

Ragnar Kjartansson: Scenes from Western Culture

May 25 – September 1, 2018



Public Opening Reception: June 2, 2018

San Francisco, CA. (May 17, 2018) – Opening May 25, 2018, the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts is pleased to present *Ragnar Kjartansson: Scenes from Western Culture*. The exhibition features two major installations by Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, *Scenes from Western Culture* and *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt*, shown alongside preparatory watercolor sketches.

Ragnar Kjartansson: Scenes from Western Culture explores Kjartansson’s fascination with social norms, theatrical artifice, and idle pleasure in an homage to French Rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). The exhibition juxtaposes Kjartansson’s work with Watteau’s painting *The Fortune Teller* (ca. 1710), on loan from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Scenes from Western Culture (2015) is a nine-screen installation of videos, each depicting a faintly absurd and occasionally ominous vision of Western daily life. A well-groomed dog lolls next to a grandfather clock ticking in a comfortable home in Iceland. A bored couple chats over dinner in a gilded New York restaurant. A cottage burns to ashes in a Swiss forest. Presented as cinematic paintings, the videos vary in length and play on an endless loop. As time passes, the ordinary scenes become increasingly eccentric.

Kjartansson draws inspiration from Watteau’s pastoral scenes of 18th-century aristocrats enjoying their leisure, a style that coined the phrase *fête galante*. Kjartansson crafts intimate moments of modern-day characters lost in a similar frivolity.

“My series of video works titled *Scenes from Western Culture* is really an homage to Watteau. He depicted with warmth and nihilism the joy of life and the overwhelming meaninglessness of it all in the culture of his day,” comments Kjartansson. “I really love Western culture, and then I’m also scared of it, like we all are, and see it as choking everything. It’s a double-sided thing, absolutely. It’s both a praise and a critique, and I’m always interested in that grey area.”

The exhibition also features Kjartansson's *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt* (2015), comprised of free-standing painted structures of snowy crags, originally exhibited in 2015 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. While the painted side of each piece gives nod to 19th-century Romantic landscapes, the exposed plywood backs and supporting struts on the reverse side of each form reveals their theatrical function. Translated as "only he who knows longing" from a poem of the same name by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt* champions the sublime and the mundane as one.

Ragnar Kjartansson: Scenes from Western Culture is on view from May 25 – September 1, 2018, at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts. Admission is free.

The public opening reception for *Ragnar Kjartansson: Scenes from Western Culture* is on Saturday, June 2, 5 – 8 pm.

Scenes from Western Culture is accompanied by a daily presentation of videos by Cory Arcangel, Chip Lord, Tony Oursler, Pipilotti Rist, Jacoby Satterwhite, and C. Spencer Yeh in MFA's Screening Room.

Related Summer Programs

For the Sake of Summer is MFA's summer program of free concerts and screenings featuring an eclectic mix of musicians and filmmakers. The series is co-presented with Canyon Cinema, Noise Pop, and the Roxie Theater, and expands upon the film and music motifs and cultural themes explored in *Scenes from Western Culture*. Visit mcevoyarts.org for more information.

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Artist Biography

Ragnar Kjartansson (b. 1976) is an Icelandic artist whose work in video installations, performances, drawings, and paintings play on the history of film, music, visual culture, and literature. His works are connected through humor and pathos, with each deeply influenced by the comedy and tragedy of classical theater. Kjartansson's use of duration and repetition to harness collective emotion is a hallmark of his practice. The artist has had solo exhibitions at the Barbican Centre, London; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Park, Washington D.C.; the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; the New Museum, New York; and the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, among other museums. Kjartansson represented Iceland at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and he participated in *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the 2013 Venice Biennale and Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg, Russia in 2014. Kjartansson's *The Visitors* (2012) showed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2017.

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McEvoy Foundation for the Arts

The McEvoy Foundation for the Arts (MFA) is a new San Francisco non-profit that presents exhibitions and public programs that engage, expand, and challenge themes present in the McEvoy Family Collection. MFA borrows from the McEvoy Family Collection as the primary source for all exhibitions and public programming. MFA is a 501(c)(3) presenting organization that does not award grants.

The McEvoy Family Collection features works in a wide array of media such as painting, illustration, video, sculpture, and installation. Artists include Mamma Andersson, Diane Arbus, Carol Bove, Brassäi, Richard Diebenkorn, Lee Friedlander, David Hockney, Alex Katz, Goshka Macuga, Christian Marclay, Robert Motherwell, Nathan Oliveira, Dario Robleto, Larry Sultan, Mark di Suvero, Wayne Thiebaud, Andy Warhol, James Welling, Edward Weston, Garry Winogrand, Libby Black, and Lisa Yuskavage, among others. A shared theme of books, newspapers, and other media reflects the family's long career in publishing.

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Photography Credits [left to right]: Ragnar Kjartansson, *Scenes from Western Culture, The Boat (Stephan Stephensen, Kristín Anna Valtýsdóttir and Gyða Valtýsdóttir)*, 2015. © Ragnar Kjartansson; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik. Ragnar Kjartansson, *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt*, 2015. © Ragnar Kjartansson; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, i8 Gallery, Reykjavik, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Photo by Cathy Carver, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

For more information:

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Gallery admission free.