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The Snow Show

R BY ROB YOUNG IN REVIEWS | 05 MAY 04



As sculptural materials, snow and ice are most commonly encountered as some form of kitsch: snow hotels, caviar-stuffed ice swans and so on. In Kemi and Rovaniemi, neighbouring Finnish towns at the cusp of the Arctic circle, Lapland tat abounds: this is the epicentre of Scandinavia's Santa Claus/reindeer ride/husky safari industries. 'The Snow Show', curated at sites in both towns by New York's Lance Fung, teamed artists and architects with a brief to explore the unique structural possibilities offered by snow and ice in sub-zero temperatures.

The participating teams' responses tended to take one of two general tacks. Some partnerships sculpted, using only compressed and moulded snow and ice; others embellished the raw material either by dyeing it or by adding other components such as metal plates, lighting, installing digital LED displays or, in a domed cavern installation by the on-site student builders, an experimental musician playing a feedback guitar. Nothing resembled an igloo or Disney castle, and given the limited parameters of the brief, a remarkable diversity of approaches was on display.

Although the show opened in a rather happy-clappy spirit, with assembled art world attendees finding common cause against the minus 25 degree winds, a mild dialectic opened up during a symposium featuring 15 of the participants. Greek studio Anamorphosis took a stern line, railing against anyone who thought architecture in any way involved casting forms; they staked out their ground as a group interested in conjuring forms out of the bare earth. However, their *Morphic Excess of the Natural/Landscape in Excess* (all works 2004), with Eva Rothschild, an amphitheatre sculpted out of an artificially created snow hillock, failed to live up to the braggadocio. In fact, since the earliest clay-fired bricks, building with smaller units has allowed for intricate and elegant shapes and forms. Tadao Ando, whose structures work with large curves and organic domes made from glass and different types of 'skin', simply constructed a parabolic Iced Time Tunnel of ice blocks impossible with 'normal' bricks, but the translucent bow was the most radiant jewel in the 'Snow Show' collection. Arata Isozaki and Yoko Ono's Penal Colony was an ice maze within a cramped 'prison compound', in which visitors were encouraged to carry candles, the implied theme being the meltability of mental confinement.

Enrique Norton and Lawrence Weiner's untitled piece, LOT-ek and Top Changtrakul's Coloured Ice Walls and Morphosis and Do-Ho Suh's Fluid Fossils integrated large slabs of ice treated with different pigments, injected with anti-freeze or moulded with plastic sheeting to allow the ice to harden in unusual shapes according to its own physics. A Finnish ice expert was on hand throughout the installation period to give advice on the handling of these substances to practitioners often unfamiliar with the temperatures.

It was the elegant simplicity of a piece such as Tod Williams + Billie Tsien and Carsten Höller's Meeting Slides that worked best: a whorl of channels twirling through deep-packed snow: slides that viewers were encouraged to enjoy in a 'container of experience'. This was the show's most 'relational' work, and a reminder that most people's idea of snow tends to revolve around recreation rather than its attendant hardships. No one, in fact, addressed such concerns, which was a disappointment - a blizzard installation would presumably have been too difficult to stage-manage - but there was spectacle too. Zaha Hadid and Cai Guo-Qiang's untitled monument was the largest work, a gigantic Arctic ocean liner of dead-end canyons with yawning overhangs, curvilinear ziggurat terracing and varying degrees of transparency in the freezing. On the opening night Guo-Qiang's intervention in the structure - 'caressing Zaha with vodka', as he put it - was the most spectacular. He and his assistants poured crateloads of vodka into channels dug into the upper surfaces, set them alight and let the blue and gold flames illuminate the night sky. The blazing fluid wrought its own distortion on the ice blocks, causing loud cracking sounds to emanate from deep within.

