

## Ragnar Kjartansson

### *'Sorrow found me when I was young'*

By Sarah Mosca

In 1849 when Polish composer Frédéric Chopin died his body was laid to rest in Cimetière du Père Lachaise in Paris (alongside Oscar Wilde, Marcel Marceau, Marcel Proust and Jim Morrison). His heart however was removed before burial upon his request. As the story goes, it was smuggled back to his native Poland by his sister Ludwika Jędrzejewicz, concealed under her winter coat. Supposedly Chopin's heart was larger than a normal heart. Medical professionals claim perhaps this is was due to the fact that he suffered and died from cystic fibrosis and not tuberculosis as is widely known. His enlarged heart now rests at Holy Cross Church in Warsaw concealed in a shrine with the engraved caption "HERE RESTS THE HEART OF FREDERICK CHOPIN". In 1926 Antoni Szlagowski intoned, "All our past sings in him, all our slavery cries in him, the beating heart of the nation, the great king of sorrows." When I read the comment made by Szlagowski about Chopin I thought what a beautiful title to be given and also that this seemed to be a particularly fitting description of Scandinavian artist Ragnar Kjartansson.

Ragnar Kjartansson constructs scenarios that have all the trappings of romantic novellas: heightened romanticism, fantasy and synthesized intimacy. He has an ability to pluck the most poetic, often sorrowful components of his influences and then theatrically exaggerate their meanings. Whether he is sitting in a bath strumming his guitar longing for a lost love; constantly drinking, smoking and making oil paintings; or singing an ode to Satan, there is irony and sadness yet also an imagined lightness within his propositions. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, "Every man has his secret sorrows which the world knows not; and often times we call a man cold when he is only sad." Sorrow and melancholy are more than despair, sadness and loss. They can provoke a certain kind of imagination stemming from a profound awareness of the mutability and impermanence of life and the inevitable cycle of birth and death.

I read somewhere that one Christmas Kjartansson's father said to him, 'it is sad and beautiful to be a human being'. I wondered, if this was where Kjartansson's preoccupation with sorrow began. After hearing this comment his father made I became so curious about what happens at a Kjartansson family Christmas. The Icelandic artist comes from a family of artful thespians. His relationships with them have both informed and often led to their participation in his work. Take for example a performance where he invited his Mother to spit on him repeatedly. He first made this work whilst at art school; they stand side by side looking at the camera and intermittently she turns to him and spits in his face. Enacting this Freudian degrading act is an attempt to examine the relationship between mother and son and family dynamics; shaming him and judging him, with this intimate act of repulsion.

In 2007 Kjartansson collaborated with the band The National when he asked them to perform live, singing their track 'Sorrow' on repeat 100 times. The first line of this song is 'Sorrow found me when I was young', so poetic and full of melancholy. It reminded me of many songs that begin with a sentiment about sorrow. For example: Prince's track Purple Rain which opens with, 'I never meant to cause you any sorrow' or David Bowie's 'With your long blonde hair and your eyes of blue, the only thing I ever got from you was sorrow'. Much of Kjartansson's work is about the quandaries of the heart. Using humour, irony, drama, hopelessness, romance, loss and fantasy he plays out these trials. He has also however made several works about death. Take for example "Death and the Children" (2002), where Kjartansson took on the personae of the 'grim reaper'. He appears from a tomb on a summer's day holding a paper scythe proclaiming "I am death". It is a humorous piece. (My favourite part is when he calls the little children following him through the cemetery 'small and ugly'). The improvised dialogue with them offers a sense of jovialness as he acts like a court jester or pied piper and they follow him through the tombstones laughing and screaming but willing to challenge his theatrical incarnation of 'death'.

Many of his works speak to the idea of 'an ending' or a 'death' of something. More often than not his works also take the form of a durational performance or a loop. This reverberation, this echo has led to Kjartansson's work being described as having a lyrical gloom. I wondered if this sense of repetition he invokes is a reference to Sisyphus? (Repeat, repeat). Performing a useless task over and over again only to accept the inevitability of ones own fate.

In "The Visitors" (2012) Kjartansson gathered a set of musical friends and they lived together in a mansion for a while in Upstate New York playing music, eating and drinking together, sharing the day to day and a common goal. Together they compiled a musical score and the project resulted in a video installation. The lyrics begin: "The stars are exploding around you and there is nothing you can do". From here we begin a tragic tale about loss, separation and the inevitability of uselessness - all embedded in the final outcome. I have heard Kjartansson say

in reference to this work: "we are all solo performers, fragile and alone, together, apart", and that the project is about a period in one's life ending and a common defeat. I like this description of common defeat very much. It makes you wonder how do you make work and create a sense of togetherness when you are singing about being alone?

