

## To Dare the Heat and the Heartbeat/*New Icelandic Art from the 1960's to today* Sara Björnsdóttir p:264 Germany 2009

### Shauna Laurel Jones

A woman's tightly-clasped hands—speckled with red, white, and blue paint—rest on a table, and through a photograph we are placed in the artist's point of view, looking down at those work-weary hands in quiet contemplation. *I Wish I Was a World-Famous Artist* (2004) is both the title and de facto caption; the "I" could apply to any viewer, tapping into the common if not universal yearning for fame promised to each of us for fifteen minutes at least. The paint on those hands, the colours of Iceland's flag, begs the question: What does it mean to be famous on, or from, an island? And wherever one is from, in whose eyes is fame measured, and what is that measure worth?

Sara Björnsdóttir has a penchant for exposing qualities in others that they might try to conceal. If she says, "I wish I were a famous artist," she might actually mean, "I know you secretly wish *you* were a famous artist." And yet this mirroring, even if it provokes, comes not from a spirit of mockery but rather a desire for disclosure of truth, a belief that it might be more interesting not to hide ourselves from one another. So too does it come from the artist's own sincerity, and Sara would be the first to admit that this photograph is a self-portrait.

To say that the binding quality in Sara's diverse oeuvre is genuineness or sincerity, however, would be misleading. Her performances can be sincerely tender, her videos sincerely ironic, her installations sincerely sensual. Sara's is a body of work that resists facile categorisation; it suggests that art is a creative lived activity rather than a product *of* one's creativity.

At the same time, Sara is not self-indulgent as an artist: she works with her audience in mind, realising art that is meant to be experienced, not merely viewed. As she bravely, warmly, and indiscriminately hugs passers-by at the opening of an art festival in Caracas in her performance piece *Embrace* (2001), her courage trumps any risk of vulnerability as she gives freely of herself to those who dare the heat and the heartbeat of her presence. As she throws china plates from off-camera in her video *Flying Saucers* (2001), violently smashing them against a wall, she reminds us that we are entitled to the anger we sometimes feel is forbidden. Then from the sharp-edged shards of saucers, she has created a beautiful mosaic on an armchair and footrest as part of the installation, asserting that through this anger, transformative possibilities arise. And yet there is an ironic bite, as the very same person expressing her anger is the one who has the power of humour in challenging someone to take this seat. The seemingly opposite emotions she expresses and arouses within individual works—as well as within her entire body of work—do not contradict one another, nor need they be seen as incompatible. Feelings are fluid, overlap, intertwine, can be equally honest and ambiguous.

Particularly ambiguous in a different way are Sara's site-specific videos, a genre she seems to have single-handedly introduced to Iceland. Works like *Confusing Space* (2003), *On Site* (2002), and *Hiding Picture* (2001) are videos of particular architectural interiors, then projected onto and within the spaces in which they were filmed. These projections, however, are off-registered and fluctuate against the unmoving backdrops with which they dynamically interact. "Confusing" is both an adjective and a verb, and through these installations Sara subtly invites her viewers to reorient their perceptions within the ambiguous spatial environments she has created but also to greater attune their awareness of themselves.

This superimposition of images or spaces is not limited to video and can be used to different effect. A large plywood installation in the National Gallery of Iceland, *Sculpture Sculpture Fucking Culture* (2005), at first resembles the hull of a ship sliced off and cemented to the

corner of the gallery, one immense container of space imposing upon another. As the piece begins to shake and the sounds of skateboarders rumble overhead, the viewer might realise that the form is more akin to part of a skatepark: an emblematic site of urban youth culture thus intrudes into a space of so-called high culture. In a mirroring of another place within itself, Sara's series of photographs entitled *I Wish You Had More Time* (2006), which show the spines of stacks of books found at a used bookstore, was originally hung in the bookstore itself in Courtenay, British Columbia. The exhibition (which also involved a sculptural installation) asked viewers to inquire of themselves, Do I have time in my life to do all I want to do? In this way Sara's wish for the gift of time has a confrontational edge: be honest with yourself; realise that you can gain more from buying a photograph of books than from buying books you will never read.

Though she claims to have increasing insight into her audience and environment—which is in a way the essence of her medium across media—Sara's work has always sought to connect with her viewers and from this connection establish a shared curiosity for all aspects of the magic of life. Whether or not Sara might want to be “famous,” her art bears no trace of aspirations for fame or attention for their sake alone. Sardonic, humorous, or purely beautiful, Sara's work shows no pretence. It is as forthright and honest as the artist herself.

Shauna Laurel Jones is an American scholar based in Reykjavík, Iceland.