

## **Art People: Olivia Petrides' voyages of discovery**

By Todd Savage

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The child of a big-game biologist father and a gardener mother painter Olivia Petrides began learning about nature at an early age. By the time she was 22, her family had lived in such far-flung locales as Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. Her father researched guides on plant life and taught Petrides to identify trees, observe animal tracks, and match scat to its source.

Eventually she collaborated with her father on several field guides, including Peterson's Field Guide to Western Trees, a three-year project that required photographic exactitude. She illustrated 35 types of oak leaves and 27 kinds of willows. "When you grow up in that environment, you don't know what a sparrow is," Petrides says, "but you know what a field sparrow is or what a white-crowned sparrow is. You don't experience generics. Your experience is in very concrete details."

In the summer of 1993 Petrides traveled to Iceland on a Fulbright research grant, and she spent the long days making sketches for her landscape-based abstract paintings. She'd often board a bus that followed the country's single highway and ask the driver to let her off when they reached a place she wanted to draw. "Being there was like being a researcher," Petrides says. "Other than these field guides, I'm not really a realistic painter, but I felt like I was somehow respecting the landscape if I just recorded it and then went back to my studio and did more abstract pieces." At the end of the summer she returned to Chicago with sketchbooks full of birds, flowers, and landscapes.

Petrides visited Iceland again the following summer to record images of the island's interior, which so resembles the moon that U.S. astronauts trained there for their 1969 landing. She also heard about Denmark's Faeroe Islands, an archipelago of 18 volcanic islands clustered in the North Atlantic midway between Iceland and Scotland. "They seemed so mysterious," Petrides says. "People would say, 'Well, you'll never get there.'" In his book *Last Places* writer Lawrence Millman describes the Faeroes as one of the most remote areas on the planet. "I thought, OK, that's good enough for me." Petrides spent three weeks there in the summer of 1995. "They're in the mist all the time. It's a little Brigadoon-ish. They just sort of disappear and appear."

While on the chain of islands, she met artists, including painters, a glass blower, a sculptor, and a textile artist who also designed postage stamps. She curated an exhibit of work by these artists, and the show later traveled to Seattle's Nordic Heritage Museum. It comes to Chicago this weekend. "There's something about going to a country and swallowing up their imagery," she says. "I like to give something back."

The exhibit "Islands in the Mist: Six Artists From the Faeroe Islands" opens this Friday at Artemisia, 700 N. Carpenter; an opening reception will be held from 5 to 8 PM, when painter Bardur Jakupsson, director of the Faeroese National Art Gallery, will give a talk. Call 312-226-7323 for more information. --Todd Savage

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo by Nathan Mandell.