

We Went to The New Museum: Kjartansson, Oleson, and Cuoghi

By Whitney Kimball, Paddy Johnson, artcity.com

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Ragnar Kjartansson: "Me, My Mother, My Father, and I"
Photo by: Image courtesy of the New Museum and Benoit Pailey

Ragnar Kjartansson: Me, My Mother, My Father, and I

What's on view: *A dimly lit room full of twenty-something guys playing the guitar and singing, while lounging on couches with beer bottles and coffee cups.*

*They're singing lines from, and performing in front of, a looped clip of a sex scene, featuring Kjartansson's parents, who were actors in Iceland's first feature film *Morðsaga* (1977). In the clip, a housewife (Kjartansson's mom) masturbates on the couch, fantasizing about having sex in the kitchen with the plumber (Kjartansson's dad), in a fancy 18th century wig and dress. The fuzzy pink lens of the fantasy shots cut starkly to the brightly lit living room, which is filled with imitation Rococo knick knacks. As the fantasy fades, his mother's expression drains, and she kicks over the vacuum cleaner. This, like the singing and guitar players, repeats infinitely.*

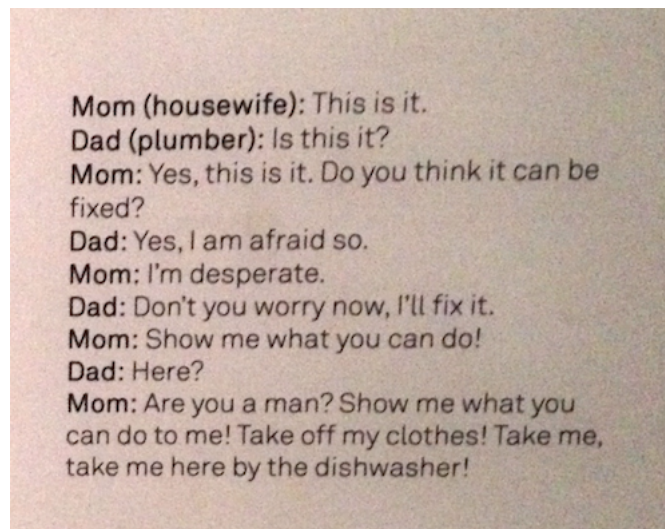
There are also soft pencil drawings of oceans ("pornographic waves") and a film of Kjartansson getting spit on repeatedly by his mom.

Whitney: I now get the Kjartansson hype. For once, the word "immersive" accurately describes a work of art; you're surrounded by young guys on little islands of mattresses and chairs, and their strumming and humming kind of washes over the room even before you notice the drawings of "pornographic waves" on the back wall. Slowly, you realize that they're listlessly singing his mother's dialogue like "Take me by the dishwasher" and his dad's "Don't you worry now, I'll fix it"- you're bathing in the fantasy and sadness. Even the repeat of the word "dishwasher", with their soft breathy vocals, hits a perfect note of sad poeticism.

As Paddy pointed out in the museum, it's not a particularly desirable interaction with one's parents, but the piece seems to identify deeply with being a woman and housewife. This makes me suspicious of liking the piece as much as I do. It's deeply heartfelt, but when talking about somebody's frustrations and exhaustion, it feels just a little too elegant.

Paddy: Wait, why were the waves on the back wall pornographic? Most of them were just waves that both he and his father drew separately. The wall text says they discovered that their marks were indistinguishable from one another, which I found to be true. I took this to mean that a lot can be carried over from generation to generation, a point made by the installation itself; every long-haired singing hipster looked either straight out of the 70's or Williamsburg.

Whitney: No, not literally pornographic, but they were titled "Raging Pornographic Sea" - I kinda took that as a reference to drowning in horniness. And I didn't notice that these were made by father and son- the marks really are that similar.

A photograph of a wall with a script of a conversation between a mother and a father. The text is written in a simple, black, sans-serif font. The conversation is as follows:

Mom (housewife): This is it.
Dad (plumber): Is this it?
Mom: Yes, this is it. Do you think it can be fixed?
Dad: Yes, I am afraid so.
Mom: I'm desperate.
Dad: Don't you worry now, I'll fix it.
Mom: Show me what you can do!
Dad: Here?
Mom: Are you a man? Show me what you can do to me! Take off my clothes! Take me, take me here by the dishwasher!

Paddy: There's something a little creepy about orchestrating a mass of different voices to articulate the same thing. Are we all really that similar? Perhaps these questions come from living in a small community, where a difference and sameness can be exaggerated. It's worth noting that the source film ends with a young blood-covered woman being raped by her stepfather. This is a group of people repeatedly reliving a portion of that trauma.

For me, this piece shares a similar set of Canadian of interests—weird incestuous sex stories from a small town—so perhaps that's part of why I respond well to it. The exploration, oddly enough, feels familiar.



