

## Sara the Navigator

Never afraid to express her feelings, Sara Björnsdóttir's new body of work navigates a course between extremes: the inner and the outer, the private and the public, the painful and the joyful, all of which are held in balance in a series of collages that nimbly veer away from the territory of pain charts and into the shared domain of lived experience. If collage works it works when it positions itself between extremes, bringing separate worlds into coexistence in the finished image. Björnsdóttir's handling of collage makes it the perfect form for her, for it is in her ability to keep opposites in the air together, that she is able to echo her interior balancing act via the exterior world of scissors and glue. In all collage we read one image whilst reading another, crucially allowing ourselves to enter the new pictorial realm created by both. The spark that flies between the disparate elements of a Björnsdóttir's collage gives the viewer no rest, we are given no choice but to flip from one visual reading to another in the activated space that exists between us and the finished work. This space keeps all the balls in the air at once, reminding us that this is the defining characteristic of collage, from Dadaist pioneer Hannah Hoch to pop artist Richard Hamilton, it is the very purpose of collage to disrupt by bringing together different worlds into the same frame.

It should come as no surprise to those familiar with Sara Björnsdóttir's previous work to realise that in addition to her materials being sourced from the world of contemporary media images, she also borrows her artistic methodology from the real world. In Björnsdóttir's 'Hostage Notes' series of prints (2011 ongoing) this method can clearly be seen to be closer in style to the Baader Meinhof group than it is to Michelangelo. The ad hoc nature of these mature works, a direct consequence of the random sourcing of text from disparate sources, bares the trade mark aesthetic of the terrorist but never before has a ransom note been so beautifully composed than the ransom note prints of Sara Björnsdóttir. In this series, the shudder of recognition that we experience through our familiarity with the hostage taker's ad hoc typography (which in Björnsdóttir's case mercifully comes to us without the customary amputated finger) is cleverly smoothed away by the balm of visual pleasure created by the beauty of the print itself. Humour is not something that we would immediately associate with a hostage situation but we would be mistaken not to realise that wit is the dominant *modus operandi* at play in the Icelandic artist's work. The dead pan nature of the 'Hostage Note Series' requires that we have to tune in to its wave length in order to get it, if we don't then it's our loss, not Björnsdóttir's: she doesn't give a damn as she knows, like the hostage taker, that she's bound to get us to pay up in the end.

A life spent between Iceland and London (where I first met Sara Björnsdóttir in 1996, when she was a student and I was a tutor on the MA Fine Art course at Chelsea College of Art) has served to pit the extremes of both places in her life and her work. Now she flits with ease from the volcanic drama of Iceland's unique landscape and the Reykjavik that she knows (and where she is known) to the anonymity of London, with barely a blink of an eye as she walks the tightrope between both locations. This ability to feel at

home away from home, especially for an islander, I'm sure was hard earned and earned over time.

The role that time plays in the new work, exhibited for the first time here at The Icelandic Printmakers Association is central to understanding it. The blue water colours were begun by Björnsdóttir in 2014 at a time in her personal life that she describes as 'desperate'. Anxiety and stress in equal measure submerged her into a state of mental turmoil. Feeling herself going under, she depicted her mental state in a series of watercolors where through swirls of ultramarine she kept herself afloat ('Not waving but drowning'<sup>1</sup>). It was not until years later when feeling anchored by the thought that the storm had passed, Björnsdóttir was able to return to these sea(mind)scapes in order to use them as the ground on which to collage the figures cut from magazines. In these 'time-based collages' female bather's heads appear to burst on contact with the watercolor paper that they are printed on, never before has Fabriano paper been implicated so sublimely at the scene of the crime but also as the scene of the crime, acting as the both background and witness to such beautiful homicides as those of the flailing female swimmers floating in their own blueness on the surface of the paper.

These 'Time-based Collages' are both innovative and autobiographic, spanning as they do both disparate media categories and periods of time in the artist's life.

*"Not Waving but Drowning" is a poem by the British poet Stevie Smith. It was published in 1957, as part of a collection of the same title. The most famous of Smith's poems, it gives an account of a drowned man, whose distressed thrashing in the water had been mistaken for waving. Wikipedia*

Perhaps it is in the remnants of the left-over magazines, that function as the port of origin from which the cut-outs have departed, included in the form of a hanging in this exhibition, that the most penetrative insight into Björnsdóttir's process can be found. Björnsdóttir became accustomed to the haunting presence of the left-over magazines as, Eva Hesse like, they hung in her studio, describing them as a form of the Oracle that she "went to" in order to find out what to do next. In the way that she describes this paper presence in her studio and the manner in which, Siren like, it called to her, not as in Greek mythology, onto the rocks, but out to sea again, one realises that Sara Björnsdóttir is essentially spiritual in her voyaging out, an artist who, like all of us, navigates the world and her responses to it, in order to locate herself, but unlike all of us, manages to locate herself in art as well.

Dr Kevin Atherton  
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