

LOUISA  
MATTHIASDOTTIR

PAINTINGS  
1930's - 1990's



## Exhibition Schedule

The Kendall Campus Art Gallery of Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Florida

January 5 - 26, 1996

The American University, Washington, District of Columbia

October 6-26, 1996

Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

January 12 - February 23, 1997

The New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, New York, New York

March 6 - April 19, 1997

Nordic Heritage Museum, Seattle, Washington

July 8 - August 31, 1997

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All paintings in the exhibition have been loaned through the courtesy of Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York.

The exhibition curator is Steven Harvey.

# Seeing and Painting

## *The Art of Louisa Matthiasdottir*

*"The reason I paint is because I want to paint what I see. But to paint what I see I must build from color. I don't do shapes and colors without seeing them in nature. Either it looks like a landscape or it doesn't. That's all. And also, either a form fits in the painting or it doesn't. After all a painting isn't really a still life or a landscape, it's a mere canvas. It can never be real life. It has to be a painting."*<sup>1</sup>

— Louisa Matthiasdottir

Over the last fifty years, Louisa Matthiasdottir has developed an original and eloquent voice as painter. Perhaps because she works in the traditional genres of landscape, still life and figure painting, and possibly because of her own reticence, it has been too easy to overlook the importance of her contribution. Consider her in the context of her immediate peers, post-war New York painters such as Robert De Niro, Leland Bell, Paul Georges and Paul Resika, whose loosely affiliated school of painterly figuration responded to both New York School abstraction and the European tradition embodied in Balthus, Giacometti, and Derain. Matthiasdottir stands out as a distinct and independent sensibility. From her earliest work, one can see Matthiasdottir developing her own approach to painting. In *Boy Playing*, 1937, she works like a bricklayer, troweling on color thickly to shape the simple forms of a child's figure. Always admirably succinct in her pictorial shorthand, she does exactly what is necessary to fix an image in paint, and nothing more. The character of her work is remarkably straight forward. The analogy of a mason or craftsman seems appropriate to the quiet steady application Matthiasdottir brings to her work. Among a group of artists obsessed with the philosophical problems and historical traditions of art, she is, as she remarked to Janet Hobhouse, "just a painter."

<sup>1</sup> Mark Strand, editor, foreword by Robert Hughes, *Art of the Real: Nine American Figurative Painters*, (New York, NY:Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1983), p. 169



MATTI (BOY PLAYING)  
oil on burlap  
1937  
23 x 31"



MATTHIAS EINARSSON READING  
oil on canvas  
circa 1946  
21-1/2 x 25-1/2"





Matthiasdottir lives in a brownstone, painted a fading French blue, in New York's Chelsea district. She is the widow of the figurative painter, Leland Bell. Their daughter, Temma Bell, is also a painter. Nowadays, she inhabits a world primarily populated by her daughter and granddaughters. Louisa (or Ulla, as she is called) was born in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1917. Her father was a well-known doctor who collected the paintings of local artists. He was very supportive of his daughter's aspirations to be a painter. Louisa recalls his taking time out to sit for her. In *Matthias Einarsson Reading*, circa 1946, an early painting of almost Matissean brio, her father reads at a desk. He is a blunt figure enveloped in a painterly jigsaw pattern of colorful arabesque. Already at twenty-eight she is in possession of her own style — a lucid, exuberant way of laying down color that excludes pictorial artifice in favor of creating what Jean Leymarie (quoting Cezanne in reference to Balthus) described as “a harmony parallel to nature.”

Rather than a fine art academy, she first attended a commercial art school in Copenhagen for three years, where she studied the basic mechanics of picture-making. In 1938, she accompanied her father to a conference in Paris and stayed for a year to study with Marcel Gromaire. Gromaire, she explained to Martica Sawin, “had the good sense to leave his pupils alone.” She came to America in 1941. Along with another Icelandic artist, Nina Tryggvadottir, she studied at Hans Hofmann's school. It was there that she met Leland Bell. In 1944, Ulla and Lee were married at City Hall. Their daughter, Temma, was born in 1945. She and Bell returned to Paris to live and work in 1950-51. In 1954, they acquired the brownstone building in New York that came to define the comfortable perimeter of their world.

