

“I have zero interest in white walls.”

By Brynja Sveinsdóttir

Children collect stones, shells and colourful litter on their way through the everyday. They see exciting fragments of the surroundings that they want to make part of their personal world. They start partaking in the human inclination to collect. An activity that probably reaches all the way to the beginning, when we collected food and other necessary items. But at a certain point, children grow out of it. They stop picking up a piece of the world to keep for themselves and probably stop seeing the environment as material for their own nature collection. They even start hurrying so much between places that there is no time to marvel at each nook and cranny of the area they pass every day.

Once we get older, our collection takes on a different form. We collect moments through photographs and memorabilia of events and places we've experienced. We collect things that make us happy, are interesting or challenge us in some way. The collection becomes connected to time – as an attempt to hold on to what we don't want to let go of. Or it starts becoming a part of how we form our characteristics, how we shape our identity and present it to others.

Sóley Ragnarsdóttir creates artworks that are spheres of collected items. Her work originates in a napkin collection that she inherited from her grandmother. Sóley's grandmother started collecting napkins when she worked at Hótel Saga in the 1960s, and her collection grew with each celebration, until the next generation took over. The collection testifies to a social life and family ties. For Sóley, who was born in Iceland but moved out of the country with her parents when she was still a child, the napkin collection carries an even deeper meaning. It is her source to fill in the blanks created by the distance from her relatives. The napkins indicate the celebrations she missed, the connections that didn't develop as far as they could and the conversations that didn't happen. They are also a reminder of what was – of the times she had with her grandmother, the relationships that bloomed despite the distance, memories of a time and place.

Sóley's roots are in Iceland but Denmark is her home. She studied art in Germany but found peace and meaning in her art creation in Thy, a coastal town in North-Jutland. There, Sóley collects material in her environment, on her daily walks of familiar areas. She collects shells, stones and amber from the coast of Thy, which is known for its unique nature. Amber that carries the history of the climate, woods and environment that created it, millions of years ago. Amber that the ocean carries to the coast of Thy – on currents that also bring plastics. Plastics that tell a completely different story – of production, distribution and short-term-usage of long-lasting material. Sóley uses a prehistoric invention, the carrier bag to collect her prehistoric material. Her act of collecting is a step back into the calm that allows us to sense our environment. Collecting fragments of the nature that surrounds us to invite it to become a part of our private universe

Sóley's works are a certain search for a self. Or rather a construction of a personal world. In recent years, Sóley has developed a method to create paintings from her collections. At first, their size was determined by the napkins themselves once they had been unfolded. However, for her exhibition *Queen of Hearts* Sóley has expanded them, and the large, round planes echo the characteristic windows in the gallery. The works are a patchwork, made from napkins from Thy, often decorated with motifs from the nature around the artist. Sóley arranges found items on top of the – napkins amber, shells, plastic fragments – and seals

them with epoxy. She deliberately selects this industrial material to preserve her collections. Material that also references her surroundings in Thy, epoxy being a key component in surfboards and boats in this surf town. The hard and shiny material is also a perfect contrast to the 'napkins delicate beauty. Sóley paints on top of the epoxy layer – patterns and repeated forms that often come from the napkins themselves. The painting is flat on the surface, which is alive with depth. The works then sit on wallpapered and colourful walls, which constitute yet another layer. Or, in the words of Sóley herself, she has zero interest in white walls.

Polarity resides within the works: delicacy and hardness; decoration and painting; flatness and dimensionality. Sóley's works stretch outside of the white walls of the artworld and into the domestic space – towards patience and the repetition of craft. Sóley challenges us to rethink the hierarchies we have created within arts through her works. She challenges how we understand decorations and what we regard as “art proper”. How making such as stitching, quilting and scrapbooks have been defined as something outside of art. How patterns have been created for hundreds of years and still we look past them when discussing the birth of abstract art. How creativity has been bubbling on the periphery without us recognizing it or understanding it as art. These opposing definitions co-exist within the works of Sóley. In her multilayered paintings, Sóley creates worlds where her family history and fragments of her everyday surroundings meet attempts to blur boundaries and hierarchies within creation.