

## MAGMA: Contemporary Icelandic Design

by David Revere McFadden



A.

*MAGMA: molten rock spewed from volcanoes*

Today, international currents and trends in art and design move with astonishing speed around the world as a result of nomadic lifestyles and digital technology. Design studios in such distant cities as Bombay, Paris, and Chicago communicate freely, images are routinely exchanged, and new ideas presented and shared. This network of communication also extends to the furthest corners of the globe, and in unexpected places such as Iceland. Today, a renaissance of art and design is flourishing in this island nation.

Geographically, Iceland sits in the North Atlantic Ocean between Greenland, Norway, and the British Isles. And while the island's Nordic heritage is proudly embraced, it is the new (and often young) generation of designers and makers of furniture, lighting, fashion, ceramics, metalwork, and glass that is receiving international attention and critical acclaim. These creative individuals are firmly placing Iceland on the international design map.

**MAGMA: Contemporary Icelandic Design** has been organized for SOFA NEW YORK by designer Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir and the Museum of Arts & Design, working in collaboration with Icelandic designers, companies, and government agencies. **MAGMA** reflects the Museum's ongoing commitment to exploring new talent and new ideas at an international level, highlighting the intersection of art and design in our time.

A.  
*Tuesday Project*  
(Tinna Gunnarsdóttir, Sigríður, Sigurjonsdóttir, and Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir)  
Moli Stools, 2006  
birch, bronze, gold, silver, copper  
17 x 11.75 x 11.75  
photo courtesy of the designers

B.  
Rósa Björk, Katharina Moebus, and Julia Maltry  
Forest Table, 2005  
wood, cotton, thermofoil on chrome and steel  
29.5 x 29.5  
photo courtesy of the designers

C.  
Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir  
Rocking Beauty Chair,  
plywood, Makrolon, aluminum  
29 x 41.25 x 23.75  
photo courtesy of the designer

Iceland is a county of astonishing landscapes, active volcanoes, geothermal energy, dramatic snowfalls, and winter darkness. Not surprisingly the world of Icelandic nature is a powerful source of inspiration for many; the concerns for the ecology of the island and issues of sustainable design are central in the practices of many young designers and makers. Tinna Gunnarsdóttir<sup>1</sup> works directly with natural materials in her designs. Her elegant floor tiles are cut directly from raw volcanic lava that covers most of the island. Planed to smoothness, the rough material achieves a subtlety of texture and color.

Gunnarsdóttir is a member of a design collaborative known as the "Tuesday Project," formed with partners Sigríður Sigurjonsdóttir and Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir. While the collaborative works in a range of materials, natural and sustainable sources are sought out for their designs. For example, a species of native birch that grows on the island—and harvested from sustainable growths—was used for their *Moli* furniture. Due to the strong winds and harsh winter climate of Iceland, the limbs and branches of the tree resemble twisted roots with unique grain patterns. The designers embellish their spare and simple designs with gold, silver, or copper plated casts of plants and flowers native to the island; the designers see these embellishments as a way to celebrate the "delicate and fragile jewels" that grow in the rough and stony landscapes of Iceland.



B.



C.

Rósa Björk, Katharina Moebus, and Julia Maltry have joined forces to create a *Forest Table*, a commentary on food ways and culture. The design incorporates the contrast between the wild and domesticated by bringing the primeval forest into the modern dining room. The dinnerware on this table literally disappears into the wild, and the diner is forced to "hunt" for the dishes and utensils. Ceramic artist Kogga Kolbrún Björgólfsdóttir's work is also informed by a deep appreciation of the beauties of Icelandic nature. Her three vessels are of simple, almost archetypal forms, glazed to evoke memories of moss, lava, and glaciers.



D.

D.  
Helga Ósk Einarsdóttir  
Milla Collection:  
Necklace and Bracelet, 2006  
silver  
necklace 60 cm. diam  
bracelet 20 cm. diam  
photo courtesy of the artist



H.

E.  
Hulda Helgadóttir  
Be The Cat Accessories, 2005  
plastic  
17.75 x 17.75  
photo courtesy of the artist

F.  
Snaefrid Thorsteinsdóttir,  
Hildigunnur Gunarsdóttir, and  
Gudrun Benónisdóttir  
Geirfugl Penguin Candle, 2006  
cast wax  
14h  
photo courtesy of the designers

G.  
Vík Prjónsdóttir collaborative  
(Brynhildur Pálsdóttir, Egill Kalevi  
Karlsson, Guðfinna Mjöll  
Magnúsdóttir, Hrafnkell Birgisson,  
and Thuridur Rós Sigurthórsdóttir)  
The Regional Blanket, 2005  
Sustainable wool; produced by  
Vikurprjón Knitwear Company  
59 x 92.5  
photo courtesy of the designers

