 1963; Deleuze and Guattari 1988). This contention reveals the multi-perspectival nature of abstraction; it is both a means of making but also a conceptual discourse that is intimately linked to abstract art as an art-historical

construct. Within this, it is synonymous with attempting to rid the art object of its worldly references, and in its place endowing the work with an absolute autonomy from its originating context (Cheetham 2006). But beyond the ideal of an absolute autonomy as a conceptual consideration, abstraction is constitutive of the apparatus of working, and determines how an artist mediates her world; what they let in and what they set aside. As this argument demonstrates, it is abstraction's ability to mediate between the artist and the world, whilst also holding in place abstraction as a historicized practice, that challenges the notion that abstraction is an exclusively mental operation. This is where its utility for anthropology is most evident. The example presented in this article demonstrates this line of thinking and is congruent with a broader idea of mind and world as intermingling (see Ingold 2010). It implies that abstraction, as generally understood beyond art, is not wholly about the rejection of substance or context, which is itself premised on the opposition of form to content, but instead, an organisational reality which does away with the form/content divide: bringing us down to a level at which they are one and the same. This dissolving of the form and content partition is engendered through abstraction's ability to move between them. The centrality of movement for an understanding of abstraction can be seen in the word's etymological root. Stemming from the Latin verb *abstrahere* meaning 'draw away', it signals the process of moving from a point of origin. Further connotations of the term 'abstract' support an understanding of abstraction as predicated on movement. Firstly, it denotes the act of abstracting specific forms from their original context, and secondly, the separation of the human spirit from the phenomenal world in which she/he is otherwise a participant.

Within art-historical discourses drawing has played a central role in the development and emergence of these two ideas. Abstraction's context is bound up with the medium through which it is expressed, and the associative development of that medium. As art historian Henri Focillon notes, drawing is decisive for abstraction's expression; for him drawing is 'a process of abstraction so extreme and so pure that matter is reduced to a mere armature of the slenderest possible sorts, and is, indeed, very nearly volatilized' (1989:100). Moreover, for Focillon drawing brings to light abstraction's central ambiguity, that it reenergises that which it denotes. And thus, paradoxically, the artist's isolation is a precondition for forms of realism, be it ethnographic or artistic: that is, the ability to reflect upon the world is engendered through separation from it. The former ethnographic precondition on the other hand, is much closer to what the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his seminal *The Savage Mind* (1972), called *bricolage* (the cutting out of items and their subsequent repositioning). Both share a spatial component: separating from the world or the removal of forms from their original context and both equally rely on the creation of distance. Thus abstraction is a process hinged on movement, whether literal or figurative. This article contends that for the artist their practice necessitates some combination of both approaches to abstraction. This is not to advocate the absolute



Fig. 1 Detail, *Sieves* exhibition by Margrét H. Blöndal  
Mothers' Tankstation, Ireland, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist.

autonomy of the art object, an approach that has underwritten modernist notions of art over the last century (Greenberg 1965), but instead proposes that it should be examined as it unfolds during the making process for the artist. This tries to account for the very responsiveness people have with the things that exist around them and foregrounds the idea that people are constantly moving, in flux and open. A focus on material abstraction can then explore how the everyday materials and properties that the artist works with oscillate through various prisms of the abstract. Within this, abstraction cannot be collapsed solely into abstract art, nor is it entirely divisible from it. Instead, abstraction is a way of exploring art practices that problematizes the assumption of context and representation. Central to this proposition is an attempt to understand abstraction as a mechanism for art making, and the kinds of affordances it offers the artist. It is not wholly a mental operation, and thus not solely guided by an overarching historical or conceptual framework, but neither can it be solely understood as an action. Doing so would negate the generative interplay that exists for the artist between these two poles. Recognising this ambiguity allows us to think differently about the role of representation in art analysis and subsequent anthropological thinking. What follows, then, is an ethnographic case study on abstraction that is based on the example of one Icelandic artist. Her artworks epitomise a way of working that was gleaned by long-term fieldwork with a collection of artists working in Iceland. Through adopting an interdisciplinary methodology that combined working as an artist with participant observation, my research strove to put the practice of art making centre stage. Pivotal to this is the recognition that the affordances abstraction offers an artist are singularly unique to their work and working aims. However, as an anthropological study of abstraction the ideas put forward here can illuminate the working practice of other artists elsewhere, whose work falls under the arch of abstraction.

