

# Svava Björnsdóttir

Svava Björnsdóttir began her artistic career in the 1970s and 80s, a time of upheaval in the practice of sculpture, and immediately garnered attention for her personal sculptures made from unusual materials and her innovative approaches to the exhibition space. Her soft shapes that entered into symbiotic relationships with a space were ahead of their time. Svava found her motifs in natural phenomena or mass-produced objects and used strong colors on her surfaces.

Svava constructs her works from raw paper pulp, originally forming them with the aid of plaster casts and now with molds made of Styrofoam. Playing with the boundaries between relief, freestanding sculpture, and painting, Svava consistently interacts with her exhibition space, where her art usually comes as an unexpected experience. She deftly alludes to classical and even ancient architectural principles, as well as art historical movements such as Constructivism and Formalism. In its own unique fashion, Svava's art is an homage to both form and the formless: while form is the unifying concept in her work, it is at the time subverted by her shapeless raw material and her references to architecture and industrial design.

Through convex curves and soft lines, Svava's sculptures show their feminine side, but their strength and power is masculine in their unhesitating invasion of space. Their large scale suggests heaviness and density. We find subtle feminist humor in this deception Svava creates through texture and the color of her paper. Wall hangings that appear to be made of concrete and rusted iron evoke Modernist sculpture or a Minimalist use of material, but in truth they are hollow and as light as a feather. In her clever way, Svava reminds us that art does not need conventional masculine qualities such as immensity and weight to have a command over both space and audience.

However, *Arcus*, her recent series of reliefs, does not fully fit such a description. Here contour lines inspired by architecture and industrial design are the most prominent features, yet also present are curved and biomorphic shapes and forms resembling basalt columns, following in the stylistic footsteps of Icelandic sculptors such as Einar Jónsson and architect Guðjón Samúelsson. In recent years, Svava's use of color has played an increasing role. The Icelandic pioneer painters

whose works hung on the walls of her childhood home had a profound influence on her. Svava approaches the *Arcus* series in part as a painter would, thus creating a tension between form and surface.

In *Arcus*, the boundaries of sculpture, relief, and painting overlap: the works are none of the above, while at the same time they incorporate all three media. Front and back sides play equal roles, thus underscoring a disruption of form. The interplay between her work and the architecture of the exhibition space is integral, but the shapes and colors also refer to attributes of Icelandic architecture, which for its own part generally engages in an active dialogue with the forces of nature. The sun shines on a concrete wall; gray buildings are brightened and darkened in rhythm with the light of the sky; suddenly, a blue patch appears in the cityscape of a town by the sea.