Pursuing her stated wish to paint what she sees, Louisa paints her pets, her friends and family, and herself. She paints the cities, harbors, green hills and farm animals of Iceland. In New York she paints still-life arrangements. The view of the world described in her paintings has developed slowly, incrementally. We see her daughter, Temma, portrayed at 14, 17, 20. There are dozens of paintings of Temma. Most often she sits or reclines, reading. She has the dark eyes and strong limbs of a Courbet. The Temma paintings often dissolve in a flurry of brushstrokes around the edges, as if she could only

get her adolescent daughter fixed for a brief moment. Yet over and over we are permitted a long glance into the private world of this intense, self-possessed young woman.

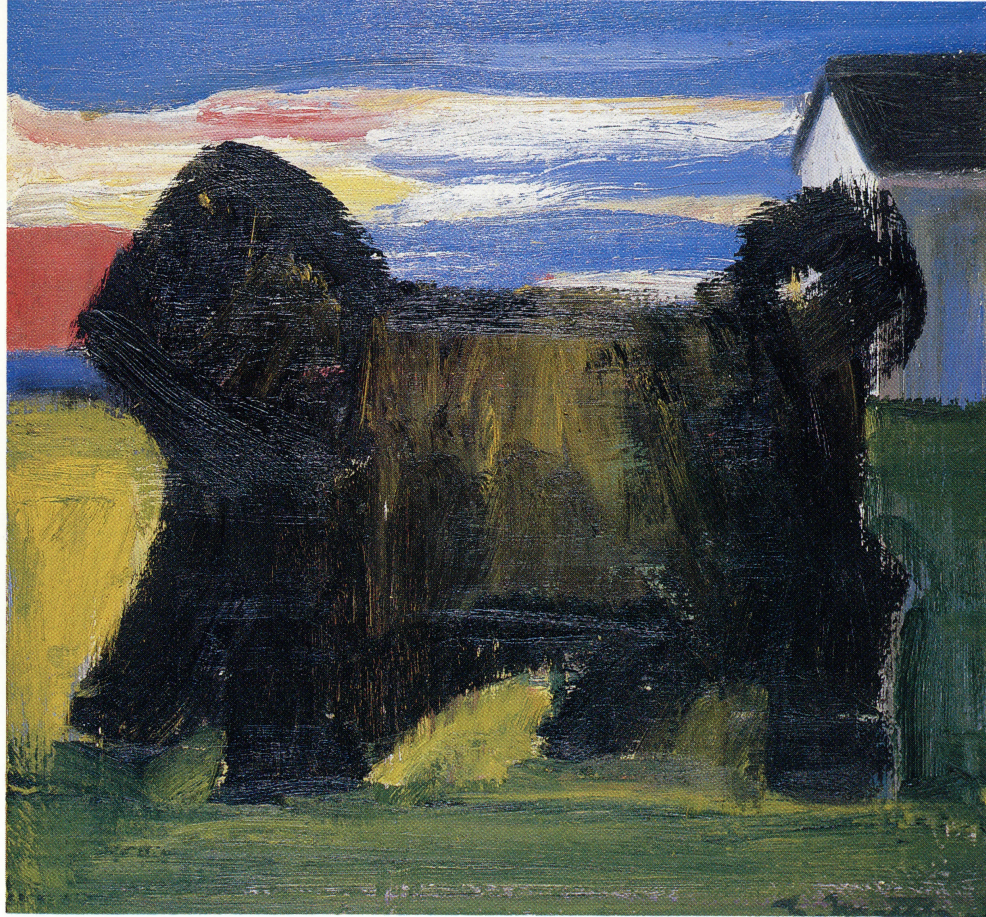
The dogs and cats in Matthiasdottir's paintings are close friends. She has the same well-observed intimacy with them that she has with family. Some of the animals from earlier paintings have passed away. “Poor Mischka,” Ulla remarks sadly, seeing her dog in an early picture. She is able to render Mischka's longhaired silhouette exactly, just as she is able to turn a sheep's simple form into an abstract building block, or to catch the leg-tucked-under posture of a cat at ease. The acuity of her pictorial shorthand is evidence of long familiar observation.

