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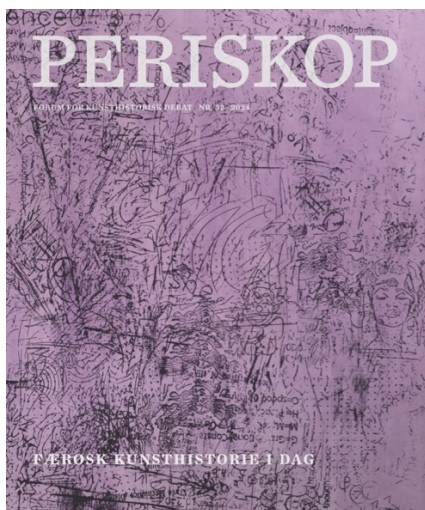
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Creating Creatures

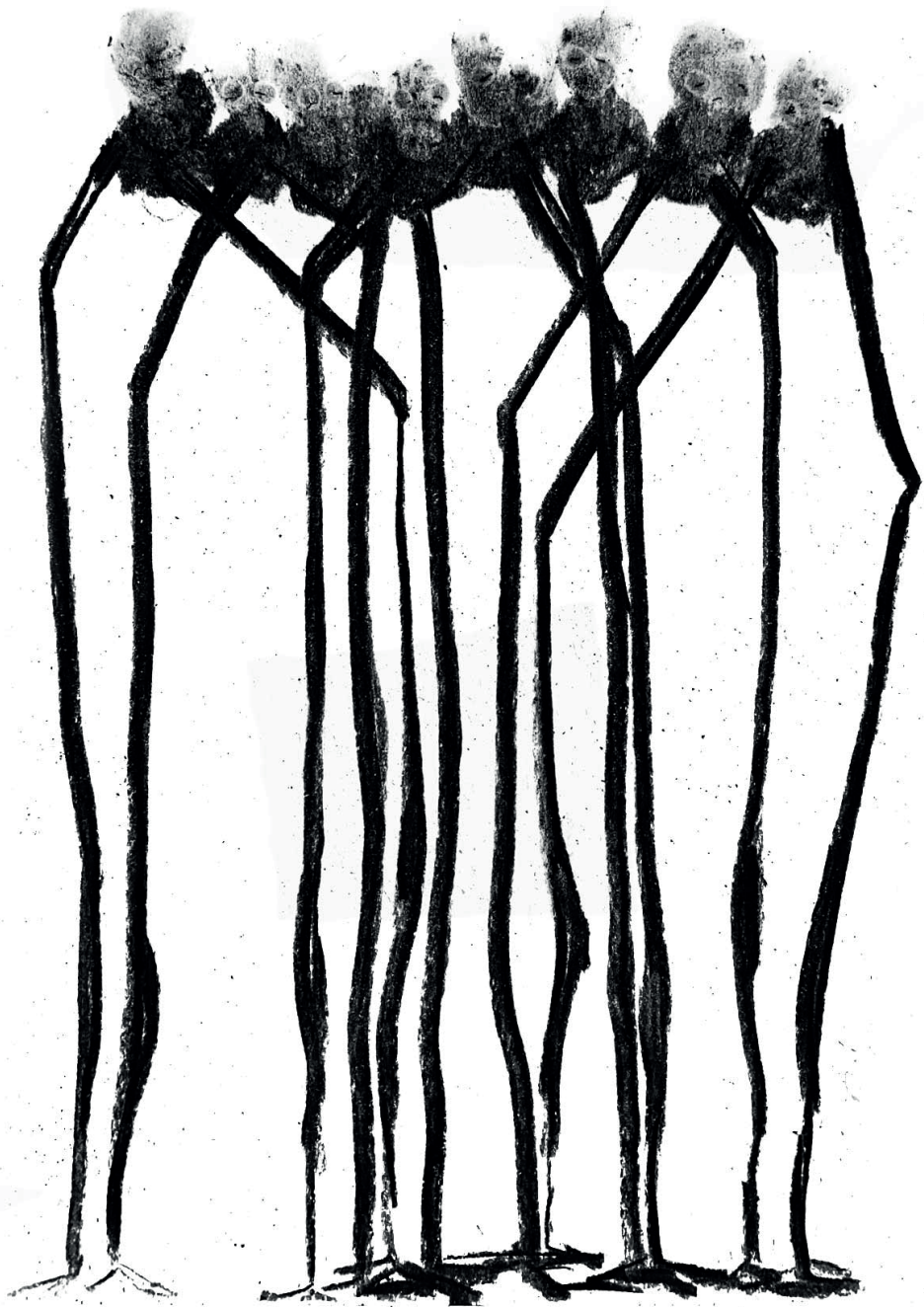
This essay is an exploration of my artistic journey and a reflection on how my upbringing as a woman of color in the Faroe Islands has profoundly influenced my creative practice. Through sharing my story and artworks, I hope to provide a platform for marginalized voices and offer readers an insight into a life that may be unfamiliar to many.

