

This is an English translation of an article by Einar Falur Ingólfsson in the print edition of *Morgunblaðið* from 11 July 2015.

Not Real Memories

Einar Falur Ingólfsson

Photographs from the 50s and 60s in Iceland are in a new book by American artist Nina Zurier. She says the pictures are a fictional story of her as she could have been if she had grown up here.

“This started because I was wondering how it would have been to grow up in Iceland during the 50s and 60s,” says American artist Nina Zurier about the concept of her book that comes out today. *Ef ég hefði verið ... Reykjavík 1950-1970* is published by Crymogea with the cooperation of Reykjavík Photography Museum. In the book are photographs by various Icelandic photographers from this twenty-year period, which Nina has chosen; full-frame on the left side and on the right she has put blown-up details which she says are her own particular “history.”

In the book Zurier tells her autobiography as it might have been, if she had not grown up in the midwest of the United States, but instead in Reykjavík.

Nina has often visited Iceland in recent years for long and short visits along with her husband, artist John Zurier. She has studied Icelandic and considers it important to be able to read and understand it. When she was thinking about the past in this country she visited the Reykjavík Photography Museum and looked at photographs. “I had seen a poster with a photo by Mats Wibe Lund from this time, of a Volkswagen Beetle on the way over Fnjóskár bridge in Vaglaskogur and I thought that it was so familiar, that I could have been in that car at that time,” she says. “I began to search in the archive; another project took over for awhile, but when I was back in California I started searching the archive again over the internet.

“For about a year I looked through all the photos from this time, but narrowed the selection to only those about Reykjavík, with some exceptions. The quality of the images themselves was important, and many of them are exceptionally beautiful.

“At first I intended to work only with small details from the photographs, and looked for things that the photos had in common. But more and more I was impressed by the beauty of the images and realized that I could not work only with details. The project changed from my original idea of an exhibition to a book with possibly an exhibition.” The exhibition of the project will open in the fall at the Reykjavík Photography Museum.

When asked why she had chosen the small details, Nina said that sometimes something caught her attention—the composition, for example. She took as an example a photograph by Lily Guðrún Tryggvadóttir of a woman combing her hair in a summerhouse. “This is an enormously beautiful photograph,” she says. “But I thought the head, arm and the bizarre light form the most interesting part.” She points to the detail of the image. “There is a long history of cropping pictures and there are not many photographs that are shown full-frame. Many of these photographs were first seen in newspapers and were likely cropped; now I show them cropped my way,” she says and smiles.

The selection of images Nina has made is undeniably unusual and I remark that Icelanders would have chosen others.

“I think that is because I do not have real memories of that time here in Iceland,” she answers. “For that reason I am free to look at the pictures without nostalgia—although I can be nostalgic when I look at some, like this one.” She points to a photo of the exterior of a building with the word “Ford” on it. “My father had a Ford dealership in 1953. That is why I had to have this picture.” She laughs and points out how formal elements echo between the images, sometimes in architecture, in other places in nature or fashion. “I look for small things like the position of people’s hands. I am a feminist, but I do not hammer on it,” she says and grins, “but I also applied that as a filter to the selection of images, and of course I was thinking about what my experience as a girl would have had I grow up in Iceland, so women are prominent in the book.”

The first picture in the book is of a woman sitting on a chair on New Year’s Eve, taken by Lily Guðrún. “In my imagination this is my mother when I am two and half months old,” she says. “Some pictures here are more personal than others. I imagine my story in the pictures.

Lily Guðrún was a great photographer but little known. She deserves her own book...” She points out one of many works in the book by another photographer, Gunnar Rúnar Ólafsson.

“There are quite a few horse pictures in the book, and I could have done a book of all horses,” she says, explaining that, with her husband, she first came to Iceland for a riding tour on Kjólur. “Look how beautiful that is,” she says, of the picture by Gunnar Rúnar of a girl holding a white horse. “But what I find most interesting is the way the white fence lines up with the horizon. I find that breathtaking.”