



# REVIEWS

## Chasing Beauty in London

BY S. ANNE STEINBERG July 12, 2016 14:03

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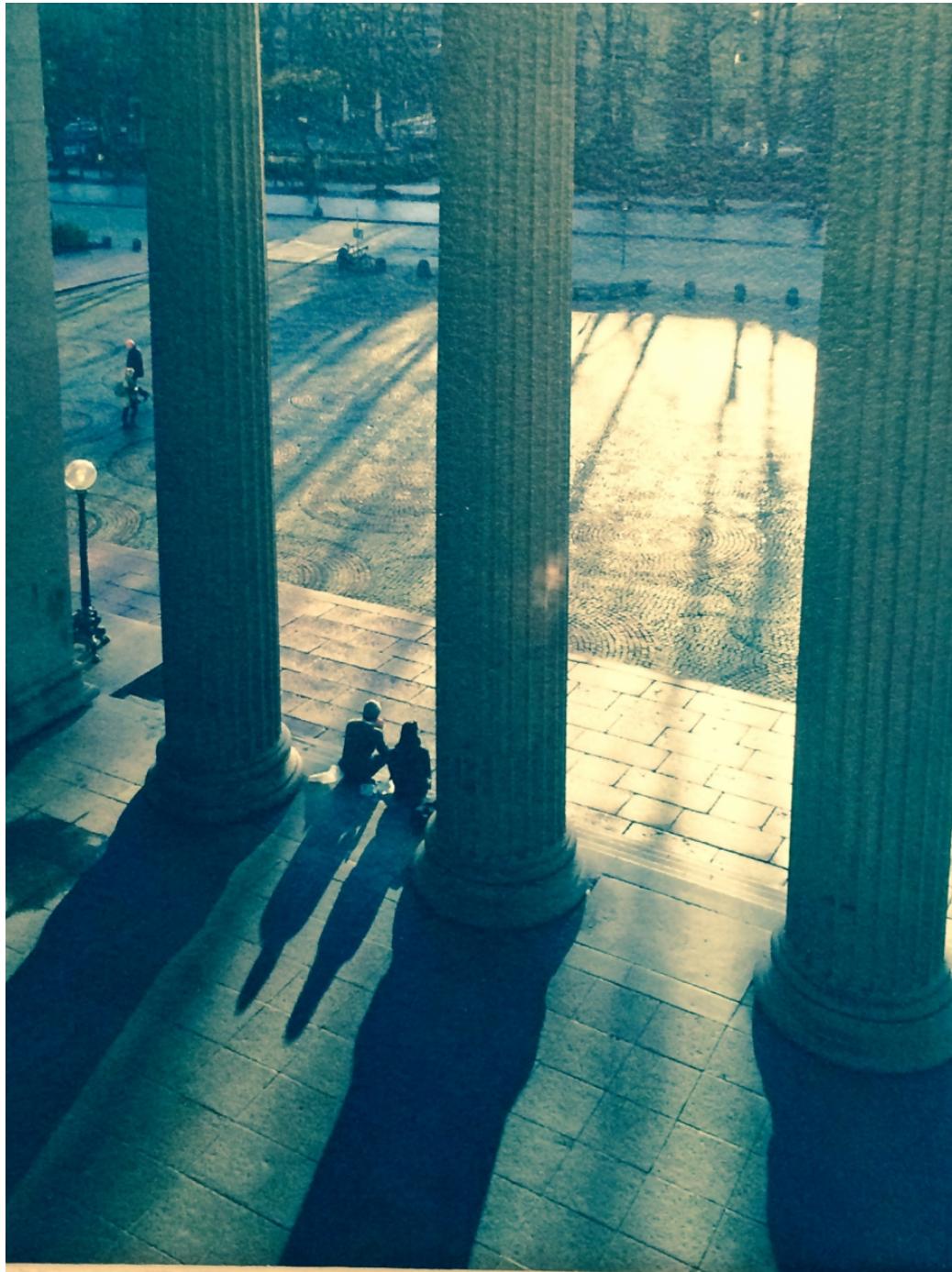
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REVIEW

Detail of Sara Björnsdóttir's *London Calling* (2016). Photo: S. Anne Steinberg.

The photograph being used to promote Sara Björnsdóttir's current show, "Flâneur," is a cacophonous display of neon lights, topped by a gaudy sign reading "London Calling." You'd be forgiven, then, for thinking that the exhibition was loud, raucous even. Some adjustment might be required upon arriving, and finding the show to be close to the opposite: modest, quiet, unassuming.

Although the show's premise—the story of a one year visit to London—is not original, the exhibition manages to avoid clichés, using audio recording (in Icelandic and English), photography, digital projection and collage to present an engaging, personal vision.

There is no attempt to pin London down—we're not given a tour of the city's biggest monuments, or told about the ways London and its citizens differ from Sara's home town and its inhabitants. Nor does the artist turn the trip into a voyage of self-discovery, losing sight of her surroundings. Instead, the exhibition tells the tale of the artist's quest for beauty, in London and in life.



*Detail of Sara Björnsdóttir's London Calling (2016). Photo: S. Anne Steinberg.*

That search begins with the everyday. We see two red-jacketed pedestrians outside a dentist's office, the imprint of a fallen leaf on the pavement, and an empty, late-night metro station, trash awaiting clearance. Things so ordinary that they are seldom preserved as images.

Then there are the specifics of Sara's story. We hear about break-ins to her borrowed flat (and see the police there, investigating), and the embarrassing crush she develops on her new, friendly landlord.

Beauty of a more traditional kind is not forgotten. Sara finds extraordinary feathers and buys a necklace made of iridescent, blue and green butterfly wings (or perhaps they are crumpled candy wrappers). In a digital projection, a museum ticket flaps like a bird before we see birds milling about the sky. Later, flight-less birds skitter across a frozen pond.

The material is left raw; there's no attempt to dominate it. It's not that the artist is neutral, an observer only—what we see depends entirely on her decisions—but that ambiguity is kept alive by a certain looseness about the presentation.



*Detail of Sara Björnsdóttir's London Calling (2016). Photo: S. Anne Steinberg.*

A second room of the show contains a selection from an ongoing series of witty sayings, presented as if the words were cut out from different publications, criminal-style. The phrases are clever, and many made me laugh. But they're also glib, lacking the fullness of the work in the first room. In that room, we feel as if we were in an urban environment, a place where all sorts of possibilities lie just around the corner, keeping us enchanted.

*"Flâneur"* runs through August 21 at Gerðarsafn.

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