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Cutting Through the Noise Surrounding Ragnar Kjartansson's Neo-Romantic Jam Band

Courtesy of the Artist and Luhring Augustine, New York
Ragnar Kjartasson in his film “The Visitors”
by Ben Davis
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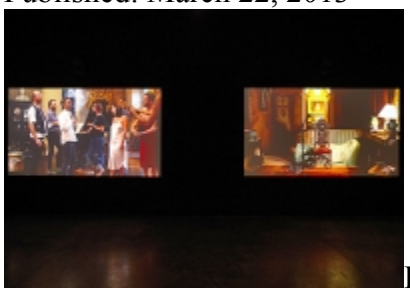

Installation view of "The Visitors" at Luhring Augustine / Courtesy of the Artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Ragnar Kjartansson's "The Visitors," just about to end an extended run at Luhring Augustine, is a great work. It is so great, as a matter of fact, that I almost immediately want to develop a critique of it, because it makes such a convincing case for its brand of big-hearted, self-depreciating Romanticism that it may well become some kind of mainstream really soon.

I'm not going to do that, because that would be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Still, it's worth looking under the hood to see how this particular aesthetic machine works. Kjartansson has risen far from being an obscure figure with an unpronounable name to go-to art star for dreamy, crowd-pleasing fare. His star-making turn came when he did the Icelandic Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, where he occupied a 14th-century palace, painting endless portraits of his friend wearing a Speedo, a kind of goofball burlesque of the cult of artist and muse. This year, he's moved onto the main stage at the Biennale: His work will be one of the attractions of Massimiliano Gioni's "Encyclopaedic Museum" show.

"The Visitors," however, really is something special, a rapturously absorbing nine-channel video installation, a masterful exercise in atmosphere, video portraiture, and all-around creative bravado. For the work, Kjartansson wrangled a load of notable Icelandic musicians up to Rokeby Farm in upstate New York ("a magical place," one of its tenants once said, "a Third World country in the First World, where everything is done in the funniest, most old-fashioned way"), setting up in a nearly 200-year-old mansion. Shown on screens encircling the gallery, the hour-long film in effect documents an extended jam session, each of the cameras trained on musicians set up in separate rooms of the mansion, coordinating with each other through headphones, together but separate.

These are skilled performers, and a lot of the pleasure of the video comes from just watching them absorbed completely in what they do, as well as from the lush music itself, which is languorous for long ambient passages of interlocking piano, guitar, and cello, before erupting into anthemic choruses. In materials accompanying the show, it is called a "feminine nihilistic gospel song," and it lives up to that far-out description. Its fragmentary lyrics are based on a poem by Kjartansson's ex-wife; one line ("once again / I fall into / my feminine ways") is repeated over and over and over again, quivering with emotion.

The spectacle begins, in Brechtian fashion, by foregrounding the theatrical nature of what is to come. One by one, the screens in the galleries come alive, as the cameras trained on the various spaces of the house are switched on. You watch the musicians plug in and warm up, in their isolation. You observe the atmosphere of bohemian languor being built before your eyes. On a central screen, a man sets up on the edge of a bed with a guitar, while a woman, naked, settles onto the mattress behind him. She will recline motionless for the entire performance, before getting up and dressing as if in a trance.

Kjartansson himself, playing bandleader, is pictured in a bathtub, completely nude and strumming an acoustic guitar, cringing with emotion as the performance builds, adopting his customary posture of cartoonishly distended artistic exhuberance.

Throughout, the film is rapturously aborbing even as it invites you to wander from screen to screen, scrutinizing the performers' tics as they move into and out of musical fusion. The most masterful moment arrives at the end, as the music crests, and then one by one the various players abandon their posts, crossing into the other spaces, gathering their fellow players together. You suddenly get a sense of how the world glimpsed through the different screens is interconnected. The whole gang at last pours out of the side of the mansion — a screen, centrally placed in the galleries, has been holding on the image of the exterior, and now the camera for the first time pans, moving to follow the crew as they march away into the misty green depths of the landscape, still chanting the same refrain.

Meanwhile, the remaining screens of "The Visitors" hold on the abandoned chambers. At last, a man passes back through the spaces of the house, whistling the tune. One by one he extinguishes the cameras. The gallery goes dark.

Romantic art — with its dramatic landscapes, evocative ruins, and tortured, lyrical psychology, so beloved by the 19th-century dandy — is a constant spirit hovering over Kjartansson's work. His signature move is to adopt what would probably be an embarrassingly naïve artistic posture and cut it with strategic absurdity, through repetition, exaggeration, or humor ("The Visitors," mind you, takes its name from an ABBA album). The point I'd make is that this wry, self-conscious form of Romanticism pretty much just *is* contemporary Romanticism, full stop. Just as wearing an ironically racy Halloween costume — "Sexy Hamburger," anyone? — is a way of trying to pull off wearing a racy Halloween costume by seeming hip about it, self-mocking Romanticism is how you can get away with expressing embarassingly effusive sentiments in a hyper-driven, jaded present.

A work like the "The Visitors" has all the strengths of the classical Romantic sensibility, and some of its potential weak points too. It offers a glimpse into a more ecstatic world; you really want to *be* these people, be invited to this party. It dwells in a kind of self-enclosed universe, spellbound by images of otherwordly artists and majestic decay. Like classic Romanticism, which arose as a personalistic reaction to European industrialization, such a neo-Romantic temperament draws its power as an implicit reproach to the dispirited, non-ecstatic lives we normally live. Unalloyed, of course, this type of thing might also become a kind of cloying, self-involved theater — indeed, you might even say that Kjartansson subtly thematizes the sense of wallowing in fantasy, since being *stuck in art* is a theme, both in this film with its endless, trance-like choruses, and in his work more generally. It's this minor-key background note that lets "The Visitors" resonate as both out of time and of its time at once.

Ragnar Kjartansson, "The Visitors," is on view at Luhring Augustine, 531 West 24th Street, New York, through March 23.

Reviews, Ragnar Kjartansson, Luhring Augustine, Ben Davis

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