Jökulsá á Fjöllum (2013)

In 1999 the Icelandic government implemented the long-term ‘Master Plan for Hydro and Geothermal energy resources in Iceland’ with the aim to expand the exploitation of its natural energy resources while considering the impact on the environment these ventures may cause. Part of the agenda was a particularly large dam system that included the construction of the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Plant, which was completed in 2007 to supply energy to power an aluminium smelter owned by an American corporation.

This financially enormous enterprise earned a great deal of criticism and opposition by environmental activists and split opinions amongst Icelandic citizens, as the construction of the dams not only flooded and obliterated a vast area of wilderness in the Eastern Highlands of the country, but several years on from the completion of the project there are also claims that the ecological balance in the lower flows of the dammed rivers Jökulsá á Dal and Jökulsá í Fljótsdal have been severely disrupted.

The neighbouring Jökulsá á Fjöllum is Iceland’s second longest river; originating in the large Vatna glacier, the river runs for 206km through some of the youngest land surface on the volcanic island, passing pristine and spectacular scenery, finally flowing into the Greenland Sea in the North-East of the country. Although the river is mostly protected by national park boundaries, the current conservative government that is eager to push for increased energy production keeps reviewing plans to harvest the water power of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum.

In July 2013 I followed the Jökulsá á Fjöllum – literally translated and beautifully mundane: *Glacial River in the Highlands* – by a combination of walking and using an inflatable raft, on its journey from source to sea. Taking into account aforementioned knowledge, I was visually exploring the culturally longstanding human relationship with and attitude towards natural wilderness.

The resulting photographic visual approach refers to Romantic painting tradition and the idea of the Sublime, that appealing terror in front of untamed wilderness and the forces of nature demanding humankind’s submissiveness, awe and respect. Originating in the early 19th century, the historical context of this idea has significantly changed in our contemporary globalised world where the concept of nature and wilderness are cultural constructs delivering mainly safe and controlled enjoyment for leisure. Further, modern society has the capacity to exploit any natural resource on the planet, and although challenged by the ecocentric point of view of the conservation movement, is predominantly doing so for economic gain, applying a utilitarian approach to the environment. Consequently the use of Romantic visual language subverts its original idea and renders these photographs of the Icelandic wilderness ironic.

But the images are also melancholic because, like poetic words, my photographs are emotional and anthropomorphic reactions to the scientific and prosaic workings of geology echoing the lost Romantic ideals of the Sublime; they are the subjective view of the visual narrator of a story, the story of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum. A story that is born in the interior of a great ice cap, then gently rolls along through a bleak, black, pure and primordial landscape, lazily spreading out across vast and dusty alluvial plains; it continues as an icy and milky creature slowly descending from the highland plateau into an increasingly green and fertile environment carving its way deep into recent lava flows and basalt columns, speeding up and concentrating its sheer force into majestic and small falls alike before it approaches its end, discharging pale-beige into the blue sea.