#### *Icelandic Art: Margrét H. Blöndal*

Icelandic art has not to date been examined in any depth within anthropology.<sup>i</sup> Even within art historical discourses, no record of twentieth century Icelandic art was available to the English-speaking world until 1989, with the publication of an exhibition catalogue accompanying the touring show, *Landscapes from a High Latitude* (Freeman 1989). The nation's literary heritage, imagined by some to be the source of its cultural identity, has taken precedence (Magnússon 1977; Pálsson and Durrenberger 1996). Not until the late nineteenth century did Icelanders begin to cultivate a modern art tradition. Few studied art in the mid-nineteenth century, and only in the last few decades of that century could a community of artists be said to have existed (Kvaran 1995). Following from this, twentieth century Icelandic art (from 1900 to the 1970s) can be tentatively divided into three distinct periods, each echoing more dominant art movements abroad.<sup>ii</sup> This persistent shadowing of international art trends is largely due to the absence of any specifically Icelandic art heritage for artists to draw on. Instead, the arrival and appropriation of foreign motifs and frameworks mark the onset of each stage, with the





Fig. 2 Detail, *Sieves* exhibition by Margrét H. Blöndal  
Mothers' Tankstation, Ireland, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist.

artist's choice of medium also reflecting this context. As with other contemporary Western art traditions the status of drawings in Iceland today is ambiguous and confused: they occupy a profile that flits between denying their legitimacy and dismissing them as purely preliminary or championing their sensitivity and worth. Moreover, their properties tie them in to broader transnational discourses on drawing that lie beyond Iceland's borders. Gunnar J. Árnason tells us in his essay for the exhibition *Icelandic and Norwegian Drawings*, held at Reykjavík Art Museum in 2001, that Icelanders imagine drawing to be the foundation of the creative process itself. In support of this claim he cites the high regard that Jóhannes S. Kjarval and Gunnlaugur Scheving, two of the country's earliest exponents of the medium, enjoy today. Both artists primarily used drawing as preparation for their painting (Kvaran 1998), and not as an independent art form, thus reinforcing the association of drawing with preparatory sketches. Nevertheless as Árnason goes on to note, artists' apprehension of the medium has undergone a marked transformation since the mid-twentieth century. He considers the move in the 1960s that questioned 'the idea that dexterity and genius were the pillars of artistic creation' (2001:33), to have been decisive in this regard. In this debate, draughtmanship – as an index of artistic vision – was subordinated to the concept as the

true indicator of artistic merit. This was mostly through the pioneers of the Icelandic avant-garde and the early influence of Fluxus and Conceptual Art in the 1970s, which left a legacy that appropriated drawing as part of its toolkit. Like the movements foreign instigators, drawing in Iceland was interpreted through the lens of a strict deconstruction of the hand of the artist, leaving the drawn mark bereft of corporeality and devoid of any pointers to illusion and figurative representation. With dexterity becoming almost secondary, drawing's identity was re-imagined and with it came an opening out of the possibilities of the medium.<sup>iii</sup>

The confluence of these ideas, both local manifestations and their foreign antecedents, form the backbone of Margrét H. Blöndal's oeuvre. Her drawings illustrate the opening out of drawing as a medium but also its imitative, figurative heritage. Her work includes three-dimensional sculptures created from coloured nylon fishing wire strung across a gallery space, small organic-looking objects fashioned out of rubber and chalk and hinting at some anthropomorphic identity and finally her smaller scale watercolour drawings, which bind them all together. The delicate watercolours dance between the figurative and the more obviously non-referential. Sweeps of colour and line that intertwine on the paper are set against the outline of amorphous forms. Consistent with the majority of the artists with whom I worked, Margrét does not draw directly from nature. Even though she is not concerned with imitation this does not preclude the use of the figurative in her work: there is no strict demarcation between what she sees and what she appears to 'make up'. Instead, the central tenets of all of Margrét's work, across sculpture, installation and drawing, are shown through the elements she uses and the tension that she creates between the traces of the objects' original life and history and their new context or identity, evoking a kind of play with distance and nearness. The drawings share a similar sensibility to the rest of her work in this regard. Common to all of them is a refusal to create a narrative for the audience to hold on to. Instead the works' weight lies in the ambiguity of her meaning and its potential multiplicity, both supported through the creation and disruption of the elements' association, the real and the newly reinvented. In this way the act of abstracting holds multiple perspectives in place and this mechanism is central to Margrét's technique as it provides the necessary ambiguity that she is hoping to affect in the audience. This ambiguity is realised conceptually in her drawings through an intentional non-figuration and within her sculptures through the displacement of objects from their original purpose. Both of which are harnessed through a focus on the material qualities of the objects she draws and re-contextualises.

