



The Scale of PERCEPTION

A Conversation with **Katrín Sigurdardóttir**

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Icelandic artist Katrín Sigurdardóttir uses scale to explore notions of land, space, and memory as well as the body's place in a world that seems to be shrinking. Her popular *High Plane V* installation at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (2006) allowed two viewers at a time to climb tall ladders and insert their heads into an imaginary glacial vista. Each head appeared gigantic in relation to the miniature icescape. The "Haul" series features 20 small shipping boxes that open and unfold to offer portable, generic landscapes.

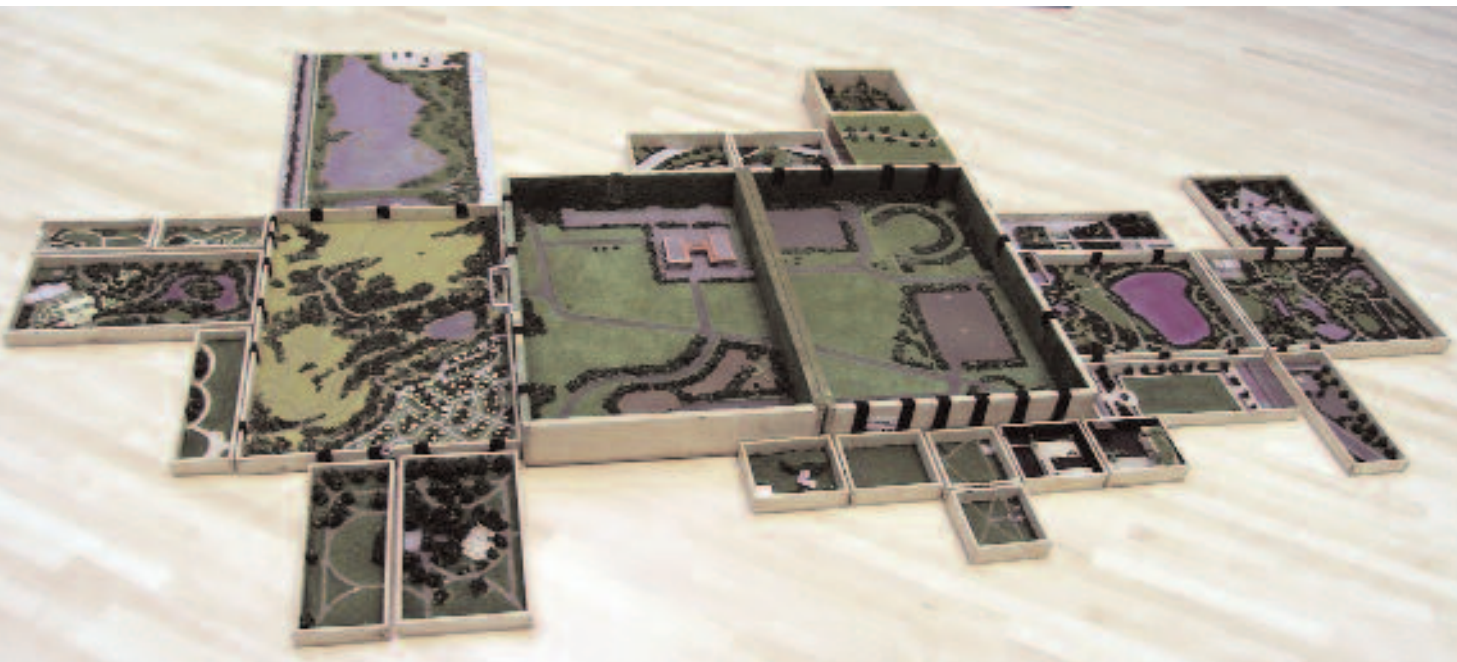
The works in Sigurdardóttir's two recent exhibitions—dystopic stacked and shelved landscapes and stacked miniature cities at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery and a miniature guard tower imprisoned in its own cube at Eleven Rivington Gallery—use scale as well as interior and exterior space to study the receding geosphere, dilemmas involving space, and how we humans may be losing touch with ourselves.

Opposite: *Megastructure*, 2008. Resin, steel, Styrofoam, foil, and pigments, 91 x 81 x 35 in. This page: *Haul IXX*, 2009. Wood, resin, and pigments, 11 x 27 x 10.5 in.

Jan Garden Castro: *What was the origin of your recent series of works?*

Katrín Sigurdardóttir: In 2007, when I was preparing for an exhibition called "Megastructure" (2008), I revisited subjects that had interested me in the late 1990s. I was introduced to the work of Archigram in the early '90s with their seminal exhibition at ThreadWaxing Space in New York; ever since, I have been fascinated by speculative architecture and engineering, futuristic and psychedelic solutions to urban problems. A megastructure is a mega-building or built network that serves as a platform or framework for buildings of more conventional scale and utility. I built an eight-foot-tall model of such a structure, a building with six artificial "landscape-levels." It was a direct spin-off from the designs of the Hungarian-French architect Yona Friedman. In many ways, this was a singular piece for me, because as a sculpture, it "behaves" more like an architectural model than almost any other work that I have shown in the past 10 years. It doesn't have the typical doublesided-ness of my other minia-





tures, which draw attention to how the work is perceived and create an ambiguous perceptual territory between the work as a sculptural object and as a model, thereby complicating the viewer's relationship to it. But it is akin to numerous other works in that it doesn't propose a structure or a space so much as it posthumously describes it. It appears more like a dystopic ruin, a memorial to modernistic prospects, and in that, points both to the future and the past—the future that became the past before it ever came to be buildable.

