

## **FOR MORE THAN A DECADE**

For more than a decade, Katrin Fridriks has been experimenting with the constitutive elements of painting—the quality of the paint, its support, as well as a range of unconventional painting techniques—in order to attain her distinct style. The unique interplay between medium, timing, and the movement of the artist’s body around a canvas positioned on the floor all contribute to the fluid and organic quality of her paintings.

Although best known for her large-scale paintings, Fridriks’ artistic practice began as the result of an early engagement with performance and land art. Both practices are also closely related to her quest for identity: born in Iceland, Fridriks spent her childhood and teenage years in Luxembourg and Germany before moving to Paris in her early 20s. The experience of cultural differences has become a generative factor within Fridriks’ artistic development, inspiring, for example, the merging of organic and constructed elements.

The most decisive step in the evolution of Fridriks’ fully-developed style (and one that also distinguishes her painting method as a performative act) is the placing of the canvas directly on the floor, requiring that she paints by physically moving around. Her most prominent forerunner in this respect is the American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. Building on his seminal technique, Fridriks has developed her own, uniquely personal practice: by transferring the movement and speed of her gestures to the paint, she manages to capture the very act of painting, thereby turning the picture itself into an event. The experience of working in real space-time for her performance art and land art pieces, along with her drive for technical perfection, have ultimately given rise to this ‘choreographical’ painting process. Yet Fridriks does not simply contemplate her own experience; she makes paintings that reproduce this shifting mode of perception for visitors to the enclosed gallery space.

The affective character Fridriks’ current, large-scale abstract paintings immediately seizes viewers’ attention. Indeed, these paintings are better described as occurrences rather than as static images. Moments of eruption, liquid matter gushing from deep within, small particles hurtling through the air, dripping all over the intense white, black, blue, red or silvery monochrome surfaces: every solid is liquefied and each layer is set in motion. At first one’s attention is drawn to these perceptual effects and to the quality of the technique employed; only after processing these initial impressions of Fridriks’ paintings does one begin to reflect on how she generates such a level of absorption among her viewers. Ultimately, this is the result of a long-term process of synthesis between her conceptual practices and her technical-chemical explorations.

## **CALLIGRAPHY**

The starting point for Fridriks’ long-term research in the medium of painting can be found in yet another cultural sphere: Japanese calligraphy. By learning this ancient technique for the drawing of a letter in a single brush stroke, Fridriks has developed a fluidity of movement and an appreciation for technical perfection.

In terms of her step-by-step method, however, Fridriks has developed, practiced, and synthesized a variety of different approaches that have freed her from many established techniques of painting. Certain elements that shaped her early works, such as the use of a paint brush, the act of making scratches in the paint or free-style underlining, have necessarily disappeared in her more advanced procedures.

After working on a series of large-scale expressive paintings based on red ground, and also her first architectural composition in the several paintings of “Redlight District” (2005), Fridriks entered a phase of technical progression, beginning with the “Monsters series” and concluding with her exhibition “Mangeurs d’étoiles” at Palais Bénédicte in Fécamp, in 2007. The latter, based on the book *The Little Prince* by French poet Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, demonstrates a privileged focus on technique and on expression through minimalist treatments—concerns that have subsequently evolved into Fridriks’ distinct modes of painting. All works in the series feature a white, 1.50 x 1.50 m canvas animated by the effect of paint being caught while moving freely over the surface, forming wild, abstract creatures or characters from the story. By comparing the calligraphic outline of the “Monsters series”, dominated by broad brush strokes, with the delicate technique of capturing speed and movement in “Mangeurs d’étoiles”, one appreciates the quintessentially transgressive direction of Fridriks’ evolution.

### **FROM DUST OF GALAXY**

The photograph of Fridriks’ first performance, “Dust of Galaxy” (2002), functions today as a self-portrait. Fridriks is shown in a fetal position amidst the innards of a large machine whose tubes and pipes resemble the internal organs of a human being. She is wearing a painted helmet featuring the first traces of her signature style, as well as a gas mask indicating the need for clean air in hostile environments. In the course of the performance she took off the helmet in order to hold it before her like a womb, an act that can be read at the same time as a symbol of Fridriks’ birth as an artist and as an allegory for the beginning of new life in general. The title “Dust of Galaxy” further relates the work to the very beginning of all life: the emergence of our solar system, the basis for our human existence. It also reminds us that we all derive from dust and gas, and consequently, of the importance of even the tiniest kernel of dust.

