





# A Lyric Isolation

## Steinunn Thorarinsdottir

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Today, with a few notable exceptions, the craft and scope of figuration have been overrun by other kinds of art: conceptual work, high-tech videos, photo-based images. The humanist concerns typically addressed through realism have also been pushed aside, if not rejected outright. In a postmodern world that celebrates speed and intellectualized insight, there is little room for something so slow—and so emotionally compelling—as the human form. True, figuration is hardly dead as a style: it has been practiced for centuries, to the point where we can ask whether it still holds its traditional gravitas and ability to communicate collective values. Ever since the poet Ezra Pound's avant-garde command to "make it new," Western art has struggled to realize the ever-increasing burden

Opposite and above: Two views of *Horizons*, 2006–07. Cast iron and glass, 12 life-size figures.

MIKE BOATMAN



Interested in Buddhism, he seeks and finds the language necessary to relate an ongoing search for an openness born of self-negation. The self hardly persists as a theme in his art, not because it is being rejected but because it is quite simply irrelevant to his goal. In this way, he proposes a different kind of humanism, in which a negative path determines the boundaries of his creativity. The consequences are immensely exciting, for they imply that new art can continue to hold representation as a means and measure of the imaginative impulse. As Modernism becomes more and more a movement of the past, subject to scholarly investigation, it may be that recognizable form has a place in the ongoing forum of contemporary art. Despite being shunted to the margins, figuration is capable of offering the pleasures of recognition—of ourselves and of the history we have created. When I praise the achievements of representation, I am by no means demanding a return to the past. Art must continue to develop according to its own impulses. That does not mean, however, that we must reject figurative language as *inherently* dated. In contemporary art, figuration exists on a level playing field, where any and all styles prove acceptable if they attain high quality.

Steinunn Thorarinsdóttir rejects any notion of the figure as a purely historicist vehicle; she is not creating according to a scholarly imagination. Instead, her figures denote the lyric isolation that all of us bear—in both art and life. Their presence is symbolic, even allegorical in the sense that they radiate a melancholy originating in a clear-eyed view of the human condition. What better way is there than figurative realism to express the innate awkwardness of people, their preference for folly and self-deception? At the same time, however, by asserting the essential dignity of the human form, Thorarinsdóttir conveys a deep concern for human nature, no matter how troubled its energies may be in contemporary life. Words cannot fully explain the gap between our imagination and the reality it negotiates, but that is exactly where figuration steps in: its imagery may embody, literally and figuratively, some of the pathos of which we are inevitably a part.

Art cannot effectively take refuge in generalities; it must rely, instead, on the particulars of form and feeling. The claim of Thorarinsdóttir's work resides, in part, in the attractiveness of the human form, even as it displays an isolation bordering on the inevitable. But

Left: *Prospect*, 2000. Aluminum and mirror stainless steel, 175 x 100 x 100 cm. Below: *Shadows*, 1998. Aluminum, 180 x 80 x 80 cm.

of originality. In consequence, Modernist work turned away from realism: painting and sculpture became profoundly involved with the investigation of their own paradigms, so that both content and form were abstracted. Modernist abstraction tended to crowd out traditional concerns with the figure, although the exceptions are important: an artist like Henry Moore stayed more or less true to representation. His poetic forms unfortunately look dated today and might even be called sentimental in their adherence to a tradition distanced from contemporary concerns.

Yet the desire to portray reality realistically—as opposed to abstractly or conceptually—can be found in some of our strongest contemporary sculptors. Antony Gormley comes quickly to mind. For more than two decades, he has been concerned with spirituality and the human form.



LEFT: KRISTJÁN PETUR GUÐNÁSON / RIGHT: ARNALDUR HALLDÓRSSON



Left and right: *Voyage*, 2006. Aluminum and basalt, 2-part memorial installed in Vik, Iceland, and Hull, England, 620 x 50 x 50 and 580 x 50 x 50 cm.

this may be a poignant mistake—we cannot proceed as if we were entirely responsible for our circumstances. Art, being what it is, effectively disperses those feelings of alienation by emphasizing a common imagination. We not only see the form, we also participate in its completion, which is determined by a perception of its meaning shared by both the artist and her audience. As a result, we can say that art embraces a holistic experience, no matter how defiant the terms of its belief. Thorarinsdottir’s public sculptures and more intimate installations remind us that even though we proceed as if blinded by experience, it is that same experience that opens us to clarity—a lucidity she quite literally embeds as a horizontal line of glass in her figures. This conveyance of transparency is neither a feint nor a joke; it eschews grandiosity in the face of something more human, something more exactly true regarding human nature.

While Thorarinsdottir cannot redeem time and place through creativity alone, she can persuade us that the poetic loss we all must acknowledge can be momentarily transformed. In *Horizons* (2006–07), her installation at the Katonah Museum of Art sculpture garden (later shown at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis and the San Antonio Botanical Garden), 12 figures were randomly placed in a spruce grove, each pointing away from the others. They both suggest and deny the promise of community. The cast iron, life-size statues suggest the color of earth, as well as the bark of the 100-year-old Norwegian spruces. As one moves in and out of the grove, the figures appear and disappear, so that the experience extends to an exploration of both art and nature. The figures are simply formed and presumably male, although they lack genitals. The horizontal stripe of glass allows light to pass through each of their bodies, giving the viewer a sense of the spirit contained by the human form.