Artistic Roots

Born and raised in the Faroe Islands to a Faroese mother and Kenyan father, I began my artistic journey in childhood with the creation of creatures initially inspired by the mythical beings found in tales and folklore. As I matured, these creatures evolved, transforming into deeply personal symbols. In retrospect, I recognize that these creatures served as a means to articulate and navigate the complex emotions stemming from my upbringing as a minoritized person in the insular society of the Faroe Islands. I felt as though I was an alien creature kid, awaiting my spaceship, and my drawings became both my escape and vehicle for self-representation.

Childhood Memories and Realizations

A childhood memory that will forever be etched in my mind centers around the revelation of my father's, and by extension my own, ethnicity. This pivotal moment occurred when he accompanied me to daycare. It was then that a child, encountering my father's distinct appearance, expressed their surprise with the words, "You have a huggabugga dad." This encounter triggered my own curiosity and led to the realization of my distinct racial identity, making me acutely aware of the differences that set me apart. As a child, the world is not fully understood, and many questions arise, often seeking expression through emotional exploration.



[1] Laila Mote:
Family Portrait #2, 2022.
Charcoal on paper.
© Laila Mote.

However, as my adolescence unfolded, the intuitions and emotions I harbored as a child gave way to stark realizations. Stepping into the world on my own, devoid of protection, exposed me to a mix of racism and sexism in Tórshavn's nightlife. In response to these hardships, I began to mask my true self, as many individuals of color do, as a defense mechanism to blend in and mitigate the discrimination I encountered. Masking is a phenomenon that compels one to regulate behavior and mannerisms as a means of self-preservation. In her book on colonial traumas and antiblack racism in Europe, *Plantation Memories* (2008, 20), artist and psychologist Grada Kilomba writes about the mask as a silencing mechanism of colonial control: "The mask re-creates this project of silencing, controlling the possibility that the Black subject might one day be listened to and consequently might belong." I couldn't control my skin color, but I could control my behavior and, to some extent, aspects of my appearance. This manifested in the daily ritual of straightening my hair for a decade, a relentless effort to conform in a climate where rain and humidity was a constant enemy.

Artistic Evolution and Expression

My artistic journey is marked by experimentation with various media, including charcoal sketches, watercolors, acrylics, linocuts, digital art, animations and more. The creatures I create have also continually evolved, mirroring my own growth as an individual and artist. A noticeable trend is their gradual shift toward a more human-like appearance, which correlates with my growing comfort in my own skin.

Because I hold a great deal of respect for the media I work with, the choice of medium for each artwork shapes the anatomy of the creatures. This is why I enjoy experimenting with various media. I see it as revealing different aspects of one's personality, eliciting various feelings and emotions depending on the medium. For instance, charcoal (see for example *Family Portrait #2 [1]*) is one of the most honest and impulsive media for me. I frequently find myself switching off my mind and dedicating only a brief amount of time to each piece, employing rapid movements to enhance the charcoal texture. The process involves creating around ten quick drawings, analyzing them, and ultimately selecting one while discarding the rest.