### *Kaleidoscopic Abstraction*

Conceptually ambiguity is at odds with abstraction's heritage. In theoretical discussions – especially within cognitive science and mathematics, where abstraction has found greatest utility (Damerow 1996; Fine 2002) – abstraction is a largely cognitive mechanism that allows for the division of ideas or experiences into the distinct categories of the unreal and thus 'abstract', and the real and thus concrete. Moreover,

this opposition implies a progression from concrete particulars in the world to general concepts and is thus often considered a technique that takes place as a thought process inside the mind of the individual (Gallese 2003). This division is also played out in anthropology and is fundamental to how we traditionally write ethnography. Margrét's art practice offers a rebuttal to this stance and instead proposes that a more nuanced process of abstraction can occur within art practice that does not accord with this division. Instead, her work calls into doubt the boundary that these terms appear to set up between the 'in here' (of the mind) and the 'out there' (in the world). Abstraction is rather a kind of patterning that weaves together relations in such a way as to dissolve any rigid demarcation between mental form and material substance. This line of thinking is supported by a recent shift towards the post-representational in the social sciences and cognate disciplines (Thrift 2008), often seen through the lens of an 'ontological turn' (Henare et al. 2007) that repudiates the strident divisions within traditional western epistemology, namely, between mind and body, and pertinent in this instance. Studies within art are particularly relevant here and point to how art making is not necessarily only reducible to an act of representation by the artist, and concurrently, as the subsequent model for analysis.

Anthropologist James Carrier offers a way forward in this regard. He defines abstraction in the main as decontextualisation, 'removing an object from the context in which it exists' (2001:245). Within this, as Carrier's analysis elucidates, a more nuanced process occurs: 'this removal can be mental, as when the object is thought of differently; it can be physical, as when the object is moved to a new place', but significantly the consequence is to remove the object 'from the practical interactions that people had with it, ... put simply, when the object is abstracted, it is removed from the set of practices, relations, meaning and values that were in context' (ibid.). By contrast, as we will see in Margret's work, the object's removal from one context into another does not repudiate the originating relations but imbricates them with others. And as Carrier realises this means that abstraction is not 'a prelude to disengagement; it is a way to secure a coign of vantage, from which the abstracting agent can act purposively within the situation, and hence shape it' (2001: 252). This points to why abstraction is important within art itself, for it enables the necessary transformation to take place that is simultaneously conceptual and material.

This understanding of the utility of abstraction is also prevalent within art historical discussions. Introduced in the late nineteenth century, the notion of abstract art covers a multitude of differing thematic and stylistic trajectories within European modernism. Intentions and objectives have differed accordingly, from the early days of Impressionism through to 1960s Conceptualism, but abstraction broadly entails a deliberate loss of reference within the art object, and correspondingly, its associative meaning is ruptured or reimagined (Barr 1936; Worringer 1963 [1909]; Osborne 1979;



Fig. 3 Untitled Drawing by Margrét H. Blöndal  
*Bild*, 2009/2010. Image courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4 Untitled Drawing by Margrét H. Blöndal  
*Bild*, 2009/2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

Bürger 1984; Fer 1997). Abstraction within art discourses has become synonymous with abstract art. Abstract art itself is also used interchangeably with such divergent terms as non-figurative, non-representational, non-iconic and non-objective, even though each has a very specific origin and rationale. The dilemma of abstraction, and with it of abstract art, lies in how this is interpreted. A recent survey of abstract art by curator Bob Nickas defines abstract art as that which creates ‘a new fact, as something that did not exist in the world until it was painted’ (2009:67). Such an encompassing definition points to how difficult abstract art is to delineate. This may be because, as art historian Harold Osborne (1979) tells us, abstraction has been the most significant stylistic and methodological project undertaken by artists, across all art movements, over the last century. He suggests that abstraction is underwritten by what he calls the ‘repudiation of the artifice’ (1979:3) which attempts to distinguish the singularity of the art object from all others. Concurrent with this, and epitomised by Wassily Kandinsky in his manifesto *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977), is the pursuit of a pure pictorial language of form. In early twentieth century forms of abstraction, circa 1910-1920, through such protagonists as Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, this reduction of visual language to its barest means was often at the service of transcendent or spiritual beliefs, through which drawing was used as a means of expressing a spiritual truth. Over time this imperative was overshadowed by an emphasis on the autonomy of pictorial forms, as proposed by its most famous advocate Clement Greenberg. Abstraction in this regard is an essentially formal, reductive concern. This characteristic is still prevalent in abstract art today and most often presented through the rubric of language: the grammar of abstract art. Despite this, as Robert Zimmer rightly notes, ‘abstraction did not at first entail a move away from the figurative. However, once the process of abstraction is to the fore, the goal of capturing the essence of an object becomes something different from painting the most accurate, most detailed, likeness’ (2003:1286). The second thread within abstract art, which involves the idea of turning away to convey what is experienced, is pertinent to this argument.

