

Jón Gunnar Árnason (1931–1989)

Sun Chariot, 1978

Chromium-plated steel

LÍ 7203

A number of works reference the sun and the cosmic ideology that inspired the artist from the late 1970s. Prior to that time Jón Gunnar Árnason had attracted attention for his three-dimensional works which addressed social issues, such as *Heart*, *Flower* and *Ego*, and took as their subject medical science, humanity's impact on nature and the dangerous, aggressive human being. The space itself becomes a part of all these works, and the observer is a direct participant, which was new in Iceland. As a rule the artist locates his "sun" works in the open air, where the energy of the sun, or of the universe, can reach them. A connection may be seen between *Sun Chariot* and Old Norse mythology: the 13th-century *Prose Edda* tells of a young girl compelled by the gods to drive her chariot around and around the earth, pulling the sun behind her. Many of Jón Gunnar's works were in some sense participatory: the observer was expected to play an active role and have an influence. The artist's sun works and environmental pieces bring with them the consciousness that humanity is part of cosmic power. Jón's training in mechanical engineering proved useful in making many of his sculptures; in addition he studied art in Scotland.

Finnur Jónsson (1892–1993)

The Universe, 1962

Oil on canvas

LÍ 1443

Twin Star, 1975

Oil on canvas

Gift of Finnur Jónsson and Guðný Elísdóttir

LÍ 4473

Hello Universe, 1962

Oil on canvas

LÍ 1523

Finnur Jónsson's interest in the firmament began in his youth in Hamarsfjörður, east Iceland, where he took part in fishing and farming work. Fishermen went out in open boats from Djúpivogur and later Stöðvarfjörður, and nothing could be more natural for him than to ponder existential questions in face of the ocean and a starry sky. From time immemorial, starry skies have sparked philosophical musings about life and existence. Finnur's interest in the subject was clearly manifested in his exhibition in Reykjavík in 1925, where he displayed the results of his years spent in Germany, at a time of ferment on the art scene. His show included a number of semi-abstract, constructivist works with symbolic elements, depicting planets in space amid figurative paintings, in the German Expressionist mode. The abstract works were not well received in Iceland, and Finnur turned his attention to Icelandic nature, the sea and genre paintings, with personal and mystical overtones. In the 1950s Finnur may be said to have gone on where he had left off with respect to the universe. *Space* and *Hello Universe* from 1962,

as well as *Twin Star* (1975), are examples of this period of his work, which coincided with the era of space exploration. The Space Race commenced in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik I* into space, and in 1961 Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth three times on the first manned space mission.

Finnur Jónsson (1892–1993)

***Ode to the Moon*, 1925**

Oil, gold on canvas

LÍ 4785

The painting is simultaneously abstract and figurative, as many familiar elements are seen in this enigmatic space where planets and other heavenly bodies float. A blue stair leads us into the centre of the work, where two crescent moons, red and gilt, are placed on either side of an axis that holds the picture space together. Finnur Jónsson may be said to have sought new paths and ventured into avant-garde territory when he left Iceland for Germany in 1921. Those were exciting times: Berlin and Dresden became melting-pots of new ideas in art and design. The Bauhaus school in Weimar was an influence on the *Der Weg* academy where Finnur studied in Dresden, as the faculty had direct links to the Bauhaus. Many different groups of artists established an alliance, and the *Sturm* gallery in Berlin and the periodical *Der Sturm* (the Storm) were like a whirlwind of ideas, looking into the future. Eight pieces by Finnur were exhibited through the group, all in the abstract constructivist mode, while also being inspired by the spiritual element in art, where the artist raises their mind to a higher plane than the worldly. By this Finnur may be said to have become one of the leaders of the European avant-garde.

Hreinn Friðfinnsson (b. 1943) ***Attending***, 1973

Photographs on paper

LÍ 8048

Hreinn Friðfinnsson's works are lyrical and at the same time heartfelt, and they have been likened to a philosophical journey of exploration of transitory everyday reality. His works are generally concerned with something airy and intangible such as light, wind, or the non-existent. Fluxus and Concept art were early influences. Hreinn was a founding member of the SÚM group of artists in the 1960s, and is one of the leaders of Icelandic conceptual art. He has used a range of media in his art: photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, found objects and installations; and he often makes use of mirrors for a symmetrical effect. His works do not appeal only to the visual; they also stimulate the observer's imagination and memory by references in the title, or by other means.

