

Ólaf Benediktsdóttir is a multi-talented Icelandic artist. She's an accomplished young writer on the Icelandic slam poetry circuit, a visual artist with a surrealist streak, and an amateur cosmologist who remade the universe in the medium of a fibreglass puzzle.



Photo: Ólaf Benediktsdóttir via Facebook

## A Monumental Mural

Benediktsdóttir recently completed a monumental mural on the rooftop of Hotel Laki in Vík, near Kirkjubæjarklaustur. The work is odd—human beings are transformed into half-bird, half-human partiers in formal dress—and provokes a sense of strange familiarity in its off-kilter portrait of the livery of celebration.

The idea behind the mural, the Icelandic artist explains, is natural: the rich bird life at the site of the hotel inspired the Icelandic artist to recreate the species she observed at a nearby lake. She resolved upon a sampling of local birds with distinct markings—markings that could conceivably find themselves featured in red carpet couture: the golden plover, dunlin, mute swan, barnacle goose, snipe, loon, white wagtail, whimbrel.

Icelandic artist Ólaf Benediktsdóttir works in surrealism.

Photo: Ólaf Benediktsdóttir via Facebook

To accomplish that, she painstakingly designed costumes according to the plumage of each bird. She says that the idea grew organically out of her study of the universe for another project, and fossil fuels before that; she travelled the root systems of scientific inquiry to arrive at an obsession with the bodies of birds, merged with the human form.

"I put a lot of work into making the beings believable and, at the same time, making the characteristics of each bird very clear," Benediktsdóttir said.



Photo: Ólaf Benediktsdóttir via Facebook

## Mythology and Science Meet

In some small way, her characters reconcile mythology with science in eight bodies, playing out the drama of opposing accounts of the world on them. They are, she said, reflections on "mythology's intuitive way of looking at the world" and the natural sciences' "meticulous way of measuring and observing it."

Her creatures join a long line of mythological human-bird hybrids: angels, valkyries, harpies.

She decided to approach the mural from the point of view of mythology because of an elf colony near the hotel, and so the Icelandic artist's characters are partly her interpretations of the hidden people of Icelandic folklore.



Photo: Ólaf Benediktsdóttir via Facebook

In her philosophy, she described a will to understand the meeting point of reality and imagination, which is the very root of folklore, according to Joseph Campbell's literary theory.

To Campbell, "myths are the 'masks of God,' through which men everywhere have sought to relate themselves to the wonders of existence," meaning that the ineffable is a metaphor for human experience and a looking glass through which we comprehend the world, in all of its unpredictability.

Folklore grounds the work of many Icelandic artists, each informed in a unique way by their narrative lineage.

## Folklore is the Nexus of Public Life and Private Fear

In her artwork, human beings look at the world in order to reconcile internal struggles in an almost hallucinogenic way by transforming birds into human beings—or by imagining themselves to be half-avian. They want to understand something that's beyond their reach, and they transform themselves to do it.

Apart from that, their headdresses—they're in all aspects human, aside from the avian heads they've donned—seem to offer a shield from public view. Unlike primates, birds don't possess facial musculature that reveals the details of their emotional state.

They don't, in other words, smile.

Understanding, then, hinges upon verbal communication and nonverbal cues, the Icelandic artist seems to say—hands in pockets, on hips, extending a champagne glass.



Photo: Ólaf Benediktsdóttir via Facebook

## Desire to be Half Human, Half Wild

The Icelandic artist asks the question in her work: What if your feelings didn't show on your face? What might you do differently?

Her characters aren't, after all, simply making their way through the world in a state of tepid, but indecipherable, curiosity; their bodies express a range of emotional postures, from boredom to seduction.

In selecting the head (the seat of language, knowledge, creativity) as the primary avian attribute of these hybrid creatures, Benediktsdóttir brings the exhausting performativity of communal life to the fore; the partiers themselves, through a fantasy akin to folklore, have transformed into half-birds out of a desire to escape the ritualism that codifies public interactions.

Icelandic artists have long worked with themes in folklore.

Photo: Ólaf Benediktsdóttir via Facebook

In their partial transformation (that is, they don't undergo a comprehensive change in substance) though, they express a desire to participate in the world without full immersion in it. Underlying this philosophy of longing is, in a very real sense, a desire to be half human.

And a desire to be half wild, outside of the powerful social constraints that we endlessly abide.



Image: Ólaf Rún Benediktsdóttir