

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Katrin Sigurdardottir. "Boiserie (detail)", 2010. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Bruce Schwarz, The Photograph Studio, ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## Katrin Sigurdardottir at the Met

Metropolitan Museum of Art  
October 19, 2010 – May 30, 2011

Katrin Sigurdardottir's current solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is part of the museum's continuing series featuring the work of contemporary artists at mid-career—others in the series include Tara Donovan and Kara Walker. The exhibition, up through May 30, 2011, and curated by Anne Strauss, in fact consists of two installations, both riffs on 18th century wood-paneled rooms (known as "boiseries"), formerly part of private homes (well, palaces) in Paris, and now preserved as part of the Met's Wrightsman Galleries. Sigurdardottir is well-known for a signature series of hand-crafted wooden boxes that unlock and fully unfold to reveal miniature, railroad-style landscapes that are deliberately elusive as to their source or location. It remains unclear what about the landscapes is real and what is imagined. These boxes are generally shipped around the world by the artist and her galleries as traveling works, with the resulting postal labels forming part of the art and adding yet another element to these memory landscapes. In other works, such as her solo installation at P.S.I, where she built an elevated plane with cut-outs to which viewers ascended on ladders to gaze on what appeared to be a vista of icebergs (in fact, polystyrene forms), she toyed with our perception of space, location, materials, and memory, mixing things outside with things inside and natural forms with constructed ones.

In her current show, she goes further, creating works that find unexpected relationships within and among the varied historical periods and media embraced by the Met's vast holdings. The intent is to elaborate on our memories of the works we encounter as we journey through the museum.

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery  
NEW YORK



Katrin Sigurdardottir. "Boiserie (detail)", 2010. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Bruce Schwarz, The Photograph Studio, ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The first of the two *Boiseries* confronts us with a room within a room, a construction we walk around within a larger and otherwise empty gallery space, fenestrated on all sides with one-way mirrors that allow us to peer and spy on a smaller-than-scale paneled room based on one of the museum's period rooms. This replica of sorts differs from the original not only in scale but in its abstraction of form. Whereas the period room is gilt and otherwise elaborated with color and fabric, Sigurdardottir reworks its elements in an intense and pure white, creating a snowy interior landscape. Thus, the furniture, carefully replicated by the artist and a local craftsman, recalls, without duplicating, their 18th century models. Our status as outsiders peering in is enhanced by the one-way mirrors through which we look, our presences eradicated in the mirrors across the room. The emptiness of the room, removed from the present, allows us to move imaginatively from the past to the present and back again.

Now I have to admit that, before seeing this show, I had not visited the original period rooms in the Wrightsman Galleries, or, if I had, they made no impression on my memory. But one of the revelations one experiences through the *Boiseries* is in fact how elegant and dreamy the original rooms are. I suggest that they are best seen *after* viewing the contemporary interpretations, because the latter's purification of the period rooms ends up breathing new life into them. I then found it much more difficult to classify the one installation as "sculpture" and the other as "decorative design" or "architecture"; rather, Sigurdardottir has not only brought together viewer and viewed as we move in or around her conceptualization of the antique French spaces, but she has also imported an often overlooked unity between what is "contemporary" and what is "historical" and, in the end, between the real and the imaginary.

The second *Boiserie* elaborates still further on these relationships. Rather than place us outside the paneled room, as in the first installation, Sigurdardottir invites us to walk in and around a spiraling and folded screen-like construction in which the paneling from another of the 18th century rooms has been replicated as linked sections of continually decreasing size, all set at angles to one another, with the sections themselves angled to indicate perspective. One starts out at a life-size panel at the beginning and ends up at a tiny, *Alice in Wonderland* doorway. The best indication of this work's success is to see how visiting children immediately swirl around with its flow and quickly lie down on the floor, looking through the pint-sized windows and doors. The constructed spiral itself is, of course, a primal form, and while it is hard to avoid thinking of Smithsonian's "Spiral Jetty" as one among many art historical references, the essential form evokes galaxies and watch springs, as well—forms that themselves ebb and flow with visual energy. In short, *Boiserie* is simply one of those rare and magical sculptural installations that freely includes the viewer both in its space and its movement through time. **MICHAEL STRAUS**