Hildur Hákonardóttir (b. 1938) ***Heaven and Earth*, 1982**

Wool, photograph on paper, Plexiglass

LÍ 4346

Hildur Hákonardóttir has had a long career in art, often using her works as a vehicle for political messages, regarding women's liberation and rights, among other causes. In the early 1980s the era of political art appeared to be waning, and polemicism was in decline. This tendency is seen in Hildur's art, as in the case of other artists. Her art had been highly political, but now she turned increasingly to nature and landscape – not in order to draw attention to injustice, but to address ideas of time and the coherence of things, as seen in her *Heaven and Earth*. To some degree these works reflect Hildur's new surroundings and her proximity with nature – but also her experiments with new and more convenient technique. In the work we see a woven wall hanging in which the green colour of the earth merges with the blue sky, while in front of the piece is something like a pyramidal greenhouse – a manmade Plexiglas structure containing repeated photographs of an enclosed patch of vegetation, which on closer scrutiny is identified as an “elven hill” (reputed to be inhabited by elves and therefore protected) in the artist's grassfield.

Jóhann Eyfells (1923–2019) ***Circular Linguisticity IV*, 1989**

Aluminium

LÍ 7284

Jóhann Eyfells' works are unique in Icelandic art history. After commencing his studies in architecture and art in California in the 1940s, he graduated from the University of Florida in architecture in 1953, and in sculpture in 1964. He made *Circular Linguisticity* on his property in Florida, where he dug holes in the ground into which he poured molten metal, so that the earth became an element of the creative process. After the metal had solidified Jóhann stacked the circles, turning them upside-down. The form is determined by a circular hoop which forms the outer surface, while inside it the metal flows freely. Here we see a confrontation between order and disorder, between cosmos and chaos.

Jóhann's art combines science, philosophy and mysticism; he himself called his style *receptualism*. Jóhann bought a property in Florida in 2002, after having been a professor at the University of Florida in Orlando for many years, and his works then became more expansive, as he was able to use his land and make use of heavy machinery. Jóhann Eyfells represented Iceland at the Venice Biennale in 1993, together with Hreinn Friðfinnsson.

Sverrir Haraldsson (1930–1985) ***Painting*, 1962**

Oil on canvas, painted Masonite

LÍ 1220

At a young age Sverrir Haraldsson was among the artists featured in the FÍM (Association of Icelandic Artists) autumn exhibition of 1952, after graduation from the Icelandic School of Arts and Crafts (forerunner of the Iceland University of the Arts). He also held a solo show in the *Listamannaskálinn* gallery. The works he showed were organic abstracts depicting rounded forms. In Paris in 1952-53 he became acquainted with Concrete art, and turned to painting geometric abstracts for the next few years, until 1955. At that point he turned his back on Concrete art and sought inspiration in nature, with which he felt a deep connection, and which gave him an outlet for his imagination. Many of the landscapes had surrealist overtones, which set them apart from the Icelandic art of the time. His outdoor artworks at his home at Hulduhólar in Mosfellsbær, north of Reykjavík, also attracted attention, as they were clearly visible to passing traffic on the main road. The polished rocks from the sea shore, threaded onto iron pipes, were reminiscent of alien space travellers; and the same impression arises from the 1962 painting, in which conical circular shapes float in a black void which is transformed into a great flash as white light throws off a bluish mist or halo around the light. And one should listen, for a crescendo is seen, reminiscent of a musical tone that emerges from a red sphere at the bottom of the painting and breaks the black silence. Sverrir's unusual spray paintings may be said to have a connection with lyrical abstraction and with his own surrealist landscapes – for unlike many other artists, Sverrir progressed from the abstract into landscape.

Guðmunda Andrésdóttir (1922–2002)

Dusk, 1976

Oil on canvas

LÍ 3844

Throughout her career, Guðmunda Andrésdóttir remained true to abstract imagery, and she took part in the exhibitions of the *Septem* group, which was for many years the main arena of the abstract in Iceland.