H.  
Katrín Ólína Pétursdóttir Young  
Grinning Ghost Snowboard  
wood, printed graphics  
59 x 11.75

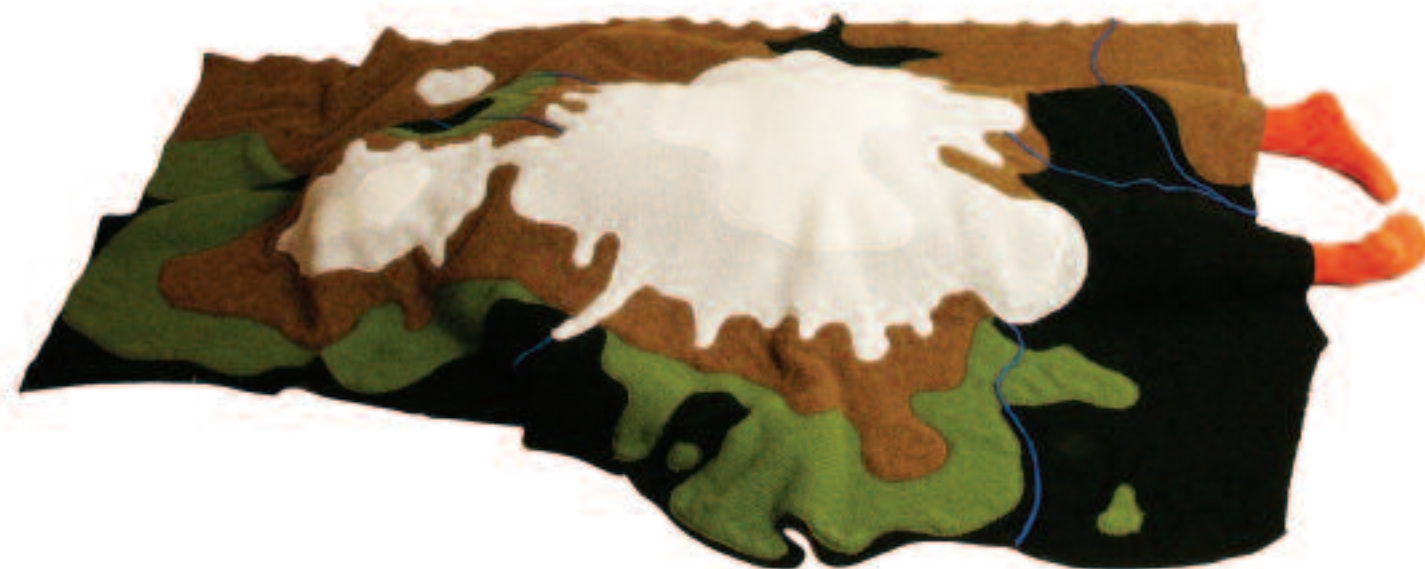


E.



F.

G.



Nature returns as a theme in Icelandic design in many ways. Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir's *Rocking Beauty* is a statement about the inner beauty of people and things, merging femininity and masculinity in form, ornament, and material. Nature and commerce are both addressed in the design: the chair is fabricated from laminated wood, Makrolon, and aluminum to create a bar code pattern that surrounds floral cutouts on the inside. The designer also uses this design to comment on the fragile ecology (wood) of Iceland, where major dams are being constructed to harness water (Makrolon) power to smelt aluminum.

Snaefrid Thorsteinsdóttir, Hildigunnur Gunarsdóttir, and Gudrun Benónisdóttir also reference ecological concerns in their *Geirfugl Bird Candle* which takes the form of a now-extinct Icelandic penguin species that was unable to fly and thus hunted into extinction. When the candle wick is lit, the bird vanishes. A note of humor is introduced in the work of Brynhildur Pálsóttir in her recipe for *How to Make an Active Volcano Cake* that features a chocolate mountain filled with raspberry filling that "erupts" when the chocolate lid is cracked open.

Vík Prjónsdóttir is a collaborative studio for Brynhildur Pálsdóttir, Egill Kalevi Karlsson, Guðfinna Mjöll Magnúsdóttir, Hrafnkell Birgisson, and Thuridur Rós Sigurthórsdóttir. The group has worked in collaboration with the Vikurprjón knitwear company. The firm is located in Vík, the southernmost village in Iceland, and is one of the oldest firms making use of the native Icelandic sheep wool. *The Regional Blanket* evokes the landscape of southern Iceland in stylized form, including a depiction of Katla, one of the most active and powerful volcanoes on the island.

Fashion designer Steinunn's wearables are inspired by the rippling forms and subtle colorations of lava flows, while Hulda Helgadóttir's fashion accessories *Be The Cat* reflect, in the designer's words, her lifelong desire "to be a cat when I cannot handle situations. I am very aware of who I am but it doesn't mean I can control myself. From lions to house cats, the animals have strong survival skills. They might be sneaky, balanced, or aggressive." These attributes are expressed in her accessories. Icelandic innovations in fashion also extend to footwear. María K. Magnúsdóttir takes on unusual materials for her shoe designs, including tanned skins of various Icelandic fish. And, Helga Osk recalls the history of Icelandic metalwork in her designs that feature highly accomplished filigree, formerly used on traditional folk costume in Iceland.

Katrín Ólína Pétursdóttir Young has created a series of limited edition graphics that are printed on snowboards and helmets, eroding the boundaries of sports, design, fashion, and art. The designs are based on the Icelandic folk character Noc, the black grinning ghost, and other characters.

The country's cultural legacy remains a proud feature of contemporary Icelandic society, reflected in the choice of materials and motifs used by these young designers, as is the unique relationships with nature that are hallmarks of the island culture. At the same, these echoes from the past are being given a distinctly 21st century tone by a group of artists and designers now entering the world arena of art, craft, and design.

Published in conjunction with the SOFA NEW YORK 2007 special exhibit MAGMA: Contemporary Icelandic Design presented by the Museum of Arts & Design, co-curated by Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir, designer and David Revere McFadden, chief curator, MAD.



This special exhibit and the SOFA NEW YORK Opening Night Gala are supported by the Trade Council of Iceland.

1 A note on Icelandic names. Unlike most Western cultures, in Iceland, family names or surnames are not used. The last name that is adopted is based on the first name of the mother or father. Thus, Tinna Gunnarsdóttir is "daughter [dóttir] of Gunnar," and Hrafnkell Birgisson is "son of Birgir." Consequently, four members of the same family might have four different family names. As a result, Icelandic telephone directories are organized by given name, rather than family name.