As beautiful as the installation may be, its primary purpose moves toward a regard for the melancholy aspect of human experience. These sexless figures might be angels if not for their lack of wings—we remember that, for Thorarinsdottir, the primary focus is the vulnerability of people, their capacity for survival and mute emotion. Their separation is obvious but not all-encompassing: light passes through the glass that makes them spiritual beings as well as inhabitants of a harsh earth. This contrast—between ethereal beauty and an often rebarbative reality—may be seen as something in which we all participate, no matter what our background or station. The seclusion surrounding the sculptures is born silently, and not only because art is by nature mute. This remoteness must be taken as both reality and a symbol of our mixed results when we attempt any communication of depth; our subjectivity inevitably joins and separates our connection with others. It is close to impossible to transcend the duality that applies to us, but perhaps if we could do so, we might take the form of Thorarins-

dottir's figures, those emblems of an indifferent world transformed by the spark carried within each of us.

Interaction with these unspeaking figures implies that we are required to fulfill their promise as guardians of a poise toward which we can struggle. They signify neither pleasure nor aggression, being so entirely themselves. But, at bottom, there seems to be a lyrical sadness to the installation. The expressiveness of the grave countenances and unseeing eyes prepare us for an allegory of loss, although what that loss is exactly is hard to pin down. As Peter Osborne, director of the Osborne Samuel Gallery in London, explains in the exhibition brochure, "They [the figures] represent mankind in a general sense." As aides to contemplation, they encourage us in our efforts to make sense of the world, which apparently is indifferent to their—and our—fate. In fact, one senses the works as uncanny references to our mortal transience, a theme often taken up by poetry.

Yet, as Osborne also points out, the sculptures have a roughness to them, evident in the artist's choice of material: their perspective is one of survival. The persistence they embody relates to both natural processes and human endeavor. Just as these figures are human constructs physically placed in nature, so too do they carry with them, on their cast iron exteriors, traces of nature, as used and interpreted by Thorarinsdottir.

One hesitates to ascribe too much philosophical significance to Thorarinsdottir's work, but a poetic reading of her figures' existence as sculpture surely does justice to the implications they convey in the real world. Their anonymity, a deliberate choice by the artist, extends their ability to affect viewers. Small changes in the tilt of a head or the placement of a hand create moments of difference, but the overall impression is one of sameness: the figures agree collectively on their symbolic position as human forms. As a result, they contribute effectively to a view that seems compassionate, despite their raw and rough details. Placed outdoors, the sculptures enact the ongoing conversation we have with nature even though they are produced by human agency. Their iron skins reflect, over time, the effects of weather—another conscious nod to the power of nature. The elements come into play as much as the artist's processes, so that the figures balance both the involuntary, inevitable influence of nature and the highly determined exigencies of art.

Inevitably, the stoicism of Thorarinsdottir's figures turns vulnerable. Their self-sufficiency a bit of a feint, the sculptures address our innate sense of incompleteness, as if they, too, had been wounded by time. But their rough-cast exteriors emphasize survival, just as their narrow windows of transparent glass stress the persistence of the spirit in transcendent terms. Viewers might wonder whether the figures' silent gravity is enough of a positive

*Illumination*, 2005. Cast iron and glass, 176 x 50 x 40 cm.





*Islands*, 2003. Aluminum, 175 x 55 x 35 cm.

experience, partly because they reveal so little of themselves. But perhaps that is exactly Thorarinsdottir's point: we cannot bear the transparency of our nature, and so we reveal as little as we can. The stripe of luminescence also suggests that the struggle to reveal ourselves will, eventually, be redeemed by matters of the spirit. This is not a failed dichotomy so much as a duality bridged by art itself. Thorarinsdottir intends to invest the human figure with the healing power of internal light, without which the sculptures would not engage in their extraordinary transfiguration. Art, it seems, is all we have in terms of retaining a transcendent sense of the human. This may be seen either as a limitation or as a brilliant assertion of the powers of the imagination. Thorarinsdottir celebrates the means of spiritual change, without which we would be stuck in an empty morass of self. Despite the rather bleak visual terms, we are enjoined to enter a striking partnership. The statues invoke nature and internal light just as much as they relate the isolation that binds us.

Thorarinsdottir's figures disclose little emotional information other than a generalized sadness; we have little to go on in terms of making sense of the grief that appears to be innate to our condition. They originate as examples of the human imagination, both in a formal and a spiritual sense. One can hardly lighten the weight that burdens these simplified human forms, although it is probably a mistake to read a purely tragic existence

in their presentation of a muted, mystical self. It is wise to keep in mind that the origins of sculpture imply a monument, or memorial, to our passing: death engenders form because it is hard to bear by itself. As the viewer continues to interact with the figures, he or she comes to the realization that memory is a large part of the installation's meaning—the memory of our transitory state and the lengths to which we uphold aesthetic beauty as a means of transcending, even if only momentarily, the heaviness caused by our awareness. Thorarinsdottir encompasses a broad range of feelings because she refuses to succumb to something so powerful as a universal fate. Her statues are emblems of survival, but they are also beautiful as examples of form.

Form is what concerns both Thorarinsdottir and the viewer. Her aesthetic rejects mortality as a failure, seeing in it the chance to transform the conscious burden of our awareness of death. These ethereal sculptures do not interact; their individual forms make a definitive comment on our isolated relations. But that is not all of the story: narrative also comes into play here, suggesting the power of storytelling to evade the sometimes overwhelming weight of the real. In some remarkable way, Thorarinsdottir's figures enact a history of ongoing existence, without which daily life would be very grim indeed. The lyricism inherent in their isolation is another way of dealing with a process best described as mourning before the fact. Poetry—of both language and of form—is particularly strong in its transfiguration of the commonplace, the goal that stands before each of us. Thorarinsdottir transforms her materials by investing them with the currency of belief; the viewer continues that transformation by understanding what it means to exist in lyric isolation, which tempers our actions and attentiveness to large themes. This may be all that is possible to do, but it is also everything that *can* be done. The sculptures thus resonate in consciousness in ways that keep both our yearning and our accomplishments alive.

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