Around 1969, after a period when her canvases were dominated by oblique lines, Guðmunda started to explore the circular form, and the organic dimensions of rounded outlines and line. *Dusk* evokes a melancholy ambiance as the mind wanders freely before darkness falls. Red and blue undulating streaks lead the eye into the picture space, where the green waves help draw attention to the red ones. Here the artist plays with movement and dimensions on the basis of the primary elements of art: line, form and colour. Many of Guðmunda's works are variations on a theme, and that is true of the works on display here, in which curved lines and circular forms create movement and rhythm. In her will the artist made a bequest for the foundation of a fund to assist and encourage young people to undertake advanced study in art.

Finnur Jónsson (1892–1993)
***Night in Midwinter*, 1950**

Oil on canvas

Gift of Finnur Jónsson and Guðný Elísdóttir

LÍ 4432

Many of Finnur Jónsson's animal pictures convey powerful emotions and strong narrative urge; the imagery is loaded, and living creatures are juxtaposed with mysterious, potent forces of nature. A seabird bathes in the greenish light of the moon, which suddenly appears and lights up the sky when a chink opens up between the billowing clouds. The bird's red eye, and its beak pointing towards the moon, remind us that the heavenly bodies have power, and influence all living things – not only humans. The short days and long nights of midwinter, from the end of November into late January, when the North Pole turns away from the sun, are a remarkable time in the north, which has inspired many artists. During the northern winter, it is summer in the southern hemisphere.

Margrét Elíasdóttir (b. 1946) ***Tiring Moon***, 1977

Textile and clay

LÍ 3891

Who has not observed the greyish-white face of the moon? Or talked to the Man in the Moon? Doesn't he get tired of hanging around up there. looking down? What does he think of what we humans do? The Moon's anxious silver-grey face sinks down the velvety dark-red sky and is seen against the Earth at the bottom of the picture plane. Over the centuries people have striven to read meaning from the heavenly bodies. The Moon, our Earth's only satellite, has been humankind's companion since the birth of the Solar System. On its orbit around the planet, which takes an average of 27 days, the Moon always turns the same face to the Earth. It almost seems that the artist has read the Moon's message, which she seeks to pass on through this enchanting work. Margrét Elíasdóttir has worked in a variety of media; she studied at the Icelandic School of Arts and Crafts (forerunner of the Iceland University of the Arts) and also learned ceramic art. In 1972 she graduated from *Konstfachskolan* in Stockholm, in ceramic and glass design.

Finnur Jónsson (1892–1993)
In the Moonlight I Stood, 1960–1970

Oil on canvas

Gift of Finnur Jónsson and Guðný Elísdóttir

LÍ 4452

The inspiration of the painting is the poem *Álfareiðin* (The Ride of the Elves), a translation (1843) by Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson of Heinrich Heine's *Reisebilder* (1826–27). This song is heartily sung by Icelanders at the New Year, when according to folklore elves are on the move, going to their new homes. Much happens on New Year's Night that we do not see, but may perhaps perceive. If a human sits at a crossroads they may see elves gathering – and then it is best to take care not to be deceived by them. When the new day dawns it is customary to say: “God be praised, now the daylight is everywhere.” Here we see elves riding across the green countryside on white horses, and the elven queen in her light-coloured robes stretches out a hand to a human who stands among the trees, watching. Bright colours catch the eye as horns are played beneath a crescent moon that hangs over the treetops. This is all in harmony with the fairytale ambiance of the song. Strongly-drawn outlines in the style of German Expressionism characterise the painting, which is reminiscent of a stage set, where the moon illuminates the stage.

Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958) *The Deacon at Myrká River*, 1931

Oil on canvas

LÍ 419

Ásgrímur Jónsson's pictures inspired by folktales are among the treasures of the National Gallery's collections. Ásgrímur was the first Icelandic artist to display pictures on folklore themes to the public, in 1905. In *The Deacon at Myrká River* (1931) he opts to depict one of the most dramatic moments in this dark tale: The deacon comes riding to fetch his sweetheart Guðrún, who mounts his horse behind him. The horse stumbles on the ice, and the deacon's hat lifts up at the back. In the moonlight Guðrún sees to her horror the bare bone of his skull: the deacon is dead, and has come to carry her away! The scene is bathed in eerie light from the sun's rays reflecting off the moon. The power of the sun is well known, and it is recorded in folktales, including beliefs that trolls and ghosts were afraid of sunlight. Ásgrímur portrayed the folktale of the *Night Troll* repeatedly in much the same way over the years, in both watercolour and oils. The story tells of a girl who is home alone on Christmas Night taking care of a baby while the family attend Midnight Mass. As she sits in the farmhouse she hears a voice at the window, praising the beauty of her hand. She keeps her head, exchanging verses with the troll all night long, until the sun rises – and according to tradition a night troll caught in the sun's rays is turned to stone. At that nerve-racking moment, the sun itself comes to the rescue; but the girl has saved herself by her courage and steadfastness

Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908–1982) ***Sunbeams*, 1966**

Copper

LÍ 7170

The title of *Sunbeams* gives rise to thoughts of the natural spectacle seen when rays of sunlight filter through clouds. Sometimes they form a fan shape, as the light radiates from a single source. Here in the north they are never vertical. The material itself was the hallmark of artist Sigurjón Ólafsson, who began his career literally sculpting, cutting his works from stone. In those works the structure of the rock was always given prominence, in accord with the import of the piece. After he graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of the Arts in 1935, having been awarded both a gold medal and the Eckersberg Prize, Sigurjón rapidly gained recognition and many worthy commissions. Due to health problems Sigurjón later had to abandon stone sculpture for other materials, such as wood and metal. He kept up with the latest developments on the international art scene, and was always at the cutting edge. He was one of the pioneers of abstract art in Iceland. Alongside his own original art he also made many portraits, which were often moulded in clay. He is regarded as one of Iceland's best portrait sculptors. In the 1960s he made many abstract works in iron and copper. The reddish-brown copper acquires a green patina of verdigris over time, which contributes to the impact of this splendid work in the delicate balance between the smooth and the sharp. The work is frontal, best viewed like an Ancient Egyptian sculpture.

Björg Þorsteinsdóttir (1940–2019)

***Circulation I*, 1974**

Etching, aquatint on paper

Gift of the heirs of Björg Þorsteinsdóttir

LÍ 9548

***Circulation III*, 1976**

Etching, aquatint on paper

LÍ 3834

The approach, as well as the delicate and refined character of the works, testify to the profound thinking of the artist. The works all reference the cosmos, with their dominant circular forms – from two spheres meeting in open space to works resembling targets from a *Star Wars* movie. *Circulation III* (1976) depicts planar circles that connect two planets. The circles expand beyond the frame. The circular form is without beginning or end, and the interplay of the forms leads to thoughts of ending, and the renewal of everything that is. Many of Björg Þorsteinsdóttir's works are abstract and at the same time lyrical, leading to thoughts of modern technoculture. Whether in the context of the balance of terror between the superpowers, the arms race that followed World War II, or philosophical musings on the transience of life, no doubt it is good to bear in mind the efforts of German scientist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) to demonstrate that nature had not been created for humanity, but that it was part of a bigger ecosystem where everything has its role in a cycle subject to laws of nature. If we look out at space through a telescope or binoculars this becomes ever more obvious. Björg's prints naturally lead the mind to the relationship between science and the arts.

Svavar Guðnason (1909–1988) ***The Milky Way*, 1958**

Oil on canvas

LÍ 1437

The art of Finnur Jónsson and Svavar Guðnason differs greatly, although both painted abstracts. With his show in Reykjavík in 1925, Finnur was the first artist to exhibit abstract art in Iceland. For some years after that Finnur was drawn to Icelandic nature, where he found his inspiration. Nonetheless, he continued to pursue the fantastical; he enjoyed painting such works, and exhibited them from time to time alongside his landscapes in the 1960s and 70s. Many of them were inspired by starry skies. The astrologer peers into the sky, seeking to read the messages of the heavenly bodies; and even today people seek guidance in astrological predictions.

Despite Finnur's early introduction of the abstract, it was not until 1945 that abstract art had an impact in Iceland, with Svavar Guðnason's exhibition of his works from his time in Denmark. He had worked closely with avant-garde artists in Denmark, and his work was included in several exhibitions of the COBRA group, formed by artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam who were advocates of abstract expressionism and spontaneous artistic expression. Svavar Guðnason's large painting *The Milky Way* is evidence that the artist was influenced by the geometric abstract after his return to Iceland. The underlying colours, showing through the surface layers, make for a vibrant effect. The pointed forms create movement in all directions in a coordinated interplay of tones.

