

## Tumi Magnússon

For the past couple of decades or so Tumi Magnússon has been justifiably extolled for his vivid, intelligent, oftentimes refreshingly eccentric paintings, and more recently for his painting-like photographs and videos. Magnússon's spare aesthetic, which involves prominent single colors as well as a subtle interplay between different colors, is linked to various forms of reductionism practiced elsewhere, including monochromes and Color Field painting. However, he is probably just as, and perhaps even more so, connected to a longstanding Icelandic affinity for evocative austerities, including the country's severe yet entralling landscape, and the acute qualities of light in that landscape, as well as to a national interest in understatement, humility, and reserve, as opposed to flamboyance and excess, developed over centuries of stoic hardship. In New York City Minimalism may have begun as an art movement in the early 1960's, but in Iceland it began as a comprehensive attitude in 874, with the first settlement.

What also distinguishes Magnússon, and what makes his work so unusual, is how he couples close, dispassionate, almost scientific observation of visual information with goofy humor and a rich sense of the absurd, especially when it comes to subject matter. Among Magnússon's more memorable past works are six abstract paintings, ranging from dark brown to tawny, which effectively capture and memorialize the different hues of Coca-Cola, from a full bottle to a slight drop, and a suite of eight paintings, from light yellow at the left, through yellowish white, and then mostly white on the right, which all chart the hues and tones of an actual egg white in the process of turning from raw to cooked. And then there are Magnússon's startling combinations, in which abstract oil paintings are in the colors of different substances, for instance horse shit and cigarette smoke (a wonderful painting, incidentally, that also loosely suggests a remote landscape and blue sky at dawn), or serum and chewing gum. These exquisitely painted works are lovely and entrancing, and evoke a meditative quiescence. At the same time they are peculiar and jarring, especially when you realize exactly what has been depicted.

Magnússon's spare approach and quietly vibrational colors remain at the core of his work, even as he has increasingly explored a kind of expanded painting, which includes temporary wall paintings, large scale photographs which can be the sizes of walls, and a video/sonic installation. For *Pencil*, 2003, he scanned a single red pencil with a sharpened point into the computer, digitally stretched and enlarged the image to gargantuan proportions, and presented this now massive pencil image as a print on adhesive plastic film covering an entire wall. With variations in red tones ranging from dark crimson to light pink, numerous vertical striations, and dense sections next to vaporous ones, this gorgeous work is mesmerizing and, quite frankly, sublime, even though it's an image of a mere pencil. With *Cat*, 2003, three different photographs of the artist's cat were similarly stretched, enlarged, and mounted on adjacent walls in the corners of rooms, so that this ultra mediated cat merged or blended with the architectural environment. The resulting orangish and white large photographs are partly catlike,

partly abstract, and altogether riveting; they are also among the most outlandish family pet photographs one is ever likely to see. The gray *Space Box*, 2008, is a huge digital photograph of nothing more than an external hard drive, yet it seems mysterious and ambiguous, suggesting a painting, a recessed space in the wall, and a horizontal obelisk akin to the crucial black obelisk in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Weirdly, even unnervingly, a familiar around the house or on the desk object becomes strange and inviting, imbued with a magical, logic-warping intensity, even as you recognize it for what it is.

All of these works brings up an essential point concerning Magnússon. He is interested in banal things so known and familiar that under normal conditions we'd hardly give them a second thought, which he scrutinizes, broods on, manipulates, distorts, exaggerates, and decisively transforms so that they become simultaneously humdrum and spectacular. In his excellent video installation *Puddles*, 2006-07, these banal things are gobs and splatters of wet, brightly colored paint, which seem to invisibly zip through the room (through loudspeakers you hear them whooshing) and thwack against different surfaces, which you see on the video screens. Magnússon's doctored version of the most basic painterly act is hilarious, and has an antic, slapstick streak, but it is also captivating and wonderfully nuanced. Quietude is intermittently interrupted by resounding thwacks. Paint smacking against a surface makes a real mess, but is also visually luscious. Slowness and patience are repeatedly startled by sudden jolts. Maybe there are inane suggestions of action painters (like Jackson Pollock) dripping and flinging wet paint onto canvas, but then again maybe there are also suggestions of rainstorms and hail; after all, the work's title certainly indicates sodden weather such as is common in Iceland, and the whole installation functions as an eccentric landscape "paining". As often happens with Magnússon, there is something meticulous and gleefully ridiculous about this work, as well as something very thoughtful and humanly profound. As you stand in the installation attempting to take it all in, Magnússon's zinging paint gobs have surprising repercussions: our best, gorgeous efforts which later seem piecemeal and ephemeral, our yen for something durably meaningful in a world of flux and constant agitation, even how we habitually concentrate on something important only to miss something else, that's also important, happening right over there.

Gregory Volk