Future Systems and Anish Kapoor's Red Solid was conceived as a large crimson whale form leaping from the site towards Rovaniemi's frozen river, but it ended up something of a wet fish. The pigmentation process didn't really work - one day pre-opening it was still only a dull pinky-grey. A bucket of post-office red paint slung over it at the last minute just looked a mess, and it seemed inevitable that, on the afternoon of the opening, the maltreatment, coupled with the presence of lights contained inside the body cavity, caused it to become unintentionally auto-destructive: it collapsed and lay in chilly fragments like so much chopped crab stick. Kapoor was already boarding his plane home at that point, so the sculpture was simply bulldozed out of existence - but then oblivion is a fate that, owing to the impermanence of ice even at these Arctic latitudes, will be common to all these delicate constructions within a couple of months.

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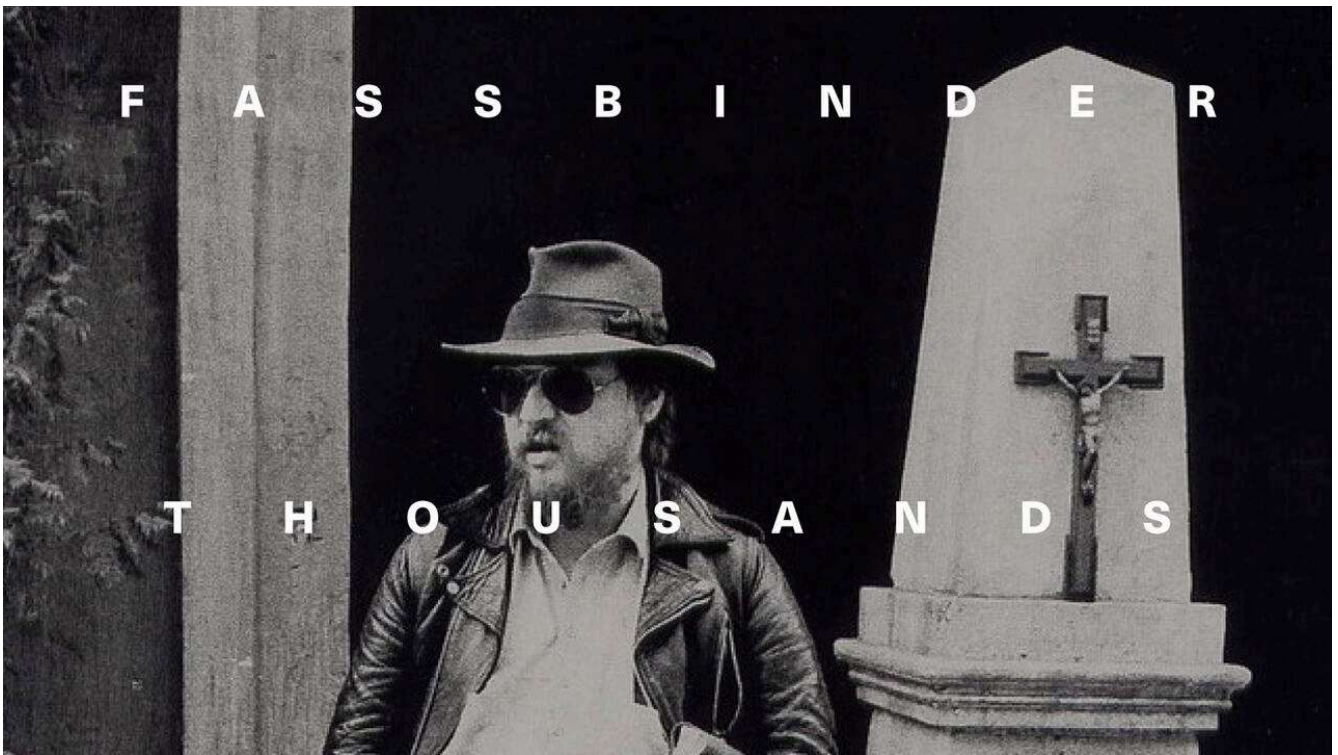
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