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Kjartansson/Henrot/Cuoghi, New Museum, New York – review

By Ariella Budick

Forget the catalogue verbiage: these installations show that conceptual art can have real power



Ragnar Kjartansson's 'Me, My Mother, My Father and I'. Photo: Benoit Pailey

Before its latest tripartite blockbuster opened, the New Museum dispatched an advance guard of verbiage: three volumes' worth of interviews and interpretations that reduced the work of Ragnar Kjartansson, Camille Henrot and Roberto Cuoghi to a series of desiccated abstractions. Having done the dispiriting homework of reading this stuff, I was thoroughly unprepared for the volcanic magic of the installations themselves – all those overlapping rainbows of sound and light, that sensual and sometimes terrifying spectacle. Conceptual art so often boils down to a dense paragraph of explanatory text that actually seeing it can feel superfluous. But in this synched trio of shows, orchestrated by Massimiliano Gioni, prose withered to insignificance in a total environment of shamanistic beauty and sensual power.

I stepped out of the elevator and into Kjartansson's "Take Me Here by the Dishwasher: Memorial for a Marriage", an empyrean realm suffused with pirouetting harmonies. Voices and guitar music swelled and ebbed across the space, blending into an aural tapestry. The players – in underwear, jeans or pyjamas – threaded their way through the darkened gallery, strumming and singing and sipping beer. Gradually, comprehensible lyrics emerged from the general murmur in the form of a sung, stilted play:

Woman: This is it.

Man: Is this it?

Woman: Yes, this is it. Do you think it can be fixed?

Man: Yes, I am afraid so.

Woman: I'm desperate.

Man: Don't you worry now, I'll fix it.

Woman: Show me what you can do!

Man: Here?

Woman: Are you a man? Show me what you can do to me! Take off my clothes! Take me, take me here by the dishwasher!

These lyrics elaborated a video projected on the vast wall, a sex scene from the 1977 movie *Mordsaga* (“Murder Story”). That film, Iceland’s first full-length feature, starred the artist’s mother as a frustrated housewife and featured his father as a young plumber and fantasy lover. The scene is hot and genuine; family lore has it that Kjartansson was conceived that same night after the cameras were put to bed. His parents’ always tense relationship eventually unwound, but Kjartansson returns to a moment loaded with hope for a real-life future spun from a fictional character’s desires.

“Take Me Here” is a kind of continuous video opera hammered together out of old film and freshly composed music. Kjartan Sveinsson, former keyboardist of the band Sigur Rós, has spun the characters’ slightly ridiculous dialogue into a billowing 10-part polyphony, played continuously (in seven-hour stints) and with supreme grace by the indefatigable troubadours. Kjartansson’s genius lies in whisking the banal together with the sublime, while drizzling in droplets of delicious irony. Or, as he puts it in a catalogue interview: “All these people singing about the birth of the artist! It’s kind of disgusting and I’m excited about that.”

That potent blend of horror and desire also permeates the videos of Camille Henrot, whose 13-minute film “Grosse Fatigue” won the Silver Lion at the last Venice Biennale. On a screen resembling a huge computer monitor, browser windows pop up and disappear in hectic counterpoint. While a hip-hop narrator gloomily intones a global assortment of creation myths, a free-associative chain of images loops around the desire to describe and contain everything we know about the universe. Henrot describes the piece as “an experience of density itself”, mimicking the web-hopping habits of laptop users, but under her total control.

Only after watching the piece several times did I begin to recognise the visual rhymes – a crayon circle drawn by a disembodied hand, marbles pitching back and forth, an almost fluorescent orange being rolled back and forth. Henrot deploys these spheres and orbits to sort cosmic chaos and mould it into a coherent story. That encyclopedic ambition may seem a bit grandiose, but it harks back to the efforts of 17th-century collectors who assembled cabinets of curiosities (malformed fetuses, exotic minerals, shrunken heads) and tried to apprehend the world by merging wonder and reason.

If Henrot hadn’t existed, Gioni and his collaborator Gary Carrion-Murayari would have had to dream her up, so close is her sensibility to theirs. The two curators also worked on the 2012 New Museum exhibition *Ghosts in the Machine*, which spotlighted many other artists vibrating along the same wavelength. That show featured Stan VanDerBeek’s “Movie-Drome”, which anticipated Henrot by 50 years: viewers lay in a darkened chamber and tried to absorb the hallucinogenic spectacle of still and moving images from multiple projectors. If VanDerBeek’s dense array prefigured the internet’s cascading windows and clouds of video, Henrot has a more mystical view of technology. “I have a superstitious relationship to objects and the conversations that they have with each other,” she has said. For her, the digital age is an enchanted cauldron spitting up metaphors and archetypes. It’s more spirit than science.

Roberto Cuoghi may be the trio’s ablest wizard. A guard with a torch guided me through black curtains into “Suillakku Corral”, a lightless enclosure where I was bombarded by almost unendurable cacophony. Echoes of songs, the violent beating of drums, spasmodic shrieks, whistles, groans, lamentations – all assaulted me in the artificial night, an uncanny force of hundreds, joined in a frantic and desperate chorale.

A text outside this chamber of discord explained that “Suillakku Corral” is meant to evoke Nineveh in the seventh century BC, when the Assyrian empire was teetering into ruin. Cuoghi has channelled the grief and fear of a dying civilisation into sounds made by an army of instruments, many of which he built by hand. Although he immersed himself in intensive research into the ancient Near East, authenticity is not the point: Cuoghi supplements such traditional instruments as the tanbur and the bamboo flute with bronze cowbells, badminton rackets, windblown leaves and Mexican beans. Like Henrot and Kjartansson, Cuoghi has fashioned a phantasmagoria of social science and spirituality, a ritual of exquisite overload.

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