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12 August, 1994

Exhibition sites:
Hafnarborg Institute of Art and Culture
Hafnarborg, Iceland

American Cultural Center
Reykjavik, Iceland

Olivia Petrides: Time and Eternity
By Bragi Asgeirsson

It is not often that we get to see charcoal drawings on exhibit in this country, and the sketches we have sometimes seen are more often than not made with pencil or chalk. The American artist Olivia Petrides has two exhibits in the Reykjavik area comprised of very large drawings, executed in charcoal and oil pastel, which is even more unusual around here.

The artist is an adjunct associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she has been working since 1985. Petrides came here on a Fulbright Grant in 1993, or more specifically on a "Fulbright-Hays Senior Scholar Research Grant." As is apparent from her drawings, the people and the land had great influence on her, especially the volcanic forms of Iceland's geology. She was captivated by the timelessness that she thought was the main characteristic of Icelandic landscapes. This idea of the eternal, evoked by Iceland, is passionately conveyed in her images.

She made one picture that reflects this strong influence, where time and eternity are the main components of the visual structure, and took it with her to the States. This image inspired many others. The major theme in all the works is similar, but diversely refined. The drawings by Olivia Petrides are dark, intense, and imposing. It is clear that she tries to invoke a spell which embraces the influences the land had upon her, and which probably includes tales of its supernatural beings, although this is not obvious in the finished artworks. Thus, the drawings are not diagrams of the external, but the expression of inner tension with diverse objective allusions and symbols, such as birds, suns and planets; and pendulums, which point to the passing of time and to infinity.

Free imagination and invented forms characterize the drawings at the American Cultural Center, whereas birds are the main theme and visual structure of the works at Hafnarborg. What most impressed me in both exhibits was the strength and simplicity of the well-structured images, where the essence is a compact and controlled expressive power.