



Imagining Iceland



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ARTE 398/660/850 *Special Topics: Imagining Iceland* is a multi-level, cross-disciplinary course initiated and led by Dr. Kathleen Vaughan of Concordia University's Department of Art Education. The Iceland Field School came to be thanks to the generosity, engagement and support of our hosts at the Icelandic Textile Center and the essential assistance of Concordia International, Concordia University's Department of Art Education and the Faculty of Fine Arts. **icelandfieldschool.ca**



Catalogue design by Tina Carlisi  
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## ***Imagining an Iceland Field School***

Under the course title of “Imagining Iceland,” the Iceland Field School (IFS – [icelandfieldschool.ca](http://icelandfieldschool.ca)) offers students experiential, place-based learning with specific reference to the Iceland context and its meanings and opportunities for Canadian learners. Our aim is not simply to learn about place. Rather, we aim to learn *with* and *through* place via connection with local experts and critical and creative engagement with our own experience. ‘Place’ for the IFS is the 800-person community of Blönduós in northwest Iceland, and more specifically the Icelandic Textile Centre ([textilsetur.is](http://textilsetur.is)) which since 2005 has provided yearround residencies to artists working in textiles, material practices, historical research, performance and digital arts.

After my own transformative month at the Icelandic Textile Center in June 2016, I recognized its potential as a place for interdisciplinary art-making and learning for Concordia students, and conceived of a ‘field school’ as a hands-on, critically-engaged intensive: hence this “Special Topics” mixed level Concordia University course.

In the IFS’s first iteration, 13 Concordia students, BFA to PhD, lived and worked for the month of June 2018 at the Icelandic Textile Center. Following a curriculum that

encouraged exploration of culturally specific techniques, engagement with communities and in-depth work on projects of their own choosing, students developed and enhanced skills in textile practices via workshops in and time to practice spinning, weaving, natural dyeing and knitting. They lived an extraordinary time under 24-hour daylight, showcasing their work to Canadian-born Icelandic First Lady Eliza Reid, singing/spinning onstage at the opening to the Knitting Festival, visiting hot springs and glaciers, and cheering with hundreds of soccer fans at the community centre’s large screen presentation of Iceland’s big game during the 2018 World Cup.

Through readings, research, conversations with locals and a field trip to the Blanda Power Plant, students also built understanding of complex social challenges common to Iceland, Canada and other developed nations – challenges that are very visible in Iceland’s comparative microcosm and exceptionally progressively addressed. Migration and inclusion (of both refugees and tourists). Environmentalism (in particular, respect for wild natural spaces and sustainable generation of electrical power via hydro sources). Identity, sovereignty and post-colonialism (in 2018 Iceland celebrated a centenary of independence





from Denmark's colonization). IFS students engaged intellectually and creatively with these issues and exhibited their performances, artworks, functional textiles and videos in Iceland (June 2018) and Canada (September 2018), with this catalogue reflecting just the tip of the iceberg.

The Iceland Field School came to be thanks to the generosity, engagement and support of our hosts at the Icelandic Textile Center and the essential assistance of Concordia International, which administered the project and procured Quebec Government mobility funding that partially offset the program fee for students. Concordia University's Department of Art Education and Faculty of Fine Arts have also been staunchly encouraging. I am grateful for the collaboration of so many, and enormously moved by the willingness and energies of the adventurous, thoughtful 13 students who embarked on the first iteration of the Iceland Field School with me.

*Þakka þér fyrir,*

**Kathleen Vaughan**, MFA, PhD  
Associate Professor, Art Education, Concordia University  
Montreal, September 2018







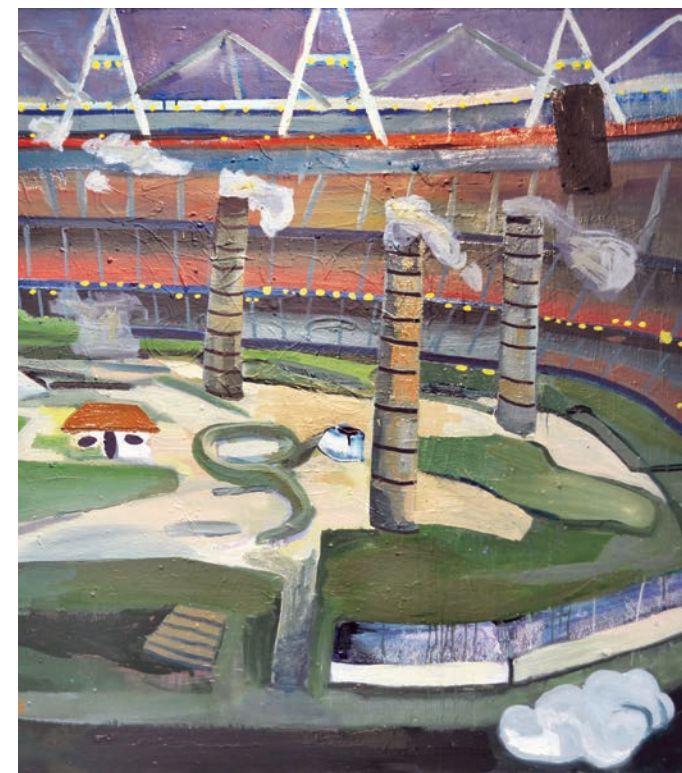
**Imagining Iceland.** This was our task as we embarked on the experience that was the first Iceland Field School, held in June 2018 in Blönduós. Mindful of our privilege and our roles as artists, learners, educators and tourists, our ‘imagining’ went beyond images culled from canonical literature, media coverage of economic upheaval or representations in popular culture. Imagining was an ongoing, critical, and placed-based reflection and subsequent strategy to arrive at what could be. Imagining Iceland was about envisioning the possibilities emerging from the personal connections, materials, techniques, heritage and surroundings specific to this given context. It was a starting point for creation, exploration, experimentation and relationship-building. This catalogue text aims to further elaborate the notion of ‘imagining’ by identifying common ground, while highlighting the specificity of each artist and their work.