Erró (b. 1932)
Apollo 13, 1981

Oil on canvas

LÍ 4222

The import of this painting by Erró relates to the human passion for exploring the earth and space. The photographs of astronauts seen in *Apollo 13* were acquired from NASA. Such posed images of astronauts evoke ideas about the achievements and power of the USA. Old navigational instruments are displayed on the table, together with a medallion. Above the men hangs a painting of *The Laughing Cavalier* as portrayed by Dutch painter Frans Hals in 1624. The half-un clothed woman in the background placed the astronauts' feat in an emotionally-fraught symbolic context, referencing gender-stereotyping. The imagery of Erró's work is enigmatic and can be interpreted in many different ways. His provocative approach, of placing art history in the context of current affairs by juxtaposing fragments of historic artworks and graphics – indeed anything that serves his idea – sparks diverse questions about the state of the human race and its future in a paradoxical world. The narrative is created using acquired visual material and symbols which are arranged as a collage, which may then be considerably enlarged before being transposed into paintings made with enamel paints, for a smooth texture with no visible brushstrokes.

Vilhjálmur Bergsson (b. 1937)

Red Connection no. 5, 1973

Oil on canvas

LÍ 3936

Connections, 1968

Oil on canvas

LÍ 1430

Outside and Inside the Circle no. 3, 1970

Oil on canvas

LÍ 1527

How are we connected to higher powers, or a super-natural world? Vilhjálmur Bergsson has addressed such questions in his art, seeking to interpret what he calls co-organic dimensions. By this he means the interpretation of diverse elements of life and a connection that flows through all the chain of life. "All life takes place in the dimensions of space and time, but nothing is entirely independent of everything else. And the threads run in all directions." Vilhjálmur goes his own way in his art, regardless of styles and trends. The works lead to thoughts of the largest phenomena and the smallest, while according to the artist the colour palette reflects Icelandic nature, which he says has moulded him. In his view Iceland is like a cosmic painting. The delicate approach and subtle variations of colour are reminiscent of the brushstrokes of the Old Masters, as organic forms float in an enigmatic space. The effect of these dreamlike, mysterious paintings is like gazing into a new dimension, where everything is connected by delicate threads.

Porvaldur Skúlason, 1906–1984

***Nocturne*, 1971**

Oil on canvas

LÍ 1571

Porvaldur Skúlason began his career as a figurative painter, but after spending time in Paris, where he got to know the French *Réalités Nouvelles* movement and Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely (1906–1997), in the mid-20th century he became one of Iceland's staunchest advocates of the geometric abstract. A period characterised by a disciplined approach with the emphasis upon the plane was followed by a time when the forms were given more freedom to expand and take flight, as if to burst the bounds of the frame. Porvaldur's walks along the banks of the Ölfusá river in south Iceland, as well as the research of space scientists, had an impact on the evolution of his paintings. The titles of his works grew more lyrical; his geometric abstract works tended to be assigned neutral titles such as *Painting, Untitled, or Composition*.

In the painting jagged forms in shades of blue hurtle across the black picture plane, reminiscent of the night sky. Here it is the black colour which lends a sense of space, where light breaks out like a cluster of bolts of blue lightning. Artist Porvaldur Skúlason knows exactly what he is doing when he adds a touch of red to the plane, thus bringing out the green – for here the entire spectrum is involved, although at a casual glance only blue and black are evident.

Kristinn E. Hrafnsson (b. 1960)
Nocturne on the Waxing Crescent Moon, 2014

Photograph on paper
LÍ 9212

In Kristinn E. Hrafnsson's *Nocturne* we discern the familiar face of artist Hreinn Friðfinnsson on a black ground in the left half of the work, which comprises two parts, while on the right is a starry sky with white specks of light that appear to form a helix. It almost seems that the artist has become the Man in the Moon, as his face emerges like a crescent moon, gazing pensively out into space. Who is not lost for words in face of the magnificence of the firmament? Hardly anyone, on the evidence of literature and other narratives, in which people of all ages describe a moment when they have felt themselves at one with the Universe.