Over the last thirty years, she has painted a series of self-portraits. They can be read in progression like a kind of slow flipbook or photo album. These self-portraits possess a subtle theatricality. There is a quality of dress-up, of children's play-acting. In *Self-Portrait with Umbrella*, 1966, Matthiasdottir is a Mary Poppins-like figure standing before her portrait of Temma. Her hats and capes are like costumes. The backgrounds sometimes have the boxed-in quality of a stage set. As in Beckett, this is a drama of low-key events. She opens or closes an umbrella. Her dog joins her. She prepares the food that might easily serve as one of her still-lives. There is a consistency of stance, of mien, across the thirty years she has been painting these self-portraits. Ultimately, we will see the drama of a subtle aging process. The self-portraits have refined themselves over time. Now they are simpler. In *Self-Portrait with Green Shoes*, 1993, she stands before us with arms crossed. She gives us a slight side-long glance. The chalky blues, whites and greys of the background are a cool and unusual complement to the subdued primaries of her sweater. There is a broken harmony of greens right down the center of the picture, culminating in her emerald shoes. Louisa brings the same exactitude of values to her study of self that Morandi does to his still-lives. Her figure is as neutral as one of Morandi's vessels. They both explore the possibilities for understated richness of color, achieved with close values and low-keyed hues.

Matthiasdottir's refined and subtle theatricality is also evident in the still lifes, where her table be-



MISCHKA  
oil on panel  
10-1/2 x 10-3/4"



TEMMA  
oil on cardboard  
1962/3  
13 x 16"





comes a theater of light and color. The objects are the dramatic elements. The resultant color harmonies are the drama. These are her most exactly observed and precisely brushed works. Her earlier still lifes were laid out more traditionally, clumped together. Now the arrangements of objects have an almost Japanese formality. Kitchen implements and vegetables are presented on a cloth over a table or desk. Each object has its own distinct sense of placement. The objects are most often separated. When they do overlap, the result has a sense of dramatic pictorial intercourse. In a recent *Untitled Still Life* from 1995, several objects float on a blue cloth. Her touch is visceral and direct. We barely glimpse summary charcoal outlines along unpainted edges. The paint is fatter than in still lifes from the eighties. The objects are slightly larger than life and they have a vivid, visual presence, or *thingness*.

The jelly jar is a perfect color cylinder. Its deep violet both invites and resists us. The pepper is redder than cadmium. The point of a kitchen knife is hidden under a shiny green avocado with a cut-out slice placed off to the side. The blue cloth flows like moving water but there is a papery dryness, like parchment, to the surface. The table appears somewhat upended so that the still-life objects are tilted up and pushed forward flattening the picture space. The image is crammed with life energy. There is a vivid weave between the bursting presence of each object and the arrested liquidity of the painting.

While many of her landscape paintings originate in *plein air* sketches done during her trips to Iceland, through their various versions they ultimately become studio pictures. The result seems mediated, as if filtered through memory. In an interview with Matthias Johannessen, Matthiasdottir said, "I like painting in America... but I understand the Icelandic landscape much better. It's not that it is any more beautiful. But it's my landscape... I'm born into it." In the painting, *Ulla and Horse* (Ulla being her granddaughter), we see a girl facing a black and white horse across a blue divide. They are standing on a green hillside with blue water stretching out behind them. The red roof of a yellow house peeks out over the hill. The encounter between the girl and the horse could have a storybook quality but instead it becomes a metaphor for the activity of seeing. The communion between the girl and the horse could also be that of the painter and her motif, or the viewer's with the painting. This small,

extremely horizontal format painting has an effect that goes well beyond the sum of its parts. Each element is simply wrought and moves toward the end of accentuating the central encounter. The harmony of colors seems simple but easily delivers the fresh morning light it depicts. In her mission to seduce us into seeing with a pleasure akin to her own, Matthiasdottir gives us the peripheral vision we have in life but which is mostly denied us in more nearly square canvas formats. Our eyes are much better lenses than those of any camera: we see stereoscopically, with free-ranging flexibility and with profound depth of field. Our eyes are most delightfully engaged and enlivened in the long golden sunlight of a "beautiful" day. In comparison, cameras are framers of minimal information. It is left to painters to create equivalents to the experience of seeing, by the arrangement of color matter.

