

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



45 / Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, visual artist, Reykjavik, Iceland

We first bumped into each other somewhere deep in the Bisti Badlands of New Mexico. There are few places in America as lonesome as Bisti. It covers parts of the Checkerboard Reservation, the New Mexico side of the Navajo Nation which dominates north-eastern Arizona, and its troll-like sandstone and rock formations are a mysterious sight to see. In the summer, Bisti is forcefully heated-to-the-extreme by the desert winds; in the winter, the same winds are freezing cold blizzards, for there is nothing that protects Bisti from the elements. To the west, on the border of New Mexico with Arizona, are the Chuska Mountains of Tony Hillerman fame. Bisti, such a desolate place, is nevertheless surprisingly close to “civilization”—if one thinks of Farmington (30 miles to the north) or Gallup (30 miles to the south) as civilized communities, which they of course are for both have a Wal-Mart Superstore... Bisti is just west of Chaco Canyon, the birthplace of Anasazi culture, with its magnificent ruins towns.

We soon discovered we both had a European background although his use of the English language was perfect—he was even mastering an American twang—and mine, no longer with much of an accent, isn't too bad either. His name was Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, “call me John,” and he was from Iceland, a country often called “the arctic desert.” Indeed, there are landscapes in Iceland very similar to the arid desert of North America. It's the temperatures that differ: camping out in Bisti in the midst of summer, as John was doing, is a brutal experience because of the overheated air; while camping out in Iceland's forlorn badlands in the midst of summer is something for which you need “only” three layers of warm clothes and an extra

sleeping bag, as my friend Gerco de Ruijter experienced, who flew his camera kite over the island. He, too, confirmed the similarities of both landscapes with their impressive formations, unique colors and weird atmospheres; these were what got him attracted to Iceland just as much as to magnificent places such as Bisti, Chaco, Death Valley, White Sands, the volcanic Valley of Fire, and Salt Lake in America.

Iceland has an unforgiving climate, as both John and Gerco confirmed. Just below the Pole Circle, it is the meeting place of fire, ice, water and eternal winds. The fierce elements create an environment with unique qualities. I learned that John's father Svein Jóhannsson Kjarval had inherited a natural formula from John's grandfather Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval (that's how they carry on family names in Iceland). It was a paint formula, for the grandfather was a painter and, as I later learned, a truly iconic artist. "I am a painter, too," said John. "Though light years from becoming iconic. My grandfather is seen as our country's most important landscape painter, at least of the first 75 years of the 20th century. After the 1970s, we enjoyed an artistic explosion; now there are scores of great contemporary and *avant garde* artists in Iceland."

John's grandfather's fame is based on his volcanic rock-shape paintings. They are uniquely rich of color and deep of harmony. "He lived from 1885 till 1972. I have known him for just a few years, and I remember watching him at work. It was he, I think, who inspired me to choose a creative profession. His style was very personal; yet what really set him far apart from his contemporary colleagues were the paints he had experimented with, which, ultimately, led to a well-tested formula he kept the secrets of." Grandpa Kjarval was a wise man, too. "Experience is an art to be studied rather than a haphazard process," is one of the statements that survives him.

John's father Svein Jóhannsson Kjarval inherited the formula. It's a fascinating story. Grandfather Kjarval made the most of the harsh climate in his country, where over the centuries super-floods were set off by natural dams of lava and ice giving way, and by volcanic eruptions under the ice cap. The floods left *tephra*, an ash as light as talcum powder, and extremely fragile soils behind. The eroded land after deforestation revealed the scorched remnants of Rowan and Bored birch trees below the slopes of Vätnejökull Glacier as well as above Hankadalur Valley. The mixture of ancient scorched earth, *tephra*, low-silicon and Andesite lava plus slowly eroded soil rich with droppings by puffins, *sknas* and other seabirds, with some thick *skyr* from Icelandic sheep milk added, formed the basis of a paint and ink of extreme strength and versatility. John said: "I can easily tell you this. No one can deduct the precise formula anyway, even if they decide to go to Iceland." Imagine the long years spent on experimentation. "My grandfather was an all-weather outdoors man. He had to be, not just to find the subjects for his paintings, but to dig up the soils as well, and not in the easiest of places to reach."

After the patriarch died, their father set up competitions between John and his brother and two sisters. They already knew of many of their grandfather's "digs," they knew several locations and could name many ingredients by name. "We went into the foothills, up the old volcanoes, into the river valleys; we collected ingredients and, once back home, began to experiment. We came nowhere close to my grandfather's solution. After three summers and days and days of our school vacations 'wasted', all four of us gave up." Luckily, when becoming 21, each of them got a copy of the family's secret formula. "I am the only artist in the family. My siblings don't care how I use the results, but each year they join me on long days of exploration followed by the careful process of mixing, adding water, draining, adding *skyr*, warming, cooling, adding water again, draining. It takes more than a couple of days. The results are all the colors the earth itself produces, deep and dramatic colors, very durable as long as we can keep the mixture smooth. No chemicals are involved. It's our heritage. We cherish it in honor of our iconic grandfather."