Where is our place in all this Creation? This work brings together all the different threads to be found in the artist's philosophical musings, in highly-varied presentation of works that run the gamut from murals to space and environmental works during his thirty years in art. His recurrent themes are questions regarding the human being's response to their environment and their efforts to cope with unpredictable nature with the aid of language, tools and science. We are all rushing through space at breathtaking speed in the Milky Way, which is part of an even bigger galaxy that appears to be still expanding. If art can help us to find our place in time and space, or to attain a better understanding of ourselves and others, perhaps it is fulfilling its purpose?

Eyborg Guðmundsdóttir (1924–1977) ***Satellite*, 1975**

Acrylic on canvas

LÍ 6122

Eyborg Guðmundsdóttir was one of a handful of Icelandic artists who pursued the development of abstract art into optical art (Op Art), which is grounded in research into human optical perception. How we see and what we see are not the same thing at all. What we see is largely determined by what we have seen before and how we analyse and classify the new things we see. The perception of a circle on a plane as a satellite is a function of what we know about satellites. Densely-spaced lines are drawn across the vibrant circular plane, some darker than others. The 1970s was the age of satellites, which were constantly being sent into orbit for a range of purposes.

During her brief artistic career, which commenced when she stayed in Paris and got to know, amongst others, Victor Vasarely, a leader of Op Art, Eyborg was able to develop a personal imagery grounded in the geometrical abstract, founded on the primary forms combined with refined use of line. During her time in Paris 1961–1965 Eyborg showed her work with *Group Measure* in various European countries.

Halldór Ásgeirsson (b. 1956) ***The Aurora Borealis Bar***, 2001

Mixed media

LÍ 6245

It is always interesting to gain insight into what an artist is thinking, and not only what they see. Such works spark connections for the observer and activate the imagination. Colour is light, and here light may be said to “paint” all around the work. The flickering spectrum of colours is reminiscent of the Northern Lights, dizzying the observer – while others are drawn to the colourful glass vessels which recall heady drinks that can have a similar effect. New norms in the arts, following the advent of Neo-Expressionism (the “New Painting”) in the early 1980s, gave rise to a new understanding of sculpture and spatial art. Recent decades have been characterised by a wide range of research into the potential of new media and freedom of expression, where artists analyse societies, social life and nature without regard for styles and schools. Halldór Ásgeirsson entered this world fresh from his studies in Paris and a stay in Japan. His works may be seen as relating to nature, as he has worked directly with the four classical elements: earth, water, air and fire. With originality and in a range of media he expresses the biological and subjective bonds between humanity and nature.

Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson (b. 1953) ***Green Night***, 1983

Oil on canvas

LÍ 4399

The moon's impact on humans has been explored repeatedly in literature and art, and scientists too have made their contribution. We know that many animals make use of the moonlight in order to hunt, and before the days of electric lighting many people were familiar with the phases of the moon – knowledge that could be useful for work or travel. Studies have shown that when the moon is full many people sleep less, or less well. Perhaps the moon affects us more than we realise. Helgi Þorgils' painting *Green Night* dates from the time when young artists burst onto the scene with powerful figurative paintings, following a period when abstract and conceptual art was dominant. The ideas of these artists had, nonetheless, roots in conceptual art. That emotionally-fraught objective expression in painting and sculpture was reminiscent of German Expressionism; Neo-Expressionism, an international movement in both European and American art, was known as “the New Painting” in Iceland. Helgi Þorgils' figurative visual world presents an aura of innocence, yet beneath the surface lies an enigmatic narrative in time and space inspired by the artist's personal experiences.

Keith Grant (b. 1930)
Aurora Borealis. Dark Sea with Stars, 1993

Oil on carton
Gift of the artist
LÍ 5665

British artist Keith Grant has long focussed on landscape in his art. Grant may be said to have dedicated himself to the north and to the magnificent nature to be found here. He has visited Iceland many times in order to paint a landscape that is unparalleled in the world. The Surtsey eruption of 1963 caught Grant's attention, and for many years he was a frequent visitor to Iceland in both summer and winter. In the Icelandic winter sky the presence of the Northern Lights makes a strong impression. *Aurora Borealis. Dark Sea with Stars* depicts the dancing Northern Lights in dialogue with a black and stormy sea. The contrast between the ocean and the Aurora intensifies the ambiance of the work and recalls the sublimity of the north. On his travels in Iceland Grant got to know the avant-garde Icelandic artists of the SÚM group, whose work impressed him. He and sculptor Jón Gunnar Árnason (1931–1989) became good friends. Keith Grant presented *Aurora Borealis. Dark Sea with Stars* to the National Gallery of Iceland in 1994 in memory of his friend Jón Gunnar.

Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir (b. 1980) ***Nebula***, 2011

Video

LÍ 8886

Nebula (2011) arose from a huge bruise on Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir's arm, sustained in an accident. The colours and outlines of the bruise gave rise to thoughts on space and nebulae.

Nebula emerged from the artist's musings about the coherence of things and the Universe in all its glory. Due to her interest in physics and space science she started to explore nebulae in more detail. Her attention was drawn especially to the elements in the periodical table, and the fact that the same elements are to be found on earth and in the nebulae of the Universe. Two videos, one of the bruise and the other of a nebula, are projected from opposite directions, so that they meet and fuse into one entity. Hildigunnur's art is characterised by experimentalism, while the import of the works is thoroughly thought through, and mediated in an original manner.

Björg Porsteinsdóttir (1940–2019)

***In Space I*, 1969**

Etching, aquatint on paper

Gift of the heirs of Björg Porsteinsdóttir

LÍ 9482

***In Space II*, 1969**

Etching, aquatint on paper

Gift of the heirs of Björg Porsteinsdóttir

LÍ 9483

People have long wondered whether life exists on other planets – perhaps even something like humans. Björg Porsteinsdóttir’s lyrical works show how well she kept up with social issues, as her works that evoke outer space would evolve in step with developments as the Space Age progressed. Organic, playful forms characterise both works, which are etchings, based on a grey-scale from white to black. The primary shapes hold the picture space together while organic forms move freely as if weightless – and indeed the titles of the works reference space. Like the modernist “Atom” poets of the 1950s, who jettisoned the old traditions of verse, Björg was unafraid of finding her own path in the media she chose. Her imagery often references the technoculture of modern times, with emphasis upon hard, cold forms in her large paintings and refined prints, where science and nature come together.

Finnur Jónsson (1892–1993)
Green Moon, 1958

Oil on canvas

Gift of Finnur Jónsson and Guðný Elísdóttir

LÍ 4446

During the 1950s abstract imagery dominated the Icelandic art world. This was not in itself anything new for Finnur Jónsson, who had participated in avant-garde art during his student years in Germany in the 1920s. At that time he made many abstract works with cosmic overtones; and while he turned to landscape on his return to Iceland, he appears to have reverted to the abstract intermittently throughout his career. The firmament with all its marvels has a universal appeal, and people have striven over millennia to understand the laws that govern it. *Green Moon* takes place entirely on the plane, which is like a whole world subject to its own laws: of line, colour and form, as well as narrative. Complementary colours – red and green – intensify each other in the white space, with rifts through which the dark-blue dimension is glimpsed.

Steina Vasulka (b. 1940) ***Of the North*, 2001**

Video installation

LÍ 8075

Steina's gigantic video installation *Of the North* (2001) is an arresting and captivating work that touches all who see it. In the 1960s the possibility of recording sound and video in real time opened up new dimensions in the world of visual arts. Steina Vasulka and her husband Woody got to know avant-garde artists working in the new media when they were living in New York, where they ran *The Kitchen* for a time – a venue for audio and video artists that opened in 1971. That was a time of rapid technological advances in electronic culture, no less than in space science. Steina (Steinunn Bjarnadóttir Briem) and Woody Vasulka were pioneers who collaborated on a range of research regarding video art and the harnessing of electronic (and later digital) pulses. The equipment itself was also used in a dialogue whose aim was to create interesting works of art without compromising standards. Their colloquy with technology became most interesting and rewarding, benefiting from Steina's background in music and Woody's technical expertise. "Motion and time are key aspects of my art," stated Steina.

Of the North (2001) is created from Steina's archive of video recordings, mostly of Icelandic nature – either the surface of the earth, or microscopic views: microbes, as well as crashing waves and melting ice, landslips and an array of natural phenomena relating to geological formation and destruction of our planet. The work also reaches out into space, with spherical objects rotating around an imaginary axis in a hypnotic rhythm, with all the concomitant sounds. The beat and energy evoke imagery

that may lead the observer's thoughts in many directions – whether to magnificent beauty, or more down-to-earth musing on the vulnerability of nature and the impermanence of the earth.