Art theorist Catherine de Zegher draws explicit attention to this approach to abstraction through suggesting a myriad of connotations, including ‘dissociation from any specific instance’, ‘expressing a quality apart from an object’ and also ‘impersonal, detached’ (de Zegher and Teicher 2005:12), which all hinge on this aspect of abstraction. Furthermore, de Zegher’s analysis is rooted in the proposition that abstraction can refer simultaneously to an image and/or object that is rooted in the visible world and to ‘the formation of an idea apart from any perceivable object...that is, as thought itself’ (ibid.). What makes de Zegher’s approach particularly pertinent here, is that she understands drawing to be thought, not its trace or record but the very action of thinking (2010:24). This drawing-as-thinking is for de Zegher partially located in the making body. Linking up these ideas we can see that abstraction in drawing is something that is potentially bodily and as a thought is also independent from any perceivable reality. This has implications for understanding the role of abstraction for contemporary artists, and although this





Fig. 5 Untitled Drawing by Margrét H. Blöndal  
*Bild*, 2009/2010. Image courtesy of the artist





Fig. 6 Untitled Drawing by Margrét H. Blöndal  
*Bild*, 2009/2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

line of thinking seems to set up an opposition between an abstract idea and an object from the world, de Zegher herself muddies this opposition by presenting it as a coalescence, or ‘oscillation between the imagined and the concrete’ (de Zegher and Teicher 2005:12). Not exclusively concrete (as something that is derived from the world) or mental but some combination of both offers abstraction a generative potential. Following on from literary philosopher Gaston Bachelard, it can be noted that abstraction enables the imagination: ‘to imagine is to absent oneself, to launch out toward a new life’ (1988:3). Significantly, this is not a dialectical opposition between the imaginary and the concrete. As a critical corollary, it is important to recognise that this idea resonates beyond the limited confines of abstract art per se. The idea of abstraction as a turning away from the world then becomes a more nuanced condition as a continuum between the real and the imaginary, and this is potentially where its creativity lies: abstraction affords an imaginative response. It is this aspect of abstraction that the following discussion will go on to examine in more detail through situating Margrét’s drawings in relation to her sculptural practice and how both are reliant upon abstraction’s transformative ability.

### *Poetic Materials*

I learned about Margrét’s work over a period of twelve months ethnographic research in Iceland during which time I meet with her for informal interviews at her home in downtown Reykjavík. In conversation with the artist it was apparent that her relationship to her environment involves a very physical sensory response, and in keeping with this she has in the past called her work a ‘geography of the domestic’ (Dagsdóttir 2005:61), alluding to how she documents but also subverts the things around her. Sitting on her living room floor, she unwrapped a number of small framed drawings which were destined for a future exhibition in Akureyrí, in the north of Iceland. The drawings, all watercolours with traces of an olive oil wash in most, were sparse and ranged from depictions of animals to fields of colour spread across the paper. She told me how she relied on her environment to nourish and provide her with the energy that enabled her to work creatively, as she notes ‘I cannot sit in my room and continue to draw every single day without some kind of communication with the environment. There needs to be some sort of dynamic’. This generative dynamic also feeds into how she conceives of her work. She suggests that this is ‘because it is not about repetition, not with me. I have to be connected to what I am doing. And if I am connected then you know I can be quite productive in one day. But it is just this thing that you never know’. For her this is a haptic response through movement: ‘if I’m not in contact and if there is nothing, nothing touching me anyway, then I’m not able to work ... if I’m not able to move and get any wind or rain then it is almost like I’m sterilised’.

