

## Self Portrait

# Agnieszka Sosnowska: In the Land of Fire and Ice

**Colleen  
Creamer**

Iceland's otherworldly terrain, along with its crucifying weather, has been known to act as a sort of foundry for art. Upon that landscape, Agnieszka Sosnowska shoots ravishing large-format black-and-white images using her body to illustrate complex, deeply personal ideas: what it means to be a woman, a sense of striving, an exploration of grief. Put simply, photography is the language that connects her to inner truths.

**Iceland's weather may** be harsh, but its atmospheric conditions make for grand landscapes that are both "surreal and beautiful" according to Sosnowska. Those terms can also be applied to her images, although living in a breathtaking environment makes it a little more difficult to find the beauty in the commonplace.

"You can drop a camera in Iceland and still get a 'good shot.'" she says. "It's another thing to be able say something with what you see every day—your home, your backyard, your job—in such a place. I am trying to tell stories with what I see and experience daily. In my opinion, that is more challenging."

Many of Sosnowska's images combine natural elements with both animate and inanimate found items she comes across while trekking about the Nordic island nation. Iceland affords extraordinary opportunities: shots with beached whales, massive panoramas of polar white, dead geese after her husband's hunt for food; the latter is an image she particularly favors.

"That geese photograph went through a lot of evolutions," Sosnowska says. "I tried to photograph them for about three years until I arrived at that one image, which I was pretty happy with. We eat the legs and breasts, and the rest we bring to a beach to leave for foxes."

Sosnowska's artistic origin story began while attending high school in Boston. As a young punk rocker, she and some friends had access to their high school darkroom, where she had the freedom to experiment across the spectrum of the photographic process. "Now, I realize how great that was because we mixed our own chemicals. We developed our own film, and we did our own printing. I was



*Self Portrait, Arthur's Stone, Djúpivogur, Iceland, 2015*



*Self Portrait, Kleppjárnstaðir, Iceland, 2018*





*Self Portrait, Kleppjárnstaðir, Iceland, 2018*

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young when I got into college. I had never been exposed to photography as a form of art. That was intensified when I started to learn how to use a view camera.”

While studying photography for her B.F.A. at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Sosnowska began a series of self-portraits that would eventually earn her widespread recognition and a number of prestigious awards.

“When I started doing self-portraits, I wasn’t really thinking about it, and that was the beauty of it. The older self-portraits I took when I was quite young. I was playing in front of the camera and reacting to things in nature that I loved. It wasn’t so much about me back then; it was to have a sense of scale, a relationship with the environment.”

Her current environment, though beautiful, can be brutally unforgiving, as anyone who has been to Iceland knows. The classification of Iceland’s climate is officially “subarctic,” as it lies just south of the Polar Circle; its actual weather is widely known as unpredictable.

“It is peaceful here, but the one war we constantly have is the one we have with nature,” says Sosnowska, who moved in 2005 to the Land of Fire and Ice—as the country with 30 volcanoes is often referred to—and married an Icelander. “I am humbled by it and also strengthened by it. Storms that make news in the United States are nothing here:

100-mile-an-hour winds that will take a tractor trailer and flip it. Much of what I can or cannot do is totally dictated by weather.”

The couple and their four dogs live on a farm outside of Egilsstaðir on the banks of the Lagarfljót River in the eastern portion of Iceland. Sosnowska shoots to find “inclusion in a place.” It helps that she met her husband while snowmobiling on top of a glacier in her new home country. (She notes, however, that, “My husband generally will not pose for me...at least, not very often.”) Throughout her journey, she has continued doing self-portraits across discrete yet compatible series.

**Sosnowska was recently** awarded a grant for one of those series, titled *Myth of a Woman*, which will be exhibited from May 4 to September 1, 2019 at the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavík. The series is based on the well-known Icelandic folk song “Mother Mine, in the Fold, Fold.” The song—as well as the folk tale—is about the haunting of a mother by the little girl she left out in the elements as an infant to die.