Perhaps we can describe Kjartansson as the Don Juan of Scandinavian Pain. 'Take me here by the dishwasher: A Memorial for Marriage' (2014), really epitomises this. I saw this work at the New Museum earlier this year. As the elevator doors opened in the museum I was surrounded by ten dreamy musicians (some only in their underwear) strumming their guitars, serenading me and the other viewers with their absurd and lovesick words, "This is it. Is this it?", "I'm desperate," they sing, "Take off my clothes!", "Take me, take me, take me here by the dishwasher ..." again on repeat. Upon encountering the scene I was engulfed by their melodic harmonies and completely seduced, like I was being led into a flood. In the gloomy romantic light there was also a projection on the far wall resembling a fantasy love scene between a woman and a plumber shot through a vaseline lens. It turns out that these characters are actually his real parents and that he was conceived the night after this fortuitous meeting on the set of Iceland's first feature film *Morðsaga* (1977). Massimiliano Gioni, the associate director and curator of the New Museum commented: "Ragnar uses music as a manifestation of emotion and seduction, it's the idea of spectacle, a way to get to the viewer more sensually."

Upon further reading about Kjartansson I noticed he mentions the term nihilism on many occasions, in reference to both his 'theatrical romanticism' and 'the artist's pursuit', stating that sometimes he feels like he is faking it. He also talks about nihilism in reference to his work 'Scandinavian Pain' (2013) in which he took a barn originally located in a misty Nordic landscape and reconstructed it in the Moderna Museet Malmö in Sweden as an ode to Edvard Munch another King of Scandinavian Pain. Kjartansson hung Munch's paintings inside the barn and later performed the ABBA song "The Winner Takes It All" on the rooftop of the barn. It seems evident that he shares a poetic melancholy with Munch, influenced by both the isolation of the Nordic landscape, the tortured artist's occupation and perhaps a mutual existential crisis. Kjartansson has said that through theatricality "he is taking deep emotions and dark pain and turning it into nothing".

In one of his more recent projects titled *The Palace of the Summerland* (2014), based on the novel 'World Light' by Halldór Laxness, Kjartansson re-enacts and retells a tale of the pursuit of a man with a dream. Travelling through experiences of adversity, indifference and contempt the man is aided only by his faith in destiny; his idea of divinity, beauty and love; and his quest to one day become a great poet. He describes it as 'a hymn to the survival of the artistic spirit under the most inhospitable circumstances'. Many artists will recognise the 'artist pursuit' being a difficult path, in many ways it seems Kjartansson struggles with the same dilemma, so in an attempt to understand it he makes fantastical work about it. Kjartansson describes the character's pursuit in 'The Palace of the Summerland' as "a hopeless task, a true disaster". It made me think of the story regarding Swedish balloonist S. A. Andrée who led an expedition to reach the North Pole at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in a hot air balloon made of black satin (another man with a dream). The photographs that document this journey are reminiscent of some kind of surreal fantasy - the image of a black satin balloon floating through the white abyss attempting to push the boundaries of masculinity, optimism and patriotism. Sadly, the balloon crashed after only two days into their journey, landing on packed ice in the far north Arctic sea. Andrée and his companions perished in the snow, their bodies only to be found 30 years later. Like the character in *Palace of the Summerland*, S.A Andrée's pursuit may initially appear to be a hopeless task, but when seen through the right lens, it is transformed to one full of hope and optimism. It is often this tension between optimism and failure that is so compelling in Kjartansson's work.

Although at times Kjartansson's work seems uncomfortably personal, playing the winner, the loser, the artist, 'death', the woeful lover, the king of sorrow, his astute theatrical methods reel you in and sweep you away (like singing a 1990's love song at a late night Karaoke session). There is something about his sorrowful ways and his pursuit of solitude that beckons you to become lost in his humorous and ironic dreamland. As an artist he highlights the interplay of lightness and darkness in our lives, always questioning does sorrow conquer happiness or is it the other way around; how do we balance the two when both are fraught with such complexities? Thinking of Ragnar Kjartansson, I wonder where he would like to be buried and if like Chopin he too will request his heart be embalmed elsewhere. Whatever the case I wish him well on his journey offering the words of American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay who wrote "Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely".

**"I truly wish you joy and happiness but most of all, I wish you love" Ragnar Kjartansson.**