The practices of both **Dave LeRue** and **Dominique Turk** speak to some of the tensions and possibilities one can associate with the imagining of place. With backgrounds in painting, these artists demonstrate both curiosity and reflexivity with regard to their learning of Icelandic fibre arts. Turk’s willingness to get lost in her creative and geographic explorations were grounded in the Icelandic notion of *betta*

*reddast*, which can be translated as *everything will be fine*. Her *Captured by Iceland*, a series of small felted landscapes documenting her travels on Iceland’s Highway 1 or Ring Road, harnesses the spirit of the postcard in connecting us with others. LeRue’s ongoing reflections on Iceland’s packaging of the sublime and its relationship to the tourist gaze speak not only to the cultural politics and spectacle of an ever-growing industry aimed at refuelling Iceland’s economy, but also to the role of the artist abroad and the ethics of international residencies. Following his extensive Iceland-based output of woven and knitted objects, LeRue’s current project is the recreation in tapestry of one of his previous painted works, which depicts the transformation of London’s Olympic Stadium into a traditional English landscape during the 2012 opening ceremonies.

The fluctuations in the landscape’s colours and the longevity of cultural traditions were driving forces for textile artist **Avy Z. Loftus**, who experimented with natural dyes and different water sources in the Textile Centre’s immediate environment. Through *My Window*, a fabric work incorporating fabric painting and the resist technique of shibori, traditional Icelandic motifs and textile traditions from Asia, is Loftus’s response to the









work of 19th century landscape painter Þórarinn Benedikt Þorláksson, an Icelander who studied abroad. In keeping with inter-cultural reflection, **Maisa Mreiwed**'s practice as a visual artist, fashion designer and researcher examines the interconnectedness of a global world. Mreiwed pays particular attention to the history of mediums and the potential of intricate details to transmit narratives of identity and culture. Such details are prominent in *Memory, Thought and Knowledge*: motifs of Icelandic plant life and other symbols surround the primary subject, the raven, which is revered in numerous Icelandic folklore. Mreiwed's use of horse hair and tog, the tough, water repellent overcoat unique to Icelandic sheep, references local economies and ways of life passed from one generation to another. **Hannah Grabowecky**'s *Collective Threads: An Icelandic Story* also combines histories — those of Iceland's textile traditions, the community of Blönduós, and of her own experience. Her quilted and embroidered tapestry includes local people, stories, and flora she encountered over a month of 24-hour daylight. These include Ingibjörg Adalrós Þórðardóttir and Sigurður Jónsson, who at the turn of the last century spun and wove the finest two-ply fabric ever made from Icelandic wool (on view at the Textile Museum in Blönduós); Grabowecky's own textile teachers; the local







trampoline; and the omnipresent lupine plant. A student in Creative Art Therapies, Grabowecy's conversations with fibre-loving Icelanders — both artists and non-artists— informed her ongoing inquiry into the therapeutic value of textile production.

Two works by **RythÅ Kesserling** also draw on textile history, and reflect her ongoing research-creation into the relationship between textiles, acoustics, and materiality. To create *Cultural Markers*, Kesserling wove cloth in the Viking-era diamond twill pattern using handspun wool she dyed with locally foraged lichen and rhubarb, integrating a pile weaving depicting a three-dimensional soundwave created from the textural outer tog fleece of the Icelandic sheep. *Weaving Memories* reflects Kesserling's practice of weaving in-situ in order to create simplified, 'slow textiles' infused with her personal, tactile experience of the landscape. This sensorial and haptic tangibility of materials and process also informs **Annick St-Arnaud**'s photo and video work. Using edibles from the Blönduós supermarket, St-Arnaud has built on an ongoing project exploring the connection between landscape, accessibility, and food. Exquisite in their simplicity and delicacy, *Fiskur|Oranges* (*Fish|Oranges*) and *Butter|ljóð* (*Butter|Poetry*) are grounded











in unexpected juxtapositions: floating, beaded oranges and pop lyrics embroidered on dried fish. Both works consider the complexities of relationship and memory, playing with subversion, preservation and the uncanny to question preconceived ideas about textile processes, labour and feminized domesticity.

