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Magnús Sigurdarson, *Storm*, gallerí@hlemmur.is, Reykjavík, 10/2 – 4/3/2001

Halldór Björn Runólfsson: Nothing is as degrading for the hunter's sense of manhood as being surrounded by small children who mistake him for an amusement, a sort of Santa Claus in his summertime outfit.

What seems to be snow dried by a storm is in fact salt with flakes of feathery ethafoam swirling about the inner room of the gallery, stirred by three large fans. The room is screened off by a plexiglas window, through which the installation can be observed from the adjacent gallery office, or contemplated directly from the street by passers-by. A loud noise of blowing wind comes from loudspeakers in the office,

creating a shivery sense of chill.

Magnús Sigurdarson's unconfined snowscape is a cleverly conceived piece of informal art challenging both the impossibility of indoor rendering of extreme climatic conditions, such as a snowstorm and the symbolic meaning of such an invasive atmosphere. Admittedly his installation does contain a sarcastic allusion to the fate of the young artist starting his career in a temperature well

below zero, with snow whirling in his face.

He has to endure a winter of intolerance with carefree optimism; the critic's lack of sympathy, or worse; his lack of presence at the artist's first exhibition. Young artists are never sure of attracting enough attention to catch the eye of the critic and get a review, or to obtain the indispensable approval of their colleagues. Their uneasiness and uncertainty amounts to a struggle in a snowstorm, where the view in all directions is blurred, and the only salvation is the artist's innate stubbornness, or the impossibility for him of doing anything but art.

This is not the first work in which Sigurdarson deals with the crisis of ideal-

ism in today's harsh society. His series of photographs of himself dressed in a camouflage safari suit with a shotgun, menacing the domestic animals in the popular Family Park in Reykjavík's Sport and Pleasure Gardens, deal with the crisis of masculine identity, echoing Freud's speculations in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Nothing is as degrading for the hunter's sense of manhood as being surrounded by small children who mistake him for an amusement, a sort of Santa Claus in his summertime outfit.

With his constantly twiddling fingers rapidly shaping small skyscrapers out of ordinary newspapers, Sigurdarson expresses this taming of natural impulses as they relate to art. With a wry sense



Magnús Sigurdarson, *Storm*, 2001, installation view. Photo: Halldór Björn Runólfsson.

of humour, as if he were a connoisseur of manufactured paper, he fondles newspapers wherever he goes, tears a strip from a page and immediately starts to shape it into a skyscraper. This has become such an unconscious act that Sigurdarson is

capable of fashioning several newspaper buildings while talking, or participating in a meeting. The dream of the grand gesture which instigated the art of the happening, performance and other bodily expression in the '50s and '60s, both in

Eastern and Western art, is reduced through Sigurdarson's twiddling to an insignificant, almost negligible twitch to calm the nerves.

His series of self-portraits reclining nude on an air mattress in the form of an inflated whale is, to put it mildly, corny at first glance, but as a response to, for instance, Hannah Wilke or Lynda Benglis, Sigurdarson's photos can be seen as an erroneous attempt by the male artist to fill the void left by the naked Valkyries who went to war on the clichéd objectification of the female body. Here again his art clearly reveals the bewildering indecisiveness of the contemporary male, who has yet to rid himself of his primitive instincts, but does not know how to channel them adequately.

The lack of examples and directives is allegorically invested in the *Storm*. Once again, Sigurdarson makes an indirect allusion to the contemporary male crisis, since most of the Icelandic literature that used to be the male community's favourite nourishment consisted of true accounts of heroic struggles with the harsh forces of nature in the mountainous wilderness or on the sea. In this struggle for survival, lots of lives were lost, and each year there are still one or two who perish in a blizzard, or drown in the turbulent waters around the island.

But the accounts of heroism become ever shorter, while a detailed record of the way in which the wrecked were saved by the coastguard fills the pages of newspapers and the screens of the television sets, with special emphasis, not on

the heroic endurance of those who managed to reach the life raft, but on the new technology which makes the rescue work ever more effective. The new heroes of stormy weather are not the struggling individuals who get caught up in it, but the helicopters, the float suits, or the GPS locating devices that spot the lost. If a living thing does attract the attention of the reader or the onlooker, it is the dog specially trained to find victims lost in blizzards and avalanches.

Television has taken us even further. Nowadays, it is considered perfectly normal to observe a rescue while it is taking place, since the coastguard hardly ever leaves town without bringing with it those other necessary pieces of equipment: a cameraman and a reporter from one of the broadcasting services. This has fortunately given the sulking male a worthy model, in the form of yet another narcissistic superstar filling the screen and forgetting that it is not him we want to see, but the rescue below.

In most of Sigurdarson's works there is a bottled-up narcissism in search of a prey to seduce. His facial expression flirts with the kind of smile that was fashionable during the Enlightenment, the difference being the streak of innocence, which Voltaire lacked. In Sigurdarson's introduction to the exhibition there is an allusion to good humour and tenacious optimism as the young artist's best remedy against the storm of ignorance. One never knows where Sigurdarson's sarcasm will lead him next.

—Halldór Björn Runólfsson