



## *Iceland* by Hans Strand



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #100

### Commentary

Photography is now approaching 200 years of accumulated images in its history. Everything has been photographed — well, almost everything. One of the most difficult things to do in 21st Century photography is to show the world something it hasn't seen photographed before. I obviously can't be definitive in saying Hans Strand has done that, but this is a very unusual image if it's not unique.

Isn't it interesting how we react when presented with a photograph like this? I will bet that most of you first asked yourself, *What is it?* I've always thought this is a much less interesting question than, *How does this make me feel?* The first question is one that labels the work so we can define it, tuck it away in a box with its peers, discontinue further examination. The other question motivates us to probe deeper, to think, to ask questions — a much higher objective for art.

So, what is it? I suppose I should just keep that a mystery and not divulge it. That would leave you the challenge of just accepting it for the curious composition of shapes that it is. But Strand tells us what it is in his caption, so I might as well divulge it here. No, it's not a photomicrograph of some creature's skin — although it looks like it might be. No, it's not plant roots — although ditto. It's not torn paper, not a satellite image of storm clouds, not a mud flat — but that's closer. It is a frozen river delta in Iceland, which you might have guessed from the title.

But here is the important question about this image: do you *need* to know what it is to appreciate it as a work of art? Well, it depends on what you define as the role of a camera in the larger context of technology and art. For many, a camera is a truthful Xerox machine that shows us what we cannot see for ourselves — not because our vision is flawed, but because our location or time don't allow us access to see for ourselves. Cameras/photographs can transport us across those barriers to see through the eyes of the photographer. All well and good. But that is only one use of a camera; when it comes to artmaking, perhaps the least important use of a camera.

Sure, Strand shows us a frozen river delta, but I would propose that is the least important aspect of his image. He shows us the patterns of life and movement; he shows us a perspective we don't often see — from high above the landscape; he shows us something that looks very *organic* — but that is in reality just dirt and water. Maybe not consciously (but then again maybe *definitely* consciously) he challenges us to reinterpret our point of view about just dirt and water to think of it as something closer to life than we might ordinarily think. That, of course, is one of the great virtues of art — its ability to propose questions that we might not think to ask ourselves without the benefit of the artistic nudge.