**Chris Mendoza's** videos resonate both with St-Arnaud's process of documentation and Kesslering's embodied encounters. Inspired to integrate a volume of Canadian poetry in his consideration the 'national landscape,' Mendoza appears on camera literally 'speaking back' to the landscape, reading poems aloud to Icelandic places. He implicates his own body in thinking beyond landscape as sight/attraction, and draws out potential parallels between various constructions of 'home' and national identity. His video work as well as his adjacent production in watercolour, spinning, and natural dyeing critically consider the linguistic and aesthetic mechanisms at play with regard to foreign and familiar landscapes as sources for material production, and the cultural mediation of experience. **Meghan Riley** also references her mediated experience of nature via *In Element*, a hand-made sweater that tracks her contact with the outdoors in and around Blönduós











and the Westfjords. Riley came to Iceland determined to ‘make’ outside as much as possible, a goal that proved occasionally impractical. To record a change in location, she shifted materials: when knitting in plain air, she used her own variable-thickness, hand-spun wool and when knitting indoors, smoother and finer machine-milled wool from the grocery store. The variations in textures, colour and thickness can be subtle, and point to questions of convenience, the mundane, the implications of trade and export and the power and unpredictability of the elements.

**Luisa Andrade Bassetto** was inspired by the outdoors as well, which she documented by photography and then painting. She considers her delicate watercolour landscapes just a stage of representation as she works towards to a final work: an elaborated mixed media portrait of place combining embroidery, weaving and needle felting with painting – creating visual/tactile surprises for viewers, already impressed by the loving precision of her paintings on paper. **Benjamin Montague**, too, created a work on paper: their zine, *Iceland, June 2018* is the second in a series of three archiving their emotional relationship to the physical conditions of the certain space and time. Using collage, hand lettering, drawing and stitching, all scanned





and printed so that what appears textural is in fact smooth, Montague's work reflects the challenges and discomforts of 'imagining' a new and different place, and their concern that they were not appreciating nor engaging with this other culture as effectively as their peers seemed to.

Finally, *A Visual Representation of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'*, conceived and directed by **Elise Timm-Bottos**, speaks to place in another way. Her 7-minute puppetry piece was inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 19th century poem, and explores themes of solitude and the sea with reused and recycled materials. As the moon and sun circle the stage, the mariner (who needlessly harms an albatross and is subsequently cursed by Lady Death) warns that a single person's action may have wide-reaching consequences. Timm-Bottos' allegoric work considers environmental decline, humans' treatment of wildlife and the long-term future of the planet — concerns that resonate through her haunting, handcrafted puppets and seemed particular vivid in an ocean-side Icelandic setting.









Indeed, the northwestern Icelandic landscape provided a dramatic, intense backdrop to our experiences. At the same time as Blönduós' extraordinary convergence of river, sea and mountains in June's 24-hour daylight could not be ignored, we worked hard not to exoticize, romanticize, or essentialize place – or at least not much. We saw that in Blönduós, townspeople sleep through midnight sunshine, wake up the next morning, and go to work. The captivating blankets of purple that cover hillsides are lupine flowers, an invasive plant that was introduced from North America to prevent erosion and now threatens native species. The spectacularly melancholic calls of the loons co-exist with the constant hum of local industry. These juxtapositions simply scratch the surface, but allude to the openness with which we approached the landscape's multi-faceted whole self and all that we still don't know about it.

Curiosity, colour, identity, histories, tangibility, encounter and the elements: these are some of the conceptual threads that tie together the work of 13 Concordia students who lived together in a northwestern Icelandic town for the magical month of June 2018. Across our respective disciplines, generations and lived experience, the specificity of our place-based learning was made

possible through both the generosity of our teachers in sharing their skills, homes, workshops, and stories, as well as our own engagement with the local cultural, industrial and natural landscapes making up the community that we called our temporary home. The connections we made there were significant, and the potential for reciprocity that placed-based, experiential learning opportunities present should not be neglected nor underestimated. Imagining Iceland has meant imagining where, how, with what and whom we can create, teach, and learn — as well as what we can give in return. And so our imagining continues.

**Emily Keenlyside**

PhD student, Art Education and Iceland Field School participant  
Montreal, September 2018





With sincere thanks to our hosts, teachers and friends in Iceland, Jóhanna Pálmadóttir, Guðrún Bjarnadóttir, Ragnheiður Björk Þórsdóttir, Hannele Henttinen, and Deborah Gray, as well as Elsa Arnardóttir, Katharina Schneider, Elin Sigurdardóttir, Guðmundur R. Stefánsson, and Baldur Sigurðsson.

In Canada, Andy Lang and Julie Trigranne of Concordia International were instrumental to creating the Iceland Field School; Stan Charboneau of the Department of Art Education helped us with the exhibition here.



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