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| Dispatches #14 | Art & Nature In Iceland

In art, Dispatches on 06/28/2010 at 10:00 am



(<http://cablegram.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/23.jpg>) The title of this post is almost laughable. In Iceland, these two entities—art and nature—are so intertwined, complex, and obvious that it seems silly to broach the topic. Iceland's awe-inspiring landscape with its mutable weather and landforms (e.g. exploding volcanoes and melting glaciers), has been and seems to continue to be a glorious burden for the country's artists.

I recently witnessed both—Icelandic art and nature—in a five-day tour of museums, galleries, and studio visits as well as a bus trip to popular tourist sites outside of Reykjavik. From the silently powerful and omnipresent figural sculptures of Steinunn Thorarinsdóttir (http://www.steinunnth.com/steinunn_home/steinunn.html) to the elegantly spare yet brilliant conceptual work of Sigurdur Gudmundsson (<http://www.i8.is/?s=8&aID=40>) to the visually rich, contextual, and feminist performative and installation work by the Icelandic Love Corporation, (<http://www.ilc.is/ILC/index.html>) the art I saw was extremely varied in terms of subject matter, technique, concept, and presentation.

Nature is not only key to Iceland's tourism industry (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npawmHVaf-E>) but the source of inspiration for generations of artists, as demonstrated in the historical collections at several art museums. I imagine this places many contemporary Icelandic artists in the tough position of addressing their ruggedly beautiful surroundings without creating clichéd work. Hence, Hrafnkell Sigurðsson (<http://www.hrafnkellsigurdsson.com/home.jsp>)'s two large photos of melting mounds of plowed snow (<http://www.hrafnkellsigurdsson.com/works/mountains-in-town/>) stopped me in my tracks at an exhibition from the collection at the National Gallery of Iceland (<http://www.listasafn.is/?root=1>). These simple images toy with the fetishistic appeal of nature, the fabrication and

commodification of the environment, and art's mischievous ability to elevate the mundane.

I had a studio visit with [Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir](http://www.gudrun.is/) (<http://www.gudrun.is/>) who has an exhibition at New York's [Luise Ross Gallery](http://luiserossgallery.com/) (<http://luiserossgallery.com/>) through July 30, 2010.

Kristjánsdóttir has a very "cool," as in, emotionally neutral focus on Iceland's environment in her videos, installations, paintings, and prints. She reduces the geophysical surroundings into evocative, abstracted forms comprising largely dichromatic arrangements—an approach she has called "weather-writing."

At the other end of the spectrum, [Eggert Pétursson](http://www.i8.is/?s=8&aID=23) (<http://www.i8.is/?s=8&aID=23>) tackles the topic of Iceland's natural and artistic heritage with outrageously exuberant paintings of local flora, recalling Monet's late garden paintings tossed in a blender with [Cy Twombly's](http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/2009-02-12_cy-twombly/#/images/1/) (http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/2009-02-12_cy-twombly/#/images/1/) dripping roses. Consisting of accurately rendered species, Pétursson's claustrophobic compositions present an outright battle between abstraction and representation with the aggressively gestural physicality of the paint at times obscuring the subject matter altogether. His work serves as an apt visual metaphor for what could be considered an ongoing reckoning between Icelandic artists and their simultaneously generous yet demanding environment.

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Image: Eggert Pétursson, "Untitled," 2005, 50 x 50 cm.

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