On the other hand, digital art (see for example *Fremmandur uppruni á Litlu Dímun* and *Fremmandur uppruni á Kallinum [2-3]*) can be both impulsive and deliberate. It allows for quick and easy changes in color, shapes, compositions etc. without leaving any traces. This feature also affords the opportunity for deeper exploration and experimentation without risking the artwork, thanks to



1/20

"Fremmandur uppruni á Kallinum"

LAILA MOTE '23

[2] Laila Mote:
Fremmandur uppruni á Kallinum,
2023. Digital print. © Laila Mote.

the remarkable “Ctrl + Z” function. In contrast, my charcoal works are driven purely by emotion and intuition. As with other media, I hold immense respect for my computer as a tool for art; therefore, I prefer my digital creations to maintain a distinctly digital aesthetic, with the anatomy of the creatures taking shape accordingly.

For some, my artworks may stir up a sense of discomfort, as I often incorporate detailed skin textures, hair and other human features on my creatures (see for example *Mítt sanna andlit / Unmasked #8* and *Mítt sanna andlit / Unmasked #7* [4-5]). My thoughts behind this juxtaposition, strange alien figures with human attributes, is to challenge the viewer to perceive the creature’s humanity. This is one of the reasons I’ve always been drawn to surrealism—the ability to craft worlds that challenge reality. This contrast between the surreal and the real serves as a pathway to understanding the daily experi-



ences of myself and other minoritized groups, simultaneously aiming to offer solace to those seeking recognition, to those who can see themselves within the creatures. My hope is that this intersection prompts viewers to contemplate the complexities of identity, alienation, and belonging.

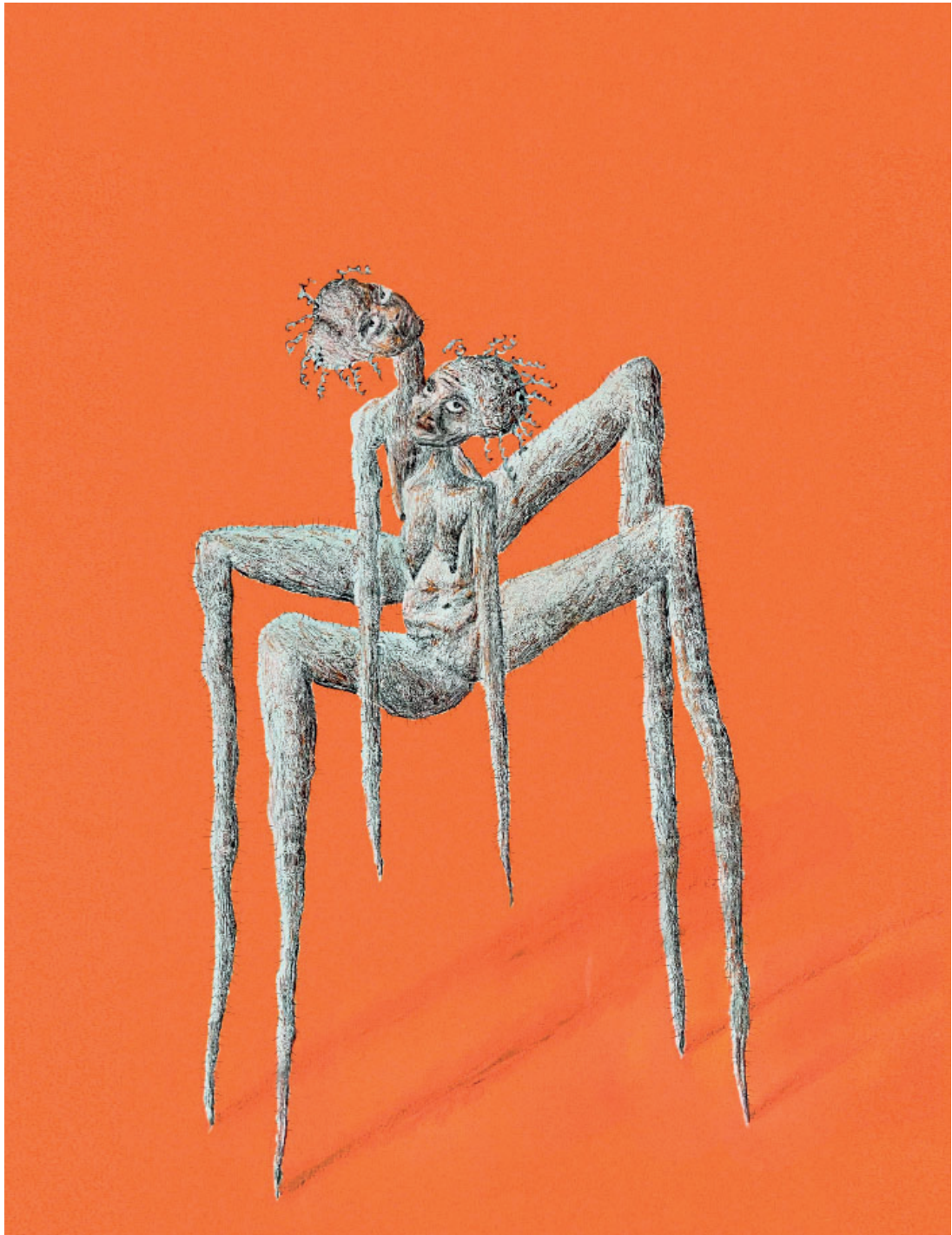
[3] Laila Mote:
Fremmandur uppruni á Litlu Dímun, 2023. Digital print.
© Laila Mote.