In her landscapes, Matthiasdottir is like a jazz musician improvising over familiar changes. She continually wrings new variations off her pre-established harmonies/chords. She plunks a red roof onto a pink house in the midst of a blue-green-yellow landscape. Permanent Green hills are nailed down with a slab of Cadmium Yellow sunlight. White brush-stroke clouds bump into violet-blue mountains. Matthiasdottir's landscapes are open. "One of the characteristics of Iceland that I like is the fact that there are no trees to speak of. When there are trees one doesn't really see beyond them, one can't get a sense of the horizon. In Iceland, the landscape is unobstructed, allowing one to see for great distances." Under Matthiasdottir's sun everything is visible in the sharp clarity of the Nordic light. Matthiasdottir has said, "Here in America there are days similar to those in Iceland, extremely bright days with very sharp, almost hard, light. These are, of course, the good days."<sup>2</sup> And this is the light of her paintings.

. . . .

Because of the quality of self-reliance evident in all of Matthiasdottir's production, it is difficult to find outside referents for her work. When we do find affinities we are finding coincidences rather than influences or allusions. With Diebenkorn and Matisse she shares an appetite for an encompass-

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pg. 161



FIVE SHEEP  
oil on canvas  
1990  
42 x 62"



PICNIC  
oil on canvas  
45-1/2 x 53-1/2"





ing azure structure, constructed with blue under-drawing, set up like a stained-glass window with simple curves, diagonals and verticals. The color structure of Matisse's Moroccan pictures for example, has something in common with the way Louisa paints the streets of Reykjavik — with the way she allows her rich blues and greens to bump up against each other. Underneath the imagery in her paintings is an abstract formalist picture-making sense that arranges color, spot by spot, like a Byzantine mosaic. Perhaps there are traces of Hofmann's practice evident in how the shaping and building of color matter always seems paramount in her pictures. Over time not that much has changed in her approach to picture-making. The brushwork of her earlier works was busier. In the eighties the paintings became sleeker and more solidly formed. In the last year or so, she seems to be turning back a bit to her earlier rougher facture. Dating her work seems unimportant to Matthiasdottir and so without reliance on the context of "periods" she prompts us to make our evaluations of each individual canvas based on the visual experience.

Perhaps it will be easier to comprehend the true achievement of Matthiasdottir's originality when we are able to see past the subject matter and understand her as a kind of abstract painter, or rather an orchestrator of color forms. Because there is no literary component in her art demanding our attention, it is left up to us to do the visual work. When we bring open eyes to her work, we can share her account of the pleasures of seeing, just as we can feel the rightness of her painted forms and appreciate the solid invention of her brushwork. In the end, Louisa's paintings are just like her. They don't really encourage conversation. They are reticent and comfortable and they reward our being there.

—Steven Harvey 1995

# Louisa Matthiasdottir

## Paintings 1937-1995

### Catalogue

*All works are oil on canvas unless noted*

*dates appear where available*

*sizes are stated in inches*

1. Tomatoes with Green and Yellow Squash and Black Pot 36 X 68
2. Still Life with Cabbage, 1986 37 X 52
3. Still Life with Ketchup Bottle, 1983 36 X 58
4. Blue Cloth Still Life, 1989 38 X 54
5. Still Life with Frying Pan and Red Cabbage, 1979 52 X 60
6. Untitled (Still Life), 1995 18 X 22
7. Horse in Landscape, 1990 39 X 52
8. Sheep in Blue Landscape, 1991 40 X 52
9. Elongated Horse Picture with Red House 27-1/2 X 87
10. Ulla and Horse 6 X 30-3/4
11. Five Sheep, 1990 42 X 62
12. Arnarfelln, 1989-90 54 X 180, (triptych)
13. Self-Portrait with Green Shoes, 1993 70 X 42
14. Self-Portrait, 1982 72 X 38
15. Self-Portrait with Umbrella, 1966 68 X 32
16. Self-Portrait with Eggplant 52-3/4 X 44
17. Self-Portrait, pastel on paper 19-1/2 X 25-1/2
18. Matti (Boy Playing), 1937, oil on burlap 23 X 31
19. Matthias Einarsson Reading, c. 1946 21-1/2 X 25-1/2



