

myth and miasma

British artist Nicola Turner was a Skaftfell artist in residence in November 2022. In her artistic practice, Nicola responds to the specific sites in which she finds herself, keeping an eye out for organic waste material to use in her work. At Skaftfell, she embarked on her residency by walking the landscape and absorbing the environment around Seyðisfjörður, informing herself about the local history, farming structures, and geographical features of the place. One of the first features to capture her attention was the floating black circle in the fjord. In response to what she learned about the mysterious ring, she created the project Myth and Miasma.

The circular floating fence in the fjord has been laid over the wreck of El Grillo, a 10,000-ton British oil supply ship that was used during World War II. The floating fence is used as a preventative measure to catch oil spills emanating from the wreck. On February 10, 1944, three German planes bombed El Grillo when it was in harbor at Seyðisfjörður. One of the bombs hit the stern causing it to partially sink. The crew of 48 men escaped but the tanker had sustained considerable damage and was subsequently sunk on the orders of the British Military. There was still a large amount of oil on board. The wreck is 134 meters long and lies at a depth of about 50 meters in the middle of Seyðisfjörður, just outside the harbour. Oil pollution has been noticed from time to time ever since the ship sank. In 1952, about 4,500 tons of oil was pumped from the ship and in 2001, another 60 tons was pumped out. An estimated 10-15 tons of oil still remain. There is speculation that the landslides that hit Seyðisfjörður in December 2020 may have contributed to the problem further by triggering a tidal wave. Heavy crude oil thickens when it's cold but in warmer weather can seep slowly through small holes forming an oil slick on the surface of the ocean, which causes wildlife to die.

Matters of Trust is a charity that collects natural waste products including hair, fur, wool and fleece from individuals, salons, groomers and farmers to manufacture felted mat and boom products to soak up petrochemicals in storm drains, wells, filtration systems, rivers and oceans. Their products have been successfully used worldwide, including for the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which released over 160 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Wool counts for less than 15% of the income made from sheep in Iceland therefore, with little value, much goes to waste. Turner has been kindly donated waste wool from some Seyðisfjörður farmers to use in the sculptural installations that she has made as part of her artist residency at Skaftfell. She noticed the similarity in the construction methods she used to those of the Matters of Trust hair booms. After the exhibition at Skaftfell Nicola will donate her 'fleece booms' to the Seyðisfjarðarhöfn, the local port, with the thought that they could be used to soak up any future oil leaks from the El Grillo.

Nicola Turner is a UK-based artist. Through her practice she investigates the dissolution of boundaries, liminal states, and the continuous exchanges across ecosystems. In doing so, she explores the interconnections between life and death, human and non-human species, and the binary states of attraction and repulsion. She combines found objects that hold traces of memory, the shapes of living forms, and materials from organic 'dead' matter such as horsehair a material used previously for bedding and furniture and, in that regard, alive with history and memory. Her work resonates with the notion of abjection and, consequently, carries within it an acute awareness of death. Amid this state of confusion and unsettlement, however, an affirmation of life's forces is simultaneously allowed to arise.

Recent exhibitions include Lapses, Shatwell Farm, Bruton; Materiality, Walcot Chapel, Bath; Winter Sculpture Park 2022, Gallery No32, Old Bexley, London; DOOResidency, Amsterdam; Stone Lane Gardens Sculpture Exhibition, Dartmoor, where she was the Ashburner Prize Winner 2021; Wells Art Contemporary, Wells; and, Unprecedented, Ovada Gallery, Oxford, 2021. With a background in set and costume design Turner has over twenty years international experience. She graduated from Central St Martins School of Art & Design and has designed for The Royal Opera House, San Francisco Opera, Nashville Ballet, Scottish Ballet, Royal Shakespeare Company, National Theatre and Sydney Opera House where she was the recipient of a Green Room Award and Helpmann Award. In 2019 she completed a MA in Fine Art at Bath Spa University and was supported by the Bath Spa University Harbutt Fund to exhibit at the 14th International Conference on the Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal. She is one of the founding directors of Bath Art Depot, a group of artists proposing an arts quarter on Weston Island, who have recently been awarded a WEVAA Research and Development Bursary.

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Floating circular fence over shipwreck at Seyðisfjörður. Photo/Nicola Turner
El Grillo sinking in 1944. Photo/Harald Sigmarsson



Hair boom being used for an oil spill in Mauritius, 2020. Photo/Beata Albert

"I could feel it. That unwholesome air had thickened, coating everything with an oily heaviness. Miasma, it was called. Pollution. It rose from unpurified crimes, from deeds done against the gods, from the unsanctified spilling of blood."

Madeline Miller



Waste wool in Seyðisfjörður. Photo/Nicola Turner
Front image: Installation by Nicola Turner in Vestdalur, Seyðisfjörður, 2022.