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| Dispatches #16 | Art & Identity In Iceland

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(<http://cablegram.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/saga-steads-kolgrafafjord.jpg>) For my final post about art in Iceland, I'll mention three exhibitions that were part of the [2010 Reykjavik arts festival](http://www.listahatid.is/en/) (<http://www.listahatid.is/en/>), in which the visual arts' focus was photography. Coincidentally, all three Icelandic artists created work that questions how a country's image based upon its history, landscape, and culture is formed or more aptly "manufactured" and communicated to natives and non-natives alike.

At the National Museum of Iceland, the exhibition [Saga-Steads](http://www.natmus.is/english/temporary-exhibitions/) (<http://www.natmus.is/english/temporary-exhibitions/>) featured landscape watercolors from 1897 by British artist/antiquarian [W. G. Collingwood](#)

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Gershom_Collingwood) paired with contemporary photographs of similar if not identical subjects by [Einar Falur Ingólfsson](#) (<http://www.efi.is/index.php?project/soegustadhir/>). Collingwood published his images in his co-authored book [A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland](#) (http://books.google.com/books?id=2qNDAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=pilgrimage+to+the+saga-steads+of+iceland&source=bl&ots=VUx4NMpQEN&sig=pe65zQsbujVh4Z3At7Dfui8CKb1&hl=en&ei=mHwKTLraHYK78ga65e3jDw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&res) offering vivid and exotic scenery for fans of Nordic sagas. Some of Einar's recent images show a landscape barely changed, but many include modern elements such as billboards and power lines. Collingwood's "stead" meant "place" or "location," but Einar's photographs illustrate the word's contemporary definition of "the place of a person or thing as occupied by a successor or substitute," effectively replacing the earlier visual tropes with less idealized but still lush depictions of Iceland's terrain.

In the exhibition [Thomsen & Thomsen](http://ljomyndasafnreykjavikur.is/english/current.htm) (<http://ljomyndasafnreykjavikur.is/english/current.htm>) at the Reykjavik Museum of Photography, black-and-white photographs by Pétur Thomsen senior (1910-88) from the museum's collection contrasted new color images by his grandson [Pétur Thomsen junior](#) (<http://www.peturthomsen.is/>) (born 1973). Whereas Thomsen senior documented industrial growth and suburban expansion in Reykjavik in the 20th century, Thomsen junior's photographs reveal the costs of "progress" such as the defilement of the landscape and natural resources. Particularly interesting were both Thomsens' images of people in their homes, with the earlier works capturing visibly uncomfortable families and couples posing in their Sunday-best and the later ones depicting more relaxed figures who nonetheless evince a Hopper-esque feeling of isolation.

As a foreigner, I can't fully understand [Unnar Örn's](http://www.unnarorn.net/) (<http://www.unnarorn.net/>) exhibition [In the Collection of Imperfection: 1939-2010](http://www.artmuseum.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-2237/3530_read-21037) (http://www.artmuseum.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-2237/3530_read-21037) at the Reykjavik Art Museum, which presented another interpretation of how a nation defines itself through collecting, representation, and promotion. But especially fascinating was the comparison of Icelandic pavilions in the 1939 World's Fair in New York and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. Despite vast changes in Iceland over the past 80 years, the themes of "modern" and "progress" prevailed in the propaganda from both eras, from the hardworking farmers of the mid-20th century to the geothermal power plants of today.

And I wondered, will there ever be a time, a country, or a government not concerned about being modern?

-N. Elizabeth Schlatter is a curator and writer living in Richmond, VA.

Image: Einar Falur Ingólfsson, "Kolgrafafjord. 29.06.2009," C-print, 30 x 38 cm

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