Jeanine Oleson: Rocky Horror Opera Show

What's on view: *As part of her New Museum residency “Hear, Here”, Jeanine Oleson has invited a room full of opera lovers to participate in performances of opera hits like they would at a Rocky Horror Picture Show screening, by dressing up, singing along, and throwing flowers. The video evidence is on view at the New Museum.*

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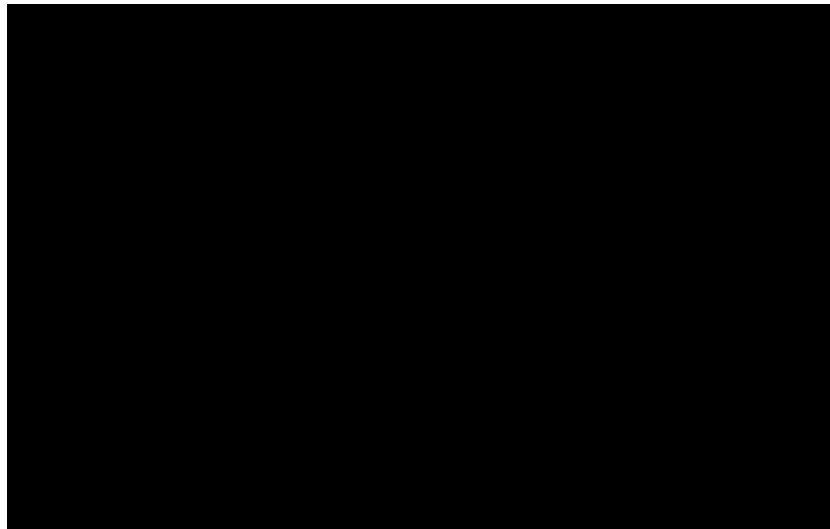
Paddy: Think of your opera standards, and you'll hear them belted out here by opera singers Amelia Watkins, soprano, Sarah Heltzel, mezzo-soprano, Cameron Schutza, tenor, and Robert Balonek, baritone. Eric Malson plays the pianist. Habanera and The Toreador Song from *Carmen*, Valentin's Aria from *Faust*, etc. Even if you don't follow opera—and I don't—you'll recognize the music.

The piece is presented as a two-channel video, documenting the perspective of the audience and the performers. The point here being that both the audience and the performers are active participants in the piece. That's underscored in the footage as well, which begins with long sequences of the audience members simply getting dressed up backstage for the performance. Most of those people we knew—it was a very New York crowd.

As soon as people get settled in for the performance an audience member tries to fly a paper airplane onto the stage. There are a couple of chuckles about that mischief, which we know is only going to escalate. And sure enough, by the time we get to the end of the performance we're looking at utter mayhem. People are madly throwing roses onto the stage while other audience members are frantically collecting them so they can be thrown again. It's as ornate as any opera you can imagine and twice as fun.

Which is to say, the piece—Rocky Horror Picture Show—is very aptly named. So perhaps mere documentation, the set and costumes isn't quite enough to communicate the experience? I mean can anyone truly appreciate what watching The Rocky Horror Picture Show in the theatre is like without actually being there? Watching the performance was fun, but it felt a little like listening to a "YOU HAD TO BE THERE!" story. Of course, it sounds *crazy*, but you don't know the half of it.

Whitney: I think we both left kicking ourselves for not going to this.



A dark room with sound

Roberto Cuoghi: Šuillakku - corral version (2014)

What's on view: *A dark, round room of tribal chanting and jungle sounds, which travel around the viewer through speakers placed around the perimeter of the room. Cuoghi studied ancient Assyrian language, rituals, and instruments, and imagines the sounds of people lamenting over Assyria's crumbling empire from the 7th century BC.*

Paddy: Entering this installation requires a lot of warning from guards. "You won't be able to see anything. Just...you'll see". My eyes never really adjusted and that's a little disorienting because the minute I enter the room I was bombarded with loud war-like sounds. Crashes, fighting, smoke crackling.

I didn't mind this so much. Not that I have much experience with crumbling empires, but I'm guessing that in the context of war, that disorientation and fear is common. And the violence seemed real; I instinctively moved to the spots in the room with speakers that seemed to have less sounds of things crashing. When I found I couldn't get away, I stood in the center.

In the end, though, I'm not sure what this added up to. If the narrative of ancient Assyrians is important, why is the actual narrative so unintelligible?

Whitney: Yeah, this was not clear to me, either. You get to imagine yourself in a different time and identity- something a lot of artists seem to be playing with (Ragnar Kjartansson, Pawel Althamer, Joe Scanlon)- but I'm not really sure where that goes in this case. I also admit that it takes a lot of effort to pull the narrative out of the sounds when it's competing with so many live action bells and whistles currently in the museum. That's no fault of the work, but most of the visitors seemed to walk in and out pretty quickly. In its own setting, this might have more life.