### **ROOTS AND NATURE, ICELAND AND ENERGY**

The island of Iceland is one of the few places on earth that still resemble these early years of our planet. Fridriks’ work often makes allusion to natural events—the eruption of a geyser, for example—from her home country. Her unique painting technique enables her to capture the sublime force of the pristine, geologically active island without depicting events or scenery as such. She rather transcends experiences in themselves by capturing the essence of occurrences. Although applied to a canvas, the paint seems to have merely come to a temporary halt before continuing to swirl and splash over the edges of the frame—and finally into the space of the beholder. Instead of capturing a moment in time, Fridriks’ technique elicits the impression of movement. On a more abstract level, this very quality evokes the origin and evolution of the universe from a singularity: this is the mode of energy conveyed by Fridriks’ paintings.

To maintain a connection with her roots, Fridriks has adhered to the principle of allowing herself to be guided by the unpredictable Icelandic landscape. The pitch-black sandstone of an extraordinary rock formation that she came upon in a hollow inspired her first land art piece, “Energy Flow” (2004). Despite its solid appearance, the stone it turned out to be a fragile but precise collocation of black basalt sand—an example of the apparent contradictions found in nature. Fridriks’ application of a strip of blue color, evoking water washing around the rock, thus represented an act of cautious interference, while serving at the same time as a reflection on the relation between nature and cultivated landscape.

The color blue is prominent throughout the works that date from this phase of Fridriks’ intensive involvement with her Icelandic heritage; she even classifies this portion of her œuvre as her ‘blue period’. The photographic series of glaciers in different shades of blue forms part of an investigation into the different states of the ‘chemical compound’ of water, another vital element for all forms of life. Iceland’s glaciers, comprised of water in its solid state, also play a crucial role in today’s climate change research,

acting as recording devices of the past.<sup>1</sup> Fridriks expresses these ecological concerns in her installations, for instance in “Water is the Petrol of Tomorrow” (2008) where she juxtaposes blue water and a bright red car. More than mere wishful thinking, water as a replacement for petrol is fast becoming a reality: over 80% of electricity in Iceland is generated in hydroelectric power stations. Moreover, Iceland is the world’s largest per capita producer of green energy. Thus Fridriks does not merely oppose nature and culture in her work: she underlines the correlating conditions.

In “Emotional Landscape,” (2005) which also marks the beginning of her ‘red period’, she draws on the contingent arrangement of hay bales, all tightly wrapped in white plastic, as the basis for her aesthetic intervention. Coming upon a landscape of white dots spread over green farmland, Fridriks was reminded of singer and songwriter Björk’s first band The Sugarcubes, which then inspired the title. The photograph shows a straight line of red hay bales created by Fridriks to draw attention to the otherwise unnoticed landscape. The color red can be interpreted as a sign in itself, even as the sign for a wound. The other shot of the scene reveals that the ability to perceive this perfect line depends entirely on the viewer’s perspective, as it shows the red hay bales to be small spots amidst an overwhelming white mass. Fridriks challenges the viewer to alter her perspective and to relate directly to these landscapes, while becoming cognizant of their development from pristine nature into agricultural land. In these large-scale land art pieces, the artists’ body performs the tasks of constructor, constantly moving around, relating to and working with the given conditions. However it is only later in Fridriks’ œuvre that she fuses the experience of her body’s movement in space with the creation of an overall perspective in her paintings.

## **THE ESSENCE OF THE OCCURRENCE**

The sublime Icelandic landscape is key influence on Fridriks’ “Perception of the Stendhal Syndrome,” (2014/2015) an installation that marks a point of culmination in her œuvre to date. Building on her previous explorations into the human perception of space-time, the exhibition intrinsically relates this process to the fundamental state of being in awe of nature and of life.