As the above shows Margrét forms a connection with her wider environment through her bodily movement within it. Echoing the painter Paul Klee, Margrét’s work adheres to an apprehension of art as a somatic movement (Kudielka 2002). Klee worked from the premise that in the beginning there is nothing but a desire to movement, ‘an

impulse (from the body) to set in motion' (1961). From this perspective a drawing is first and foremost a gestural movement of the body. For drawings very specificity is arguably its ability to bear witness to the bodily action of the artist, that is, to offer a trace of the movement of creativity in physical form. Artist Avis Newman takes this further and considers the historical origins of drawing to not belong exclusively to the realms of vision but to movement. Disconnected from perception drawing is a 'muscular, ionic, and plastic sensation' (2003:5). Both Klee and Newman in this instance describe the moving body as the catalyst for drawing. In doing so they locate movement firmly with the body of the artist. Margrét's work would suggest a more complex scenario in which movement is a mechanism for art-making but also a factor in the content of her practice. Her drawings, then, are also about movement beyond her own corporeality. In this instance the image produced should not be understood as being exclusively a record of her bodily movement; a by-product of a somatic activity which leaves a physical trace on the page (Ingold 2003:9), but something more. Linked to this is her engagement with the medium of drawing as an art form, and the wider socio-historic discourses that underpin its development. This in turn brings back or allows the work to become a constellation of thematic concepts and the sensorial, and from this, the differing forms of representation they potentially employ. Within this constellation observation takes on a nuanced role and secures the oscillation between overarching concepts and the artist's sensory dialogue with the world.

For American art historian Leo Steinberg, there has been a progressive shift in how drawings were made over the last century. Previously, for him, 'the artist's eye was fed by the visible world, there occurred an almost automatic translation, like a conversion of energy, by which the action of seeing became a movement on paper' (1972:252). Now the rationale of drawing has changed. Previously, according to Steinberg, the artist's gaze was fixed on her surroundings, and 'the drawing took shape almost unchecked by the artist's eyes, which were too closely engaged in the visual field to take much time out for looking down at the page' (ibid.). This intention has now changed and 'the artist's eyes are riveted to the sheet, and the hand is employed in subdividing and articulating forms already found in the large. With the world shut out, or only dimly remembered, the artist seems closeted with his drawing' (ibid.). Steinberg laments this loss of direct observation, and its consequence for the rendering of form. This shift in practice does however call into question the assumption that drawing is an activity exclusively concerned with the (simultaneous) observation and description of visual reality. Aligning observation with a purely visual understanding of our encounter with the world is potentially reductive. Margrét is heir to this line of thinking. As Bailey notes, historically drawing in the West functioned to present 'an "imitation" of visual reality' (1982:34). Even though such a narrow objective has been largely discredited by art theorists, specifically by E. H. Gombrich (1960) and later Nelson Goodman (1968), who both note that depiction is not restricted to the imitation of appearances, there is still a prevailing assumption, through the term 'observation', that drawing reflects, in some form, the visual world that we see. There is the counter-



Fig. 7 Detail *Touching the membrane/Þreifad á himnunni* exhibition by Margrét H. Blöndal Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist

argument that proposes that imitation, like observation, is itself not a straightforward process and that those that reject it (within art) are failing to account for its complexity. Observation, in particular, should be understood to include the idea of participation, that is, observation is an active process of engagement with our surroundings (Ingold 2000). Correspondingly, imitation comes to be about joining in with this movement (see Berger 2005). Yet tellingly, in acknowledging this movement we find an analysis of the medium that is consonant with the artist's making processes and their intentions, which, I suggest, resonates here. This line of thinking also highlights the specific correlation between ways of looking and the specificity of the medium employed. For instance, in conversation with Margrét she told me that she loved drawing 'as a way to observe things, one in connection to the other'. Consistent with ideas of the artist's ability to 'see' beyond the phenomenal world (Klee 1961; Kandinsky 1979 [1926]), observation for the artist is a special technique of creative looking, or in keeping with the creative credo of Kandinsky (1979), an awareness that, in this instance, is hinged on forging a relation between things: a connection or movement between objects. **Within this**, and what needs to be stressed is that drawing for Margrét issues from this way of seeing and is divorced from the act of observation itself or the thing observed. In this instance drawing is a retrospective action that is not determined by the perceivable world as she



Fig. 8 Detail *Touching the membrane/Þreifad á himnunni* exhibition by Margrét H. Blöndal Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist

draws, and whilst the ‘real’ is not severed from her work it is hinged on a re-imagination of what she perceived and encountered. Which in so doing allows movement to take centre stage. Regarding observation as more than just direct immediate perception, the issue of what is represented also becomes more nuanced and allows the artist to present a multi-faceted perspective that problematizes a singular moment of imitative representation. The notion of a prism is useful here. Prisms diffuse light into its constituent parts, individualising colours which are not apparent to the naked eye. A refracted essence is revealed through altering what is normally seen. Abstraction is similarly able to offer an essence through the re-representing of what is perceived but without being tied to the moment of perception.

