

Katrin Sigurdardóttir

by Shane McAdams

Greenberg Van Doren, June 18 – August 21, 2009

Eleven Rivington, May 29 – July 3, 2009

For a country of just over 300,000 people, Iceland does a pretty efficient job of disseminating its culture abroad; we've all spotted the "dottirs" and "ssons" sprinkled around the art world. Though this cultural exportation is usually accomplished figuratively (as in, "the smiles of Icelanders warm the icy hearts of New Yorkers"), when I first saw Katrín Sigurdardóttir's work several years ago, the act flirted with the literal as she presented a series of topographical dioramas placed inside dresser drawers. Sigurdardóttir introduced the art world to her homeland as a strange hybrid of personal and natural geography, offering a few recreated acres at a time. Matter-of-fact models, perhaps, but through her act of parceling and nesting, would-be maps turned into memories, and representations of the earth became abstract diaries. In a two-part, two-venue show at Greenberg Van Doren and Eleven Rivington, Sigurdardóttir resumes this ambivalent relationship to the way individuals navigate and process space.

The notion of a "landscape" in Western art changed dramatically after the earth was mapped in its entirety in the late 19th century. And it's been turned inside out ever since the first mapping from space in 1957. Hudson Valley vistas by someone like Asher B. Durand represent a once-monolithic worldview that has since evolved into fragmented notions of perception and space. Sigurdardóttir's sculpture is emblematic of this unorthodox present, where "landscape" isn't merely a privileged view of a mountain range, but rather a multi-sensory exchange between an individual and a site or object, where the object's identity runs through culture, time, history and memory.



Katrin Sigurdardóttir, "Untitled," 2009, resin; 8 × 15 × 9 3/4 inches
(20 × 38 × 25 cm), cGreenberg Van Doren Gallery.

The four dioramas presented at Greenberg Van Doren fall into the earth-in-drawers mode of her earlier show, and deal with the contingency of spatial interaction head-on. Each of the four works resembles ready-to-transport landscapes in miniature to one degree or another, where the viewer's perspective can go from looking-glass intimate to a tropospheric remove with a back

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step or a knee bend. “Megastructure,” the centerpiece of the Greenberg Van Doren show, features a six-tier stack of mini-landscapes supported by four somewhat irregular, umber-colored columns. Imagine a baker’s rack crossbred with a model-train-landscape. According to the release, the work is referencing certain utopian housing projects of the 1960’s, but one wouldn’t infer that from the piece itself. It’s more likely to induce a psychic tug-of-war between the right and left sides of the viewer’s mind, suggesting scientific objectivity even while it seeks to preserve and memorialize.

Though thoroughly engaging, the sculptures at Greenberg Van Doren feel a bit reheated. “Megastructure” is in fact from 2008 and has been shown once before. Downtown at Eleven Rivington, however, Sigurdardóttir’s “Untitled” is a unique, conceptual jaw-dropper. The small gallery space is completely filled by a single sculptural construction. From the street all we can see is the backside of a nondescript, four-walled enclosure. The unpainted MDF boards and exposed studs give no clue that they surround a carefully recreated scale replica of a royal watchtower, which is revealed only by a window on the far side of the work. Initially, you assume you are looking through a peephole into an illuminated diorama, but it soon becomes clear that what you are looking at is merely a reflection of the architecture on the near wall. Two-way mirrors on either side of the interior space cause the image of the bell tower to kaleidoscope toward infinity, offering a million replicas but not a glimpse of the original, no matter how much you crane your neck or contort your body. This futility is surprisingly frustrating and seems to underscore the sad truth that our relationship to any place in time endures only through fleeting and constantly degrading mental souvenirs. One senses that Sigurdardóttir’s notion of place is a time-sensitive, multi-sensory concept no easier to pin down than one of Heisenberg’s electrons or Charlie Kaufman’s screenplays. This makes Katrín Sigurdardóttir very much an artist of her time. What makes her unique, however, is her unusual urge to deconstruct social and spatial dynamics even as she recoups what’s personal and nostalgic in them – an appropriate and productive contradiction for an artist with a body in New York and, it seems, a mind in Iceland.