Art for Advocacy

As I have grown older, I have delved into the broader issues plaguing the Faroese society. The realization that racism and discrimination is deeply embedded in the structural fabric of our society has become a central focus in my work. In my younger years, my art served as an outlet for my personal emotions, and I kept it somewhat private until a few years ago. Today, my approach is more conceptual, as I actively strive to illuminate topics and emotions that resonate with me as a woman of color, aiming to provide visibility for other minorities



[4] Laila Mote: *Mitt sanna andlit / Unmasked #8*, 2023.
Acrylic, watercolor, ink, and modelling paste on acrylic paper, 50 x 70cm. © Laila Mote.



[5] Laila Mote: *Mitt sanna andlit / Unmasked #7*, 2023.
Acrylic, watercolor, ink, and modelling paste on acrylic paper, 50 x 70cm. © Laila Mote.



[6] *Samhugi við Palestina*, 2024, sticker. © Laila Mote.

brought my work to public space with a design for the organization Samhugi við Palestina [6]. My wish for my work to circulate broadly also led me to embrace digital art and art prints in 2022, recognizing their potential to democratize art and make it more accessible. By offering art prints in different scales and price points, and by incorporating Faroese landscapes into my work, I have aimed to make my art more inclusive. Striking a balance between the weirdness of the creatures and the ordinary in the landscapes, I found myself gradually drawing the interest of the general public in the Faroe Islands, with prints steadily finding their way into homes across the country. It is my hope that these pieces will encourage conversations, perhaps challenging ones, on a more regular basis.

LITERATURE

Kilomba, Grada. 2008. *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Munster: UNRAST-Verlag.

and stimulate dialogue about discrimination. This effort is both vulnerable and demanding, given the personal nature of my work. However, I leverage this vulnerability as a strategic tool, recognizing that people often require a tangible representation to fully grasp complex issues.

Simultaneously, I have explored ways to distribute a social justice message and start conversations outside of art's conventional spaces, such as exhibition and museum spaces. I believe that visual art can both respond to urgent political issues and foster greater social awareness over time. In 2024 I