Margrét described to me how she would go out and look around her in order to be able to work. She called this habitual action ‘seeing with my drawing eyes’, which involves looking *for* forms that have the particular qualities that she is interested in using in her work. As she explains, she looks at a certain object ‘with the intention of finding the form that I need, a weight, a colour, a movement’. The form that she is looking for is a quality or property of something that she wishes to capture and use later. But it is how these forms connect that is vital: ‘it is always about linking something, making connections’. Her interest, then, is in qualities that the object may

possess, and not in the thing itself and how these qualities can be recombined together. Such a line of thinking offers a distinction between the materiality of objects and the material's inherent qualities (Ingold 2007). In these cases the 'objectness', including its socio-cultural context, of the things that she draws are called into question through focusing on the material properties that the object possess. Arguably she does this through a focus on a material's movement. As she recalls, 'I am interested in animals for instance, not in and of themselves, but in the way they move'. It can be argued that, in this instance, focusing on movement and not on the objects themselves allows her to see past what the object may actually be and, instead, conflate its qualities with others that interest her. An object's materiality, understood in this discussion to be the particular social context that an object is normatively embedded within, is pulled into a productive tension with its physical properties.

In this way Margrét builds up a collage of impressions in her work that does not tie what she draws to its social origin, but is, nevertheless, gleaned from it. As an additional point, it is interesting to note that perhaps it is these very qualities, which Margrét separates from the object, that may in fact constitute the object for some. In terms of movement for instance, it could be argued that it is the movement of the animal that makes it an animal, and that this quality is inseparable from it. In observing her environment in this way she is involved in a very distinct form of engagement with it that necessitates continual reflective involvement with what she is seeing. This process takes place repeatedly during the making of a work. Again, while sitting in her living room she gestured to the walls and space surrounding us and told me how it became a studio space too. So, 'if I'm in this room I just hang them [the drawings] on the wall...and I also become aware of what is missing, what element is missing. ... so I might need something that is more stabilised'. Abstraction is a process, then, that allows for a kind of fracturing of forms. In selectively choosing how she sees she is advocating a less harmonious or 'all over' form of engagement with her surroundings. Margrét's work further supports this line of thinking through her thematic interests which, as noted, are concerned with a kind of displacement and rupture. In returning to this idea, the art critic Chris Fite-Wassilak notes in the accompanying text for the 2007 exhibition, *Threifad á himmuni* ('Touching the Membrane'):

Her drawings bring forward a detail, singling out an element and bringing it into a new context. The detail echoes its source image, the moment and angle of its capture hinting at narrative. But more directly, it becomes into being in and of itself, plucked from its surroundings to exist independently [...] to make an entirely new entity: the unnoticed mark, just one constituent of a whole scene, has become the site of engagement.





Fig. 9 Detail *STORMRISS* exhibition by Margrét H. Blöndal  
Nicolas Krupp Galerie, Basel, 2008. Photo courtesy of the artist



This describes well how Margrét's work is built up around the selective choice of elements. Yet it also assumes an either/or scenario: as if the rejection of the original context necessitates the creation of an independent entity, a complete transformation. Margrét herself rejects this proposition and suggests that drawing is not this reductive and actually sits somewhere *before* an entirely new entity comes into being, that is, before one context is replaced by another. Margrét achieved this through working with abstract qualities. This is when the idea of abstraction makes the most sense. Carrier again: 'one such way sees abstraction as a basic mental capacity, the ability to see and think about things with a distinctive orientation. In this view, the abstracting person must be able to stand at a mental distance from his or her environment, his or her own immediate sensory perception and feelings. Those who are submerged in their environment are unable to contemplate it. Thus, as a mental capacity abstraction requires standing back and reflecting, interposing the mind between stimulus and response, between the sensory world and thought' (2001:245). The problem with this is that it reduces abstraction to a wholly cognitive process, a reduction that is not congruent with Margrét's practice.

This disjuncture is substantiated further by Margrét's sculptures, which mirror her drawings and form the second half of her practice. She collects and refashions second-hand objects that hold some physical attraction to her and through their rearrangement in a new setting she plays between the familiarity of the object, its normative associations and its more poetic qualities. Discarded pieces of neon plastic woven around taut thread, knotted cloth, or balloons tethered to pieces of wood, are all given a new life through a process of re-imagination that focuses on how an object's identity can be manipulated by reconsidering its material properties. The objects are accorded a new status and value through drawing attention to alternative interpretations of the object's potential meaning and use. In so doing meaning becomes somehow arbitrary and the imaginative potential of what materials may afford moves to the foreground. This process of displacement is also present in her drawings, where she takes something known and recasts it in a new light. The nuances within this process, however, mean that it is not the reductive form of abstraction (as suggested by the first definition of abstraction, as the removing of elements from their context) that is more usually proposed. Through Margrét's work it can be suggested that abstraction, far from being a removal from the everyday, is in fact a process that can bring us back to it through a material transformation. This is where abstraction can be seen to be more than just an ancillary to abstract art, and instead, as shown through the example of Margrét's working processes, as a material mechanism that brings these historic concepts into practice, into the world and marshalled to multiple competing effect. For example, her work reveals how an object's previous identity should not be merely disavowed, which would signal an overtly formal reading of the work as 'abstract'. Instead its history should be *held as a possibility*; that is in many instances explicit only to her, as she notes 'it's not about the way they [the sculptured objects] were used before. The history can sometimes add something to the piece, just



