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Iceland comes to North Dakota
North Dakota Museum of Art Organizes Major Icelandic Exhibition

On June 22 the work of seven contemporary Icelandic artists will open at the North Dakota Museum of Art under the banner *Into the Tussock*. Nothing in the show subscribes to stereotypes, no pictures of volcanoes, no watercolors of ice and snow and barren landscapes, no photographs of contemporary bankers tossing their empty moneybags into the sea, or fishing fleets sailing into the stormy North Atlantic, or modern-day Viking heirs hunkering down to write their Sagas.

Instead, this sophisticated lot has sent to North Dakota works steeped in the history of European art such as **Guðjón Ketilsson's** relief carvings of all the hats in Bruegel's 1567 painting *Peasant Wedding Feast*. Who could imagine that reproductions of hats could be so charming? Or paintings from **Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson's** Blond Miss World Series (1951 – 2007)? Begun in 1951 with the establishment of the Miss World contest, the artist decided to follow the concept of blondness by painting one portrait each year for fifty years of the winner, "the most beautiful woman in the world." Cookie-cutter like, the paintings celebrate a bland, commercialized vision of official beauty as subscribed to in the twentieth-century West.

The celebrated sound artist **Finnbogi Pétursson** has created a new work for North Dakota. Pétursson often uses implements that produce electronic or acoustic sound—loudspeakers, wires, and instruments—to form sculptures themselves. For example, in the 2001 Venice Biennale, the artist built a monumental sound tunnel that incorporated a pipe organ of the artist's own making. As visitors walked through, they were greeted with a tone that resonated at a frequency that when distilled formed a new, single wage at the frequency of 17hz, a dark sound known as the diabolus. It was actually banned by the Catholic Church in medieval times for its supposed devilish and disordering qualities. Pétursson's creation of the diabolus mixed contemporary electronics with the centuries-old organ pipe to essentially un-censor a sound once forbidden in the Church, whose seat, of course, was in Venice itself.

All that is yet known about the North Dakota piece is that it is small enough to travel to several sites in North Dakota, northwest Minnesota, and Manitoba. Size matters in that the exhibition was organized by the North Dakota Museum of Art in collaboration with the North Dakota Council on the Arts in order to assure that audiences from across the region could see today's Icelandic art. Additional support to fund the five North Dakota sites, and the Minnesota and Canadian tour came

from the Icelandic Foreign Ministry; Eimskip, Iceland's oldest shipping company; The American-Scandinavian Foundation, and MetLife Foundation.

Iceland has always existed on the edge of Europe. While the great cathedrals of Europe were being built, the Icelanders were writing their Sagas. Literature came to dominate cultural life down to current times in this small country rich with writers and publishing houses.

This instinct for storytelling appears in the work of several artists including **Olöf Nordal** with her Iceland Specimen Collection. Three photographs of wax figures, *Son and Father, Daughter and Father*, and *Father and Son*, are inspired by a legend about a man who, when crossing a mountain, came across the body of a young man left behind by a receding glacier. As the man inspects the perfectly preserved body, it occurs to him that he is looking at the remains of his own father who had disappeared before he was born. Father and son meet for the first time—the son in his late 60s, his father just over 20.

Specific, living human beings are captured in wax but rare birds are killed and stuffed in order to create natural and cultural artifacts. Nordal's work, *Iceland Specimen Collection – Great Auk*, consists of two photographs from The Natural History Collection of Iceland. One shows a stuffed example of the extinct Great Auk, bought at an auction abroad on behalf of the Icelandic people. The rare object was "returned" home, as it were, at the same time as precious manuscripts were generously given to Icelandic authorities by the Danish monarchy. The other photograph shows an artificial or man-made surrogate of the "real" bird, made domestically before the nation owned a specimen of the great "Icelandic" bird. The replica, made from the skin of several cliff birds, is obviously misshapen: the taxidermist's effort hampered by the fact that the original bird was long extinct.

The exhibition was co-curated by NDMOA Director and Chief Curator Laurel Reuter and Icelandic artist **Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson**. Reuter visited many artist studios in Iceland over the past four years. She ultimately invited Friðjónsson to join her as co-curator because of the singular "Icelandic-ness" of his painting as well as his long involvement in organizing exhibitions of both Icelandic and international artists for his own Corridor Gallery (housed in his home in Reykjavik since 1979 "to open up a door to art which would not otherwise be seen in Iceland"). Friðjónsson, whose work is also in the show, is one of Iceland's most celebrated contemporary painters. His approach to painting is informed by his powerful sense of Iceland's cultural heritage, land, and the connection between man and nature—and washed with a comic edge that has a bittersweet pathos to it. Ultimately, these same characteristics are shared by the other artists in the exhibition.

Building things with one's own hands is still close to people in seemingly isolated places such as Iceland and North Dakota. **Katrín Sigurðardóttir** and **Helgi Hjaltalín Eyjólfsson**, like **Guðjón**

Ketilsson, fabricate and build their art. Sigurðardóttir is known for constructing landscapes in shipping crates which she simply folds up and sends off to the next exhibition. The landscapes, while not identified as Iceland, certainly suggest her home place.

Eyjólfsson, on the other hand, defines the rudiments of interior landscapes from rough building lumber. The housing for a grandfather's clock has no mechanism. Wainscoting wraps a non-existent room. A slice from a tree suggests one could count rings and thus calculate the age of the tree—except he wrapped a core with layers of veneer, around and around, adding ring after artificial ring until it measured thirty-nine inches in diameter.

For this exhibition Eyjólfsson is creating a new work in the Museum galleries. The artist lives near the Atlantic where the horizontal lines of the water and sand dunes are broken only by a tall pole that stands on the shore close to his home. He uses the pole as a pedestal for mounting smaller objects. It reminds him of a picture of another pole taken in Dubrovnik during the war in the nineties. He is building such a pole in the Museum galleries, this time for mounting watercolors.

Whereas both minimalism and landscape are strong forces in contemporary Icelandic art, the surreal, object based art in this exhibition has been chosen to resonate with the descendants of these early settlers. This picture of Iceland through the work of some of its leading artists presents an art based in making, constructing, storytelling, and mythmaking. It speaks of intellectual girth, charm and wry humor—the same characteristics that might be attached to the artists coming from Iceland for the opening, according to Museum Director Laurel Reuter. On June 22 at 6 pm Birgisson, Nordal, Friðjónsson and Eyjólfsson will give informal gallery talks about their work. The Museum opening will be followed at 7 pm by the kick-off of the Museum's Summer Concerts in the Garden, featuring the North River Ramblers.

For the opening, the Museum has rented parking lots to the north and west of the building from UND. The Museum is located at 261 Centennial Drive in Grand Forks. It is open weekdays from 9 – 5 pm and weekends from 1 – 5 pm. Admission is free.