The show at Greenberg Van Doren took this work as a departure point. Although all of the works in the show were new, completed in 2008 and '09, there was a retrospective intent in their making, i.e., looking back to my work of the last 10 years and processing it. The show consisted of four objects that attempt to articulate a lineage from works such as the "Haul" series to *Megastructure*.

This lineage goes from the mega-shelves of a utopian urban plan to a landscape, segmented, contained in a cabinet, and hence related to furniture or antiquated museum display cases, to a place envisioned and packed in a box. In a tangent off this line, the small stacked cityscape on a "no-tricks" white pedestal references Friedman and his elaboration on vertical expansions in urban space. It is also a reference to the vertical layering of old cities, with new towns built literally on the ruins of the old, as revealed through archaeological excavations. All of the works in the show are boxes: the megastructure as the box around the city, the cabinet as a box around land as an ownable entity, the crate that contains the mountain as an artifact, and the white pedestal as the classic gallery furniture that "white-balances" and serves as a social reference point. All of the works also show a kind of impossible "layering" of terrains, one on top of the other, layering by design, layering by time, layering through objectification.

JGC: *What is the origin of the stacked and shelved mountains?*

KS: In 2002, I visited the Egyptian Museum in Turin, a beautiful museum not only for its holdings but also for its antiquated displays. That same year, I placed landscapes in vitrines, similar to those I had seen in the museum. The stacked landscape has a reference to this work. It consists of heavily segmented terrain that when installed together looks much like a game board, but it divides into 24 panels, which then divide further into three units that resemble the inner structure from a chest of drawers or a cabinet. Each cabinet is an individual work. Like *Odd Lots* (2005) and *Haul* 2005 (2005), this work comments on segmentation, ownership, and conquest, both of land and of art.

The Green Grass of Home, 1998. Plywood, hobby-modeling materials, canvas, and hardware, installation view.

JGC: *You didn't use much color.*

KS: It's not entirely monochrome; I'm just not using the exaggerated colors that I used in my past landscapes and that are commonly used in miniatures. The color range is truer to that of real landscapes, although I should make the point that none of these landscapes has a definite reference point anywhere on the planet. It's a common misconception that my work depicts Iceland, especially among those who have not been there. When I make the landscapes, I'm thinking just as much about California and Switzerland, and yet it's not specifically those places either. The Icelandic landscape has an almost mythical status in people's minds, and the surge of tourism, the branding and marketing of the country in the last decades, has only inflated these visions. I play with exactly this trick. My interest is always less in place itself than in the way that place is perceived, imagined, remembered, described, mapped, essentially obscured and invented.

JGC: *The show at Eleven Rivington in New York featured a guard tower imprisoned in a white cube.*



Above: *Untitled*, 2009. Resin, 8 x 15 x 9.75 in.
 Below: *Untitled*, 2009. Mixed media, 111 x 114.25 x 114.25 in.

KS: That show was a more distilled, abstracted statement. One large installation filled the entire gallery. The work is an outside-in white cube, so an inversion of the gallery space or a doubling of the space in a slightly shrunken scale, depending on how you see it. The two elements in this cube, twin objects, one in full scale and the other in miniature, are modeled on the small stations of royal guards. These single-body chambers are usually placed by a palace entrance, and these two are based on the guard stations outside the Royal Palace in Copenhagen. It is interesting that these stations are not fixed to the ground; instead, they have floors and legs similar to those of a large wardrobe, so they are somewhere between architecture and furniture. They are part of a façade and, of particular interest to me, a structure for single-body surveillance and control.

The relationship between the viewer and the work is always important to me, and most of my work with scale only becomes activated by the viewer's presence—the uncomfortable confrontation between the perceptive scale of the miniature and the scale of the body and the architecture that contains it. As in *High Plane*, this installation is a device for perception, a dual perception, a controlled view of that which is on the other side of the white cube, something in a surreal scale in proportion to the viewer. But here, the body is always invisible, erased behind the mirror, which both blocks and expands the view. In this work, I am trying to take on the limits between in and out, interior and exterior, inclusion and exclusion, visibility and projection. The guarded palace is obscurely related to the exhibition space, the gallery, the museum. The life being guarded, that of the artist, is invisible, yet it is present in the empty space surrounding the work, within the actual gallery walls.

JGC: *Does the work address current problems in Iceland and the rest of the world?*

KS: My process as an artist does not directly address current events in Iceland. It would simply be opportunistic. I talk a lot about what's happening, and that is the most suitable medium. Social issues, issues of identity, power, and nationality, are very much at the foundation of my work however obscure they may be. There are many narrative possibilities. For instance, people have read my work in an eco-political context—a reading pertaining to global capitalism and the exploitation of natural resources seems warranted. However, no one reading is more correct or appropriate than any other. It's all what the viewer brings to the work.

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