Fig. 10 Detail *Solvent Spaces* exhibition by Margrét H. Blöndal  
Richmond, Virginia, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist

as a layer that nobody knows about but myself'. For her it does not matter if the audience is unaware of the personal significance of her works, the child in the photograph being her son, the cuddly toy belonging to her as a little girl. The past lives of the everyday items that she uses are not told, for her there is little to be gained from its retelling. Rather it is about drawing attention to the mutability of objects and how their changeable identity is contingent upon context and use. This thematic interest in transformation marries her sculptural works with her drawings: the objects she refashions suggest a movement through time, the past history is there for the viewer to imagine and then reconsider.

So far it has been suggested that the process of abstraction is a movement from one context with its specific values and relations into another context with an alternative set of relations and meanings. Drawing is the medium for this creative act and resides in the space in-between one context and another. It functions in the slippage between them. We can see this process of abstraction at work through examining how Margrét constructs her images, and the transition from being in the environment to drawing. The 'qualities' that are of interest to Margrét are gathered together through photographing them in situ before returning to her studio to draw. Thus, convergent with Margrét's 'drawing eyes' is her camera, which she uses to document and then recall what she sees prior to making the drawings. Sitting at her table with her laptop in front of her she then imports the newly gathered material into her computer, and only then does she finally draw from the image on the screen. She told me that such technology was very useful to her because it enabled her to focus on the details within the image as she chooses. Tellingly (and akin to the way she uses her drawing eyes), she is not looking at the object as a whole but instead, as she describes it, it's about following the qualities in the image: 'I look at things such as weight and scale and observe and draw them'. Thus the camera is not merely an auxiliary device or technique but actually enables Margrét to refine and capture what she wants more accurately. In addition to this the camera also performs an important intermediary task, she told me, allowing her to avoid drawing directly from nature. The camera, then, adds another layer of separation, enabling her, she says, to 'avoid being too literal'. Along with her drawing eyes, it introduces another means of creating the necessary distance from what she sees. Thematically, this ties into her broader intentions; in her drawings, a large majority of which are figurative, there is a conscious concern not to take a literal transcription of what she sees too far. The aim is more to create a tension between the source of the work and its traces and the pull towards capturing something beyond the particulars of the source image. She explains that the photo acts as an 'anchor' in the work, enabling her to follow the trace offered by the image, but also to go beyond it. Thus drawing is not an imitative exercise but nor is it wholly non-referential, instead it is something in between. This 'in between' is key, and does not suggest a movement back and forth between the imaginative and imitative as discreet categories. Instead, drawing dissolves the distinction between them. For instance, when she gathers the weights and textures that interest her, the way her cat is lying curled up on her living room floor or the texture of a tree branch that she ran past

while out jogging that morning, she is re-imagining the qualities in a slightly different register. She plays with the movement, evoking an ambiguity of origins.

The fact that she chooses to use the medium of drawing is telling in this regard. The specificity of drawing resides in its very practice and through looking at Margrét's work, and how she goes about making it, we can come to a better understanding of what drawing is. Her emphasis on ambiguity is analogous to drawing's particularity in this instance. Her *Airmail Paper Drawings* (1999-2002) are a good example of this. For Margrét, using written English in these works was a form of drawing, as she recalled:

These were the first drawings that I did. They were written in English, and obviously not my first language and at that time it was easier for me to use English and not Icelandic because of the distance. I could distance myself from it and think of it more as a drawing tool when I was writing. So the things that I wrote on paper, I didn't think of them formally as a prose or a poem. It was more just the term drawing felt like the correct term.