UNTITLED STILL LIFE  
oil on canvas  
1995  
18 x 22"



STILL LIFE WITH FRYING PAN AND RED CABBAGE  
oil on canvas  
1979  
52 x 60"





20. Temma, 1962-63, oil on cardboard 13 X 16
21. Temma, 1961, oil on cardboard 18 X 15
22. Portrait of Lee 35 X 21
23. Reykjavik Harbor, 1991 43 X 65
24. Aegrsagata, 1980 52 X 62
25. Crossing 52 X 60
26. Picnic 45-1/2 X 53-1/2
27. Bicycle Rider, oil on board 10-1/2 X 13-3/4
28. Kisa, 1978 8 X 10
29. Frank and Cats 11 X 13
30. Horse, 1978 9 X 14
31. Mischka, oil on panel 10-1/2 X 10-3/4
32. Rider - Iceland, 1976 13 X 14
33. Girl and Dog 10 X 10
34. Sheep and Lamb 14 X 17
35. Reykjavik Bus Stop Study 10 X 14
36. Study for Man in Landscape 4-1/2 X 12
37. Study for Blaze and Mischka 9 X 12
38. Study for the Crossing 10 X 11
39. Lake Landscape 10 X 10
40. Artist and Mischka, oil on panel 8-1/4 X 7
41. Two Sheep 8 X 10
42. Picnic (Iceland Landscape) 12 X 14
43. Street Scene 10 X 15
44. Horse 14 X 10
45. Study for Girl on Bicycle, oil on board 12 x 19
46. Keilir 8 x 14

## LOUISA MATTHIASDOTTIR

Louisa Matthiasdottir was born in 1917 in Reykjavik, Iceland. She studied in Denmark and with Marcel Gromaire in Paris. She came to New York City in 1943, where she studied with Hans Hofmann. She currently divides her time between studios in Reykjavik and New York City.

### *Solo Exhibitions*

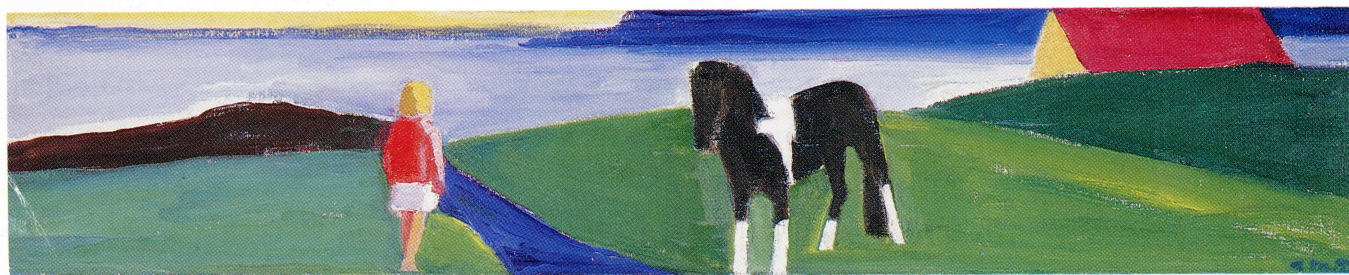
- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1948 | Jane Street Gallery, New York City   |
| 1958 | Tanager Gallery, New York City   |
| 1960 | University of Connecticut, Storrs  |
| 1964 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, New York City   |
| 1966 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1968 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1969 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1970 | Albrecht Art Museum, Saint Joseph, Missouri                                      |
|      | Framehouse Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky   |
| 1972 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
|      | Litchfield Art Center, Connecticut   |
|      | Windham College, Putney, Vermont   |
| 1974 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1976 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1978 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
|      | University of New Hampshire, Durham  |
| 1980 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1982 | Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts                    |
|      | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1983 | Gross McLeaf Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania                                 |
| 1984 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1987 | Gross McLeaf Gallery   |
|      | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
|      | Bryggens Museum, Norway  |
|      | Galleri Borg, Reykjavik, Iceland   |
| 1988 | Meredith Long and Company  |
|      | Donald Morris Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan                                      |
| 1989 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1991 | Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  |
| 1993 | The Reykjavik Municipal Art Museum, Iceland                                      |
| 1994 | Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York City                                       |
|      | "Paintings," Donald Morris Gallery, Inc.   |
|      | AHI Gallery, "Songs of the Earth: twenty-two American painters of the landscape" |

