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An Artist of Fire and Ice: Sara Bjornsdottir

Geologically speaking, the island of Iceland is an infant. Only 20 million years have elapsed since lava-spewing volcanoes laid the foundation for the land known to us as Iceland. This island continues to be one of the most volcanically active places on Earth. With the birth of Surtsey, an island just off the coast of the mainland, from a volcanic eruption that began on the ocean floor, it is evident just why Iceland is referred to as “a land in the making.” Created by volcanoes and sculpted by the most massive moving glaciers in Europe, this is truly a landscape of extremes, of fire and ice.

The people of Iceland possess the edgy attributes of this wild landscape in which they live. With a population of approximately 283,000 in the entire country, winters in which the sun never rises, summers in which the sun never sets, and a remote setting in the Atlantic Ocean, there exists the recipe for a truly individualistic and self-reliant people. In recent years, technology has greatly diminished the tangible aspects of Iceland’s centuries-long isolation. The country joined the modern world almost overnight, with more changes taking place in the last fifty years, than in the thousand previous years. Despite this transformation, however, the tradition of isolation and self-reliance lives on in the temperament of the Icelandic people, creating an art scene with a most distinctive flavor.

The tradition of written poetry in Iceland dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the tradition of fine arts gained foothold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. From the medieval literature of sagas and poems,

which continue to be a living and breathing presence in Iceland, to the numerous displays of contemporary art on exhibit in the cities, the creative energy in this small country is palpable.

Sara Bjornsdottir, an Icelandic artist of the younger generation, embodies the unique landscape, history and energy of Iceland. Receiving the majority of her artistic training in Iceland, she draws inspiration from her land and its people. Her work characteristically deals with opposites, energy and feelings. She observes that she is most inspired by, “the creative energy of the people I’m surrounded by here in the dark cold island in the North Sea.” The role of the Icelandic artist seems clear when she states that “...in such a demanding intensive environment we make life worth living for each other by always creating.”

During the summer of 2003, The National Gallery of Iceland, in the capital city of Reykjavik, displayed her installation entitled, “Flying Saucers.” I had made the fortuitous decision to visit the gallery during my recent excursion to Iceland. My first experience of the installation occurred before I even entered the room. The sounds of shattering, smashing, and crashing reached my ears. Aurally violent, the continual sound of objects smashing and breaking gave me reason to pause and gather myself before I entered the installation. Upon entering, I discovered a film being projected. In this film, saucers are being thrown by an unseen person, smashing against a wall, and exploding into many bits upon contact with the wall. As the film played, the heap of broken saucer shards grew ever higher and still the smashing relentlessly continued. As this disembodied expression of pure, raw anger washed over me, discomfort ensued. Watching the film, I had the intense sensation that I was witnessing someone’s emotional meltdown and that I should leave immediately. The sense of intimacy was imminent. I felt like a voyeur, but the film was on a continuous loop and I found myself lost in this pure, raw and angry

activity, eagerly anticipating the next saucer that would be hurled into view. The forbidden quality being expressed compelled me to watch the explosive film. (Many a day I have felt mad enough to hurl dishes at a wall, but something learned somewhere made the serious contemplation of such an act an impossibility.) Having lost track of time and place, I slowly became aware of the other component of the installation, sitting in lovely repose under a soft light. The armchair and footrest, which were upholstered with the broken bits of saucers, sat bearing witness to the events in the film. The saucer shards had been painstakingly and lovingly arranged into a beautiful mosaic and glued to the chair and footstool. The effect was stunning and surprising. The contrast between the shattering dishes in the film, and this lovely chair made from the pile of saucer rubble, captured my imagination. The fury expressed in “Flying Saucers,” had a cathartic quality. It spoke to me of a pressure that must be released, whatever the consequences, and the exquisite transformation that may result.

The tradition of the Icelandic poet endures in the way that Bjornsdottir artfully translated raw emotion into another form, a form that can pierce a person’s soul. In creating “Flying Saucers,” Bjornsdottir wanted to express her frustration with the state of women’s liberation today. In her mind, she explained, she imagined a frustrated someone throwing dishes at the wall, instead of washing them. The expression of anger is viewed by Bjornsdottir as healthy and necessary, and “wrongly labeled by society as bad.” She likens anger to a “natural force.” With volcanoes, avalanches, earthquakes, and glaciers a fact of daily existence for Icelanders, her choice of the words “natural force,” speaks volumes about the power she sees vested in emotions. Bjornsdottir explains that the expression of anger can be a “wondrous thing,” because

something new and more exciting will be created.” In the short run, this wondrous thing might be a mosaic chair, or in the long run it may be substantial social change.

A great thinker once observed that the amount of oppression inflicted upon people is in exact proportion to how much they will put up with. Whether at work, within the family, or on the larger scale of world events, this most certainly rings true. In our own history, many great social achievements came only as a result of a people deciding that it was time to express their frustrations overtly, and the changes that followed are wondrous. The organization of labor, women’s suffrage, the Civil Rights Movement, and other seminal events in U.S. history, all grew out of a feeling and an expression of frustration and anger.

In this modern era, from childhood on, we are encouraged to control our emotions. In recent years, anger management has become a big moneymaking business. Bjornsdottir’s work makes the global suggestion that the very anger we as a society work to extinguish, is the key to positive transformation of the individual and of society.

Raised on the island forged by fire then honed by ice, Bjornsdottir’s art is sublimely reflective of the psyche of this small island, writ large for the global community to consider.