



FEATURE

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OF LENS AND LORE

Majestic landscapes, undulating glaciers and a culture rooted in myths of elves and trolls are the inspiration behind **Agnieszka Sosnowska's** series, *Iceland*. She talks to Donatella Montrone about her pictures of longing and belonging.

Left: **Steinunn** with turf rolls, Iceland 2015.



Above **Arnar collecting sticks in the cod drying racks, Iceland 2015.** Opposite **Self portrait with swan, Iceland 2013.**

Agnieszka Sosnowska hadn't set out to become a photographer when she accepted a place at Massachusetts College of Art. Instead, she had planned to study illustration. 'From a young age I was always interested in the arts,' she says. 'My teachers told my parents I had a talent for drawing and painting, and when anyone would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would always say "an artist".'

As a fresher, she signed up to a course in photography that would eventually change her life. 'I was a student there during a renaissance of teaching. My professors were amazing: Abelardo Morell, Laura McPhee, Barbara Bosworth, Frank Gohlke and Nicholas Nixon. They each stand on their own in the art world. Frank introduced me to documentary photography, and Nick's passion for using an

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8x10 view camera was a huge influence in my picture making,' says Sosnowska.

'The photography department was in the old building – the original building where the school was founded. When I was there it was at least 200 years old and we had the most basic, the roughest facilities – the darkrooms were very rough. It was a time when most photojournalists had abandoned analogue for digital – and the large format camera, with its hardwood

box and heavy metal components, seemed destined for the vitrine.

Sosnowska was inspired by her photography lecturers, not least Morell, who one sunny day turned his draughty Boston classroom into a camera obscura. He blacked out all the windows and made the room light-tight, then cut a small hole in the material, creating the effect of a pinhole camera. 'The building was in the busy medical district and there was lots of traffic. When that beam of light came through the pinhole, we saw everything projected on the walls throughout the room – people walking, and cars and ambulances driving past. It was magic.'

Sosnowska started spending more time in the darkroom and less time in the art room. She learned to use a 4x5 view camera and experimented with composition, often placing herself

at the centre of the photo. 'I put myself in the picture for a couple of reasons: one is because a lot of people don't like being photographed, and I was always available. But I also put myself in the frame to try to react off something, be it a landscape or something in the composition. At first I did it to see how things would look and to illustrate scale, but in time the pictures became autobiographical.'

She'd make frequent trips to her hometown on the outskirts of Warsaw, photographing aunts and uncles, and documenting the surrounding farmland and its inhabitants. While travelling in Poland she began a series of self-portraits, she says, 'In order to better understand who I was and what I'd hoped to become'. But the more she explored rural Poland, the more she felt disconnected. 'My parents and I are first

generation in the US, and we always kept our culture alive at home with food and language and small traditions, but when I travelled back to Poland it almost didn't matter how good my Polish was – to my family, and to the people who lived there, I was the American,' she says.

'A lot of what I saw on the farms was surreal. The methods the villagers used for harvesting grass, for example, was really old world, tying it around a post and letting it dry out. I watched a woman take many kilograms of hay, put it in these bedsheets she had sewn together and sling it over her back. Then she got on a bus with it. I had never seen that before – ever.' The result of these trips back to her homeland is Sosnowska's first complete body of work, *Family* – an intimate series of longing and belonging that 'gives voice to her past'.

Sosnowska married an Icelander about 12 years ago. They moved to Egilsstaðir, a rural town in east Iceland with a population of about 3,000 where they bought a farm which features prominently in her series *Iceland*, alongside a number of images centred on the country's ever-changing landscape.

Many of the pictures in the series have an otherworldly quality, depicting an often surreal and hostile landscape shaped by undulating glaciers and rock formations. Others are self-portraits, in which Sosnowska plays out the role of a mythical character against a majestic backdrop. And some depict her husband at work on the farm, skinning reindeer or fishing.

She holds photography workshops in Reykjavik and also teaches at Brúarásskóli, a small school in the countryside with an >



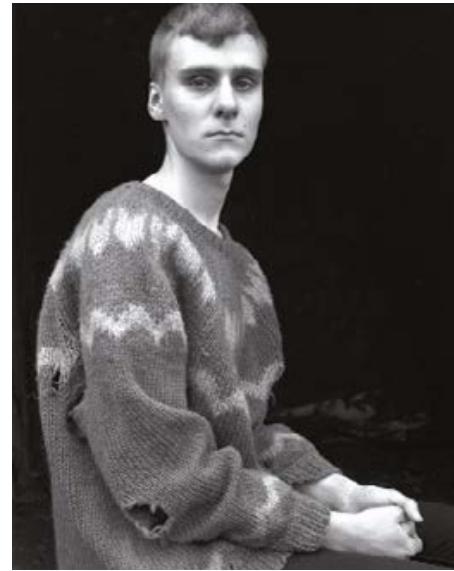


Above **My belt, self portrait, Iceland 2011.** Below **Arney's pets, Húsey, Iceland 2013.** Opposite **The haircut, self portrait, Iceland 2013.**





Opposite top *Æsa the bride*, Iceland 2013. Opposite bottom *The field trip*, Iceland 2015. Above *Rest*, self portrait, Hoge Veluwe National Park, Holland 2015.



Above left *Arnar in the borrowed sweater*, Iceland 2015. Above right *Fall harvest*, self portrait, Iceland 2014.

< intake of about 40 students ranging from preschool to year 10. 'My first year in Iceland, I stopped taking self-portraits. It was difficult getting acclimatised – the job, the language, new friends. But I kept taking pictures of the people, the farmers, my students and my husband, because I needed to exercise what I was seeing. I've since found a cultural connection in Iceland – an awakening. I have grown tremendously here.

'Icelandic culture is rooted in ancient sagas, myths of elves and trolls. Icelanders have a deep belief in hidden elves that live inside rock kingdoms. It's a core belief that begins in childhood. So it was important for me to find my own dialogue within Iceland. I wanted a connection. Learning about Icelandic myths and how intertwined they are with nature was my connection, and this is what inspires the characters I create in my self-portraits. From beneath the dark cloth of my 4x5, I can compose the edges of a story that reveals my inclusion in a place.'

Sosnowska shoots with a 4x5 Graflex view camera, which requires a tripod, sheet film, holders and a handheld light meter. 'To compose a single image can take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. It takes time and patience. I have to get to know what I am photographing. I develop everything myself in a small darkroom that my husband built. It's basically just a counter with an enlarger and ventilation. I don't have running water so I bring my prints into another room to wash them. It's a small, small space, but after experiencing the darkrooms at Mass College of Art, I can develop in a tent if I have to!'

For nearly a decade Sosnowska has been shooting portraits of her students – at field trips, in class, when they have down time. 'I guess I am interested in how the kids are changing physically. Some kids hit a certain age and it's hard to tell if they are male or female. It's really fascinating to watch them grow and develop. But I am also interested in the day-to-day stuff – their mannerisms, the

way they communicate, how they interact. Through the years I have watched them learn, grow, love and grieve, and I've realised the impact an adult can make in a child's life. It's immense. It's a privilege,' she says.

'I used to think photographs merely showed the viewer what the world looked like, but I realised very early on that a photograph is much more than that. A photograph tells a story without necessarily answering any questions' – and it is these questions that motivate Sosnowska's stories.

PROFILE

Agnieszka Sosnowska has recently won first place in Center's Director's Choice category for her series, *A Year Book*. She has also won LensCulture's Visual Storytelling Award and is the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship. To see more of her work, visit her website: sosphotographs.com.

**Ice fishing, self portrait,
Iceland 2016.**

