

REYKJAVÍK

Shoplifter / Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir

Reykjavík Art Museum

“Chromo Sapiens,” a vast, immersive exhibition by Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir—better known as Shoplifter—debuted in the Icelandic national pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Like Olafur Eliasson, who also grew up in Iceland, Shop-

lifter is concerned with interactive experiences and making art meaningful to people of all ages and backgrounds. Both artists spent their formative years in the harsh landscape of their native country, with its raging waterfalls, hot

springs, caverns, caves, active volcanoes, and lush northern lights.

Shoplifter’s complex sculptures, murals, drawings, and intimate installations numinously transform the places that contain them. Her themes

vary from beauty to fashion, mythology, and more recently, the earth. A multidisciplinary artist whose work cannot be slotted into a single category, she employs color, sculpture, architecture, space, performance, sound, and design while continuing to explore unusual manipulations of her signature material—artificial hair.

In “Chromo Sapiens,” Shoplifter scaled up her technique, using synthetic hair to fabricate an astonishing, chromatically intense environment that fuses popular culture and the natural world of Iceland. The visual saturation finds its aural equivalent in an accompanying soundscape by the Icelandic cult metal band HAM. The group has been an important influence on Shoplifter since her teenage years; she cites its unique sound, which reverberates through the body’s depths. The eerie, penetrating arrangements orchestrated by HAM, its sound engineer Timothy Glasgow, and producer Skúli Sverrisson infiltrate all three cave-like rooms that make up the installation. Shoplifter set speakers at midriff height and at numerous levels overhead, so that the



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sound can be sensed everywhere. Each unit lies buried behind bountiful quantities of troll hair, adding to the startling effect.

The three distinct settings in “Chromo Sapiens” powerfully delineate the sense of a hidden world. *Primal Opus* is dark and cavernous, with infinite strands of soft synthetic hair engulfing every surface. Dimly lit with glowing blues, magentas, greens, white, and black, this illusory environment becomes all-encompassing—one is both inside and part of it. It is an alien place that nevertheless invites exploration, functioning like an underground passageway leading deeper into Shoplifter’s world.

The luminous *Astral Gloria* turns expansive, with a soaring cathedral ceiling awash in warm, radiant hues of red, yellow, orange, and green, like those of the northern lights or Iceland’s volcanic eruptions. Furry stalactite and stalagmite formations punctuate this dense textural grotto, and a bench encourages visitors to pause and delight in the enchanting psychedelic explosion.

Opium Natura, the third room, promotes a sense of calmness with its subtle,



gentle masses of hair in shimmering, delicate yellows and pinks set within various shades of white. The radiant white light suffusing the space hints at a sublime secret garden. This airy, cloud-like womb undulating with fluffy hair tufts provides a captivating zone of tranquility.

Voyaging through “Chromo Sapiens” is like “falling down the rabbit hole” in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Shoplifter invites us on a particularly

strange and complex journey, asking that we let go of the ordinary, open ourselves to the bizarrely organic, otherworldly milieu, and allow the imagination to take flight. Her environment is particularly ingenious in how it translates her attraction to the natural world and her concerns about beauty and vanity. Unlike many artists who use their work to pontificate, Shoplifter allows intensive visual experimentation and problem-solving to guide

thought into poetic and metaphoric form, resulting in an extraordinary work devoid of dogmatism. Inspired by the 2019 Biennale theme, “May You Live in Interesting Times” (the mythic Chinese curse), Shoplifter opted to focus on generating positive experiences rather than concentrating on disturbance and crisis. In this time of international calamity, perhaps more artists should return to visual invention.

—ELAINE A. KING

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:
SHOPLIFTER
Two installation views of “Chromo Sapiens,” 2020.