Thus, the use of a foreign language is enabling for Margrét because there is a degree of removal for her, no matter how subtle. Furthermore, and of special interest here, is that she describes this quality as drawing. This supports an understanding of abstraction as an active, selective process for the artist. The artist's 'drawing eyes' made possible a dual concern with connection and disconnection and literalness and descriptive representation. This is integrated through her working methods and her thematic and stylistic concerns, and drawing especially offers her a way of engaging with the environment that allows for her particular form of creativity. This line of thinking is supported by art historian Kirk Varnedoe, in relation to abstract art again, when he notes that 'abstraction is a remarkable system of productive reductions and destructions that expands our potential for expression and communication' (2006:41).

## Conclusion

This article began with a suggestion that abstraction was not antithetical to contextual understanding. Context in this instance is twofold; it speaks to the material site of origin for the objects and drawings the artist creates but also the historical and philosophical emergence of abstraction as a historized practice. Through following how one artist uses abstraction both facets of this oscillation are revealed and in doing so challenge the preconception that abstraction is solely a (mental) transformation of the concrete. Instead abstraction as an analytic is a mirror upon the artist's making processes. Yet to fully account for the specificities of Margrét H. Blöndal's work through the prism of abstraction also renders problematic the place of context within an anthropology that seeks to explore art (see Wright 2010). The concept of abstraction, usually theorised as a mental operation, is for the artist also a material concern. This article begins by defining abstraction in two main ways: firstly, as an act of repositioning elements taken from the material world, and secondly, as an attempt at separating the human subject

from the world. Within modernist discourses we find a convergence of both readings of abstraction, alongside a doctrine of progression towards an essence or truth that characterised early modernist endeavours, often couched in terms of metaphysical ideals. Postmodernist thinking has debunked this move towards an absolute truth but, nevertheless, I found within my research an understanding of abstraction that recognises art as a concentration of form and substance that, correspondingly, dissolves any distinction between them.

Abstraction enables the separation of the properties of things from their contextual identity, from their designated purpose or meaning. Through their re-imagination Margrét presents the viewer with a richer associative understanding of the forms she works with: what the viewer experiences is a return to the phenomenal world of the artist through an abstraction of it. There is an oscillation present between precision and openness in her work, and abstraction enables this double orientation. The ambiguity between what is fashioned from the artist's surroundings and what is a product of her imagination, is heightened by her choice of thematic interests. In her work there is a tension between what is 'real' and out there in the world, and what is 'inside' and internal. Or more accurately, in her hands these categories are dismantled and transformed into something other.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> There has however been plenty of anthropological work on other aspects of Icelandic culture. Early anthropological writings include Victor Turner (1971), who examined the Saga literature, with a particular focus on the Njál's Saga (see Arent 1964). A wider interest in 'anthropology at home' (see Hastrup 1993) also had a marked affect within Icelandic anthropology from the late 1970s, with a number of Icelanders turning to their homeland (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> This observation was offered by Ingólfur Arnarsson. The first phase stretched from the turn of the twentieth century to 1945: during this time Icelandic art was subsidiary to the landscape traditions of the Scandinavian mainland. This state of affairs persisted until independence from Denmark in 1944. The early exponents of modern art, such as landscape painter Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, responded to a wider trend towards romanticism (Magnússon 1989), and used the natural realism and symbolism typical of Danish landscape painting, termed the 'Nordic sublime', to depict the Icelandic landscape itself (see Taylor 1989; Sawin 2001). Their work was thoroughly embedded in a nationalistic ideology, however, and focused on the specificity of the Icelandic landscape through painting and sculpture to champion nationalistic causes (Ólafsdóttir 2001). The second period, dating from 1945 to 1965, was largely concerned with abstract art, and came to prominence through the hard-edged abstract paintings of Svavar Guðnason (Kvaran 1995). The final period spanned from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s and was witness to a gradual shift in the centre of influence away from Scandinavia towards America, with the arrival of Fluxus, Conceptualism and Minimalist art forms.

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<sup>iii</sup> The first generation of Conceptual artists – circa 1970s – were instrumental in adopting these new approaches, with Icelandic artist Kristján Guðmundsson the most prominent example (see Jónsson 2001). Born in the west of Iceland in 1941, he is a self-educated artist who has used drawings as his principal means of expression since the 1970s. A Venice Biennale candidate in 1982, his work typifies a philosophical engagement with the medium itself, and through this with the language of art more broadly. Wholly abstract in their absence of figurative forms, his works span the last three decades and are characterized by a frugality and sparsity of elements. The mathematical precision of their execution is married with a sober elegance that recalls the artwork of his minimalist peers during the early stages of his career. In keeping with these influences he interprets drawing beyond its narrow confines of paper and pencil and uses the idea in an expansive and experimental way. Indeed, the very exploration of what constitutes drawing forms the backbone to his work.