

Kahn and Selesnick, *Eisbergfreistadt*, review of the Boston exhibition

The Boston Globe *boston.com*

VISUAL ARTS REVIEW

Going with the floe

Duo's sly works revolve around tale of an iceberg

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff | May 13, 2007



Nicholas Kahn & Richard Selesnick, *Funfzig Millionen Mark*, 2007. Casein on paper. 30 1/4 X 53 3/4 in.

The biggest art bargain of the year is currently available at the Pepper Galley: a 50-million-mark banknote that can be purchased for a little more than \$8,000. Face value may be the least of the bargain: This is a *big* 50-million-mark banknote, roughly 2 1/2 feet by 4 1/2 feet.

Of course, with the dollar as weak as it is, there has to be a catch. The currency is neither legal tender in the United States nor drawn on the central bank of any existing nation, past or present. It comes from a sovereign entity with the rather imposing name of *Eisbergfreistadt*, or Iceberg Free State--a *Mitteleuropa* figment of the imaginations of Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick .

For some two decades, Kahn/Selesnick have been concocting visual poems of the almost-possible: images of Edwardian lunar expeditions ("The Apollo Prophecies"), a lost Central Asian metropolis ("City of Salt"), post-apocalyptic life in a Caledonian fen ("Scotlandfuturebog"). They specialize in a history that isn't so much counter-factual as para-factual: imaginary gardens with real zeppelins in them.

Usually, their images take the form of large-scale panoramic photographs. Yet they also utilize painting, film, and mixed-media. "Eisbergfreistadt," which runs at the Pepper Gallery through June 9, includes a pack of hand-painted playing cards; a man's size 40 jacket and woman's size 8 dress, both made of Eisbergfreistadt currency; and a wonderfully weathered wheelbarrow overflowing with same. Actually, Kahn/Selesnick prefer the term "notgeld." "Notgeld" is a German word meaning "emergency money," referring to the currency printed up during periods of hyperinflation.

1412 14th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005

T: 202-332-8767 F: 866-289-6809 info@irvinecontemporary.com www.irvinecontemporary.com

IRVINE CONTEMPORARY

Kahn/Selesnick are distant kin to such other nostalgist-exotics as the cartoonist Glen Baxter, illustrator Bruce McCall, and painter Donald Evans who specialized in meticulously detailed sheets of postage stamps from countries of his own imagining.

Kahn/Selesnick would protest that Eisbergfreistadt is not entirely their own creation. A very large iceberg purportedly made its way across the Baltic in 1923 and ran aground in Lubeck, Germany. This immense ice floe proceeded to become (this is where Kahn/Selesnick's fancy takes over) its own sovereign entity. It presumably melted away--the artists maintain a diplomatic reticence on the subject of outcome--in the mists of Weimar-era hyperinflation.

Hyperinflation is only the most obvious of the many German cultural elements from the '20s Kahn/Selesnick draw on for "Eisbergfreistadt." They are as much cultural historians --perhaps "connoisseurs" would be a better word or even "curators"--as they are visual artists.

There's the influence of director Arnold Fanck's mountain films, which gave Leni Riefenstahl her start; a photograph like "Seefläshe (Sea Plane)" could come straight from Fanck's "S.O.S. Eisberg." That man's jacket sports a very Bauhaus-y cut. And the 25 archival black and white prints framed together as "Geschichte Von Eisbergfreistadt (The Story of Eisbergfreistadt)" glory in Expressionist angles and the look of New Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, the style which came to dominate German photography in the '20s.

Kahn/Selesnick painstakingly evoke the era they're appropriating. Yet they also delight in transcending it. There is something slightly medieval about their sensibility. Their images can reveal odd, unexpected irruptions of detail, like the dirigible skeleton in the background of "Kartenspiel (Card Game). A favorite Kahn/Selesnick motif is the snout mask, which comes right out of Hieronymous Bosch. Here one is worn by a card player -- who's also wearing a fedora.

Kahn/Selesnick also tap into elements that go back even earlier in time. The polar bear suit worn by the rower in "Schlangeboat (Snake Boat)"--how can he keep a hold on his paddle with those claws?--is at once hilarious and spookily primeval. "Seefläshe," "Kartenspiel," and "Schlangeboat" are very big: 7 feet wide by a foot tall. They have the feel of two-dimensional dioramas. Their odd proportions make them seem both larger than life and weirder than life--not a bad shorthand description of Kahn/Selesnick's work.

Because of their size, the three panoramic photographs dominate the show. Of course, dominance is a relative thing. There are only 13 items in "Eisbergfreistadt," but in their intricate interlocking of theme and element that baker's dozen give the sense of a much larger whole.

The three-dimensional objects in the show--the wheelbarrow, a lovely leather valise stuffed with notgeld, and the currency-covered clothes--could be auditioning for an actual diorama. The clothes, worn by tailor's dummies, stand by a window. When it's open, the breeze makes the notes flutter, as if the dress were dancing a ghostly hootchie-koo. All that's needed to complete the picture is Louise Brooks wearing it, driving Ruhr industrialists and Prussian *Junkers* mad with desire. Whether that desire be for her, the dress, or both, only Kahn/Selesnick know for sure.

1412 14th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005

T: 202-332-8767 F: 866-289-6809 info@irvinecontemporary.com www.irvinecontemporary.com