It was common, says Sosnowska, that poor Icelandic women who became pregnant out of wedlock were shunned to the extent that they felt compelled to kill their own children. In particular, the song is about a farmhand who left her baby girl in the forest. Some years later, after being invited to a dance and having nothing to wear, the ghost of her daughter appears and offers her mother her own clothes, prompting the woman’s descent into madness.

“The circumstances surrounding the women doing this were many,” Sosnowska adds. “Basically, if a woman wasn’t married, there were extreme consequences to her having her child. Even when Christianity came to Iceland around 1,000 A.D., it continued. Actually, the place where this ghost story originated is not far from where I live, a fjord called Loðmundarfjörður.”

She learned about the fable after hearing a woman singing what is, in actuality, an Icelandic children’s song just about the time she arrived in Iceland. Though she found it grim, she also found beauty both in the music and the story’s innate sadness.

“At that point I didn’t know Icelandic, and it was a really hard thing. I asked her what she was singing, and she told me the story. When





*Self Portrait for Rodin, Kleppjárnstaðir, Iceland, 2012*



*Self Portrait, Beached Humpback Whale, Heraðsandur, Iceland, 2012*



In many of these images Sosnowska appears emotionally exposed. In one, she stands naked out in the Icelandic wild wrapped only in an animal skin.

I talk about this to people it sounds like a downer, but I don't mean it to be, because I think that it can be cathartic."

In working through the series there was a kind of "peeling away." Sosnowska had to put herself in a position that was not one of strength, that was not a comfortable place for a highly independent woman. In the beginning, she had to let her guard down if the outcome was to fit what she had imagined for the series. In many of these images Sosnowska appears emotionally exposed. In one, she stands naked out in the Icelandic wild wrapped only in an animal skin. In another, she is hunkered down musing over frozen water, as if studying its properties; water, of course, being a metaphor for life.

"I knew I had to be more vulnerable," Sosnowska says. "It was very hard to do, because I have often projected strength. To be vulnerable is not something that comes easily to me. This series has evolved dramatically from when it started, so I think that it is probably the

most growth I have had as an artist."

That growth is also personal, as Sosnowska was in the process of coming to terms with her own limitations as a potential mother. She had to again turn the camera on herself to continue the *Myth* series, but not exactly in the same way she had previously taken self-portraits.

"In my thinking, I connected [the series] to women's strengths here in Iceland. The strength of women in general had a huge influence on me moving here and living here," she says. "Also, in my personal life, my husband and I tried for years to have children, and we couldn't. I thought about incorporating some other elements, but then I decided to just do these as self-portraits in the same way I had been doing them."

**The *Myth* project** is by far the most challenging enterprise Sosnowska has undertaken. She usually has a visual starting point for an image or a series, but when she applied for



*Self Portrait, Kleppjárnsstaðir, Iceland, 2018*



*Self Portrait, The Figurehead, Mjóifjörður, Iceland, 2014 .jpg*



*Self Portrait, My Belt, Heradssandur, Iceland, 2011*







*Self Portrait, Redwood National Park, California, 2016*

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the grant, she knew intellectually what she would be attempting but had little idea of how the concept would play out artistically.

“I will be really honest—just as a visual person this was difficult. I can usually see something. I can see an image, or I have an artistic concept, and then I say, let’s see how I can get funding for it. My husband said, ‘You are going to get this.’ It’s been incredibly challenging because I had no idea how to begin. If I can do this, it will be something that is never going to be finished.”

By placing herself at the center of the series, she is also chronicling her own personal growth, and who can say when or if that will end. For now, she is facing herself by quite literally facing the world. “The self-portraits I am doing now as a result of this project are more real both in expression and in conveying a feeling or emotion. In the past, I would look away or focus more on creating shots from a rear profile.”

One of the most compelling images in either of the self-portrait series shows the photographer stepping out of what is called a “snorkel hot pot” (something like a hot tub) in a thin wet dress in winter. The oblique pose is similar to a sculpture by Auguste Rodin. Sosnowska had just returned from Paris where she had seen some of the French artist’s work.