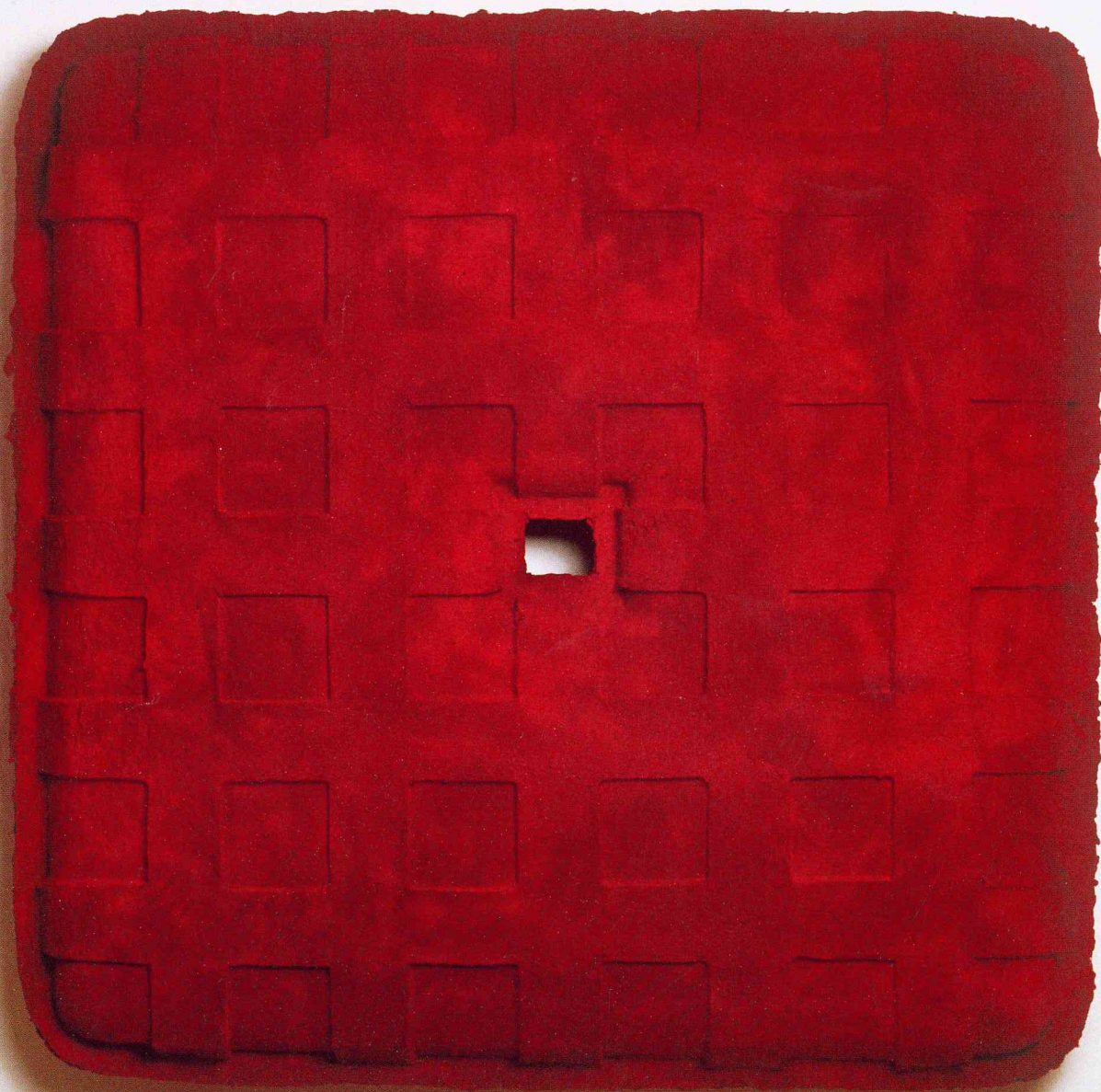
Svava's newest works are among the few in her oeuvre that are placed on the floor instead of the wall. As contradictory as it may sound, these are the works whose surfaces are given the most opportunity to function as paintings. The fertile development in Svava's art is clearly evident here. With titles referring to water and wine and shapes resembling beakers or chalices, they simultaneously have an organic quality. Recurrent themes in Svava's work are forms and convex shapes that call to mind Baroque art and decorative ornamentation; such shapes can also be found in everyday objects, like ornate table legs or long-stemmed glasses. These are the shapes that are echoed in her new sculptures that, in a seemingly effortless, powerful, and decisive way, seem to float across a room like dancers liberated from the force of gravity. Here we find the bold fearlessness in Svava's work process and presentation style that characterize her art. For the first time, she has let go in her creative process and allowed the paper, to a certain extent, fall into the shapes that this material invites. This interplay between coincidence and prior knowledge of her medium's capabilities is also reflected in her use of color, as she allows it to be absorbed into the wet paper and spread into expressive gradations. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the art of sculpture takes on the air of painting.