“Perception of the Stendhal Syndrome” is comprised of one of Fridriks’ large-scale white-on-black paintings from the series “Gene & Ethics” (1.80 x 2.80 m) and a custom-made, sculptural magnifying glass, measuring 1.58 m in height, which is hung from the ceiling at specified distance from the canvas. Upon approaching the glass every viewer perceives a wholly unique work, as even the slightest variation in movement generates an entirely new image. The installation thus simultaneously allows for a macro- and a micro-perspective on Fridriks’ painting, thereby revealing the breadth of her skill. It is the literally puzzling and elusive nature of this experience that lies at the heart of her interests, as each viewer is instinctively forced to come to terms with her own position, in relation to both the work and to the actual physical space.

As the title of the series suggests, “Stendhal Syndrome” indicates that Fridriks’ interest in the possibility of an overwhelming aesthetic experience though a single piece of art was already present in 2007. Her all-encompassing installation “Perception of Stendhal Syndrome” (2014/2015) goes a step further, providing the opportunity to approximate this experience as opposed to viewing a conventional self-contained image, one has the impression of watching the painting happen before her eyes. This phenomenon is essential to the engaging affect that Fridriks provides to her viewers: even before contemplating it consciously, a spectator experiences a sensuous involvement with the artwork.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor O. Targulian, Sergey V. Goryachkin: „Soil memoryTypes of record, carriers, hierarchy and diversity“ in: *Revista mexicana de ciencias geológicas* (VI International Symposium and Field Workshop on Paleopedology), Vol. 21, N<sup>o</sup>. 1, 2004, pp. 1-8.

The term “Stendhal Syndrome” is a medical diagnosis referring to the overwhelming aesthetic experience that can sometimes result from the contemplation of a work of art. It was first described by the writer Marie-Henri Beyle, known better by his pen-name Stendhal, who experienced a seizure after visiting the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence in 1817: “Absorbed in contemplating sublime beauty, I saw it close-up — I touched it, so to speak. I had reached that point of emotion where the heavenly sensations of the fine arts meet passionate feeling. As I emerged from Santa Croce, I had palpitations (what they call an attack of the nerves in Berlin); the life went out of me, and I walked in fear of falling.”<sup>2</sup> However, it was only in 1989 that this phenomenon came to be known as Stendhal Syndrome. At that time Graziella Magherini, an Italian psychiatrist from the Santa Maria Nuova hospital in Florence, named the condition after the French writer. In her practice she had treated 106 emergency cases of tourists displaying comparable symptoms; most of these had been brought to her directly from one of the city’s galleries and museums. The only way to restore her patients to their original state was to remove them from the sphere of influence of art: they needed to leave the city and to return to real life. Fridriks’ installation refers to the possibility of this type of intensive aesthetic experience being elicited by a single work of art. By providing at the same time an all-encompassing involvement (by means of the large-scale painting) and an extremely close-up view (through the magnifying glass), she induces the almost haptic experience described by Stendhal, who in contemplating a work of art “touched it, so to speak”.

Fridriks is also working on an entire series of paintings entitled “Stendhal Syndrome,” characterized by their depiction of energetic black and white trails on a white or silver ground. As in the series “Gene & Ethics,” the paintings convey an explosive energy emanating from an inner core that reaches out encompasses the viewer on both a bodily and a psychological level. The basic conception of the image, with two equivalent halves and a vertical axis running through its center, alludes to the Rorschach test, a method of psychological evaluation based on the interpretation of symmetric inkblots. The abstract patterns employ the principle upon which the Rorschach test is based: the tendency of the human brain to find familiar shapes and to attach meaning to it. A viewer discerns eyes gazing back at her, or even wild creatures within these contingent structures. However, just as in the case of the Rorschach test, this represents only the entrance into a vast world of interpretation, one ultimately determined by the imaginativeness of the viewer.

Friedericke Schafer  
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<sup>2</sup> Cited from: **Iain Bamforth, Stendhal’s Syndrome, in:** British Journal of General Practice, *December 2010*, p. 945f.