

Public Sculpture in Iceland

by D. Dominick Lombardi

Known for its many natural wonders—volcanoes, glaciers, lava fields, geysers, and waterfalls—Iceland is quickly becoming a world-class art center. In addition to Reykjavík's museums and galleries, the country has an ever-growing collection of public artworks. One of Reykjavík's newest and most conceptual public sculptures is *Flaedisger* (Flood Reef 1999) by Borghildur Óskarsdóttir. Located on the shore behind the airport, *Flaedisger* consists of large concrete block letters lying on the sand. The letters, which spell *náttúra* (nature), are left to be covered and uncovered by the changing tides. The piece will eventually erode and shift, becoming veiled in sand, seaweed, and barnacles as it is slowly claimed by the ocean.

Steinunn Dórarinsdóttir's compelling and beautiful *Köllun Calling*, 2000) stands on a grass field beside St.

Joseph's Church, located across the street from Reykjavík's hospital. *Köllun* represents the nuns who started the first hospital in Reykjavík in the late 1800s. The lone female form is soft in detail, reminiscent of the work of Medardo Rosso. A narrow cross of glass stretching from her mouth to the center of her chest completely penetrates the sculpture from front to back. When the sun strikes the glass, the sculpture appears to radiate light from within.

In 1990, Richard Serra gave *Áfangar* (Portal View, 1990) to the city. The work consists of a series of pairs of pillars that encircle Videy, an island in the harbor of Reykjavík. Visitors can take a ferry and walk the island, periodically standing behind and looking through the columns at the surrounding views. This angle of sight, which includes the two parallel pillars, the

land, and the water behind, is a vague reference to the symbol of Reykjavík—three waves of water behind two pillars.

Magnús Tómasson's *Óthekkti embaettismadurinn* (The Unknown Civil Servant, 1994) is situated in a small square in the center of downtown Reykjavík. The lower half of the sculpture realistically represents a man in a suit carrying a briefcase. What would normally be his upper body has been replaced by a large rectangular rock. The metaphorical aspect of the rock as flesh and blood is Magritte-like, while at the same time, it presents the bureaucrat as shortsighted and hard-headed.

Three sculptors with a significant presence and their own museums in Reykjavík are Einar Jónsson, Ásmundur

Below left: Borghildur Óskarsdóttir, *Flaedisger* (Flood Reef), 1999. Concrete block letters, view of site-specific work. **Below right:** Magnús Tómasson, *Óthekkti embaettismadurinn* (The Unknown Civil Servant), 1994. Bronze.



Sveinsson, and Sigurjón Ólafsson. Ólafsson's *Íslandsmerki* (*Icelandic Emblem*, 1974) stands on a grassy rotary in front of the Hotel Saga. The rhythmic and whimsical forms commemorate the Viking era, when pillars adorned with carvings of the Nordic gods were thought of as a source of strength for the owner. Sveinsson's *Vatnsberinn* (*The Water Carrier*), created in 1937 and cast in 1967, is dedicated to the women of Reykjavík who, before there was a municipal water system, carried heavy buckets of water from the wells to their houses. The sculpture minimally depicts a woman with drooping shoulders, straining neck, and a sorrowful yet determined facial expression.

The northern town of Akureyri also has a number of significant public sculptures. Jón Gunnar Árnason's *Sigling* (*Sailing*, 1986), with its uplifting

forms, makes a sinuous transition from the harbor's edge to the townscape. Nearby, and just up the hill overlooking the great fjord of Akureyri, stands Einar Jónsson's compelling and powerful *Útlaginn* (*The Outlaw*, 1904). A romanticized view of extreme hardship, the work shows a moment in the life of a man who has been banished to the Highlands by a Danish court. His wife, who has died during their arduous journey, is draped across his back. The child in his left arm and the dog at his side are quiet and scared. The shovel he uses as a walking stick will soon be used to bury his wife.

Nearby, in front of the local high school, is another work by Sveinsson. *Ódinshrafninn* (*The Raven of Odin*, 1952) is makes a strong abstract statement from any angle, and the sweeping gesture of the forms gives it great forcefulness despite its rather intimate size.

Ragnar Kjartansson's larger-than-life *Audhumbla Cow and Milkmaid*, 1980–84 is appropriately situated next to the town's dairy cooperative. Best described as Social/Regionalist in style, the work depicts a woman as she sits quietly on a small stool beside a cow. Her expression of quiet satisfaction and the gesture the cow makes by gently licking her back elude to the strong, practical, and respectful union Icelanders have with the land and its resources.

On a rocky hilltop at the University of Akureyri is *Íslandsklukkan* (*Bell of Iceland*, 2000), by Kristinn E. Hrafnsson, which commemorates the 1,000th anniversary of Catholicism in Iceland. It consists of a large bell situated between two cut stone monoliths. In numerical order and end to end, the artist lists in raised numerals each successive year from the beginning of the Viking settlements in 874, to the date of the work.

About one hour east of Akureyri stands the most compelling location

of any public sculpture in Iceland. Iceland creates electrical power from natural geothermal steam and dammed water. Power Station III (Laxárvirkjun), called Laxá III, which is owned by the power company Landsvirkjun, has, for the past two years, held exhibitions of sculpture and installation art. Artists respond well to this remarkable environment for contemporary sculpture. One of the most interesting works, *Virkjun* (*Hydro*, 2001) by Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir, is composed of various strategically placed valve wheels that are directly mounted into the rock walls. The feeling one gets, standing underground, adjacent to the base of a dam and seeing these shut-off valves, is both intimidating and humorous.

More information on the public art of Reykjavík is available at Web site <<http://www listasafnreykjavikur.is>>. For Akureyri, see <<http://www.akureyri.to>>.



Left: Steinunn Dórarinsdóttir, *Köllun* (*Calling*), 2000. Right: Richard Serra, *Áfangar* (*Portal View*), 1990. Stone, view of site-specific work in Videy.

