

## INTERVIEW WITH ANNA JÓELSDÓTTIR: PAINTING INHABITING THE SPACE

BY JOVANA STOKIC

Anna Jóelsdóttir's works reflect her refusal to stay in one place. As she goes back and forth between Iceland and the United States, she also moves beyond the canvas. In her idiosyncratic approach to objects such as sticks or diaries or big three-dimensional installations, one can always trace her closeness to the logic of painting. Anna's meticulously painted sticks show her way of solving the dichotomy between hard-edge geometry and her curvilinear abstraction. Her two series of paintings titled *gaps* and *walls* speak eloquently about this ongoing dialogue within the language of abstract forms, that are always somehow related to the logic of representation.

**JS:** Your painting can be divided into groups in regard to the treatment of space. How do you see the progression from hard-edge geometric forms to the free-floating linear forms you call *chaos*?

**AJ:** I began to gradually break down the hard-edge structure and, at one point, it became the series *space/time* (illustration #35). I was still searching for a different way and kept trying out new ways of working with the hard-edge structures in an attempt to integrate it and the *chaos* differently. In the *gaps* (illustration # 4) I tried horizontal planes in space. There I was able to create a dialogue between two places, but I wanted still to find a better way and planes became *walls* (illustration # 2). They are vertical and have the same dialogue between two elements and also between chaos and control. In *chaos* I could do both: tear down or build up [forms] but always in a flux (illustration: *no way near, the dandelions are over, when the bough breaks and loosing ground*).

**JS:** It is interesting that your idea for the new body of work – three-dimensional installations – was influenced by the harsh reality of economic crisis in Iceland. Paintings that were supposed to be shipped to Iceland for a big exhibition could not be sent due to a budget cut. How do you see these new installations on mylar, beyond their practical qualities, in the context of your work?

**AJ:** This is the next step. A year ago I started to experiment with mylar. I did it in my studio, at first just following my instinct, not being really aware of where this

would take me. I made installations on my studio wall, skylight, and the window. I got more and more excited because somehow I got to do what I am always trying to do in my painting – I always want to go behind things, to take them into space. These installations fulfilled that need to be in space.

**JS:** These installations are always site-specific. How do you approach the space your paintings are going to inhabit?

**AJ:** I am learning as I go – how to prepare, how to work with the space. It is like swimming and trying to get to the other shore. It is both thrilling and scary – you have a rough idea about the space, then, when you come and see it with the artwork, it does look different. You have to readjust, but always to have a starting point, just like in a painting. I approach this problem as a painter, I try to see the space as a painting, try to imagine things in a space like they would fit into a painting.

**JS:** Your abstraction possesses a minimalist quality, but also has a more referential relationship to the visible world, or even landscape. What is the starting point of your version of painterly abstraction?

**AJ:** During 2001 and 2002, when I was in grad school, I started this dialogue between hard-edge lines and chaos. I started doing these lines that became like a two-way street, over time, the hard-edge gradually started to disintegrate and integrate with the chaos. I guess it is in my nature – and generally in human nature – to like to stay in control, somehow holding the chaos close to us. It is all process-oriented, and intuitive. I keep moving.

**JS:** It is evident that the chaos creates now forms that are very balanced. They make sense and follow the logic of form. I see several elements of your poetic are guided by internal logic you devise: from the notion of starting point, line, rhythm, balance, to the notion of color.

**AJ:** My sense of color evolved over the years. Color was much more cool and contained. In the beginning color was just a hint, it is much more present now.

I am always hunting for new colors. My shelves are filled with many colors. And this is the starting point: I look at these and I pick and choose and this is how I often start. I know when a piece is finished only after I have put it aside for awhile, and return to it later with a fresh eye.

**JS:** Your treatment of line and sound brings to mind Kandinsky's notions of sound in painting.

**AJ:** It is not related to Kandinsky, but to the fact I am hearing-impaired. I have to read people's expressions and their lips – I am filling in information that I can't get. I do a lot of guessing in everyday life. Basically, it is related to my work as a process of making meaning from fragments and my stories do the same things – surreal fleeting thoughts of something I hear and remember. This is the only way I can explain this. Today I went to see the Kandinsky show in the Guggenheim. I never thought he influenced me but I was a little shocked to feel so familiar with his late work after 1934. I had not seen it before but one could easily make a connection to my early work.

**JS:** There are several contemporary artists whose approach to abstraction can be compared to yours, for example, Matthew Ritchie or Julie Mehretu...

**AJ:** I am not necessarily influenced by artists who are doing similar things I am doing or using the same media as I. I fall in and out of love with artists, but I have never fallen out of love with Richard Tuttle. His work is open-ended and a little raw. Also, it is hard to categorize, and I always disliked categorizations. Sarah Sze is another artist I find exciting in her treatment of process and change. Kara Walker, Mary Heilmann, and Amy Sillman are also a few of many artists I am drawn to.

**JS:** Tell us about the painted books you are making.

**AJ:** My drawings remind me of the practice of keeping journals. It is very personal – I call them journals, visual writing – like written diaries. We come back to language as it is a big part of my approach to the world. It is related to my hearing impairment and how I process information but also to my relationship to two languages – I



communicate with people here and in Iceland – switching all the time.

**JS:** How do you understand the narratives you propose in the accompanying text *priest chews velvet haddock*. I don't see them as themes of your paintings.

**AJ:** My narrative text tries to parallel what I do in the paintings. They are not meant as a theme or a topic of the work. Some people say they see sound in my paintings, but I don't think sound necessarily has only to be equaled with music. In my case, I believe that sound has more to

do with my relationship to language. The narrative lies somewhere between poetry and prose. They are fragments of thoughts and partial images. I rely on the reader to "fill in" and make her own meaning, like a viewer would do with an abstract painting. So there is a parallel between my abstract painting, poetry, and hearing impairment. All use "filling in" to make meaning. Communicating back and forth daily in two languages also has a "silent" and frustrating element to it because of what is lost in translation. I am interested in memory and perception and find it fascinating how much we rely on these elements we know so little about.

*New York-based art historian and critic Jovana Stokic holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts at the New York University. Her Ph.D. dissertation, titled "The Body Beautiful: Feminine Self-Representations 1970 – 2007," analyzes the work of several women artists since the 1970s, particularly focusing on the notions of self-representation and beauty. She has been writing art criticism for several years, and has curated several thematic exhibitions in the US, Serbia, Italy, and Spain. Jovana was a fellow at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and the curator of the Kimmel Center Galleries, New York University. She has most recently written an essay for Marina Abramovic's MoMA exhibition catalogue.*