### *Selected Two-Artist and Group Exhibitions*

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1963 | Manhattanville College, Riverdale, New York (with Leland Bell)                      |
|      | "Five American Realists," Knoedler Gallery, New York City                           |
| 1964 | Indiana University, Bloomington (with Leland Bell)                                  |
| 1966 | Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri (with Leland Bell)                              |
|      | Procter Art Gallery, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (with Leland Bell) |



ULLA AND HORSE  
oil on canvas  
6 x 30-3/4"



REYKJAVIK HARBOR  
oil on canvas  
1991  
43 x 65"





- 1967 Austin Art Center, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut (with Leland Bell)  
 "Painting and Sculpture Today," John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana
- 1972 Swain School of Art, New Bedford, Massachusetts, (with Leland Bell)
- 1973 "A Family of Painters," Canton Art Institute, Ohio (with Leland and Temma Bell)  
 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
- 1974 Haustsýning F.I.M., Reykjavik
- 1975 "Painterly Representation," Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1978 "Drawing and Painting on Paper," Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri
- 1981-82 "Contemporary American Realism Since 1960," Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Oakland Museum, California
- 1982 "Perspectives on Contemporary Realism: Works on Paper from the Collection of Jalane and Richard Davidson," Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois
- 1983 "American Still Life Painting, 1945-1963," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas
- 1984 "New Vistas - Contemporary American Landscapes," Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York  
 "American Art Today: Still Life," Visual Arts Gallery, Florida International University, Miami, Florida  
 "Nine Realists Revisited, 1963-1984," Robert Schoelkopf Gallery  
 "10 Gestir Listahatidar 84," Reykjavik
- 1987 Stoppenbach and Delestre, London, England
- 1991 "Twentieth Century and Contemporary American Art," Callen McJunkin, Charleston, West Virginia
- 1992 "Color as a Subject," The Artists' Museum in association with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and Staempfli Gallery, The Police Building, New York City
- 1994-96 "Relatively Speaking," Sweet Briar College Art Gallery, Sweet Briar, Virginia; Newhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York; Rockford Museum of Art, Illinois; Rahr West Museum, Manitowock, Wisconsin; Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York (November/December 1996)
- 1994 "Transport," Maier Museum of Art at Randolph-Macon Women's College, Lynchburg, Virginia  
 "Unstill Still Life," University of Rhode Island
- 1995 "Louisa Matthiasdottir/Jane Freilicher - Paintings", Walker-Kornbluth Gallery, Inc., Fair Lawn, New Jersey

*Public Collections*

- Albrecht Art Museum, Saint Joseph, Missouri  
 Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, Austin  
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, District of Columbia  
 Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington  
 Listasafn Kopavogs, Reykjavik, Iceland  
 Reykjavik Municipal Art Museum, Iceland  
 New Jersey State Museum, Trenton  
 Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

*Corporate Collections*

- Chemical Bank, New York City  
 Chemical Bank, London, England  
 The Continental Corporation, New York City  
 Reader's Digest, Pleasantville, New York  
 H.J. Heinz & Company, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
 Mitsubishi Corporation, New York City  
 Mellon Bank, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
 Miller, Tabak & Hirsch, Inc., New York City  
 Flugleidir (Icelandair), Reykjavik, Iceland

## Afterword

A comprehensive exhibition of works by Louisa Matthiasdottir is something that we have wanted for a long time. We are extremely pleased that it is now a reality, and that it will be shared with at least four other communities. We wish to express our thanks to the artist, who continues to make these wonderful paintings; to the Scandinavian-American Foundation, whose grant adds luster to the exhibition in the form of this catalogue; to Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, for their great assistance with the assembly of these works; and, not least, to Curator/Essayist Steven Harvey, who introduced me to Ulla and realized this happy undertaking.

Robert J. Sindelir

Director

Kendall Campus Art Gallery

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front cover: SELF-PORTRAIT WITH GREEN SHOES

oil on canvas

1993

70 x 42"

back cover: SELF-PORTRAIT WITH UMBRELLA

oil on canvas

1966

68 x 32"