Sosnowska’s work is enhanced by her

imaging format: a Graflex 4 x 5 camera mounted on a solid tripod. But to go any larger would be too heavy and unwieldy on such difficult terrain. The Graflex is built to take abuse, if necessary. “It’s tough, so if it falls, which has happened sometimes, I’m not going to freak out about it. [Also] this year in preparation for printing this project I finally invested in a really nice enlarger. Quality equipment makes a difference. My process takes a lot of time. What the view camera does is really slow you down.”

Upon receiving the funds for the *Myth* series, she considered buying a digital camera, thinking that it would afford her more freedom, not to mention more time. She was advised by friends and mentors, however, not to switch, though she “takes no issue” with digital. “Honestly, I can spend up to an hour taking a single photograph, and that’s just setting up the composition—what’s in it, what’s not in it.”

Sosnowska is printing all the images for the National Museum exhibition herself: at least 100 prints to arrive at the 60 to 80 photographs that will actually be on view. It’s an enormous undertaking, as many images will be 16 x 20 and 20 x 24. She won’t have to go far; her husband built her a darkroom in their farm’s barn. If Sosnowska has a philosophy, it’s that getting the nuts and bolts of one’s process down to a science leaves room for art. She prints exclusively on Ilford Multigrade warm-tone fiber-based paper and uses only Ilford developer. She tones in selenium to increase print longevity and to expand the tonality range.

“All I’m thinking about is getting this completed and doing a really good job. I do no manipulation in the darkroom. I don’t mess around. I have always used the same film and the same paper. I like the same chemicals. I keep things pretty limited, so then all I have to do is push myself to produce good content.”

Her process, honed over time, was likely the reason the museum’s printer passed on printing her photographs, which was the original plan. After showing him her work, he told her he couldn’t give the prints the same care that she could.

**In addition to** sculpture, Sosnowska finds inspiration in the work of American impressionist John Singer Sargent and British artist and designer Edward Burne-Jones. But paint-



*Self Portrait, Loðmundarfjörður, Iceland, 2017*



*Self Portrait, The Hayride, Hróarstunga, Iceland, 2012*





ings are used only as a reference point. "I don't want my work to be like someone else's, but if I am going to take from something else, I would rather have it be from paintings. I'm interested in artists who have done things with the human figure. I look at paintings and try to dissect what means something to me or what is interesting to me."

Becoming increasingly fluent in Icelandic, Sosnowska speaks perfect English as well as perfect Polish; she and the rest of her family were born in Poland. Her father came to the U.S. in the 1960s; she and her mother arrived in the early 1970s. After the dalliance with photography in her teens, she stumbled into photography as a career during her first year in college.

"I wasn't going to pick photography. I was majoring in illustration, actually. It wasn't until taking photography as an elective just for fun that I realized that I could tell stories with it. I thought I would tell stories with paper and pencil. I'd thought of photography more as a way of commerce. I didn't know it could be used to narrate."

Working in Iceland begs a lot of questions for Sosnowska. Given the beauty of the country, how does an artist compete with the landscape? Simple: find meaning through it by immersing oneself in it.

"My aim is to take the otherworldly landscape of Iceland and try to convey who I am in it, rather than what the landscape is. Here is my place in all of this, and this is how I have changed as a woman here."

#### **Addendum**

*You can see more of Agnieszka's images at [sosphotographs.com](http://sosphotographs.com), [artsy.net](http://artsy.net), and on her Facebook and Twitter pages. She is represented by the Panopticon Gallery ([panopticon-gallery.com](http://panopticon-gallery.com)) and Vision Neil Folberg Gallery ([visiongallery.com](http://visiongallery.com)).*



*Self Portrait, Pembroke, Massachusetts, 2017*



*Self Portrait, Our Lettuce Bed, Kleppjárnsstaðir, Iceland, 2012*



*Self Portrait, Snowball Fight, Mjóafjörður, Iceland, 2012*





*Self Portrait, Fall Harvest, Kleppjárnsstaðir, Iceland, 2014*





*Self Portrait, The Storm, Landsendi, Iceland, 2015*