Ragna Sigurðardóttir

---

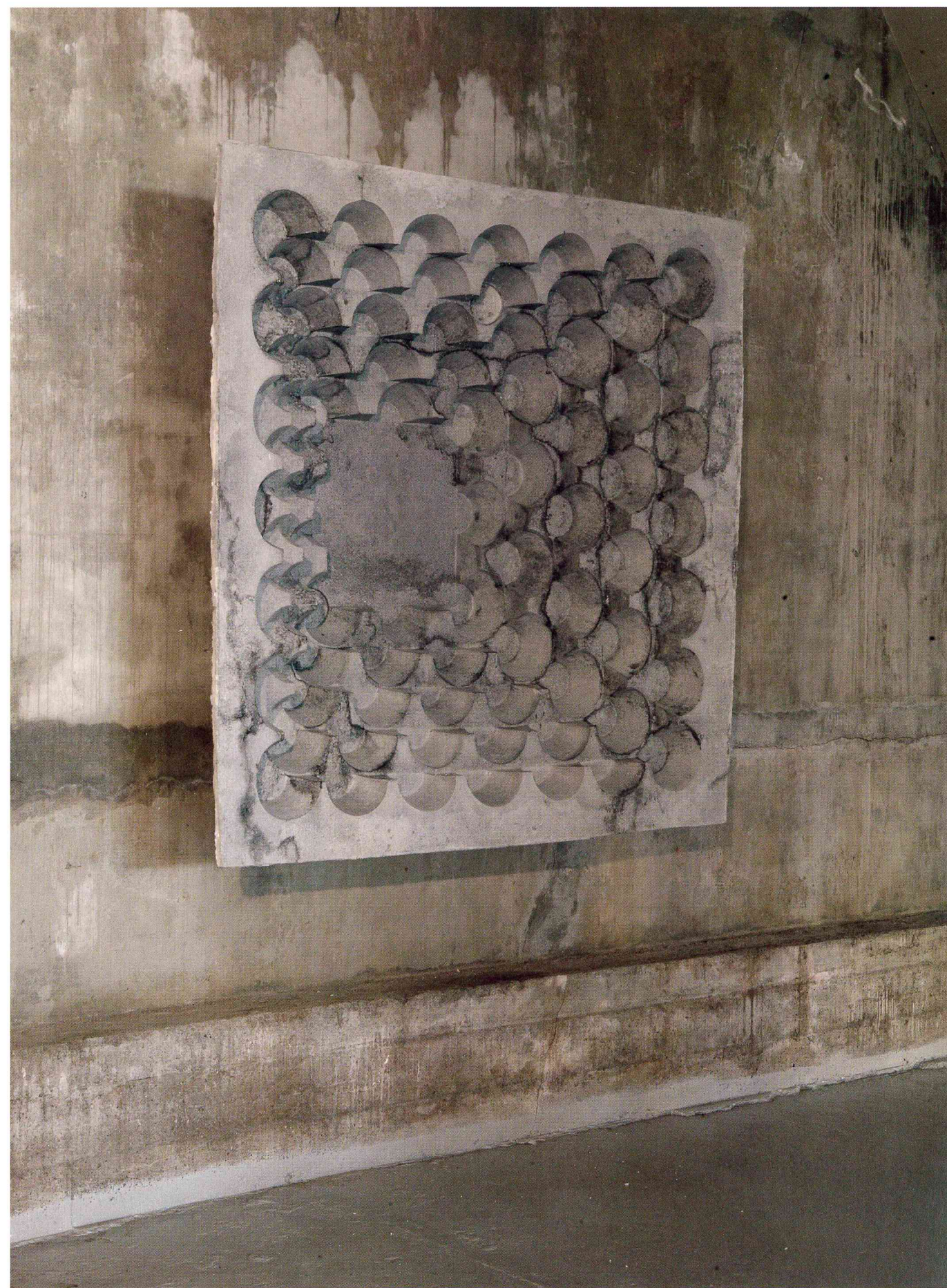
Born in Reykjavík 1952 // Studied at: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris / Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Munich // Selected solo exhibitions: 2000 *Yfirlitssýning*, National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík / 2004 *Arcus*, Akureyri Art Museum / 2008 *Sjón-deildarhringir*, Gerðarsafn, Kópavogur Art Museum, Gerðarsafn // Selected group exhibitions: 2001 *Mynd*, Sonja Henie Onstad Art Center, Høvigodden, Norway / 2007 *Kvikar myndir*, ASÍ Art Museum, Reykjavík / 2008 *Straumar*, ASÍ Art Museum Reykjavík.





Untitled  
1989  
Paper  
100 x 100 x 20 cm





(Left)  
*Arcus II*  
2004  
Paper  
170 x 170 x 50 cm

(Right)  
*Arcus V*  
2006  
Paper  
170 x 170 x 50 cm



