

ART PAPERS

IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT: ART FROM ICELAND NEW YORK

Regional themes can be limiting. But if the region in question happens to be interesting—as Iceland is—and limitations are kept firmly in mind—as they clearly were when co-curators Markús Thór Andr sson and Ragnar Kjartansson organized *It's Not Your Fault: Art from Iceland*—they can provide an essential bit of context to illuminate the traditions and aesthetic syntax to which a diverse group of artists are responding [Luhring Augustine; June 28–August 8, 2008].

In fact, the work on view shows that nationality is only a conscious point of departure for a few contemporary Icelandic artists. Ragnar Kjartansson's video installation, *God*, 2007, is polished and worldly in its showbiz-inflected take on grandly universal themes. The viewer enters a screening room hung with deep pink chiffon curtains to view the video of a carefully coiffed singer in evening clothes, standing in what resembles a set from *The Lawrence Welk Show*. Surrounded by a small ensemble of musicians, the singer gives various shades of emotional color to a repeated lyric, "Sorrow conquers happiness." The setting is so colorful, and the music so well-orchestrated, that the phrase's pessimistic words take a while to sink in—undoubtedly prompting the intended questions about the relationship between God, church, medium, and message.

The exhibition's title comes from  sd s Sif Gunnarsd ttir's work *It's Not Your Fault*, 2003. Video documentation of the performance is on view here. Her installation *Crown without Fear*, 2006, is a debris-strewn set that, seemingly aiming for cyberpunk squalor, ends up recalling a music-video set from the early eighties, purposeless and bereft without the animating presence of the artist.

 smundur  smundsson, whose performance-based works explore social discomfort, presents two works. *The Soundtrack of Our Lives*, 2008, his interpretation of popular songs, evokes the awkwardness that one might

feel catching a friend singing in the shower. *My Friend from the Deep*, *Deep Blue*, 2004, presents a tight-frame closeup of his face as he sings and narrates a rambling and heartfelt ode to whales and other ocean denizens—an apt, if perhaps inadequate, tribute from a native of a land whose earliest civilizations depended on whaling for survival.

Similarly working at the intersection between Iceland's isolation and the interconnectedness of contemporary global culture, Magn s Sigurdarson's *The Stranger*, 2007, finds him posing on a beach in strange punkish makeup and clothing, looking awkward, alien, foreign, and out-of-place. In a dramatically different piece, he recreates the elemental wildness of the Nordic climate, caging it behind Plexiglas in *Storm*, 2001, a roomful of salt blown by powerful fans to simulate the patterns of blown snow and ice.

Haraldur Jonsson's *Crumpled Darkness*, 2008, evokes the moodiness of a land of long nights and severe winter storms. But the net effect of mounds of carefully crumpled black paper is also strangely minimalist and tidy. Katrin Sigurdardottir's untitled work from 2007 initially achieves a similar effect. The piece consists of a white platform with stairs on one side and a square hole at the top. Climbing the stairs and peeking into the hole yields nothing: it's just an empty chamber. The viewer must climb further. She must mount the platform entirely and stick her head all the way through the small opening—assuming an undignified position. Only then can the viewer discover the piece's secret reward: a pretty little inverted topography of glacial peaks. The remoteness of Iceland, the explorer's reward, and the value of active participation in art at the expense of personal dignity make for an unlikely collection of themes, but the piece's elegant construction saves it from mere cleverness.

Hrafnhildur Arnard ttir's *Lonely*, 2003, and *Hairy*

Moon, 2008, come closest to something you might have to be Icelandic to truly "get." The late Birgir Andr sson, 1955-2007, digs through ephemera to discover stories of Iceland's past in *Different People*, 1989. Unnar  rn looks at what it means to isolate something and label its origin in a group of related works—*Laissez Faire (shadow economy)*, 2008; *Faux Pas (reader-samantekt)*, 2008; *Faux Pas (fragment)*, 2008; *Faux Pas (Manhattan schist)*, 2008; *Coup de Grace*, 2008; and *Coup d'etat*, 2008, inspired by the miscellany in the collection of the Reykjanes Heritage Museum.

These nine artists could, in some sense, hail from almost anywhere in the global artworld. But, as curator Andr sson suggests, they handle tropes of isolation, melancholy, and cold with unusual facility, combining them fluently with a flair for performance and fantasy. In the end, this may be something that natives of a land rich in oral tradition are best suited to do.

—Lara Kristin Lentini



Magn s Sigurdarson, detail from the series *The Stranger*, 2007, mounted c-print, 49 x 60 inches [courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami]
ABOVE: Haraldur Jonsson, *Crumpled Darkness*, 2008, installation: crumpled black paper sheets, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York]